

cjm

update

Una Padel surveys recent developments in criminal justice.

Robbery

Although crime rates generally seem to be continuing to fall, the rise in street robbery - up 13 per cent in 2000/1 and still rising - is causing serious concern for politicians and public alike. In March the Government announced a new cross-government Robbery Reduction Initiative designed to identify short-term solutions and deliver better results ahead of the Government's broader reform package as well as working on long-term solutions. The group is chaired by the Home Secretary and members include the Lord Chancellor, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, the Secretary of States for Education, Health, Transport and Work and Pensions, and the Chair of the Youth Justice Board.

The initiative involves the ten police force areas which deal with 82 per cent of all robbery in England and Wales. It aims to:

- Increase the detection rate for robbery cases
- Increase the number of offenders charged and brought before the courts
- Speed up the process between arrest and sentence
- Deal with offenders effectively and reduce the number of robberies in these ten areas.

Additional pilot projects in Hackney, London and Longsight, Manchester will deal specifically with juvenile robbers. The emphasis once again will be on tackling robbery 'hot-spots' and fast-tracking offenders through the court system.

Prison Population Crisis

The prison population is attaining record levels almost every day at the moment and there is little sign of change. By mid-March it had reached 70,197, an increase of more than 5,000 on the same week in 2001, and was increasing at the rate of 300 per week. The operational capacity, which is the maximum safe, overcrowded capacity of the prison estate, was 71,834. Such levels of overcrowding mean that prisoners are often moved further from home if there are no spaces for them in their own areas. Families then find it more difficult to visit, and relationships (an important factor in resettlement) are damaged. Shortage of resources means that education and offending behaviour programmes suffer. If the Robbery Reduction Initiative lives up to expectations it may well fast-track robbers into jail, but it is difficult to see how the prison estate is going to be able to cope if the other pressures on it are not alleviated in some way.

The only policy change which has been announced to attempt to deal with overcrowding is the 'Presumptive Home Detention Curfew' which will be implemented at the beginning of May. All prisoners serving sentences of between three and 12 months (except those convicted of violent or serious drug offences or those with a history of sexual offending) will be released on Home Detention Curfew for up to the last two months of their sentences unless there are compelling reasons not to do so. Previously release on HDC has been discretionary for this group and the numbers released have been smaller than expected.

Security Industry Regulation

A new body, the Security Industry Authority, has been established to regulate and license the activities of an estimated 300,000 security industry employees from night-club bouncers and doormen to wheelclampers. Molly Meacher has been appointed as Chairman and John Saunders as Chief Executive of the SIA which will become operational in 2003. Its role will be to provide an effective regulatory framework for the industry and to protect the public by providing a standard test and licensing arrangements for employing security staff.

Rural Crime

New statistics from the last British Crime Survey show that people in rural areas experience significantly lower levels of criminal victimization than their urban counterparts. Less than three per cent of people living in rural areas were victims of burglary in 1999, compared with five per cent in non-rural areas, and the figures for violent crime were similar. Confidence in the police was higher in rural areas with 84 per cent reporting that they felt the police there did a 'very' or 'fairly' good job compared with 77 per cent of non-rural residents.

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders

Amendments to the legislation on Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) are included in the Police Reform Bill. If they become law they will allow courts to impose an ASBO on top of another sentence and the area covered by an ASBO could be extended over a wider geographical area - even the whole of England and Wales if considered necessary - instead of being confined to a specific geographical area.

ASBOs were introduced in April 1999 and in the last three years, to March 2002, 466 have been granted. Of these 84 per cent have been on men and 74 per cent on people aged 21 or under.

New Voice for Victims of Crime

A new Commissioner for Victims is to be appointed to give victims of crime a voice in relation to reform of the criminal justice system and to advise the criminal justice services and agencies. Speaking at the conference 'Through the Prison Gate' hosted by the Inspectorates of Prison and Probation, the Home Secretary also announced the formation of an advisory panel, the members of which will include victims of crime and families of victims, and that a Bill of Rights for Victims is to be produced.