

Una Padel summarizes the latest Home Office statistics on offenders and sentencing.

- The Home Office has predicted that the prison population is likely to continue to rise and could hit 110,000 by the end of the decade. Projections published in mid-December suggest that the most optimistic scenario would mean a population of 91,400 in 2009, the most pessimistic 109,600. £275 million has been allocated by the Treasury to provide new prison places in the next financial year, and a review of the Correctional Services is underway to look for longer term answers to stop major increases in the prison population. *Proposals in the Criminal Justice Bill are designed to divert some of those who now go to prison into community sentences and replace short prison sentences with 'Custody Plus', but the overall impact of the legislation is likely to add nearly 1,000 to the prison population.*
- New Home Office statistics on women and the criminal justice system were published in December. They show that in 2001:
 - The peak ages of reported offending was 15 for girls and 18 for men
 - Theft was the most common indictable offence committed by female offenders
 - 19% of known offenders were women
 - Women were less likely than men to be remanded in custody
 - Women spent less time on remand than men
 - Women were less likely than men to be fined or sent to custody and more likely to be discharged or receive a community sentence
 - Women received shorter custodial sentences than men

These differences reflect differences in offending history and type of offence between women and men, so perhaps comparisons with men are not helpful. The top eight offences for which women were sentenced to custody in 2001 were:

- Theft from shops
- Fraud
- Wounding
- Production, supply and possession with intent to supply a class A controlled drug
- Summary motoring
- Burglary of all kinds

- Handling stolen goods
- Robbery

Recent figures suggest that the rise in the reception of sentenced women into prison is driven by a more severe response to less serious offences. Theft and the handling of stolen goods accounted for 41% of sentenced receptions of women in 2001, drug offences for 14% and violence for 12%. The average female prison population in 2001 was 3740. 26% of the women in prison in mid-2001 were from an ethnic minority compared to 20% of the male population, and 19% of the female prison population consisted of foreign nationals. Women prisoners were less likely to be in a stable relationship than women in the general population, but more likely to have child-care responsibilities. About 20% had spent some time in care as children. Over 40% of sentenced women prisoners and over 50% of women remanded in custody reported that they had been dependent on drugs in the previous year.

- Statistics on the work of the Probation Service in England and Wales in 2001 have also just been published. They show that
 - 32% of sentences imposed by the courts for indictable offences in 2001 were community sentences – up from 30% in 2000.
 - There was a fall in the number of pre-sentence reports requested and 21% of those prepared did not include a sentence proposal
 - The number of sentence specific reports (where the court asks the probation service to assess an offender's suitability for a particular sentence) increased by 6,800.
 - The number of community sentences given to offenders with no previous convictions continues to rise. 51% of offenders starting Community Punishment Orders had no previous record.
 - 11% of offenders starting the main community orders were from ethnic minorities.
- A new joint inspection programme for Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) was announced in mid-December. HM Inspectorate of Probation will lead the inspection team which will consist of members of the Inspectorates of Probation, Constabulary and Prisons, the Social Services Inspectorate and the education inspectorates. The team reflects the multi-agency make-up of YOTs and will have the task of assessing the impact YOTs and their partner agencies have in the prevention of offending by young people.
- A number of measures contained in the Police Reform Act 2002 were implemented at the beginning of December. They included changes to anti-social behaviour orders which extend the geographical areas covered by conditions attached to them, and measures to speed up the process by which landlords and the British Transport Police can apply for them. Among the other measures introduced were interim sex offender orders restricting an offender's behaviour while courts consider an application for a full sex offender order.