

Enver Solomon reviews recent developments in criminal justice.

Police powers

The Serious Organised Crime and Police Act came into force on 1st January 2006. It grants police a wider range of powers including:

- The power of arrest for all offences.
- Enabling the police to apply for 'multi-premises' and 'all-premises' warrants allowing multiple access to premises owned or occupied by a suspect.
- Allowing the police to take digital photographs of suspects on the street where they have been arrested, detained or given a relevant fixed penalty notice, rather than back at the police station.
- Allowing the police to take, retain, speculatively search and share footwear impressions.
- The power to arrest a person protesting outside someone's home if they are causing harassment, alarm or distress.
- The power to direct a protester to leave the vicinity of a home and not return for up to three months.
- Allowing the police to impose conditions on any person protesting within 1km of Parliament, to protect the smooth running of Government.

Additional powers are also granted to Community Support Officers to direct traffic, deter begging, to search detained persons for dangerous articles or items that may be used to assist escape and to enforce certain licensing offences and to enter licensed premises.

The new legislation brings about a radical shake-up of the organisations and powers to fight major crime - most notably by creating the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA). SOCA brings together the National Crime Squad, the National Criminal Intelligence Service, and parts of the customs and immigration authorities. It formally launches on 1st April 2006 and will have approximately 5,000 civilian staff with powers to arrest and carry out their own investigations.

Compensation for victims of crime

The Home Office has launched a consultation document which sets out plans to reform the compensation structure and support given to victims of crime. *Rebuilding Lives, Supporting Victims of Crime* proposes offering victims of less serious violent crime practical help, such as personal attack alarms, self defence classes or the number of a local locksmith, instead of compensation. Reform of the criminal injuries compensation scheme would increase payments to the most seriously injured victims of violent crime. The Home Office says it intends to lift the £500,000 limit on compensation for the most seriously injured survivors and is consulting on what that new maximum should be. It is also considering whether to increase the £11,000 limit on payments to murder victims' families. Practical support for victims of crime would be provided by Victim Care Units around the country that would develop a range of help for victims depending on the victim and the crime they have suffered.

For more information, see <http://www.cjsonline.gov.uk/downloads/application/pdf/Rebuilding%20Lives%20-%20Supporting%20victims%20of%20crime.pdf>

Young criminals

The vast majority of young people do not get involved in crime or anti-social behaviour. The Home Office's Crime and Justice Survey of around five thousand young people aged between 10 and 25 found that three quarters had not committed any crimes in the twelve months prior to interview. Of the quarter who said they had committed at least one offence many had offended occasionally or committed minor, relatively trivial offences.

Levels of frequent and more serious offending were as follows:

- eight per cent of all young people admitted committing an offence six or more times in the last 12 months.
- 12 per cent said they had committed at least one of the more serious offences measured. This was most often an assault resulting in some form of injury, including minor injuries such as bruising. 11 per cent admitted committing an injury assault; less than one per cent a robbery and two per cent had committed at least one serious property offence (burglary, theft of a vehicle or theft from the person).
- two per cent of young people were classified as frequent serious offenders - i.e. committing a more serious offence at least six times in the preceding year.

Acts of anti-social behaviour, defined as being noisy or rude in public, causing a neighbour to complain, graffiti or racially or religiously motivated threats/abuse were not widespread.

A quarter of young people said they had committed at least one of type of anti-social behaviour in the last 12 months. Being noisy or rude in public and causing a neighbour to complain were by far the most common, committed by 16 per cent and 12 per cent. Graffiti and racially or religiously motivated threats/abuse were rare. Overall only five per cent were classified as committing anti-social behaviour frequently.

For more information, see <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/hosb2005.pdf>