

Written evidence from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies

1. About us

- 1.1. The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (hereafter 'the Centre') was founded in 1931. We advance public understanding of crime, criminal justice and social harm. We are independent and non-partisan, though motivated by our values. We stand with those most vulnerable to social harm. We believe that the United Kingdom's over reliance on policing, prosecution and punishment is socially harmful, economically wasteful, and prevents us from tackling the complex problems our society faces in a sustainable, socially just manner.
- 1.2. Through our various events we bring people together to share ideas and develop solutions. In partnership with Oxford University Press and an independent international editorial board we publish the *British Journal of Criminology*, one of the world's top criminology journals. In partnership with Taylor and Francis and an independent editorial advisory board we publish *Criminal Justice Matters*, a quarterly magazine covering contemporary developments relating to political debate, policy and research. Our annual publication *UK Justice Policy Review* reviews criminal justice and welfare policy across the four nations of the United Kingdom. We also produce a range of other reports drawing on our own research as well as research by our partners and collaborators.
- 1.3. In July 2013 the Centre launched Justice Matters: a three year initiative promoting fresh thinking on downsizing the United Kingdom's criminal justice systems and the development of alternative policies and practices that are proportionate responses to the harms people experience.

2. Summary

- 2.1. This submission addresses two areas of interest the Committee highlighted in its call for evidence: the impact of recent spending reductions and the contribution of existing criminal justice policies to crime reduction.
- 2.2. On the first of these, the Centre believes that there is considerable scope for a reduction in criminal justice spending, if this reduction is complemented by a comparable reduction in the size and scope of the criminal justice agencies affected.
- 2.3. On the second of these, there is significant research evidence indicating that levels of victimisation are related to underlying social arrangements, rather than to the interventions of criminal justice agencies.
- 2.4. In essence, the question of the rates of harm and victimisation in society and the question of the size, scope, reach and operation of the different parts of the criminal justice system need to be separated.

3. Impact of recent spending reductions

- 3.1. There is considerable scope to reduce criminal justice spending if complemented by reductions in the size and scope of criminal justice agencies.
- 3.2. Current criminal justice spending reductions are being implemented following previous, and generous, real terms spending increases, as the Centre's three reviews of government spending on the police (5); the prison and probation services (6); and the Crown Court and magistrates' courts (4) between 1999 and 2009 make

clear. Spending on the police in England and Wales grew in real terms by 50 percent between 1999 and 2009. In the case of the Prison and Probation Services there was a real terms spending growth of 36 percent between 2004 and 2009. Expenditure on magistrates' courts grew in real terms by 17 per cent from 1998/1999 to 2003/2004 and by 31 per cent from 2005/2006 to 2008/2009. Expenditure on the Crown Court increased by 10 per cent in real terms from 2005/2006 to 2008.

- 3.3. These generous spending increases financed growth in these services, though this growth was uneven. Police numbers grew significantly while their caseload as measured by police recorded crime rates stabilised. Prison numbers and probation caseloads grew more quickly than budget growth, putting significant strain on both services. Per prisoner expenditure declined in real terms from 2006. Frontline probation staff numbers declined after 2006 while caseloads grew. Magistrates' courts' caseloads and staffing declined from 2006 while Crown Court caseloads grew from 2005.
- 3.4. The current squeeze on public spending presents an opportunity to resize the various criminal justice agencies in a manner that delivers real social benefit and leaves those services in better shape. This would involve a general downsizing of the criminal justice system: fewer arrests; fewer prosecutions; fewer prisoners; fewer probationers; fewer criminal justice workers, whether police officers, judges and magistrates, prison and probation officers or others.
- 3.5. There is little evidence of the government embracing this challenge. It appears to favour maintaining the current size of the justice system, or even to expand it in the case of prisons, on shrinking budgets, while chipping away at legal aid in particular as a means of finding savings. The long-term effects of this on staff morale, system effectiveness and justice are difficult to predict, but are likely to be significant.

4. Contribution of existing sentencing, prison and probation policies to the reduction of crime

- 4.1. The Centre's starting point is that the main influences on levels of harm and victimisation are social arrangements – for example rates of wealth and poverty, levels of employment and unemployment, unequal power relations – rather than the criminal justice system and its individual agencies. One of the clearest demonstrations of this comes from an assessment of homicide rates. A 2011 article by William Pridemore in the *British Journal of Criminology* found that higher levels of homicide were associated with higher rates of poverty (8). This is but one contribution to significant research evidence on the links between violence victimisation and social arrangements. Research by Danny Dorling and published by the Centre as part of a collection of articles entitled *Criminal Obsessions*, examined the increase in homicides in Britain between 1979 and 1999 (1). Dorling found that the rising trend in the number of homicides during this twenty year period was very unfairly distributed. Those living in the richest neighbourhoods saw their risk of being a victim of homicide fall. Those living in the poorest neighbourhoods saw their risk of being a victim of homicide go up sixfold.
- 4.2. In contrast, evidence for the effect of criminal justice interventions on official crime rates is poor. A review of international evidence explaining falls in official crime rates by Graham Farrell and colleagues was published in 2010 (3). They found no evidence that rates of imprisonment, police numbers or policing strategies could explain falls in crime, apart from some partial effects in the United States. To achieve this, the United States has relied on policies of hyperincarceration and

aggressive policing strategies disproportionately targeting black people and the most economically disadvantaged.

- 4.3. The lack of evidence for the impact of criminal justice interventions is corroborated by the National Audit Office (NAO) briefing for the Justice Committee, *Comparing International Criminal Justice Systems*, published in February 2011. The NAO noted that official crime rates have fallen over recent years across a number of countries. However, it found 'no consistent correlations' between official crime rates and the numbers in prison across a range of countries. Prison, it noted 'is very expensive' and it questioned 'aspects of its cost-effectiveness'. The Centre endorses these conclusions and supports the NAO's position on the 'benefit of conducting more research into prison population trends in other countries in order to learn lessons from those with declining prison populations'.
- 4.4. This does not mean it is not possible to make meaningful interventions in response to victimisation. They do, however, need to be the right ones. For instance, our comprehensive review of gun and knife crime strategies for the Children's Commissioner for England cast doubt on the effectiveness of police-led approaches and found that effective strategies typically were holistic, engaging with the big questions of disadvantage and social exclusion, as well as addressing individual, familial and neighbourhood problems (9).
- 4.5. The Centre's 2012 report, *Reducing the numbers in custody: looking beyond criminal justice solutions*, compared a number of countries' social and economic arrangements and their levels of imprisonment and victimisation (7). Countries with lower rates of poverty and inequality and more generous social safety nets were typically safer, had lower rates of violence and lower rates of imprisonment. In 2007 the Centre published research by Professor David Downes and Dr Kirsten Hansen on the underlying drivers of prison populations (2). They found a strong correlation between welfare spending and rates of imprisonment. Countries with more generous welfare provision typically had lower rates of imprisonment. Those with less generous welfare provision typically had higher rates of imprisonment.

5. Crime reduction policies: a co-ordinated approach

- 5.1. The Centre is in favour of a criminal justice system that is responsive to the needs of victims and witness and treats suspects, defendants and convictees with respect and dignity.
- 5.2. The criminal justice system is good at punishing certain individuals and groups. It fails to prevent social problems from arising, or to resolve those that occur. It is possible to deliver lower levels of victimisation and a smaller criminal justice system at the same time. Our current over reliance as a country on criminal justice interventions crowds out more innovative, just and effective policy and practice solutions to the problems our society faces.

References

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