



HeadsUp Forum # 29

www.HeadsUp.org.uk

Crime in Britain :: How big is the problem?

(23 February – 13 March 2009)

A wide range of views and expertise were represented by the decision-makers. Their involvement and support was, as always, crucial to the success of the forum.

11 legislators pledged their support for the *Crime in Britain* forum, were involved in providing a statement for the Backup materials or took part in the debate.

They were:

- **Lord Harris** – Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Policing
- **Robert Brown MSP** - Liberal Democrat Spokesperson on Justice
- **Simon Reed** - National Vice Chairman, Police Federation of England and Wales
- **Phil Willis MP** – Chair, Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skill
- **Fergus Ewing MSP** – Minister for Community Safety
- **Pam Hibbert** - Assistant Director of Policy at Banardos
- **Stephen Hammond MP** - Conservative Shadow Minister for Transport
- **Sharon Hodgson MP** – Member, Children, Schools and Families Select Committee
- **Philip Davies MP** – Member, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee
- **Angela Burns AM** - Member of the Children and Young People Committee
- **David Drew MP** - Member of the All-Party Child and Youth Crime Group

www.headsup.org.uk is a safe, online space for under 18s to debate the political issues important to them. **Young people** share viewpoints with their peers and **decision-makers** up and down the country. Through the forums, HeadsUp develops **young people's** political awareness and promotes active citizenship so they can play an effective part in the democratic processes that affect them.

HeadsUp enables **politicians** to consult with **young people**, to find out their ideas, experiences and opinions. There is ample background information to prepare **young people** for the debates, as well as **teachers'** notes and activities.

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Forum Summary

There were 314 posts made in the forum from 153 HeadsUp users[∞] - with an average of 197 unique daily visits to the site over the course of the forum. The discussions on the forum were broad but the general themes and directions of the debate are highlighted in the pages below along with practical suggestions given by forum users.

The debate was split into four different forum threads addressing the significant issues in the wider debate about crime, the justice system and young people. These were:

- **The Police** – Do they treat young people fairly?
- **The Media** – Does the media criminalise young people?
- **Law, punishment and justice** - Is prison enough to rehabilitate criminals and stop them breaking the law?
- **Your Community** – Do you feel safe in your community?

The Police

The police was the most popular thread commented on by users - perhaps because many of them had some contact with the police. A lot of the users on the forum felt that they were negatively stereotyped in general for being young, but particularly by the police. Some also did suggest that the police dealt with black and white teenagers differently in their experience.

I think that the police in my area are doing a wonderful job but I think they could do so much better if they left race out of it and judged us for what we are doing rather than what colour skin we have.

They [the police] can also make things alot worse especially when they tell kids that are not getting into trouble to go home or something like that as that make the children think "whats the point of being good when the police still have a go at us and accuse us of doing bad things"

i personally think that police are a tad bit too judgemental. i know they are doing there job but; sometimes they are deciding whether we are up too something just by what we wear, or the colour of our skin.

[∞] Includes: young people, moderators, teachers and decision-makers.

However, a lot of young people were supportive of the police, thought they needed all the powers necessary to stop crime and shouldn't be scared to stop certain groups of young people if they were suspected of committing crimes.

Stop and search

Some of the young people on the forum had experience of stop and search, either personally or through friends. Although most users felt stop and search helped fight crime, particularly those who had been stopped, many felt it was being used indiscriminately and that young people were being asked to justify their actions when they'd done nothing wrong. Those that complained of mistreatment by police officers felt that the officer that had stopped them did not treat them with respect, unfairly targeted them and did not explain the process to them or the reason they were being stopped.

i still remember one time when i was out with some friends and we were walking down the street in daylight and the police man stopped us and asked us what we were doing and asked for our details. we hadn't done anything wrong and we were just walking into a shop to buy some stuff and we were extremely sensible i actually felt quite offend and when we asked the police man why he wanted our details he said don't ask questions but them we just walked away.

I've been hanging out with some mates before and a couple of policemen came and asked us if we were grafiting because it was a problem in the area. We moved on but later they saw us again and questioned us about what we were doing, where we were going and why weren't we at home in bed.

there were 4 black people and 1 white person and 1 ginger person. the police came over to us and told us to go home. we told them that we cant. they kept on asking and eventually we ignored them. they got angry and started pushing all the black people but left the white person and the ginger person ran away. i do not think this is fair because this shows racism and unfair behaviour towards the public

Prison and community sentences

Almost all users that commented on this subject in the forum felt that prison sentences were too lenient and that prison was too comfortable to be a deterrent from committing crime. Re-offending rates were highlighted as an example of how prison wasn't working well enough. Community sentencing was quite a popular alternative to prison, with forum users suggesting it as a way of punishing less serious crimes, as well as making convicted criminals meet their victims and facing the consequences of their actions.

It is said that 80% of the criminals sent to prison come back out and commit a criminal offence again! What does this tell us? It tells us that prisonment is not a right punishment. Look at the prisons now... there comfy, they've got tv's and luxury...is this real punishment? nope.

Most of the forum users suggested that sentences for serious crimes should be longer, with life actually meaning life in prison, and multiple life sentences given for the most serious crimes.

I think that if someone gets a life imprisonment then they should spend the rest of their life in jail, rather than getting let off after a few years. People who commit less serious crimes often spend the same time in prison as someone who has committed a murder.

Some suggestions for improving the current system were; the police monitoring prisoners better once they had been released, prisoners being given counselling in prison to change their behaviour, using manual labour as a punishment in prison, re-education classes and making those convicted of offences meet their victims to understand the consequences of their actions.

I think that we should get the criminals to do manual labour. My thoughts are for us to make them run so many hours on hamster wheels, a day, so they can produce electricity in a renewable way. The worst your conviction the more hours a day you have to run.

Statistics show that many offenders re-offend within a year or two if not months after they leave prison. The only way to stop this is to use other techniques such as getting the offender to meet their victim and see how much pain they have caused.

why not MAKE them complete a school-like programme where failure/misbehaviour makes you start again? A sort of re-education.

For these forum users community sentences were not necessarily seen as the 'easy option' but a necessary alternative or compliment to a prison sentence that may have more chance of changing people's behaviour one they had served their sentence.

Capital punishment

There was a lot of discussion on the forum about the death penalty and whether capital punishment should be brought back. This issue, as is often the case, evoked strong opinions on either side of the debate. Many of the young people that suggested it thought it might be a good idea to deter people from committing serious crimes.

Punishment should be a deterrent, and I think that the ultimate deterrent is execution. Who would commit rape with the thought that they would die if they were caught?

I would suggest we must reach a logical conclusion, in order to prevent crime and people reoffending, we make it a capital offence to commit even the smallest of crimes (perhaps not including parket tickets). That includes children.

Some, however, did advise caution and reminded forum users of the serious and final nature of allowing the state to sentence people to death.

I don't agree with the death penalty at all. Though I feel for the families of victims etc, just yesterday I read about a man being released 27 years after he had been charged guilty of murder and a while back a man was released after a similar amount of time for a wrongful accusation of rape and assault- if we had a death penalty one or both of these INNOCENT men would be dead.

If you take away certain people's rights it leads to a landslide in respect for ALL people's rights. It's easy to judge but perhaps we should all consider how we would want to be treated if it were us or our families being put to death.

Capital Punishment is really a way to get revenge- not justice. Abiding by 'an eye for an eye' is only really argued for when talking about murder- if someone was arrested for GBH we don't all protest at a prison sentence and say 'I know, let's beat that person black and blue and break a few bones'. So, if we don't take that stance on all crime, why do it with murder?

This suggests that the forum users felt that the current deterrents to turn people away from crime were not serious enough.

Age of criminality

HeadsUp users were not all convinced that a minimum age for being held responsible for criminal behaviour was necessary or desirable. Many felt it was unfair that some children may not be punished because they were too young, even though they had committed the same crime as someone older who would be punished.

Age: I don't think a minimum age for crime responsibility is right. A shoplifter nicks something from a shop in Britain, but because he/she is under the age of 10, they get away with it because they apparently aren't old enough to know that stealing is wrong. How is that right?

Someone of 8 years and above would be aware of the actions that they have done and the crimes that they have committed

Many forum users felt that young people should know the difference between right and wrong at a young age and much earlier than adults thought they should. This was perhaps because many of the forum users were not much older than children of the ages being discussed, and probably would have thought that at that age they would have been able to tell what was right or wrong and legal or illegal.

However there was acceptance that younger children may not fully realise the consequences of their actions and that family upbringing had a big impact on the ability of children to tell right from wrong.

If you cannot tell right from wrong at the age of 14 you are obviously have some problem with processing or have not had the right up-bringing. If anybody has gone until that age without getting told off for stealing or hurting then there is something seriously wrong happening with their morals. I think that some may have special circumstances but most average children should know, and if they don't, we should blame their role-models.

educate younger people inside of schools and colleges about the consequences of committing a crime. Law should be a subject that is done as part of the curriculum at a younger age.

Schools and teachers were seen to have a big role to play in educating young people about the law and differences between right and wrong, as well as closing the gap between children in this respect.

Negative stereotyping of young people

Negative views of young people were believed to be held by adults throughout society, often prompted by media coverage, and many forum users felt they were being blamed for things that a small minority were responsible for.

its not fair that when you walk into a shop you get people following you around! - like i was going to steal something!!! Also recently Morrisons has made a new rule that teenagers aren't allowed in without an adult! This isn't fair - i only want to go in and give them some buisness!!

It was felt by many that posted on this topic, that there should be more balanced reporting about what young people do that also included some positive coverage, like good exam results and young people volunteering for charities.

I think that the media is always pointing out the bad crimes that young people do rather than giving us recognition when we do good things. This means that people often get the wrong impression about teenagers and fear them when going out. I think if the goverment encouraged the media to publish more positive stories about teenagers then maybe we'd be encouraged to do more good things.

Others suggested that a media narrative that only highlighted the negative things that young people do could create a self-fulfilling prophecy. The divisive impact of this type of media reporting, that emphasises the generational divide between teenagers and adults, was also seen to be a problem.

I think that sometimes the media should publish good stories about us like our grades. As if you keep telling someone they are bad and useless they will eventually start to believe it.

I think because of things teenagers are stereotyped to do like grafiti and get drunk on a friday night then people think all teenagers are the same. I know it's a problem but they do have to realise that we're not all like it!!

The media needs to become knowledgeable about the facts instead of stirring up the problem, and comprehend that crime isn't carried out just by teenagers but actually a lot more by adults.

One forum user was concerned that adults and older people without much contact with young people might be more likely to believe the negative stories that appear in the media.

Newspapers, the news and other media have a big influence on older people - ones that don't associate with teens and they will think that all teenagers are like this. But we're not.

Impact of violent computer games and films

Most of the forum users felt that it was unlikely that many teenagers would emulate behaviour seen in violent films or computer games directly but many mentioned that they thought it did glamorise crime and make it more acceptable to a degree.

I totally agree with the fact that video games, television, some films and a minority of music manipulates young teenagers into thinking gang crime and violence is socially acceptable. Especially video games, as you are not just watching it on screen, but also participating in the action

i feel films do glamorise crime and make it seem 'cool' yet teenagers are old enough to no right from wrong and either way should not commit crimes.

How realistic and close to real life situations a computer game or film was seen to have an impact on whether people would try to recreate the behaviour. The correct age restrictions were also supported by one forum user and they said that they were currently being quite strictly enforced by shops selling violent games or films.

I think that films and games certainly glamorize some aspects of crime particularly to people that can be easily led and the culture of 'do it for a laugh'. I have however noticed that shops are taking the issue of certificates and film ratings such as PG, 15 and 18 etc has been taken more seriously. I know this as I have been asked on a large number of occasions, particularly in the last 3 months to show ID before being allowed to make the purchase.

There was a question of what was the causal factor when it came to the media and crime - would the young people that committed crimes have done so without media influence? Some felt that the media did have an influence on young people's perceptions of crime and the acceptability of certain behaviour, but this user questions whether it was simply a catalyst - with some people more likely to commit crimes than others – regardless of media influence.

The vast majority of people who play violent video games don't commit crimes. But some do. Would they commit the crimes if they didn't play the game, or watch the film? Some would. But is it the video games making them commit the crimes, or them being future criminals giving them the interest in the game? I'd say the last one.

Political Context

Crime, law and order, violence, vandalism and anti-social behaviour are consistently issues that adults put at the top of their priorities for Government when asked in opinion polls what the most important issues are facing Britain¹. Most groups of adults however are less likely to be victims of crime than children or young people².

Young people are also often portrayed negatively in the media which can mean the majority of young people are being blamed for the criminal behaviour of a small

¹ The second most important issue after the economy in the [Ipsos MORI issues index February 2009](#).

² Men aged 16-24 are most likely to be victims of crime and 51% of 11-16 year olds surveyed in a Ipsos MORI/Youth Justice Board youth survey had been victims of crime in the last 12 months.

minority³ - leading to distrust or even fear by adults. This shows how crucial it is that they are able to not only give their views on such serious issues as crime and justice, but that they are able to have their views fed into the political process to improve the outcomes of the decision making processes that will disproportionately affect them.

HeadsUp makes sure that young people's views on crime are sent to the appropriate policy-makers, journalists and politicians so they can take into account young people's views on the issues.

The HeadsUp team would like to convey our thanks and appreciation to the decision-makers, young people and teachers that got involved in this important debate. We would also like to extend an invitation to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, interested NGOs, academics and journalists to respond to the findings.

Responses and requests for further information should be directed to:

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³ Media Portrayal of Young People – impact and influences (December 2008)
http://www.ncb.org.uk/Page.asp?originx_8357eg_74606060750424n64m_20091275132z