

A Portrait of Modern Britain

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Crime and closing the 'Toughness Gap'

David Spencer and Alexander Tait



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Endorsement

“As this timely report sets out, voters across the political spectrum, and across ethnicities, want much bolder action on crime. The Left has often been far too squeamish about policing, despite crime’s disproportionate effect on the working class communities we seek to represent. The new Labour government now has the opportunity to face down the vocal anti-police activists, back our officers to take back the streets, and reconnect with our working-class base in the process.”

Jonathan Hinder MP – Labour MP for Pendle & Clitheroe

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About A Portrait of Modern Britain

A Portrait of Modern Britain is a major project being undertaken by Policy Exchange. It aims to analyse current demographic trends in modern Britain, including significant regional and local variations in age and demography – and how these are changing over time – while charting the wide range of views held by the populous on matters from healthcare to history; immigration to economics.

The first ‘Portrait of Modern Britain’ study was carried out for Policy Exchange in 2014 by two young researchers named Rishi Sunak and Saratha Rajeswaran, the first of whom would go on to become the UK’s first ethnic minority Prime Minister of modern times. Focusing on the lives and contributions of ethnic minority citizens, it was welcomed by politicians and political leaders across the political spectrum.

Using bespoke polling carried out exclusively for Policy Exchange, the project aims to identify how governments can successfully focus on what unites us – and how to deliver for the country – building on the latent strengths of British identity and culture that bind us together, while fulfilling the legitimate material and economic aspirations of the younger generation.

Future reports in the series will place a spotlight on young Britons, and on national attitudes towards the economy and other key public services.

A Portrait of Modern Britain is being led by a team including Iain Mansfield, Rakib Ehsan and Lara Brown of Policy Exchange.

About the Authors

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Contents

Endorsement	2
About A Portrait of Modern Britain	4
About the Authors	5
Introduction	7
Key Findings	9
1. Voters across every demographic group want the police to take a tougher approach to crime	9
2. The 2019 Conservative voters with the toughest views on crime abandoned the party in 2024	10
3. Reform UK is establishing themselves as the political home for those who are most likely to be dissatisfied with the police and want the police to be tougher on crime	13
4. Labour’s crime and disorder policies in Government risk being out of step with their 2024 voters	16
5. The crime and disorder policies of the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party are also out of step with their 2024 voters	21
6. Contrary to the prevailing narrative, ethnic minorities report far higher levels of confidence and satisfaction in the police than white respondents	22
7. Reflecting that crime hits the poorest hardest, those who are economically struggling are the group who most want the police to be tougher on crime	24
8. The public want the police to focus their time on violent crime – not for example online ‘hate crime’ or ‘community outreach’	26
Conclusion: What does a tougher approach on crime and criminals look like?	28

Introduction

British policing, and the criminal justice system more widely, is in crisis.

Great swathes of the public believe that those who commit crimes do not suffer sufficient consequences for their actions.¹ They witness police officers being told to consider making fewer arrests,² and a low likelihood of offenders being charged or summonsed to court.³ When they look at the criminal courts, the public see huge delays⁴ and lenient sentences for those that have broken the law.⁵ The public observe individuals in their neighbourhoods continuing a life of crime, when they should be in prison.

There is a significant distance between how tough on crime and criminals the public believe the police and criminal justice system should be, and how tough on crime and criminals the public believe the police and criminal justice system currently are. We call this the ‘Toughness Gap’.

And this is not just about public perception. While overall crime may have fallen over the 30 years, this headline obscures an explosion in many types of crime – including an increase in criminal offences by 12% over the last year alone.⁶ Robbery increased from 62,354 offences in 2021 to 82,437 in the year to September 2024.⁷ Knife crime increased by 88.6% between 2015 and 2024.⁸ Police recorded incidents of shoplifting increased by 23% between 2023 and the year to September 2024 – the highest levels since current records began over 20 years ago.⁹ Fraud increased by 19% over the last year.¹⁰ Between 2010 and 2018 over 70% of police stations in London were closed.¹¹ Between 2010 and 2017 the number of police officers in England and Wales was cut by 19%, before a rapid recruitment exercise replaced some of the officers lost.¹² By 2024 the number of police officers was still 3% below 2010 levels.¹³

As part of its ‘A Portrait of Modern Britain’ project, Policy Exchange commissioned exclusive polling on the views of the British public across a wide range of areas – including on crime and policing. This report reveals that a distinctive electoral battleground has opened on crime and policing.

We reveal two key trends.

- (i) Firstly, there is a clear mandate for the police to adopt a tougher approach to crime than they are currently perceived to be taking. This finding is observed across every major demographic group (age, sex, ethnicity), every economic grouping and amongst supporters of every political party.
- (ii) Secondly, Reform UK is establishing itself as the political home for those who are most likely to be dissatisfied with policing and those who believe there is the greatest gap between how tough

1. House of Commons Justice Select Committee, Survey of 2,057 adults in England and Wales (24th February to 1st March 2023), [link](#)
2. BBC News, Police urged to consider making fewer arrests, 22nd May 2024, [link](#)
3. Home Office, Crime outcomes in England and Wales 2023 to 2024, 24th July 2024, [link](#)
4. Ministry of Justice, Justice Data, 12th December 2024, [link](#)
5. See examples of case studies within: D. Spencer (2024), *The Wicked and the Redeemable: A Long-Term Plan to Fix a Criminal Justice System in Crisis*, Policy Exchange, [link](#)
6. Office for National Statistics, Crime in England and Wales: year ending September 2024, [link](#)
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. E. Facchetti (2024), *Police Infrastructure, Police Performance, and Crime: Evidence from Austerity Cuts*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, April 2024, [link](#)
12. Home Office, *Police Workforce: England and Wales*, 31st March 2024, [link](#)
13. *Ibid.*

policing should be and how tough policing currently is.

These two trends come with lessons and warnings for other political parties – particularly the incumbent Labour Government.

Many within Government believe that it has only a ‘narrow path’ to tread when it comes to crime and policing. On one side maintaining the confidence of the law-abiding majority that they will be protected from crime and criminals; on the other retaining the confidence of various groups – such as black people, women or those in more deprived circumstances – not to be subject to ‘over-reach’ by policing.

This is a false antithesis. It is a formula which inherently excludes the very sense of a law-abiding majority – of whatever ethnicity or sex or economic status – instead creating a notion that those from ‘minority’ groups need to be protected at all costs from a repressive State. Those seeking to frame the issues in this way include a vast array of activist and lobby groups – including, amongst others: The Runnymede Trust, Inquest and Liberty (‘The National Council for Civil Liberties’), alongside a cadre of their legal supporters. In reality – across different demographic groups including ethnic minorities and those who are economically struggling, there is a clear appetite for a tougher approach to crime in Britain today.

The maintenance of order and the protection of its citizens is the most fundamental task of any government. Failure to do so is usually followed by an increase in the political saliency of crime.¹⁴ Polling in 2024 showed that a belief that crime was the most important issue facing the country had reached its highest levels since 2019.¹⁵ Before the General Election last year 79% of the British electorate considered crime to be “a big problem”.¹⁶

If the feeling that the state – through the police and criminal justice system – is not adequately protecting the public from crime continues to grow, then this issue will become increasingly salient in our politics. Its effect will be that political parties that fail to meet the public’s demands for a less permissive approach to crime and disorder are electorally punished. If Labour are to meet the expectations of the public on crime and policing it is this central message that must be reflected in the Government’s policies and narrative. If Labour do not, as we show in this paper, they can expect that Reform UK will be well positioned to take advantage.

14. S. Karstedt & R. Enticht (2022), Crime And Punishment: Public Opinion And Political Law-And-Order Rhetoric In Europe 1996–2019, *British Journal of Criminology*, [link](#)

15. Yougov, The most important issue facing the country, 971 - 5226 GB Adults per wave, [link](#)

16. Ipsos, Majority of Britons think crime is a big problem with 6 in 10 Britons believing it has risen over the past year, 26th June 2024, [Link](#)

Key Findings

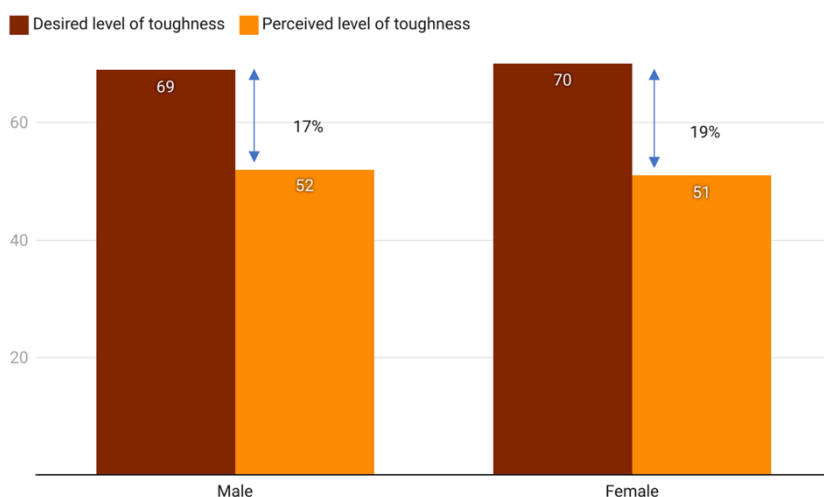
1. Voters across every demographic group want the police to take a tougher approach to crime

Perhaps the clearest trend in the polling data is that respondents across every major demographic breakdown – across different age groups, both sexes and different ethnic groups – and supporters of every political party show a clear preference for the police taking a ‘tougher’ approach to crime than they perceive is currently the case.

This is demonstrated through what we have called the ‘toughness gap’: the difference between how tough on crime respondents view the police as being and how tough on crime respondents want the police to be.¹⁷

There are only marginal differences in the ‘toughness gap’ reported by men and women – with both groups believing to a substantial degree that the police should be tougher on crime than they currently perceive the police to be.

Chart 1: The gap, by sex, between the public’s perception of how tough the police are on crime and how tough the police should be on crime¹⁸



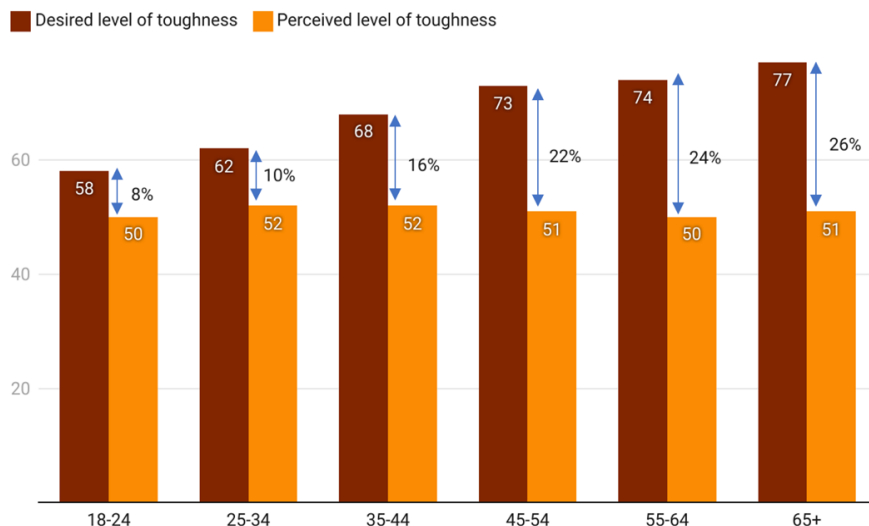
Amongst different age groups, the ‘toughness gap’ increases progressively as Britons get older – with the gap for both the 55 to 64 year olds and the 65 years plus cohort being three times as large as that for 18 to 24 year olds. All age groups perceive the police’s toughness at a similar level; the larger gap amongst older people emerges from older Britons

17. The ‘toughness’ gap is calculated as follows. Respondents were asked how tough they perceived the police to be on crime and how tough they would like the police to be on crime. For both questions, respondents were asked to give a score from 0 to 10 with 10 being ‘extremely tough’ and 0 being ‘extremely soft’. A weighted average score based on the number of respondents for each score was then created. The ‘toughness gap’ was then the difference between the two weighted averages as percentages.

18. Polling for Policy Exchange by Redfield and Wilson Strategies, 3rd to 5th February 2024, sample size: n=2,000, [link](#)

advocating for the police to take a much tougher approach to crime.

Chart 2: The gap, by age group, between the public’s perception of how tough the police are on crime and how tough the police should be on crime¹⁹



By voting intention, there is a toughness gap for every political party. The toughness gap is almost identical for both Labour and Conservative voters at 17% and 18% respectively, is 9% for Liberal Democrat voters, 13% for Green voters and 38% for Reform UK voters. This is a feature explored in sections two, three, four and five of this report.

Amongst different ethnic groups, the toughness gap is largest amongst white respondents – being three times as large as that of black and Asian respondents – a feature we explore in greater detail in section six of this report.

Across different economic groups, those who describe themselves as economically ‘struggling’ report the largest ‘toughness gap’ – at 21%. This compares to a ‘toughness gap’ of 19% for those who describe themselves as ‘comfortable’ and 17% for those who describe themselves as ‘just getting by’. This feature is explored in more detail in section seven of this report.

2. The 2019 Conservative voters with the toughest views on crime abandoned the party in 2024

In 2019 34% of respondents voted Conservative – however, by 2024 the share of voters who intended to vote Conservative had fallen to 19%.²⁰ Of those who voted for the Conservatives in 2019: 26% did not intend to vote at all in 2024, 24% planned to switch to Reform UK and 12% planned to switch to Labour.²¹ Notably, the Conservative’s record on crime was the reason given for many of those who did switch their vote – with nearly a third of switchers to Reform UK and almost a fifth of switchers to Labour listing the Conservative Government’s record on crime when asked why they voted as they did.²²

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ipsos, No easy answers: new analysis from Ipsos examines why 2019 Conservative voters left the party in 2024, 1st October 2024, [link](#)

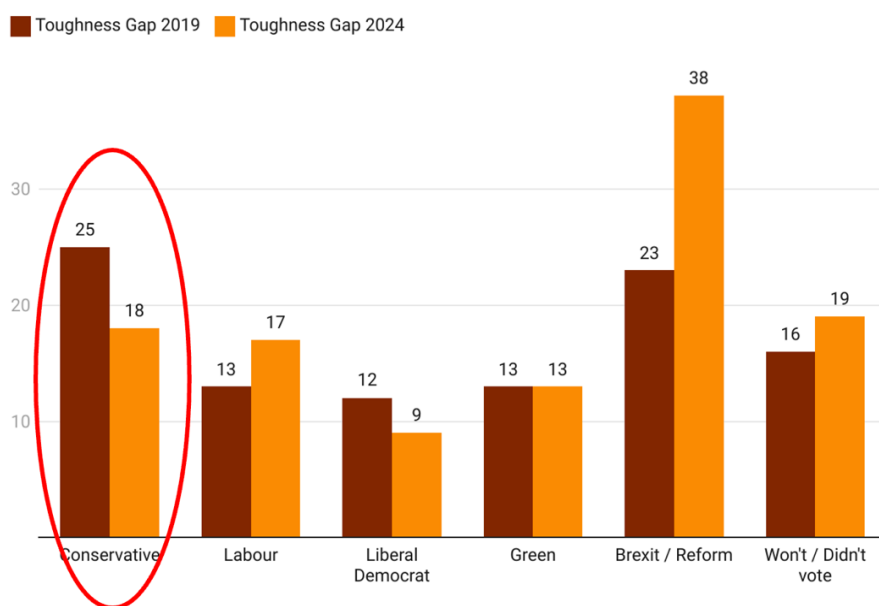
22. Ipsos, No easy answers: new analysis from Ipsos examines why 2019 Conservative voters left the party in 2024, 1st October 2024, [link](#)

The departure of these voters left behind a smaller Conservative cohort who were less likely to be critical of the current approach to crime and policing. In all three key measures – the ‘toughness gap’, respondents’ confidence in the police to protect them from crime, and respondents’ satisfaction with the police response after reporting a crime – attitudes towards the police of those who intended to vote Conservative in 2024 became more favourable compared to their 2019 counterparts. We attribute this to the flight of the Conservative’s 2019 ‘tough on crime’ voter bloc.

Taking each of the three key measures in turn:

- (i) The ‘toughness gap’ for Conservative voters shrank from 25% in 2019 to 18% in 2024. This was the largest decrease of any major party over this period – there was a smaller decrease in the ‘toughness gap’ amongst Liberal Democrat voters and no change amongst Green voters. The ‘toughness gap’ for Labour voters meanwhile increased from 13% to 17% while the ‘toughness gap’ for Brexit / Reform UK voters surged from 23% in 2019 to 38% in 2024.

Chart 3: The ‘toughness gap’, by political party, for voters in 2019 and by voting intention in 2024²³

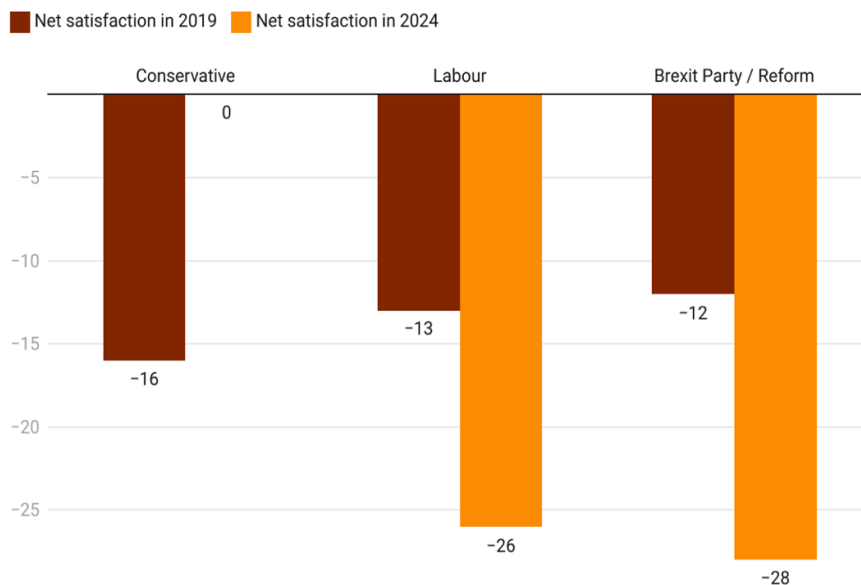


- (ii) Those intending to vote Conservative in 2024 were less likely than the Party’s 2019 voters to be dissatisfied with the police’s response to a reported crime – with ‘net satisfaction’ rates increasing from minus 16% to 0%. In contrast, Labour’s 2024 voters were more likely to be dissatisfied with the police’s response to a reported crime than their 2019 counterparts – with ‘net satisfaction’ levels falling by 13% to minus 26%. Comparing 2019 Brexit Party voters with intended 2024 Reform UK voters, the fall is even more

23. Polling for Policy Exchange by Redfield and Wilson Strategies, 3rd to 5th February 2024, sample size: n=2,000, [link](#)

precipitous: from minus 12% to minus 28% – a fall of 16%.

Chart 4: Net satisfaction of 2019 & 2024 voters (Conservative, Labour & Brexit/Reform UK) in the police after reporting a crime²⁴



(iii) Conservative voters’ confidence in the police to protect respondents from crime were more favourable in 2024 than in 2019 – increasing from 69% of respondents having some measure of confidence to 78%. The views of Labour voters over the same period remained broadly unchanged with 70% of respondents having some measure of confidence in the police in both 2019 and 2024. For Brexit / Reform UK voters their confidence in the police plummeted – from 57% to only 46% having some measure of confidence in the police in 2019 and 2024 respectively.

Chart 5: Conservative 2024 & 2019 voters’ confidence in the police to protect them from crime²⁵

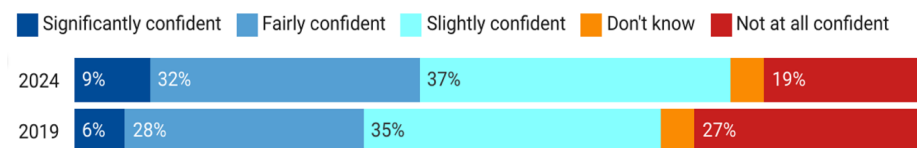
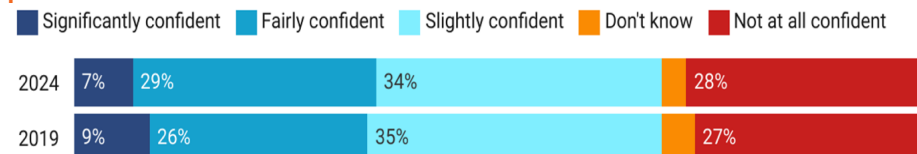
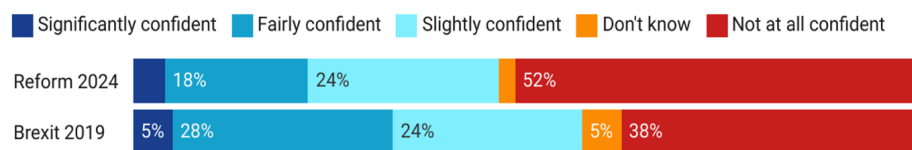


Chart 6: Labour 2024 & 2019 voters’ confidence in the police to protect them from crime²⁶



24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.

Chart 7: Reform 2024 & Brexit Party voters' confidence in the police to protect them from crime²⁷



As outlined earlier in this report, while overall crime fell over the 14 years that the Conservative Party was in Government,²⁸ there are specific trends which have been deeply harmful for the Conservative's reputation as a party of 'law and order'. The Conservative record on crime in government, and in particular a perception that they were insufficiently 'tough on crime and criminals', was a key failure for which the Party was punished by a significant swathe of their previous voters. If the Party is to rebuild their previous coalitions at future elections and regain power it will need to re-establish its credentials with 'tough on crime' voters as being serious about the fight against crime and disorder.

3. Reform UK is establishing themselves as the political home for those who are most likely to be dissatisfied with the police and want the police to be tougher on crime

While Reform UK benefit from having no record in Government to defend, the party's narrative on policing and justice has been consistent and unambiguously 'tough' on crime. Reform UK's 2024 General Election manifesto, "Our Contract with You", contained commitments to: recruit 40,000 additional police officers, "Commence Zero Tolerance Policing" and "increase Stop and Search substantially".²⁹ Under the plans outlined by Reform UK those offenders who commit a second violent or serious offence would be sentenced to a mandatory life sentence.³⁰ During the 2024 BBC Election Debate, the Leader of Reform UK Nigel Farage advocated for "broken windows" policing,³¹ which holds that dealing effectively with more minor crimes is likely to prevent more serious offending.³²

During the House of Commons debate into the violent disorder during the summer of 2024, the Reform MP for Ashfield Lee Anderson asked the Home Secretary:

"The amount of stabbings and deaths by stabbings in this country is reaching shocking levels. Over the past few weeks, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have fast-tracked the violent criminals in these riots, and got them into court and in prison within two weeks. Is it not about time that we did the same with these yobboes—these thugs—who are carrying knives?"³³

The largest 'toughness gap' between the desired and perceived current levels of how tough the police are in the fight against crime is amongst 2024 Reform UK voters – at 38% it is over twice the rate of 2024 Conservative,

27. Ibid.

28. Office for National Statistics, Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2024, [link](#)

29. Reform UK (2024), Our Contract with You, [link](#)

30. Ibid.

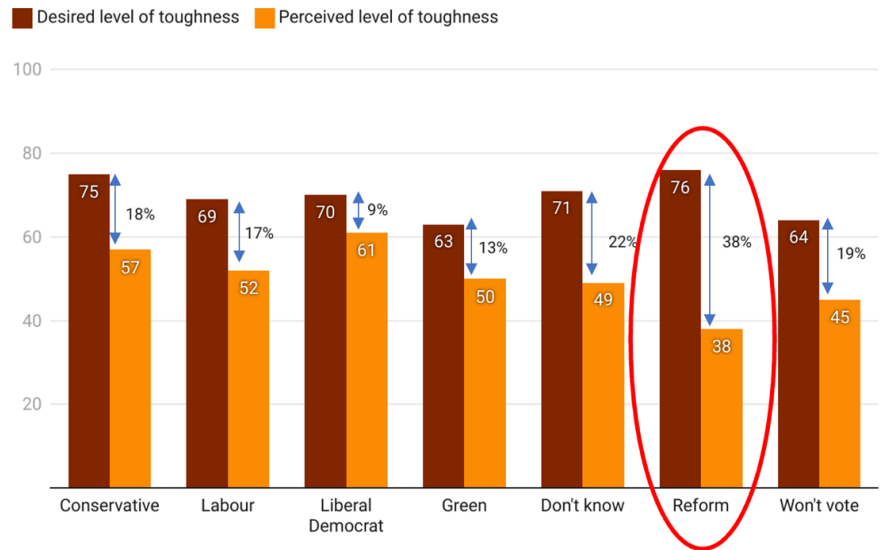
31. BBC Election Debate 2024, 7th June 2024, [link](#)

32. G. L. Kelling & J. Q. Wilson (1982), Broken Windows: The police and neighbourhood safety, The Atlantic, March 1982, [link](#)

33. Hansard, Vol 753, Column 65, 2nd September 2024, [link](#)

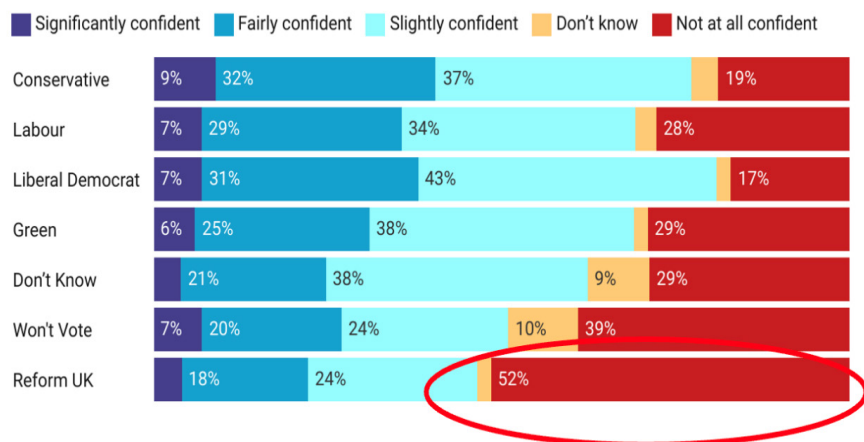
Labour and Green voters; and more than four times the ‘toughness gap’ for 2024 Liberal Democrat voters. The narrative of Reform UK’s on crime and policing is aligned well with the views of their voters.

Chart 8: The gap, by political party (2024), between voters’ perception of how tough the police are on crime and how tough the police should be on crime³⁴



The desire to see the police be ‘tougher’ on crime is matched by Reform UK voters’ unfavourable view of British policing more generally. A majority of Reform UK voters at the 2024 General Election report ‘not being at all confident in the ability of the police to protect them from crime’. In contrast less than a third of Green and Labour voters, and less than a fifth of Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters, reported being ‘not at all confident’ in the police.

Chart 9: Confidence in the ability of the police to provide protection from crime, by political party voting intention in 2024³⁵

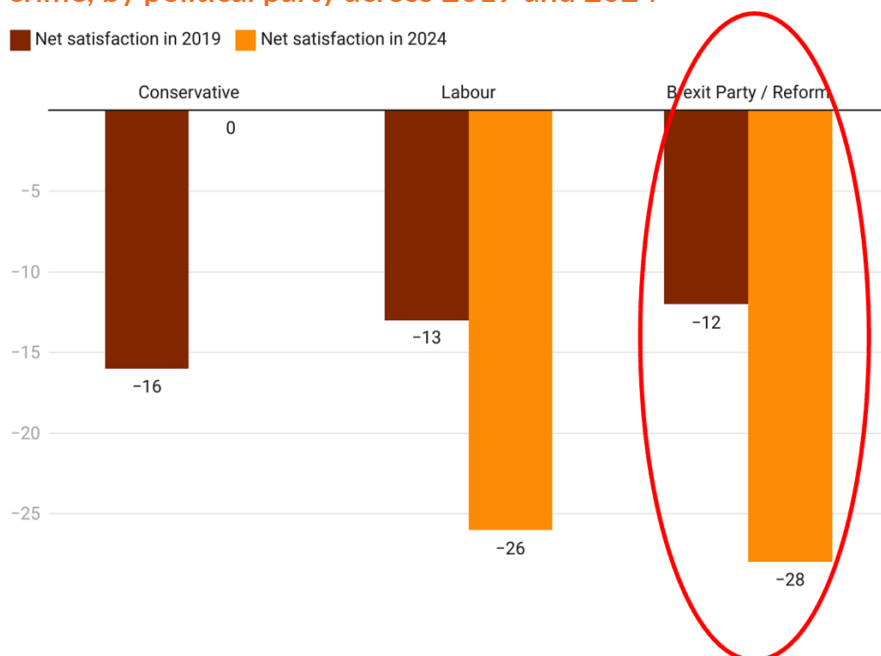


34. Polling for Policy Exchange by Redfield and Wilson Strategies, 3rd to 5th February 2024, sample size: n=2,000, [link](#)

35. Ibid.

This was similarly reflected in the increased dissatisfaction of Reform UK voters (compared to Brexit voters in 2019) when they had reported a crime. In 2019 Brexit voters reported a ‘net satisfaction’ rate in the police of minus 12% – similar to Labour voters’ ‘net satisfaction’ rate of minus 13% and slightly less dissatisfied than Conservative voters on minus 16%. By 2024 Reform UK voters’ dissatisfaction with police actions after reporting a crime was far greater (compared to 2019 Brexit Party voters) – ‘net satisfaction’ levels for Reform UK voters decreased to minus 28%, compared to an increase in satisfaction for Conservative voters. Labour voters reported a decline in satisfaction which was similarly precipitous to that reported by Reform UK voters.

Chart 10: Net satisfaction with the police’s response after reporting a crime, by political party across 2019 and 2024³⁶



The lack of confidence in, and dissatisfaction with, policing amongst Reform UK voters reflects a broader belief that the British state is failing to deliver across a range of functions. Of Reform UK voters: 56% (more than any other mainstream political party – including Scottish Nationalist Party voters) have a “Negative opinion of the United Kingdom as it is today”, 77% believe “immigrants to the UK are getting more priority from the Government”, and they are less likely than voters of other parties to expect good treatment from the NHS.³⁷

Not all voters that are discontent with the police, however, have found a political home in Reform UK. Policy Exchange has previously examined the phenomenon of “sofa voters” – those individuals who voted in 2019, but did not vote in 2024.³⁸ The 2024 election saw the number of those failing to vote rise substantially, with overall voter turnout at this election being the lowest since 2001. Of these non-voters: 9.1 million considered voting, 2.7 million of which seriously considered voting, constituting

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. J. Vitali (2024), The Sofa Voter, Policy Exchange, [link](#)

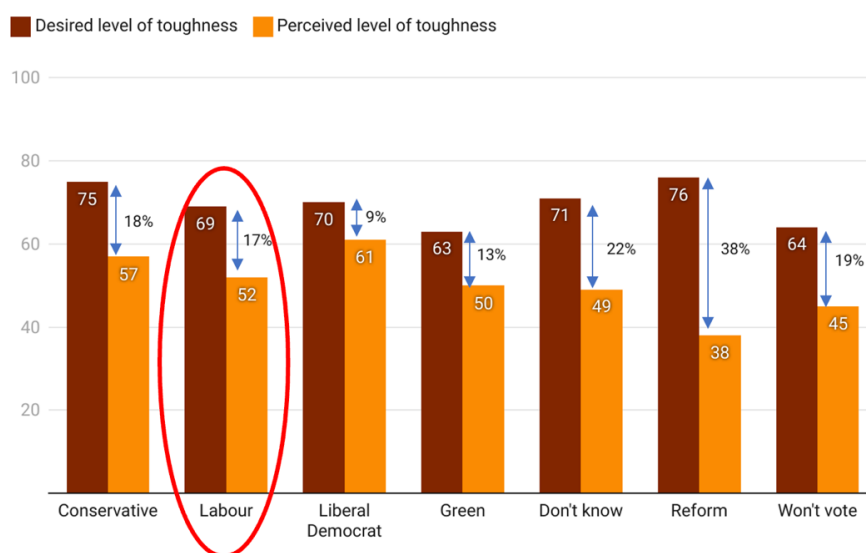
– as Policy Exchange demonstrated at the time – a potentially decisive electoral bloc.³⁹ This offers a huge political opportunity. Any party able to effectively appeal to these voters on crime and tap into their considerable dissatisfaction with the police would be well positioned to take advantage of it electorally.

4. Labour’s crime and disorder policies in Government risk being out of step with their 2024 voters

The example of the Conservative Party in Government – and their performance on crime, criminal justice and policing during that fourteen-year period – should serve as a warning to Labour in Government. A combination of factors suggest that it is Reform UK’s pitch to voters on crime, policing and criminal justice which Labour is most vulnerable to. These include: Labour voters’ evident dissatisfaction with the police response to crime and a desire for a tougher policing approach to crime; Labour’s policy and performance in Government so far; the gap between the views of many Labour MPs and their voters; the results of the 2024 General Election; and the reality that 2024 Labour voters may well be attracted by Reform UK’s unambiguously ‘tough on crime’ narrative.

Labour voters are unambiguous in seeking a tougher and less permissive approach to crime with a ‘toughness gap’ of 17% between the desired and perceived level of toughness in the police’s approach to crime.

Chart 11: The gap, by political party (2024), between voters’ perception of how tough the police are on crime and how tough the police should be on crime⁴⁰



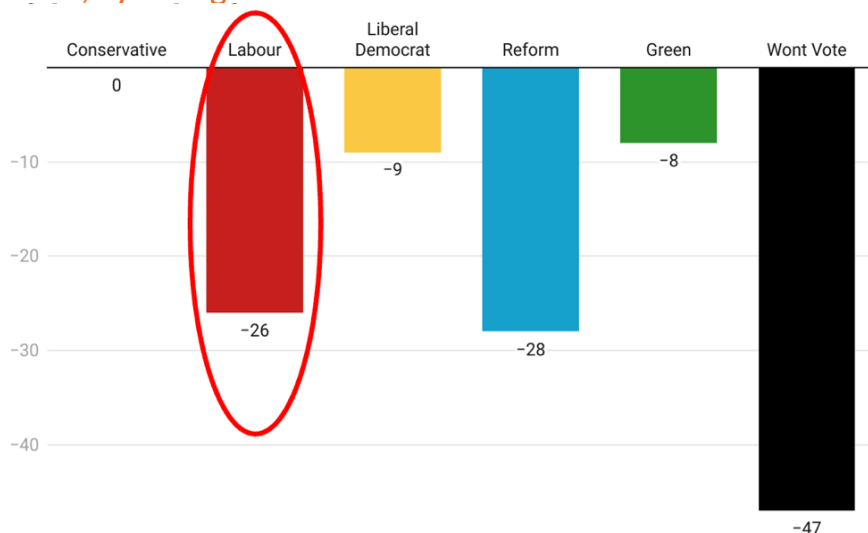
Reflecting their desire for a tougher approach to crime and criminals Labour’s 2024 voters also report low levels of confidence in policing – with 28% reporting that they were ‘not at all confident’ in the police’s ability to protect them from crime. Labour voters are also highly dissatisfied with

39. Ibid.

40. Polling for Policy Exchange by Redfield and Wilson Strategies, 3rd to 5th February 2024, sample size: n=2,000, [link](#)

the police response to crime – with a net satisfaction rate of minus 26%. This is a greater level of dissatisfaction than 2024 Conservative voters whose net satisfaction rate with the police response to an offence they had reported is zero (indicating that as many 2024 Conservative voters were as dissatisfied as satisfied with the police response to an offence they had reported) and almost as low as Reform UK on minus 28%.

Chart 12: Net satisfaction with the police’s response after reporting a crime, by voting intention in 2024⁴¹



The Labour 2024 General Election manifesto established, as one of the Party’s missions for government to: “Take back our streets”. The Party made commitments to: recruit more police officers into neighbourhood policing, start “Cracking down on antisocial behaviour”, deliver a “Knife crime action plan” and to continue “Tackling violence against women and girls”.⁴²

However, these commitments and the desire of Labour voters to see a ‘tougher’ approach to crime, jars with some of the actions taken by Labour in government since the election in July 2024.

In July 2024 the Government sought, and Parliament approved, changes to the law which enabled some prisoners serving determinate sentences to be automatically released from prison at the 40% point, rather than currently at the 50% point. The change came into effect on the 10th September 2024 for those serving sentences of less than five years and the 22nd October 2024 for those serving sentences of five year or more. The Government have claimed, with some justification, that the prisoner release was a necessity due to the inheritance bequeathed them by their Conservative predecessors – and would only be a temporary measure. However, the scenes of inmates being released early from prison and being collected in luxury motor vehicles, drinking bottles of champagne and expressing their gratitude to the Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer MP, does not assist the Government in delivering a narrative that they are relentlessly protecting the law-abiding majority and taking a tough

41. Ibid.

42. Labour Party, “Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024”, [link](#)

approach to crime and criminals.

The early release of prisoners also appears to reflect a strand of thought within Labour which diagnoses the British justice system as excessively carceral. This was most obviously articulated by Lord Timpson, now the Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending prior to his time in Government when he said in a February 2024 television interview that the country was “addicted to sentencing, addicted to punishment.”⁴³ He also stated that:

“We have 85,000 people in prison, it’s gonna go up to 100,000 pretty soon – a third of them should definitely be there. There’s another third in the middle which probably shouldn’t be there but they need some other kind of state support, a lot of them have got massive mental health issues, they’ve been in an out of prison all their lives. And then, there’s another third, and this is a large proportion of women, prison is a disaster for them because it’s just putting them back in the offending cycle.”⁴⁴

The chair of the Government’s Independent Sentencing Review, former Secretary of State for Justice and former Conservative MP David Gauke has said:

“I think there is a question to be asked – do we want to keep on building prison capacity when, one, it’s very expensive and two, the evidence does not suggest that it’s an effective way of reducing crime.”⁴⁵

If the Government does not deliver a tougher, and less permissive, approach to crime and criminals – not merely in terms of occasional narrative, but in terms which the public can see in their local neighbourhoods – they will electorally suffer at the hands of those political parties who make such promises.

This is the kind of challenge that the Labour Government’s most senior strategists must navigate in the swirling shoals of internal ‘coalition politics’ that is the Party’s ‘broad church’. The responses of various Labour politicians following the recent not guilty verdict in the prosecution of the police officer who shot and killed Chris Kaba are revealing. Following the verdict the Labour Mayor of London offered only the most tepid support for police officers – mentioning only briefly the pressure that firearms officers work under.⁴⁶ The statement by the Labour Leader of Lambeth Council failed to offer even this minimal level of support for the thousands of police officers working to keep the residents of Lambeth safe from crime and criminals – focusing instead on her desire to speak, “to the Met and the government to continue the push for change that we need to see in both Lambeth and London to ensure that we have the fair and accountable policing our communities both need and deserve.”⁴⁷

Within the Parliamentary Labour Party the contest for how the Government should approach these issues is most clearly on display.

On one side are those MPs, often hailing from the ‘Red Wall’, who understand that only a Labour Party that is “tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime” has any chance of retaining and winning support

43. Channel 4, Timpson’s boss on upside-down management and business secrets, 29th February 2024, [link](#)

44. Ibid.

45. BBC News, Building more prisons not answer to crisis – Gauke, 14th November 2024, [link](#)

46. Statement from the Mayor of London, 21st October 2024, [link](#)

47. Statement from the Leader of Lambeth Council, 21st October 2024, [link](#)

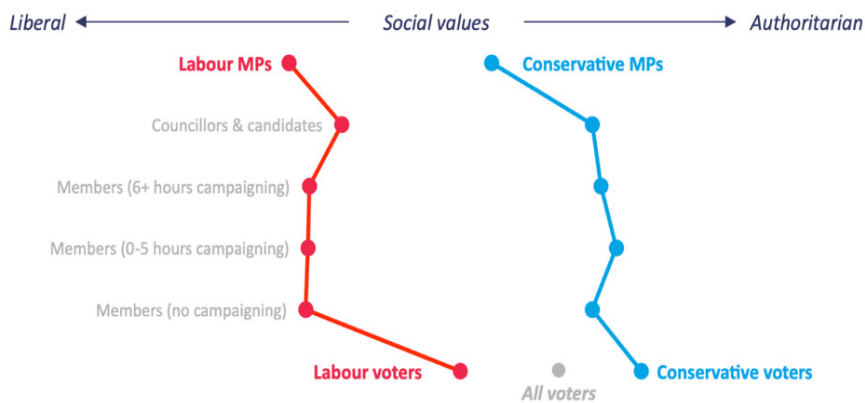
beyond a narrow sliver of ultra-progressives. In the aftermath of the verdict in the Kaba case, Jonathan Hinder MP (a former police officer and Labour MP for Pendle & Clitheroe) recognised in the House of Commons that his former colleagues in the police service run towards danger, pursue dangerous criminals and – very rarely – must use lethal force, all on the public’s behalf.⁴⁸

Meanwhile Kim Johnson MP, the Labour MP for Liverpool Riverside – who has campaigned against the joint-enterprise laws which are key in the fight against crime – claimed that “the police have protections, while our black communities are over-policed and under-supported”.⁴⁹ Thankfully, in response, the Home Secretary demonstrated she had little truck with Ms Johnson’s perspective.⁵⁰

It is not unusual for MPs to be wildly out of step with their voters in relation to social values, as demonstrated by Cowley’s (2020) work replicated in Chart 13 below. However, if in Government Labour fails to chart a course which demonstrates that it genuinely understands (in a way which some of its own elected representatives clearly do not) what the law-abiding majority of people in this country want on crime and policing there will be electoral consequences. Because the public are very clear – they want police forces and a criminal justice system which is less permissive and tougher on crime and criminals.

Chart 13: Social values of Conservative and Labour MPs, councillors and candidates, members and voters, 2020 (UK in a Changing Europe research)⁵¹

Social values of Conservative and Labour MPs, councillors and candidates, members, and voters, 2020.



Source: ESRC Party Members Project survey, YouGov, fieldwork Dec 2019; UK in a Changing Europe MPs survey, Ipsos Mori, fieldwork Jan-Feb 2020; BES Internet Panel Wave 17, fieldwork Nov 2019, and Wave 19, fieldwork Dec 2019.

That Reform UK won only five seats at the 2024 General Election understates the electoral risk they pose to Labour. With over 4.1 million votes and 14.3% of the total number of votes, Reform UK achieved an undeniably significant voting bloc at the 2024 General Election. However, the principal cause for concern for Labour – given the nature of the ‘First Past The Post’ electoral system – is that Reform UK came second in 98

48. Hansard, House of Commons, 23rd October 2024, vol. 755 col. 311, [link](#)

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

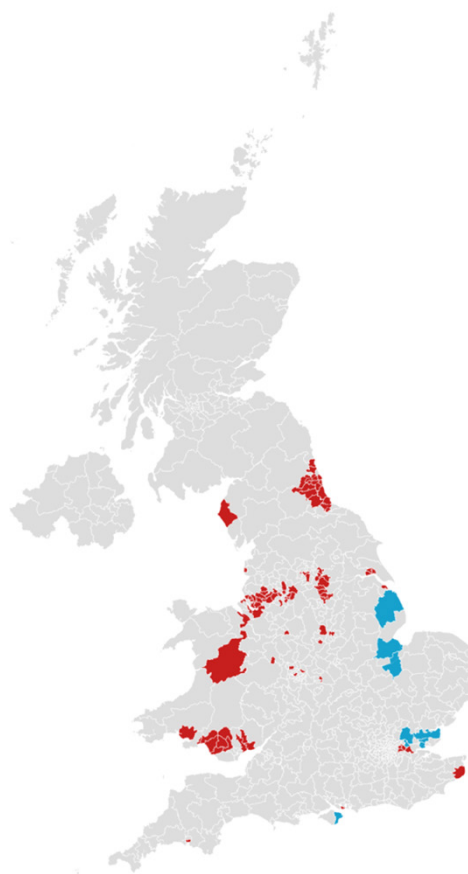
51. P. Cowley (2020), Largest political parties out of touch with voters, 30th June 2020, UK in a Changing Europe, [link](#)

constituencies and, of those, in 89 seats came second to Labour. In a further eleven constituencies, Reform UK came within a 10% margin of the winning party, despite coming third behind both the Conservatives and Labour.⁵² Reform UK would have required less than 4,500 additional votes in each of these seats to overhaul the eventual winner – indeed if Reform UK were able to take votes from both Labour and Conservatives simultaneously it would take far fewer votes to swing the seat their way. This suggests that these constituencies too could be vulnerable to the appeal of Reform UK.

In relation to policing, in particular, it is not only a prospective 2029 General Election which Downing Street should be alive to – it is other elections between now and then, including elections for Police and Crime Commissioners in 2028.

Chart 14: Map showing constituencies at the 2024 General Election where Reform came second to the winning Party (colours based on winning Party)

■ Conservative ■ Labour



Whilst Labour voters in the past could attribute their dissatisfaction with policing to Conservative failings, the responsibility for ensuring that policing and the wider criminal justice system is effective now lies with them. If the State's performance and approach in this area does not align with voters' expectations, they will eventually lay the blame with the

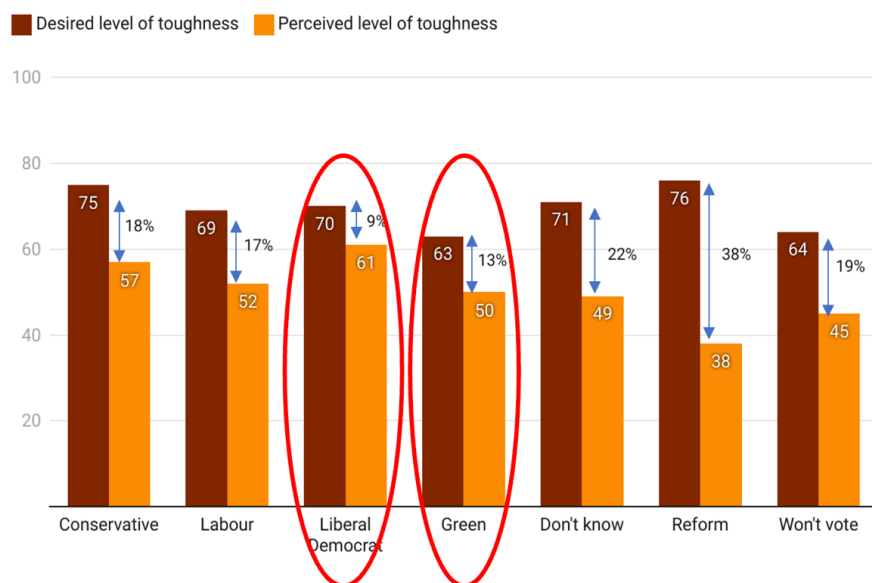
52. Basildon Billericay, Cannock Chase, Tamworth, North Warwickshire and Bedworth, Sittingbourne and Sheppey, Lowestoft, Chatham and Aylesford, Havant, South West Norfolk, Dudley, Bridgwater

incumbent Government. There is a very clear risk that at a future election many 2024 Labour voters will join the leagues of ‘sofa voters’ by staying at home or vote for Reform UK – just as many 2019 Conservative voters did in 2024. Nigel Farage MP has said that his party would now be “coming for Labour.”⁵³ Should such events transpire, the Labour Government cannot say that they were not warned.

5. The crime and disorder policies of the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party are also out of step with their 2024 voters

The difference between the position taken on crime and policing by political parties and the views of their voters does not only apply to Labour and the Conservatives. Voters for both the Liberal Democrats and Green Party want the police to take a tougher approach to crime – yet in both cases the parties’ 2024 General Election manifestos took a different approach.

Chart 15: The gap, by political party, between voters’ perception of how tough the police are on crime and how tough the police should be on crime⁵⁴



The Green Party, in their 2024 General Election manifesto stated:

“Green MPs will expand restorative justice when crimes do take place, both to give victims a voice and to help offenders take responsibility for the harm they have done. We will focus on the prevention of crime through restoring the funding withdrawn from youth services since 2010 and through community-based policing. We will focus on rehabilitation through investment in the probation and prison services; Greens choose to rebuild people’s lives rather than condemning them to a downward cycle of crime and imprisonment.”⁵⁵

53. The Guardian, “We’re coming for Labour: Reform’s small seat count conceals size of its threat”, 5th July 2024, [link](#)

54. Polling for Policy Exchange by Redfield and Wilson Strategies, 3rd to 5th February 2024, sample size: n=2,000, [link](#)

55. Green Party, Real Hope. Real Change: Manifesto for a Fairer Greener Country, [link](#)

Similarly, the Liberal Democrats committed in their recent manifesto to: “end the disproportionate use of stop and search” and “halting the use of facial recognition surveillance”.⁵⁶ More recently, Alistair Carmichael MP, the Liberal Democrat’s Justice Spokesman, put forward a motion at the Party’s Annual Conference to scrap prison sentences for offenders with terms under a year.⁵⁷

The picture we have is one of party leaderships and other elites out of step with the expressed wishes of their own voters.

6. Contrary to the prevailing narrative, ethnic minorities report far higher levels of confidence and satisfaction in the police than white respondents

An oft-heard objection to taking a tougher approach to crime is the discriminatory effects that this might have on ethnic minorities. This concern was invoked by the then Leader of the Opposition, Sir Keir Starmer MP when opposing the Conservative Government’s Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill in 2021.⁵⁸ The notion that British policing is “institutionally racist,” after coming to prominence in the 1999 Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (chaired by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny),⁵⁹ was reaffirmed by the Baroness Casey Review into the Metropolitan Police in 2023.⁶⁰

Elements of this narrative have been embraced by some in policing with the 2022 Police Race Action Plan, jointly developed by the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the College of Policing, setting out changes to ensure “an anti-racist culture, values and behaviours within policing.”⁶¹ The Plan aims to address “disparities affecting Black people” and “lower levels of trust and confidence in the police among some Black people.”⁶² The Police Race Action Plan goes on to claim that these low levels of confidence amongst black people stem from being “under-protected and over-policed.”⁶³

Many assertions concerning these issues reflect those made by activist organisations, purporting to speak on behalf of minority groups.⁶⁴ Our data, however, finds them wanting.

When questioned on their confidence in the ability of the police to protect them from crime, both black and Asian respondents expressed higher levels of confidence than white respondents. Almost a third of white respondents stated that they were ‘not at all confident’ in the ability of the police – the highest levels of any ethnic group. Perhaps most strikingly, black respondents were three times more likely to express that they were ‘significantly confident’ in the police’s ability to protect them from crime than white respondents.

56. Liberal Democrats, For a Fair Deal: Manifesto 2024, [link](#)

57. Daily Telegraph, Burglars should be spared jail, say Lib Dems, 12th September 2024, [link](#)

58. The Independent, Keir Starmer: Impact of government’s police bill on Black people is ‘concerning’, 24th March 2021, [link](#)

59. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (1999), February 1999, Cm 4262-I, [link](#)

60. L. Casey (2023), Final Report: An independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service, March 2023, [link](#)

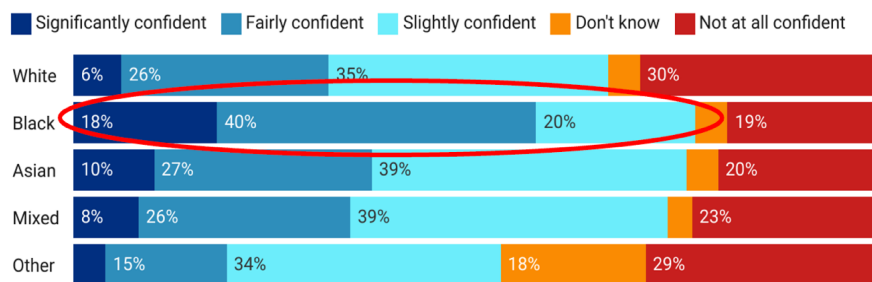
61. NPCC, Police action plan released to address race disparities affecting Black people, changing a legacy of distrust, 24th May 2022, [link](#)

62. Ibid.

63. NPCC & College of Policing, Police Race Action Plan, 2022, [link](#)

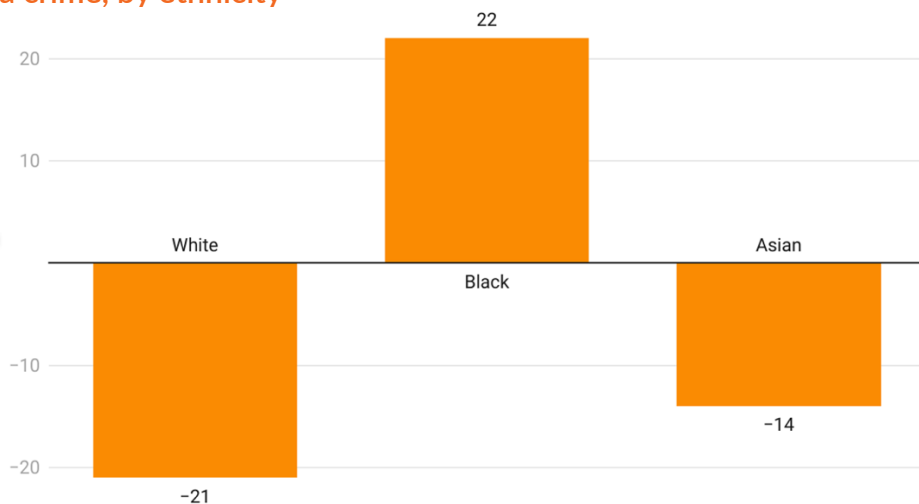
64. See for example: Runnymede Trust (2023), Over-policed and under-protected: The road to Safer Schools, January 2023, [link](#)

Chart 16: Confidence in the ability of the police to provide protection from crime, by ethnic group⁶⁵



White respondents who had suffered a crime were far more likely to be dissatisfied than black respondents with the way it was handled by the police. On the contrary, black respondents were the only group to possess positive levels of ‘net satisfaction’ with the way the police had handled any crimes they had been the victim of.

Chart 17: Net satisfaction with the police’s response after reporting a crime, by ethnicity⁶⁶

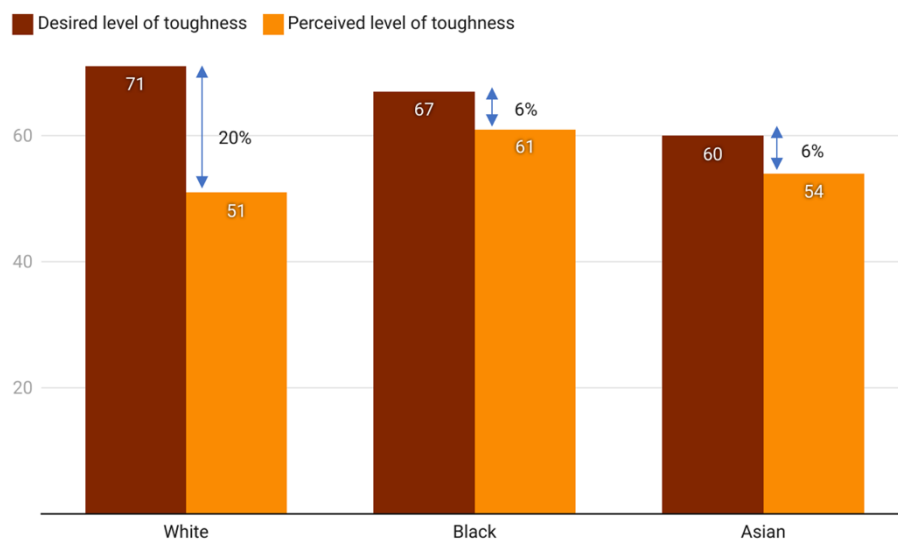


Additionally, though there was some disparity across different ethnic groups, when asked how tough on crime they perceived the police to be and how tough they wished them to be, all groups wanted the police to be more tough on crime than they currently perceive the police to be.

65. Polling for Policy Exchange by Redfield and Wilson Strategies, 3rd to 5th February 2024, sample size: n=2,000, [link](#)

66. Ibid.

Chart 18: The gap, by ethnicity, between the public’s perception of how tough the police are on crime and how tough the police should be on crime⁶⁷



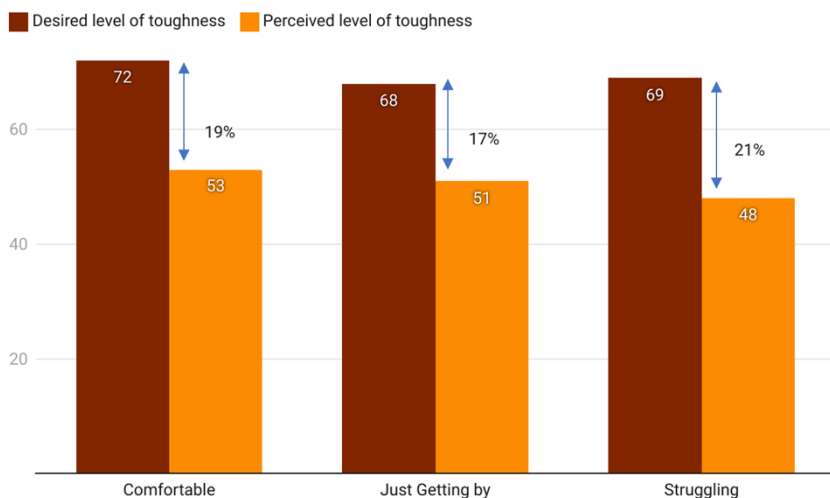
Together this data paints a picture of a black population with more confidence than other ethnic groups in the police’s ability to carry out one of their most basic functions: protecting the public from crime and providing an adequate response when citizens are victims of crime. The notion that black people are a population that is “over-policed and under-protected”, which has seeped into the highest echelons of policing, Government and wider discourse, does not bear scrutiny.

7. Reflecting that crime hits the poorest hardest, those who are economically struggling are the group who most want the police to be tougher on crime

Those who define themselves as economically ‘struggling’, a group that the Labour Party has traditionally sought to represent, are clear in demanding that the police take a tougher approach to crime. Though this wish cuts through all economic groups, with a majority of each deeming the police to be softer on crime than they should be, the struggling category possess a fairly larger ‘toughness gap’ than other groups.

67. Ibid.

Chart 19: The gap, by economic category between respondents' perception of how tough the police are on crime and how tough the police should be on crime⁶⁸



Additionally, those who define themselves as 'struggling' are considerably less likely to have confidence in the police to protect them from crime and to express satisfaction with how the police have addressed any crime they have reported.

Chart 20: Confidence in the ability of the police to provide protection from crime, by economic category⁶⁹

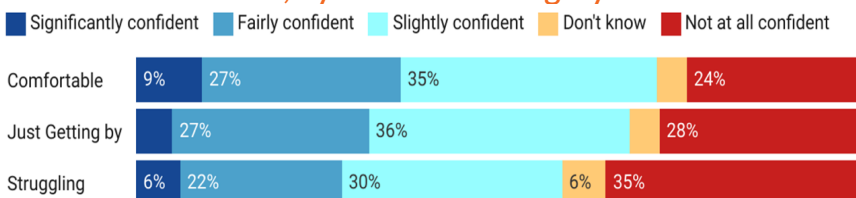


Chart 21: Net satisfaction with the police's response to a reported crime, by economic category⁷⁰



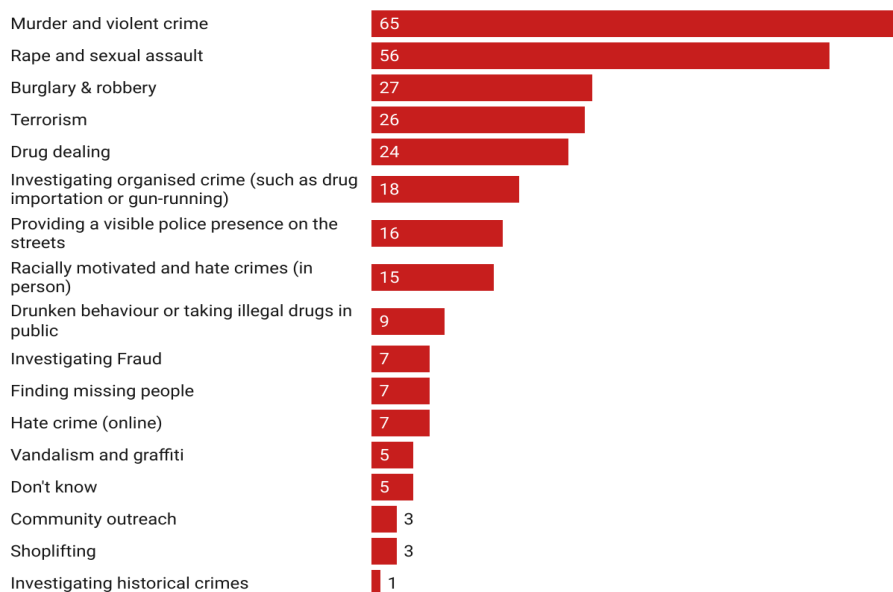
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.

As is well documented, including by David Lammy MP in his 2015 reports for Policy Exchange,⁷¹ the effects of crime are generally most harshly felt by the poorest in society.⁷² Taking these elements together gives strength to the proposal that the current Labour Government should take a tougher approach to crime. Indeed for the Labour Party itself, taking a tougher approach to crime could and should be framed as a key ‘social justice’ issue. Certainly, if the Labour Party does wish to genuinely present itself as being on the side of those who are economically struggling and, in the words of the Prime Minister, be a Government which exists “in the service of working people”⁷³ a tougher approach to crime is essential.

8. The public want the police to focus their time on violent crime – not for example online ‘hate crime’ or ‘community outreach’

In addition to a clear mandate for the police to be tougher on crime, respondents also point towards the areas that they believe the police should prioritise. The activities prioritised by the public are “murder and violent crime” and “rape and sexual assault.” This remains true across every major demographic group – including by age, ethnicity, political affiliation and sex. Similarly, there are a set of activities that respondents, across all major demographic groups, do not believe that the police should prioritise. These include hate crime (online) and “community outreach”. Policy Exchange recently explored one of these areas in ‘Non-Crime Hate Incidents: A chilling distraction from the public’s priorities on policing’ (2024).⁷⁴

Chart 22: Respondents’ top three priorities for the police in the UK⁷⁵



71. D. Lammy (2015), Taking Its Toll: The regressive impact of property crime in Britain, Policy Exchange, March 2015, [link](#) & D. Lammy (2015), Low Crime for All: How to reduce crime for London’s communities, Policy Exchange, September 2015, [link](#)

72. See for example: Trust for London, Crimes recorded by neighbourhood income deprivation decile in London (2023), [link](#)

73. No. 10 Downing Street, Our government of service: Prime Minister Keir Starmer lays out his plans to deliver change for the country, 17th July 2024, [link](#)

74. D. Spencer (2024), ‘Non-Crime Hate Incidents: A chilling distraction from the public’s priorities on policing’, Policy Exchange, [link](#)

75. Polling for Policy Exchange by Redfield and Wilson Strategies, 3rd to 5th February 2024, sample size: n=2,000, [link](#)

A mere 7% of respondents thought the police should focus on “hate crime (online)” as a matter of a priority while only 1% believed that “investigating historical crimes” should be a priority. Likewise, “community outreach” was viewed by only 3% as a priority. A “community outreach” understanding of the police’s role sees local policing as principally a matter of gesturing to different constituent parts of a community, while doing little to actually fight crime and improve the sense of security for the law-abiding majority.

Conclusion: What does a tougher approach on crime and criminals look like?

Policy Exchange's Portrait of Modern Britain polling demonstrates that crime and policing is a policy area which provides remarkable clarity as to the expectations of the wider public. The commonly heard narrative – of an over-bearing and indeed discriminatory State – is dismissed. The public want a tougher approach to crime and criminals.

What would a 'tougher approach to crime' practically look like? We recommend five areas where such an approach could be taken.

1. A narrative and policy focus on enforcement as well as prevention and rehabilitation

In their communications and policy-development on crime the Labour Government focuses insufficiently on enforcement as opposed to their 'comfort-zone' of prevention and rehabilitation – an approach encouraged by an array of Labour's 'stakeholders' and activists. Labour's timidity in supporting and encouraging enforcement activity by the police and other agencies against all criminals, however, is not one shared by the law-abiding majority.

The Party's approach on knife crime is totemic of this approach. In their Manifesto for the General Election Labour rightly described knife crime as a "national crisis" with an aim to "halve knife crime in a decade". Labour outline an array of measures they will take to support prevention and rehabilitation – these include: the creation of a new Young Futures Programme with a "network of hubs reaching every community", local prevention partnerships to "identify young people who could be drawn into violence", and pathways to support young people out of violence by placing "youth workers and mentors in A&E units and Pupil Referral Units".⁷⁶

Each of these activities may well have value, but there is almost nothing in the Labour manifesto on the enforcement activities also necessary to combat knife crime – indeed they state that only the "most serious cases" of knife possession will lead to custody. Yet it is difficult to conceive a case of knife possession or knife-enabled offences which would not be serious. Stop and search is not mentioned by Labour in their manifesto at all.

Section 315 of the Sentencing Act 2020 provides that those over

76. Labour Party, 2024 General Election Manifesto, [link](#)

the age of 16 years old who are convicted of repeated possession of offensive weapons and pointed or bladed articles should be sentenced to a minimum term of imprisonment.⁷⁷ However in around a third of cases of adults (over 18 years old) over the last eight years, Judges and Magistrates have elected not to sentence the offender to immediate custody.⁷⁸ While not imprisoning offenders in such circumstances is permitted under the legislation if the Judge or Magistrate concludes that such a sentence would be ‘wholly unjust’, for such a provision to be applied in as many as a third of cases suggests a weakness towards a type of criminality which is in marked contrast with the public’s expectations.

Sentencing outcomes for offenders (over the age of 18 years) under section 315 of the Sentencing Act 2020 – relating to repeated possession of offensive weapons and pointed or bladed articles⁷⁹

Year Ending (March)	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Adults (aged 18+) - Total convictions	3,478	3,928	4,182	4,119	3,539	3,915	4,032	4,042
Immediate Custody	67	70	72	72	66	64	66	60
Suspended Sentence	21	19	17	18	21	22	23	25
Community Sentence	6	5	6	6	7	8	6	6
Fine	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Conditional Discharge	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Other Sentence	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	5
Sentenced at Crown Court	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	3

If Labour is to be taken seriously on crime and policing the Government cannot merely focus on the areas where the Party, and their most vocal activists, appear to be most comfortable. The public want and expect the Government to vigorously support police enforcement against those who commit crime. Anything less will leave the Government open to the accusation that they are “soft on crime, soft on the causes of crime”.

2. Prioritising police time, resources and activities on crime over other activities.

The use of police time on activities beyond crime and disorder have increased substantially over recent years. The use of police time on Non-Crime Hate Incidents, the subject of a 2024 Policy Exchange research paper,⁸⁰ is just one example of such activities which can include missing persons investigations, ‘public safety and welfare’ activities, ‘community engagement’ and matters which should be the purview of other agencies such as non-crime mental ill-health matters. The College of Policing estimated in 2015 that 83% of all calls to police Command and Control centres are non-crime related.⁸¹

Neighbourhood policing teams often undertake activities which are

77. Section 315 Sentencing Act 2020, [link](#)

78. Ministry of Justice, Knife and Offensive Weapon Sentencing Statistics: January to March 2024, [link](#)

79. Ibid.

80. D. Spencer (2024), ‘Non-Crime Hate Incidents: A chilling distraction from the public’s priorities on policing’, Policy Exchange, [link](#)

81. College of Policing (2015), College of Policing analysis: Estimating demand on the police service, Jan 2015, [link](#)

thoroughly ineffective as part of the fight against crime and disorder. These include activities which other individuals and agencies should do – such as staffing ‘community stalls’ to hand out leaflets to passing members of the public and bicycle marking. One very senior police officer described these activities to one of the authors of this report as “kissing babies”. He is right to be so dismissive.

Shifting the role of the police away from non-crime demand to a focus on crime and disorder will require the intervention of police chiefs and democratically elected leaders – both Ministers and Police and Crime Commissioners. It cannot be left to policing alone to make such determinations. The Government should make a clear-eyed choice about what activities the police should stop undertaking in order that they can focus on what should be their primary role: catching criminals.

3. Substantially increasing the number of offenders who serve time in prison.

A lack of prison places has led to both the last Conservative and the current Labour Governments choosing to release prison inmates earlier than they would otherwise have been. Police officers have been instructed to consider “pausing” arrests due to the lack of prison space.⁸² The judiciary have been told to consider prison capacity limits when sentencing those convicted of criminal offences.⁸³

Between 1997 and 2010 the annual average number of individuals incarcerated in England and Wales, under Labour governments, increased from 61,114 to 84,725 – an increase from 119 inmates to 152 per 100,000 of the population. Between 2010 and 2023 the annual rate of individuals incarcerated, under coalition and Conservative governments, actually reduced from 152 to 141 inmates per 100,000 of the population – with only a very marginal increase in absolute terms, from 84,725 to 85,968 inmates over the period.⁸⁴

The Crime Survey of England and Wales – which accounts for only ‘personal crime’ such as assault, theft or criminal damage and not offending against businesses or so-called ‘offences against the State’ such as drug dealing – estimates there were 9.5 million criminal offences committed in England and Wales in the year to September 2024.⁸⁵ According to the Ministry of Justice 1.1 million people were convicted of criminal offences in the year to March 2024.⁸⁶ Compared to these huge numbers we send comparatively few people to prison each year. The law-abiding majority rightly expect that there are serious consequences for those individuals who commit criminal offences and thereby immiserate the lives of millions of people. A substantial majority of the public, 80% according to recent polling, believe the country should build more prisons.⁸⁷ Far more of those who choose to commit criminal offences should be in prison because of the choices they have made.

82. BBC News, Police urged to consider making fewer arrests, 22nd May 2024, [link](#)

83. BBC News, Courts told to delay sentencings over prison space, 23rd August 2024, [link](#)

84. Ministry of Justice, Offender Management statistics quarterly: January to March 2023, [link](#)

85. The Crime Survey of England and Wales – which estimates only ‘personal crime’ such as assault, theft or criminal damage and not offending against businesses or so-called ‘offences against the State’ such as drug dealing – estimates there were 9.5 million criminal offences in England and Wales in the year to September 2024: Office for National Statistics, Crime Survey of England and Wales: year ending September 2024, [link](#)

86. According to the Ministry of Justice 1.1 million people were convicted of criminal offences in the year to March 2024: Ministry of Justice, Criminal justice statistics quarterly: Year ending March 2024, [link](#)

87. YouGov, Prison overcrowding: what solutions would the public support?, 24th July 2024, [link](#): 80% of the public strongly support or somewhat support the building of more prisons

4. Sending the most prolific offenders to prison for a minimum term of imprisonment on conviction for every further offence.

Many of those responsible for the scourge of criminality are individuals who are not merely repeat offenders but offenders who are so prolific in their offending that they account for a substantial proportion of the crime in our country. They are relentless in their commitment to a criminal lifestyle. The Policy Exchange paper, *The Wicked and the Redeemable* (2023), summarised a number of examples of individuals with well over a hundred previous convictions who, having been convicted of a new tranche of offences, were sentenced to community or suspended sentences rather than terms of imprisonment.⁸⁸

In the year to December 2022 of those offenders who had 45 or more previous criminal convictions (which we referred to as ‘hyper-prolific offenders’) only half were sentenced to a term of imprisonment on further conviction for an indictable or ‘either-way’ offence.⁸⁹ For the year to December 2023 the proportion was even lower – only 46.2% were sentenced to a term of imprisonment.⁹⁰ It is difficult to conceive of a statistic which better demonstrates the contempt with which the criminal justice system is treating the law-abiding majority.

For the protection of the law-abiding majority the most prolific offenders should be sentenced to lengthy terms of imprisonment. Policy Exchange has previously proposed a minimum term of two years custodial imprisonment (to be served in full) for all hyper-prolific offenders on meeting that level of offending.

The Government should also take more steps to deport Foreign National Offenders. At the end of June 2024, there were 10,435 Foreign National Offenders held in custody, representing 12% of the custody population.⁹¹ As of March 2024 there were a further 15,364 Foreign National Offenders living in the community having been released from prison.⁹² At a very minimum the Government should examine changes to the law to enable every single Foreign National Offenders to be deported to their country of origin.

5. Unshackling the police from over-burdensome accountability.

The last forty years of legislation and politics has created an environment designed to limit and neuter policing to apparently protect various groups from State over-reach. The drive for increased checks and balances – an increase in the ‘accountability State’ – has gone too far with the result being failing police forces and a failing criminal justice system.

Some of legislation of the last forty years which has contributed to this includes, but is not limited to: the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996, the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. Although

88. D. Spencer (2023), *The Wicked and the Redeemable*, Policy Exchange, [link](#)

89. Ministry of Justice, *First time entrants (FTE) into the Criminal Justice System and Offender Histories: year ending December 2023*, 16th May 2024, [link](#)

90. *Ibid.*

91. His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service, *Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2024*, [link](#)

92. Home Office, *Immigration Enforcement data: Q1 2024*, [link](#)

parts of this legislation have enabled policing to become more effective at catching criminals – this is far from universally the case.

A lengthy survey of the policy and legislation which overburdens police officers and prevents them from being able to effectively prevent and detect crime is beyond the scope of this paper. However, one area which could be subject to rapid change are the various authority levels for police officers to take certain actions. For example, the extension of suspects' time on pre-charge bail requires the authority of an Inspector or Superintendent;⁹³ to use dispersal zone powers officers must obtain the approval of an Inspector;⁹⁴ for officers to use certain stop and search powers in the event of potential serious violence requires the approval of an Inspector.⁹⁵ In all of these cases and many more the burden on officers – both senior and more junior – could be reduced by providing Constables and Sergeants with the autonomy to make these decisions themselves without the constant reference to more senior colleagues.

Similarly, oversight bodies – such as the Independent Office for Police Conduct – have contributed to an environment which makes the catching of criminals less, not more, likely. The Independent Office for Police Conduct's functions should be drastically scaled back. Further, to prevent vexatious complainants preventing police officers from exercising their lawful powers and responsibilities, all complaints against police officers should consider at the earliest stage the previous convictions of complainants (particularly convictions for dishonesty or violence offences) to determine whether a complainant's account of events can be relied upon. Too many criminals use the police complaints process to impede the actions of those police officers who are simply attempting to do their job fighting crime.

*

If the relatively new Labour Government does not deliver a tougher, and less permissive, approach to crime and criminals – not merely in terms of occasional narrative, but in terms which the public can visibly see in their local neighbourhoods – they will in due course suffer electorally. Reform UK is well-positioned to take advantage. This is a challenge that those at the very top of the Labour Government must recognise and act upon quickly – they have been warned.

93. Sections 47ZD & 47ADZ Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, [link](#)

94. Section 34 Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, [link](#)

95. Section 60 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, [link](#)



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