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More than 11,000 criminals – including those convicted of homicide, attempted murder and serious assault – would escape jail under the SNP's new justice plans.

Yesterday, Nicola Sturgeon said she wanted sheriffs to stop handing down sentences of less than 12 months to boost rehabilitation.

However, analysis by the Scottish Conservatives has revealed the new measures would see thousands of serious criminals instead handed fines or community sentences.

In 2015/16, the most recent timeframe for which statistics are available, 11,195 offenders were sentenced to 12 months or less.

That included two convicted of homicide, 109 of serious assault or attempted murder, and 82 of robbery.

In addition, 27 people convicted of sexual assault were sent down for under a year, in addition to 285 housebreakers and 334 found guilty of handling an offensive weapon.

As it stands, courts are instructed to have a presumption against sentences of less than three months.

Last month, think tank Reform Scotland said this should be extended to six months.

Yesterday, as part of her Programme for Government, the First Minister said it was her intention to increase that even further.

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Liam Kerr said:

“The SNP is creating an impression that this change will only really impact low-level offenders whose rehabilitation would be better served with alternative punishments.

“But the reality is it will see certain offenders convicted of homicide, serious assault, attempted murder and sexual assault escape a jail term.

“That's a shocking way to treat victims of crime, and will do nothing to help rehabilitation.

“Prison is meant to do four things; punish, deter, keep the public safe, and rehabilitate.

“With these proposed changes, the Scottish Government is utterly neglecting all but one of these.

“If ministers are serious about rehabilitation, they should ensure prisoners are compelled to work or undertake education while inside, instead of trying to empty prisons.”