

The government sets out its agenda to reduce crime

I reproduce below parts of the government's explanation of its wide ranging Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill which the Commons will vote on today.

The Bill will tackle crime by:” equipping police officers with the powers and tools they need to keep themselves and all of us safe; putting the Police Covenant into law; doubling the maximum sentence for assaulting workers in emergency services; tackling unauthorised traveller encampments; requiring schools, police, councils and health authorities to work together through Violence Reduction Units to prevent serious crime; empowering the police by a new court order to target known knife carriers, making it easier for officers to stop and search those convicted of knife crime; enabling the trialling of secure schools; improving employment opportunities for ex-offenders; introducing tougher sentencing for the worst offenders and ending automatic halfway release from prison for serious crimes; and introducing tougher community sentences.

The Serious Violence Duty will require local authorities, the police, criminal justice agencies, health authorities and fire and rescue services to work together, share data and intelligence, to formulate an evidence-based analysis of the problems associated with serious violence in a local area, and then produce and implement a strategy detailing how they will respond to those particular issues. Prisons and educational establishments will also need to work with these core partners where necessary.

Protecting children and young people in vulnerable positions from sexual abuse and exploitation is a top priority for this Government and we have been reviewing the law in this area very carefully to ensure that any changes we make are the right ones. The current “positions of trust” offences criminalise sexual activity with a child under the age of 18 by people who hold a defined “position of trust” in respect of that young person even if such activity is consensual, effectively raising the age of consent from 16 to 18 in those circumstances. The positions of trust offences build on the “general” child sex offences, which make it a crime for anyone to engage in sexual activity with someone under the age of 16. Non-consensual sexual activity, whatever the age of the victim, is illegal. Following thorough engagement with stakeholders, including representatives from faith groups and the sporting sector, we have concluded that there is a clear need to extend the scope of positions of trust legislation, which currently covers a number of statutory roles such as teachers and social workers, so as to also include those who carry out certain activities within religious and sports settings, for example, those whose roles involve them in being a faith leader or sports coach. By doing this we aim to stop such people who seek to abuse their positions of trust from manipulating or exploiting young people to engage in sexual activity.

Criminal Damage to Memorials

While incidences of damage to memorials are typically of low monetary value, they very often carry a high sentimental and emotional impact. Under the current law, cases of criminal damage with a value less than £5,000 must be tried summarily and carries a maximum penalty of three months' imprisonment or a £2,500 fine. The Bill will toughen the law where criminal damage is caused to a memorial, by removing the consideration of monetary value which would otherwise determine venue and limit sentencing powers, effectively increasing the maximum sentence from three months to 10 years' imprisonment for criminal damage to a memorial where the value involved in monetary terms is assessed to be less than £5,000. These changes will allow the court to consider all the impacts, not just financial, so that the sentence can reflect the full range of harm caused.

Public Order

We have seen the extensive disruption that some protests have caused in recent years, stopping people getting on with their daily lives, hampering the free press and blocking access to Parliament. We need to improve the police's ability to safely manage such highly disruptive protests by giving them new powers to manage public assemblies and processions. In particular, the Bill will:

- Widen the range of conditions that the police can impose on static protests, to match existing police powers to impose conditions on marches;
- Broaden the range of circumstances in which police may impose conditions on the generation of noise at a protest, including single person protests;
- Amend the offence relating to the breaching of conditions so that someone commits an offence where they know or ought to have known of the conditions imposed by the police;
- Introduce a delegated power enabling the Home Secretary to clarify "serious disruption to the life of the community" and "serious disruption to the activities of an organisation which are carried out in the vicinity of the protest"; two of the thresholds at which relevant conditions can be placed on a protest should a senior police officer reasonably believe there to be a risk of the protest meeting these thresholds;
- Codify in statute the common law offence of public nuisance into in line with proposals put forward by the Law Commission

Unauthorised Encampments

As reported before on this website

Driving Offences

Whilst many deaths and injuries are the result of a tragic accident, too many of these incidents involve criminal behaviour. The Government is bringing forward changes to driving penalties to meet its longstanding commitment to ensure the courts have the powers they need to deal with those drivers who kill by dangerous driving or by careless driving when under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Our aim is to make sure that the penalties available to the courts for such offences are proportionate and reflect the seriousness of the

offences committed. We will also create a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving to close an existing gap in the law.

Serious Violence Reduction Orders

Serious Violence Reduction Orders (SVROs) will give the police additional stop and search powers to target those convicted of knife and offensive weapons offences. SVROs will target those who pose the greatest risk of harm, will discourage offenders from carrying weapons again as there is a greater likelihood of being caught and brought to justice, and will help protect exploited individuals. SVRO will save lives and make communities safer. To ensure that SVRO operate as effectively as possible we will pilot the new orders before they are rolled out nationally.

Courts

Finally, the Bill will contain measures to help improve the efficiency of the court and tribunals system by modernising existing court processes to provide better services for all court users.”