

# RESEARCH FINDINGS No. 137

## CONFIDENCE IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: FINDINGS FROM THE 2000 BRITISH CRIME SURVEY

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*The agencies of the criminal justice system have a joint performance target to deliver an improvement by 2004 in the level of public confidence, including that of ethnic minority communities. New questions measuring confidence in the criminal justice system were therefore included in the 2000 British Crime Survey. These supplement those asking about individual agencies of the criminal justice system and provide a baseline against which to set targets.*

### KEY POINTS

- ▶ Confidence in the criminal justice system is higher in some respects than others:
  - 69% of people are confident that the system respects the rights of the accused and treats them fairly
  - 46% are confident that it is effective in bringing people who commit crimes to justice
  - 34% are confident it deals with cases promptly and efficiently
  - 26% are confident it meets the needs of victims.
- ▶ Overall there has been a slight fall in the proportion of people who say the various parts of the criminal justice system do a good job, since the previous British Crime Survey in 1998. This is particularly marked in the case of the police, although they still receive the highest rating overall.
- ▶ Ethnic minorities have more confidence in many aspects of the criminal justice system, but not as regards fair treatment of suspects and witnesses. This concern appears to be directed at the police rather than the courts.
- ▶ Although people who have been victims of crimes reported to the police tend to be less confident, recent victims are more confident than average that the system meets the needs of victims. Generally, having had contact with the system at some time appears to decrease confidence.
- ▶ People who believe, incorrectly, that crime is going up a lot, and who underestimate the severity of sentences, are the most critical of the system. These beliefs are widely held, despite the fact that most people think they are getting fairly accurate information about the criminal justice system.

### CONFIDENCE IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

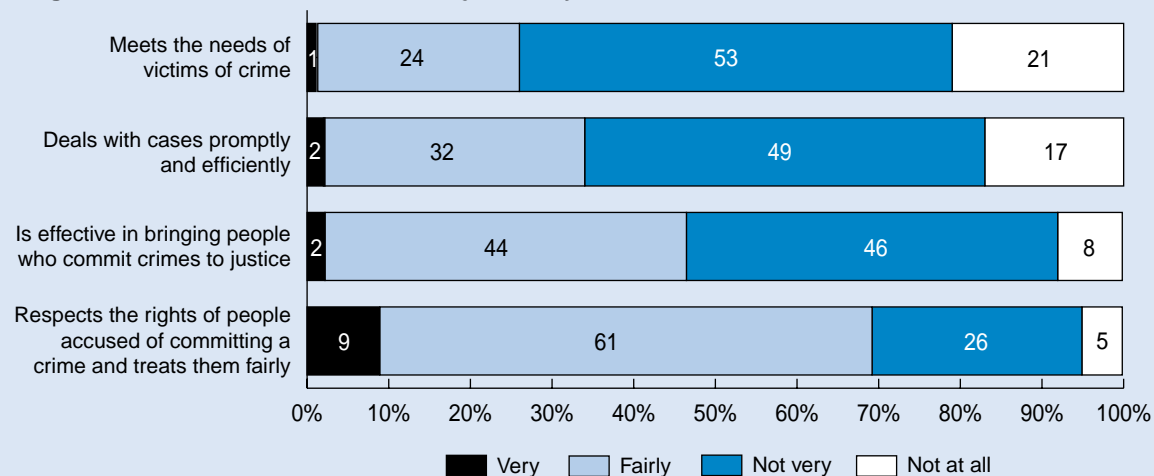
The criminal justice system in England and Wales is comprised of several separate agencies and departments, which together are responsible for various aspects of the work of maintaining law and order and the administration of justice. These include the police, Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), courts, prison and probation services.

Public confidence in the criminal justice system is an important prerequisite for an effective system. Although

satisfaction with individual organisations has been measured in the past, there is now increasing emphasis on the need for criminal justice system organisations to work together in achieving the various objectives they have been set by the current government. One of these joint objectives is promoting public confidence, including that of ethnic minority communities.

The 2000 British Crime Survey (BCS) assessed public confidence in four different aspects of the system (see Figure 1). Overall, confidence is not

*The views expressed in these findings are those of the author, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy).*

**Figure 1 Confidence in the criminal justice system**

high. Although a majority are confident that the criminal justice system respects the rights of people accused of committing crimes and treats them fairly, less than half believe it is effective in bringing people who commit crimes to justice, and only a third that it deals with cases promptly and efficiently. Just a quarter are confident that the criminal justice system meets the needs of victims of crime.

#### RATING OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AGENCIES

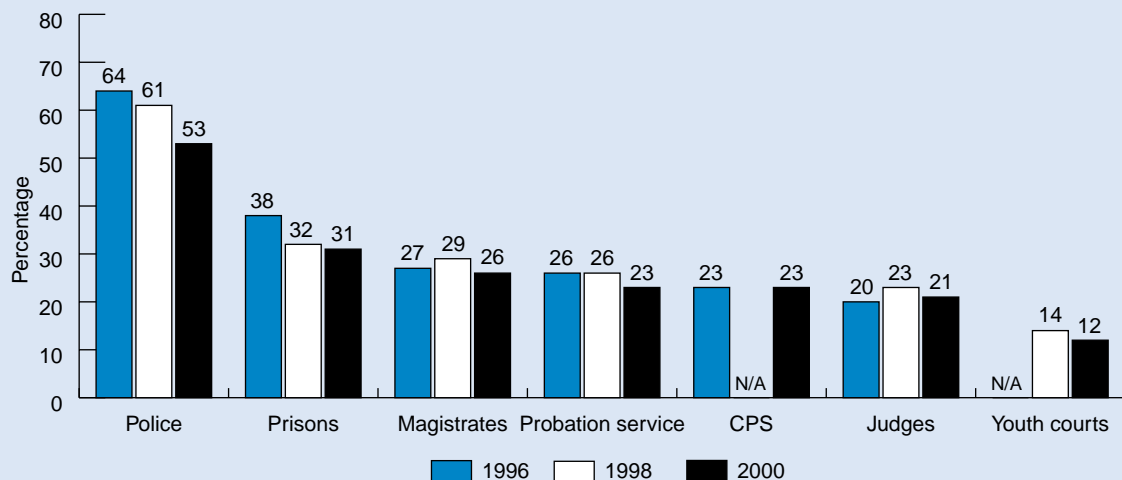
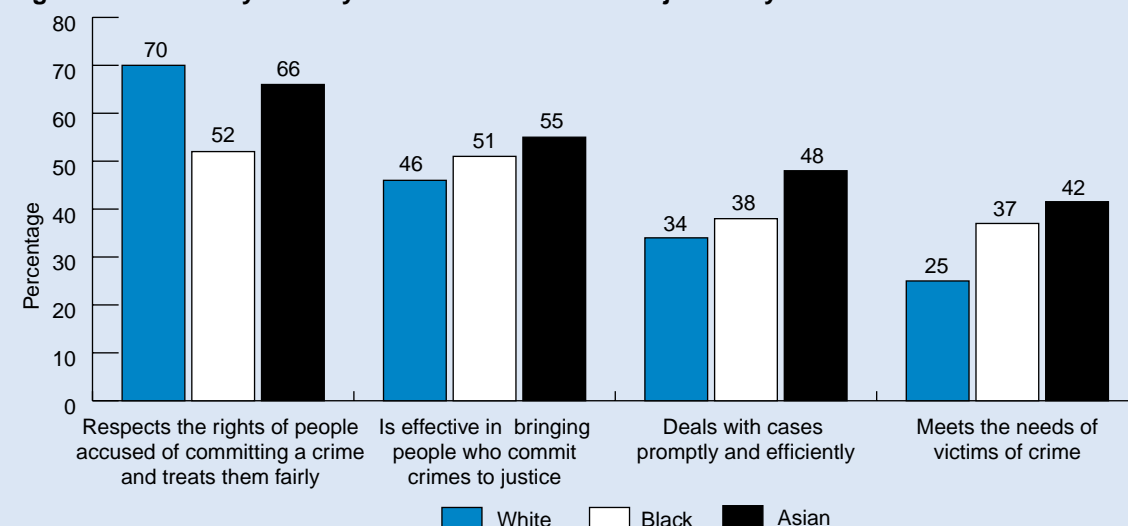
To assess public confidence in some of the individual agencies of the criminal justice system, the 2000 BCS also repeated questions from previous sweeps on how good a job the different professions are doing. Although they still receive the highest ratings, the police have suffered a marked drop in confidence since 1996, with only

just over half of people now believing they do a good or excellent job. The BCS has another measure of confidence in *local* police (see Sims and Myhill, 2001). Ratings of local police have not fallen as much since 1998. (However, this could well be because the options for rating local performance are slightly different. In particular, they do not include an 'excellent' option. If 'excellent', 'very good' and 'fairly good' are added together for assessments of *national* police, the downward trend in confidence is nearer to that for local police.) To a lesser extent, all parts of the criminal justice system have seen some decline in confidence over the last two years (Figure 2). Not surprisingly, negative attitudes about the components of the system are related to confidence in the system overall. For instance, those who think the police are doing a poor or very poor job are by far the least confident (Table 5, page 5).

**Table 1 Confidence in criminal justice system by age, sex, education and social class**

	It respects the rights of and treats fairly people accused of committing a crime	It is effective in bringing people who commit crimes to justice	It deals with cases promptly and efficiently	It meets the needs of victims
	% very or fairly confident			
16–24	67	52	42	42
25–44	68	45	35	27
45–64	70	42	29	19
65–74	71	49	32	23
75+	70	55	40	30
Male	70	43	32	24
Female	68	49	36	27
Degree+	68	43	27	21
A level/diploma	70	42	30	23
Other qualification	70	47	35	27
No qualifications	69	50	39	29
Professional/managerial	69	42	26	20
Skilled manual/non-manual	69	44	35	26
Unskilled	69	52	40	33
<b>ALL</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>26</b>

Notes: Source 2000 BCS. Don't knows excluded.

**Figure 2 Criminal justice system agencies doing a good or excellent job****Figure 3 Those very or fairly confident in the criminal justice system**

### WHO ARE THE MOST AND LEAST CONFIDENT?

It is not possible in a survey such as this to fully explore influences on people's beliefs about the criminal justice system, but the statistical technique of logistic regression can help to identify the factors that are independently related to poor confidence. The factors discussed below are all independently related to one or more of the confidence measures.

Men tend to be less confident in the criminal justice system than women, and the middle-aged less confident than the young and old (Table 1). The more educated and those in the professional/managerial social classes are the least confident that the system

is effective in bringing people who commit crimes to justice, meeting the needs of victims and dealing with cases promptly and efficiently. There is relatively little variation in the view that the system respects the rights of the accused.

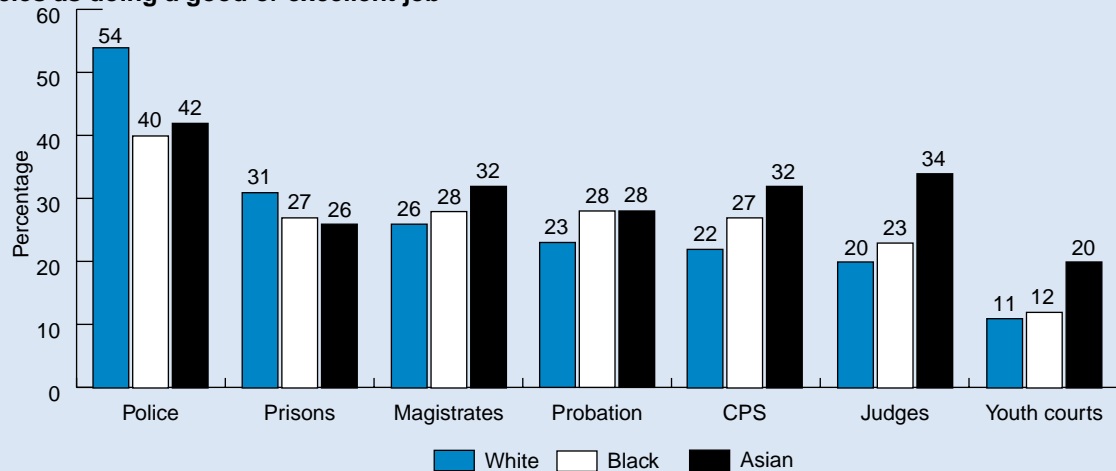
Ethnic minorities are more confident than white people that the system is effective in bringing people to justice, dealing with cases promptly and efficiently and meeting the needs of victims of crime (Figure 3). However, they are less confident that the criminal justice system respects the rights of, or treats fairly, people accused of committing a crime. Black respondents have particularly low confidence in this respect. These findings may reflect variations in cultural expectations of the system, as well as the effects of direct and indirect experience.

As far as one can judge from the questions asked, the concern about treatment of suspects is directed predominantly at the police. Black and Asian ratings of the criminal justice system organisations are better than those of whites, with the exception of prisons, and most strikingly the police (Figure 4). Also, black and Asian respondents were more likely than white respondents to think witnesses were not treated well by the police, but were fairly in line regarding treatment of witnesses by the courts (Table 2).

**Table 2 Perceived treatment of witnesses (percentage believing they are treated very or fairly well)**

	White	Black	Asian
	%	%	%
The police	83	61	77
The courts	78	76	79

Notes: Source: 2000 BCS. Based on those who answered the question, between 10% and 20% of each group said they could not give an answer.

**Figure 4 Percentage of white, black and Asian respondents who see criminal justice system agencies as doing a good or excellent job****Table 3 Confidence in criminal justice system of those who have had contact with criminal justice system at some time**

	It respects the rights of and treats fairly people accused of committing a crime	It is effective in bringing people who commit crimes to justice	It deals with cases promptly and efficiently	It meets the needs of victims
	% very or fairly confident			
<b>In last year:</b>				
Victim of crime reported to police (17%)	68	39	35	28
<b>Ever:</b>				
Been a victim of crime reported to the police (59%)	69	41	31	22
Been in court as witness, spectator or juror (34%)	69	42	30	21
Been in court as person accused of crime (10%)	61	38	30	22
Had contact with probation service (9%)	63	38	24	17
<b>ALL</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>26</b>

Notes: Source 2000 BCS. Don't knows excluded.

## SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

In forming judgements about the criminal justice system, people will be influenced by a wide range of factors. Many people have had some direct experience of the system, as victims of crimes reported to the police (59%), as suspects arrested by the police (12%) and appearing in court (10%), or through attending court for some other reason, for instance as a witness or juror (34%).

Having been a victim of a crime reported to the police at some time is highly related to a lack of confidence that the criminal justice system meets the needs of victims or delivers justice (Table 3). However, recent victims are if anything slightly more positive in this respect.

Experience of the court system, as a witness, juror or spectator, is also predictive of lower confidence, particularly in respect of the system's efficiency. People who had been arrested by the police lacked confidence in respect of the treatment of people accused of crime, as did those who had had contact with the probation service.

Many people are drawing not only on personal and vicarious experience, but what they have seen, read or heard through various media. The television or radio news was the most commonly cited source of information (by nearly three-quarters). About half say they get information from television documentaries, local and tabloid newspapers. Around a third mention broadsheet papers. Only 5% said they had got information from school or college. The Internet is currently bottom of the list at 3%.

Although only a minority of people believe that what they read, see and hear about the criminal justice system is very accurate, most think it is fairly accurate and few are prepared to accept it might be inaccurate. Thus about a fifth said that their main source of information was very accurate and three-quarters that it was fairly accurate, while just 6% thought it was fairly or very inaccurate.

## INFLUENCE OF 'KNOWLEDGE' ON CONFIDENCE

Giving people access to accurate information about crime and the criminal justice system is essential to securing confidence in the system. Previous

**Table 4 Knowledge about crime and sentencing, by confidence in the criminal justice system**

	It respects the rights of and treats fairly people accused of committing a crime	It is effective in bringing people who commit crimes to justice	It deals with cases promptly and efficiently	It meets the needs of victims
% very or fairly confident				
<b>Perceived two-year trend in crime:</b>				
A lot more crime (33%)	64	35	28	18
A little more crime (34%)	71	49	35	28
About the same (27%)	73	53	37	31
A lot or little less crime (6%)	70	57	40	34
<b>Perceived custody for burglary*:</b>				
Large under estimate (74%)	69	42	31	22
Moderate under estimate (10%)	68	50	35	31
Accurate (15%)	73	59	45	37
Over estimate (1%)	67	52	37	29

Notes: Source: 2000 BCS.

Don't knows excluded.

\* In 1999, 72% of male burglars aged 21+ received a custodial sentence for burglary of a dwelling. For comparability with previous BCSs, a large underestimate is 30% or under; moderate is 31% to 49%; accurate is 51% to 79%; an overestimate is 80% to 100%.

sweeps of the BCS (Hough and Roberts, 1998; Mattinson and Mirrlees-Black, 2000) have shown that people's opinions about the criminal justice system are generally founded on very poor knowledge of crime and sentencing practice. Those who believe that crime is going up a lot and who most underestimate the severity of sentences are the most critical of the system.

A third of BCS respondents thought that crime had gone up a lot between 1998 and 2000, and a further third that it had gone up a little. In fact both BCS and police recorded crime (corrected for changes in the counting rules) fell over this period

(Kershaw et al., 2000; Povey et al., 2000). This is important, because those who think there is a lot more crime are by far the least confident (Table 4). (This is despite the fact that when asked to specify from a prompted list the main cause of crime, only a minority blames the criminal justice system. One in ten say the main cause is too lenient sentencing, and less than one in 20 too few police. Over a third say drugs, and a fifth lack of parental discipline.)

Likewise, the three-quarters of respondents who greatly underestimate the use of custody for burglars are considerably less confident in all

**Table 5 Attitudes to sentencing and the criminal justice system, by confidence in the criminal justice system**

	It respects the rights of and treats fairly people accused of committing a crime	It is effective in bringing people who commit crimes to justice	It deals with cases promptly and efficiently	It meets the needs of victims
% very or fairly confident				
<b>Police are doing:</b>				
Poor or very poor job (9%)	51	16	15	11
Fair job (38%)	65	37	29	21
Excellent or good job (53%)	75	58	41	32
<b>Judges are:</b>				
Very out of touch (41%)	62	30	25	15
A bit out of touch (38%)	71	51	37	29
In touch (20%)	79	68	46	40
<b>Sentences are:</b>				
Much and a little too tough (3%)	52	45	31	27
About right (19%)	73	68	45	41
A little too lenient (30%)	72	54	38	31
Much too lenient (49%)	67	32	28	16

Notes: Source: 2000 BCS.

Don't knows excluded.

respects (other than the system respects the rights of the accused) than those with a more accurate perception of current sentencing practice (Table 4).

### ATTITUDES TO SENTENCING AND CONFIDENCE

Given that the public still underestimates current sentencing to such a degree, it is no surprise that nearly 80% continue to believe that current sentencing practice is too lenient. Black and Asian respondents, however, are much less likely to think this – about two-thirds in each case. There is a similar pattern with regard to perceived treatment of juveniles by the police and courts, with two-thirds of white respondents thinking it is too lenient, compared with only a half of blacks and Asians.

Although the majority continue to think sentencers are out of touch with what ordinary people think, there was some improvement in respect of judges, with a reduction from 45% to 41% now thinking they are 'very out of touch'. Asians were considerably less likely to express this view in respect of judges (only 28% did so), but both Asian and black respondents were more likely to think that magistrates were out of touch than were white respondents.

Negative attitudes towards the judiciary and current sentencing practice are related to confidence overall. The most confident are those that think current sentencing practice is about right, and that the judiciary is in touch with what ordinary people think. Least confident are those that perceive sentencing to be too lenient and the judiciary very out of touch (Table 5).

### PROMOTING CONFIDENCE

Many criminal justice system initiatives could or should have an impact on public confidence, either directly or indirectly. For instance, given that it was found that the public has a particularly punitive response to persistent offenders (Mattinson and Mirrlees-Black, 2000), it might be expected that the introduction of mandatory sentencing for burglars would promote confidence. S4 Crime Sentences Act (1997) requires that third time adult burglars get a minimum prison sentence of three years, unless this is considered to be unjust given the circumstances. A quarter of people said they were aware of the measure. Whether they had heard of it or not, 18% said it gave them a lot more confidence, 36% a little more confidence and 38% said it made no difference. Disappointingly, the measure had least impact on those with the lowest confidence. About a third of those who were not at all confident that the system delivered justice said the measure gave them more confidence, compared with nearly two-thirds of those who were already very confident.

### CONCLUSION

The findings on confidence will form the baseline for the target of promoting confidence, together with two new questions, to be introduced in 2001, assessing confidence in the system's effectiveness at reducing crime and in dealing with juvenile offenders.

### METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The 2000 British Crime Survey has a nationally representative sample of 19,411 people aged 16 and above and an ethnic boost of 3,874. A randomly selected core sample of 9,663 answered the questions on confidence in the criminal justice system. Including the ethnic boost gives a total sample size of 10,117. The National Centre for Social Research and Office for National Statistics conducted the interviews, which took place in the respondent's home between January and July 2000. The response rate was 74%. The sample was drawn from the small users Postcode Address File (PAF).

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