

Police give up on charging thieves

Offences ‘decriminalised’ as some forces are criticised for failing to bring prosecutions

By Charles Hymas, Home Affairs Editor, and Dominic Gilbert

POLICE and prosecutors have been accused of undermining justice as it emerged some forces are not charging any thieves.

The failure of police to successfully pursue criminals emerged as Lord Stevens, the former Metropolitan Police commissioner, warned that the latest crime figures exposed a “perfect storm” of rising offences and falling prosecutions overall.

The new data show that the chances of a theft resulting in a charge have halved, from 10.8 per cent in 2015 to 5.4 per cent, and from 2.6 per cent to 1.3 per cent for personal theft.

In the most dramatic example, four force areas – North Yorkshire, Gloucestershire, Dyfed-Powys and Durham – brought no charges for personal theft in the three months to September 2019, despite 300 crimes being recorded.

The Criminal Bar Association warned that effectively theft was being “decriminalised” because the police were failing to pursue prosecutions.

Caroline Goodwin, the chairman of the association, said: “Whether it’s reported theft and robbery or reported rape, if charging rates fall to close to or even zero, then the public feels offences are in effect being decriminalised.

“Faith in the entire criminal justice system is rapidly eroded if offences remain as crime categories on the statute books but nothing substantial is done to prevent them, let alone enforce, charge and prosecute.” The damning figures showed that overall, the chances of any crime resulting in a charge had more than halved from 15.5 per cent in 2015 to 7.3 per cent.

In the past year, knife crime hit a record high, robberies and crimes of violence each rose by 12 per cent and vehicle theft increased by 4 per cent. Lord Stevens said the trend was fuelled in part by cuts to detective teams. “The Met alone was short of 800 detectives. This is showing in prosecutions and success rates,” he said.

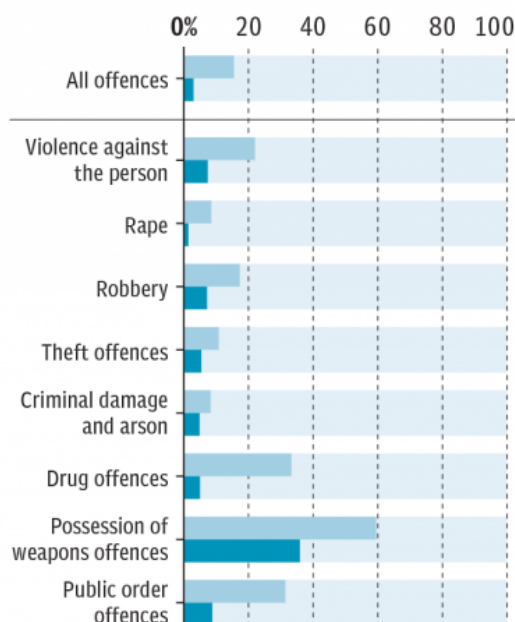
“The Crown Prosecution Service is probably under-resourced and we have heard from the Criminal Bar that courts are under-resourced. All of that amounts to a perfect storm.”

John Apter, the chairman of the Police Federation, representing rank-and-file officers, said the police were doing their best but cuts in some places had “crippled” forces. “With almost 22,000 fewer officers [a 14 per cent cut] and thousands fewer staff, there will be a consequence,” he said.

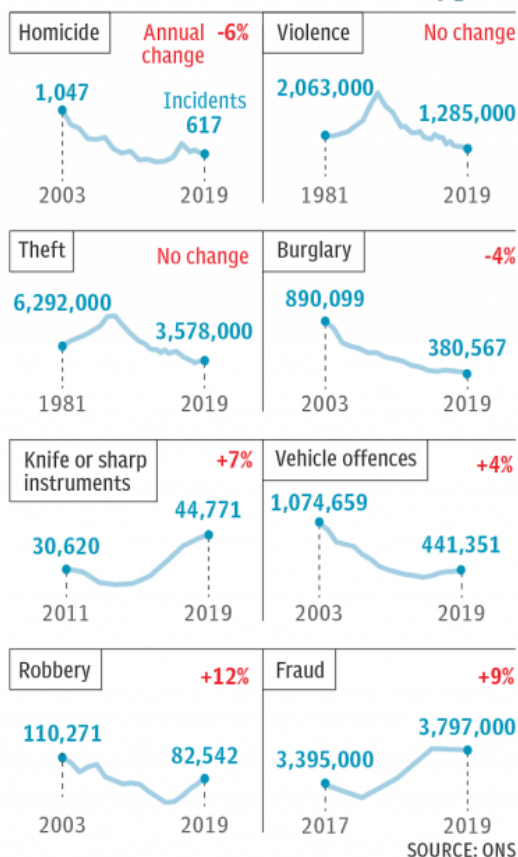
Kit Malthouse, the policing minister, admitted the figures were “extremely concerning” and acknowledged violent crime was “too high” but insisted the Government was “throwing everything” at it, including the recruitment of 20,000 more officers.

Percentage of offences resulting in a charge or summons

England and Wales, year ending September 2019



Overview of the main crime types



Even charging rates for violent offences have fallen sharply, with robbery down from 17.3 per cent in 2015 to 7.2 per cent. This is despite a 12 per cent annual rise in robbery to September 2019, with 82,542 offences. It is the fourth consecutive year of rises and the highest number for 12 years, according to the Office for National Statistics.

The number of crimes of violence against a person rose by 12 per cent to just over 1.6 million, while the proportion of such offences charged fell from 22 per cent in 2015 to 7.4 per cent.

Despite a 7 per cent rise in knife crime in a year, to 44,771 offences, the highest since records began in 2011, the proportion charged for weapon possession offences fell, from 59.5 per cent in 2015 to 35.9 per cent.

Theft charges overall were down from 10.8 per cent in 2015 to 5.4 per cent, while there was little change in the number of recorded offences over the past year.

However, vehicle offences, including theft of cars, continued to rise, up 4 per cent in a year to 441,351. Only 4.9 per cent of criminal damage offences resulted in a charge, according to Home Office data.

The proportion of rapes resulting in charges collapsed from 8.3 per cent four years ago to 1.4 per cent as the number of offences rose by 43 per cent since 2016.

In total, police-recorded crime rose by 7 per cent to almost 5.8 million, although homicides were down 6 per cent to 617 and burglary decreased by 4 per cent to 380,567 offences.

Over the past five years there has been a sharp rise in cases where the victim does not support criminal proceedings, up from 8.7 per cent to 22.9 per cent. In 43.4 per cent of cases no suspect could be identified.

Andy Cooke, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) lead for crime, said the further fall in charging rates was "concerning but not surprising". Pointing to the 22,000 reduction in officers since 2010, he said: "In the past decade, we've dealt with more complex crimes and increasing demand, while our resources fell. Changes to crime recording mean we now record more crimes that have no realistic prospect of conviction, which also affects the statistics."

The NPCC says it has had to prioritise cases where there is "a realistic prospect of prosecution" and those where victims may be particularly vulnerable, such as isolated elderly people. It means some forces operate

“screening” where, for example, investigations into thefts worth less than £50, with no suspect and no CCTV footage, are ditched within hours.

The continued surge in knife crime comes despite a police crackdown, with greater use of stop and search, and masks big variations between forces.

The blitz on knife crime in London appeared to be paying off, with the rate of increase slowing from 7 per cent in the previous year to 2 per cent in the year to September 2019.

There was a 20 per cent drop in homicides where a knife or sharp instrument was used, to 221 offences, mainly driven by the decrease in London.