

Prison reform trust response to the consultation on proposed changes for future editions of Criminal Justice Statistics

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. The Prison Reform Trust provides the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Penal Affairs Group.

The Prison Reform Trust's main objectives are:

- reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime; and
- improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families.

www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Introduction

We generally welcome the proposals within the consultation. Recent changes to expand the use of data tools across the Ministry of Justice's statistical publications are an improvement, allowing users to interrogate data in ways not previously possible.

Statistical publications from the Ministry of Justice play an important part in allowing the Prison Reform Trust to work effectively. Data is routinely used for the development of our research programmes, our briefings and publications, media appearances, and is vital in our advocacy work with government departments, parliamentarians and local agencies. In particular our flagship publication, the Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, relies on up to date, and relevant statistics from, amongst other sources, the Ministry of Justice.

There are two overarching points that we would like to raise which we believe would help to improve the quality of the existing data tools.

The move to publish data tools has brought about some improvements in analysis of the prison population, allowing users to examine particular cohorts, including by gender, age and ethnicity. This is welcome, but there are still gaps for users when trying to extract and analyse data in this level of detail. For example, sentencing data can only be extracted from the data tool by ethnicity for people sentenced in the crown court, as explained in caveat 4 of the sentencing data tool. Previously published data tables within Criminal Justice Statistics (table Q5.8) provided sentencing outcomes by ethnicity for indictable offences at all courts. By only being able to focus on the most serious offences, triable at the crown court, interrogating sentencing outcomes by ethnicity using the data tool only provides a partial picture. We would urge the Ministry of Justice to either reinstate the original table within the quarterly publication, or include magistrates courts sentencing data within the data tool. This example highlights the limitations that users can often face when trying to

examine data in a greater level of detail, particularly when looking across protected characteristics.

We would also like more localised sentencing data to be included within the data tool. There is growing political interest in localism and the devolution of criminal justice services, yet the availability of local data remains limited. Despite being able to examine particular cohort groups, it would be helpful to be able to go one step further and examine this data by locality. This could be either provided by region; criminal justice area; town/city; or sentencing court. This would enable our work to identify which areas have high custody rates for particular cohorts, and also develop the Ministry of Justice's evidence base for analysing the potential impact that greater devolution of criminal justice could have.

Response to questions

1. Changes to the content of CJS Overview Tables

We support these changes. Data tables will still be available quarterly and annual data can be extracted using the data tool that is relevant to our work.

However, we were not entirely clear why the consultation proposes moving to only include average, rather than median, fine amounts given the inherent risk of outliers distorting this figure. We are concerned this could make the data of limited use.

2. Publication of information on defendants failing to appear at magistrates' court

These changes do not impact on our work.

3. Publishing more detailed information on remand decision statistics

We are very supportive of these changes. Following the introduction of the no real prospect test in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act this additional information will aid our monitoring of the use of remand. We are particularly concerned about the use of remand for low level offences. The inclusion of custodial sentence lengths should also be helpful in examining the use of remand and short custodial sentences.

The existing prosecutions, convictions and remands data tool provides breakdowns to allow users to examine gender, ethnicity and age; this should remain the case for the new remand tool.

4. Rationalising the interactive data tools

The proposed changes to the motoring data tool will not impact on our work. However, we have some concerns about the extension of Home Office offence codes to cover all data tools. These are outlined in our response to question 5.

The publication of the Ministry of Justice's data tools is incredibly important for our work. We use the tools for the production of our flagship publication, the Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile. Data is also used for our research reports, and

our funded programmes, for example our programme to reduce women's imprisonment. We publish a range of briefings and reports to effect change in the criminal justice system. Recent reports include our Sentencing of Mothers discussion paper, and Why Women? briefing.

The following data tools are used regularly and have been particularly useful:

- sentencing data tool;
- prosecutions, convictions and remand data tool;
- criminal justice sentencing outcomes by offence data tool; and
- out of court disposals data tool.

5. Publishing outcome by offence information at the Home Office offence code level

Whilst we can see the merits that this may have for detailed analysis within offence groups, we have two particular concerns with the proposal to extend Home Office offence codes to all data tools.

Existing offence groups within the data tool provide a simple and accessible means for specialist and non-specialist users alike to interrogate data. We are concerned that if Home Office offence codes were to replace the existing offence groups then it could make meaningful analysis a more complex and involved task for data specialists, and near impossible for non-specialists to interpret meaningfully.

Furthermore, we do not support the removal of time series, as this will make analysing changes or trends more difficult.

Prison Reform Trust
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