



**RUNNYMEDE TRUST WRITTEN CONSULTATION RESPONSE TO:**

**Youth Crime Action Plan (Home Office)**

10 October 2008

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We welcome the opportunity to submit our thoughts and views on the Youth Crime Action Plan. The Runnymede Trust is an independent policy research organisation focusing on equality and justice through the promotion of a successful multi-ethnic society. Our mandate is to promote a successful multi-ethnic Britain – a Britain where citizens and communities feel valued, enjoy equal opportunities to develop their talents, lead fulfilling lives and accept a collective responsibility, all in the spirit of civic friendship, shared identity and a common sense of belonging. The criminal justice system (CJS) has long been of special concern to us.

- We are concerned that the action plan fails to address the over-representation of young black people in the criminal justice system.
- We also believe that social justice is acutely underemphasised in this action plan.

Having read the action plan with great care, we have decided not to respond to the individual questions, but rather discuss, in broad terms, the relationship between youth offending and social justice. This is because we believe that social justice and social mobility are crucial to any crime reduction strategy, particularly where youth crime is concerned. We would also like to draw your attention to the likely failure of the action plan to succeed unless it addresses the over-representation of young black people in the criminal justice system. After considering the issues raised in the action plan, we have the following comments:

## Youth Crime and Social Mobility

1. If we take figure 2 on page 28 as a point of departure, it is clear that low socio-economic status is the single highest risk factor for both high rate offenders and infrequent offenders. Consequently, a successful youth crime reduction strategy needs to address deprivation and inequality, and promote social mobility. While this is acknowledged in the action plan, it is not given the prominence we think it should have. Indeed, the few sections which discuss reducing child poverty and increasing opportunity are vague, with little concrete detail. In contrast, the sections outlining enforcement, punishment, and targeting 'high risk' families are more detailed and elaborate.
2. The action plan gives the impression that the government is far more keen to be tough on crime than on its causes. This, we argue, is the equivalent of painting over rust spots. Of course, current levels of offending must be dealt with, and many of the suggestions in the action plan are commendable, such as offering street-based outreach teams to disaffected young people, focusing on alternatives to custodial sentences, and expanding the provision of youth centres. But we are concerned that the main thrust of the action plan is punitive in nature – focusing on enforcement; identifying and targeting young offenders; sending out messages; 'breaking the cycle of offending' and so on – rather than looking at long-term and concrete preventative measures.
3. It is encouraging to see plans to expand services such as Sure Start, and that 'tackling unemployment, increasing opportunities, and transforming early years services' are considered important factors in reducing youth crime. However, short of saying that the Government will continue 'as we have done over the last ten years', there is little in the way of specific policies to realise these aims. In fact, the inequality gap has grown in Britain in the last ten years, which has coincided with a sharp rise of homicide rates in Britain's poorest wards.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between inequality and murder rates is well established, and Britain is no exception.<sup>2</sup> We realise that teen-on-teen murders are a small proportion of youth offending, but our point is that murder can be seen as a social barometer, and the rising number and younger age of people involved in violent offending is indicative of the harsh and brutal effects of increased inequality in the UK.
4. Unfortunately, where prevention is concerned, the action plan spends more time and effort analysing 'risk factors' to identify families with 'multiple difficulties' and 'future high-rate offenders' in order to target them with 'non-negotiable interventions'. We would like to point out that there is no 'natural' crime level in any society. However, the action plan appears to work on the assumption that high crime levels amongst young people are normal, and that the state's role is to contain it or suppress it. We are particularly concerned about the current trend amongst CJS agencies to talk about 'nipping problems in the bud', which indicates a belief that some groups and individuals are naturally prone to crime, and must be identified early in order

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<sup>1</sup> Danny Dorling (2005) 'Prime Suspect: Murder in Britain', in Paddy Hilliard et al (eds.), *Criminal Obsessions: Why Harm Matters More than Crime*. London: Crime and Society Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Shaw, Helena Tunstall and Danny Dorling (2005) 'Increasing inequalities in risk of murder in Britain: trends in the demographic and spatial distribution of murder, 1981–2000', *Health and Place* 11: 45-54.

to curb their (inevitable) future offending. While we recognise that offending behaviour must be responded to, we would argue that the state's role is primarily to create a society and a social environment which is not conducive to youth delinquency. Unequal societies have higher violent crime rates. If inequality is reduced, then so is violent crime.

5. If the government is serious about reducing youth crime, it should expand its narrow focus on punitive measures to include creating a society which actively promotes equal opportunities for all children and adolescents. We remain of the belief that government should include children and young people within the proposed Single Equality Bill.<sup>3</sup> The number of children in prison tripled between 1991 and 2006, and the UK locks up more children per capita than any other western European country.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, according to Unicef, Britain is bottom of the league of 21 industrialised nations where the welfare of children and adolescents is concerned,<sup>5</sup> and a recent report from End Child Poverty revealed that Britain's poorest children are being let down by underfunded schools,<sup>6</sup> which will have severe ramifications for social mobility. As End Child Poverty point out, government investment in education of the poorest children have yielded good results, "demonstrating that there is no excuse for failing students in poverty".<sup>7</sup>
6. To conclude, Runnymede has long argued that the empirical link between inequality and crime means that criminal justice policies must be linked to social justice policies. Whilst the youth crime action plan does acknowledge this, we are concerned that this perspective plays second fiddle to punitive measures.

### **Young Black People and the Criminal Justice System**

7. Our argument outlined above has particular relevance to a race equality agenda, and we are extremely alarmed to see that there is no discussion in the action plan on how to reduce the severe over-representation of young black people – particularly males – in the criminal justice system. Ethnic minorities are severely over-represented in all stages of the CJS, and this trend seems only to be growing. In 1985, ethnic minorities constituted 12.5% of the prison population; in 1990, this figure stood at 16%; in 2005, it was 19.8%.
8. Research has consistently shown that minority ethnic groups in general, and Black Caribbean, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi people in particular, suffer from disproportionate disadvantage and exclusion; they are more likely to live in sub-standard housing in deprived areas, attend underfunded and underperforming schools, and find low-paid jobs or be unemployed. A strategy which aims at reducing crime through reducing inequality – which we are arguing for – would therefore necessarily have a strong race equality focus.

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<sup>3</sup> See Runnymede Trust Response to Discrimination Law Review (2007)

<http://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/policy-repsponses.html>

<sup>4</sup> [www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk)

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF (2007) 'Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries', *Innocenti Report Card 7*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/news/press-releases/gcse-chances-of-poorest-are-a-post-code-lottery/24/113>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/news/press-releases/gcse-chances-of-poorest-are-a-post-code-lottery/24/113>

9. The proposals for identifying and targeting 'families at greatest risk of serious offending' strike us as particularly worrying, especially as the action plan links this to school exclusions. The action plan states that 'these are the families whose children are disrupting our classrooms'. We find it extraordinary that little thought seems to be given to possible race equality issues in adopting this approach. Institutional racism and stereotyping exists in British schools, where a perceived 'violent' predisposition of black pupils means that they are more vulnerable to exclusion as perceived violence is seen as a legitimate reason to exclude. Black Caribbean males remain three times more likely to be excluded from school.<sup>8</sup> We are therefore concerned that there will be a racial bias in the identification and targeting of 'problematic families with children at risk of offending'.

Thank you for considering our response and the concerns and issues we highlight. We look forward to learning the result of the consultation process and the next steps the government intends to take on youth crime.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this response, please contact Rob Berkeley (Deputy Director) at the Runnymede Trust, 7 Plough Yard, Shoreditch, London EC2A 3LP Tel: 020 7377 9222.

The Runnymede Trust  
10/10/2008

*Further information about the Runnymede Trust can be found on our website –*  
[www.runnymedetrust.org](http://www.runnymedetrust.org)

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000662/SFR24-2006.pdf>