

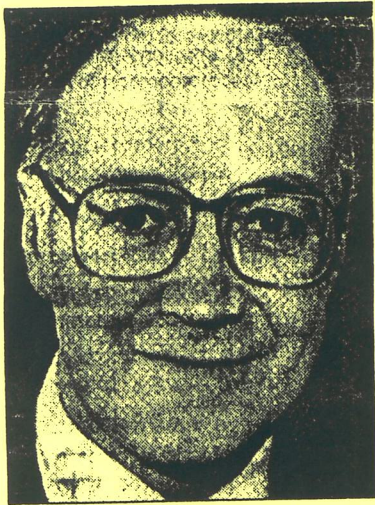
# opinion

# The Crime Bill and the Black Community



**T**HE Crime Bill introduces mandatory life sentences for violent crimes, including rape, and minimum sentences for other crimes. It abolishes parole and ends anonymity for child offenders. It is part of a law-and-order agenda which elevates victims' rights but undermines civil rights. As with the Police Bill, many oppose it, but its implications for women and Black communities are just beginning to be spelled out.

WAR has been campaigning for an overhaul of the criminal justice system, an end to police, Crown Prosecution Service and the courts' bias against victims of rape and domestic violence. Up to one-third of reported domestic violence incidents are categorised as a 'non-crime' and no action is taken. Of those recorded, most never reach the courts. Yet domestic violence is the single most widespread violent crime. Since only one in 200 rapists is convicted, most rape victims would not benefit from the new Crime Bill.



Michael Howard

The smokescreen of mandatory sentences hides this fact. It is feared that the new mandatory sentences would endanger victims. If the sentence for rape is the same as that for murder, rapists are more likely to kill the only witness. Instead of delivering the justice, protection and compensation to which everyone is entitled, mandatory sentences offer retribution to a few victims and encourage witch-hunts against some sections of the community. There has been little opposition to the Bill by black communities, even though Black people are up to 13 per cent more likely than white people to be victims of crime, but are less likely to get justice. At the briefing, the BWWFH spokesperson quoted Doreen Lawrence: "The police had investigated her family rather than Stephen's murder."

Police figures show that although they comprise only six per cent of the population, Black people are stopped, arrested and convicted more often than whites; one in five Black youths are stopped by police; 38 per cent of prisoners on remand are Black; Black women are 20 per cent more likely to be imprisoned than white women, and serve longer sentences.

By increasing sentences for petty crimes and naming

offenders as young as ten, the Bill would wreck families and result in more miscarriages of justice. Operation Jackpot, an investigation into Stoke Newington police for falsely charging Black people with drug dealing, is an example of the wider implications of the Bill: one wrongful conviction can become the basis for a mandatory life sentence. A spokesperson from WinVisible (Women with Visible and Invisible Disabilities) raised the issue of people diagnosed as mentally ill, who would face prison instead of hospital treatment. Black people are almost four times as likely to be diagnosed as schizophrenic than their white peers, and twice as many Black people as white are locked up for psychiatric observation

without any assessment.

Our prisons are already overcrowded, with 60 per cent of prisoners convicted of crimes against property. In 1994, 75 per cent of all new prisoners were unemployed and half had outstanding debts.

Women are more likely to be imprisoned for their first offence, including non-payment of fines. Of women imprisoned for non-payment of fines in 1994, 33 per cent were convicted of prostitution offences.

Prison affects not only women's lives but the lives of their children and others in their care. So prison is a double punishment for a mother separated from her children and other people she is responsible for. Vivien Stern, former director of

the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, has said that in the USA, which has provided the model for this and other radical reforms, education and social welfare cuts are paying for new prisons. These policies mean that women's unwaged caring work is expected to compensate for the loss of social and welfare services. The Crime Bill, and the Police Bill, which is now at the committee stage, are part of the same trend. Although proposals to legalise police bugging of people's homes and offices, including lawyers' and doctors' surgeries, without prior permission, were defeated in the House of Lords, the Commons may try to reinstate them.

Increasingly, people, including some Law Lords, are pointing out that the law and order bills are not aimed at dealing with crime but at preventing opposition to government policies which increase poverty, inequality and violence.

Lord Meston outlined the Lords' opposition to the Crime Bill on the grounds that sentences would not be just if judges had to ignore the specific circumstances of each case. Support is needed to see that the Crime Bill is amended and the Police Bill opposed.

Further information: Black Women for Wages for Housework: phone (0171) 482 2496; Fax (0171) 209 4761.

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SARA CALLAWAY

**Last month, Legal Action for Women (LAW) and Women Against Rape (WAR) held a briefing on the Crime (Sentencing) Bill in the House of Lords**

**Black Women for Wages for Housework (BWWFH) have highlighted the implications of the Bill and are urging people to lobby peers from all parties**

IF YOU ARE AN ORGANISATION OR PRESSURE GROUP AND WOULD LIKE TO PUBLISH YOUR VIEWS ON A TOPICAL ISSUE, FAX US ON 0171 537 2288. NO MORE THAN 700 WORDS.