

Fines

Peer-reviewed research on the effectiveness and impact of sentences, orders, and requirements.

Jay Gormley, University of Glasgow
Melissa Hamilton, University of Surrey

Published: 16 Sep 2025
Last updated: Aug 2025

SHARE THIS     

Summary

This bulletin summarises research on the effectiveness of fines as the primary sentence for adults convicted of offences in England and Wales. Effectiveness is considered in terms of fulfilling the aims of sentencing under Section 57 of the Sentencing Act 2020.

Fines are by far the most common disposal in England and Wales and are typically used as the principal disposal in relatively less serious offences. Most commonly, fines are used for motoring offences (notably speeding offences), railway offences not involving fare evasion (which were primarily related to passenger misconduct), failure to pay the television license, and truancy from school.

The proven reoffending rate of fines compared to other disposals is favourable. However, the data does not allow us to control for many factors that strongly influence both sentencing and reoffending risk. As such, it is not possible to say whether fines themselves are responsible for the lower reoffending rates. Indeed, fines are not intended to rehabilitate and there is no obvious mechanism whereby they may address criminogenic risk factors.

Fines are intended to provide punitive and/or deterrent effects. In doing so, fines may seek to ensure that it is not cheaper to offend than to obey the law. While the notion of a punitive element via financial detriment is straightforward, there are issues of equality, given that those receiving fines may have very different abilities to pay. For those who struggle to repay, fines can be highly onerous. In some cases, there may even be a risk of offending to repay a fine. Therefore, care must be taken in setting the amount of a fine.

While commonly used, fines are under-researched compared to more severe disposals. As such, more detailed data on, for example, reoffending or experiences of being subject to a fine, are lacking. There is also a dearth of data on public attitudes to fines.

Introduction

This bulletin concerns the effectiveness of fines as a sentencing outcome given to adults. While fines can be issued in addition to other sentence types—such as custody or Community Orders—this paper addresses fines imposed as the primary sentencing outcome. This reflects the approach of Ministry of Justice statistics, which classify sentencing outcomes by the most severe penalty imposed in a case. In this hierarchy of severity, fines are ranked below immediate custody, suspended custody, and Community Orders, but above conditional and absolute discharges, and other non-punitive disposals (Ministry of Justice, 2025a). Fines as a primary sentencing outcome are available in all but the most serious of offences, but are more typically used for relatively less serious offences (Sentencing Council for England and Wales, no date b).

Below, we summarise evidence on when and where fines are used, what amounts of fines are issued, how fines are experienced as punitive or not, and the evidence regarding fines and reoffending. The focus is on empirical studies concerning fines issued in England and Wales for the years 2010-2025.

A monetary fine is by far the most commonly used sanction in England and Wales

In 2024, 78% of the 1.15 million sentenced individuals were given a fine as the primary sentence (that is about 898,000 defendants) (Ministry of Justice, 2025b, p. 9). Table 1 shows, by general offence group, the number of individuals sentenced in 2024 who received a fine as the primary punishment, along with the average fine amount (Ministry of Justice, 2025c).

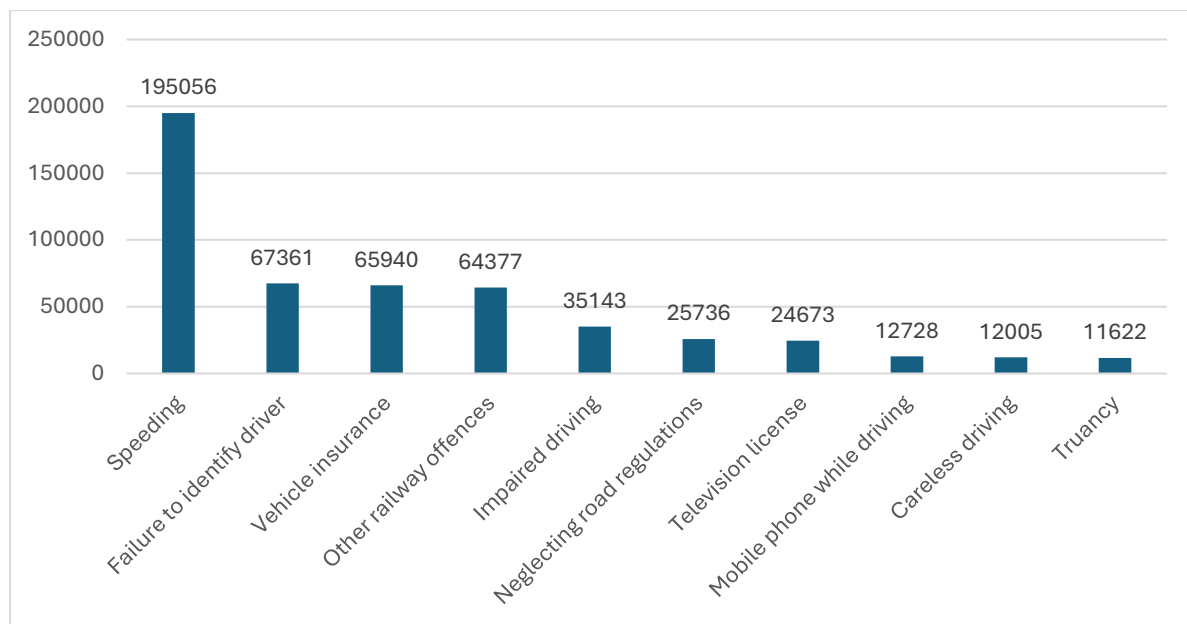
Table 1: Fines as Primary Sentences in 2024¹

Offense Group	Cases	Average Fine (£)
Summary motoring	658,671	309
Summary non-motoring	206,703	214
Drug	12,736	138
Theft	8,083	117
Violence	4,537	686
Misc. crimes against society	3,560	944
Public order	2,962	219
Weapon possession	520	314
Fraud	409	253
Criminal damage & arson	165	190
Sexual offences	88	477
Robbery	2	0

Overall, 96% of all fines are issued for summary offences (motoring and non-motoring), which are lower-level cases usually dealt with in magistrates' courts. Figure 1 contains the top 10 crimes for which fines were issued as the primary sentence in 2024 (Ministry of Justice, 2025c).

¹ It may not be clear what types of acts are within some of the offence groups. Summary non-motoring crimes include such offences as common assault and low-level criminal damage. Miscellaneous crimes against society include such offences as exploitation of prostitution, bigamy, and receiving stolen goods. Examples of public order offences are riot, outraging public decency, and violating a restraining order. Offence Group Classification (Ministry of Justice, 2024).

Figure 1: Top Ten Crimes with Fines in 2024



As shown in Figure 1, fines in 2024 were most frequently issued for motor vehicle offences, such as speeding, failure to identify the driver, and driving without valid insurance. Also among the top ten offence types attracting fines were railway offences not involving fare evasion (which were primarily related to passenger misconduct), failure to pay the television license, and truancy from school.

Outside of summary offence categories, the offence groups with the highest likelihood of resulting in a fine were drugs, theft, and violence (see Table 1). It might be surprising that violence ranks fifth among twelve offence groups in terms of the total number of fines issued. However, this reflects a very small proportion of fine cases—around 4,500 instances, accounting for just 0.5% of all fines in 2024. Of the fines issued in the violent crime group, 65% of fines were for assaulting an emergency worker.

Table 1 above also presents the average fine amounts by offence group. The overall average fine in 2024 was £283, with over one-third of cases within a range of £200-250. At the top end, more than 3,600 cases resulted in fines over £1,000, including 310 individuals who received fines exceeding £10,000. We did not include demographic information in this Bulletin, because the available data is incomplete, and the gaps are too large to draw meaningful or accurate conclusions.

Fines must reflect the seriousness of the offence, while considering the financial circumstances of the individual to the extent known to the court (Sentencing Act 2020, s125(1))

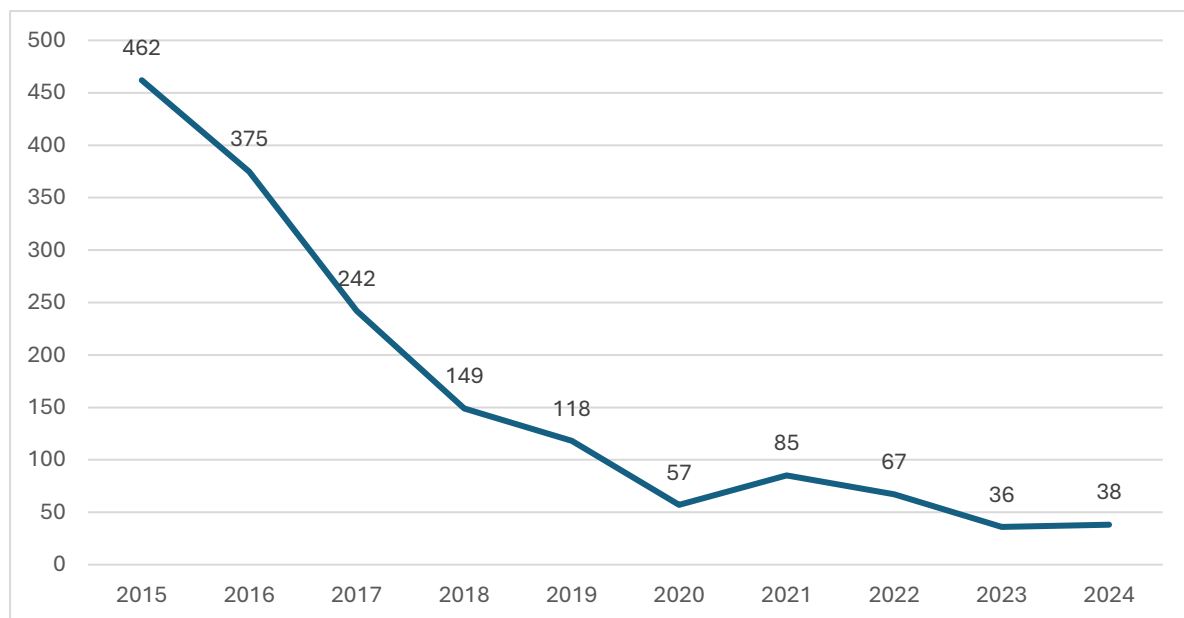
To guide this process, the Sentencing Council for England and Wales (SCEW) applies a system of fine bands, which express the penalty as a percentage of the individual’s relevant weekly income (Sentencing Council for England and Wales, no date a). These bands range from 25% (the lowest point of Band A) to 700% (the highest point of Band F). Despite the initial focus on the individual’s weekly income, other circumstances may lead to adjustments to the amount of fine issued. The court can also consider the individual’s financial circumstances more broadly

(such as reasonable living expenses due to dependents or access to significant assets) to adjust the fine downward or upward. Some offences involving the intent to gain a significant commercial benefit may require an upward adjustment to better achieve proportionality. Still, fines cannot exceed the relevant statutory maximum, though in the most serious cases, a statutory cap no longer exists (Sentencing Act 2020, s122(3) and Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 s85).

When fines are not paid, the courts can use several enforcement methods, such as deductions from benefits, attachment of earnings, or instructing enforcement agents to recover the money owed

While the use of imprisonment for fine default still exists, it has become increasingly rare in recent years, as shown in Figure 2 (Ministry of Justice, 2025d, tbl 2.A.3.).

Figure 2: Number of Individuals Imprisoned for Defaulting on their Fines by Year



While imprisonment for failure to pay fines is uncommon, the lack of other relevant data makes it difficult to assess whether the low risk of custody has any effect on individuals' willingness to comply with fine payments.

The evidence base

Reoffending outcomes

One way to begin thinking about the effectiveness of fines is by looking at reoffending rates. Table 2 compares reoffending rates for the most recent year available across the four major types of sentencing outcomes: fines, discharges, Community Orders, and immediate custody (Ministry of Justice, 2025e).

Table 2. Reoffending Rates and Average Number of Reoffences by Sentence Type for the Year Ended March 2023

Sentence type	Known reoffenders	Average # of reoffences
Fine	22%	3.7
Discharge (conditional or unconditional)	26%	4.4
Community Order	43%	4.2
Custody	37%	5.3
Short custodial sentence (<12 months)	56%	6.2

According to this data, those who received fines had the lowest proven reoffending rate at 22%, compared to 26% for discharges, 43% for Community Orders, and 37% for custodial sentences. To allow a closer—though still imperfect—comparison with fines, we also include reoffending rates for custodial sentences under 12 months, which are often given for less serious offences. Even so, fines are linked to a much lower reoffending rate than short prison terms (22% vs. 56%). The average number of new offences committed by those who reoffended after receiving a fine was also lower than for the other sentence types.

While there are data limitations (see below), Table 2 helps place fines within the broader sentencing landscape. They indicate that fines tend to be used in cases involving less serious offences and lower-risk individuals, and that in those contexts, they may represent a proportionate and adequate response that avoids the costs and consequences associated with more intensive penalties.

Rehabilitation

While rehabilitation is a core aim of many sentencing frameworks (especially for Community Orders and custodial sentences), fines are not well suited to that purpose for these reasons:

- Fines do not address underlying causes of offending (e.g. addiction, mental health, housing instability).
- There are no rehabilitative conditions or programmes attached to fines (unlike Community Orders).
- Fines may even have regressive effects—pushing financially insecure individuals further into hardship, which can increase reoffending risk.
- Fines are the ‘only penal sanction for which the offender can (and routinely does) get someone else to bear the burden.’ (Zedner, 2004, p. 206)

Indeed, the SCEW does not mention rehabilitation in its guidance on the use of fines.

Deterrence

In terms of deterrence, research across criminal justice suggests that the perceived likelihood of being caught and punished plays a larger role in deterring offending than the severity of the penalty itself (Gormley, Hamilton and Belton, 2022). A recent small study casts further doubt on the deterrent effect of fines, whereby interviews with magistrates revealed a majority consensus that:

finer do not act as a deterrent against further offending. We heard that magistrates felt that those with the means to pay their fine would not be impacted in any way that would deter them from similar future actions, while those on low incomes would not be deterred either, as their fines often do not get paid. (Centre for Justice Innovation, 2024, p. 20)

Adding to these concerns is the possibility that the pressure to pay fines may, in some cases, push individuals toward further criminal behaviour in order to raise the money. While the scale of this issue is unknown, and robust data on its prevalence does not exist, some recent research has revealed anecdotal evidence that it does happen in individual cases (Centre for Justice Innovation, 2024).

Equality/Proportionality

One of the enduring challenges of fines is that their punitive impact varies widely depending on the individual's financial situation. For individuals with substantial means, fines may be absorbed with little practical effect, raising questions about whether they can meaningfully punish or deter.

For sentenced individuals with limited means, the financial consequences of a fine can be severe. While SCEW guidance allows for downward adjustment in such cases, advising that fines 'should be a hardship but should not force the offender below a reasonable 'subsistence' level,' recent research by the Centre for Justice Innovation (2024) found that this goal may not be consistently met in practice. In interviews with 56 fined individuals, researchers found that fines can exacerbate financial hardship and emotional stress, especially where enforcement methods such as benefit deductions or payment enforcement are perceived as rigid or excessive.

Data Limitations

While fines are the most common disposal, they are also under-researched. We found no recent studies that specifically evaluate the effectiveness of fines imposed as a standalone primary sentence in relation to reoffending or deterrence. Most contemporary research treats fines as part of broader financial sanctions—such as fees, restitution, or court costs—or aggregates fines from both criminal and civil proceedings, making it difficult to isolate the independent impact of criminal fines as a sentencing outcome.

Reoffending data

At first glance, Table 2 might suggest that fines are more effective in reducing reoffending than other sentencing outcomes. However, these comparisons come with important limitations. The data do not control for many factors that strongly influence both sentencing and reoffending risk—such as the seriousness of the original offence, the individual's criminal history, age, socioeconomic background, or whether a guilty plea was entered. Without controlling for these factors, it is not possible to say whether fines themselves reduce reoffending, or whether they are simply given to people who are less likely to reoffend in the first place.

Deterrent effects

Overall, the evidence base for deterrence as a reliable outcome of sentencing—particularly in relation to fines—is weak. This does not mean that fines could never have any deterrent effect, but it suggests that any such effect is likely to be limited or context-specific. Further research is needed to understand if/when certain types of offences or persons—such as economically

motivated crimes—are likely to be deterred by financial penalties (Gormley, 2024). Research also needs to explore when a fine might push individuals toward further criminal behaviour.

Perceptions of fines and their legitimacy

Relatively little is known about how fines as a criminal penalty are understood or perceived by the public. A lengthy House of Commons report on public opinion and sentencing did not address fines at all (Justice Committee, 2023). This omission is notable, given that fines account for the majority of criminal sentences issued each year. The limited visibility of fines may contribute to public uncertainty or indifference about their legitimacy as a criminal sanction. For some, fines may appear lenient or inconsequential, while for others—particularly those who struggle financially—they may be experienced as disproportionately harsh. This divergence between perception and experience raises questions about transparency, communication, and sentencing legitimacy.

Additionally, there needs to be a greater understanding of how fines are subjectively experienced to determine when they work best and when they might risk being criminogenic.

Future research and policy discussion would benefit from closer attention to public and offender views on fines, how they compare to other disposals, and how financial penalties can be calibrated to maintain both proportionality and confidence in the justice system.

Conclusion

Fines can provide a fair and proper means to dispose of a criminal case by fulfilling punitive aims. This can serve the interests of justice while also being cost-effective compared to other disposals. However, there are equality concerns. There is also little evidence that fines in and of themselves reduce reoffending via deterrence or other means. Indeed, in some cases, fines may even risk being overly punitive and driving people into further offending. Thus, for now, one key challenge with fines is ensuring they have both a desired, fair, and proportionate impact on individuals.

This Bulletin is part of a series on the effectiveness of sentencing in England & Wales. Other Effectiveness Bulletins can be found [here](#).

For further information, contact info@sentencingacademy.org.uk

References

- Centre for Justice Innovation (2024) “Where the hell am I going to get that money from?": The impact of court fines on people on low incomes. Available at: <https://justiceinnovation.org/publications/fines>.
- Gormley, J. (2024) Reconceptualising the effectiveness of sentencing: four perspectives. Sentencing Council for England and Wales. Available at: <https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/publications/item/reconceptualising-the-effectiveness-of-sentencing-four-perspectives/>.
- Gormley, J., Hamilton, M. and Belton, I. (2022) The Effectiveness of Sentencing Options on Reoffending. Available at: <https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Effectiveness-of-Sentencing-Options-Review-PUBLISHED-FINAL.pdf>.
- Justice Committee (2023) Public opinion and understanding of sentencing: Tenth Report of Session 2022-23. House of Commons. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/6741/public-opinion-and-understanding-of-sentencing/>.
- Ministry of Justice (2024) Offence group classification - Q4 2024. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6824af60ffcd6ecfbf1ab8ac/offence-group-classification-2024.ods>.
- Ministry of Justice (2025a) A Technical Guide to Criminal Justice Statistics Quarterly. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6824bb0cb296b83ad5262f48/criminal-justice-statistics-technical-guide-December-2024.pdf>.
- Ministry of Justice (2025b) Criminal Justice Statistics quarterly, England and Wales, year ending December 2024. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6824ac12aa3556876875ec5e/Criminal_Justice_Statistics_quarterly_-_December_2024.pdf.
- Ministry of Justice (2025c) Criminal Justice System Statistics: Outcomes by Offence data tool: 12 months ending December 2017 to 12 months ending December 2024. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68878445be2291b14d11affa/Outcomes-by-offence-tool-2017-2024.xlsx>.
- Ministry of Justice (2025d) Prison Receptions: January to December 2024. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68549259f812712f84581554/prison-receptions-2024.ods>.
- Ministry of Justice (2025e) Proven reoffending index disposal data tool 2025. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6793d0f7c74f1dca7492f3af/PRSQ-index-disposal-data-tool-jan-23-mar-23.xlsx>.
- Sentencing Council for England and Wales (no date a) Fine Bands. Available at: <https://sentencingcouncil.org.uk/ancillary-suppl-information-text/approach-to-fines/2-fine-bands/>.
- Sentencing Council for England and Wales (no date b) Types of sentence: fines. Available at: <https://sentencingcouncil.org.uk/about-sentencing/types-of-sentence/fines/>.
- Zedner, L. (2004) Criminal Justice. Clarendon Law Series. Available at: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/criminal-justice-9780198763666?cc=gb&lang=en&>.