

Sentencing Academy News

August / September 2026

Sentencing Hub updates

We have published a new key fact sheet on sentencing for [murder and life sentences](#), answering questions such as:

- How many people are convicted of murder every year?
- How long are the sentences that people convicted of murder serve in prison?
- What percentage of people receive a Whole Life Order, meaning they will never be released from prison again?

We have published a new fact sheet on [sentencing women](#) (see more below).

We have updated all of our [offence snapshots](#) with the most recent sentencing data. These snapshots visually summarise sentencing trends and outcomes for specific offences – including demographic information – for high-profile offences. These include:

- What happens to the people who are convicted of manslaughter, but who do not receive an immediate prison sentence?
- What is the ratio of women to men convicted of rape?
- What is the average fine for someone convicted of speeding?

Research Spotlight: Sentencing Women

Our new fact sheet on sentencing women highlights the significant differences between women and men at different stages of the criminal justice system in England and Wales. Women are substantially less likely than men to become involved with the criminal justice system: in 2025, women accounted for 20% of all sentences. Women also represented just 4% of the prison population, with 3,350 women in custody. Since 2000, women have consistently made up a small proportion of the prison population, averaging around 5%.

There are also notable differences in sentencing outcomes. Women are less likely than men to receive an immediate custodial sentence and more likely to receive a fine. When women do receive prison sentences, they tend to receive considerably

shorter ones. In 2025, the average custodial sentence length was 10.5 months for women, compared with 20.5 months for men.

Offending patterns between men and women also differ markedly. Women account for a relatively small proportion of convictions for serious offences. They represented 8% of convictions for the most serious (indictable-only) offences, including 16% of those convicted of violent offences, 8% of drug offences, 7% of robbery offences, and just 2% of sexual offences.

There is comparatively little research available examining whether women and men are treated differently at courts in England and Wales. What we do know is that women are, on average, sentenced less severely than men, and some of this difference persists after accounting for observable differences between male and female defendants (see e.g. [Hopkins et al., 2016](#); [Pina-Sanchez & Harris, 2020](#)). However, the evidence does not establish that women receive a uniform or deliberate judicial “discount”. In fact, there is evidence suggesting that women are sentenced more severely than men under specific circumstances (see e.g. [Lightowlers, 2019](#)). Much of the aggregate difference between sentence outcomes for men and women therefore reflects differences in offending, offence seriousness, and previous offending histories, while the remaining disparity may reflect a combination of legitimate personal mitigation, perceptions of harm and culpability, gendered expectations, and factors that sentencing data cannot adequately observe.

Find out more about women and sentencing [here](#).

Other News

Introduction of new “restriction zones”

The Ministry of Justice has announced that a new system of “restriction zones” will be launched in October. Described as a more rigorous version of “exclusion zones” – which ban offenders from specific locations such as a victim’s home or place of work – a “restriction zone” can confine an offender to a certain area upon their release from prison. The zones will be drawn up by probation officers and will seek to balance the rights of victims to be able to go about their lives without fear of meeting their offender with the offender’s rights to still be able to access vital appointments and services that help to reduce their chances of reoffending. The zones can last for as long as they are needed to manage the risk posed by offenders on licence, with reviews taking place at least every three months.

The announcement of their introduction is available [here](#).

Miscellaneous amendments to sentencing guidelines consultation

The Sentencing Council has launched its sixth annual consultation on miscellaneous amendments to guidelines. These consultations seek views on a wide range of more

minor amendments to existing sentencing guidelines and allows the Sentencing Council to make these changes without a full consultation on an individual guideline where only a minor amendment is proposed. Many of the proposed amendments to guidelines focus on increasing or clarifying guidance on a wide range of issues; however, there is also a proposal to increase the starting point for the offence of using a mobile phone while driving a goods vehicle.

The consultation document is available [here](#) and the consultation runs until 2 December 2026.

Other Publications

Tonry, M. (2026) *Comparative Studies of Sentencing: The First Four Decades*. Crime and Justice

In 2026, Michael Tonry, one of the world's leading sentencing authorities, published a volume of essays reviewing developments across a range of jurisdictions. In reviewing the essays, Tonry concluded that a number of general lessons can be learned by looking across national boundaries:

1. *Continuity*. The core elements of sentencing look much the same in the 2020s in many countries as they did in the 1970s. They remain focused on impartial efforts to understand what happened and why and to decide what may and justly should be done with people who are convicted.
2. *Politicization*. Sentencing policies and practices have remained largely insulated from partisan politics in most European and Common Law countries and Japan, although recent developments in a few countries, Sweden, for example, are worrisome. The fundamental rule-of-law precept that decision-making in individual cases should be insulated from influence by politicians and public opinion remains strong almost everywhere. Politicization has been chronic and extreme in the United States since the 1970s. It has happened in milder forms in Australia, England and Wales, and New Zealand since the 1990s and intermittently in some countries in Central and Eastern Europe.
3. *Imprisonment*. With a few conspicuous exceptions, imprisonment rates have been broadly stable in most Western countries and Japan for five decades despite steep rises in crime rates (except in Japan) in the late twentieth century and sharp declines since then. In Central and Eastern Europe, imprisonment rates have fallen everywhere substantially since 1990. The conspicuous outliers are Finland, where the rate dropped by two-thirds from the 1960s to 1990 and then stabilized, and the United States, where the imprisonment rate quintupled between 1973 and 2007 and remains four times higher than when the increase began.
4. *Policy transfer, sentencing*. There is little evidence of successful transfer of sentencing laws and systems between countries. No Western European country nor

Japan imported the severest American sentencing laws exemplified by “three strikes” laws and extensive use of life sentences without possibility of parole. Other Common Law and some Central and Eastern European countries followed the American lead though their new laws were fewer, narrower, and usually substantially less severe. Numerical American-style sentencing guidelines were never seriously considered in Europe and were considered but rejected in Australia, Canada, England and Wales, Scotland, and New Zealand. Looser numerical guidelines exist in England and Wales, with weak echoes in Scotland.

5. *Policy transfer, community penalties.* Many European countries controlled prison population growth partly by establishing new alternatives to imprisonment based on American models. The clearest examples, all with well-documented histories, are community service orders, electronic monitoring, and victim-offender mediation. Pioneering prosecutorial diversion programs in the United States in the 1960s may also have influenced the adoption and expansion of similar programs in Europe. Many European countries have established day-fine programs based on Scandinavian models.

6. *Determinants.* Explanations for why sentencing policies, processes, and practices vary substantially between countries are primarily to be found in national histories and cultures. General theories focusing on “cultures of control,” “governing through crime,” penal populism, and emanations of neoliberalism portray important developments, but their influence varies widely, depending on national histories and cultures.

The chapter is available to read [here](#).



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