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Public attitudes to the criminal justice system: the impact of providing information to British Crime Survey respondents

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Introduction

Previous research has shown that knowledge about crime and the criminal justice system (CJS) amongst the public is poor. However, people who are better informed about crime and sentencing tend to rate the CJS more highly.¹ Therefore, in 2002, further research was carried out by Chapman *et al.* to investigate the impact of providing information to respondents on their attitudes to crime and the CJS. This research found that providing information (either in a booklet, video or seminar²) led to both increased levels of knowledge and increased confidence in the CJS. However, there was no evidence to suggest that the increased confidence was caused solely by participants' improved knowledge: increased confidence may have resulted simply from the act of being given information.

The booklet, 'Catching up with crime and sentencing', is 20 pages long and contains charts, as well as brief sections of text. It had been found to be as effective a way of providing information as the other formats, but was the least expensive. Therefore, it was given to a sub-sample of 845 respondents from the 2002/03 British Crime Survey (BCS) (a large continuous face-to-face survey asking about people's experience of crime and their attitudes to crime-related topics). As in the Chapman *et al.* project, no financial incentive was offered to respondents in this study and they were not told to read the booklet, or that they might be questioned about it at a later stage.

Around two weeks later, these respondents were contacted for a follow-up interview, in which they were asked some of the same questions that they had been asked in the BCS interview.³ This report presents results from the follow-up interviews and comparisons of these with results from these respondents' BCS interviews.

Key points

- A quarter of respondents said that the booklet had changed their views.
- Reading or flicking through the booklet led to an improved knowledge about violent crime and crime trends, but knowledge on the proportion of burglars and rapists sentenced to immediate custody was not improved. Respondents' knowledge about the proportion of a sentence spent in prison was good prior to being given the booklet.
- For those who looked at the booklet, confidence increased in all the aspects of the CJS asked about.
- However, findings suggest that some increases were the result of engaging people in the topic of crime and criminal justice through taking part in the BCS interviews, rather than of improved knowledge resulting from having read the booklet: confidence increased for some aspects for those who did not receive it.
- Eighteen per cent read the booklet in full, 19 per cent read some sections and 44 per cent flicked through the booklet.

¹ See Hough and Roberts (1998), Mattinson and Mirrlees-Black (2000) and Mirrlees-Black (2001).

² One group of participants was provided with a booklet, another a video and the third group attended a seminar. Those who received the booklet showed the same increases in knowledge and confidence as the other groups and, since this was the least expensive format, the booklet was revised and has been made more widely available.

³ Hough and Park (2002) examined how respondents' attitudes had changed ten months after they had been provided information about the CJS. Respondents were provided information in a more interactive way than by supplying written information and a shift towards less punitive and more liberal attitudes was still evident ten months later. However, because of the different methodology used, it cannot be inferred that a similar lasting effect would result from looking at the booklet provided in this study.

- Twenty per cent did not read the booklet at all. The most common reason for not reading it was that the respondent did not have enough time (70% of those that did not read the booklet).
- The majority found the booklet interesting (85%), easy to understand (96%) and felt they had learnt from the booklet (88%) (Figures 1 to 3). Women were more likely to find the booklet interesting than men.

The booklet⁴, 'Catching up with crime and sentencing', was given to respondents at the end of their BCS interview. It contains:

- statistics on crime;
- information on the courts and sentencing; and
- information on re-offending.

The follow-up interview asked:

- 1) what respondents thought of the booklet;
- 2) questions about respondents' confidence in the CJS; and
- 3) factual questions on crime and sentencing practice. (The answers to these questions were presented in the booklet.)⁵

The questions on confidence in the CJS as well as those on crime and sentencing practice had also been asked in the main BCS interview. This report compares results from the BCS interviews with results from the follow-up interviews for those respondents taking part in this study. Respondents were also asked some open-ended questions about the booklet: results for these are presented in grey boxes.

Around a quarter of the 845 respondents taking part in the interviews were *not* given the booklet. Respondents who were not given the booklet were included in order to determine whether any changes in views between the two interviews could have been the result of other factors (such as taking part in the BCS itself, or media coverage at the time of the two interviews). See Methodological Note for more information.

Of those who received the booklet, 18 per cent read the booklet in full, 19 per cent read some sections and 44 per cent flicked through the booklet. Twenty per cent did not read the booklet at all.

Because the majority of respondents who looked at the booklet only flicked through it, the results that follow are based on those who either read the booklet in full, read some sections or flicked through, unless otherwise stated, and are referred to as 'those who looked at the booklet'^{6, 7}.

⁴ Available on the web at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/cuwcs.pdf>

⁵ The follow-up interview did not include questions on all of the information presented in the booklet.

⁶ The numbers of those who read the booklet in full or read some sections are not large enough to detect statistically significant results.

⁷ It was not appropriate to determine the change in attitudes for **all** of the respondents who received the booklet (but did not necessarily read it), in order to estimate attitudinal changes if the whole population received the booklet. This is because findings in this study suggest that confidence increased as a result of taking part in the BCS itself which only a small proportion of the population take part in.

Reaction to the booklet

What respondents said about the booklet

- Of the 80 per cent of respondents who looked at the booklet, the majority found it interesting (85%), easy to understand (96%) and felt they had learnt from it (88%) (Figures 1 to 3).
- More women than men found the booklet very or fairly interesting – 90 per cent as compared to 80 per cent⁸ (Table 1).

Figure 1 Was booklet interesting?

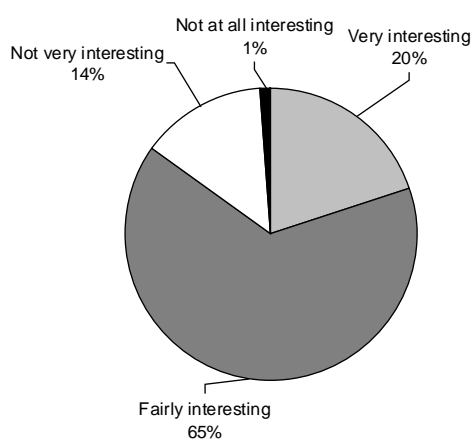


Figure 2 Was information in booklet easy to understand?

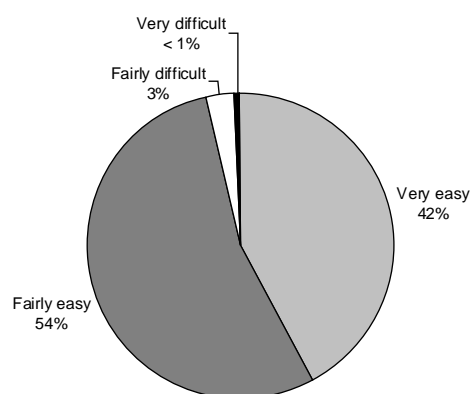
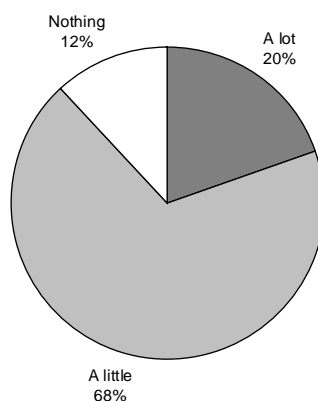


Figure 3 How much was learnt from booklet



Note: Unweighted N for Figures 1, 2 and 3 = approx. 460

⁸ This difference is statistically significant at the 95 per cent level – see Methodological Note.

- The booklet was easy to understand regardless of educational background.
- Respondents were asked whether they found the information in the booklet believable: only eight per cent did not believe the information.

Those who said that they did not find the information in the booklet believable were asked an open-ended question regarding what they did not find believable. Of the 37 respondents who were asked this question, ten replied that they were wary of either government statistics, or statistics in general. Some compared the information presented in the booklet to what was read in the media, as in the following example:

'The statistics seem to go against what I saw on TV and read in the newspaper, in the media. Either media is making it up or the government is making it up. It is hard to know whom to believe. I know that media has good sources.'

Another respondent described the booklet as a 'PR exercise'.

At the end of the interview, all 645 respondents who were given the booklet were asked if there was anything else that they wanted to say about the booklet. There were a greater number of positive comments (40 comments) about the booklet (for example, concerning how informative or how well put together it was) than negative ones (20 comments) (such as that the booklet was not useful or was lacking in a particular type of information). A small number of respondents said that the booklet should be circulated more widely or more regularly.

Did respondents say that their views had changed?

- Respondents were asked a general question about whether reading the booklet had changed their views. A quarter of respondents said that it had. Those with A/AS levels or higher qualifications were more likely to say that the booklet had changed their views than those whose qualifications were below A/AS level (30% compared with 19%) (Table 1).
- Younger people were more likely to say that their views had changed: thirty-nine per cent of 16- to 29-year-olds, compared to 23 per cent of 30- to 59-year-olds and 18 per cent of those aged 60 or more.

Respondents who said that that their views had changed (115 respondents) were asked an open-ended question about how these had changed. Many respondents who answered this question did not explain how their views had changed but gave a description about how their understanding and knowledge had changed: for instance, just under a quarter of respondents (24) used the word 'awareness' and said that they were more aware.

A small minority (six respondents) also said that they had improved their personal security as a result of reading the booklet.

Improvements to booklet

- Only two per cent of those who did not read the booklet were put off by anything about the booklet itself, with 79 per cent saying that nothing could have been done to the booklet to make them more likely to read it. Of the 20 per cent who did not read the booklet, the most common reason was that the respondent did not have enough time or was too busy (70% of those that did not read the booklet) (Table 2). Thirty-four per cent said that they did intend to read the booklet.⁹

All those who did not read the booklet (117 respondents) were asked an open-ended question about what could have been changed in the booklet to make them more likely to read it. Some suggested improvements in the design of the booklet, while others suggested that a more interactive way of giving the information could be used or that the actions that were being taken to solve problems should be included.

Changes in knowledge about crime and the CJS

- Respondents in both the BCS interviews and the follow-up interviews were asked five factual questions on crime and sentencing relating to:
 - violence;
 - crime trends;
 - sentencing of rapists;
 - sentencing of burglars; and
 - average proportion of a custodial sentence spent in prison.¹⁰

Knowledge about crime

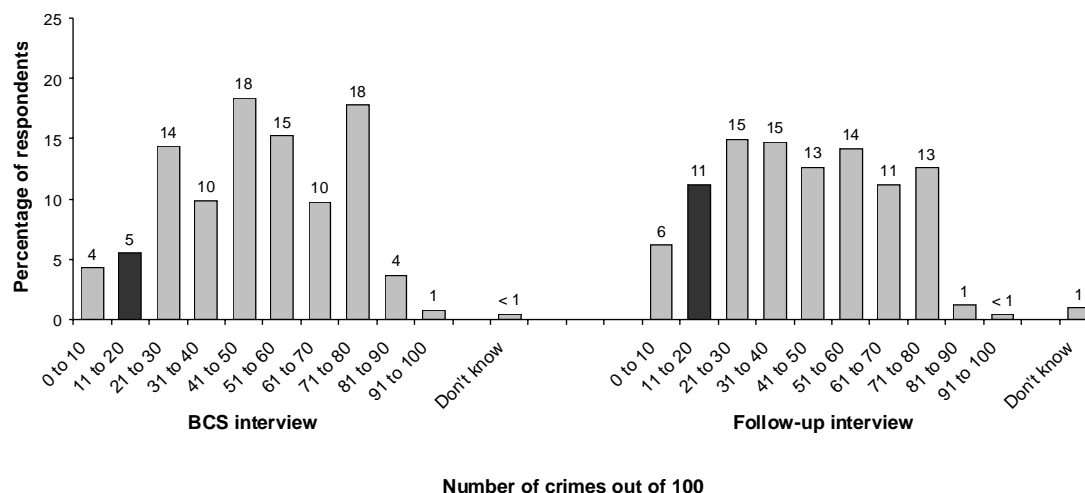
- Respondents in the BCS and follow-up interviews were asked how many crimes out of 100 involve violence or the threat of violence. The booklet had stated this proportion as 14 per cent (from police recorded statistics for 2000/01).
- As shown in Figure 4, there was a wide variation in the estimation of the proportion of crimes that are violent by respondents in both the BCS interview and the follow-up interview, with a very small proportion of respondents giving the correct answer. However, there was a significant increase between the BCS and follow-up interview in the proportion estimating that between 11 and 20 crimes in 100 involve violence.¹¹ In addition to this, there was a general tendency to make lower estimates in the follow-up interview.

⁹ Figures do not sum to 100 as respondents could choose more than one answer.

¹⁰ Half of those taking part in the study were asked these questions – see Methodological Note for more information.

¹¹ Only one respondent estimated exactly the correct figure for the number of crimes involving violence in the follow-up interview. (No respondents gave this figure in the BCS interview.)

Figure 4: Respondents' estimation of the number of crimes involving violence or the threat of violence



Notes: 1. Unweighted N = 239 (Based on those who looked at booklet. Not all respondents were asked this question - see Methodological Note for more information.)
 2. Includes 'don't knows' but excludes refusals.
 3. Answer stated in booklet is within black bar (14%, from police recorded statistics 2000/01).

- Respondents in both interviews were also asked whether there was more or less crime in the country compared to two years ago.¹² Successive sweeps of the BCS between 1996 and 2002/03 have shown that very few people felt that crime had decreased during the last two years. However, the proportion believing that there was less crime increased a small but significant amount from two per cent in the BCS interview to seven per cent in the follow-up interview.
- The improvement in knowledge about violence and crime trends is likely to have resulted from reading the booklet, rather than from having taken part in the BCS alone. Some respondents were given a follow-up interview although they were not given a booklet, in order to determine whether improvements in knowledge may have resulted from other factors. For these respondents there was no change in the proportion believing that there was less crime or giving an accurate estimate of the proportion of crimes that are violent, and there was no general tendency towards the figure for the proportion of crimes that are violent given in the booklet.

¹² Respondents were asked 'I would like to ask whether you think that the level of crime in the country as a whole has changed over the past TWO YEARS. Would you say there is more crime, less crime or about the same amount (since two years ago)?' The booklet did not give specific information on the crime trend over the last two years; the trend information given was since the early nineties. According to the BCS, crime had fallen between 2000 and 2002/03 (the interviews for this project were carried out between May and July 2002).

Knowledge about sentencing

- In addition to the information on crime, the booklet gives information on sentencing: it states that 98 per cent of rapists¹³ and 75 per cent of burglars¹³ are sentenced to immediate custody. Knowledge about this was poor both in the BCS interview *and* the follow-up interview:
 - the average (mean) estimate for the number of rapists out of 100 that are sentenced to immediate custody was around 50 in both interviews; and
 - the average estimate for the number of burglars out of 100 that are sentenced to immediate custody was around 40 in both interviews.

This was true for both those who at least flicked through the booklet and those who either read some sections or read the booklet in full.

- The booklet also gives information on the average proportion of a 12-month sentence that a prisoner will spend in prison. The number of months that people believed were spent in prison reflected the information in the booklet both in the BCS interview and the follow-up interview: half to two-thirds of a sentence is generally served in prison, and the majority of respondents (approximately 60%) in both interviews believed that between six and eight months of a 12-month sentence are spent in prison.¹⁴

Overall, knowledge had improved for the two questions regarding crime, but not the two questions regarding the sentencing of rapists and burglars. Respondents' knowledge about the proportion of a 12-month sentence spent in prison was good prior to being given the booklet. (These findings, however, may simply be attributable to the ordering of the booklet: information on crime was given at the start of the booklet and 1) may have been easier for respondents to remember, or 2) was the information more likely to have been read.)

Changes in confidence in the CJS

- A number of questions concerning confidence in, and the perceived effectiveness of, particular aspects of the CJS were asked in both the BCS and later in the follow-up interviews.

Change in confidence for respondents who looked at the booklet

- The results from the BCS interviews shown in Figures 5 and 6 broadly match those from the 2002/03 BCS as a whole¹⁵.

¹³ Aged 21 or over.

¹⁴ In the previous 2002 study, different questions on sentencing and prisons were asked (see Chapman *et al.*, 2002). For those who received the booklet there were improvements in knowledge in the most common type of sentence given for all offences; whether prisoners serving a 12-month sentence will be supervised on release; the average sentence for someone convicted of rape and the cost of keeping a prisoner in prison.

¹⁵ Published in Nicholas and Walker (eds), 2004.

Figure 5: Confidence in the CJS in the BCS and follow-up interviews

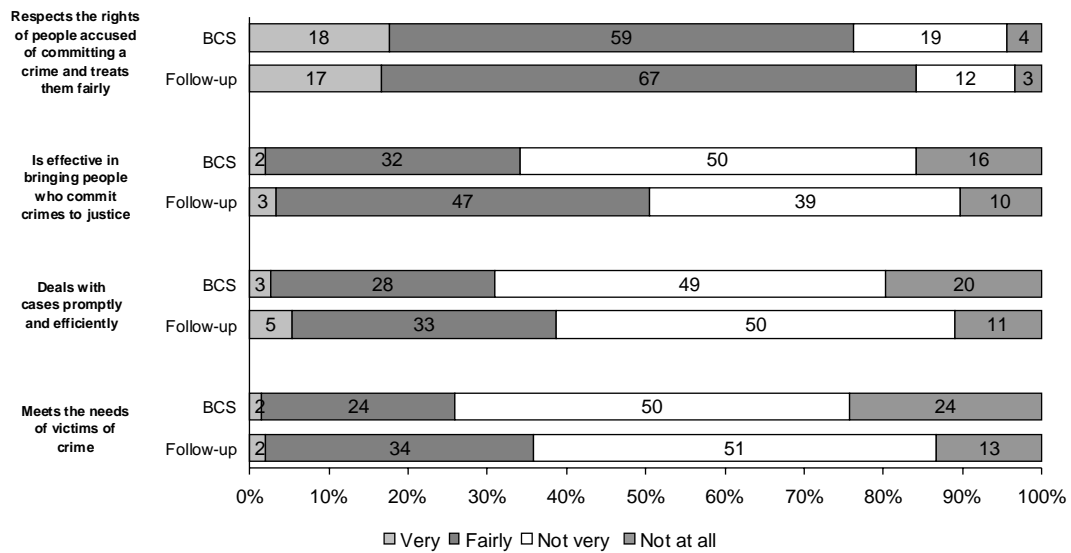
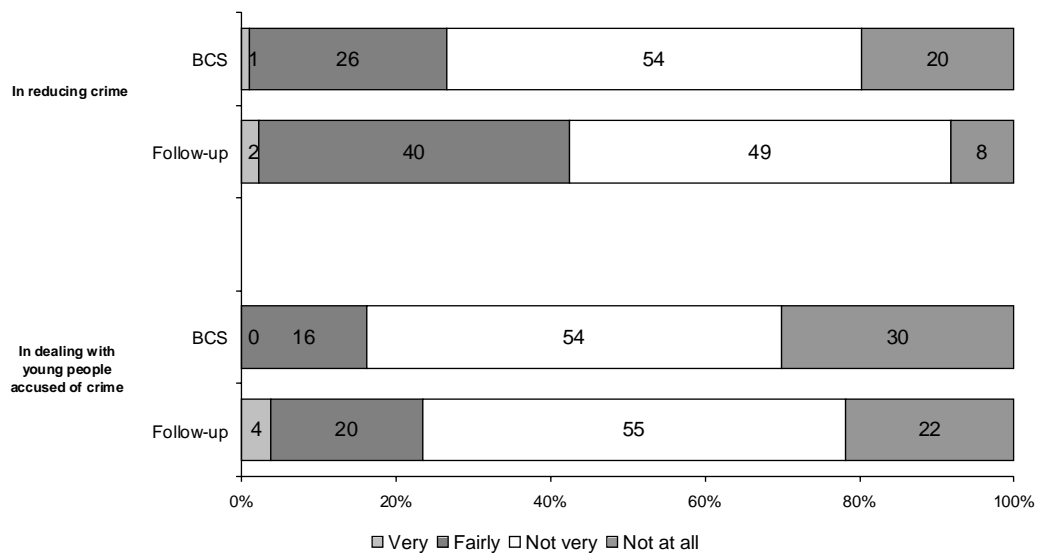


Figure 6: Perceived effectiveness of the CJS in the BCS and follow-up interviews



Notes for Figures 5 and 6: 1. Unweighted N = approx 460 (based on those who looked at booklet).

2. Results for the 2002/03 BCS as a whole are published in Nicholas and Walker (eds), 2004. (Differences between the figures for BCS interviews presented here and those published in Nicholas and Walker are not statistically significant.)

3. Excludes 'don't knows' and refusals.

- Confidence in the CJS had increased in the follow-up interviews for those who had looked at the booklet: people were significantly more likely to feel very or fairly confident in the follow-up interview as compared to the BCS interview for all of the six questions asked about confidence (Figures 5 and 6).
- The increases in confidence in the CJS are shown in the box below. (Results suggest that the increases in confidence for those who at least read some sections – i.e. excluding those who just flicked through – were even greater.¹⁶)

Increase between BCS and follow-up interviews in those feeling very/fairly confident that the CJS:		
	Received and looked at booklet	No booklet
Is effective in bringing people who commit crimes to justice:	+ 16%*	+ 11%
Meets the needs of victims of crime:	+ 10%*	+ 11%*
Deals with cases promptly and efficiently:	+ 8%*	+ 13%*
Respects the rights of people accused of committing a crime and treats them fairly:	+ 8%*	+ <1%
Increase between BCS and follow-up interviews in those feeling that the CJS is very/fairly effective:		
In reducing crime:	+ 16%*	+ 8%
In dealing with young people accused of crime:	+ 7%*	+ 2%
Notes:		
1. The increases shown are percentage point increases between the two interviews in the proportion of those feeling very/fairly confident or that the CJS is very/fairly effective.		
2. Increases significant at the 95 per cent level are indicated with an asterisk.		
3. Unweighted N for 'Received and looked at booklet' is approximately 450. Unweighted N for 'No booklet' is approximately 200.		

Change in confidence for respondents who did not receive booklet

- Another noticeable finding is, however, that increases in confidence were not restricted to only those who received the booklet. The box above shows that there were similar increases for those who did not receive the booklet for three of the questions: confidence in the effectiveness of the CJS in bringing people who commit crimes to justice (although the increase in this aspect was not statistically significant¹⁷), meeting the needs of victims of crime and dealing with cases promptly and efficiently. Therefore, increases in confidence in these aspects of the CJS were not solely attributable to looking at the booklet.

¹⁶ However, the number of respondents who either read the booklet in full or read some sections was not large enough to detect statistically significant increases.

¹⁷ The increase was not statistically significant at the 95 per cent level but was approaching statistical significance: the number of respondents who did not receive the booklet was not large enough to detect some differences.

- For perceived effectiveness in reducing crime, results suggest that there was again an increase for those who did not receive the booklet, but the increase was not as great as that for those who did (and was not statistically significant at the 95 per cent level¹⁸).
- For confidence that the CJS respects the rights of people accused of committing a crime and perceived effectiveness in dealing with young people accused of crime, levels of confidence were broadly unchanged in the follow-up interview for those who had not received the booklet. This was in contrast to results for those who received and looked at the booklet, whose confidence had improved in these aspects of the CJS, as shown in the box.

Opinions about sentencing

- Respondents in both interviews were also asked what they thought about the sentences handed down by the courts. There was a significant increase in the proportion feeling that the sentences handed down by the courts are about right (from 15% to 25%) for those who received and looked at the booklet. However, there was also a significant increase (from 20% to 34%) for those who did not receive the booklet (Table 3).

These results suggest that confidence in some, but not all, aspects of the CJS was increased by taking part in the BCS itself.

- Respondents were asked some questions about the BCS interview itself, to which there were very positive replies. Ninety-four per cent said that taking part in the BCS was very or fairly interesting. The increases in confidence for those who did not receive the booklet indicates that simply engaging people with the topic of crime and criminal justice results in increased confidence.^{19, 20}
- These increases in confidence cannot be attributed to any increase in respondents' *awareness* of crime and criminal justice issues as a result of taking part in the BCS, as perceived by respondents themselves: respondents were asked if taking part in the BCS had made them more aware of crime and criminal justice issues, with a little over half of respondents (60%) saying that taking part had made them more aware. However, those who said that taking part in the BCS made them more aware were no more likely to have increased confidence between the BCS and follow-up interviews than those who said that they were not more aware.

¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, the number of respondents who did not receive the booklet was not large enough to detect some statistically significance differences.

¹⁹ It is possible that the increase resulted from other factors. However, the increase is unlikely to be attributable to issues about crime or the CJS being reported in the media at the time. There were no particularly positive stories concerning crime or the CJS in the media just prior to the follow-up interview, or particularly negative stories at the time of the main BCS interview, that may have resulted in confidence being greater in the follow-up interview.

²⁰ There was no evidence that those who had been asked questions on crime and sentencing practice in the BCS interview (not all respondents) were more likely to have had a significant increase in confidence than those who were not asked these questions: being asked detailed questions on the types of crimes for which the offender is sentenced to prison, and the length of time spent in prison did not make respondents feel that they were more aware of crime and CJS issues or result in bigger increases in confidence.

Table 1 Reaction to booklet

Percentages

	Was booklet interesting?	Was information in booklet easy to understand?	How much was learnt from booklet?	Did views change as a result of reading booklet?	
	% very/fairly interesting	% very/fairly easy to understand	% learnt a little/a lot	% yes	<i>Approx. unweighted N</i>
Sex					
Male	80	97	89	25	220
Female	90	96	87	25	240
Age					
16-29	84	93	90	39	90
30-59	85	98	87	23	280
60 or over	86	96	89	18	100
Level of education					
Below A/AS level	83	95	86	19	230
A/AS level and above	87	98	90	30	230
ALL ADULTS	85	96	88	25	460

Table 2 Reasons for not reading booklet**Percentages**

Lost it	3
Not enough time / too busy	70
Not interested	6
Couldn't understand / difficult to read	1
Threw it away	0
Not read it yet but intend to read it	34

<i>Unweighted N</i>	117
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Note: Figures do not sum to 100 as respondents could choose more than one answer.

Table 3 Opinion on sentences handed down by the courts**Percentages**

	BCS interview	Follow-up interview
<i>Respondents who received and looked at booklet:</i>		
Much too tough	1	< 1
A little too tough	< 1	< 1
About right	15	25
A little too lenient	50	42
Much too lenient	32	32
<i>Unweighted N</i>	216	216
<i>Respondents who did not receive booklet:</i>		
Much too tough	1	-
A little too tough	1	-
About right	20	34
A little too lenient	51	40
Much too lenient	27	26
<i>Unweighted N</i>	91	91

Note:

Not all respondents were asked this question - see Methodological Note for more information.

Methodological note

Sampling and fieldwork

During May and June 2002 some respondents interviewed for the 2002/03 British Crime Survey were given the booklet 'Catching up with crime and sentencing'. These respondents were interviewed again, about two weeks after the BCS interview, by telephone.

A total of 845 respondents were interviewed. Quotas were set for age and gender to ensure that the sample was broadly representative¹.

A sub-sample of respondents were not given the booklet in order to determine whether any changes in views between the two interviews could have been the result of other factors (such as taking part in the BCS itself, or media coverage at the time of the two interviews). Table A shows the number of respondents who were given the booklet.

Half of the respondents were asked factual questions regarding violence, crime trends and sentencing, and about their opinions regarding the length of sentences, in both the BCS and follow-up interviews. (Only half of respondents were asked these questions because not all respondents taking part in the BCS are asked these questions: they are only asked of a random quarter of the BCS sample².) Some of the respondents who had not been asked these questions were included in this study in order to investigate the impact of being asked these questions: half of those selected to take part in this study had been asked these questions and half had not, as illustrated in Table A below.

Table A

	Given booklet	Not given booklet	Total
Asked questions on violence, crime trends and sentencing in BCS interview	321	100	421
NOT asked questions on violence, crime trends and sentencing in BCS interview	324	100	424
Total	645	200	845

¹ Although the sample had been selected from the BCS which is a nationally representative sample, only those respondents who had agreed to be contacted again could be selected to take part in the follow-up interview. Therefore it was necessary to ensure that this sub-sample was representative.

² For part of the BCS interviews, respondents are randomly allocated to each of four modules of questions, with the

Statistical significance

Although tests of statistical significance should not generally be carried out on simple quota samples, they have been carried out on the results for this report in order to help interpret the statistics. The quota sample used in this study was drawn from the BCS, which is a random sample. The variables measured can therefore be assumed to be normally distributed.

Tests at the 95 per cent level of statistical significance have been applied (the level at which there is a one in 20 chance of incorrectly identifying a difference solely due to chance variation) and all differences mentioned are significant unless otherwise stated.

It should be noted that the sample may be biased towards those BCS respondents willing to be contacted again.

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