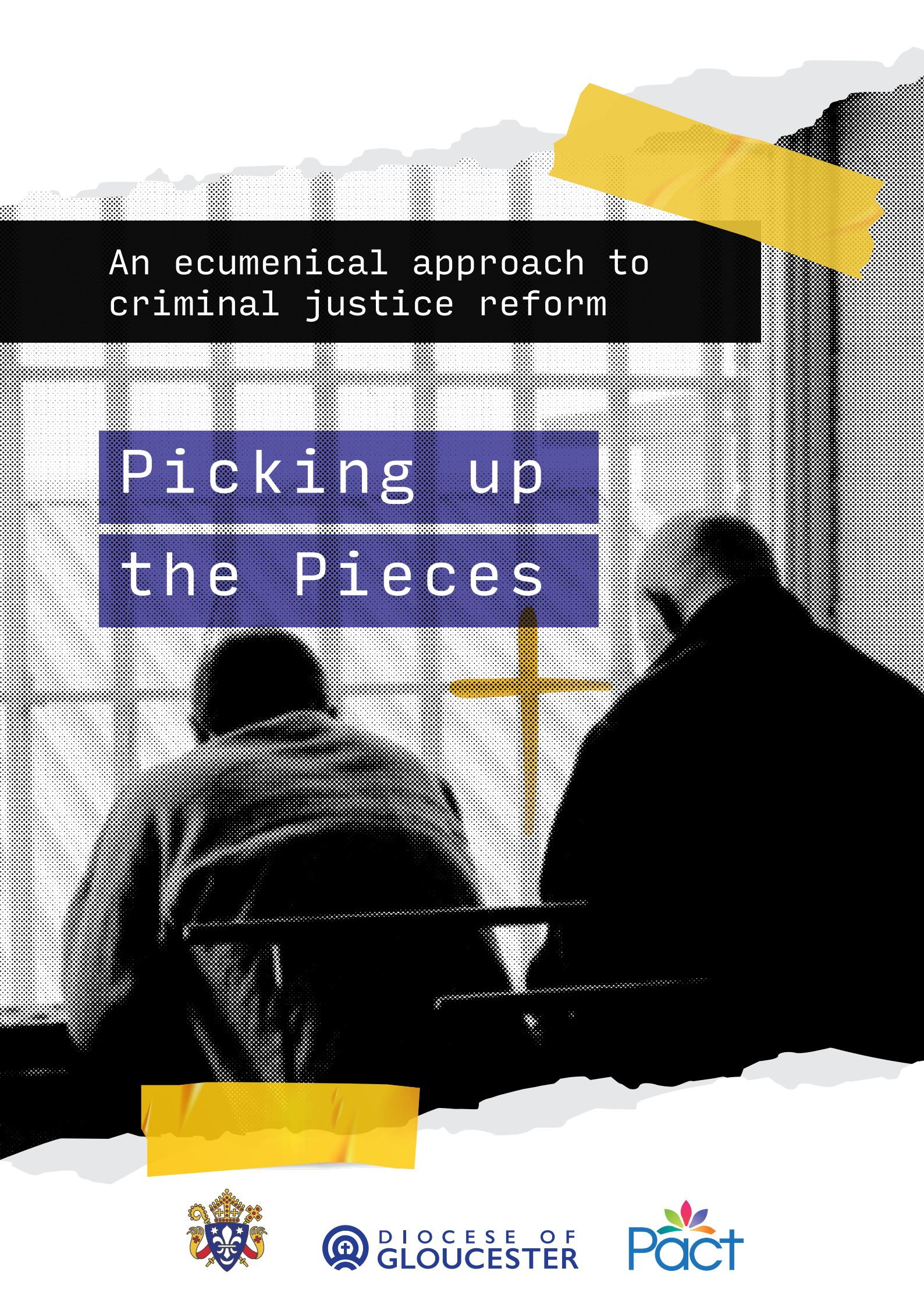




An ecumenical approach to
criminal justice reform

Picking up the Pieces



 DIOCESE OF
GLOUCESTER

 Pact

"I needed
clothes and
you clothed
me, I was
sick and you
looked after
me, I was in
prison and
you came to
visit me."
Matthew 25:36

Foreword

The criminal justice system is in crisis after decades of lengthening prison sentences and underinvestment. As Christian leaders, we are calling for reform.

We are proud to stand in a long line of Christians calling for prison reform, a legacy that includes Quaker Elizabeth Fry, who transformed 19th-century prison conditions and influenced policy across Europe and the United States.

This report calls for change and invites the government to work alongside the hundreds of churches, Christian organisations, and other faith communities that are already working to 'pick up the pieces' of our broken criminal justice system.

In every prison in this country, there are chaplains of all faiths providing pastoral, emotional, and practical support alongside spiritual guidance. In visitors' centres and inside prison visits halls, there are Christian organisations supporting children and families as they visit their loved ones in prison. As people go through the gate, there are faith-inspired volunteers who walk beside them as they attempt to re-enter society. There are communities of churches, temples, mosques, and other religious buildings that welcome people who have left prison. They not only provide practical support such as food and accommodation, but they also provide places of community and belonging with the offer of spiritual support.

A range of Christian organisations, alongside other faith-based and secular groups, work with young people to help them develop lifestyles that contribute to society, rather than paths that lead them toward involvement in the criminal justice system. They also work with and support those who have been victims of crime, including the many people in prison who have been victims of crime themselves.

Christians volunteer and work in the criminal justice system because of a core belief in the inherent dignity of every individual. This dignity is greater than their worst act or the worst experience they have endured. No one is beyond the possibility of redemption and of living a transformed life.

We strive for a society where no one has to live in fear of crime; a society where people who end up in prison are reformed and ready to rejoin society once released. We know this cannot happen without change.



This report contains ten recommendations. We must do more to support the victims of crime, including the children of prisoners, who are 'hidden victims'. We call on the government to 'think family and community'. We know with the right support, families and good relationships can reduce reoffending by 39%. We also recommend greater use of restorative justice, which the government's own research shows is effective in reducing reoffending.

We remind the government that the UK's 40,000 church communities and hundreds of Christian charities offer ever greater potential to work alongside the government; to divert people from crime, support victims, reduce reoffending by former prisoners, and change people's lives for the better. Many of these projects already exist and are plugging the gaps of the failing justice system. We want to help shape a society in which all people can flourish.

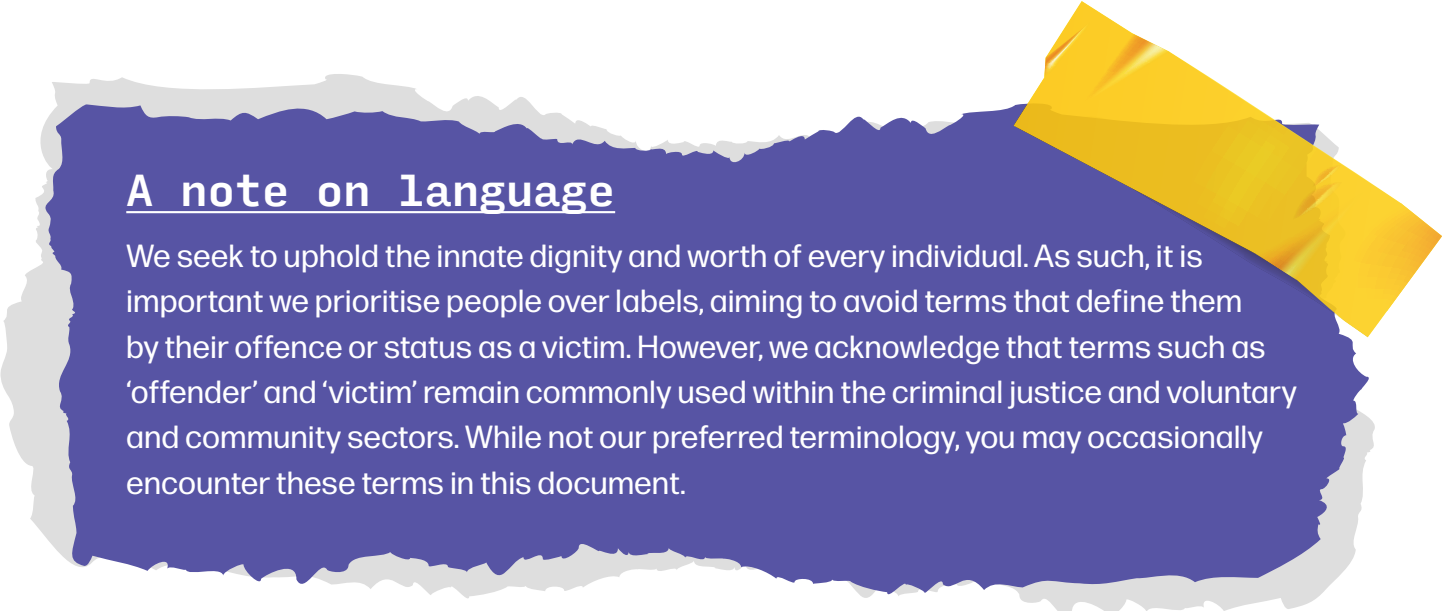
Being tough on crime and the causes of crime is not about locking more people up and for longer, but rather requires creativity and a reformed whole systems approach in which people are recognised as unique individuals created in the image of God.



The Rt Rev Rachel Treweek, Lord Bishop of Gloucester, Anglican Bishop to His Majesty's Prisons in England & Wales



The Rt Rev Bishop Richard Moth, Bishop of Arundel & Brighton, Liaison Bishop for Prisons, Catholic Bishops Conference of England & Wales



A note on language

We seek to uphold the innate dignity and worth of every individual. As such, it is important we prioritise people over labels, aiming to avoid terms that define them by their offence or status as a victim. However, we acknowledge that terms such as 'offender' and 'victim' remain commonly used within the criminal justice and voluntary and community sectors. While not our preferred terminology, you may occasionally encounter these terms in this document.

Context

The state of the criminal justice system

As the Rt Rev Richard Moth, Catholic Liaison Bishop for Prisons, has stated, it is “a time of great challenge and opportunity for the criminal justice system.”¹ The challenge is clear: our prison system is overcrowded, understaffed, and under-resourced. It is characterised by high levels of violence and mental health need, with much of the estate housed in ageing buildings not fit for purpose.

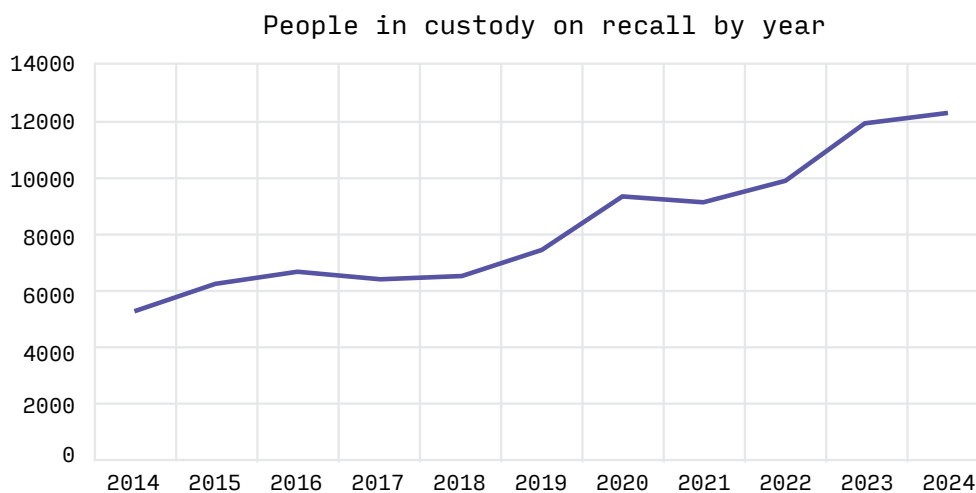
England and Wales have one of the highest imprisonment rates in Western Europe,² with the prison population rising by 93% over the past 30 years.³ We are sending more people to prison for longer: in 2022, more than twice as many individuals received sentences of ten years or more compared to 2010.⁴ On 30 June 2025, the prison population stood at 87,334, just below the usable operational capacity of 89,573.⁵ Projections indicate this figure could reach as high as 114,800 by 2028.⁶

More than a third (37%) of people sentenced to custody in the year leading up to June 2024 received sentences of six months or less.⁷ Crown court caseloads have reached historic highs, causing significant delays in judgement and sentencing. The remand population has soared to over 17,500 – its highest level in 50 years.⁸

Prisons are becoming increasingly unsafe. In the 12 months to December 2024, self-harm incidents rose by 11%, and assaults increased by 13% compared to 2023. During the same period, there were 91 self-inflicted deaths.⁹ Within this increasingly strained environment, recruitment and retention remain significant challenges. The government, His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), and trade unions have raised serious concerns about several prisons, including newly built facilities, that have struggled to recruit and retain sufficient staff to operate safely. Such concerns have seen hundreds of officers placed on national detached duty, sometimes being sent hundreds of miles to cover shortages in prisons that have failed to recruit locally.

In too many prisons, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) has reported that staff-prisoner relationships have become “perfunctory” and “transactional”, rather than effective or trusting.¹⁰ Purposeful activity remains inadequate, with prisoners spending prolonged periods in their cells with little structure or opportunities for development. In 2023-24, Ofsted and HMIP rated 31 out of 39 prisons as either poor or not sufficiently good.¹¹ Given these conditions, it is no surprise that for many in custody, prison sentences are failing to provide meaningful rehabilitation.

Thanks to the heroic efforts of HMPPS, charities, and other agencies, there has been a reduction in the proven reoffending rate over the last decade. However, far too many individuals still leave prison only to commit further crimes. The adult reoffending rate currently stands at 38.3%,¹² while recall rates remain alarmingly high. Over the past ten years, the number of prisoners in custody on recall has more than doubled, from 5,260 on 30 June 2014 to 12,199 on 30 June 2024,¹³ underscoring severe issues in through-the-gate and post-release support.



A year of opportunity

Despite this grim picture, there is a growing sense of optimism and hope within the criminal justice system. Many issues that churches hold close to their hearts are beginning to see positive, albeit tentative, progress toward reform.

In May 2024, Parliament approved changes to the law governing the termination of Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) licenses. As a result, by March 2025, more than a quarter of those previously sentenced under IPP were released from their sentence. However, the reforms applied only to individuals already in the community, leaving many still behind bars.¹⁴

In November 2024, the Ministry of Justice commissioned the Independent Sentencing Review, chaired by the Rt Hon David Gauke, former Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice. Published in May this year, the final report calls for immediate reform of the sentencing framework in England and Wales, “ensuring custodial sentences reflect the seriousness of the offence and keep victims and the public safe, while embedding greater sustainability and fiscal discipline into the prison system”.¹⁵ The majority of the recommendations have been accepted by the government in principle, with a Sentencing Bill due later this year.

In December 2024, the government launched an Independent Review of the Criminal Courts, led by Sir Brian Leveson, a retired senior judge and the current Investigatory Powers Commissioner. The review focuses on identifying long-term solutions to ease pressure on the Crown Court, reducing waiting times between charge and conviction or acquittal.¹⁶

At the start of 2025, the government established a Women's Justice Board, bringing together experts from criminal justice, the voluntary sector, and government to inform a new, and much-needed, strategy for women caught up in the justice system.¹⁷

Alongside potential criminal justice reforms, the government has launched 'Change NHS', a national conversation to develop a '10 Year Health Plan for England'. The initiative aims to respond to concerns raised in Lord Darzi's 2024 independent investigation, which revealed that over a million people were waiting for community mental health services, 50,000 of whom had been waiting for over a year.¹⁸

With three in five women and over half of men in prison reporting mental health problems,¹⁹ reform in this area is crucial. The Mental Health Bill 2025 presents a significant opportunity for change. Key measures include a 28-day limit for transferring individuals with severe mental ill health from prisons to secure hospitals, as well as the removal of police stations and prisons as designated 'places of safety' for those in mental health crises.²⁰

The role of Christian churches

Christians have long been at the heart of the criminal justice system, providing spiritual and pastoral care for people who have been harmed by crime, engaging in prison and probation services, and shaping the development of the modern prison estate with a strong emphasis on reform and rehabilitation.

Christian churches often help bridge the gap between prisons and the community, offering support, insight, and guidance before, behind, and beyond the prison walls. It is this practical experience, alongside their moral teachings, that provides the churches with a unique and important understanding of the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of the criminal justice system.²¹

Almost half (44.6%) of the prison population who specify a religion or belief self-identify as Christian.²² A recent review of 'Faith and the Prison System' highlights the significant positive impact of faith-based initiatives in prisons. Such initiatives, it states, are "the seeds of a different and better criminal justice system, one which focuses just as much

on crime prevention and rehabilitation as it does on punishment and deterrence”.²³ Indeed, the HMPPS National Partnership Framework (introduced in 2020) highlights the vital contribution that faith and belief can make to desistance,²⁴ while the Ministry of Justice’s recent synthesis of evidence found that interventions delivered by Christian organisations can significantly reduce reoffending.²⁵

There is a clear commitment across Christian churches to harness the current climate of opportunity. 2025 marks a Year of Jubilee for the Catholic Church in which all are called to be ‘pilgrims of hope’ and in which the late Pope Francis had called for consideration of “prisoners who, deprived of their freedom, feel daily the harshness of detention and its restrictions, lack of affection and, in more than a few cases, lack of respect for their persons”.²⁶

The Rt Rev Rachel Treweek, Anglican Bishop to His Majesty’s Prisons, has committed to being “part of the solution to this problem”,²⁷ while the Catholic Church has emphasised the need to “highlight the threat to human dignity across our criminal justice system and herald new opportunities for promoting the common good in our courts, prisons and probation service”.²⁸ At this critical juncture, we have a unique opportunity to present a unified voice and speak truth to power.

Faith in action: Christian churches at work

Almost half of the population of England and Wales identifies as Christian. Two-thirds consider themselves to have a faith.²⁹ In recent years, Christians of all denominations have been increasingly active on the frontline of a failing system, providing support to victims and survivors, young people at risk of involvement in crime, people in prison and with convictions, and their children and families.

Christian volunteers, chaplaincies, and organisations provide vital services at every stage of the criminal justice process. There is good academic evidence of the efficacy of faith-based approaches in supporting people to desist from reoffending after release from prison, and of the power of ‘redemption narratives’.^{30 31}

The case studies below are illustrative examples of just some of the work that goes on in prisons and communities every day. However, the Church should not simply be seen as another service provider, but rather as a “prophetic voice and vessel for social justice” that stands in solidarity with both people who have been victims of crime and those with convictions, and advocates for systemic reform.³²



Case study: supporting victims and survivors

Safe in Faith is a project of Caritas Westminster that fosters trauma-informed support for survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and exploitation with an understanding of how faith shapes their experiences. Rooted in Catholic social teaching, it welcomes people of all different faiths. The initiative grew from the Domestic Abuse Working Group of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and the National Board of Catholic Women, with guidance from a panel of experts with lived experience as survivors of abuse.

People subjected to sexual harm can find the criminal justice system so re-traumatising that they do not feel able to seek justice.³³

"The way I was treated, I felt like it was me that was on trial, not my rapist. The whole experience was more traumatic than the actual assault." – Julie, sexual assault survivor

Safe in Faith offers faith-literate resources and trauma-informed training to Catholic clergy and parishes and to interfaith groups of counsellors and helping professionals. This work ensures support for those subjected to harm at each stage of their journey, from safety seeking to trauma recovery.

"Thank you, Safe in Faith. My priest saved my life and my children's lives." – Mary, domestic abuse survivor

Through faith-literate support, victims/survivors are able to explore how religion can be weaponised by perpetrators, but can also be a huge support in their darkest moments:

"The person who abuses you may take many things from you, and at times the darkness can feel so unbearable and lonely, but I always remembered the footprints in the sand – it is through those times that God carried me."
– Emily, domestic abuse survivor

Case study: intervention in the community

Spark2Life is a black-led charity founded by former prisoner and ordained minister Dez Brown. The organisation's mission is to "prevent harm and promote life" by working to reduce the risk of children and young adults entering cycles of offending, empowering people to overcome adversity and promote wellbeing, and advocating for equitable systems, including an equitable criminal justice system.

Spark2Life's community-based programmes, working across nine London boroughs, support young people (11-30 years old) who are involved in and/or on the periphery of becoming involved with the criminal justice system, including those in or associated with gangs and serious youth violence. Through trauma-informed long-term therapeutic mentoring and case-working, the charity helps young people to reduce the potential of becoming involved in crime, improves their relationship skills, and increases their engagement with education, training, and employment opportunities.

Jay* had suffered numerous traumatic experiences since the age of 15 years, when he was criminally exploited, and had strained relationships with his family. At the age of 17, he was referred to Spark2Life where he was matched with a caseworker who had lived experience. According to Jay,

"he could understand what I was going through; it was easy to trust him."

Over the course of a year, during which time Jay faced many more challenges, including a physical assault, Jay's caseworker helped Jay find ways to practically keep himself safe and explore the impact that trauma had on his emotional wellbeing. Jay shared:

"My Spark2Life caseworker helped me feel happier, and motivated. He was there for me, no matter what. He trusted me and that I can do better, and this helped me trust myself."



Case study: supporting people in prison

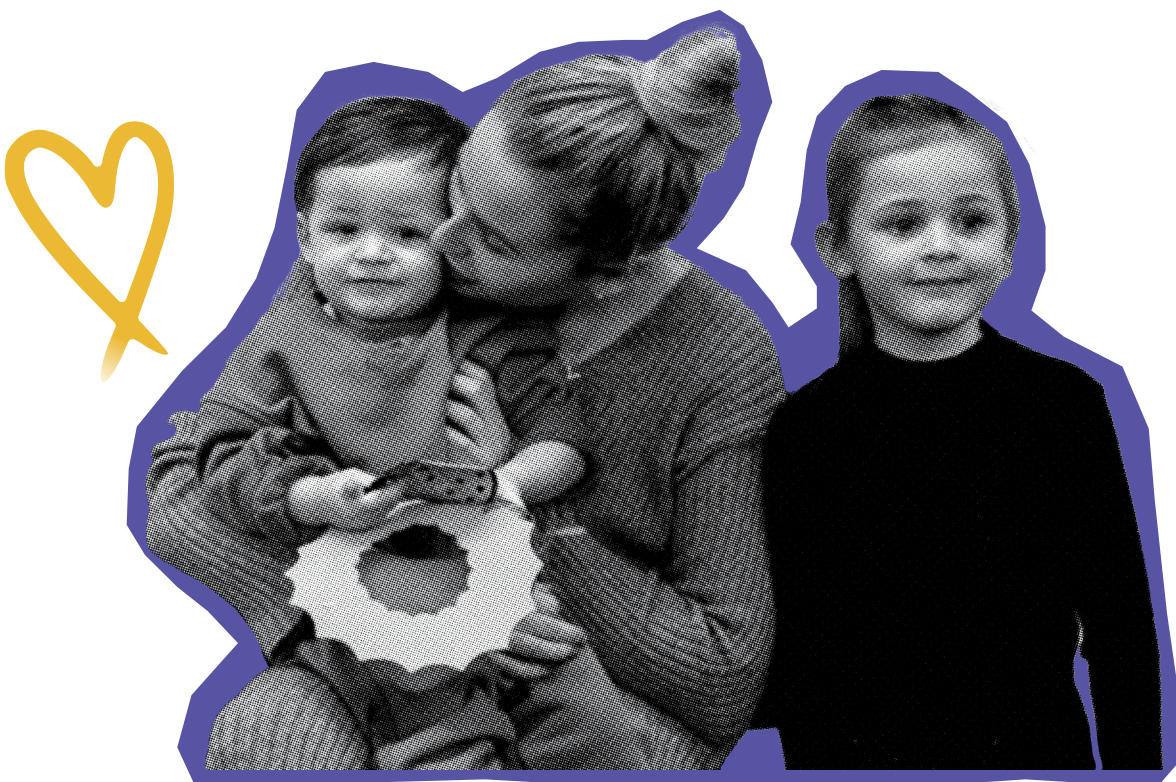
The Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact) is the national Catholic charity that supports people in prison, people with convictions, and their children and families. Founded as the Catholic Prisoners' Aid Society in 1898, the charity has remained true to the values of Catholic social teaching, offering hope to thousands of families across England and Wales. It relies on over 350 volunteers, many of whom share the Christian faith, to provide its services in prisons and communities.

Operation Elf is Pact's annual scheme that supports parents in prison to give Christmas gifts to their children. The project matches parishes with their local prisons, allowing parish members to donate gifts that parents in prison can give to their children on a family visit. This initiative allows mothers and fathers in prison to participate in the Christmas tradition of giving, reinforcing their parental identity and helping to strengthen the bond between parent and child. This work also helps to reduce reoffending - people in prison who receive visits from family and loved ones are 39% less likely to reoffend.³⁴

"As a prisoner, we are not allowed to give presents and would have been left out. It was a good way to include our kids and give us an opportunity to give them presents ourselves."

– A dad in prison

"Thank you so much for the gift voucher. It was lovely to be able to give this to the children, and they talked about what they would buy. It brought some Christmas spirit for me and my family." – A mum in prison





Case study: supporting people leaving prison

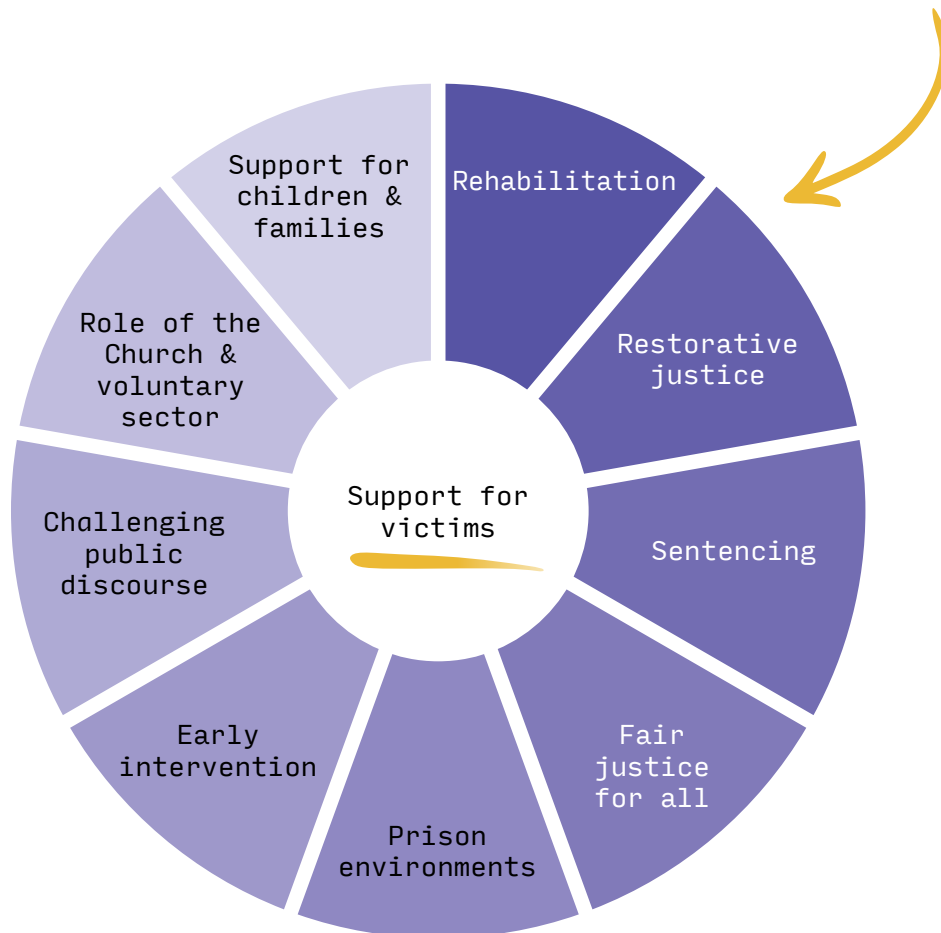
Initially piloted by The Free Churches Group, The Welcome Directory is a multi-faith organisation focused on the resettlement of people leaving prison. It aims to empower faith communities to become places where people who leave prison find acceptance, discover restored relationships, and recognise the possibility of change.

Vineyard Church Northampton has a regular Sunday congregation of approximately 100 people. The church operates a charity that supports marginalised groups within the local community through a range of projects, including food banks and homelessness services. The charity frequently receives referrals from the probation service and has also provided support to individuals leaving prison. Over the years, prison chaplains have directed prison leavers to the church community. The church offers a welcoming, non-judgemental environment where people resettling in the community can participate in worship and experience a sense of belonging and acceptance.

“A prison leaver who regularly visited the food bank told us at that time, “you were a life saver”. He’d come here, rather than going to the pub or round the street corner. He knew nobody and we’d signpost him to other help. If he hadn’t found our community, he might have connected with individuals who might not have given him the best advice.” – Vineyard Church volunteer

Recommendations

We have based our ten recommendations on priorities for the criminal justice system shared by the Christian churches, with care for victims of crime at the forefront of reform.



1. Make care for victims the first priority of the criminal justice system

The Christian churches are united in their commitment to prioritising care for victims of crime. In 2022, the Rt Rev James Jones KBE chaired the Independent Commission into the Experience of Victims and Long-Term Prisoners, stating that “those who have been offended against have a moral right to see that the offender is appropriately punished, and that the offence is not repeated. Such a just hope is predicated on the reform of the offender”. However, the Commission found that people who have been harmed by crime often feel “overlooked, disregarded, neglected, marginalised and further traumatised” by the criminal justice system.³⁵

The Catholic Church states that “listening to the voices of victims in the criminal justice process is a practical means of ensuring that our system is informed by those it intends to serve”³⁶ while The Rt Rev Rachel Treweek has called for a sentencing advisory board that includes victims’ representatives and “takes evidence from victims’ campaigns”.³⁷

There is a shared call for improved support for victims, while also acknowledging that many people in prison have been victims of crime themselves. The Prison Reform Trust notes that “29% of the prison population experienced abuse as a child (rising to 53% for women prisoners), compared to 20% of the general population”.³⁸ Caring for victims, therefore, is “critical both to their welfare and to the future wellbeing of the wider community”.³⁹

The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 should be amended to establish a statutory duty requiring the Secretary of State for Justice to increase levels of victim satisfaction (as measured by the Crime Survey for England & Wales) by at least five percentage points annually. In addition, as recommended in ‘Remember Me’, the government should improve the reporting process for victims of antisocial behaviour and increase public trust in the possibility of punishing and reducing low-level crime. The government should also commit to improving support services for victims of crime, including assistance from independent specialist services whenever necessary.⁴⁰

2. Renew focus on rehabilitation

A recurring theme in Christian discourse is the urgent need to rehabilitate rehabilitation. There is consensus that reform requires a renewed focus on the rehabilitative purpose of custody, with a shift away from prisons as purely punitive in function. As the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) highlighted in their submission to the Sentencing Review: “committal to custody has to be seen as a beginning not an end”.⁴¹ Chaplains from The Free Churches Group reiterate the need for a clearer strategy for rehabilitation and call for rehabilitative practice to be evidence-based and informed by existing knowledge regarding desistance theory.

The Rt Rev Rachel Treweek has called for prisons to become “places of transformation” where individuals can engage in “purposeful activity, therapy, education and developing healthy relationships”.⁴² This call is echoed by the Catholic Church, which highlights the need to support and challenge prison leaders to demonstrate, “a clear vision and strategy for rehabilitation” that incorporates solutions that acknowledge both personal and societal influences on the causes of crime.⁴³

3. Invest in restorative justice programmes

The Church of England, the Catholic Church, and The Quakers all call for the extension of quality, evidence-based restorative justice programmes across the criminal justice system. As the General Synod of the Church of England reminds us: “at the heart of the Christian message is [...] the belief that human life is not grounded on the retributive logic of an eye for an eye, but on repentance and forgiveness which can promote the rehabilitation of individuals”.⁴⁴ Indeed, the Catholic Church states that “the ultimate goal of punishment is the healing and restoration of relationships across the community” and that restorative justice therefore plays a crucial role in both healing for the victims of crime and rehabilitation for offenders.⁴⁵

The Free Churches are official partners of Prison Fellowship and, as such, advocate for the use of the Sycamore Tree programme in prison. The programme explores the effects of crime on victims, offenders, and communities, and seeks to restore relationships by encouraging participants to take responsibility for their personal actions. A 2009 evaluation found that the initiative significantly improved prisoners’ ability to understand the impact of their behaviour on the victims of their crimes.⁴⁶

As highlighted by the Ministry of Justice, “There is good recent evidence, published in 2013, that restorative justice interventions can reduce reoffending.”⁴⁷ A systematic review of ten restorative justice conference (RJC) interventions found RJC significantly reduced reoffending compared to prison alone, while victims reported higher satisfaction in case handling and fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms. RJC were also highly cost-effective, with the cost of crimes prevented estimated to be eight times higher than the cost of delivery.⁴⁸

4. Support sentencing recommendations with increased investment in probation services and prison regimes

The Christian churches have welcomed the Independent Sentencing Review as an opportunity to create a just and proportionate criminal justice system that supports effective rehabilitation, addresses prison overcrowding, and creates a more cost-effective justice model.

The churches welcome the proposal for an ‘earned progression’ approach, where people in prison can show real change and earn earlier release under close supervision in the community. However, we know that far too many are still spending too much of their

sentence locked in their cells. For this proposal to work, it must come with investment in HMPPS and voluntary sector organisations working in prisons to ensure there are meaningful education and training opportunities for people to demonstrate progress.

As outlined in the review, there is also an urgent need to sufficiently resource the probation service to ensure it can effectively support the use of alternatives to custody. Probation officers will play an integral role in ensuring the success of non-custodial sentences. Providing adequate resource will ensure they are able to offer the tailored support required to help people turn their lives around, reduce the likelihood of reoffending, and ensure victims are not at risk of further harm.

Finally, the review's terms of reference did not address the number of people currently serving indeterminate or lengthy sentences, including those serving under the IPP scheme. Further reforms are needed to ensure that we uphold each person's inherent dignity and capacity for rehabilitation, while also ensuring they are afforded meaningful opportunities to make amends for the harm caused to society.

5. Ensure fair justice for all

Racial justice

Following the Lammy Review in 2017 and subsequent HMIP review of the experiences of adult Black male prisoners and Black prison staff (2022), there has been an increased focus on the need to address the discrimination faced by people of the global majority within the criminal justice system.

The Free Churches Group has shared that it welcomes the Sentencing Review's emphasis on rehabilitation but remains concerned about the adequate representation of global majority voices. It strongly advocates the integration of the Lammy Review's recommendations into future action plans to ensure a more equitable and just approach.

This concern is shared by the Church of England, whose Worcester Diocesan Criminal Justice Affairs Group identified "the disproportionate impact on those from black and minority ethnic communities at all stages of the CJS" as a key area of concern for 2024-25.⁴⁹ Similarly, the Racial Justice Advocacy Forum (an ecumenical network of global majority Christians) has actively committed to "advocate for a fair and just criminal justice system that stands as a beacon of equality".⁵⁰

In 2023, the National Church Leaders Forum identified "a rising concern about how Britain's criminal justice system treats individuals from different ethnic groups".⁵¹ The Catholic Church extends its concern to the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities and asks that we consider what we can do better to support disproportionately affected groups within the criminal justice system.⁵²

Justice for women

The Rt Rev Rachel Treweek has been clear that, for the majority of women, “prison does not work”,⁵³ and that we need community-based alternatives that respond to the complex needs of women, who are frequently victims of abuse, trauma, poverty, and exploitation. This sentiment is echoed by the Catholic Church, which recommends that “the government and Sentencing Council should introduce a statutory presumption on courts to avoid issuing custodial sentences for female offenders found guilty of non-violent offences”.⁵⁴

Justice for older prisoners

The Catholic Church is concerned for the ageing prison population – the fastest growing group in our prisons. The number of prisoners aged 60 or over has increased by 82% in the last decade⁵⁵. The Church recommends that the government develop a new strategy for the effective punishment and rehabilitation of older prisoners.⁵⁶

6. Make prison environments safe and decent

Human dignity lies at the heart of Christian values, yet the harsh realities of overcrowded, understaffed, and often violent prison environments starkly undermine this principle. As the Catholic Church states, “the prevalence and persistence of poor prison conditions represents a major threat to the effective rehabilitation of those serving sentences”,⁵⁷ a concern that has been echoed by The Rt Rev Rachel Treweek and the Quakers.

We welcome the government’s commitment to improving prison officer training and the introduction of a new Independent Commissioner for HMPPS Professional Standards. Effective recruitment, training, supervision, and support for prison and probation staff is a key element of improving prison environments. As the Quakers stated in their submission to the Sentencing Review: “easing overcrowding, introducing more comprehensive staff training and ensuring well-maintained buildings are a pre-requisite for achieving the key aim of successful rehabilitation”.⁵⁸

7. Invest in early intervention to divert people from crime

The Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Quakers, and the Free Churches Group, all highlight the need to look upstream at the complex reasons for crime, rather than focus on the criminal justice system in isolation.

Investment in early intervention is crucial, with The Rt Rev Rachel Treweek highlighting that “what we spend on education, health, and social care – not least in the early years – has a knock-on effect for who does and does not enter the criminal justice system”.⁵⁹

The Catholic Church suggests that a “greater awareness of the importance of mental health and well-being” should also “assist in addressing these complex factors affecting crime and reoffending”.⁶⁰ The Quakers emphasise the importance of diversion and community crime prevention, and the need to focus support on those at risk of criminalisation. The churches support a public health response, with a particular focus on building more resilient families and communities that nurture community cohesion.⁶¹

8. Challenge the public narrative on criminal justice

The Church of England, the Catholic Church, The Free Churches Group, and the Quakers urge a fundamental shift in public discourse on criminal justice. The government should foster public support for a culture of rehabilitation, rather than a system focused on vengeance and punishment.

Both the Church of England and the Catholic Church have highlighted the destructive role of the media in creating a moral panic regarding the prevalence of crime and the need for more punitive sentencing. The Catholic Church has called for journalists, politicians and faith groups to “be vigilant in challenging penal populism”.⁶² The Rt Rev Rachel Treweek has also recommended that sentencing policies be insulated from media and public pressure.⁶³

9. Support the ‘hidden victims’: prisoners’ children and families

The churches share a commitment to highlighting the important role of family in supporting rehabilitation. The Quakers explicitly state in their vision for criminal justice that they are “for helping to keep prisoners’ families together”.⁶⁴

In 2017, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, the Church of England and the Free Churches Group made a joint submission to the prison reform inquiry, highlighting the important role that chaplains play in supporting family contact and calling for their role to be recognised within the new performance measure for maintaining family ties.⁶⁵

More recently, the Catholic Church has called for on-site social workers to be employed in all women’s prisons to support positive connections between mothers and their children.⁶⁶ Both The Rt Rev Rachel Treweek and the Catholic Church have highlighted the need for the state and wider society to recognise and support the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment, who are described as the ‘hidden victims of crime’.

Both the Catholic Church and the Church of England call for the identification of prisoners' children to ensure they receive support to mitigate the impact of parental imprisonment, as promised in Labour's 2024 manifesto.

10. Work with churches and other faith communities to transform lives

Faith and faith-based initiatives play a vital role in supporting and informing the criminal justice system. Not only is there a shared commitment to ensuring the reliable and regular availability of chaplaincy services within prisons, but the voluntary and community sector also holds a wealth of knowledge and expertise to support all those affected by crime.

As The Rt Rev Rachel Treweek has stated: "This is an opportune time for the church and all multi-faith communities to engage with HMPPS, to transform the lives of those who have offended and to care for those who have been affected by crime".⁶⁷ The Rt Rev Richard Moth reminds us we are called to "remember and accompany all those affected by crime, from the victims and perpetrators of crime to the families and the wider community, and to address the acute and chronic problems undermining our criminal justice system."⁶⁸

We encourage the government to establish a £10 million fund to which local churches, community chaplaincies, and other established faith and multi-faith organisations can apply for up to £20,000. This scheme could help to deliver many times its value in services for victims and people with convictions. It could support both new initiatives and successfully piloted programmes to divert young people from crime, support prison leavers to avoid reoffending, and ensure victims and survivors receive the trauma-informed care they need to rebuild their lives.



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