

niacro

NIACRO

POLICY PRIORITIES **2017-2018**





Overview

NIACRO is a voluntary organisation which has been working for almost 50 years. We are committed to collaboration and partnership which supports our aim to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities.

We know that reducing crime is not just the responsibility of the Department of Justice (DoJ) - it requires the participation of a range of departments, statutory bodies, and voluntary and community sector organisations.

The Strategic Framework for Reducing Offending (2013) was designed to co-ordinate a range of Executive policies and strategies that can contribute to reducing offending in the long term, emphasising the duty of all departments to support a reduction in offending, in recognition of a clear need for more strategic partnership between sectors and better cross-departmental working.

It is critical that the Executive departments work together to achieve shared objectives and commitments. We call for the *Strategic Framework for Reducing Offending* to be implemented and monitored by departmental committees to ensure departments recognise their role in reducing offending.

Further, it is critical that the role of the third sector, who support justice outcomes is recognised, and that voluntary organisations are valued and supported as key strategic partners.

We ask that all political parties make a commitment to the following **six pledges** to contribute to a safer and fairer society with less offending and fewer victims:

1. Remove barriers to effective resettlement
2. Stop criminalising children
3. Support families and children affected by imprisonment
4. Pursue alternatives to prosecution
5. Attend to mental health and wellbeing across the criminal justice system
6. Tackle hate crime

Ask #1:

Remove barriers to effective resettlement

Resettlement back into the community following custody or a conviction is critical to reducing the risk of reoffending. This is not just an issue relating to justice: pathways to effective resettlement include access to meaningful education, employment and training; sustainable housing; and appropriate mental and physical healthcare.

Our service delivery experience shows that there are still a number of barriers that prevent people accessing the support they need to reintegrate with the community.

It is a concern that many of those with convictions are still experiencing difficulty, for example, in obtaining insurance (house/home etc.) which maintains their social isolation and stigma.

We believe the Northern Ireland Assembly can contribute to a reduction in reoffending by pledging to:

- Promote equality of access to Further Education.
- Educate employers about fair and safe recruitment.
- Ensure access to 'through-the-gate' support services for released prisoners.
- Review the Rehabilitation of Offenders legislation, building on the filtering of records approach.

Ask #2:

Stop criminalising children - invest in early intervention

The Review of the Youth Justice System in Northern Ireland (2011) found that “contact with the criminal justice system, even for relatively minor matters, can have serious implications for young people’s future life chances.”

The Police Service of Northern Ireland’s (PSNI) use of stop and search powers have remained as a consistent and growing power over the past decade. Analysis of most recent data shows the powers are used 68% more than ten years ago; and at a greater rate than any other police service in the United Kingdom. In this regard, stop and search is the most common form of adversarial contact with the public.

The PSNI state the powers are “an operational tool used to prevent, detect and investigate crime as well as to bring offenders to justice”. Yet evidence demonstrates stop and search has a minimal, and in some cases negligible, effect on the prevention or detection of crime. It is also notable that children (17 and under) remain a significant focus of these powers. Between 2010/11 - 2016/17, over 25,000 children have been subject to stop and search, with 15-17-year-old males five times more likely to be stopped proportional to numbers in the population.¹

¹ The Detail (2017), ‘PSNI Urged to Reconsider Use of Stop and Search on Children: <https://www.thedetail.tv/articles/psni-urged-to-reconsider-use-of-stop-and-search-on-children>

Whether or not a young person enters custody, formal involvement with the criminal justice system can impact on their educational outcomes and increase their likelihood of further offending, leading to increased crime, victims and policing costs. It is therefore in everyone's interest that we stop criminalising children and seek to prevent young people from ever entering the criminal justice system.

To do this, we call on the Assembly to:

- Raise the age of criminal responsibility.
- Invest in early intervention.
- Divert minor youth offending out of the criminal justice system.

Ask #3:

Support families and children affected by imprisonment

It is estimated that at any moment, 1,500 children in Northern Ireland have a parent in prison.² The families of people in prison are a forgotten group. This figure exceeds those affected by parental divorce, on the child protection register, or in care. However, children of prisoners are often the forgotten, hidden victims of crime. Many serve a silent sentence along with their family member; feeling shame, fear, loss, guilt, sadness and often feeling stigmatised or isolated by others.

There is very little support for partners, children and extended family when someone enters custody, despite a wealth of evidence including the recently-published Farmer Review³ which shows effective support at this stage results in better outcomes for the family, the person in prison, and the wider community. In this review, Lord Farmer has identified family as the “golden thread” running through the reforms across the prison estate.

The work of NIACRO’s family focused projects directly contribute to several Executive commitments, including: reducing the level of serious crime; reforming the prison service; safeguarding vulnerable children; and tackling poverty and social exclusion.

² NIACRO, Families and Imprisonment: <https://www.niacro.co.uk/families-and-imprisonment>

³ Ministry of Justice, The Importance of strengthening prisoners’ family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime (2017)

Providing support for families affected by imprisonment not only improves the mental health and financial capability of that family, but can also have a positive impact on the mental health of the person in prison, contributing to effective resettlement and desistance when they re-enter the community – greatly reducing the risk of reoffending and helping to create safer communities.

We therefore call on the Assembly to recognise the needs of this forgotten group and protect them from the ‘silent sentence’ handed down to the innocent families of people in prison by pledging to:

- Ensure families of those in prison get access to emotional and practical support.
- Introduce a statutory responsibility for children with a parent in prison.
- Assess the impact of imprisonment on children at pre-sentence report stage.

Ask #4:

Pursue alternatives to prosecution

Prosecution can be an expensive and ineffective response to low level offending. This is exacerbated further when prosecution leads to custody. In 2015-16, the actual cost per prisoner place in Northern Ireland was £57,643⁴; this represents a significant expense with questionable benefits particularly in instances of minor offending and fine default.

We are not convinced that imposing a fine or short custodial sentence for a minor offence always has the desired outcome of reducing the risk of that person repeating their actions in the future. Instead, we believe they should be offered an early intervention programme that will address their behaviour.

We therefore call on the Assembly to commit to exploring more effective (and cost-effective) disposals which will contribute to a reduction in offending, a reduction in Court caseloads, and a reduction in cost to the public purse by pledging to:

- Invest in sustainable diversion and cost-effective alternatives.
- End the imprisonment of fine defaulters.

⁴ Northern Ireland Prison Service, Annual Report, 2015-16.

Ask #5:

Attend to mental health and wellbeing in the criminal justice system

Many who experience the criminal justice system experience mental ill health. According to the Prison Reform Trust, 10% of men and 30% of women have had a previous psychiatric admission before they entered prison. A more recent study found that 25% of women and 15% of men in prison reported symptoms indicative of psychosis. The rate among the general public is about 4%.⁵ At all stages in the due process it is critical that those in need of support and diversion are so referred.

Specifically, we ask political parties to give public leadership to the concerns being raised with us by families who have a family member in custody and who feel powerless to support their relatives. In particular, we would highlight the need for appropriate support, including a seamless connection with appropriate services upon release.

We would propose that a small panel of experts would be asked to review, within a time limited period, the current arrangements for supporting vulnerable prisoners.

⁵ Prison Reform Trust, Mental Health Care in Prisons:
<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/ProjectsResearch/Mentalhealth>

The establishment of such a group would demonstrate that the issues of mental health and wellbeing within the criminal justice system is of immediate concern to many beyond the justice and health professionals employed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust respectively.

This can be done by committing to:

- Establish a Ministerial Group with a focus on wellbeing.
- Develop the capability of staff in criminal justices organisations to understand and respond to mental ill health.
- Ensure that upon committal and release, individuals have access to a seamless and continual process of mental health care.
- Work with the voluntary and community sector to improve mechanisms that support those with mental ill health within the criminal justice system.

Ask #6:

Commit to tackling hate crime

In 2016-17 there were 2503 reported hate motivated incidents to the PSNI.⁶ While hate crimes motivated by sectarianism are on the rise, there is a racially-motivated incident or crime on average of three times a day, despite the relatively small numbers of people in Northern Ireland from ethnic minorities or from other countries.

The police figures show that fewer than one in five racist crimes result in any specific outcome, suggesting that over 80% of such hate crimes result in no prosecution or even warning for the person who has committed the offence.

Homophobic hate crime remains particularly high with figures almost identical to those of the last two years, the highest ever recorded by the PSNI.

NIACRO would ask the political parties to make a commitment to ensuring that incident of hate crime are tackled.

⁶ PSNI: Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland: Quarterly Update (2016-17)

We call on the Assembly to:

- Map incidents of hate crime; plan and deliver community education accordingly.
- Provide for the inclusion of ethnic minority community representative in local communities structures, and facilitate positive contacts with racial and ethnic minorities.
- Implement policies and practical interventions to reduce poverty and unemployment in areas particularly affected by hate crime.
- Provide leadership and demonstrate civic courage on the issue.



The logo for niacro, featuring the word "niacro" in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font inside a red circular background. This circle is set against a white vertical bar that is centered on a red background with abstract circular patterns.

You can read our **Policy Asks** on our
website: www.niacro.co.uk

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The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland: NIC101599

Company Registration: No NI 018121

Charity Registration: No XN 48280