

Do you agree with the arguments being made in this article?

Government 'criminalising young'

The government is too quick to criminalise young people for petty offences where informal punishment could be more effective, says a report.

Ex-Youth Justice Board chairman Prof Rod Morgan criticised an "extensive net widening" of the use of summary powers such as cautions and on-the-spot fines.

His report for King's College, London, urged assessment of the development.

The Ministry of Justice said there was a reluctance to bring young people to court unless necessary.

The report for the college's Centre for Crime and Justice Studies said: "There is a good deal of anecdotal evidence, for example, that behaviour, particularly that of children and young people, is being criminalised which arguably would be better dealt with informally (school-related misbehaviour, for example) and in previous times was."

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Prof Rod Morgan

It added: "The increased use of pre-court summary justice is one of the most important elements in the government's strategy for modernising the criminal justice system.

"The implementation of the strategy has received virtually no research, inspectorial or parliamentary scrutiny.

"The trend towards pre-court summary justice should more incisively be scrutinised to ensure that justice is being meted out fairly and effectively. We cannot be wholly confident that this is so."

Shadow home secretary Dominic Grieve accused the government of "pursuing easy targets instead of going after the real criminals".

"Not only are serious offenders escaping real justice due to the reliance on spot-fines but, as this report shows, many people who should be dealt with informally are being criminalised," he said.

Police time

The Ministry of Justice said the government was keen to avoid individuals, especially children, being prosecuted through the courts when an equally effective alternative could be found.

A spokesman said: "The best way to avoid a criminal record is not to break the law.

"The law-abiding majority want to see crimes dealt with effectively, and fixed-penalty notices and cautions are part of this process.

"They allow police to deal swiftly with low-level offending, freeing them up to spend more time on frontline duties and more time investigating violent, dangerous and serious offences."

Do you agree with Prof Morgan? Are you a young person who has received caution or on-the-spot fine? Send your comment using the form below:

Name