

BBC Bitesize

Britain in 1900 was very different in lots of ways from today's Britain. Since then there have been two world wars, times of economic prosperity and depression, and a digital revolution. As society changed, criminals have adapted, and crimes have evolved. There are new crimes, as well as old crimes committed in new ways.

Today some of the most common crimes are car and motoring offences; cybercrimes and theft; violence and sexual offences; and hate crimes.

Advancements in science and technology have revolutionised how the police do their jobs today. Crime scene DNA can now be collected and used as evidence to help identify victims and suspects. While police cars and helicopters have improved response times and two-way radios allow for better communication between officers. But things looked a little different at the beginning of the 20th century.

During World War One a new crime came to the fore. Conscription was introduced which meant that all healthy 18- to 41-year-old men had to join the armed forces by law. Conscientious objectors were men who, on religious or moral grounds, refused to take part in the war. This was considered a criminal offence.

In general, the public did not support conscientious objectors, they were viewed as weak, lazy and avoiding their responsibilities. The media coverage was hostile and newspapers often published cartoons making fun of them.

Conscientious objectors faced a special trial called a tribunal, where they were court ordered to help the war effort. But those who still refused were sent to prison where they were kept in solitary confinement and had to complete hard, back-breaking labour.

The death penalty, which had been a common punishment in previous centuries, was now being seen in a new light. Following World War Two public opinion was turning against the death penalty.

In the 1950s notorious criminal cases that were seen to be unjust also influenced the change of opinion on capital punishment. One of these cases was that of 19-year old Derek Bentley who was executed in 1953.

Bentley had severe learning difficulties and when his 16-year-old accomplice shot two police officers during a burglary, they were both charged with murder. Despite the undisputed fact that Bentley did not fire a gun, they were both found guilty, and Bentley was sentenced to death. This caused a huge public outcry and helped influence the eventual abolition of the death penalty as a punishment for murder in 1965.

Prisons continued to be a subject of debate throughout the 20th century. While seen to be good at keeping criminals locked up and off the streets, they were expensive to run and re-offending rates were high.

Many changes have been made to prisons as governments tried to find the balance between preventing crime, rehabilitating criminals and preparing them for life after prison.

From the late 1960s, alternatives to prison sentences, known as non-custodial punishments, were introduced. Including community service orders and electronic tags. These measures helped to keep non-violent offenders out of prisons.

In a move towards further crime prevention in the 1980s, communities were encouraged to be more vigilant, with initiatives like neighbourhood watch and community support officers helping to prevent crimes and identify suspects.

Policing continues to evolve and in recent years there have been attempts to make the force more representative by recruiting more women and people from ethnic minorities into police services.

Society in Britain has changed dramatically since the early 1900s, along with attitudes to crime and punishment. Capital punishment has been abolished, prison conditions have improved and modern policing has a focus on preventing crime as well as catching criminals. Today, the emphasis is on improving the system of legal punishment as society continues to search for the right balance between deterrence and rehabilitation.