

Marie Goldman

MP for Chelmsford



Having tougher sentences to deter crime not backed up by evidence

LAST Friday, at about 7pm, there was a tragedy in one of Chelmsford's lovely parks. Early reports say that a young man, in his very early twenties, was attacked and a murder investigation is underway. I'd like to thank Essex Police for their very swift action. My thoughts are with the victim's family at this devastating time. I hope yours are too.

But I'm wrong about the time and place. That's not when and where the real tragedy happened. Sure, it was the final act, but I doubt very much it was the start, beginning and end. The real tragedy is that we failed to prevent the incident happening in the first place.

It's important to say that I don't know any more details about this particular incident, and we shouldn't speculate on an ongoing investigation. So let's talk in the abstract. After all, it isn't as though this is the first tragic death we've ever heard about - nor is it likely to be the last. And neither is it something very specific to Chelmsford. On the contrary, these are challenges seen up and down the country, and with Chelmsford's proximity to London, to a certain extent it's perhaps surprising we don't see more of it - thankfully.

Knocking on doors at the weekend, a constituent was keen to tell me that we need tougher sentences to prevent crime. I don't agree. The evidence simply doesn't back it up.

Whether someone might face five or 15 years in prison if they commit a particular crime doesn't tend to factor into their thinking, not least because most people aren't aware of the specific differences in possible sentence lengths for whatever crime they may commit.

In addition, far from deterring repeat offences, longer prison sentences can have the opposite effect. In short, they don't rehabilitate offenders, they reinforce a sense of hopelessness and introduce prisoners to other criminals.

Unfortunately, prison in the UK seems to be far more about punishment than it is about preventing the same thing from happening again. I understand the motivation from the

public to want to see people who have committed crimes face justice - and there are some particularly heinous crimes where the only way to keep us all safe is to lock up the perpetrator for the rest of their life. But if our aim is to prevent crime, the simple fact is that making sentences ever longer doesn't do that.

So what does? Well, studies have consistently shown that one of the key influences in preventing crime is the certainty of being caught. If you think that if you commit a crime, your chances of being caught are very high, then it will very much influence your decision about whether or not to commit that crime.

Of course, that isn't the only factor. Key to everything is understanding the underlying causes of crime. What drives people to commit a crime in the first instance? That's a much bigger and even more complicated question, but I would argue that an absence of good quality youth services, or inspiring, positive role models for young people play a key role.

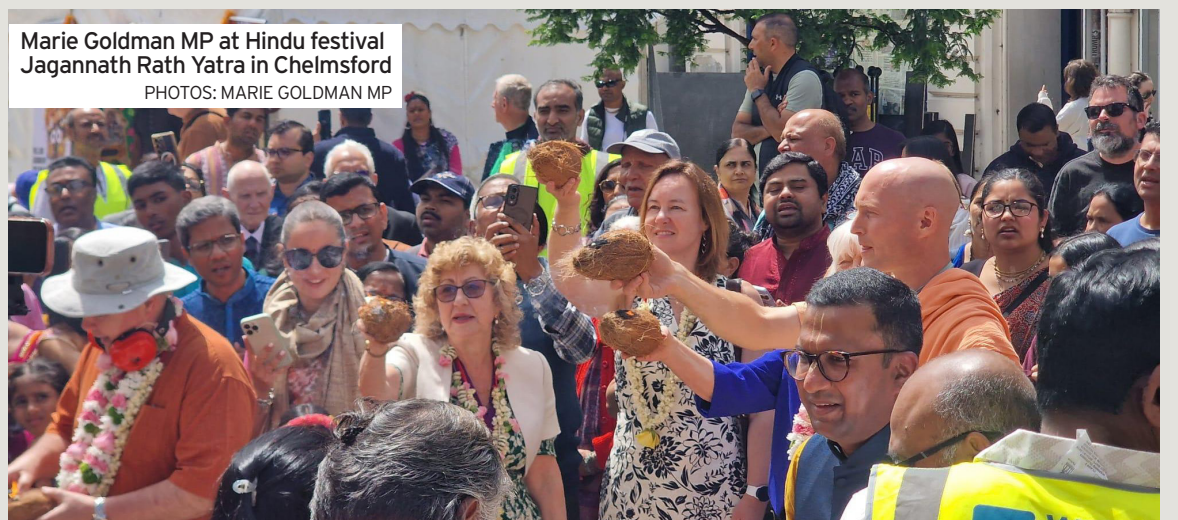
The doom scrolling and addictive traits of social media are highly influential too, with some devastatingly dangerous rabbit holes that young people can be taken down.

Last week, I visited the National College of Policing in Ryton near Coventry as part of a parliamentary delegation. Among other things, we discussed social media and some of the incredibly malign influences there - including something called 'The Com'

(short for 'The Community') - an online forum operating around the world, but in particular in the US and the UK, where children, especially girls, are being groomed by boys and young men to harm themselves. Such is the psychological power and control of this 'community', some girls have even been persuaded to take their own lives, while others watch on.

It's disgusting, devastating and heartbreaking. But we mustn't shy away from talking about it so that we can understand how to tackle it.

I was encouraged by the international collaboration that is happening between crime agencies on both sides of the pond, which I understand has resulted in girls in both



Marie Goldman MP at Hindu festival Jagannath Rath Yatra in Chelmsford
PHOTOS: MARIE GOLDMAN MP



Some of the participants in the Hindu festival Jagannath Rath Yatra in Chelmsford

Cheerful Hindu festival and parade in city

I AM so sad to hear of the murder investigation in Chelmsford - and yet there was so much other positive activity happening in the city over the weekend, including the incredibly bright, colourful and cheerful Hindu festival, Jagannath Rath Yatra.

This included a fabulous parade through Chelmsford High Street.

It's a little incongruous given the content of the rest of this week's article, but the photos I've provided are of that - a reminder that we can choose to focus on the bad stuff, but that there should always be space for the good stuff too.

After all, that's surely



The Jagannath Rath Yatra celebrations brought joy to Chelmsford city centre

what gives us the courage, hope and determination to continue to strive to make our world a better place to live in.

the US and the UK being successfully safeguarded, but it's hard to keep up.

Much of this activity happens below the radar. We don't know about it until it breaks through into the public consciousness through some specific event that gets widely reported on.

If we think we are immune to any of this in Chelmsford, we need to think again.

As an MP, it's genuinely hard to find the appropriate line between

appearing to jump on a bandwagon and reassuring the community. I don't always get that right, so please forgive me if that's the case.

I've lived in Chelmsford for over 20 years - it's my home. It's where my children were born and have grown up. I use its shops, its parks, its facilities, just like everyone else.

And when something terrible happens, I find it deeply worrying too - I want my friends, my family, and everyone else to be, and to feel, safe. But I think Essex Police do an

excellent job. They don't always get it right - none of us do.

But I genuinely believe they are one of the better police forces in the country (and my visit to the College of Policing confirmed that opinion).

So rather than second-guessing what they are doing all the time, I think it's important not to intentionally make their job harder, but give them the space to get on with it.

Of course, I will continue to play my part in holding them to account.

Marie