

What does the public think about prison?

Absent from the current debate about responding to crime is much analysis of what the public thinks about different policy options. In this briefing Rob Allen, Director of Rethinking Crime & Punishment summarises the findings from recent research on public attitudes undertaken in the UK and suggests lessons for policy. The evidence shows that:

- The public does not rank prison highly as a way of reducing crime
- Members of the public know little about the sentencing options available to the courts
- Most think that people come out of prison worse than they go in
- It is not clear whether attitudes have become more or less punitive in recent years
- British people seem to favour prison more than other Western Europeans but less than Americans
- People in lower social classes have more punitive attitudes than those in social class A/B
- Better parenting, more police on the beat, better discipline in schools and constructive activities for young people are preferred options for reducing crime
- The idea of rehabilitating offenders is viewed positively
- An overwhelming majority agree that more use should be made of intensive community punishment for young offenders.

rethink

‘The British public seems clear on what would do most to reduce crime – more police on the beat with four or more out of ten choosing better discipline in schools for young people.’

As part of its work to raise the level of debate about prison and other responses to crime, Rethinking Crime & Punishment has commissioned a number of pieces of research to shed more light on public attitudes in this area. In this first briefing, we summarise this research, placing it in the context of what is known from other sources about public attitudes to imprisonment.

Do people think prison works?

Findings from November 2001 show that prison is not ranked highly as an option for reducing crime (Table A). When asked what would do most to reduce crime in Britain, only 8% chose the option of sending more offenders to prison (3). This echoes responses to similar previous surveys. 12% thought imprisoning more offenders would do most to reduce crime in 1996 and 6% in 2000 (1).

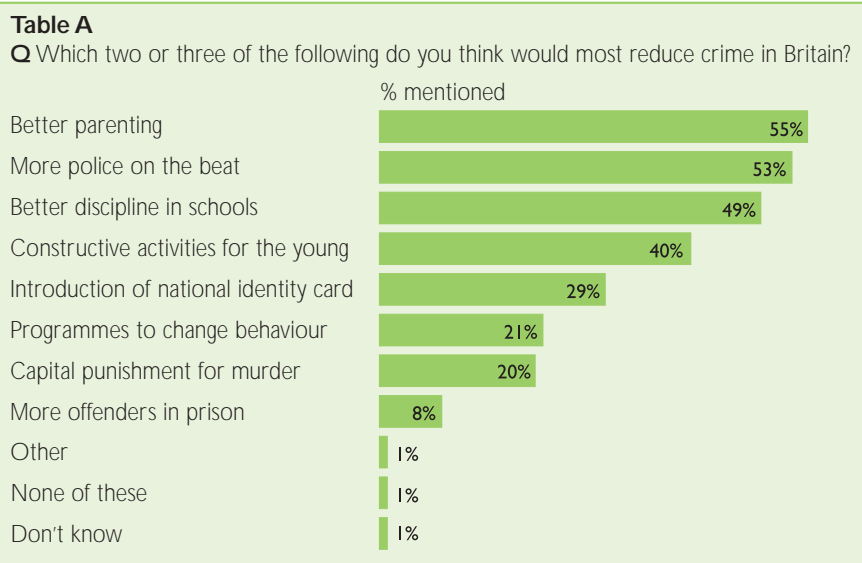
Most people agree that prison has a negative effect on offenders (3). 53% agree that most people come out of prison worse than they go in, with only 14% disagreeing. A quarter doesn't know or has no opinion.

Scepticism about the impact of prison on crime is reflected in hypothetical spending preferences (Table B). Asked how they would spend a hypothetical £10 million on dealing with crime, only 2% opted to keep 400 adult offenders in prison for a year (3).

What should be done to tackle crime?

The British public seems clear on what would do most to reduce crime. More than half opted for better parenting and more police on the beat with four or more out of ten choosing better discipline in schools and constructive activities for young people. Two options

for spending the £10 million on dealing with crime were mentioned much more than others; almost a third would set up teams in 30 large cities to identify and work with children most at risk of getting into crime, while just over a quarter would hire more police officers. In research undertaken for the Sentencing Framework Review, the general public is clear about what they want sentencing to achieve – it should aim to stop re-offending, reduce crime or create a safer community. Very few spontaneously refer to punishment or incapacitation. When asked to rank specified purposes of sentencing, the largest proportion ranked rehabilitation highest (49%) and three quarters of the public believe most offenders can be rehabilitated. A majority support the philosophy underpinning restorative justice that if offenders were more aware of the effect of their crime on their victims, they would be less likely to reoffend (6).



There also seems to be a very high level of support for greater use of community punishments. More than nine out of ten agree that there should be more use of intensive community punishments that keep track of young offenders and tackle their offending, with only 3% disagreeing (4).

What do the public know about alternatives?

Alternatives to prison do not enjoy high public awareness. In the Sentencing Framework Review, less than a third of people could recall three or more sentences unprompted, with only a half naming community service (6). In research conducted for the Scottish Parliament, only one person in one hundred said they knew a lot about the range of sentences available to the courts (7).

Reduce crime. More than half opted for better parenting and giving better discipline in schools and constructive activities

Are attitudes to prison changing?

Poll evidence is ambiguous. In MORI surveys, the proportion of the public thinking that tougher institutions for young offenders, making prison sentences longer and imprisoning more offenders would do most to reduce crime, fell significantly between 1994 and 2000 (1). However the International Crime Survey shows a gradual increase in support for prison sentences for cases of burglary between 1996 and 2000 coupled with a decrease in support for community sentences (2). In similar vein, the proportion of the British public thinking it a good idea to reduce the numbers in prison fell from 47% in 1992 to 39% in 2001. More than one in six say they don't know. Thus some evidence suggests the public has become more punitive, while other research shows they are becoming less so.

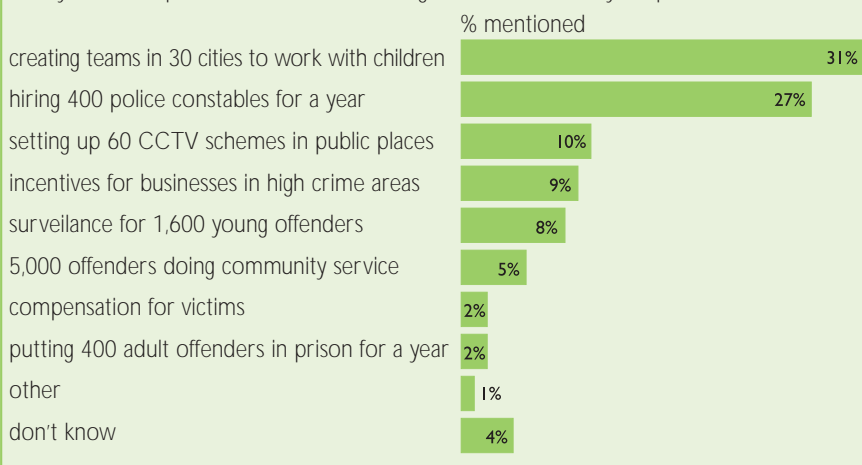
Who holds what attitudes?

A variety of surveys have shown that those in lower social classes have more punitive attitudes than those in higher social classes. For example, more people in social class A/B think it a good idea to reduce the prison

population than a bad idea (46% v 40%), a pattern even more pronounced among readers of broadsheets (54% v 32%). As for the best way of reducing crime, those in social class D/E are much more likely to choose the re-introduction of capital punishment (25%) or more offenders in prison (11%) than A/B's (11% and 5% respectively) (3). Most evidence suggests that the most hard line demographic subgroups are older, lower class and conservative, although some surveys find younger people more punitive.

Table B

Q If you could spend £10 million on dealing with crime would you spend it on...



How does the UK compare with other countries?

The International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS) asks samples from 16 countries about their sentencing preferences in respect of a recidivist burglar aged 21 who steals a colour television. In the 2000 survey, UK countries were among those most favouring prison – 54% did so in Northern Ireland, 52% in Scotland and 51% in England and Wales, against an average of 34%, with a range of 56% in the USA to 7% in Spain. The proportions favouring community service in the UK countries – 30%, 24% and 28% – were below the average of 41%. Most of the countries with above average support for prison have cultural origins in Britain – the USA, Canada and Australia. All of the countries in the least punitive half of the table share a mainland European or Scandinavian heritage. In these countries, community service is more popular than prison.

Looking at trends over time, the countries most in favour of imprisonment have remained the same. The average level of support for imprisonment in the ICVS has increased between 1996 and 2000 – from 34% to 38% in ten countries involved

in both surveys – while support for community sentences has fallen (from 36% to 30% across seven countries).

A very recent survey in the USA suggests a shift in opinion in the other direction. The survey conducted in 2001 for the Open Society Institute found that the American public prefers dealing with the roots of crime rather than strict sentencing by a two to one margin (65% to 32%). This compares with a Gallup poll in 1994 when 48% of Americans favoured addressing the causes of crime and 42% preferred the punitive approach (5).

Lessons for policy

Penal policy in many Western countries has in recent years been heavily influenced by the perception that there is strong public support for greater use of prison. In opinion polls, the public do generally express support for harsher sentences for convicted offenders but it is well established that their preferences for a tougher approach are based on inaccurate knowledge about existing levels of sentence severity and do not take account of sentences other than prison. Over half of people make large underestimates of the proportion of adults convicted of rape, burglary and mugging who are in fact sentenced to prison. Evidence from the USA and elsewhere suggests that the proportion of the population who tell pollsters that the system is too soft remains fairly static whatever the objective sentencing levels actually are.

The findings presented here confirm that measuring public attitudes in this area is by no means easy. Some of the evidence is contradictory and it is difficult to tell how settled a view people take on a complex and emotive subject. There are however at least three important lessons for policymakers:

The British public is not as pro prison as is generally supposed. They are sceptical about its role in reducing crime and would prefer public money to be spent on other approaches.

The public supports the idea of rehabilitation and restorative justice but has very little awareness of the range of sentences available to the courts. Almost everyone agrees with greater use of intensive community punishments for young offenders. This suggests that there is much scope for better 'marketing' of alternatives to prison to the public.

There is much support for preventive approaches. Both in the USA and UK, there is a growing public desire for prevention, particularly for measures that intervene early in the lives of children at risk. This is widely preferred to later intervention through imprisonment.

References

- (1) Public attitudes to prison: an analysis of MORI trend data (February 2001)
- (2) Public attitudes towards prisons: a review of the evidence (Mori, May 2001)
- (3) Crime Omnibus Survey (Mori, November 2001)
- (4) Crime Omnibus Survey (Mori, March 2002)
- (5) Open Society Institute: Changing public attitudes towards the criminal justice system (February 2002)
- (6) Making punishments work (Home Office, 2001)
- (7) Public attitudes towards sentencing in Scotland (NFO System 3, March 2002)

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