

Attitudes to Crime and Punishment: the Results of a Deliberative Poll of Public Opinion

This note looks at how attitudes to crime and punishment are shaped and maintained, and assesses which social groups are more and less open to attitudinal change. It summarises the results of re-analysis of a 'Deliberative Poll' in which participants were able to absorb factual information and develop their views in extensive discussions with others over a weekend.

The results of a 1994 experiment provide some important insights into the extent to which attitudes towards crime and punishment alter in response to information and discussion and whether changes last. The main findings are:

- The Deliberative Poll triggered significant shifts in attitudes about the best ways of controlling crime. For example, 35% of participants initially thought that "sending more offenders to prison" would be a very effective way of reducing crime. After the weekend, only one in five took this view.
- By no means all people adopted more liberal views after the event; many adopted tougher views. In general, people adopted less extreme views after the event, with a net shift in a liberal direction.
- Older people tended to be more authoritarian and punitive than younger ones, as did tabloid readers when compared with broadsheet readers. Those with A-level plus qualifications tended to be less tough-minded than others in their views.
- While 50% initially thought "stiffer sentences generally" would be a very effective way of reducing crime, ten months later only 36% thought the same.
- Support for community penalties was originally quite high and remained largely unchanged.
- There were few consistent predictors of preparedness to modify views. The most striking finding was that the views of the better educated were more likely than others to shift in a liberal direction.

rethink

A shift towards more liberal views was more pronounced, leading people simply softened their attitudes slightly, rather than

Deliberative Polls

Deliberative Polls (DPs) were invented by James Fishkin, an American political scientist. They are designed to capture public opinion more thoughtfully than conventional sample surveys, by allowing participants to absorb information on a given topic and to develop their views in discussion with others. The DP reported upon here took place in 1994 and was the first in Britain. It was the result of a collaboration between the National Centre for Social Research and Channel 4 Television (who funded the research).

DPs are not without their critics. For example it has been argued that the changes in attitudes that arise in DPs are more a consequence of the experience of being treated in a special way than the deliberative experience itself. It has also been suggested that the results depend simply on the quality of the advocacy of the specialists who brief the DP participants. Finally, critics have suggested that whatever the desirability of having a well-informed and thoughtful public, DPs are irrelevant as politicians need to take account of the reality of public opinion as it actually is.

Whatever the case, DPs are important in demonstrating convincingly that there can be large differences between people's uninformed and untutored views, and those which they hold after they have had an opportunity to absorb information and discuss the issues with others.

The 1994 Deliberative Poll on Crime

The first stage of the DP involved a representative sample of the electorate, in which respondents were interviewed about their views on crime and punishment. After the interview, each person was invited to take part in a televised weekend event in Manchester. Around 300 people attended; as a group they were an almost perfect replica of the larger group who took part in the initial survey.

Before arriving in Manchester, they were sent briefing materials which introduced the issues at stake. Once there, they were randomly divided into groups within which they discussed (under the moderation of a trained group leader) their views and some of the possible consequences of various courses of action or inaction. They also got the opportunity to cross-question various experts and politicians (including pro- and anti-prison

reformers, an ex-prisoner and politicians from all three main parties). After the weekend they once again completed the questionnaire. Finally, some ten months later, participants were again re-interviewed in order to assess the durability of any changes in their views.

Attitudes before the DP event

At the time of first contact (that is, before the weekend), the sample had fairly authoritarian views about crime control. For instance, over two-thirds (68%) thought that "teaching children the difference between right and wrong" would be a very effective way of helping prevent crime in Britain. However, there was a clear awareness of the role that broader socio-economic factors (particularly poverty and unemployment) can play in crime. Thus, when people were asked to rank six different possible ways of reducing crime, over eight in ten people opted for "reducing unemployment and poverty" as one of their three chosen options. Moreover, nearly half thought this would be the most effective way to reduce crime, more than double the proportion who opted for giving police greater powers (19%) or making sentences stiffer and building more prisons (14%).

The sample also had tough-minded views about sentencing. There was, for instance, an overwhelming view that "life should mean life" and that courts should give "tougher sentences to criminals"; over eight in ten people agreed with each of these statements. By contrast, there was little support for sending fewer people to prison and opinion was divided over the extent to which prison should be reserved only for those who are "hardened criminals" or who pose "a danger to society". Although there was a belief that prisons can have a rehabilitative role, when forced to choose between government focusing its energies on punishment or reform of criminals, people's preference tended towards punishment (55% versus 36%).

A clear exception to this punitive set of views about sentencing related to the punishment of young first-time offenders (whom only a very small minority thought deserved custodial sentences).

Who thought what?

There were marked differences between the views of particular groups. In particular, older people tended to

adding to a net liberalisation of views overall. In many cases, experiencing a dramatic change in their opinions.

Table 1. 'Very effective' ways of reducing crime

	Pre-event survey	Post-event survey	10 month follow-up
Teaching children the difference between right and wrong	66	77	62
Sending more offenders to prison	35	17	21
Firmer discipline in schools	53	56	45
Stiffer sentences generally	50	35	36
More police on the beat	62	52	48

be more authoritarian and punitive than younger ones, as did tabloid readers when compared with broadsheet readers. Education also appears to make a difference; those with A-level plus qualifications tended to be less tough-minded in their views. Finally, location also emerged as strongly linked to attitudes, with those in cities tending to be more punitive and authoritarian than those in other areas.

These factors all tended to emerge even when a wide range of other social characteristics (including experience of crime) were taken into account. So, if we were to caricature the sort of person who holds extremely authoritarian views about crime control (favouring, for instance, stiffer sentences, more police on the beat and firmer discipline in schools) we would be thinking of an elderly tabloid reader living in a city. However, these factors are independent of one another – young tabloid readers will be relatively punitive as well, as will elderly broadsheet readers.

Did information and debate change people's views?

After the weekend event people's views shifted in a more liberal and less punitive direction on many – but by no means all – measures. This effect was still evident when respondents were surveyed again ten months later – although the difference was more muted. Table 1 shows less support after the DP for various ways of controlling crime, including tougher sentencing, greater use of imprisonment, more police officers on the beat and firmer school discipline.

Table 2 covers views on prison regimes and sentences. The proportion calling for life sentence for murder fell, as did the proportion wanting heavier sentences. However attitudes remained unchanged on other issues, such as the need for 'honesty in sentencing'

(where, for example, a life sentence is exactly that). Support for community penalties remained largely unchanged.

The direction in which attitudes shifted was by no means consistent. As a result of the weekend the views of a significant number of people became less liberal. However, a shift towards more liberal views was more pronounced, leading to a net liberalisation of views overall. In many cases, people simply softened their attitudes slightly, rather than experiencing a dramatic change in their opinions.

Whose views changed the most?

The apparent link between attitudes to sentencing and both newspaper readership and education suggests that the provision of (different sorts of) information and the promotion of debate might be expected to have a considerable impact on people's views.

However, the results are not quite so clear-cut. We did not, for instance, always find the greatest change among those who were the least 'knowledgeable'. In particular, those with A-level plus qualifications were more likely to change their views on sentencing than those without these qualifications.

However, on the other hand, we did find that starting with low levels of information about the criminal justice system was linked to significant shifts in a more liberal direction on the appropriateness of custodial sentences for young offenders. So, if we assume that the weekend provided this group with more or better information than they had before, then it is clear that targeting those with little knowledge can have a significant impact. We found two characteristics amongst those whose views became more liberal as a result of the DP. First, an important part of this group had started off with

Table 2. Views on court sentences, prison regimes and community penalties

	Pre-event survey	Post-event survey	10 month follow-up
Prison life should be made tougher and more unpleasant	71	71	75
All murderers should be given a life sentence	83	71	71
Courts should give tougher sentences	83	71	75
Life sentence should mean life	89	86	87
Keep offenders out of prison, but make them report regularly to probation officers	59	64	62
Keep offenders out of prison but make them work helping people in the community	73	80	75
Keep offenders out of prison but make them get training and counselling	15	25	19
Send under 16's convicted of burglary to a secure institution for young criminals	30	21	23
Make 16 year old first time burglars do community service	81	81	80

markedly authoritarian or punitive views (although this was not always the case – sometimes it was those with more liberal views who changed the most). Secondly, those who changed often appeared to require some intellectual capacity to absorb and process information, as indicated by their level of educational attainment.

However, we must be wary of over-interpreting our data as the numbers of people who participated in the Deliberative Poll does limit our analysis.

Translating findings into action

These findings suggest we should be pessimistic about the payoff of a highly targeted strategy to inform and educate those members of the public whose views put them at the very “tough-minded” end of the attitudinal spectrum. Of particular note is the fact that there will only be a partial overlap between those who hold the sorts of views that any such strategy might seek to change and those with the greatest ‘capacity’ to process new information. It may be more realistic to think in terms of achieving smaller changes across a broader cross-section of the population.

It is also important to bear in mind that there was change in both directions as a result of the weekend event, with a minority of people hardening their attitudes. Certainly, when we asked participants to indicate whether or not

they thought their views had changed as a result of the weekend, one common response was that the weekend had increased their awareness of crime and the impact it has on some communities (rather than simply affecting their views about punishment). Perhaps some of this group developed more punitive views as a result? Consequently, there is a possibility that using social marketing techniques to promote less punitive penal policies could produce unintended consequences.

The full report, Public Attitudes towards Crime and Punishment, by Alison Park and Mike Hough, is available from the National Centre for Social Research, 35 Northampton Square, London EC1V 0AX
Tel: 0207-250-1866.

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