

Informing the Public

The media can play a crucial role in correcting public misconceptions of crime. Rob Allen details a number of potential strategies.

Raising the level of public and political debate about crime and punishment in Britain is the objective of an important new initiative to be launched by the Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust (EFCT). The Trust is concerned that in recent years policy and practice in dealing with offenders have been unduly influenced by the need to meet the perceived demands of the public for more and more punishment. The result is a system which is neither as fair or as effective as it should be - more people in prison than necessary, less investment in prevention than there might be and an unwarranted lack of public confidence in community punishments.

At the heart of the problem is an enormous information deficit. The Trust will be looking to fund a range of activities designed to address the public's misunderstanding about the reality of crime and our response to it. There is no doubt that the media are an important part of the cause of that misunderstanding and need to be part of a strategy of developing a more rational agenda.

Research has identified a number of serious public misperceptions about crime and sentencing. At a factual level people overestimate the amount of crime which is violent and the proportion of offenders who are juveniles. They underestimate the severity of sentencing and the range of alternatives which are available to courts. Little wonder perhaps that in headline terms, a harsher criminal justice system is attractive to most people. Improving the quality and accessibility of information is thus a key objective of the EFCT project. People who are misinformed are more likely to demand harsher punishment. It will be sensible to target groups whose views might be changed, and disseminate basic information much more widely and imaginatively than is currently the case.

Efforts will need to be made to influence the media both in respect of their editorial lines and their coverage of crime. All too often they paint a picture of crime out of control, a system failing to cope, criminals as evil monsters and alternatives or reforms as doomed to failure. More objective reporting, with scene setting and context, a widening of the lens to look at the causes of and solutions to crime are much needed.

The kind of activities the Trust may fund includes:

- A major public information and education campaign
- Work to persuade media to put crime and sentences in context
- Systematic networking of faith groups, unions, professional bodies, schools and colleges
- Experimenting with study circles and other deliberative forums such as citizens juries
- Providing better information to magistrates and judges about crime patterns, effectiveness of sentences and accurate readings of public opinion
- Researching and publicising international examples of alternative ways of dealing with crime
- Producing or contributing to TV programmes, films or other media
- Making more use of new technology
- Producing information packs, case studies and other material for educational use
- Identifying and recruiting celebrity ambassadors
- Getting sentencing data included in local crime and disorder audits

Exploring alternatives to prison

Beyond the basic facts there is a need to explore and promote alternatives to prison. People will support demanding and effective intermediate sanctions and restorative justice but they do not understand what they involve, and are sceptical about their impact. The media are important here. The reporting of offenders subject to demanding community penalties sometimes "walking free" reinforces the view that prison is the only punishment. The kind of activities the EFCT project might fund include:

- A high-powered inquiry to explore the role of Restorative Justice
- Action research on attitude change in one particular location, involving local media
- Campaigns promoting alternatives to prison for particular groups - young people, women, mentally disordered, drug dependent, and elderly offenders
- The production of radical policy papers on new forms of sanctioning

Direct public involvement

There is also a need to encourage greater direct public involvement with the criminal justice system and prisons. This should not only help to inform people about the realities of prison and alternatives but help to break down barriers of stigma and prejudice which can underpin punitive attitudes. Research on prejudice reduction suggests that contacts must have social and institutional support, be frequent, durable and close enough to permit meaningful relationships to develop and involve co-operative activity.

Activities might include:

- Open days in prisons or prison weeks
- Increasing genuine prison community involvement
- Sentencing forums in prisons
- Public involvement in probation

All of these activities should serve to make people a good deal better informed than currently. There is however a further obstacle to overcome if a more rational policy is to result - that is the superficiality of how policy makers, politicians and practitioners perceive what the public want in this area. While eight out of ten people say they think sentencing is too lenient, when confronted with real cases, public sentencing preferences are, if anything, more lenient than sentencing guidelines. It is clear that the public is not nearly so pro-prison as reports in the media would sometimes suggest. Polls have consistently

shown that more people disagree than agree with the notion that "prison works: the more prisons the better".

What is needed is a public debate and agenda which gets behind the simplistic half truths of penal populism in which politicians and media seem all too happy to collude. This will be difficult to achieve. Just as the reporting of crime can make the exceptional appear commonplace, so the reporting of particular lenient sentences can get translated into an attitude that sentencing in general is too lenient. But people are able to make distinctions and choices in this field. What they deserve is the opportunity from press and politicians alike to make them in an informed and responsible way.

Rob Allen is Director of the Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust Project on public attitudes to punishment.

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Cartoon from Payback, the campaign to improve public information about community punishment. www.payback.org.uk

