

What Does the Public Think about Prison?

Rob Allen reviews the evidence about what people really think about prison as a solution to crime.

Absent from the current debate about responding to crime is analysis of what the public thinks about different policy options. This article summarises research on public attitudes undertaken for Rethinking Crime and Punishment, a three year initiative set up by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to raise the level of debate about prison and other forms of punishment. It suggests that:

- People do not rank prison highly as a way of reducing crime. Better parenting, more police on the beat, better discipline in schools and constructive youth activities are preferred options.
- Most think that people come out of prison worse than they go in.
- Attitudes may be getting less punitive but British people seem to favour prison more than other Western Europeans.
- People in lower social classes have more punitive attitudes than those in social class A/B.
- There is overwhelming support for making more use of intensive community punishments.

Penal policy in many Western countries has in recent years been heavily influenced by apparent public support for greater use of prison. In opinion polls, the public generally express strong support for harsher sentences for convicted offenders but it is well known that preferences for a tougher approach are based on inaccurate knowledge about existing levels of sentence severity. Over half of people surveyed make large underestimates of the proportion of adults convicted of rape, burglary and mugging who go to prison. There is something of a comedy of errors in which policy and practice are not based on a proper understanding of public preferences and opinions and those same opinions are not based on a proper understanding of policy and practice. In fact, evidence from the USA and elsewhere suggests that the proportion of the population who tell pollsters that the system is too soft remain fairly static however harsh the system becomes.

Given particular case studies to consider, the public's sentencing preferences are in line with or more lenient than actual sentencing practice. As the recent *Home Office Review of Sentencing* said, "Tough talk does not necessarily mean a more punitive attitude to sentencing" (Halliday, 2001). None the less, in a context of so-called penal

populism, rates of imprisonment have increased substantially; in the UK over the last ten years, the average daily population rose from 45,000 in 1991 to 65,000 in 2000, an increase of 44%. Earlier this year the prison population reached 71,000.

As part of its work to raise the level of debate about prison and other responses to crime, Rethinking Crime and Punishment has commissioned a number of pieces of research to shed more light on public attitudes in this area.

Do people think prison works?

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

Most people agree that prison has a negative effect on offenders (MORI Nov. 2001). 53% agree that most people come out of prison worse than they go in, with only 14% disagreeing. A quarter don't know or have no opinion.

Scepticism about the impact of prison on crime is reflected in hypothetical spending preferences. 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 (MORI Nov 2001).

What should we do to tackle crime?

The British public is clear 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 most; 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 (MORI Nov 2001). Research undertaken for the sentencing framework review found that 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 referred 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 (Halliday 2001).



The media plays an important role in shaping attitudes

There is also a very high level 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 (MORI March 2002).

What about young offenders?

Attitudes specifically to young offenders seem to share many of the characteristics of broader public opinion in this area but there are some important differences. The 1998 *British Crime Survey* (BCS) found that only 14% thought that the juvenile courts did a good or excellent job while 47% thought they were doing a poor or very poor job. This was easily the worst result among the parts of the system. The low rating is linked with a perception that the courts are too lenient, which is in turn linked with poor knowledge. The BCS has found that people considerably overestimate the involvement of juveniles in crime and they substantially overestimate the proportion of crime which is violent. Those with the poorest knowledge are most likely to be critical. It is thus not surprising that people are critical of a system if they think it responsible for tackling a much bigger and more serious problem than it in fact is.

One interesting dimension is the belief, reported in the BCS, that the youth courts do not have adequate powers — three-quarters of people think this. But when asked to suggest new ways, many of the suggestions such as curfews, fining parents and community work are already available to the court. This is mirrored by research carried out for the *Review of the Sentencing Framework* that found that less than a third of people could

recall three or more disposals unprompted. Somewhat implausibly only 67% remembered prison, 50% community service and 49% fines (Halliday 2001).

Have attitudes to prison changed?

Poll evidence is ambiguous. In MORI surveys, the proportion of the public who think 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 (MORI Feb 2001). 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 (MORI May 2001). In similar vein, the proportion who think 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.

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 reintroduction of capital punishment (25%) or more offenders in prison (11%) than A/Bs (11% and 5% respectively). Most evidence suggests that the most hard line demographic subgroups are older, lower class and conservative, although some surveys find younger people more punitive.

How do we 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 Catalonia. The proportions favouring community service — 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 10 countries involved in both surveys — while support for community sentences has been falling (from 36% to 30% across 7 countries).

A very recent survey in the USA suggests a shift in opinion in the other direction. A survey conducted in 2001 for the Open Society Institute found that the American public favours dealing with the roots of crime over 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 (Hart Research Associates, 2002).

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4437 times by the end of April 2000.

I am surprised no one has stepped in to try and get an order to remove these children to a place of safety. But maybe if the Howard League succeeds in its claim against the Home Office for failing to apply the Children Act in prisons these children might be better treated.

So there is plenty to speak out about regarding children in prison. But that is not all. The situation of women in prison is an outrage too. There are 4328 women in prison, an increase of 21% on last year alone. What sort of women? In fact women suffering from multiple deprivation – women who come from poverty and from the worst our society has to offer. According to the Prison Reform Trust, 25% have been in care, 20% in a psychiatric hospital, nearly half have no education to speak of, and half are dependent on drugs.

So we put them in a place like Eastwood Park, which according to our measured and thoughtful Chief Inspector Anne Owers is neither safe, decent nor constructive. She said that the prison could not deal with the high level of psychiatric illness among the prisoners. So why were they there?

Many were suicidal or damaged themselves. In one month there were 47 incidents of self-harm and 56 suicide risks. There have been three suicides since April 2000. It sounds like a hospital not a prison.

Then the visitors were very badly treated. They had no access to lavatories. Some of the prisoners had to receive their visitors and talk to them through glass – so called closed visits. There must have been a grave security risk but it is hard to believe it is right. Finally the prisoners at Eastwood Park often did not even get their one hour a day in the fresh air although this is a basic human right – accepted by all the prison systems of the world as a right.

I cannot imagine going to another country and saying we are locking up hundreds of mentally ill women, treating their visitors with disrespect and not allowing them their one hour's exercise in the open air per day.

I would possibly keep quiet about it abroad, but it is not acceptable to keep quiet about it at home. It is too shaming. Here in this room are 500 people who all care about prisons, and are all decent, respectable people with moral codes. What is going on in this country in our own prisons is not good enough. If we were only to be concerned about the women and children without noting the situation of men in overcrowded prisons there would be enough for all of us to do.

Outsiders working in prisons have a responsibility to awaken the conscience of the community. They must ensure people know what is being done in their name, help the politicians understand that their penal policies will not do and that they are asking the prison service to do what it is not right to ask them to do. They must show that there is here a broad constituency of concern that wants to see less which makes us ashamed and more which is acceptable, ethical and constructive in prisons and in the community when prisoners leave.

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What lies behind attitudes?

A review of the mainly North American literature on attitudes suggests that attitudes to offenders are more sympathetic in times of prosperity and optimism. While demographic factors are important, variables such as prejudice and fear of crime play an important role. A just world belief – that good things happen to good people and bad things to bad people – and Christian fundamentalism are all linked with punitiveness. Those who fear crime are more likely to think courts lenient and advocate heavier sentences. Perhaps surprisingly, victimisation does not seem to effect punitive attitudes.

The media plays an important role in shaping attitudes, having taken over the role of elders as primary storytellers in modern culture. The media misrepresents the level of occurrence and nature of criminal acts. Those who watch a lot of TV tend to be more fearful, and those who watch crime programmes are more punitive.

Measuring attitudes is more complicated than it seems. Some people hold attitudes for instrumental reasons – more prison keeps me safe – others for expressive reasons – more prison gives offenders what they deserve. Attitudes to prison may also include attitudes to the various components – retribution, deterrence, incapacitation and rehabilitation. Increasing knowledge and understanding may reduce punitive attitudes as may developing empathy, but a number of studies have shown that repeat offenders elicit little sympathy (Wood and Viki, 2001).

Measuring public attitudes is by no means easy. Some of the evidence is contradictory and difficult to read. The important lessons for policy are that: the public are not as pro-prison as is generally supposed; there is a much scope for marketing alternatives to prison; and that there is much support for prevention.

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