

Tabloid Tactics: pushing prison reduction

The tabloid media's dramatic and punitive rhetoric on crime is the daily diet of millions, so getting through the bombast requires some innovative methods. **Lucie Russell** describes the SmartJustice campaign.

SmartJustice was set up three years ago, charged with the task of reducing the prison population. The campaign, which is funded by the Network for Social Change – the group behind the successful Jubilee 2000 Drop the Debt Campaign – initially started with a staff of two, under the auspices of the Prison Reform Trust and based in their London offices.

The first step was to decide who the campaign should be aimed at. We identified four main groups as influential in reducing the prison population – the government, sentencers, the media and the general public. It was felt that while the penal reform sector was already doing excellent work with sentencers, government and the broadsheet media, the popular press and the general public had been neglected. Yet we believed it was essential to reach this group in order to achieve real political change.

So, in September 2002 we set out on the mammoth undertaking of persuading 'Middle England' that low-level offenders should not be sent to prison.

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Crime produces a wide range of emotions. Sympathy for offenders generally isn't one of them. Victims of crime can feel angry, fearful, hurt and frustrated with a criminal justice system they believe is letting them down. These emotions are fuelled by tabloid rhetoric and politicians who vie with each other to talk ever tougher on crime.

Meeting this emotional response with a rational discussion about reducing the prison population was always going to be fraught with difficulties. But surveys have shown that the public does not necessarily equate tough on crime with more people in prison. Research by Rethinking Crime and Punishment has shown that people are in favour of measures that tackle offending behaviour above building more prisons – yet there is little awareness of the alternatives and how they work.

We found that arguments about money (i.e. how much it costs to send someone to prison) held little sway as did arguments defending the human rights of offenders. Most people, we concluded, did not particularly care how many people were in prison. What they did care about was public safety and preventing the next victim.

Armed with this knowledge, we chose to focus on pragmatic, common-sense arguments that would appeal to people's self interest. Our central message was that prison, while essential for dangerous and violent offenders, does not keep us safe from crime in the long run. At the same time we wanted to promote community punishments and crime diversion schemes as tough and viable alternatives to custody.

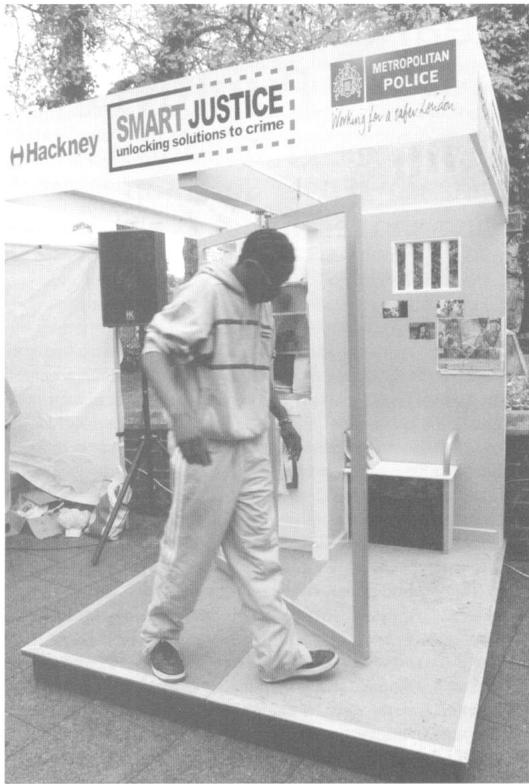
There is of course, plenty of evidence to back up the idea that short prison sentences for low-level offenders are not effective. Home Office figures show that eight in ten shoplifters and car thieves are reconvicted within two years of leaving jail.

We found the alternatives harder to explain. Prison

after all is a singular, easily understood concept. The alternatives meanwhile are complex and wide-ranging. Moreover, prison conjures up a strong visual image that sticks in people's minds. There is no such corresponding image for community penalties.

We were also faced with the difficulty of marketing community penalties as effective alternatives to prison without misleading people into believing that they were a fool-proof solution to bringing down the crime rate. To combat this we focused on strong best practice examples that were having a real effect in reducing crime in a given area.

We also used colourful examples of offenders paying back to the community in imaginative meaningful ways in order to make the alternatives come alive. 'Donna's Dream House' was a prime example. Under the scheme, more than 100 offenders put in more than 4000 hours of unpaid work to transform a derelict drug den into a home for terminally ill children. Many were so inspired by the project that they put hours in above and beyond their normal hours to get the job finished. Several have



Tony Epes

A young actor demonstrates the SmartJustice Revolving Door

gone on to jobs in the building trade, while others have stayed on to volunteer at the project.

The next task was to carefully hone our language towards our target audience. Jargon was banned as were words that smacked of being 'nice' to offenders. They were replaced by tough words that spoke of 'reparation', 'payback' and 'responsibility'. Our language has not always been politically correct, a fact which has not always made us popular among the sector. (One of our campaign postcards read: "Thousands of drug addicts were locked up this week – feel safer? You shouldn't.") This drew complaints from a professional who believed we were pandering to stereotypes of drug users.)

We then devised a set of innovative campaign materials, including scratchcards, postcards, a website and an e-newsletter to spread our messages.

Having finely tuned our messages, the next decision was — where to take them? It was obviously unrealistic to expect a splash in the tabloids every week so we focused on a strong working relationship with the *Mirror* which culminated in a joint reader survey on attitudes to crime and antisocial behaviour last summer. The survey showed that only 31 per cent of people thought that greater use of prison was the best way to deal with 'problem' young people, with more than 80 per cent saying that better parenting and more for young people to do were preferable options. And 69 per cent felt that more drug treatment programmes would reduce anti-social behaviour.

Local press has always been a strong component of our communications strategy as research shows that more people

read and trust a local or regional paper than a national. Our satellite office set up in the North East last year has developed an excellent working relationship with the regional press that has resulted in many positive articles about alternatives to custody with encouraging headlines like: 'Why Prison is Not the Answer,' in papers such as the Northern Echo.

We have also worked hard to place our stories in less than obvious sources such as Readers' Digest, the Jewish Chronicle and Women's Institute newsletters

But a large part of our work has involved cutting out the media altogether and talking directly to the people we want to reach. This has involved a programme of talks to groups such as Rotary Clubs, Parish Councils, Women's Institutes, pensioners clubs, Mothers' Unions and colleges. Where appropriate we have taken former prisoners with us as we found this greatly increased the impact of our messages. Our talks have on the whole been well-received, but there have been difficult moments such as when a member of staff was confronted by a room full of angry pensioners — most of who had been victims of crime, including violent muggings, in the recent past.

We have also tried some more innovative approaches to spreading our messages. Last summer we began the 'Revolving Door Tour' which used street theatre to increase public confidence in community solutions to crime.

The door — a 6' x 6' x 8' structure — features on one side a mock-up of a shop and on the other a mock-up of a prison cell. The two are separated by a perspex revolving door. Actors playing the part of offenders steal from the shop then move to the prison cell and back out into the shop again to commit more crime.

The door illustrates the fact that nearly 90 per cent of young male shoplifters are reconvicted within two years of leaving jail. We have taken the door to high streets, shopping centres, outside town halls — anywhere that they will attract attention from the general public. In an age where few people attend public meetings, the door's strength is that it brings the issues out onto the street, grabbing people's attention and providing an enduring visual image of the revolving door of prison and crime.

SmartJustice — originally due to finish this September — has now been funded to run for a further two years. But how successful has it been? Evaluating the campaign was always going to be difficult. Public opinion rarely changes overnight — or even in three years.

We can however measure our influence on the people we have had direct contact with. The evaluation forms we hand out at our talks confirm the fact that the general public is not as punitive as we are sometimes lead to believe. Audiences generally report that our presentations have made them more receptive to the idea of non-custodial sentences and the need to tackle the causes of crime.

And perhaps one of the most rewarding affirmations that we are on the right track has been a letter from a branch of the Women's Institute deep in the conservative heartlands of Essex. It reads: "Does prison work? We certainly agreed with you that it does not."

Lucie Russell is director of SmartJustice. See www.smartjustice.org for more information.