

# Just How Punitive is the Public?

Mike Hough and Julian V. Roberts summarise a survey on public opinion about youth crime and justice in Britain.

## The study

The youth justice system in England and Wales was radically overhauled in 1998. Remarkably little is known about how the public regards either youth crime or the youth justice system, however. This report presents findings from the first national, representative survey of public attitudes towards these issues. The aim of the study was to take stock of public knowledge and opinion after the first four years of the new youth justice system and to assess:

- Levels of public confidence in youth justice.
- Levels of public knowledge and understanding about the youth justice system.
- The relationship between knowledge about, and confidence in youth justice.
- Whether people find current youth sentencing practice broadly acceptable.

## Misperceptions about youth crime

Many misperceptions exist with respect to youth crime in England and Wales. Most people believe that the number of young offenders has increased since 2001, although statistical trends suggest that this is true for only a very limited number of offences.

Most people also over-estimate the proportion of all crime for which young offenders are responsible, and the proportion of youth crime involving violence. They also over-estimate the proportion of young offenders who will be re-convicted of a criminal offence.

## Best ways of reducing crime

When asked about the most effective way to reduce crime, people distinguish between crime by young and adult offenders. Making sentences harsher was seen as the most effective way to reduce adult crime. Increasing discipline in schools was identified by the largest proportion of the sample as being the most effective way of reducing youth crime.

## Rating the system

Most respondents rated youth courts as doing a poor job. Only 10% rated youth courts as doing a good job. Most also thought that sentences imposed on young offenders are too lenient. This finding is consistent with survey data in other countries.

## Purposes of the justice system

The public distinguishes between the purpose of sentencing adults and juveniles. Rehabilitation was seen as more important for juveniles than adult offenders.

The public also distinguishes between the purpose of prison for young and adult offenders. Education and job training were seen as being more relevant to juvenile than to adult prisons. Punishment was seen as more important for adult prisons than for juvenile institutions.

Over three-quarters of the sample acknowledged that they had not heard anything about Youth Offending Teams (YOTs).

## Sentencing preferences

There was a considerable gap between the sentences that respondents *wanted* to see imposed on young offenders and the sentences that they assumed *would* be imposed. Generally speaking, expected sentences were less harsh than favoured punishments. For three different offenders described in scenarios, respondents favoured custody at a much higher rate than they assumed would actually be imposed in youth courts.

When respondents were given descriptions of cases in which to impose sentence, there was significantly less support for custody as a sanction when the young offender had made some restorative steps such as writing a letter of apology and promising to make compensation to the victim.

When asked about alternatives to imprisonment, significant proportions of respondents found alternatives to be satisfactory substitutes for imprisonment. This result is also consistent with research in other countries. When respondents were informed about the costs of custody, they were significantly less likely to favour imprisoning the offender.

## Conclusions

The survey revealed that the public have a more pessimistic view of youth crime than is justified by the official crime statistics. As well, although only one specific youth justice reform was the subject of an awareness question, it seems likely that the public knows little about the structure of youth justice in Britain. An important criminal justice priority is therefore to promote awareness of the system, and of the true scope of the youth crime problem. The public gives poor ratings to the youth courts in Britain in large measure because they believe that the sentences imposed on young offenders are too lenient. Increasing public awareness of the youth crime problem (as well as the youth court response), may well promote public confidence in youth justice.

The study found strong support for alternatives to imprisonment. Significant proportions of respondents found community alternatives to be

The survey, conducted in 2003, explored public knowledge of important questions pertaining to youth crime and justice, as well as attitudes to the sentencing of young offenders. Particular emphasis was placed upon public reaction to restorative sentencing. Wherever possible, these findings are placed in international context through comparisons with surveys of the public in other jurisdictions.

- People were ill-informed about youth crime trends. For example 75% of those polled believed that the number of young offenders had increased in the previous two years – when numbers coming to police attention were actually falling.
- People also knew little about youth justice. Only a quarter had heard of youth offending teams (YOTs) and one in eight knew what these teams do.
- Ratings of the youth justice system were negative. Only 11% of the sample thought that the system did a good job, and 71% thought it too soft on young offenders.
- When confronted with specific cases, however, many people supported restorative or rehabilitative approaches to young offenders.
- For example, just over half the sample (52%) said that a community penalty with reparation was an acceptable sentence for a violent 16-year-old robber with three previous convictions. Such an offender would now receive a custodial sentence.
- Public support for custody as a sanction fell when even a few details about the offender's life were presented to respondents.
- People's dissatisfaction with the youth justice system reflects their lack of knowledge and their belief that sentencing practices are too lenient.

#### **About the survey**

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) Omnibus Survey is conducted on a monthly basis. Clients in government departments, universities and private sector organizations purchase blocks of questions posed during a face-to-face interview conducted by professionally trained interviewers that typically lasts for less than an hour. This research made use of the survey conducted in April 2003, purchasing a block of around 30 questions that took around 15 minutes to complete. The questions were asked of 1,692 people aged 16 or over across England and Wales. The response rate for the April 2003 administration was 67%, comparable to the response rates of previous sweeps of the survey.

acceptable as a sanction instead of imprisonment. As well, it was clear that when the young offender makes restorative steps, public support for custody declines. Taken together, the findings of the survey demonstrate strong public support for restorative considerations at sentencing.

How should criminal policy in the area of youth justice aim to synthesise these somewhat conflicting images of public opinion? We have shown that opinion about youth crime is demonstrably misinformed on several dimensions. We would argue that this misinformation is systematic, and results in large part from inaccurate media representations of youth crime. This is of little comfort to politicians, who are well aware that the electorate bring to the ballot box not only their knowledge and experience, but their misperceptions and prejudices.

The dissatisfaction that people express with youth justice is real, whether or not it is grounded in the realities of current sentencing practice. There has to be *some* response to these public views. There is a pressing need to improve the quality of information available to the public about crime and justice – and this obviously includes youth crime and youth justice. We do not underestimate the seriousness of problems. Those best placed to inform the public – government researchers and statisticians – have increasingly less credibility in a world that equates Government with 'spin'. This puts a particular obligation on reform groups, on academic criminologists and on the youth justice system itself to address public misperceptions. Our findings suggest that the key to doing this is to ensure that people do not lose sight of the essential humanity of young people who have behaved very badly.

Media representations of youth crime focus on violent crimes, and report specific examples of the worst kinds of juvenile offenders. But these are not the cases that appear in

youth courts on a daily basis. The public need to be reminded that behind the headlines about 'feral rat boys', there is a large number of young people who have become involved in the criminal justice system as a result of a wide variety of factors, not all of which are under their control.

Finally, there is clearly potential for building on public support for new approaches to sentencing young offenders, including reparation. Like sentencers, the public wants offenders to apologize, to express remorse, to feel remorse and to translate this emotion into some form of practical reparation for the crime victim. The practicalities of putting viable reparative schemes into effect are challenging, but the potential of such schemes is obvious.

*Mike Hough is Professor of Criminal Policy and Director of the Institute for Criminal Policy Research, School of Law, King's College London. Julian V. Roberts is Professor of Criminology and University Research Chair at the University of Ottawa.*

#### **Acknowledgement**

We are very grateful to the Nuffield Foundation for funding this study.

The full report, *Youth crime and youth justice: Public opinion in England and Wales*, by Mike Hough and Julian V. Roberts, is published by The Policy Press. Copies are available from: Marston Book Services, Tel: 01235 465500, Email: [direct.orders@marston.co.uk](mailto:direct.orders@marston.co.uk).

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