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 crime 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.

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.

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