What the public wants from prison reform: Finding common ground

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This article is a transcript of a presentation given at The Perrie Lectures in 2025. The Perrie Lectures is an annual event which has the purpose of stimulating dialogue between criminal justice organisations, the voluntary sector, and all those with an academic, legal, or practical interest in people in prison and their families. The theme of the 2025 event was 'The Future of Imprisonment'.

I'd like to begin with an uncomfortable question: Who are we talking to when we talk about prison reform? Because, too often, the answer seems to be... *ourselves.* That is, the campaigners, the policymakers, those who work in justice charities and who talk about justice for a living. I say this not as an attack but from a place of respect and real understanding — because after working deep in the justice sector for more than two decades, I'm one of you! And yet I've come to see a problem when we mostly talk to ourselves about criminal justice reform. That is that we miss out on something vital, that our conversations become echo chambers, and that we risk overlooking the concerns of other people who've lost trust in our justice system — ordinary voters, victims of crime, residents in high-crime areas — people whose trust it will be vital to win back. And the danger is that if we remain in a bubble, we deepen an already polarised debate.

It seems the age-old question of where responsibility and accountability lie divides us more than ever. We have a fundamental split between people who feel the individual is responsible for the tear he causes in the fabric of society on committing a crime…and people who believe society is responsible for the tear. Two sides that the media loves to bait with the shorthand of 'tough' vs 'soft'. And it's this polarisation that's clouding a new way forward for our ailing justice system; that's keeping us locked in a tug-of-war between punishment and rehabilitation, individual responsibility and systemic injustice… debates that generate a lot of heat, but not much light.

I want to discuss the importance of listening. Listening to explore different perspectives, find common ground, and discover new ways to move forward, to break free of this stagnation. But first I'd like to take a step back, because it's a surprise to me as much as anyone that I'm standing here discussing public opinion research. My own journey began quite differently; it began as a practitioner — listening and learning from people in prisons about what it was they needed in order not to come back. Understanding how difficult the question, 'How do you want your life to be?' is for people who had never previously considered there was another option.

The Switchback approach

I set up Switchback[1] in 2007. It is a resettlement charity based in Spitalfields in East London and its scaffolding is a human relationship that — with both support and challenge — has now helped thousands of young men not only to get things sorted after prison and find employment they can keep, but to fundamentally change their relationship with themselves and society. Its ethos is of seeing the moment of release as an opportunity to choose how you want to go forward. And this approach is in the full knowledge of the numerous pitfalls awaiting individuals in the immediate days and weeks following release. Housing is rare and precarious, family and relationships are often fractured and unreliable, easy ways to pay off old debts with quick money are everywhere, racial profiling in stop and search still has to be contended with, bank accounts are harder to secure without ID or an address, job applications require criminal record disclosure. And yet at Switchback it was always important not to be feeding these young men — at this critical juncture — a story of disempowerment, a story of the world being against them.

Switchback is an organisation that, together with its young men, rallies against these hurdles. An organisation that understands how each new obstacle chips away at someone's resolve to go straight. It is a demonstration of how society should extend a helping hand to people who have served their time and need to start over. Switchback also understands the strength and courage of the young men it works with, and that, in having someone who believes in them, they can overcome these hurdles and build entirely new lives that they can be proud of. Critically, the organisation doesn't further disempower its young men through narratives of victimhood. It recognises that, yes, society

1. Switchback. (n.d.). *Supporting young men to find a way out of the justice system and build a stable, rewarding life they can be proud of.* Retrieved from www.switchback.org.uk

has a responsibility to address roots of crime and offer viable ways out, but also that people have agency and responsibility for their actions.

Charting this course was always a balancing act that felt rare and valuable. But having moved on from the organisation after 15 years of leading it, I found myself looking back on the work we, as justice charities, did to try to influence bigger change in the system. While organisations were doing important — often life-changing — work with individuals, the prison population was ballooning, conditions were deteriorating and cycles of harm and trauma for victims and perpetrators were being perpetuated on a grand scale. I recognised in myself and colleagues a sense of futility and exhaustion, and a growing detachment from the people and communities most affected by crime in their daily lives. I wondered how I might apply the lessons from Switchback — the embracing of complexity and rejection of binary thinking — to changing the system more widely.

Asking new questions

What happens when we actually start listening to those people beyond our 'bubble'? To what extent are people able to hold on to more than one truth at the same time? And might we be able to find common ground between the extremes of *'hang em' and 'hug em'?* Through launching the Common Ground Justice Project[2] a few months ago, co-founder Sam Boyd and I decided to find out.

One of my initial fears about asking questions was that people wouldn't care. That my own proximity to the justice system meant I hadn't noticed that others didn't really think about it much. While healthcare and education are so obviously crucial to everyone, maybe 'the man on the street' felt justice wasn't something that he was particularly bothered about. Maybe the justice system was seen to be something for 'other' people, for 'poor people', for 'bad people'. However, we found the opposite was true.

I was surprised to discover that in fact 42 per cent of us approach debates about criminal justice through the lens of personal experience or through close friends or family (for example as a victim, offender or through work). This rises to over 50 per cent in some geographical areas. Working together with More in Common,[3] we conducted national polling and sat down for deep conversations with voters across the country. The researchers at More in Common commented on the very high engagement on this subject.

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What we heard when we listened more deeply to the public

The results were eye-opening. Our pilot research shows most voters and victims are not — as social media would have us believe — at the extremes. They believe in personal and systemic responsibility, punishment and rehabilitation. And how we do justice in this country matters to people.

By using More in Common's lens of the British Seven Segments,[4] we were able to gain a far deeper understanding of the public's starting points than seen before. We learned that people broadly fall into three groups: punishment-first, rehabilitation-first, and balancers in the middle. But across these groups we found many shared sentiments.

What we heard was:

- ❏ A **deep frustration** with the status quo. Public and victim confidence in the system has collapsed. 90 per cent of the public wants change and 64 per cent want 'major' change. Only 1 in 5 think that prison reduces reoffending.
- ❏ We observed strong understanding and empathy around systemic drivers of crime, with the punishment-first group, interestingly, even more likely than others to attribute crime to social determinants like poverty or addiction.
- ❏ We found widespread **openness to new ideas**—60 per cent of people support expansion of punishments outside of prison. Interestingly, amongst victims, this openness rises to 68 per cent.
- ❏ And yet… we heard a **hesitancy**—a worry — particularly among women and people from ethnic minorities about what those new ideas might actually *look like* in practice.

2. The Common Ground Justice Project. (n.d.). *Engaging people across divides to uncover a new way forward for the criminal justice system that cuts crime and commands broad public support.* www.commongroundjustice.uk
3. More in Common. (n.d.). *Understanding polarisation and working in initiatives to tackle division our society.* Retrieved from www.moreincommon.org.uk
4. More in Common. (n.d.). *Segmentation of the British public based on extended research into Britons' core beliefs, their values and behaviours.* www.moreincommon.org.uk/seven-segments

In short: people are ready for change—but they want to see a path that's grounded, not abstract or ideological. And they want to be able to visualise it, they want concrete examples of new solutions that speak to their core values.

Meanwhile, we did find one group of voters that stuck out as an outlier, with views that are markedly more liberal and rehabilitation-focussed than the rest of the country. This group, More in Common's so-called 'Progressive Activist' segment, tend to be younger, highly educated, urban, on higher incomes (though not necessarily wealthy) and motivated by a strong sense of societal injustice. They make up around 8 per cent of the country. Yet, strikingly, they make up around 80 per cent of policy and campaigns roles in public and charity sector organisations.

This, I think, should give us pause for thought. It is a big disconnect. And reinforces the need for those of us in policy, campaigns, academia and the charity sector to reach outside our bubble with openness and curiosity. And of course we were looking for the common ground. We heard from Reform voters in the North East and Liberal Democrats in the South West, we spoke to people of all political stripes, ages, ethnic backgrounds and genders in different parts of the country. We also held a group entirely made up of victims of crime and another of people who had themselves been in prison and on probation. Through an array of strong opinions, four clear areas of common ground shone through—principles that the public across divides, find they can come together on:

1. The need for swift and certain punishment. Punishment matters — deeply — to people and their sense of justice having been done, and we won't get far by shying away from that fact. We found that this belief in punishment is less about retribution and more about justice for victims and beliefs about deterrence (even though, as the research shows, severity of punishment in reality is less effective a deterrent than certainty of being caught). Delays, too, breed distrust. People want consequences to feel timely and real.
2. We heard the need for better accountability—on all sides. Not just for those who commit crimes, but for the system itself—police, courts, politicians. In other words, people who cause harm should be held accountable for their actions, and the government should also be accountable for the wise use of taxpayer funds.
3. The need for clear fairness in sentencing. Too often, people see justice as inconsistent and unequal. There's a pervasive sense that the system comes down far too heavily on certain groups, while letting other more serious offenders off too lightly. We heard from one Labour to Reform switcher in Bolton South, 'There's a wealth gap. So, the poorer in our communities, their journey to prison is very quick. But if you have money and you can afford top tier defences for exactly the same crime, you'd probably get off and that's wrong. The Huw Edwards saga. How ridiculous is that that he got away with a suspended sentence, yet somebody can swear at a football match and get six months in prison.'[5]
4. The need to see greater contribution. People want to see those who have done harm making things right—not just sitting behind bars. Strikingly, the value of contribution was a principle shared by prison leavers as much as victims, with many saying they'd wanted to contribute more — both to society, and to victims by way of apology or reparation — but found no way to do so. None of the victims we spoke to had heard of the victim's levy. As for many voters, this came through in terms of wanting to see people in prison and on probation cease being a tax burden on society and to start to contribute taxes instead. There was a real understanding of the value of employment.

These four emergent common ground justice principles: punishment, accountability, fairness and contribution are revealed from our initial broad questions. This is just the start for us, and we are looking forward to deeper listening in these areas.

A need for bold action

The Sentencing Review signals promising new signs of political bravery, and an openness to bold solutions, which our research shows have the potential for widespread support if they meet some key tests. The scale of the problem is such that we'll need much more of that boldness in the months ahead.

Prisons are perhaps the most visible part of our criminal justice system, even though people in prison are out of sight behind high walls. Yet, prison is everywhere: TV dramas, documentaries, films. It captures the public's imagination because prison stands for something clear, you either go to prison, or you don't. To many, this means justice is done, or it's not. And that binary means prison becomes *emblematic*—a

5. The Common Ground Justice Project and More in Common. (2025). *Course Correction: Britons' Expectations of Criminal Justice Reform,* (p. 25). www.moreincommon.org.uk/media/sf3dcgkz/course-correction-final.pdf

symbol of justice itself. But it's also more complicated than that. On the one hand, the public often sees prison as synonymous with punishment. If someone's done wrong, prison is what makes it right. There is a strong view that it represents a deterrent. And of course it keeps dangerous people off the streets for a period. There is also a prevalent belief that the prison environment needs to be harsh — that to make it punitive it needs to go beyond the deprivation of liberty: 'If we made prisons horrible places, made the punishments ridiculous, no one would do it.'

And yet, when you dig deeper, people also show a huge amount of empathy — especially for those whose crimes are bound up with addiction, poverty, or mental illness. People tend to support rehabilitation. They believe in second chances. One Conservative voter we spoke to who runs a construction company said,

> 'I've employed two young lads previously young offenders, and they rehabilitated and one of them is now an ambulance technician. He's done very well. The other one runs his own company. So, it does work. If they're given an opportunity and they get respect, I think they give respect back.'

And this exposure to roads away from crime is critical. The existence of prison as an option for punishment and rehabilitation is well known. But — although open to it — the public know very little of what else is available. Despite being unfamiliar with alternatives to prison, fewer than a third of people we heard from agreed with spending the forecast £10bn allocated to new prison building. A clear majority — 59 per cent — supported diverting *at least some of these funds to* community sentencing. Perhaps the vast amount of money earmarked for prison expansion reflects a failure of creativity and imagination for what a different future could look like?

A different approach that we tested on our focus groups was that of the Iceland supermarket boss Richard Walker who suggested that offenders could be sentenced to a job in Iceland instead of prison, with a backstop of jail time in the event of non-compliance.[6] People physically sat up straighter. Their ears pricked up. This was something they could imagine, that made sense, that spoke to common values: an element of punishment, proper accountability, proportionality and a better sense of contribution to society in return for harms caused. And there was a real willingness to get behind it — 65 per cent of the public supported this idea. Even the most authoritarian segments of society showed majority support.

It's clear that it would help expand our options if we made visible alternative routes to the same ends. The brilliant James Graham play, PUNCH,[7] does this well: using theatre to reach people with the true story of how justice *can work* through bringing people together across divides. It shows how the values we know are important to people can be brought to bear through the quiet — not widely known — option of restorative justice. Perhaps we should turn the old adage 'Where there's a will there's a way' on its head? Instead, perhaps there's more truth in 'Where people are shown another way there becomes a will'.

Rebuilding public confidence

Nobody who works in any part of the justice system is unaware of the challenges. And it's a credit to the Justice Secretary and the prisons minister, who spoke just before me, that they are seeking to meet these challenges head on, face up to the prisons crisis and — crucially — that they acknowledge the need to rebuild confidence from the ground up.

This is an 'all of us' challenge. We are hearing that the British people:

- ❏ Feel let down by the current system.
- ❏ Want justice to reflect the values of punishment, accountability, fairness and contribution.
- ❏ And are open to reform—but need to trust it.

And for those of us working in policy or advocacy, there is a clear call to action: If we want effective justice reform, we must first build a bridge back to the public. Not by lecturing, but by listening. Not by imposing values, but by finding shared ones. Because without the public there is no reform, only rhetoric.

The public may not be the obstacle but the untapped ally, willing to see what new solutions look like. So, while the first question may be 'What does the public want from prison reform?' the next question must surely be 'Do we have the courage to show them?'

6. Elliott, F. (2025, January 27). Criminals could be sentenced to work at Iceland instead of being sent to prison in bid to tackle jail overcrowding. *Daily Mail.* www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14328995/Criminals-sentenced-work-Iceland-instead-sent-prison.html
7. Graham, J. (2025). Punch [Play]. Methuen Drama. Jacob, a teenager from Nottingham, spends his Saturday nights seeking thrills with his friends. One fateful evening, an impulsive punch leads to fatal consequences. After serving prison time, Jacob finds himself lost and directionless. Searching for answers, Joan and David – the parents of his victim James – ask to meet, sparking a profound transformation in Jacob's life. Retrieved from www.punchtheplay.com