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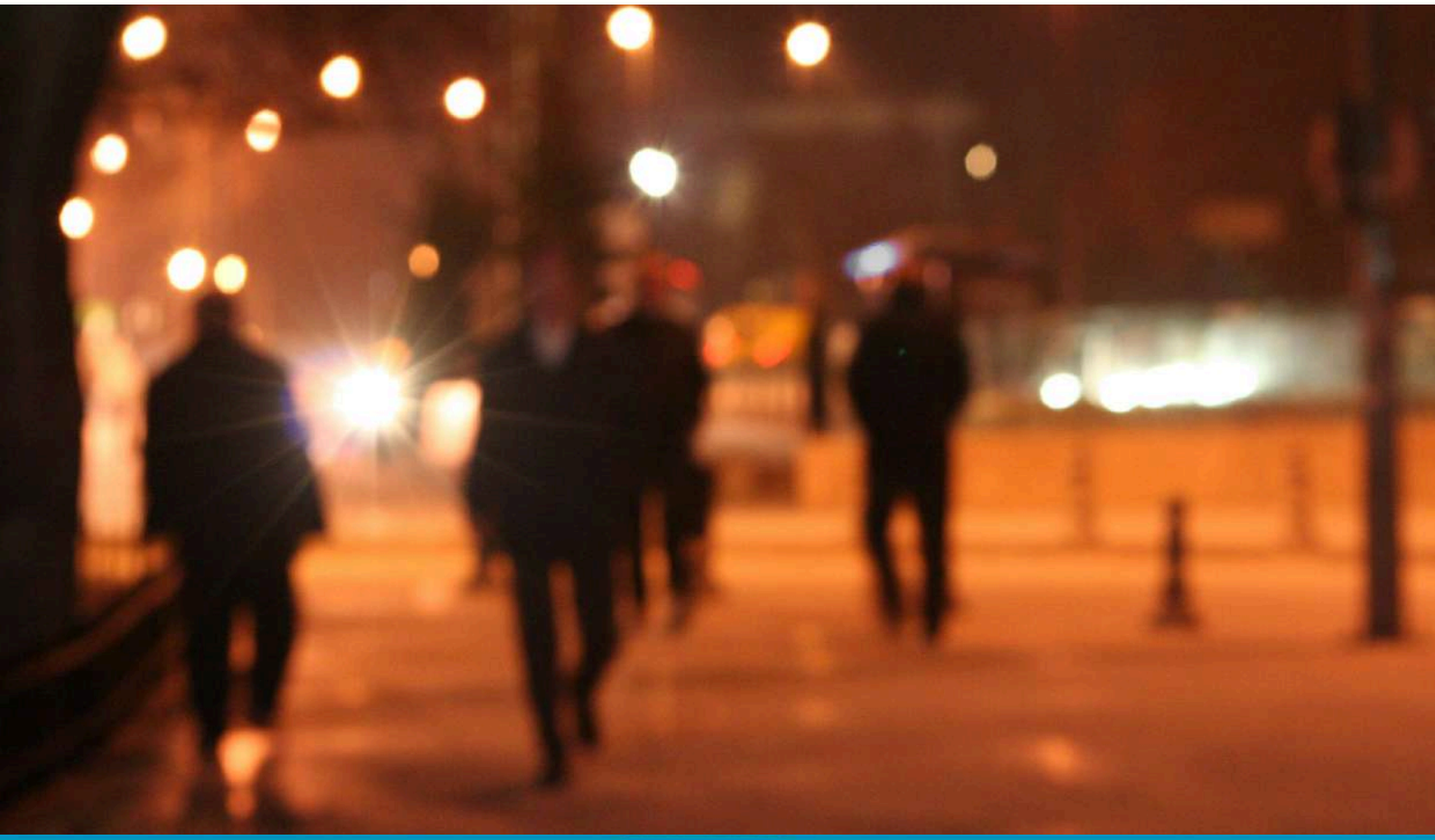
How voluntary sector organisations can influence Public Opinion on Crime

A Review of the Evidence



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CLiNKS
Supporting the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

About the author

Dr Tom McNeil is a lawyer specialising in charity law with significant experience working in the criminal justice field. He is currently CEO of The JABBS Foundation for Women & Girls and a member of the MoJ Women's Justice Board. His PhD combined cost of crime findings with academic literature discussing the process and value of deliberative democracy. This research formed the basis for his new book Public Opinion on Crime: Message Framing and Deliberative Democracy for a Progressive Consensus which is free to access here.

Why read this evidence review?

This review captures some of the key lessons from the academic research into public opinion on crime. It summarises aspects of associated disciplines regarding how opinions are formed and theories on punitive sentiment among the public. It also provides recommendations on areas for future research.

Organisations may be particularly interested in the key pointers for successful approaches to directly influence public opinion on crime and criminal justice. These focus principally on 'deliberative democracy', which can essentially be a method for more substantive, inclusive and balanced public debate.

This paper is likely to be most relevant to voluntary sector organisations interested in shifting punitive attitudes, such as those seeking prison and criminal justice reform. Researchers and students may also find it a useful starting point, for inspiring further enquiry. The lessons from the evidence and emerging insights into enhancing public debate, could also be of interest to those wanting to challenge punitive public attitudes on the issues of immigration and other beliefs that are based on prejudice or are otherwise vulnerable to manipulation. Deputy Mayors for Policing and Crime and other devolved or public authorities, might therefore also consider how their practice of public engagement could be enhanced through more structured and informed dialogue.

Theories on public punitiveness

Public opinion theories describe the way in which the media and society discuss crime as 'degraded'. They highlight the inter-relationship between political rhetoric on crime, public pro-punishment sentiments, the scapegoating of poorer communities and reactionary government policies. However, these theories tend to oversimplify the range of opinions within the public. They also pay insufficient attention to the different ways the public debates on crime could take place and the various building blocks of opinions.

There are further intricacies, but the term 'punitiveness' principally refers to calls for harsher punishment or tougher law enforcement responses to crime. A central theme in criminology has therefore been the analysis of 'penal populism' and 'populist punitiveness'. These and associated theories typically depict a society marked by cruelty and widening inequality, thereby cultivating the conditions for misplaced blame, misinformation and a desire for retribution. The likes of Garland (2021) persuasively argue that Western nations have become increasingly punitive in recent decades, including mass incarceration. Such concerns emanate from what has been called the 'punitive turn' (Bottoms, 1995, Pratt, 2007), defined by several dynamics.

First, the rise of right-leaning political movements in the 1980s and 1990s which sought to politicise issues of law and order (Garland, 2017, Simon, 1993, Wacquant, 2009), a trend alive and kicking in contemporary society. Secondly, the punitive turn corresponded with a cultural shift away from welfarism towards a preoccupation with crime and punishment, resulting in increasingly authoritarian criminal justice policies (Garland, 2021); culminating in a centre-right consensus on law and order (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2012). Analysis of political dynamics has emphasised the rhetoric and policies of key right-leaning political figures across the political spectrum in the UK and US over the last 40 years or so, and their corresponding electoral success (Pratt and Miao, 2019, Gunderson, 2022, Kramer and Michalowski, 1995). Thirdly, scholars argue that this social change is marked by a denigration of expertise on crime and rehabilitation, in favour of populist ideas (Garland, 2021).

Critiques from Matthews (2005), Jennings et al. (2017) and others highlight, sometimes with a sense of irritation and frustration, limitations in the punitiveness literature. They argue that the punitiveness scholars have been too binary in their sociological accounts; omitting analysis of simultaneously progressive policies such as on rehabilitative initiatives, the overgeneralization of public opinion and gaps in empirical analysis. Public opinion on crime studies do demonstrate a degree of punitive public sentiment, ill-informed views and increases in punitive government policies. However, they lack depth, often relying on survey responses without any detailed investigation of why people lean to particular perspectives, or the reliability of their answers under the artificiality of questionnaires. Punitiveness theories therefore arguably oversimply the complexity and diversity of public opinion. A fuller analysis of the 'mechanisms' behind opinion formation and the methods society can use for meaningfully engaging and influencing punitive public attitudes, could be fruitful.

Public opinion on crime

Empirical research indicates that a significant portion of the public hold punitive views, but not uniformly and often with nuanced perspectives. The research however is generally patchy, contains limited qualitative analysis and misses opportunities to understand crime opinions in depth.

Specifically on crime, the British Social Attitudes survey finds significant reductions in support for the death penalty. In 1996 65% agreed that sometimes the death penalty is appropriate, in 2011 56% agreed, in 2013 51% agreed, down to 41% in 2020 (The National Centre for Social Research, 2021, NatCen for Social Research, 2017). Despite the downward trend, it finds a large proportion of the public appear to support capital punishment. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is the UK's most comprehensive survey of crime rates; occasionally considering wider issues such as public perceptions of crime (Office for National Statistics, 2017). However, it similarly has limited utility in bridging the empirical gaps in punitiveness theories. While it finds inaccurate public perceptions on crime (Office for National Statistics, 2019) or inaccurate public perceptions being informed by the media (Office for National Statistics, 2017), they do not incorporate a qualitative understanding of how perceptions are formed, or how they relate to attitudes on punishment.

Independent polls have identified similar trends to the BSA surveys, such as 65% of respondents believing that criminal courts sentencing is too lenient compared to 5% that felt they are too tough, and with 59% believing judges are out of touch compared to 17% believing they are in touch (YouGov, 2023). Polls have typically found men with right-wing political views, readers of right-wing newspapers (e.g. Daily Mail) or less educated people, are more likely to support the death penalty, harsher prison sentences or less support for rehabilitative interventions (Home Office, 2011, The National Centre for Social Research, 2022, Ipsos MORI, 2019, YouGov, 2020b, YouGov, 2019, YouGov, 2020a).

Academic surveys highlight trends around inaccurate public perceptions of crime rates (Office for National Statistics, 2011, Mitchell and Roberts, 2012, Haines and Case, 2007). Survey studies have however also found correlations between perceptions of rising crime and actual rising crime rates sometimes involving a time lag (Karstedt and Endtricht, 2022, Pickett, 2019), mirroring evidence into the links between rising crime and public punitiveness in the UK (Jennings et al., 2017).

Other surveys and polling, similarly find growing public recognition of the importance of employment, training, better education, health and rehabilitation to tackle the social factors behind crime. This support corresponds with reduced public support for prison (Toch and Maguire, 2014, Sundt et al., 2019, Johnston and Wozniak, 2022). One recent independent poll in the UK and conducted globally across 32 nations, found that on average significant proportions of the public believe that issues like poverty and unemployment (53%) and addiction (43%), cause crime. While this does not necessarily translate to equivalent support for rehabilitative solutions, it does suggest there is a more nuanced and fairly widespread international awareness of social factors behind crime (Ipsos, 2024). Deliberative polls or focus groups also frequently uncover contradictory views on sentencing; advocating for retribution and prison, simultaneously supporting drug treatment or community sentences (Hutton, 2005).

There is also some evidence to suggest that there might be greater support for predominantly rehabilitative approaches for 'juvenile offenders', when given a choice between more punitive and rehabilitative survey options. This was especially true for those who believed young people were capable of reform, were willing to be reformed or deserving of treatment (Mears et al., 2015). These studies further underline the critique of the punitiveness literature's depiction of a 'homogeneous punitive public'. Pickett (2019) suggests public punitiveness is a myth; highlighting various survey studies that show members of the public will choose less punitive options (e.g. life without parole rather than the death penalty) when given a choice and contextual information around the offending. However, existing research still leaves gaps in our understanding on how these opinions are formed and influenced and why contradictory perspectives might be held, with fairly limited discussion of how to frame public messaging or public engagement methods.

Public opinion mechanisms

Different literatures have sought to uncover the dynamics of why we believe what we believe, which I argue are integral to better understanding public opinion on crime. These identify 'public education and information' (Mitchell and Roberts, 2012), 'message framing' including media and economic frames (Jewkes, 2015, Gottlieb, 2017) and 'underlying beliefs' (Lakoff, 2017) as central pillars to our attitudes on crime. These discussions bring into focus, and incorporate, a further vital dimension. This is the role of both emotion and reason in opinion formation (Lacey and Pickard, 2015). Emotion can be depicted as somehow secondary or manifesting in faulty distractions (Provis, 2020), but my own research points to a more sophisticated view on the inherent and important interconnectivity of facts and feeling.

Each of these literatures deserves considerably more attention than I can provide in this review. Nevertheless, the short summaries below may be helpful.

Public information on crime

Public opinion on crime studies find significant proportions of the public are consistently found to hold inaccurate perceptions of crime (Mitchell and Roberts, 2012) without realising their knowledge gaps (Hutton, 2005). This includes believing victimisation risks are higher than reality (Haines and Case, 2007, Mitchell and Roberts, 2012, Roberts, 1992, Office for National Statistics, 2017), believing in ever rising crime rates, overestimating violent crime (Pickett, 2019), and that the criminal justice system and judges are more lenient or less successful at prosecution or rehabilitation than is actually the case (Roberts, 1992, Research Development and Statistics Directorate, 2000). In the US, the public have also been found to hold inaccurate beliefs about a positive correlation between immigration and rising crime despite evidence to the contrary (Puddy et al., 2024). However, in contrast, active public engagement in discussions on crime such as in-depth focus groups or deliberative methods, have been found to increase support for less punitive policies (Rowan, 2011, Roberts, 1992, Johnstone, 2000, Ryfe, 2002). This is particularly the case when substantive public engagement is ongoing (Dzur and Mirchandani, 2007, Dzur, 2012). Studies referencing the impact of 'contextual information around crime' in focus groups or public engagement, therefore provide helpful indicators regarding the kind of information and context needed to absorb it (Mitchell and Roberts, 2012).

Framing

The framing literature, predictably, explores how framing issues in particular ways can influence crime attitudes. Touching on just a few examples, consider de Vries et al. (2020) who highlight research that finds framing social issues as a 'crime problem' can attract greater public concern and support for 'criminal justice solutions' to a social problem. In contrast, Bell (2022) theorises that crime can be successfully reframed away from 'criminal justice' towards 'social justice'. This optimistic view it is thought, can come through shifting the focus on punishment to issues like fair pay and solutions to other inequalities as a way to reduce crime. Evidence shows certain crime frames are effective, and helps justify the attention given to the framing concept. Lacey and Pickard (2015) claim presenting responses to serious crime through a 'forgiveness' frame, while acknowledging that the applicable offending behaviour was repugnant and the offender responsible, garners more support for rehabilitation.

This contrasts with 'blame' frames, which engender anger, disgust and desire for punishment. Karstedt and Endtricht (2022) outline how politicians have successfully persuaded voters by elevating the salience of crime through rhetorical and alarmist frames, like those discussed in connection with punitiveness theories and political analyses. They note however that deployment of these frames correlate with actual rising violent crime, making it hard to disentangle whether 'framing' or 'justified public fear' influenced voting. O'Neil et al. (2016) conducted surveys and interviews to test various criminal justice frames. Framing prison as a 'dead end' metaphor (i.e. sending people to prison leaves offenders with no hope) in conjunction with optimistic frames around human potential and rehabilitation, was found to elicit more support for less punitive responses. It also increases scepticism regarding the utility of incarceration. Based on their experience of policy, political and academic circles, Welsh and Farrington (2000) find cost-benefit frames increase support for crime prevention.

Media framing

The 'media framing' literature, mostly devotes significant attention to how media shapes public conversation and perceptions of crime. This includes how mainstream media oversimplifies crime and stimulates punitiveness by omitting social factors behind crime (Chagnon, 2015, Jewkes, 2015, Kort-Butler and Sittner Hartshorn, 2011). It also looks at how media stokes fear and outrage by exaggerating crime, demonizing minority or lower social class groups and undermining progressive crime solutions (Greer and McLaughlin, 2010, Jewkes, 2015, Green, 2008). Not all scholarship on media frames emphasises the media's role in stoking punitiveness. Schnepf and Christmann (2024) highlight how framing domestic homicide as a 'love killing' rather than 'murder' in a US newspaper framing experiment, can undermine the immense seriousness of the crime (e.g. seen as a crime of passion or encourage victim blaming) particularly for men with sexist perspectives.

Underlying beliefs

The 'underlying beliefs' pillar considers stigmatising schemas, unconscious biases and discriminatory misconceptions. Insensitivity to pre-existing underlying beliefs risks alienating those with conflicting ideologies on divisive issues. Differences in beliefs or stereotypes also underlie the importance of message framing, because 'reframing' issues could help ideas resonate with people who see matters differently. Likewise, recognising people's beliefs helps identify how 'not' to frame issues and avoid triggering particular anxieties, prejudices, falsehoods or tropes (Lakoff, 2017). While evidence finds stereotypes can be perpetuated in the media and commonly believed by the public, 'ideologies' are messy, vary significantly between individuals in unpredictable ways and rarely correlate neatly with the generalised positions of political parties (Guiney, 2022). Political psychologists query the existence of measurable or consistent ideologies, finding for instance unreliable correlations on views around morality, freedom and economics among 'conservatives' (Feldman, 2013). This conclusion challenges the idea that people can be neatly categorised or that crime attitudes are unchanging or stuck within a particular political ideology.

Notwithstanding ongoing theoretical uncertainty, links are made between political ideology and 'underlying beliefs' on crime. Broadly, political scholars like Jost et al. (2003) depict conservative ideology as being motivated by maintaining the status quo; desiring order, certainty and security because changes pursuing fairer societies present unknowns and unwanted risk (Feldman, 2013). People sympathetic to conservative ideology have been found to place more weight on 'loyalty to religious groups or nationality', 'respect for authority' and notions of 'purity', while left-leaning people emphasise more strongly 'caring' and 'fairness' (Graham et al., 2009). More specific to crime, conservative ideology is linked to punitiveness and authoritarianism; expecting retributive responses for those they perceive as bad people 'choosing' immorality (Andreescu and Hughes, 2020, Unnever et al., 2008), rather than believing in 'root causes' of crime. Other findings discuss how racist stereotypes are often accompanied by lower education levels, resentment towards minority communities based on perceived threats to economic security and public safety and a rejection of 'structural racism and inequality' narratives (Unnever et al., 2008, Puddy et al., 2024, Cullen et al., 2021).

Insights into opinion formation typically fall short of providing thorough solutions on how to engage these mechanisms in real-world public debates. Further, emerging evidence around worrying contemporary global trends like 'fake news' (Ceron et al., 2021)(Ceron et al., 2021), and public anxiety over this unreliable information landscape (Kleis and Graves, 2017), make an understanding of effective public engagement even more pivotal.

Deliberative democracy

'Deliberative democracy' theory and methods are capable of incorporating our understanding of the ways in which public opinions are formed and the practicalities on how to enhance public debate on crime. The objective is to cultivate dialogue that prioritises facts and evidence. Deliberative theories often stress that a key objective of deliberating should be to challenge failures in the current political system to harness meaningful public participation on big issues, with too much influence afforded to powerful lobbyists (Dryzek, 2002). However, the principles of enhanced public debate need not necessarily agree to this particular socio-economic analysis.

These methods simultaneously require respect for emotional perspectives and should be delivered in a way that deliberately presents complex issues in an accessible way or in terms that facilitate a fresh understanding. It therefore offers insight into 'how' to challenge punitive attitudes and mitigate manipulative political discourse and emerging influences like fake news. Deliberative democracy is itself however awash with debated concepts, presenting multiple nuances and emphases. As interesting as these genuinely are, they can hinder action.

Scholars have discussed the ideal location of deliberative democracy, such as in narrow constitutional settings or much wider public participation in crime deliberations (Dryzek, 2002). They debate the aims and emphases, such as whether it is to seek higher quality debate, public consensus, perceived legitimacy from those participating and/or the ability to inspire civic activism (Cohen, 1998, Timotijevic and Raats, 2007). They also contemplate the different information types considered valid within deliberation, such as rational, emotional or culturally diverse narratives (Deveaux, 2018).

My own research analysed the impact of deliberating on crime opinions by comparing pre and post-deliberation interview answers on questions of punishment, prevention and rehabilitation. By providing a diverse range of members of the public with expert and emotional frames (e.g. lived experience accounts of a traumatic journey into crime) and time for debate as a group, my qualitative fieldwork found that deliberations brought participants to a progressive consensus. That is to say, after hearing pro-prison arguments and contrary rationales for early intervention in schools or through community sentencing, all agreed that the priority should be solutions that aim to tackle the underlying factors behind crime rather than punishment. This includes those who had initially supported the death penalty. It also shifted individual punitive participants' perspectives towards more progressive opinions, stimulated civic inspiration and found that a mix of rational and emotional information was persuasive for influencing crime opinions (McNeil, 2025).

My fieldwork also found that nearly all participants found 'invest to save' arguments persuasive, e.g. early intervention expenditure of education and family support could prevent crime in the long term. However, for certain groups, cost-benefit analyses needed to be sophisticated in order to be persuasive. For others, moral reasons for preventative investment were more pivotal. For those starting with more punitive attitudes and leaning towards punishment approaches, the arguments that were most important were ones evidencing 'the effectiveness' of preventative or rehabilitative efforts. As such, their concerns were less orientated towards retribution as an end in itself, but more towards a desire to see people committing crime change and desist. A focus solely on the factors behind crime, such as poverty and trauma, may therefore often be ineffective for shifting punitive attitudes (McNeil, 2025).

My findings should not be overstated given they only involved 17 participants and a qualitative analysis. However, they are consistent with the findings of other research into deliberative methods (Carman et al., 2015), and therefore present a plausible approach to enhancing public debate.

Recommendations

In a bid to be useful, the following outlines certain recommendations based on the summarised evidence. They are however in no way exhaustive and the wide range of intersecting research disciplines present many more avenues for research and policy.

Public opinion research

- Attitudes are not static, and therefore more contemporary research should be conducted into public opinion on crime. In particular, given the continued rise in online misinformation, much more work is required to investigate its impact, but also tools for mitigating its harmful effects. Further investigating the extent to which punitive sentiment might be rising now, and its correlation with punitive messaging on social media, would help interested parties reflect on the urgency on attitudinal shift efforts. This could also include the technical tools (e.g. artificial intelligence) or regulatory environment needed to tackle misinformation on social media.
- A more comprehensive and contemporary exploration of crime framing and messaging, could test a greater variety of methods and narratives for influencing public opinion. With potential changes in cultural norms and social attitudes, this kind of work is never complete.

Practising deliberative democracy

There are a number of key lessons that can be learnt from the evidence.

Widescale public participation

Widescale public participation in substantive debate, could stimulate wider social attitudinal shifts while broadening who benefits from deliberation (Mansbridge et al., 2012). Public deliberation could specifically enhance public crime debates as a precursor to policy reform, including greater support for early intervention to prevent or resolve traumatic experience, ill health, addiction and associated social challenges. However, further work is required to realise this potential, including overcoming logistical barriers for scaling-up deliberation to widen public participation.

Influencing public debate

For those seeking to deliver enhanced public debate, or indeed debate among a diverse range of influential decision makers, they should consult guidance on the principles of good procedure, to ensure a respectful, balanced and inclusive deliberation; ensuring all have equal opportunity to debate constructively. A clumsy process could create power imbalances and polarisation. Training programmes to widen the number of people with the skills to host deliberative forums, could have wide ranging benefits for crime debates and much wider.

Exploring the potential of AI

Whether through central or devolved government, researchers or voluntary sector organisations, further work is required to specifically explore how to widen public participation through new digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI). These should investigate the opportunities presented by well-tested education and debate AI tools, including language processing tools.

There are some early adopters using AI for conducting interviews in a criminal justice context (Geiecke and Jaravel, 2025). Uses of and arguments for AI-enabled deliberative decision making are emerging (Zhang et al., 2023, Landemore, 2022). There may be considerable risks, but that is why high quality research is required, especially as the risks of doing nothing in a world of proliferating polarisation present huge risks in their own right.

Effective types of argument: facts and emotion

For organisations wishing to stimulate constructive public debate, it is important to remember the importance of both reason and emotion and the advantage of blending emotional and factual framing, when engaging with the public in substantive discussions. Further, solely outlining the costs of criminal justice failure, like the expensive ineffectiveness of prison or the factors behind crime like addition and abuse, may not succeed in shifting punitive attitudes. Those engaging with the public should therefore explore ensuring they:

1. Outline credible evidence for why preventative and rehabilitative approaches actually work to reduce crime – some evidence suggests punitive stances are often fuelled by a belief that only punishment works to stop crime or that people cannot change and therefore should be imprisoned or restricted. Fundamentally, this requires the presentation of 'evidenced solutions';
2. Provide sufficient detail and analysis to ensure any cost-benefit analyses are credible, as sceptics will be unpersuaded by broad statements on how the costs of crime can be prevented. Knowledge should not be assumed, and a full and effective narrative will likely outline the causal factors of crime, the effectiveness of interventions and the corresponding cost compared to punishment alternatives;
3. Provide a combination of moral reasons, real life case studies (e.g. lived experience presentation) and factual arguments for preventative or rehabilitative interventions, as different cohorts of the public require different emphases to feel fully persuaded; and
4. Incorporate the perspectives of those with frontline expertise of working in criminal justice or other relevant disciplines including health and education, as their wisdom around what works may be particularly influential for shifting the attitude of others.

It is for the readers of this review to consider whether they can engage with and/or support the recommendations above. A far more detailed analysis can be found in my book, which can be accessed for free here.

Finally, readers who are interested in developing their work on developing public opinions on crime are welcome to get in touch with me at: tom.mcneil@jabbswomenandgirls.org.uk

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Our vision

Our vision is of a vibrant, independent and resilient voluntary sector that enables people to transform their lives.

Our mission

To support, represent and advocate for the voluntary sector in criminal justice, enabling it to provide the best possible opportunities for individuals and their families.

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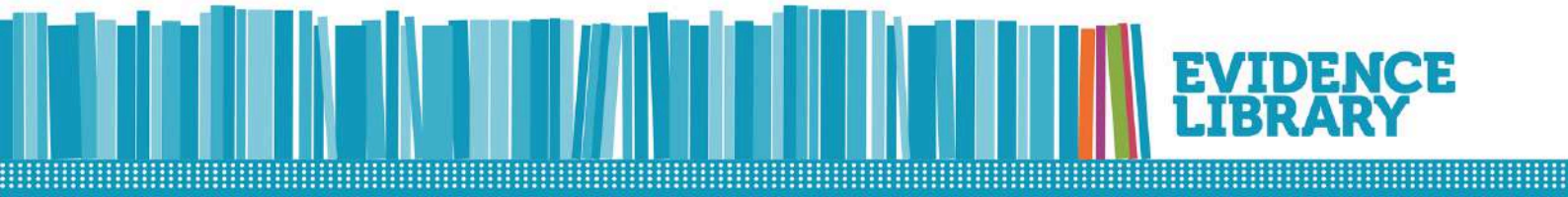

An online evidence base for the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

This article forms part of a series from Clinks, created to develop a far-reaching and accessible evidence base covering the most common types of activity undertaken within the criminal justice system. There are two main aims of this online series:

1. To increase the extent to which the voluntary sector bases its services on the available evidence base
2. To encourage commissioners to award contracts to organisations delivering an evidence-based approach.

Each article has been written by a leading academic with particular expertise on the topic in question. The topics are selected by Clinks' members as areas of priority interest. With the support of Russell Webster, Clinks is working towards building a comprehensive directory of the best evidence available across a wide range of criminal justice topics.

Clinks

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