

May 2025

Course Correction

Britons' Expectations from
Criminal Justice Reform



**More in
Common**

Common
Ground
Justice
Project

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Course Correction

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About More in Common

More in Common is a think tank and research agency working to bridge the gap between policy makers and the public and helping people in Westminster to understand those voters who feel ignored or overlooked by those in power. Our British Seven segmentation provides a unique lens at understanding what the public think and why. We've published groundbreaking reports on a range of issues from climate and refugees to culture wars to crime. We are a full-service research agency offering polling and focus group research and are members of the British Polling Council. Full methodological information can be found at the end of the report.

About the British Seven segments

This report uses our [British Seven](#) segmentation to categorise participants. This is a psychographic, values-based segmentation of the British public which in many cases is more predictive of beliefs on certain issues than other demographics.

The seven segments are:

Progressive Activists: A passionate and vocal group for whom politics is at the core of their identity, and who seek to correct the historic marginalisation of groups based on their race, gender, sexuality, wealth, and other forms of privilege. They are politically engaged, critical, opinionated, frustrated, cosmopolitan, and environmentally conscious.

Civic Pragmatists: A group that cares about others, at home or abroad, and who are turned off by the divisiveness of politics. They are charitable, concerned, exhausted, community-minded, open to compromise, and socially liberal.

Disengaged Battlers: A group that feels that they are just keeping their heads above water, and who blame the system for its unfairness. They are tolerant, insecure, disillusioned, disconnected, overlooked, and socially liberal.

Established Liberals: A group that has done well and means well towards others, but also sees a lot of good in the status quo. They are comfortable, privileged, cosmopolitan, trusting, confident, and pro-market.

Loyal Nationals: A group that is anxious about the threats facing Britain and facing themselves. They are proud, patriotic, tribal, protective, threatened, aggrieved, and frustrated about the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

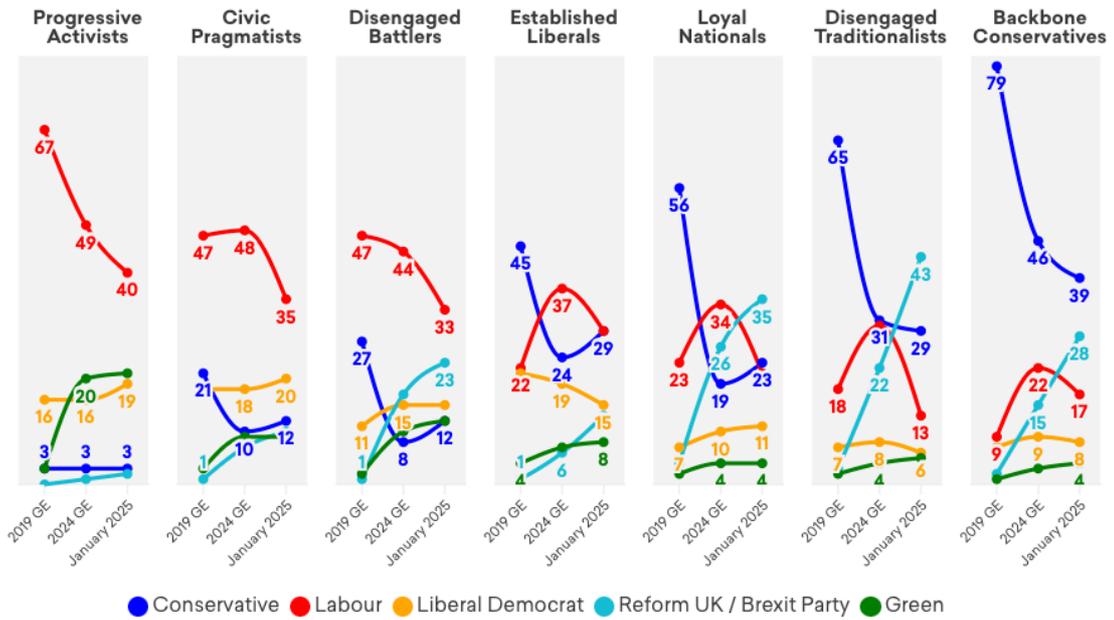
Disengaged Traditionalists: A group that values a well-ordered society, takes pride in hard work, and wants strong leadership that keeps people in line. They are self-reliant, ordered, patriotic, tough-minded, suspicious, and disconnected.

Backbone Conservatives: A group who are proud of their country, optimistic about Britain's future and who follow the news, mostly via traditional media sources. They are nostalgic, patriotic, proud, secure, confident, and engaged with politics.

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More information about the segments can be found at <https://www.britainschoice.uk/segments/>

Vote distribution of segments in the 2019 and 2024 General Elections, compared with their voting intention at the beginning of 2025.



Foreword

Recent events have propelled the criminal justice system to the forefront of public debate. The controversial early release of thousands of prisoners to ease overcrowding was one of Labour's first acts in government. The Stockport attack, the 2024 summer riots, the media storm over 'two-tier' justice, David Gauke's independent review of sentencing – all have contributed to a new and intense scrutiny of the UK's approach to crime and punishment.

The backdrop to these events is a justice system in crisis, of which the overcrowding of our prisons is only one symptom. As this report shows, victim and wider public confidence has collapsed; voters are deeply frustrated with the status quo and now rank criminal justice alongside the NHS, immigration, and the economy as a top priority for reform.

The Common Ground Justice Project, which commissioned this research, aims to find a new way forward for the justice system which can command broad public support. In the context of a noisy, polarised debate, we're starting by listening: to voters across the country, to victims, perpetrators and communities most affected by crime.

To that end, More in Common conducted national polling and focus groups to better understand public attitudes to criminal justice through the lens of their British Seven Segments model. What emerges is a public ready for change, with views more complex than the popular framing of 'tough' vs 'soft' justice. While there are key differences between segments, most people are not at the extremes. They want a better balance: enforcing punishment while also improving accountability and proportionality and ensuring people who commit crime make a contribution to society rather than being a burden on the taxpayer.

This is the emerging common ground that can point towards a different future: delivering a real sense of justice for victims, safer streets, and restoring public confidence – even national pride – in the British justice system.

What might such a future look like? While the public shows little enthusiasm for costly prison expansion, many struggle to imagine credible alternatives. Yet our findings show that when people are presented with concrete examples of new approaches that speak to core values, they respond with openness. The will for change is clear – but to harness it, we need greater efforts to identify new ways forward that feel tangible, achievable, and properly resourced.

We also found that the public segment whose views on criminal justice differ most sharply from the rest of the country (Progressive Activists) is significantly overrepresented in policy and communication roles across the public and charity sectors. For those advocating change or shaping justice policy, we hope this report underscores the importance of not only following the evidence of what works, but also speaking to the values of the British public whose trust in the system is essential.

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The report is just the first step, but an important one, of our journey to improve understanding of attitudes on criminal justice and light the way to a justice system that better serves victims and wider society.

Sam Boyd and Alice Dawnay

Co-Founders, Common Ground Justice Project

<http://commongroundjustice.uk/>

Executive Summary

The public think the criminal justice system is broken

As with many parts of public life today, most Britons don't think our criminal justice system (our police, our courts, our prison and probation system) is working. More than half of Britons (58 per cent) believe the criminal justice system does a bad job at reducing crime and two in five (39 per cent) think the system does a bad job at protecting the public.

Part of that is driven by a feeling prisons are ineffective. Only one in five Britons (21 per cent) think prison actually reduces likelihood of reoffending and more think that prisons increase the likelihood of an individual reoffending. In this context, fewer than three in ten Britons think all of the £10bn forecast budget earmarked for building more prison cells should be dedicated to this purpose, with a majority (59 per cent) in favour of diverting some or all funds to community sentencing.

Strong demands for change

Nine in ten Britons think the criminal justice system is in need of change and half want radical change. Those who have personally fallen victim to crime are particularly in favour of serious change. The desire for reform of the criminal justice system is at a similar level to desire for reform in the economy, NHS and immigration system.

Understanding the public's differing starting points

While there is widespread agreement that the system needs significant change and consensus on the desired outcomes of criminal justice, the public diverge on how to achieve those goals. Britons broadly fall into three groups in their attitudes towards criminal justice reform: the punishment-first group (45 per cent of Britons), the balancer group (29 per cent of Britons) and the rehabilitation-first group (26 per cent of Britons). The rehabilitation-first group is notably overrepresented among those working in the public and charity sectors¹. Understanding the starting points and concerns of each of these groups is key to designing a justice system that can command their support. More in Common's British Seven Segments help to shine a light on what that change might look like in practice.

Finding common ground on justice reform

While the segments have distinctive starting points on criminal justice, there are common principles that shape the outcomes Britons want their justice system to deliver. Most segments want to ensure offenders are punished, held accountable for what they've done and that the sentence fits the crime. Britons would also like to see offenders make a contribution to their community.

¹ The largest segment within the rehabilitation-first group is the Progressive Activists, an influential minority overrepresented in public and charity sectors. [More in Common's Progressive Activists report](#) explores this segment in detail.

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Openness to community alternatives

Three in five Britons (60 percent) support expanding the use of community sentences for certain offenders who are currently sent to prison. Levels of support for community sentences are higher among those who have been victims of crime. This seems driven both by empathy around systemic drivers of crime, and a pragmatic 'do what works' approach. For the 'punishment-first' group, support for community sentencing increases significantly in cases where a prison "backstop" is included for non-compliance.

1. The public's starting points on criminal justice

When asked to describe Britain in a word in 2025, the word 'broken' stands out above all others. In focus group discussions in every corner of the country on issues relating to public services or the state of the country - there is a clear sense things aren't working as they should be and a demand for change.

For many Britons, the criminal justice system is a prime example of Broken Britain. Public perceptions of the criminal justice system are shaped by general disillusionment with politics - but in the opposite direction the perception that the criminal justice system does not work itself drives broader public disillusionment.

Many Britons approach debates about criminal justice through the lens of personal experience. 42 per cent of people say they have experience of the justice system either personally or through close friends or family (e.g. as a victim, offender or through work). This rises to over 50 per cent of residents of Wales and Yorkshire and the Humber. Men are more likely than women to have experienced the justice system as either a victim (31 per cent compared to 25 per cent of women) or an offender (10 per cent compared to 3 per cent of women).

More starkly, 33 per cent of the public say that they or a close family member have been the victim of or significantly affected by crime. Those who are the most likely to say they or close family have been a victim of crime are also the most likely to be non-voters.

A broken system

The clearest examples of a broken criminal justice system emerge from individuals' own experiences and stories of a system that doesn't keep people safe. In one focus group conversation after another, the absence of police on the beat in high streets and communities across the country is cited as a case in point for how Britain's public services have deteriorated to the point of breakdown. The result is many people feel unsafe and think those running the criminal justice system are uninterested in the crime that affects their lives.

I mean I've lived in Walkden all my life. I dunno whether it's because I'm older, but I wouldn't like to walk around in the dark here in Walkden anymore. I mean I don't know about anybody else, but our street lamps are rubbish. They don't light up the streets.

Christina, Civic Pragmatist, Bolton

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There doesn't seem to be enough police officers to accommodate the areas and they just seem to move from one area to another as to where the crimes are... they just don't seem to be enough people, there's no resources.

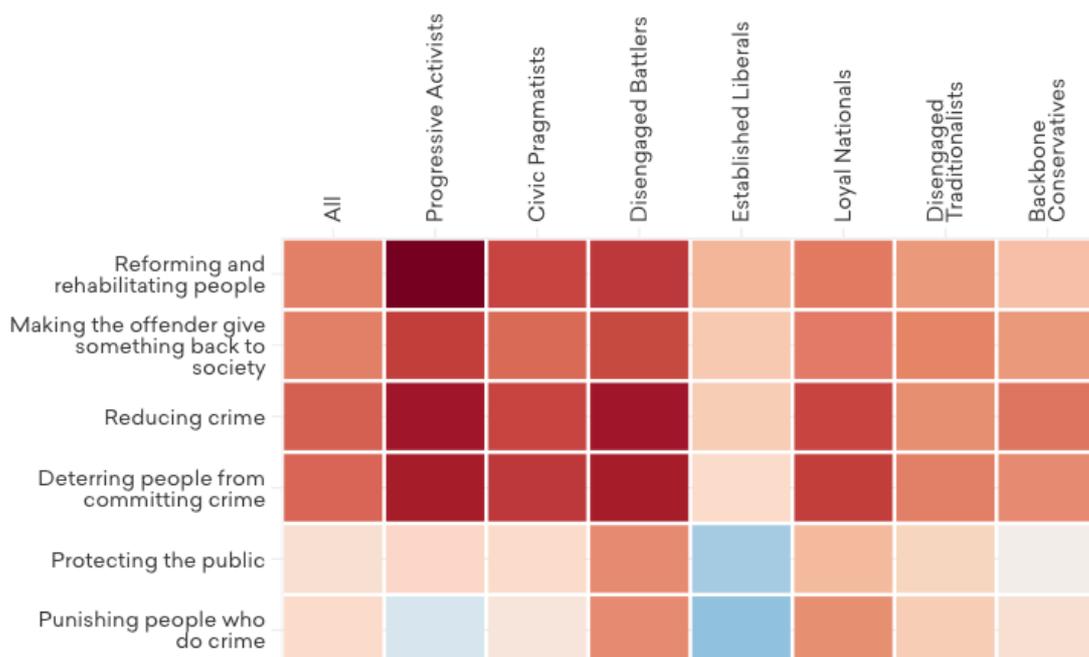
Julie, Loyal National, Rother Valley

In this context, it is little surprise that most Britons (58 per cent) think that the criminal justice system does a bad job at reducing crime. This view is held even more strongly (65 per cent agreement) by those who have been victims of crime or whose close family have been victims. Confidence in the criminal justice system's ability to keep people safe is also low - two in five (39 per cent) say the system does a bad job at protecting the public.

Low confidence in the criminal justice system's ability to deliver its basic functions - from rehabilitation to crime reduction, deterrence to protection - is shared across segments. Confidence is lowest among Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, Disengaged Battlers and Loyal Nationals. These are also the four segments most likely to have been victims of crime. Across six purposes of criminal justice, Established Liberals are more positive than not about the system's ability to protect the public and punish criminals, while Progressive Activists are more likely to say the system does a good than bad job on punishment.

How good or bad is the criminal justice system in this country at...

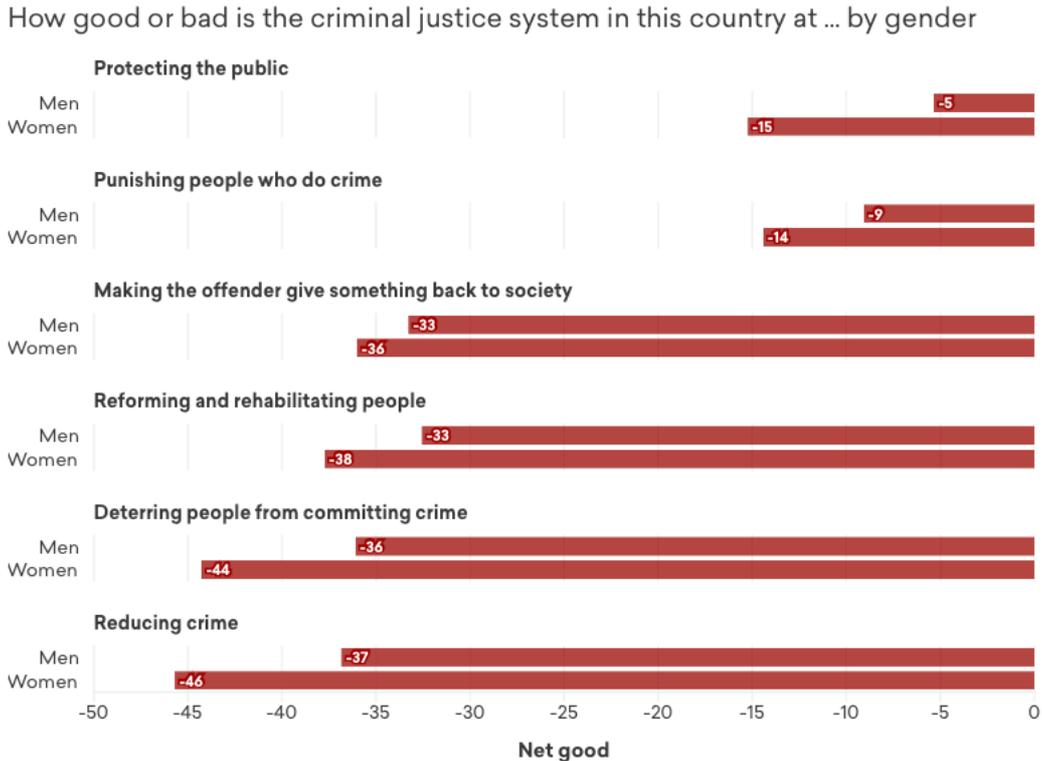
Selected -70  30 %



Source: More in Common, March 2025

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There is also demographic variance - women have lower confidence than men in the system's ability to deliver across all six purposes. The gender gap is the strongest on protecting the public, crime reduction and deterrence. People from ethnic minorities are generally more likely than white people to say that the criminal justice system is doing a good job than bad job across its purposes, particularly public protection and punishment.



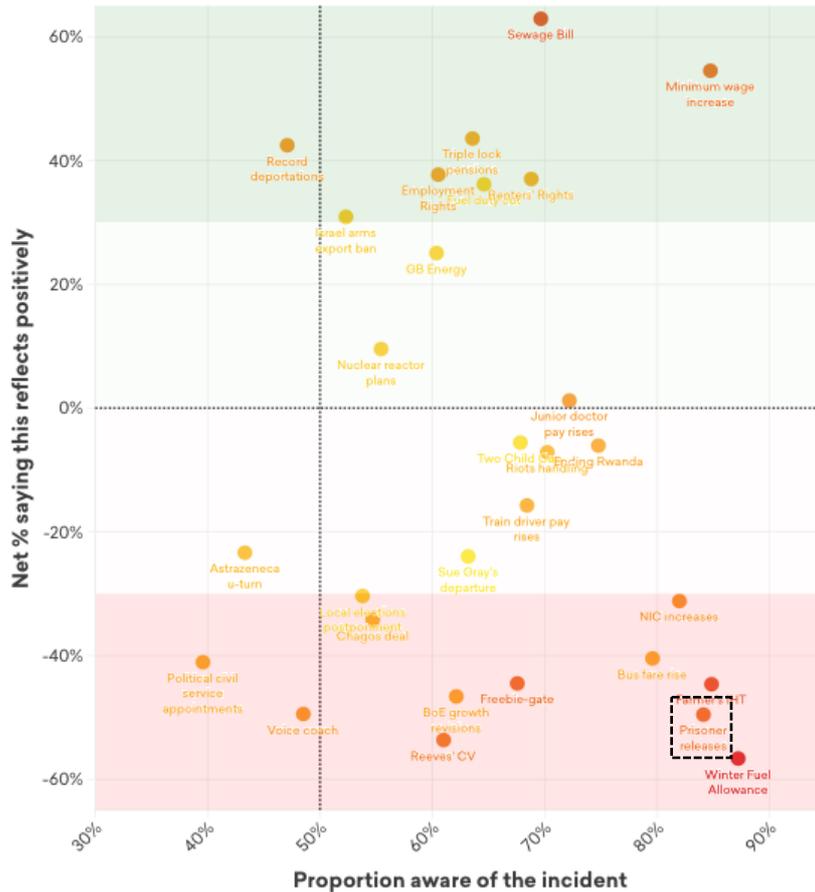
Source: More in Common, March 2025

In the last year, one of the most visible examples of a broken criminal justice system was the early prisoner release due to overcrowding. On More in Common's policy tracker - which measures the cut-through and reception of various government policies - the prisoner release is among the most well-known of the government's decisions or policies and among the most unpopular. More than eight in ten Britons have heard at least something about early prisoner release - the third most well known of the government's policies, after the means-testing of the winter fuel allowance and the changes to inheritance tax rules for farmers. It is also among the most unpopular decisions that the government has made - three in five (61 per cent) Britons say the decision reflects negatively on the government. Clearly, the political risk of further criminal justice system failings is high.

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Labour's first months: Successes and failures

Lighter colours indicate greater ambivalence (more people expressing neither a negative nor positive view of the event)

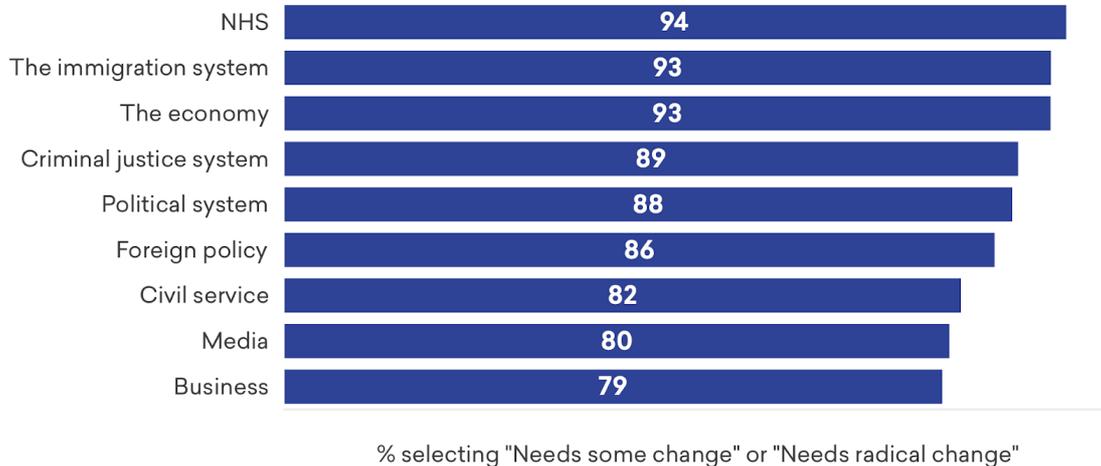


Mandate for change

Almost nine in ten Britons (89 per cent) say the criminal justice system needs to change and one in two Britons think this change needs to be radical. The extent of change the public want to see made to the criminal justice system is comparable - in both breadth and intensity - to the changes the public want to see made to the immigration system, the NHS and the economy.

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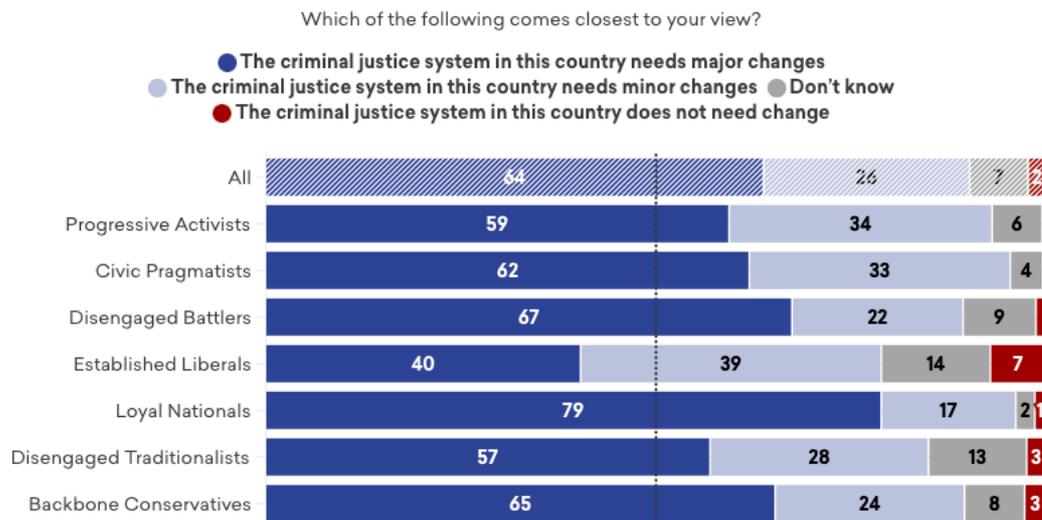
Thinking about the following aspects of the UK, which if any do you think needs to change?



Source: More in Common • February 2025

Two thirds of the public (64 per cent) want to see major changes to the criminal justice system, while a quarter (26 per cent) want to see minor changes. Only two per cent of the public think the criminal justice system does not need to change. The demand for major change is strongest among the Loyal National segment who best reflect a typical Red Wall or 'hero' voter, and who have shaped the past few UK General Elections. Four in five Loyal Nationals think the criminal justice system needs major change. Established Liberals (a typical 'Blue Wall' voter) are the least likely to think the system needs major changes, but even this group are still more likely to think the system needs change than not.

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Source: More in Common, March 2025

Victims of crime are more likely than others to say the justice system needs major change (70 per cent of victims vs 61 per cent of those who haven't been a victim). While men are more likely to think the system needs change overall (92 per cent of men and 87 per cent of women), women are more likely to say this change needs to be major (67 per cent of women back major changes vs 61 per cent of men). Members of ethnic minority communities are less likely than white people to say the justice system needs reform (66 per cent of white people say the system needs change vs 54 per cent of Black and Asian people). This finding would benefit from more in depth research among ethnic minority communities.

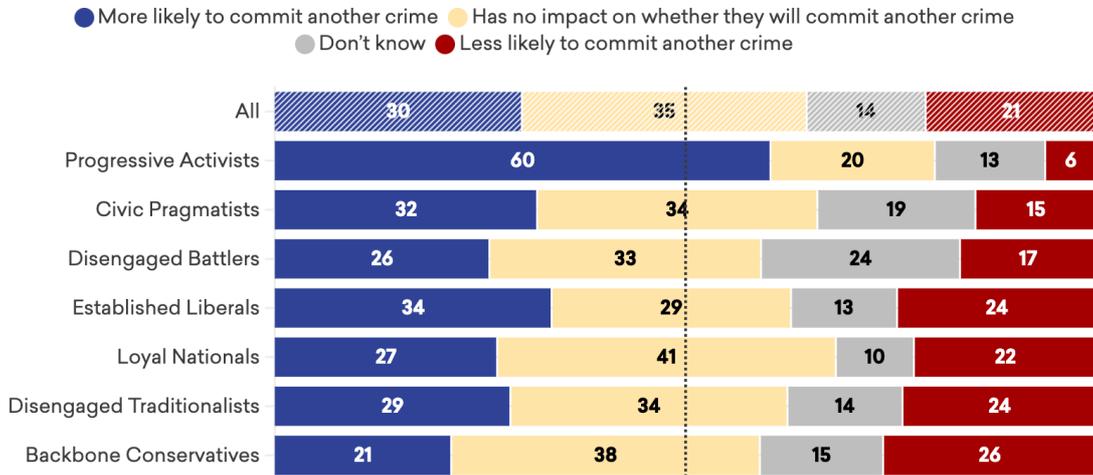
Low confidence in prisons

Central to the public's frustration with the criminal justice system is a strong sense that prisons are not working as they should. While public knowledge of the prison system is relatively low, many have little confidence that sending people to prison makes prisoners less likely to commit crime.

In fact, the public are more likely to think that going to prison increases someone's likelihood of re-offending (30 per cent) than makes reoffending less likely (21 per cent). All segments (bar Backbone Conservatives) are more likely to think that prison makes offenders more likely rather than less likely to commit crime - although a plurality of every segment (bar Progressive Activists) think it has no impact either way.

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Which of the following comes closest to your view in general? Going to prison makes someone...



Source: More in Common, March 2025

There are some demographic differences when analysing views on prisons' effectiveness. Younger generations are more likely to say going to prison makes people less likely to offend. White people are more likely to say prison has no impact on whether offenders commit another crime, while ethnic minorities are more likely to say it reduces the likelihood. Victims of crime are less convinced that prison is effective at reducing reoffending (35 per cent of victims say prison makes offenders more likely to commit crime vs 30 per cent for non-victims).

While few are convinced by the effectiveness of prisons, there is less consensus among different groups as to why prison is ineffective at reducing reoffending. For some it's because prison is not a tough enough environment for offenders. For others, prisons trap offenders in a cycle of reoffending and are not focused enough on addressing the root causes of offending behaviour, such as addiction.

I've never been to prison but by all accounts it's like a holiday home. It's like Butlins, there's no deterrent.

Tina, Loyal National, Taunton

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I think a big issue is that it's like a vicious circle. I mean you go in, you come out, you can't get a job, you've got a criminal record, nobody wants to employ you.

Rich, Loyal National, Taunton

If I lost everything, like everything, my house and everything and I was going to be homeless, I would just go out and commit a crime because then I'd know I'd get a lovely bed, three meals a day and a PlayStation. It's ridiculous. Jail should be a deterrent.

Damien, Disengaged Traditionalist, Bolton

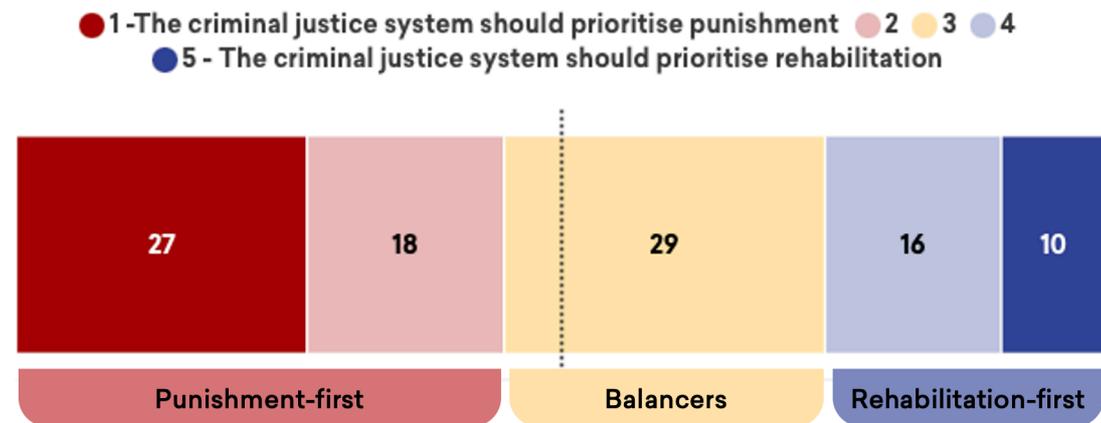
2. The British Seven segments and criminal justice reform

While there is clear agreement on the need for change in the criminal justice system - and the limited ability of prisons to reduce crime or make re-offending less likely - there is less consensus on what change should look like in practice.

Differing views on issues of public policy are often informed to a large degree by people's upstream values and perspectives. In the context of criminal justice three broad values-based groupings emerge from the data: a punishment-first group, a rehabilitation-first group and a 'balancer' group.

In reality most Britons want the criminal justice system to achieve multiple aims and objectives, but these categorisations help to explain the public's different starting points in conversations on the justice system, and the nature of the change they would like to see.

Please indicate which of the following statements comes closer to your view, using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 indicates you agree fully with the first statement and 5 indicates you agree fully with the second statement.

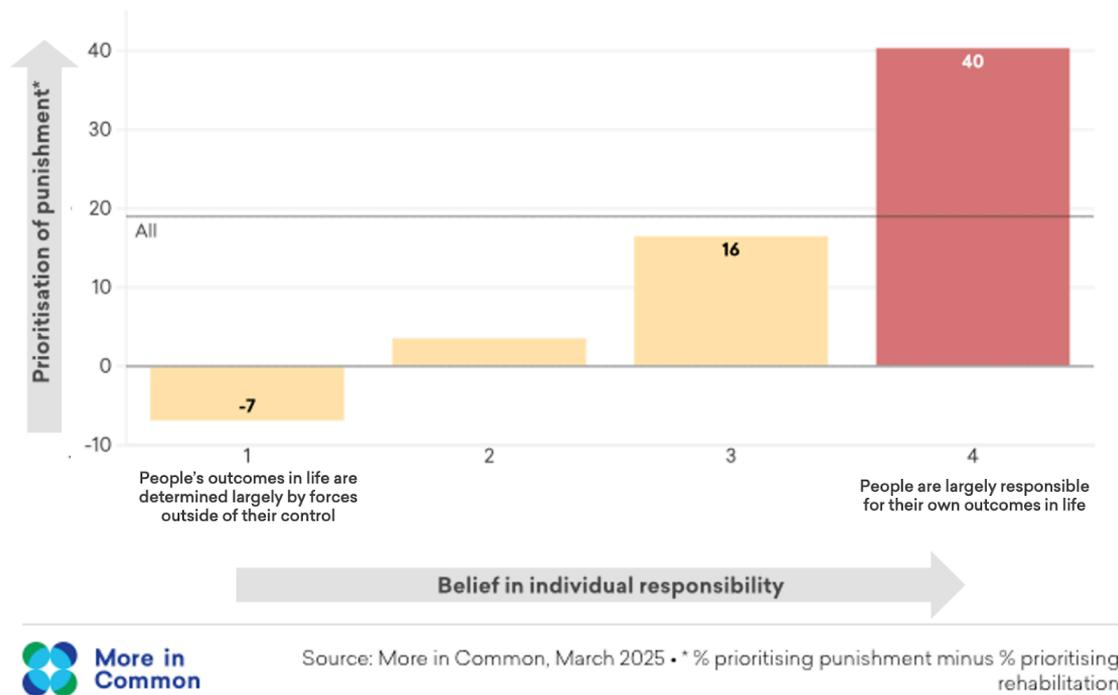


Source: More in Common, March 2025

The punishment-first group

This group, representing a plurality of Britons (45 per cent), prioritises punishment over rehabilitation in the criminal justice system. They see the main priority as punishing offenders as a means of deterrence - believing punishment is the most effective way to stop people reoffending in the future. The punishment-first group is made up largely of Loyal Nationals, Disengaged Traditionalists and Backbone Conservatives. Within this, Loyal Nationals believe most strongly that the criminal justice system should prioritise punishment.

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Prioritising punishment over rehabilitation is, for many, linked to personal responsibility. Views on individual responsibility are highly predictive of views on punishment - half of those who think people are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life strongly believe that the criminal justice system should prioritise punishment.

It's all on the individual when they come out if they want to re-offend or whether they want to sort their lives out and move forward

Jason, Loyal National, Taunton

However despite placing a heavy premium on individual responsibility, members of the punishment-first group are most likely to attribute crime to social determinants including poverty and addiction rather than individual factors. In focus groups, the same people who express strong views about punishment also talk about the need for better rehabilitative support.

If we made prisons horrible places, made the punishments ridiculous, no one would do it...

And definitely people with substance issues should be sentenced with rehabilitation orders because they have a health problem that needs fixing...they need support.

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Damien, Disengaged Traditionalist, Bolton

While these segments all prioritise punishment first in the criminal justice system, there are distinctive elements to their approaches to how the system might function better.

Loyal Nationals: Loyal Nationals are a segment with some of the strongest views on the criminal justice system, shaped by the the group's high level of threat perception. They are most likely to say it needs major change, and most likely to say that going to prison has no impact on the likelihood of reoffending. Their scepticism about both prisons and community alternatives is driven by a concern that neither of these approaches are harsh enough.

Disengaged Traditionalists: Disengaged Traditionalists' support for a punishment-first criminal justice system is motivated by their strong belief in individual responsibility. They see punishment as effective at making sure that those who have done harm are made to pay the price. They are a punishment-first rather than punishment-only group - they also see value in rehabilitation and are open to some community alternatives to prison where there is a backstop if offenders don't live up to their responsibilities.

Backbone Conservatives: Backbone Conservatives prioritise punishment over deterrence, and have strong support for harsher sentences. Along with Established Liberals, they are the least likely to have been a victim of crime. Backbone Conservatives are more likely to judge the success or failure of a sentence on whether they can visibly see that justice has been carried out. Along with Loyal Nationals, they are more likely than average to cite addiction as a key cause of crime (43 and 44 per cent respectively compared to 36 nationwide).

The balancer group

This balancer group consists of about three in ten Britons (29 per cent). Civic Pragmatists, Established Liberals and Disengaged Battlers are overrepresented in this group. While most Britons see crime as being caused by both systemic and individual drivers, balancers are more likely than average to highlight systemic drivers such as poverty. However, there are distinctive drivers to their views on the criminal justice system.

Civic Pragmatists: In judging the efficacy of punishment, offenders' contribution to society is more important for Civic Pragmatists than for other groups. In part, this might be motivated by their strong involvement in voluntary organisations and belief in putting back into the community.

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Established Liberals: Like Civic Pragmatists, Established Liberals are balancers who lean toward prioritising rehabilitation in criminal justice. Established Liberals are the second most supportive segment on the use of community sentencing after Progressive Activists. As the most pro-status-quo segment, they are the group least likely to say the justice system needs major reform. Along with Backbone Conservatives, they are least likely to have been victims of crime.

Disengaged Battlers: Disengaged Battlers are a balancer group who lean towards punishment as the goal of the criminal justice system - most often explaining the need for punishment as providing justice for victims. They are the segment most likely to have been arrested, and to have experienced a close friend or family being arrested, and the second most likely to say the justice system needs major change. Compared to the other balancer segments, they are more likely to blame crime on individuals' decisions and characters.

I just think the system at present isn't working, especially for first time offenders ... that opportunity should be there for them. I think it is better to rehabilitate and try and get them to be contributing members of the community rather than putting them in prison and them just coming out worse.

Huma, Civic Pragmatist, Taunton

The rehabilitation-first group

The final group is the rehabilitation-first group that represents just over a quarter of Britons (26 per cent). Those who have been victims of crime are more likely than average to fall within this group.

One segment is heavily overrepresented within the rehabilitation-first group - **Progressive Activists**. Two thirds of this segment take a rehabilitation-first approach to criminal justice - the strongest views of any segments one way or another on punishment and rehabilitation.

Progressive Activists, who typically think about issues more systemically, attribute crime to systemic rather than individual factors - for example, they are almost twice as likely as average to see poverty as one of the main causes of crime (67 per cent among Progressive Activists versus 35 per cent national average). They are most likely to think prisons increase the incarcerated's likelihood of reoffending and give the broader criminal justice system a mixed review saying it is good at punishment, but bad at rehabilitation.

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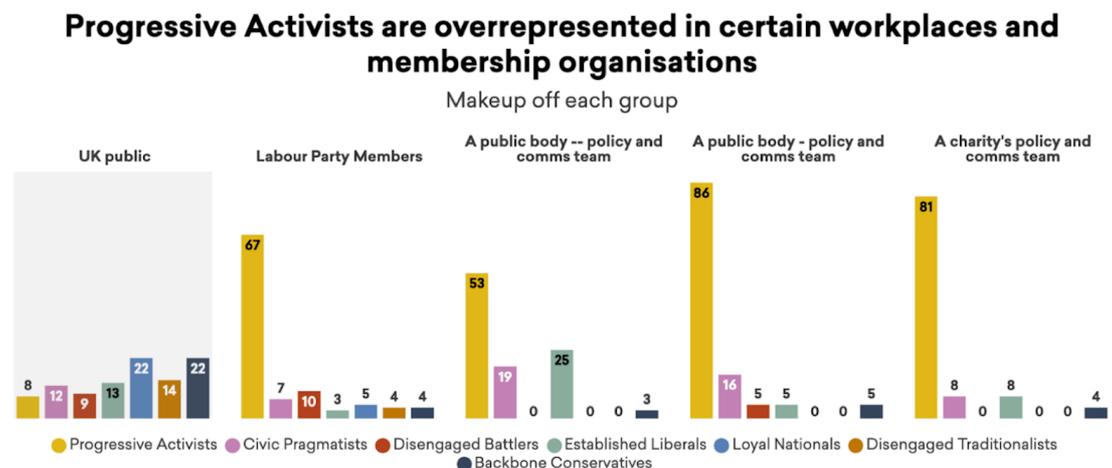
Progressive Activists are twice as likely as the general public (44 per cent, against 20 per cent) to think early interventions to prevent crime should be a priority, and 40 per cent say the same about rehabilitation (compared to 17 per cent of Britons). They are attitudinal outliers on criminal justice issues.

I think if you're in poverty you'll do anything. If something's legal or illegal, it doesn't really matter because you do what you're going to need to do to survive ...learned behaviour as well. If you've seen your parents or your older brother acting a certain way, behaving a certain way, I suppose you're going to carry that on as well.

Sarah, Progressive Activist, Rother Valley

Progressive Activists views' on the justice system matter because they are the segment most likely to engage with the justice system through their work. Almost one in five Progressive Activists say they have engaged with the criminal justice system through their work - more than double the national average. As previous More in Common research has found, Progressive Activists are also overrepresented in civil service and civil society roles - including those which intersect with the justice system.

The extent to which Progressive Activists diverge from the majority in their opinions about criminal justice issues suggests that attempts to influence public opinion on criminal justice reform through progressive messaging or framing alone may be ineffective. Those advocating for criminal justice reform (many of whom will be Progressive Activists) will instead need to invest effort to reflect the public's broader values, viewpoints and perspectives in order to build support for criminal justice reform.

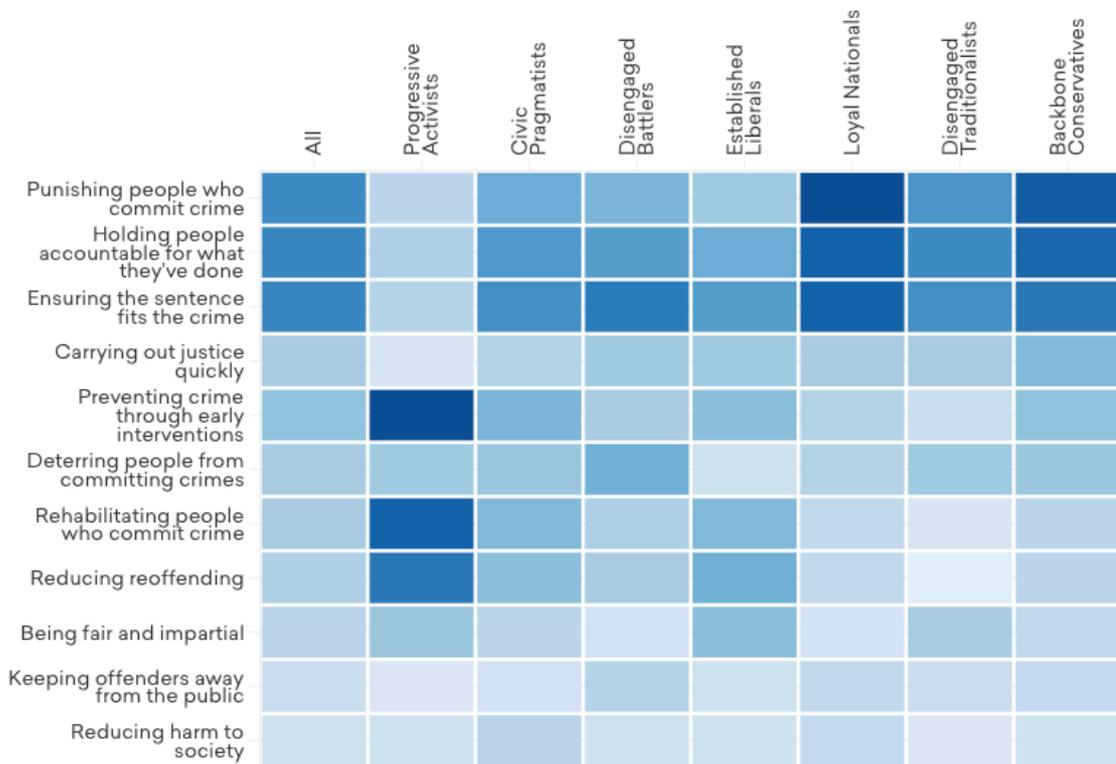


3. Key public priorities for the criminal justice system

When asked what the criminal justice system should prioritise, three clear themes emerge: punishment, accountability and proportionality. Britons see these aims as interrelated - focus group participants intuitively connect these priorities to reducing crime and in this way protecting the public, which they rank as the most important purpose of a criminal sentence.

What should be a priority for the criminal justice system in this country? Select up to three.

Selected 5  45 %



Source: More in Common, March 2025

The importance of punishment and accountability

The public thinks the main priority for the criminal justice system should be punishment. It is seen as the best route to provide justice for victims and the most effective form of deterrent. Punishing people who commit crime is a top three priority for the justice system among all segments bar Progressive Activists.

It should be for punishment if you've done something wrong and obviously... [it depends] what the crime is, but if it's something which is

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really bad, then obviously that person needs to have every privilege taken away including their lifestyle and access to their friends and what have you. And they should be put into a prison.

Tina, Loyal National, Taunton

The whole point of prison is to punish them by taking away the things that they thought they could freely have while taking advantage of society... and reform them and rehabilitate them back into society. If that's not happening, what is the point of prison?

Izzy, Progressive Activist, Bolton

For those who selected punishment, the reason it most matters is first to provide justice for the victims and then to deter offenders from committing future crimes. The deterrence effect against the individual offenders reoffending is seen as more important than the deterrent signalling effect to others who may commit similar crimes. Public preferences conflict here with some academic research² on this topic, which shows that harsher punishments have limited additional deterrent effect, especially compared to the certainty of punishment (i.e. the likelihood of being caught and punished).

There are differences between segments as to why they believe punishment is important. Progressive Activists who think punishment is important prioritise the deterrent effect - a view shared with Backbone Conservatives, Disengaged Traditionalists and Established Liberals. Meanwhile Civic Pragmatists, Disengaged Battlers and Loyal Nationals who think punishment is important prioritise justice for victims.

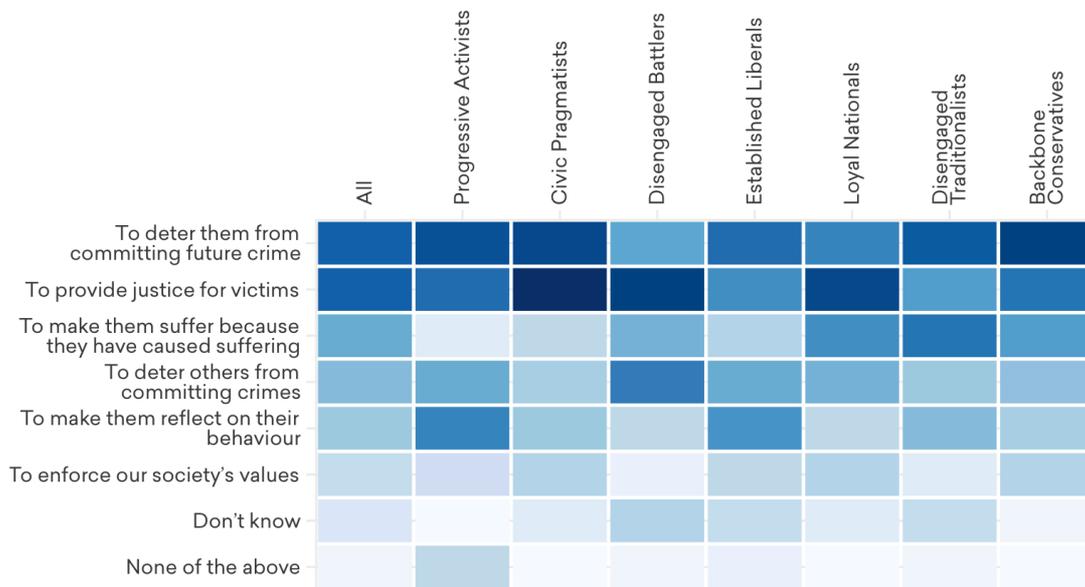
² <https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Effectiveness-of-Sentencing-Options-Review-FINAL.pdf>

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In your view, what is the most important reason to punish people who commit a crime?

[Only those who say punishment is an important purpose of a criminal sentence]

Selected 0  35 %



Source: More in Common, March 2025

Unsurprisingly victims are more likely to say that providing justice to victims is the main reason to punish offenders (27 per cent vs 21 per cent). What is more counterintuitive is that victims are less likely than non-victims to see causing suffering to offenders as an important aim of punishment (10 per cent of victims hold this view vs 14 per cent of non-victims). For victims punishment is more about justice than vengeance.

The second top priority for the criminal justice system is holding people accountable for their crimes. Holding criminals to account is a priority for all segments bar Progressive Activists. For older Britons, holding people accountable is a more widely held priority - 45 per cent of over 75s hold this view versus 33 per cent of the general population. Policy proposals which emphasise accountability for criminals, therefore, are likely to chime well with the public's value base on criminal justice.

Yeah, I think visibility, transparency, proportionality, the speed of it all – I think they're all important as offenders need to be held responsible for what they've done.

Stephen, Loyal National, Rother Valley

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Proportionality - ensuring sentences better fit the crimes

Rather than a blanket desire to make every sentence tougher or longer, the public wants to see a more proportional approach where the sentence fits the crime. High profile examples convey a sense to the public that sentences are inconsistent, confusing, and therefore unfair, furthering dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system.

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. Think of 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. It's just bonkers.

Damien, Disengaged Traditionalist, Bolton

There's no consistency in the system of punishment I don't think. Or with the crime that certain people, they tend to come down harder on some lesser crimes than what they do on harder crimes.

Jason, Loyal National, Taunton

I feel like there's so much inconsistency in sentences and I feel like that also causes a lot of disdain for the system and misunderstanding about how it works. It seems to work differently for different people.

Cam, London, Lived Experience Group

The public believes ensuring sentences fit the crime should be a key priority for the justice system - and it ranks as the number one priority for Reform UK voters. This can explain why the same people who prioritise punishing people that commit serious crimes also want to see better rehabilitation approaches for those who commit minor crimes. The importance of proportionality underlines why Reform voters (who tend to fall within the Disengaged Traditionalist and Loyal National segments) are, in general, a punishment-*first* rather than punishment-*only* group.

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For the justice system to demonstrate a commitment to proportionality it is vital that both, on one hand, people who commit more serious crimes are not seen to get off lightly and, on the other, people who commit more minor crimes are not seen to be unduly penalised but supported in a rehabilitation journey.

The emerging importance of contribution

Beyond these headline priorities, focus group discussions unearthed a conviction that offenders should be made to make a contribution - whether to society, the economy or their local community. Support for contribution is driven both by the positive benefits of offenders paying their own way, in contrast to the drain on government resources represented by prison spaces, and a common-sense desire for the system to set offenders onto a path clear from crime. Many point to the low employment rates after prison as an illustration of a broken system, where people get trapped in a cycle of offending. When evaluating different forms of sentencing, two of the key tests for the public are whether offenders contribute to society and whether they can land employment afterwards.

Support for greater contribution is shared across focus groups with the general public and the focus group with prison-leavers - who saw sentences involving employment as a way to guide offenders into a more positive lifestyle. The Victims Levy (which sees offenders directly contribute to victim support) was broadly welcomed by the victims' focus group, though none of the participants were aware of its existence.

If they're given an opportunity and they get respect, I think they give respect back

Jason, Loyal National, Taunton

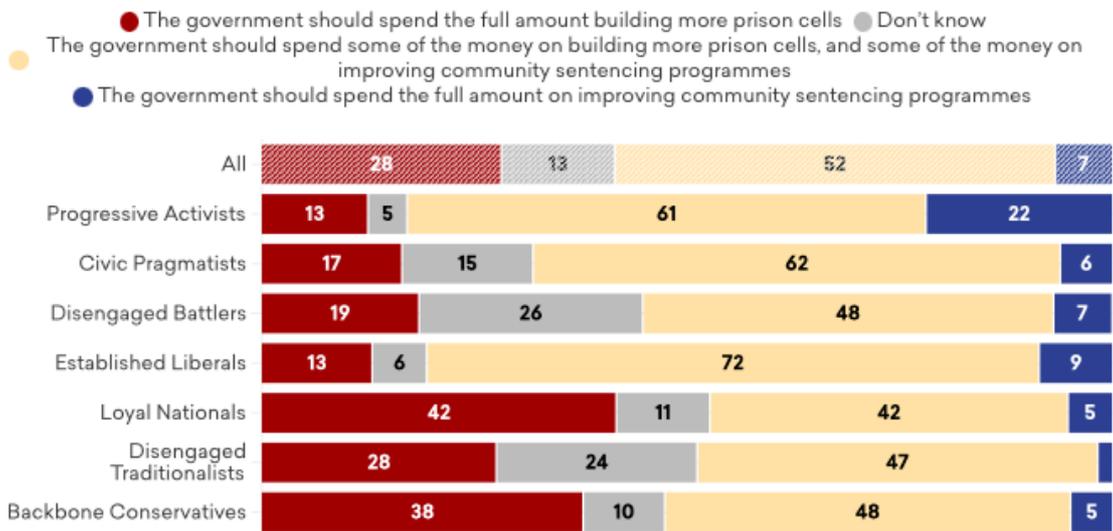
I know so many women that had careers before they came in... So I think it's recognising that people with convictions have talent. They have so many skills.

Bianca, Lived Experience Group

4. A way forward

Given the disillusionment with the criminal justice system and low confidence in prisons' ability to reduce reoffending, it is perhaps unsurprising that only three in ten Britons think that the government should spend the full £10 billion forecast cost on building more prison cells. While support for full allocation of the budget to the prison building programme is stronger among more punishment-first segments (such as Loyal Nationals and Backbone Conservatives), it does not command majority support among any groups. Instead a majority of Britons think the government should split the money between building more prison cells and improving community sentencing.

UK prisons are almost at full capacity. The government has plans to spend £10 billion building 20,000 new prison cells. Which of the following comes closest to your view?



Source: More in Common, March 2025

Broad support for expanding use of community sentences

Three in five Britons (60 per cent) support the greater use of community sentences for some offenders who are currently sent to prison. This kind of sentence could involve community service, paid or unpaid work, wearing an electronic tag to limit activities, a curfew or attending drug rehabilitation. The public are three times more likely to support than oppose greater use of community sentences - with majority support in all segments bar Disengaged Traditionalists. Support for expanding community sentences as an alternative to prison is greater among victims of crime (67 per cent) than other members of the public (57 per cent).

This support is not unconditional. While evidence suggests that community sentences are often more effective than prison at reducing reoffending, the public is not convinced that community sentences will be enough of a deterrent. There are concerns around the impact on public safety - particularly

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among women. Many also raised worries about whether community sentences will be sufficiently resourced to ensure they are effective. This is particularly relevant at a time when the country's probation system is under significant staffing pressures³.

Drug alcohol treatment centres. If they don't turn up, what do they do? Somebody's got to go and find them to say, why haven't you been to your course?... Wearable substance monitoring devices. So you wear one of them and you start smoking marijuana, it starts beeping. So what? A lot of these need policing and we haven't gotten the resources to police.

Julie, Loyal National, Rother Valley

I think tagging can be really effective... But in order to do that you've got to ensure that the basic equipment actually works and that it's not creating more barriers to people with work and education. I know I was trying to attend lectures at 9:00 AM in the morning and I kept being late because I couldn't leave my house before eight o'clock and it took them about five months to change that.

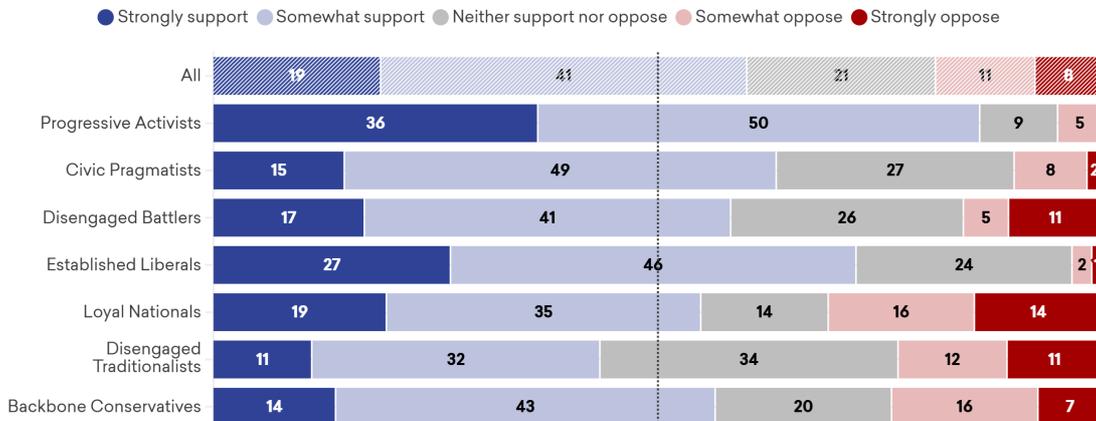
Bianca, Lived Experience Group

However, in the context of broad disillusionment with the justice system and low confidence in prisons, many Britons are open to alternatives that aim to reduce re-offending, as long as the deterrent effect of the punishment is sufficient.

³ <https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/news/current-pressures-on-new-probation-staff-counterproductive-to-long-term-retention-in-the-probation-service-inspection-finds/>

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Some people are sentenced in the community instead of a prison sentence. This could mean community service, unpaid work, wearing an electronic tag to limit activities, a curfew or attending drug rehabilitation. To what extent would you support or oppose using this kind of sentence for certain offenders currently sent to prison?



Source: More in Common, March 2025

A case-by-case approach

While there is broad high level support for increasing the use of sentencing in the community in principle, the public think sentencing decisions should be taken on a case-by-case basis, meaning support or opposition is highly dependent on the context. For groups including non-violent offenders, first-time offenders and parents of young children, a plurality support community alternatives to prison in some cases, while fewer than one in ten extend this to all cases.

It's got to be a mixture of punishment and rehabilitation but I guess it's probably difficult to strike the balance and find what would be effective for different people. So they kind of have to have a more broad approach for it. So that's probably why it's not always as successful as it could be. They can't tailor it to be what it needs to be for each individual

Ellie, Civic Pragmatist, Taunton

Even with petty theft, if it's repeated over a period of time, then there should be more consequences to it... stop them repeating it again because they know the more I do it, then there'll be more consequences for me.

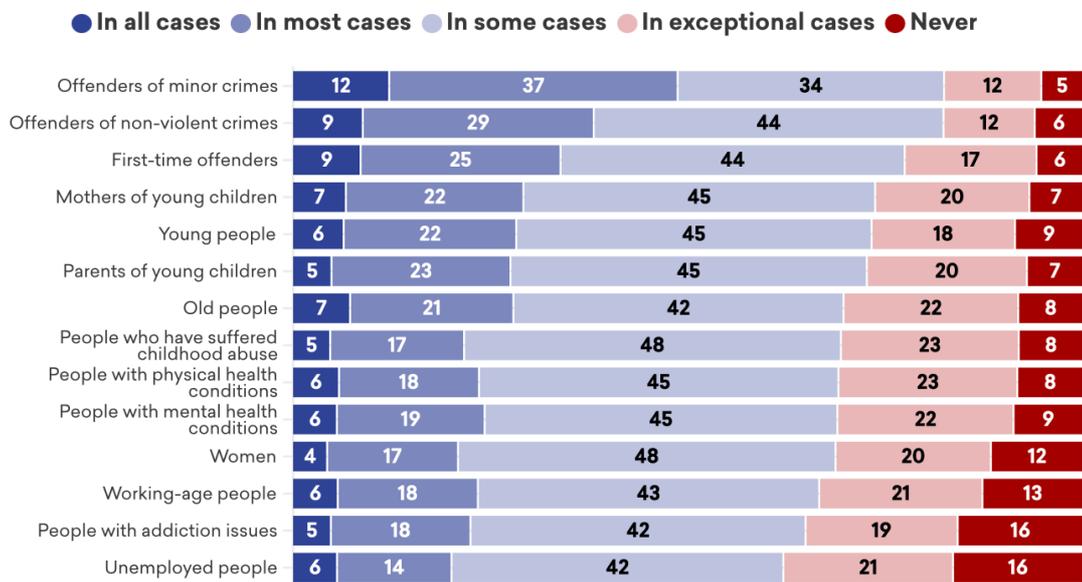
Teniola, Loyal National, Worsley

Britons tend to think that sentences should be based primarily on the crime committed. Four in five Britons (83 per cent) think offenders of minor or non-violent crimes should receive a community sentence instead of prison in some or all cases - more than say the same based on who offenders identity or their

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circumstances. Non-violent offences made up more than a third of the prison population in September 2024. While sentencing non-violent offenders in the community may not be appropriate in all cases, an expansion of community sentencing for some non-violent offences could meaningfully contribute to reducing prison overcrowding. Both the quantitative and qualitative research found that there is support for a case-by-case approach to sentencing for some violent crimes too – with cautious openness to greater use of community alternatives for less serious violent crimes.

For each of the following type of offender, in which cases do you think they should receive a community sentence instead of prison?



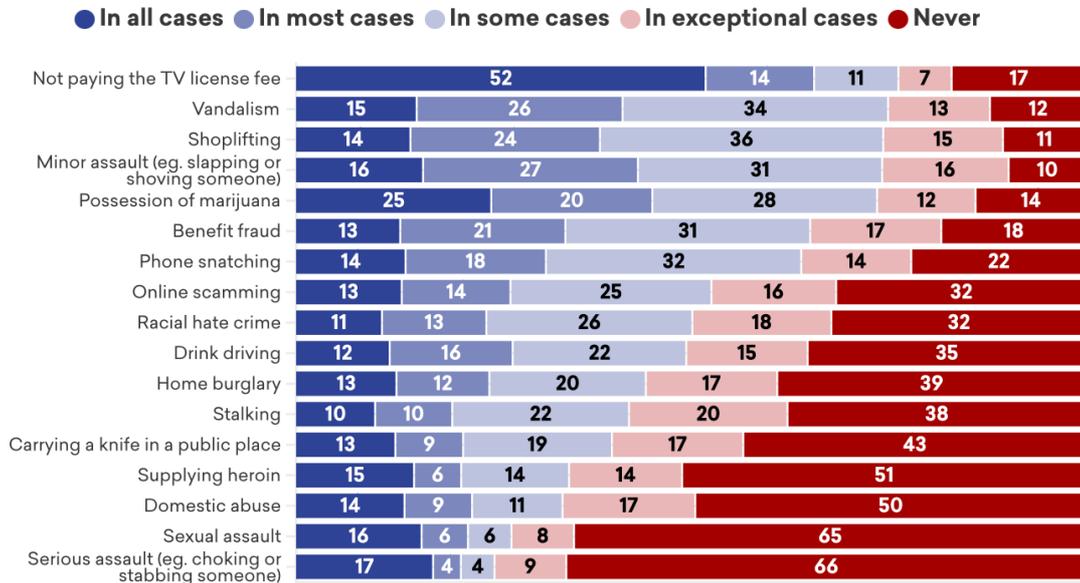
Source: More in Common, March 2025

I don't mind [community sentencing being used for convictions of] a little bit of violence... low level... like drunken brawls... I feel like when it's more serious like a stabbing, obviously that's an absolute no go.

Ellie, Civic Pragmatist, Taunton

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For each of the following type of offender, in which cases do you think they should receive a community sentence instead of prison?



Source: More in Common, March 2025

While there is clear support for using community sentencing in some cases across a range of offences, it is evident the public does not extend this to every type of crime. Any move to greater community sentencing should sit alongside greater clarity about which crimes are appropriate for a community sentence and which ones may not be, in order to provide reassurance and address concerns around the impacts on public safety.

I think sometimes [a community sentence] is more of a punishment because for some people going to prison, it's a bit like a holiday... But obviously, yeah, it depends on what it is. If you're a risk to the public, if you're a risk to women, kids or anyone on the streets, then no

Hayley, Established Liberal. Queen's Park

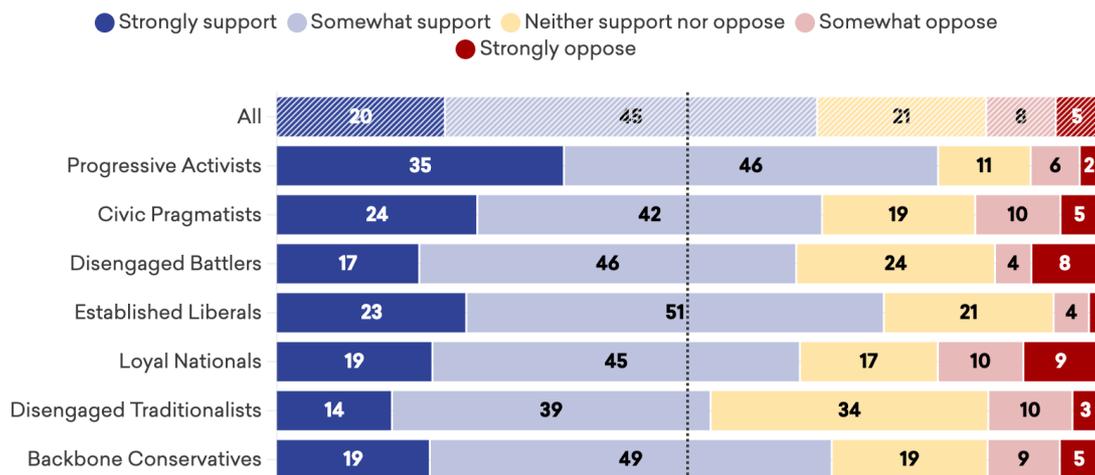
A tangible example

The principle of contribution explored above helps to explain support for one form of community sentence recently proposed by Iceland Managing Director, Richard Walker. He suggested that certain offenders receive a suspended sentence through taking a paid job at Iceland, alongside a backstop that if employed offenders did not show up to work or meet an expected standard the community sentence could become a prison sentence. Using this kind of

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sentence as an alternative to prison for certain crimes commands majority support within every segment.

The head of Iceland Foods recently suggested that people who commit certain crimes instead of going to prison could have the option of a suspended sentence through taking a paid job at Iceland (in the shop or as a driver). If they didn't show up to work or do a good job they would then lose this option and go to prison. To what extent would you support or oppose using this kind of sentence for certain crimes?



Source: More in Common, March 2025

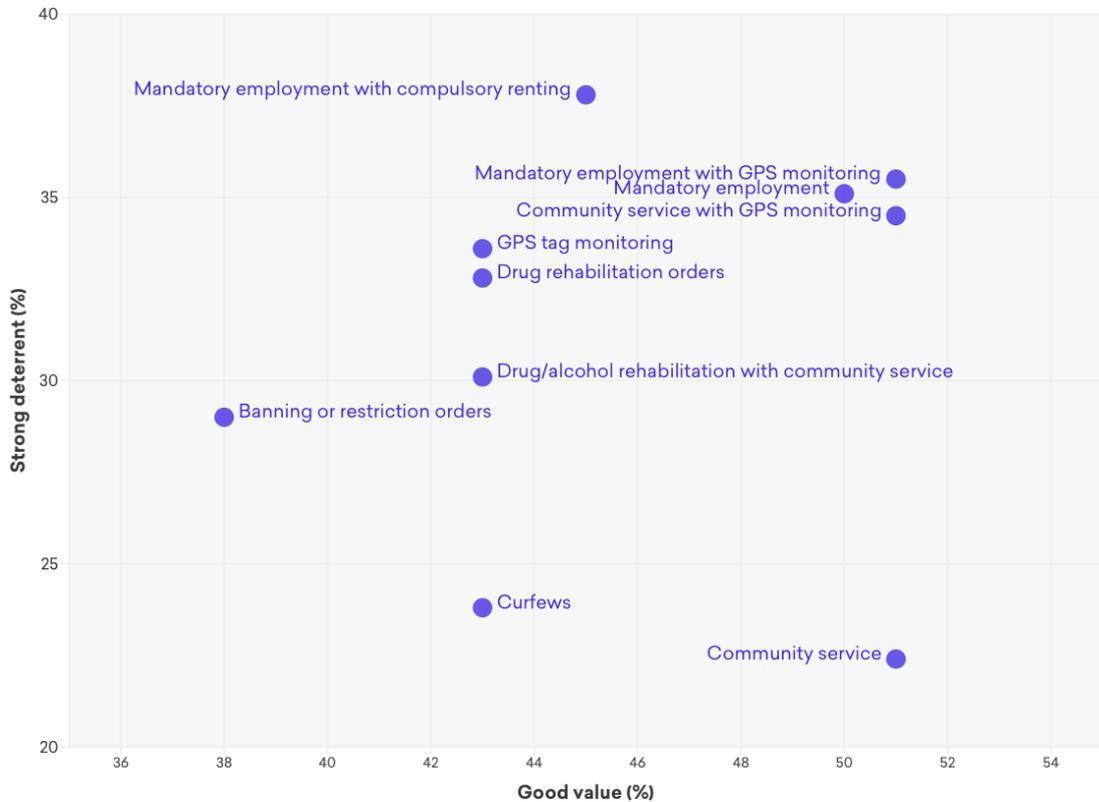
The breadth of support may be explained by the fact that, while the public tends to think of community sentences as weaker deterrents than prison sentences, mandatory employment was seen as the strongest deterrents of the community sentence types tested. Moreover this type of community alternative is seen as the best value for money for the taxpayer - as offenders contribute something back to the economy.

Support for a specified example of a community sentence such as this stronger than support for community sentences in the abstract. This aligns with focus group conversations where those who share their skepticism and hesitations around community sentencing in the abstract, are often more positive about tangible examples.

By saying to them, right, okay, you've committed this crime, however for a period of 12 months or whatever, you've got to now do this, give them a reason to get up in the morning to go to work, to contribute into the country by the taxes and what have you. The fact that they've got that they've got to behave otherwise they will be in prison, but the prisons let them down, let us down because they don't, as I said previously is very much like a holiday camp, so that's not really a deterrent, but the scheme in place I think is a good thing.

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Tina, Loyal National, Taunton



Source: More in Common

The role for a backstop

Another element of community sentencing that mitigates some hesitations around community sentencing is the inclusion of a prison backstop. This policy tool applies to those not abiding by their sentence conditions, and is already used in many cases. Retaining the possibility of a custodial sentence shifts support particularly among the most sceptical segments, as well as women and ethnic minorities.

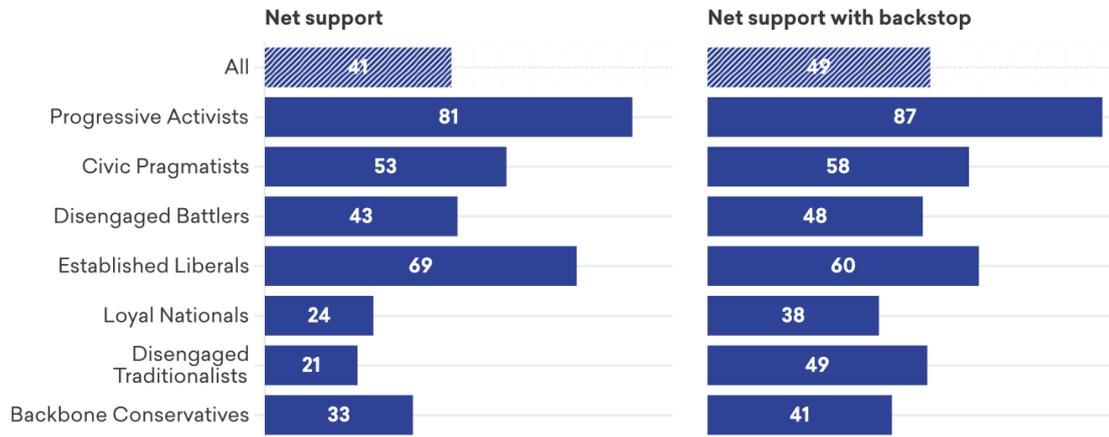
In a survey experiment in which respondents were asked about their support or opposition for increasing the use of community alternatives, adding the condition 'If an offender does not comply with their community sentence, it could become a prison sentence' increased net support by 8 points. This was most notable for socially conservative segments. Among Disengaged Traditionalists (the segment with the lowest support for the concept of community sentencing), adding a prison backstop more than doubled net support, from 21 per cent to 49 per cent.

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Some people are sentenced in the community instead of a prison sentence. This could mean community service, unpaid work, wearing an electronic tag to limit activities, a curfew or attending drug rehabilitation.

[If an offender does not comply with their community sentence, it could become a prison sentence.]

To what extent would you support or oppose using this kind of sentence for certain offenders currently sent to prison?



Source: More in Common, March 2025

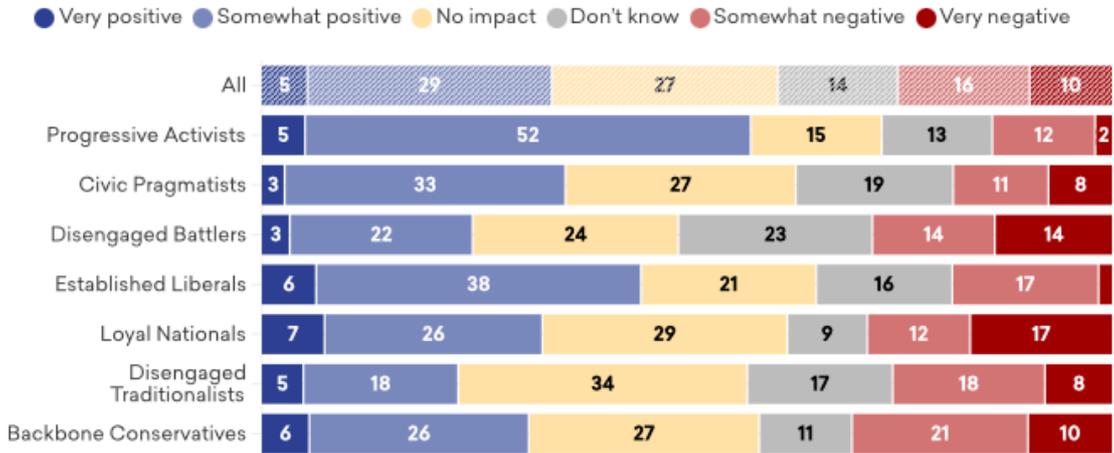
The shift in support for community sentencing with the inclusion of a backstop is driven by stark rises in support among women (+17 point change in net support from +35 to +52) compared to a statistically insignificant change for men. The backstop also increases support significantly with people from minority ethnic backgrounds where net support shifts by 29 points (27 to 56) compared to just a four point rise among white people. The effect of the backstop is also more significant for non-university educated people: a 13 point rise in net support for +34 to +47, compared to a one point rise for university-educated people.

This finding suggests that policies expanding community sentencing may command the confidence of more people if a prison backstop is integrated. Whether or not this helps with prison overcrowding would depend on the effective management of sentences in the community and the likelihood of breaches leading to additional imprisonment, a possibility which has been highlighted by a recent increase in the number of offenders recalled to prison.

Most of all what determines support for community alternatives is whether they can be expected to reduce reoffending. Regression modelling of survey responses found that whether or not a respondent expected a particular community sentence to reduce reoffending was most predictive of whether a respondent supported the use of that community alternative. Further work is needed to confirm the viability of expanding community sentences but there is clear evidence that, if communicated effectively, this may provide a path forward to address the public's disillusionment with the justice system and deliver change that can meet their expectations.

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What impact do you think using community sentences instead of prison sentences for more people who commit crime could have on the following: Rates of reoffending



Source: More in Common, March 2025

Conclusion

What emerges from our conversations with and surveys of the public is a complex picture of public attitudes toward Britain's criminal justice system and potential reforms.

While there is widespread agreement that the system needs significant change and consensus around the desired outcomes, Britons have nuanced and often diverging views on how to achieve these shared aims.

Three clear priorities emerge from the public's perspective: punishment, accountability, and proportionality. Public protection remains key, while the principle of contribution—having offenders make meaningful contributions to society and their community—has strong support across different segments.

Despite the strong emphasis on punishment, there is limited enthusiasm for mass prison building and many are at least open to the use of community alternatives for certain offences. Three in five Britons support expanding community sentences for some offenders currently sent to prison, especially when these alternatives are based on accountability and contribution.

The public's approach is case-by-case rather than ideological. Most people want proportional responses that fit the crime, with strong support for expanding community sentences especially for non-violent and minor offences, while maintaining tougher sanctions for serious crimes. Women, ethnic minorities, and more socially conservative segments in particular are more likely to support community alternatives when a prison "backstop" for non-compliance is included.

As Britain faces ongoing challenges with prison overcrowding and limited effectiveness of the current system in tackling recidivism, these findings suggest a potential way forward. Greater use of robust community sentencing could meet the public's value tests and address practical constraints. Reforms that meet the public's expectations on punishment, emphasise offender accountability and contribution to society, ensure proportionality, are seen as sufficiently resourced and which include appropriate safeguards could potentially build broad public support across the diverse segments of society as a path to fixing Britain's broken justice system.

Methodology

More in Common is grateful to the Common Ground Justice Project for commissioning this research. More in Common has retained full editorial control over this report.

Polling was conducted by More in Common between 28th February and 27th March 2025 of 5,949 people representative of Great British adults. More in Common is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by their rules, with data tables available at: <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/polling-tables/>.

Focus groups for this report were conducted by More in Common in February and March 2025, online with participants from the following areas: Rother Valley, Taunton and Wellington, Bolton South and Walkden, Brent. The Brent focus group was conducted with victims of crime. An additional national focus group was also held with people who had experience of being subject to probation supervision and served prison sentences of various lengths, conducted by the Common Ground Justice Project.

Focus Group Locations



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Focus group summaries

Rother Valley

- Participants: Mixture of Labour, Conservative, and Reform voters
- About the area: 218th most deprived constituency in England (out of 543). South Yorkshire has a relatively high crime rate (108 per 1,000 compared to an England-wide rate of 86.8).
- Discussion summary:
 - Participants identified poverty, addiction, learned behavior, lack of deterrence, and intergenerational cycles of crime as key drivers. Many noted that young people are influenced by family, peers, and social media, often turning to crime due to limited opportunities or desperation.
 - Most felt the justice system is under-resourced, inconsistent, and too lenient. Prisons were seen as ineffective for repeat or "career" criminals, with concerns about early release, lack of rehabilitation, and reoffending. Some supported tougher sentencing and clearer deterrents.
 - Opinions on community sentencing were mixed—while alternatives like tagging or community payback were supported for minor or first-time offenses, many felt they were too soft for serious or repeat crimes. Effectiveness was seen as dependent on enforcement and the offender's circumstances.

Taunton and Wellington

- Participants: Mixture of Liberal Democrat and Conservative voters
- About the area: Less deprived than average (307th most deprived English constituency out of 543). Avon and Somerset has a crime rate slightly above average (94 per 1,000 compared to an England-wide rate of 87).
- Discussion summary:
 - Participants linked crime to poverty, addiction, boredom, peer pressure, and lack of opportunities, particularly among youth. Many felt that environmental and generational influences play a significant role.
 - While prison was seen as necessary for serious crimes, many participants felt short sentences to be ineffective. They supported rehabilitation, education, and job opportunities (e.g., the Iceland model) as better ways to reduce reoffending—provided these options include clear consequences and are not perceived as rewards. Some also spoke of their positive experiences with reformed offenders.
 - There was strong interest in community-based alternatives like tagging, curfews, and structured work programs, especially when combined with rehabilitation. Participants were critical of the current justice system's inconsistency and cost, rejecting prison expansion in favour of early intervention and reintegration-focused solutions.

Bolton South and Walkden

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- Participants: Labour to Reform switchers
- About the area: Among the most deprived areas (19th most deprived English constituency out of 543). Greater Manchester has a relatively high crime rate - 110 per 1,000 (compared to an England-wide rate of 87).
- Discussion summary:
 - Participants expressed concern over increasing local crime, particularly involving youth, theft, and antisocial behavior. Many felt that the justice system fails to act as a deterrent, with punishments viewed as too lenient or inconsistent.
 - While most agreed that punishment should be more severe—especially for violent or repeat offenders—there was recognition of the need for rehabilitation, particularly for those with addiction issues or difficult backgrounds. However, there was skepticism toward alternatives like paid employment as a sentence.
 - Community sentences were generally seen as too soft unless they were visibly tough and matched to the severity of the crime. Many participants supported the idea of public accountability, tailored rehabilitation, and visible consequences to help deter reoffending.

Queen's Park and Maida Vale

- Participants: Victims of non-violent crime
- About the area: Top quartile of deprivation (121st most deprived constituency in England out of 543). Brent has one of the highest crime rates in London (113 per 1000, compared to an England-wide rate of 87).
- Discussion summary:
 - Participants described crime in London as widespread, often driven by cost of living pressures, lack of opportunities, peer pressure, and gang influence. Many felt these issues were systemic and deeply tied to upbringing and environment.
 - There was broad consensus that the criminal justice system is not working effectively. Concerns included underfunded police, overcrowded prisons, lenient or delayed sentencing, and a lack of meaningful deterrents. Many doubted the system's ability to rehabilitate.
 - While some supported community sentences and open prisons for lower-level crimes, most stressed that alternatives must be tough and tailored. There was also interest in combining community service with rehabilitation or tagging, but skepticism remained about their effectiveness for serious or repeat offenders.

Lived experience of prison and probation

- Participants: A nation-wide group of prison leavers
- Discussion summary:
 - Participants identified poverty, lack of support, addiction, mental health issues, and environmental influences (like peer pressure and social media) as key drivers of crime. They emphasised how crime affects communities deeply—creating fear, perpetuating cycles of violence, and undermining trust in local safety.

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- Many felt that prison often fails to rehabilitate and instead reinforces criminal behaviour, especially when support on release is lacking. While some individuals used prison time for personal growth, most agreed that the current system does not address root causes or help reintegrate people effectively.
- There was strong support for tailored, structured community sentences—especially those that offer education, work, and mental health support. Participants warned against one-size-fits-all approaches.

The Common Ground Justice Project would like to thank all participants in this research for their engagement, openness and honesty throughout the process.



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