

Who's in Prison and What's the Purpose of Imprisonment?

A Survey of Public Knowledge and Attitudes

Research Report

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Executive Summary

This report summarises findings from a survey of the public conducted in 2024. It contributes to the well-established and still growing literature on public opinion and imprisonment. The primary focus was upon public knowledge of prisons and prison trends in England and Wales. This survey is a follow-up to an earlier report by the Sentencing Academy on public knowledge of sentencing.

Key Findings

- Most people acknowledge that they know little about prisons in England and Wales, with almost three-quarters of respondents stating that they knew either 'not very much' or 'nothing at all'.
- More than nine in ten respondents significantly over-estimated the proportion of women within the prison population; 93% of respondents thought that women made up 10% or more of the prison population. The correct answer is 4%.
- Respondents also over-estimated the proportion of the prison population serving a sentence for a violent offence; whilst around one in three adult sentenced prisoners have been sentenced for a violent offence, 58% of respondents thought that violent offenders made up 40% or more of the prison population.
- Offenders who have served a short prison sentence of less than 12 months have the highest re-offending rate. However, most respondents considered that prisoners released after having served longer sentences had a higher re-offending rate.
- When asked to specify what they considered to be the single most important purpose of imprisonment, the most popular option, chosen by 42% of respondents, was protecting the public by removing offenders from society. Rehabilitation was the next most commonly-chosen purpose, attracting 19% of respondents.
- Approximately three-quarters of respondents (73%) considered prisons to be either 'not at all' or 'not very' effective at rehabilitating offenders and preventing re-offending. Whilst the perception of prisons as being effective at punishing offenders was less negative, over half of respondents (53%) thought prisons were 'not at all' or 'not very' effective in performing this function.
- In common with many previous surveys, a significant proportion of respondents considered prison conditions to be 'too easy', with 49% of respondents holding this view.

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Introduction

How much do the public know about prisons and the prison population? This research report contributes to the well-established and still growing literature on public opinion and prisons. The survey follows a previous Sentencing Academy analysis of public knowledge of sentencing trends, published in January 2022.¹ Researchers have explored public knowledge of prisons for decades (see Roberts and Hough (2005a; 2005b) for reviews of previous research). However, little research has emerged in recent years. The last comprehensive survey of public opinion and prisons was published over 20 years ago (MORI, 2003). The primary focus here is upon the knowledge which underpins community attitudes to the use of imprisonment as a sanction.

After exploring levels of knowledge and sources of information, we posed questions about prisons in England and Wales. The survey was conducted for the Sentencing Academy by YouGov in January 2024. The total sample size was 1,871 adults and fieldwork was undertaken between 4th - 5th January 2024. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in England and Wales (aged 18+). The complete survey instrument is available from the Sentencing Academy.

I. Public Knowledge of Key Prison Statistics

Most people acknowledge they know little about prisons

Respondents were asked how much they know about prisons. As can be seen in Table 1, almost two-thirds of the sample (63%) stated that they knew 'not very much' about prisons. Approximately one-quarter stated that they knew 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount'.

Table 1: Self-Reported Knowledge of Prisons (2024)

Knowledge of prisons	
A great deal	3%
A fair amount	24%
Not very much	63%
Nothing at all	10%

Q: How much, if anything, do you know about prisons in this country?

These trends are comparable to those emerging from a poll conducted in 2003. Table 2 provides a breakdown of responses from 2003 to the same question but with slightly different response options. As can be seen, the levels of self-reported knowledge are quite consistent across the two surveys. Similar trends emerge in other nations of the United Kingdom. A Scottish survey found that almost 90% of respondents acknowledged knowing 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about Scotland's prisons (Justice 1 Committee, 2002).

¹ Available here: <https://www.sentencingacademy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Public-Knowledge-of-Sentencing-Practice-and-Trends.pdf>

Table 2: Self-Reported Knowledge of Prisons (2003)

Knowledge of prisons	
A great deal	4%
A fair amount	26%
Not very much	38%
Hardly anything	14%
Nothing at all	17%

Q: How much, if anything do you know about prisons? (Source: MORI (2003, p.4)).

Although the current survey did not explore public confidence in prisons, previous research has revealed that confidence levels are lower for prisons than other branches of the criminal justice system.²

National media cited as main source of information about prisons

The national media was cited as the main source of information about prisons by the highest percentage (36% of respondents). Films and television accounted for the next highest percentage (15%). Surprisingly, perhaps, social media was cited as the principal source of information by only 5% of respondents (Table 3). These findings suggest that public legal education initiatives should focus on national media in order to reach the widest public.

Table 3: Main Source of Information about Prisons

Source of information	
National media	36%
Films and television programmes	15%
Conversations with friends and family	7%
Social media including X (formerly Twitter)	5%
Local media	4%
Government publications and websites	4%
Podcasts and YouTube lectures	3%
Other	9%
Don't know/ not applicable	17%

Q: Which of the following is your main source of information about prisons?

² In 2013, respondents to the Crime Survey of England and Wales expressed highest confidence in the police and lowest confidence in prisons (Hough et al., 2013). In 2003, only 6% of the sample stated that they were very confident in the work of prisons; 17% were very confident in local police, fewer (9%) in 'police in England and Wales' (MORI, 2003, p.8).

Most people know the prison population is higher today

The prison population is slightly higher today than a decade ago. At the time the survey was conducted (in January 2024), there were 87,448 prisoners in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2024a). In the same month in 2014 the population was 83,962 (Ministry of Justice, 2014).³ About one-third of the sample chose the correct response (Table 4).⁴ It is noteworthy that an even greater percentage believed that the prison population was 'much higher today' than a decade ago. This view is likely a consequence of the recent and widespread media coverage of the high prison population and the Government's initiatives to address the issue.

Table 4: Perceptions of Change in the Prison Population (2014-2024)

Perception of change	
Much higher today	39%
Slightly higher today	37%
About the same today	18%
Slightly lower today	4%
Much lower today	2%

Q: Compared to 2014, do you think the number of adults serving a prison sentence is: *Correct response in bold.*

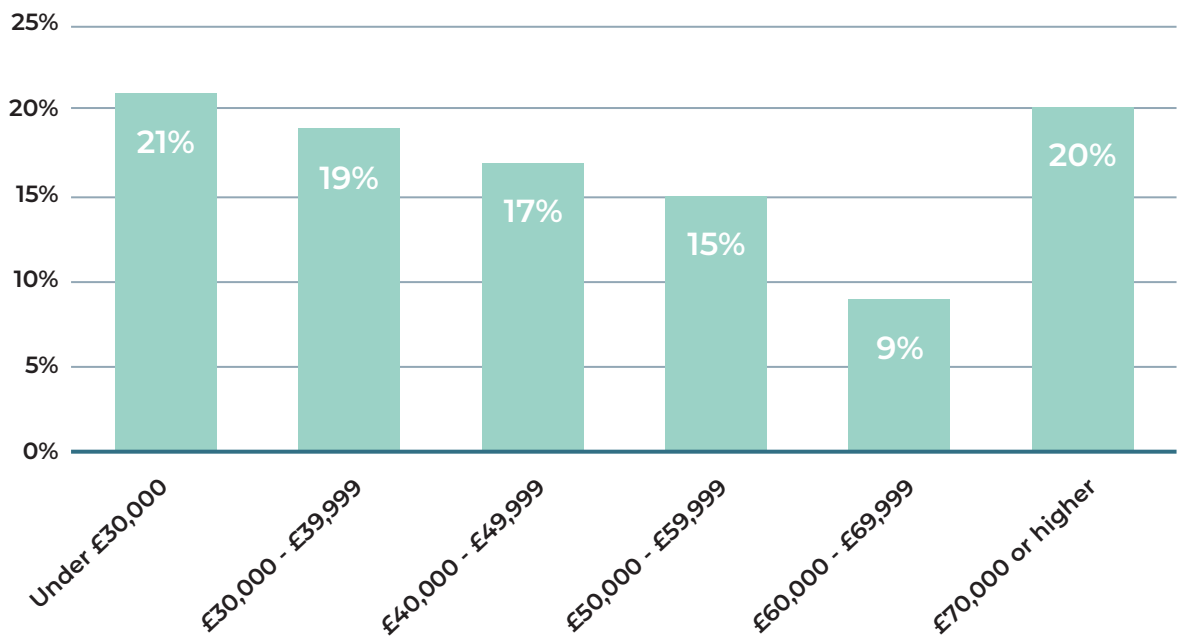
³ Taking a longer view, the prison population has more than doubled in recent decades, rising from 41,800 in June 1993 (Ministry of Justice, 2013a, p.1).

⁴ Respondents were not asked to estimate the size of the prison population, but research going back decades suggest few people have even a rough idea of the number of prisoners. The earliest published survey found that less than 2% of the public had even 'the haziest idea of the number of people in prison' (Silvey, 1962).

Many people under-estimate the costs of housing adult prisoners

The annual cost per prisoner in England and Wales in 2022-23 was approximately £51,000 (Ministry of Justice, 2024b). As can be seen in Figure 1, approximately one-third of the sample provided an approximately accurate estimate within the range of £40,000-£60,000. Around one-fifth significantly *under-estimated* the cost of imprisonment (estimates under £30,000) and about the same percentage significantly *over-estimated* the cost (£70,000 or higher).

Figure 1: Public Estimates of Annual Cost of Housing an Adult Prisoner



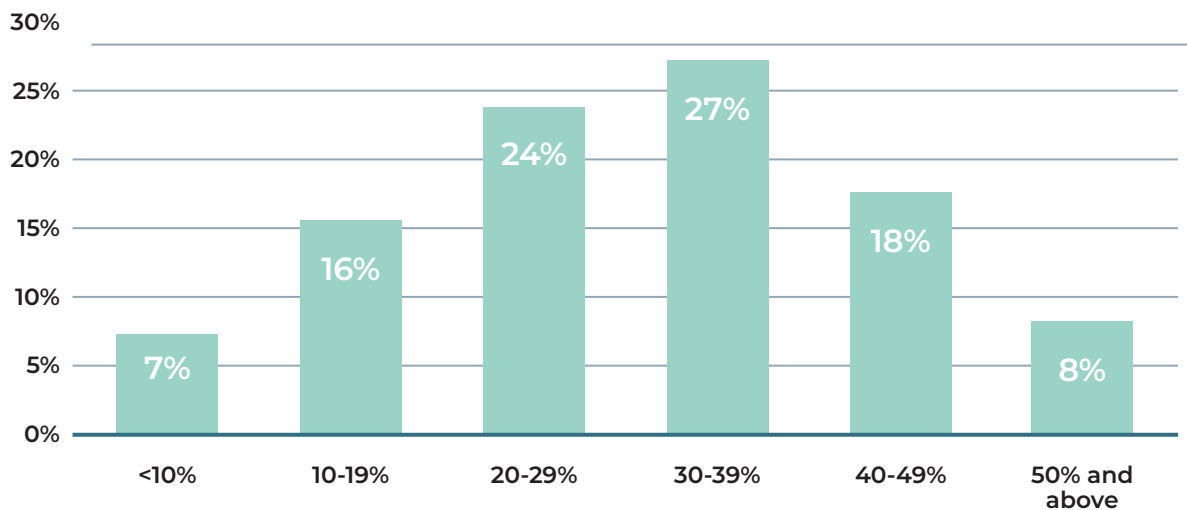
Q: On average, how much do you think it costs to house an adult prisoner for one year?

Most people over-estimate the proportion of women in the prison population

At present, approximately 4% of the sentenced adult prison population are female (Mutebi and Brown, 2023, p.10). Although the number of women in prison increased by 12% from 2022 to 2023 (Prison Reform Trust, 2024, p.49), the gender ratio in the prison population has been very stable over time. It has remained between 3% and 5% for decades; it was 4% thirty years ago (Home Office, 2000, Table 1(a)).

As can be seen in Figure 2, most people over-estimated the percentage of female prisoners. Over half the sample (53%) estimated a percentage in excess of 30%. It is unclear why so many people over-estimate the proportion of female prisoners, but recent media coverage of offences committed by women may have played a role. The mean and median estimates of the percentage of female prisoners were 30% and 35% respectively, both significantly higher than the true figure of 4%.

Figure 2: Estimates of the Percentage of Female Prisoners

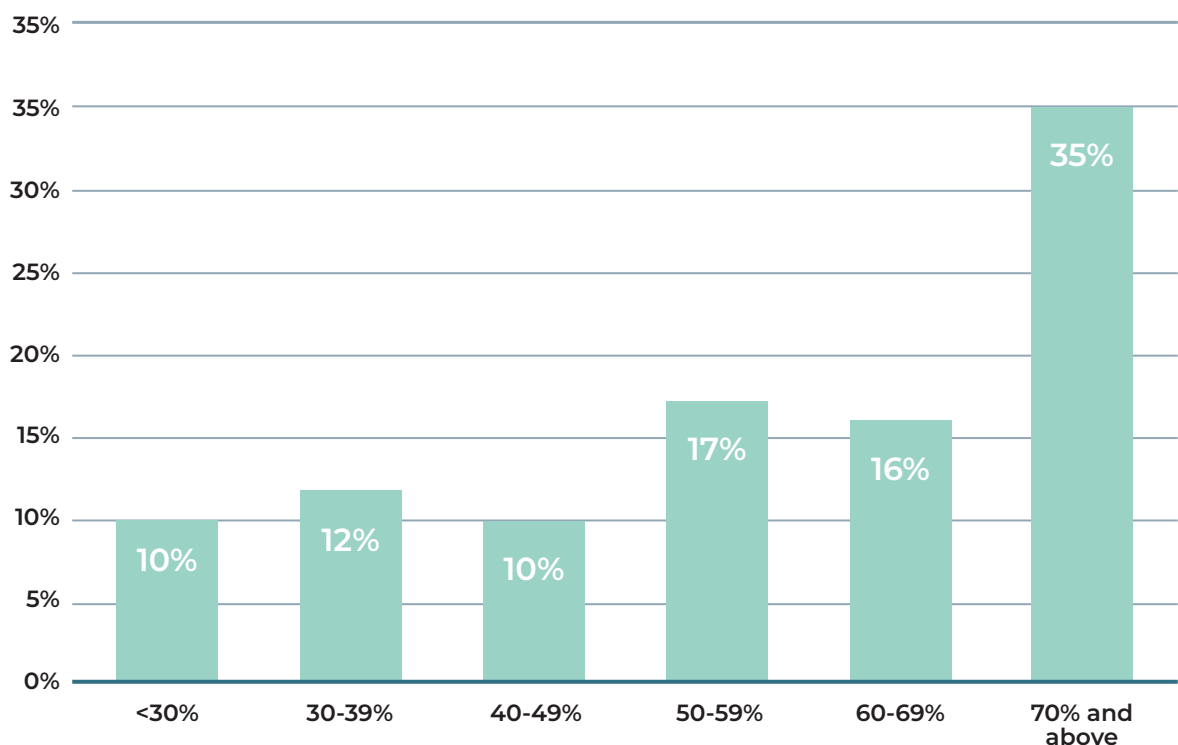


Q: What percentage of the adult prison population are women?

Awareness of the high rates of prisoners with mental health or substance abuse problems also limited

Research has documented the significant percentage of prisoners with mental health problems. For example, one study found that nearly three men in five and over four-fifths of women in prison self-reported mental health problems (Prison Reform Trust, 2024, p.60).⁵ Approximately half of all women entering prison reported a drug dependency (Prison Reform Trust, 2024, p.58).⁶ Respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of the adult prison population with at least one mental health or substance abuse problem. As seen in Figure 3, many people appear unaware of the extent of mental health and substance abuse problems in the prison population, with approximately half of respondents estimating that fewer than 60% of prisoners have at least one mental health or substance abuse problem.

Figure 3: Public Estimates of the Percentage of Prisoners with At Least One Mental Health or Substance Abuse Problem.



Q: What percentage of the adult prison population have at least one mental health or substance abuse problem?

⁵ The Centre for Mental Health estimates that 'as many as 90% of prisoners have some form of mental health problem, personality disorder, or substance misuse problem' (Durcan, 2016, p.4). See also Durcan (2023).

⁶ Of all male prisoners, 29% reported a drug issue at the time of admission to prison.

Who is in prison? Composition of the prison population

In order to understand public knowledge of the composition of the prison population we asked respondents to estimate the percentage of prisoners in three common categories: drugs; violence; and sexual offences. On 31 December 2023, these three offence categories accounted for, respectively, 17%, 32% and 20% of all adult sentenced prisoners (Ministry of Justice, 2024d, Tables 1.2a(i)-1.2b).⁷ Table 5 summarises public estimates of these key statistics. As can be seen, most people were inaccurate. Although offenders sentenced for a drug offence account for fewer than one in five sentenced adult prisoners, almost two-thirds (61%) provided an estimate of 40% or more. Similarly, while violent offences account for around one sentenced prisoner in three (32%), most respondents provided an estimate of 40% or more. Respondents also generally over-estimated the proportion of prisoners serving a sentence for a sexual offence, with 40% estimating that offenders sentenced for these offences accounted for at least 30% of the sentenced prison population.

Table 5: Public Estimates of Prison Population: Three Offence Categories

	Drugs	Violence	Sexual Offences
Less than 10%	3%	3%	16%
10-19%	9%	6%	22%
20-29%	13%	15%	21%
30-39%	15%	18%	15%
40-49%	16%	16%	11%
50% or more	45%	42%	14%

Q: What percentage of the adult prison population do you think is serving a sentence for a drug crime/ crime of violence/ sexual crime? *Correct response in bold.*

⁷ These figures are calculated as a proportion of adult sentenced prisoners and exclude remand and convicted but unsentenced prisoners.

Focus on short sentences of imprisonment

In light of the then-proposed Government legislative reform relating to short sentences of imprisonment, the survey probed public awareness of this issue.⁸ First, survey respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of adult prisoners who were serving a short prison sentence (one of 12 months or less). As of 2022, 5% of the sentenced prison population was serving an immediate custodial sentence of less than 12 months (Mutebi and Brown, 2023, p.4). Table 6 shows that most people believe that the percentage of short prison sentences is much higher: almost two-thirds provided an estimate of 40% or more. This over-estimate of the short sentence population may be a consequence of the perception that sentencing is too lenient. People may also over-estimate the short sentence prison population as they are thinking of the proportion of prison sentences that are short, which is higher than the proportion of prisoners serving a short sentence at any one time.

Table 6: Public Estimates of the Percentage of Short-Term Prisoners (12 months or less)

Estimate of percentage of short-term prisoners	
Less than 10%	2%
10%-19%	7%
20%-39%	30%
40% or more	61%

Q: Prison sentences usually range from a few months to imprisonment for life. What percentage of all adult prisoners do you think are serving a sentence of 12 months or less? Correct response in bold.

Reducing re-offending after release is one key objective of a sentence of imprisonment. The survey asked two questions about re-offending rates:

- i. What percentage of **all prisoners** are re-convicted of another crime within one year of release from prison?
- ii. What percentage of **short sentence prisoners** (a prison sentence of under 12 months) are re-convicted of another crime within one year of release from prison?

These questions track the official re-offending statistics published by the Ministry of Justice.⁹ The Ministry of Justice provides the following definition of re-offending: 'A proven reoffence is defined as any offence committed in a one-year follow-up period that leads to a court conviction, caution, reprimand, or warning in the one-year follow-up or within a further six-month waiting period to allow the offence to be proven in court' (Ministry of Justice, 2024c).

The latest data release reveals a 25% re-offending rate for all adult offenders (Ministry of Justice, 2024c). The re-offending rate has been stable for the past decade (Ministry of Justice, 2024c). Those released from a custodial sentence have a higher re-offending rate than the overall rate for all adult offenders; the proven re-offending rate for adult offenders released from custody was 36.8% (Ministry of Justice, 2024c). The public generally over-estimated the re-offending rates for all prisoners. Table 7 shows that more than seven respondents out of 10 estimated a re-offending rate for all prisoners of 40% or more. Almost half estimated the rate to be 60% or greater (Table 7).¹⁰ The mean and median estimates were 48% and 45% respectively.

⁸ In November 2023, two months before this survey was conducted, the Government introduced the Sentencing Bill that contained the creation of a statutory presumption against short prison sentences of 12 months or less; however, this proposed legislative reform was not passed before the dissolution of Parliament in May 2024 for a General Election.

⁹ We specified 'less than 12 months' rather than '12 months or less' as this is how the Ministry of Justice publish the data.

¹⁰ This tendency to over-estimate re-offending rates has been found repeatedly in research in other countries; see Redondo et al. (1996); Roberts and White (1986).

Table 7: Perceptions of Re-Offending Rates, All Prisoners and Short Sentence Prisoners

	All Prisoners	Short Sentence Prisoners
Less than 10%	0%	2%
10-19%	1%	7%
20-29%	10%	12%
30-39%	14%	13%
40-49%	14%	16%
50-59%	16%	16%
60-69%	18%	15%
70% or higher	26%	18%

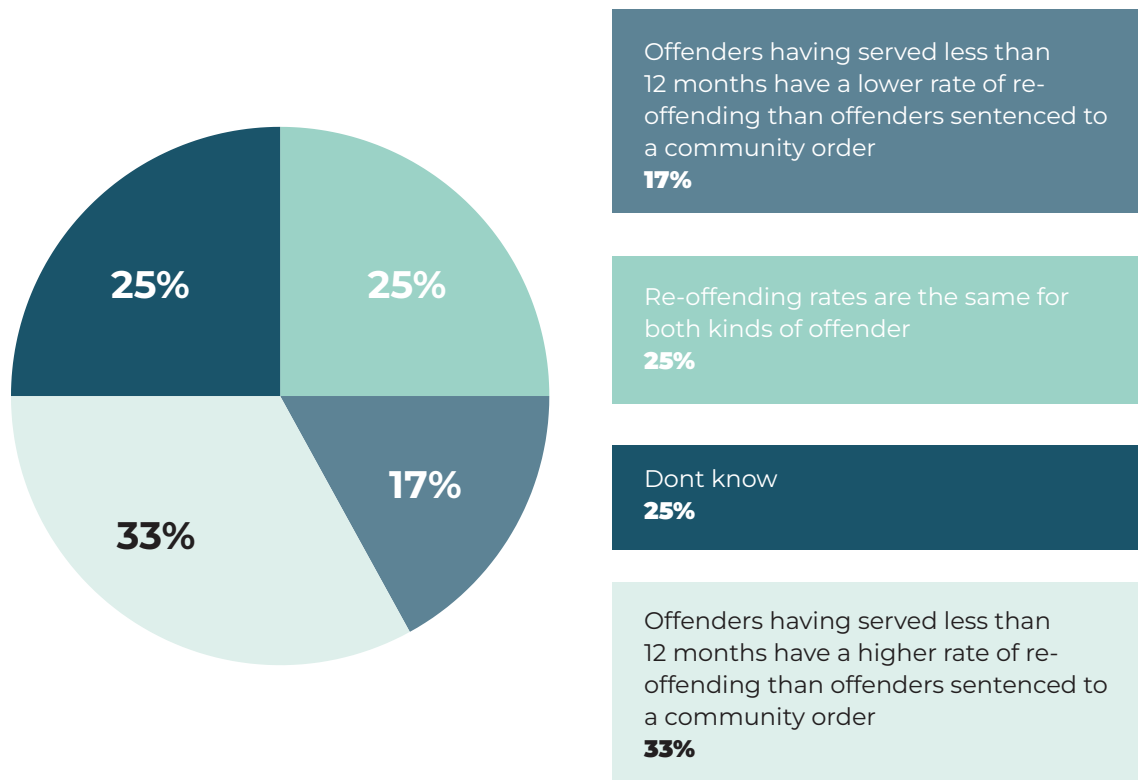
Q: What percentage of all prisoners / short sentence prisoners do you think are re-convicted of another crime within one year of release from prison? *Correct response in bold.*

Independent studies conducted in England and Wales and other jurisdictions have demonstrated that short prison sentences are associated with higher re-offending rates than the other principal sanctions (suspended sentence orders and community orders) (Ministry of Justice, 2013b, Table 1.1).¹¹ The latest statistics reveal that adults released from custodial sentences of less than 12 months had a proven re-offending rate of 55.5%. Those who had served sentences of 12 months or more re-offended at a substantially lower rate (20.4%) (Ministry of Justice, 2024c). Whilst short prison sentences are associated with the highest rates of re-offending, respondents to the survey considered that those released from longer custodial sentences would have a higher re-offending rate than those who have served a short sentence.

Respondents were asked whether they believed that prisoners who received a short prison sentence (under 12 months) have a higher or lower re-offending rate than offenders sentenced to a community-based sentence. Again, public estimates can be compared to the official re-offending statistics, which demonstrate that offenders who receive a community order have a lower re-offending rate than those who serve a short prison sentence. As can be seen in Figure 4, one-quarter endorsed the view that re-offending rates were the same for the two profiles of offender. People were slightly more likely to choose the correct answer: one-third believed that short sentence prisoners had a higher re-offending rate; 17% responded that this group had a lower re-offending rate. It is noteworthy that only one-third of respondents were aware that re-offending rates were higher for those who have served a short custodial sentence than a community order.

¹¹ There are several explanations for the paradoxical finding that offenders given shorter sentences are more likely to re-offend. Short prison sentences provide little opportunity for prisoners to undertake re-training or rehabilitation programmes. At the same time, even a short prison sentence will disrupt the individual's professional development or employment opportunities.

Figure 4: Perceptions of Effectiveness of Short Prison Sentences



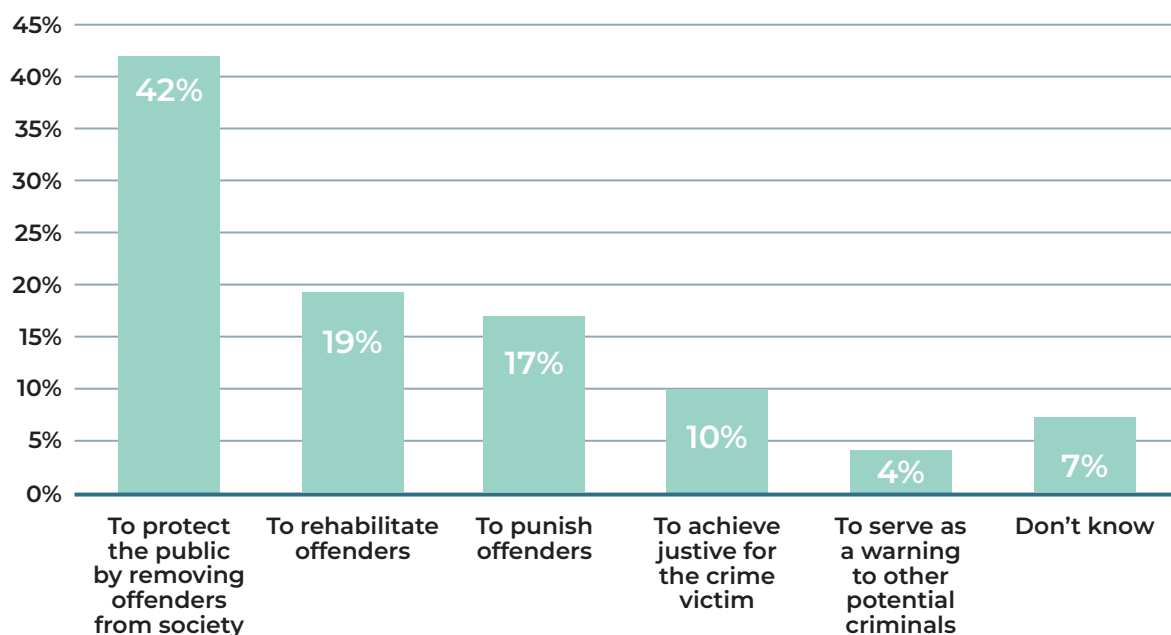
Q: Do you think offenders sent to prison for under 12 months have a higher or lower re-offending rate than offenders sentenced to a community-based sentence?

II. Public Attitudes to the Purpose and Nature of Imprisonment

We conclude this report by noting key findings regarding public attitudes to prisons. Respondents were given a list and asked to identify the single most important purpose of imprisonment.¹² As can be seen, the most popular purpose was protecting the public by removing offenders from society, sometimes described as incapacitation (42%). Rehabilitation was the next most popular purpose, attracting 19% of respondents. When answering a general question of this kind, people are likely to have an image of the most serious offenders in mind. This may contribute to the strong public support for incapacitation as a sentencing purpose.

Several previous surveys have asked the public to rate the importance of several purposes of imprisonment, rather than require them to identify the single most important objective. When asked to rate the different purposes, levels of public support for rehabilitation and punishment are generally comparable.¹³ In addition, responses to this question vary significantly if respondents are asked about less serious crimes and then more serious offences. Public support for rehabilitation is much greater when they are asked to consider less serious forms of offending.

Figure 5: Public Perceptions of the Most Important Purpose of Imprisonment



Q: What is the most important purpose of imprisonment?

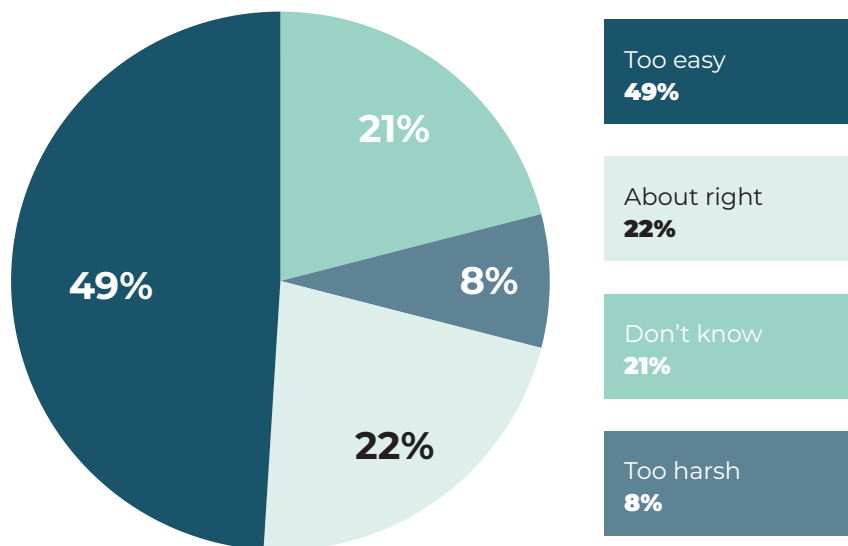
¹² Although the Sentencing Act 2020 specifies the objectives of sentencing, there is no statement of the purpose or objectives of imprisonment, per se. It would be useful for Parliament to clarify in legislation the purpose of imprisonment.

¹³ For example, Hough et al. (2009) found that 72% of the public assigned high importance to punishment, 66% to rehabilitation. Support for punishment was stronger for more serious crimes.

The public perceive prison life to be too easy

In 1995, two-thirds of the UK public agreed with the statement that 'prisoners have much too easy a time' (Dowds, 1995). A Scottish survey conducted a few years afterwards found the same trend: half the respondents agreed that life in Scottish prisons was too easy (Justice 1 Committee, 2002). This perception of prison life continues today.¹⁴ As can be seen in Figure 6, approximately half the sample (49%) endorsed the view that prison conditions were too easy. Less than one-quarter (22%) considered conditions to be 'about right', and a similar percentage chose 'don't know'. Only 8% of respondents considered conditions to be 'too harsh'. Similar trends emerge from surveys and qualitative research in other jurisdictions (see Roberts and Hough (2005b) for a review). Researchers have demonstrated that the perception that prison life is too easy is associated with another opinion, namely that prison sentences are too short (Glanz, 1994). We found this same finding in our survey: 71% of respondents who considered sentencing to be either 'much too lenient' or 'too lenient' also considered prison conditions to be 'too easy'.

Figure 6: Perceptions of Prison Conditions



Q: In your opinion, are living conditions for people serving sentences in prisons too easy, about right, or too harsh?

¹⁴ YouGov has repeated this question on surveys since 2019, and the percentage of respondents endorsing the view that prison conditions are too easy has remained stable at around 50% during this period; see: Are prison living conditions too easy? <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/are-prison-living-conditions-too-easy>.

A prison sentence can serve several objectives, including punishment, rehabilitation, and prevention of offending through deterrence or incapacitation. The survey asked respondents to rate the effectiveness of two key objectives: punishment and rehabilitation. As can be seen in Table 8, the public appear to have little confidence in the effectiveness of imprisonment to achieve either objective.

Over half (53%) responded that imprisonment was 'not very' or 'not at all' effective in punishing offenders for their crimes. Only approximately one-third thought prisons were an effective punishment, almost all respondents in these categories choosing 'fairly' rather than 'very' effective (Table 8).

Perceptions of effectiveness were even more negative with respect to rehabilitation. Approximately three-quarters (73%) chose 'not very' or 'not at all' effective. Thirteen percent perceived prisons to be 'fairly effective' and only 3% responded 'very effective' at achieving rehabilitation. The net difference for rehabilitation was -57%.

Table 8: Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Prisons: Punishment and Rehabilitation

	Punishing offenders for their offences?	Rehabilitating offenders and preventing them from re-offending?
Very effective	5%	3%
Fairly effective	32%	13%
Not very effective	42%	52%
Not at all effective	11%	21%
Don't know	9%	10%

Q: How effective, if at all, do you think prisons are at: Punishing offenders for their offences / Rehabilitating offenders and preventing them from re-offending?

The percentages of respondents endorsing the different responses have been very stable in recent decades. For example, a nationwide survey conducted in 2000 found that a significant majority of the British public disagreed with the statement that 'prison works' (MORI, 2000, cited in Roberts and Hough, 2005b, p.97).

Conclusion

It is a paradox that the most visible sentencing option is also the one with which the public are least familiar. Almost 50 years ago, Louis Blom-Cooper observed that 'Although prisons are sited in the centres of dense urban populations, prisoners are out of sight and out of the mind of the public' (1976, p.72). Researchers exploring public knowledge of prisons in 1974 concluded that the British public was 'generally misinformed about conditions in prison' (Banks et al., 1975, cited in Roberts and Hough, 2005b). This survey has demonstrated the need for greater public education regarding the nature and use of imprisonment. Significant pluralities of the public are unaware of the nature of the increase in the prison population since 2014 or the full cost of housing adult prisoners. The findings also reveal a striking lack of confidence in the effectiveness of prisons to punish, rehabilitate or prevent re-offending. The public are particularly sceptical about the effectiveness of prison in achieving rehabilitation.

Most people retain the view, long held, that prison life is too easy. Unlike the key imprisonment trends, there is no objective measure by which to evaluate the veracity of this opinion. Yet this view is unlikely to be shared by the professionals working in prisons. If half the population sees prison life as too easy, this belief may fuel demands for more severe imprisonment regimes, or longer sentences of imprisonment. Neither strategy – making prison life harsher or prison sentences longer – has been shown to reduce re-offending rates or promote rehabilitation.

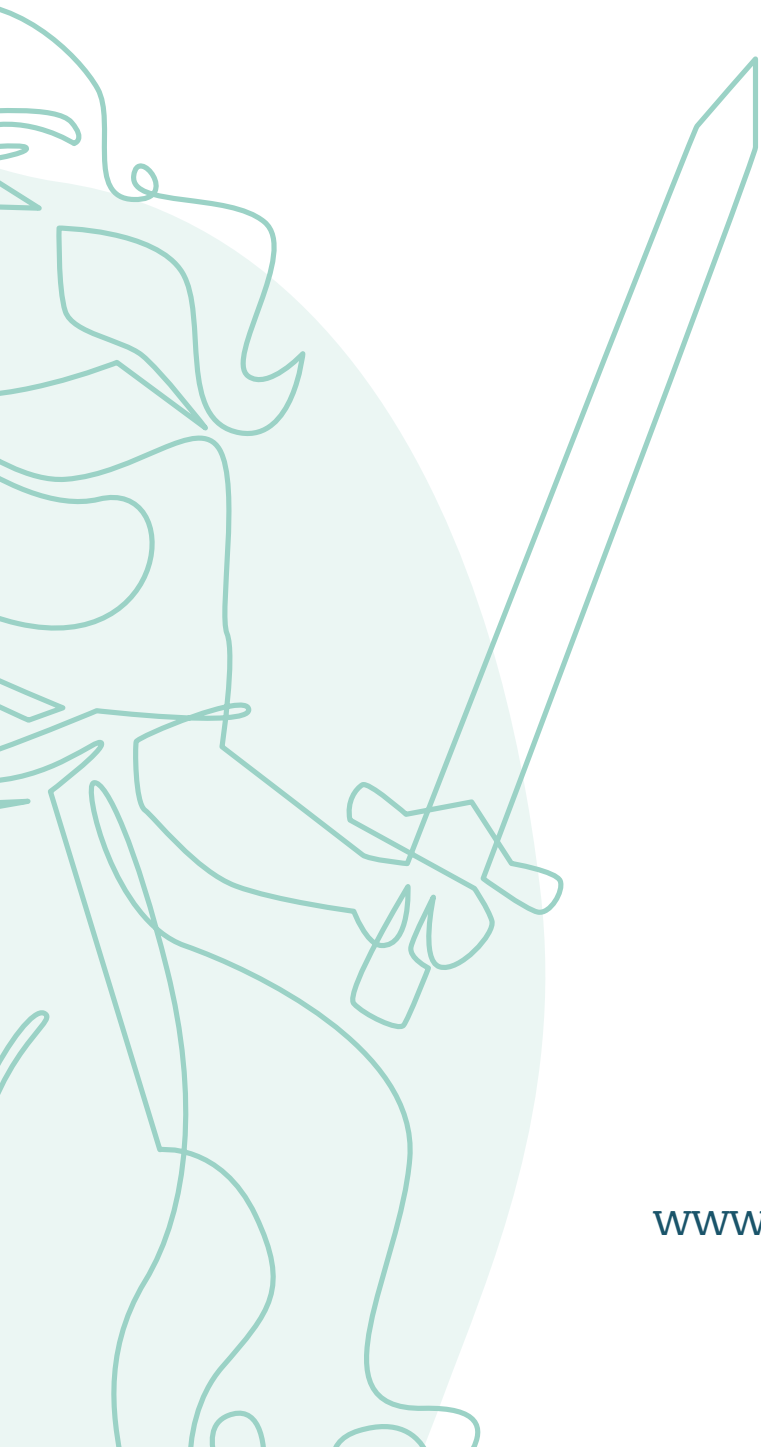
At the time the survey was carried out, the Government had recently brought forward legislation to introduce a presumption against the imposition of short prison sentences. This proposed reform reflected recognition that short sentences of imprisonment are associated with higher, not lower, rates of re-offending than other sanctions such as suspended sentence orders or high-level community orders. Public support is important for any penal reform and possibly this one in particular. The trends emerging from this survey suggest that a greater effort is needed to make the public aware of the official research which would underpin any future reform in this area.

It is important that the public have accurate information about sentencing and the use of imprisonment. At present, it is hard for the average member of the public to readily access statistics regarding these critical issues. This fact, coupled with selective media coverage of sentencing and prison statistics contributes to the public misperceptions in this area. We urge the respective authorities to make a greater effort to provide the public with the information necessary to make informed judgements about sentencing practices in England and Wales.

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