

Prison Reform Trust submission to the Riots Communities and Victims Panel

December 2011

The Prison Reform Trust is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective prison system. We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Riots Communities and Victims Panel.

This submission contributes to the following theme in the second phase of the Panel's work:

The usual suspects: *How to help reduce re-offending for the good of the community and individuals.*

One month after the disturbances, the Prison Reform Trust commissioned an ICM telephone poll of 1,000 members of the public across Great Britain. We wanted to find out people's views on:

- the best ways of dealing with those convicted of offences of theft and vandalism, and
- effective ways to prevent crime and disorder.

The main findings of the survey were:

- An overwhelming majority of the public (94%) want people who have committed offences such as theft or vandalism to be required to do unpaid work in the community as part of their sentence to pay back for what they have done.
- Nearly nine out of 10 people (88%) agree that victims of theft and vandalism should be given the opportunity to inform offenders of the harm and distress they have caused.
- Almost three quarters (71%) believe victims should have a say in how the offender can best make amends for the harm they have caused.
- Offered a range of measures to prevent crime and disorder, most people (84%) consider that better supervision of young people by parents would be effective.
- There was also widespread support for better mental health care; making amends to victims; 'unpaid community work; and treatment to tackle drug addiction. A prison sentence was seen as a less effective in preventing crime and disorder than each of these approaches.

In our view, the punitive response of the courts to most offences of theft and vandalism in the wake of the disturbances constitutes a missed opportunity for a more constructive restorative approach, which would have been welcomed by the majority of the public.

The link to the briefing paper on the Prison Reform Trust website is:

<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Riots%20poll%20briefing%20lo.pdf>

If you would like to discuss the survey and its implications further, please contact Juliet Lyon, Director of the Prison Reform Trust.

Finally, the Prison Reform Trust's Out of Trouble programme makes the case for a tailored approach to meet the needs of young adults.

Over a quarter of the rioters were aged 18-20 according to MoJ figures and nearly three quarters were under 25. This group was very involved in the criminal justice system well before the riots occurred. Almost 10% of the prison population is 18-20 years old and the social and economic costs of young adult offending have been estimated at up to £19 billion a year. The riots and their aftermath illustrate how important it is to tackle offending and attitudes to offending by this age group. At the moment they are treated like any other adults in the criminal justice system, the only difference being that they are subject to a particular form of prison sentence – Detention in a Young Offender Institution. But neurological Evidence suggests that adults do not develop mature thinking patterns until they are 24/25. The Prison Reform Trust and the T2A Alliance, of which we are a member, believes that young adults should not be treated the same as other adults by the criminal justice system and that that a significant reduction in re-offending by this age group will only occur when their specific needs are met and sentences oriented towards their life stage.

If you would like to draw further on the experience and expertise of the Out of Trouble programme please contact its Director, Penelope Gibbs.

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