

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIP

“Creating a knowledge-base of public confidence in the criminal justice system”

<http://criminaljusticeresearch.ncl.ac.uk/>



RESEARCH BRIEFING

Project Output 4D
May 2009

In-depth Qualitative Data Analysis

PURPOSE OF BRIEFING

This briefing paper gives an overview of the findings from the analysis of the in-depth qualitative data collected as a follow-up to the survey. It is an interim rather than a final statement of findings and draws attention to the key issues identified so far. A more detailed report on this phase of the project will be included in the final report on the empirical research which will be available after all phases of the data collection and analysis have been completed. The final report will be available to read on the project website (<http://criminaljusticeresearch.ncl.ac.uk/>) by the end of June 2009.

AIM OF IN-DEPTH QUALITATIVE PHASE

The purpose of the in-depth qualitative phase was to explore the issues raised by the survey data in more depth. The research was designed to address three main areas of enquiry:

- **CONDITIONS** – How do the public find out about the CJS? How do they interpret the information they receive? How is this related to confidence?
- **OBJECTS** - What do the public expect from the CJS and do their perceptions of the system match their expectations? How do specific expectations and perceptions contribute to general confidence?
- **OUTCOMES** – What factors are related to willingness to engage with the CJS? In what way (if any) does public confidence relate to willingness to engage?

KEY FINDINGS: CONDITIONS

The qualitative data revealed four key areas of interest:

- Respondents as **discerning consumers** of information from a range of sources
- The role of **trusted informants** in delivering information about the CJS which is perceived as reliable
- The use of **stories** as a device for understanding and communicating about crime, the CJS and the state of society
- The variation in the **impressions** left by the different sources of information

Key findings were:

- Regardless of whether they were confident or not confident respondents were equally likely to express distrust in the media portrayal of crime and the criminal justice system
- Respondents tended to see good local experiences as atypical or irrelevant to their view of the CJS and/or the state of society
- Bad local experiences tended to be seen as typifying the CJS and/or the state of society
- Stories from a variety of sources were an important medium through which respondents understood and communicated about the CJS
- Only respondents who were confident expressed any trust in official information about the CJS
- Respondents who were not confident were more likely to:
 - express a low level of trust in official information about the CJS
 - rely on word of mouth accounts of criminal justice activity and get involved in conversations about a decline in values during focus groups/interviews

KEY FINDINGS: OBJECTS

Respondent expectations and perceptions of the CJS were concentrated in four key areas. These were:

- Maintaining social order
- Reducing crime
- Delivering justice
- Serving the public

Key findings were:

- Confident and not confident respondents expected similar things from the CJS: maintaining social order, reducing crime, delivering justice and serving the public
- Most respondents perceived some evidence of declining respect and order in society
- Respondents expected offenders to be given sentences which would deter offending and reduce the likelihood of reoffending. Both confident and not confident respondents expressed the view that the CJS was not effective at doing this, although they had varied beliefs about the most effective sentences for this purpose.
- A desire for the CJS to deliver justice was implicit in many respondent comments, although respondents struggled to articulate this desire explicitly
- Respondents expected offenders to be given sentences which would punish them and deliver justice
- Respondents who were **confident** were:
 - ...less likely to see instances of disrespect as indicative of a general social decline
 - ...more likely to note points of continuity and improvement in the state of society
- Respondents who were **not confident** were:
 - ...more strongly aligned with the belief that harsh punishment is the most effective way to deter offending.
 - ...generally more preoccupied with the issue of punishment

- ...more likely to think that the CJS should reflect *their own* views, which they assumed to be typical of the majority
- ...more likely to favour a system which would allow members of the public to take their own, potentially violent, action against offenders who threatened them or their property

KEY FINDINGS: OUTCOMES

The quantitative data revealed that confidence that the CJS is effective and willingness to engage were not strongly associated. The qualitative data revealed that:

- Respondents often explained their decisions about whether to engage with the CJS in terms of the **costs and benefits** of doing so
- Potential benefits of engaging referred to by respondents were: action being taken, protecting people, offenders being punished, crime reduction, making police aware of problems, getting stolen goods back
- Potential costs of engaging referred to by respondents were: inconvenience, diverting CJS resources from serious important issues, risk of reprisals
- Respondents' decision about whether to engage with the CJS were also influenced by **social norms** including: a sense of responsibility, habitual behaviour and beliefs about the legitimate domain for CJS activity

CONCLUSION: KEY DIFFERENCES

Confidence does not appear to be based on a considered evaluation of CJS performance in key areas of concern. Rather, confidence appears to be rooted in respondents' embedded beliefs about the nature and causes of criminality, their trust in authority figures to tell the truth about crime and CJS effectiveness, and the way in which they interpret the available information about the world around them. Respondents who are not confident differ from confident respondents in three key areas:

- **Accessibility** – they are distrustful of the motives of politicians and senior figures within the CJS, who they see as acting out of self-interest. Perhaps as a result they tend to see official information materials and community engagement-related activity as always attempting to paint a positive picture of the CJS in order to manipulate public opinion. They are also more likely to dismiss positive first-hand experiences of the CJS as atypical, and so fail to utilise these experiences as a source of information.
- **Outlook** – they are more pessimistic about the general state of society and tend to see each observed incident of disrespect, violence and disregard for the law (whether seen in the media or experienced first-hand) as evidence of a pervasive and chronic social decline.
- **Beliefs about what works** – they see harsh punishment as the most powerful mechanism for deterring criminality and changing the behaviour of offenders, and attribute perceived increases in crime and decline in respect to the erosion of the power of traditional authority figures to discipline offenders and would-be offenders. Punishment, discipline and fear are seen as key instruments of control.

These three key areas of difference between confident and not confident respondents point to the very real difficulty of effecting significant and lasting change in the *overall* level of public confidence. The differences suggest that in order to 'cross over' from being not confident to confident, respondents need to change not just their surface perceptions of how well the CJS is doing, but also more deeply held beliefs and their general outlook on society.