



HUMANKIND RESEARCH

Better Justice

August 2025 • Narrative Analysis

To understand the media narratives shaping public opinion on criminal justice, we combined structured content analysis with journalist insights:



- We analysed 51 articles written in the last year across the Daily Mail, the Sun, and the Times.
- Each article was systematically coded using a framework of punitive and progressive themes and we identified where themes were more dominant.
- We interviewed and anonymised a set of senior journalists and commentators to better understand editorial decision-making, constraints, and opportunities for reform-minded voices.
- We synthesised findings into “cracks” in the narrative landscape, highlighting where reframing has the greatest chance of shifting public debate.

- Dominant narratives

Dominant narratives

“Justice System in Crisis” is a powerful entry point, but it’s politically contested.

- This theme appears **across the board** - used both to argue for harsher sentencing and for systemic reform.
- Right-leaning media frequently highlight court backlogs, prison overcrowding, and “revolving door” offending.
- This frame tends to provoke high comment engagement, particularly when linked to overcrowding, early releases, and perceived threats to public safety.

Cost and control outperform compassion.

- Reformist narratives based on **compassion or fairness tend to be rejected** or mocked.
- But when framed in terms of **cost savings, efficiency, or public safety**, they are more likely to be accepted.

- **Community sentences have a branding problem.**
- Often perceived as a “slap on the wrist” - unless they are framed as **tough, targeted, and rehabilitative**.
- Tabloids only support them when they’re framed as **“tougher than jail”** or tied to a visible public benefit (e.g. work placements).

- **“Soft Justice” is the stick used to beat reform.**
- Used to **discredit nearly every progressive reform** - even those designed to reduce reoffending or cut costs.
- Especially potent when tied to sex offenders, foreign nationals, or violent crime.
- These stories often trigger the largest volume of comments, with a strong mix of emotional backlash and heated debate.

- Dominant narratives

Dominant narratives

Certain offenders are more “sympathetic”.

- **Women (especially mothers), white British offenders, and visibly reformed individuals** receive more sympathy in coverage.
- System failure narratives resonate more when told through **victims of the system** (e.g. IPP prisoners, wrongful recalls).

Foreign nationals, race, and identity are narrative landmines.

- These topics are consistently weaponised to drive punitive sentiment.
- **Immigration + crime** narratives dominate many “Villains and Heroes” stories.

- **Rehabilitation narratives work best when tied to public safety.**

- Stories that focus on reducing reoffending or building skills get some traction – but only when framed as preventing future harm.
- The idea that “prison doesn’t work” can land if paired with “this alternative does.”

- **Expert voices are used selectively, but still carry power.**

- Media frequently quote experts to lend credibility - but only when they reinforce punitive narratives.
- Reform-minded experts are quoted (especially in The Times), but their voices are often presented without endorsement, or subtly undermined.

- Opportunity areas

Opportunity areas

1. Reclaim the “crisis” narrative by **positioning smart reforms as solutions to systemic failure** - not leniency.
2. Shift messaging from “offenders deserve better” to **“our current system is wasteful, broken, and failing to protect you.”**
3. **Rebrand community sentencing** as a form of accountability that **cuts reoffending and costs**, not leniency.
4. Anticipate “Soft Justice” framing. Pre-empt it by grounding reforms in **evidence, risk assessment, and clear public benefit**.
5. **Themes framed around cost-effectiveness or community safety generally face less online backlash** and lower comment volumes – useful when pitching reform narratives.
6. **Use strategic case studies that align with audience perceptions but challenge assumptions** - e.g. “ordinary” people let down by chaotic systems.
7. **Avoid letting justice reform arguments get pulled into identity-politics debates** unless strategically necessary. Focus on outcomes, safety, and cost.
8. **Push for narrative shifts around effectiveness:** “What works to reduce harm and repeat crime?”
9. **Amplify credible, safety-focused experts** - especially former police, prison staff, and victims’ advocates (who support reform). These messengers can shift the debate without triggering accusations of ideological bias.