BETTER JUSTICE

Message Research & Testing Project

Briefing Paper

March 2026

This document summarises the results of a multi-stage process of research, development and testing, carried out by Future Narratives Lab for the Better Justice Partnership during 2025, that aimed to design, develop and test approaches that can effectively build support for rehabilitative approaches to crime and justice, especially alternatives to prison. The Partnership wanted to inform an approach to framing and communications to maximise the impact of their advocacy.

Contents

- ➔ **Headline Findings**
- ➔ **Stage 1 Summary: AI Interviews**
- ➔ **Stage 2 Summary: Initial Messaging Development & Testing**
- ➔ **Stage 3 Summary: Elaboration & Testing with Wider Audiences**
- ➔ **Stage 4 Summary: Identity Compositions**
- ➔ **Methodology Notes**

About FNL & Better Justice Partnership

Future Narratives Lab is a non-profit research and strategy initiative dedicated to building the narrative power of civil society. We combine cultural analysis, community organising principles, and applied communication practice to help movements, coalitions, and charities create narratives that shift public understanding, build political will, and open space for systemic change
futurenarrativeslab.org

The **Better Justice Partnership is a coalition of five organisations advocating for** early intervention and diversion to improve public safety, reduce high re-offending rates and tackle the disproportionate criminalisation of people facing multiple disadvantage and racial inequality.

Headline Findings

The following points summarise the findings of multiple rounds of research, development and RCT style testing a range of messages, with various audience segments. Further details of messages, sampling and outcome measures are contained in the Methodology Notes.

- ➔ **Wide support for young people getting a chance to 'learn from mistakes':** Interviews showed strong, often unsolicited support among right-leaning audiences for younger people being given the opportunity to learn from mistakes and turn their lives around. Testing showed consistent support from all audiences for this principle: in Stage 2, brief exposure to a message framed this way reduced agreement with a pro-prison statement by 10 percentage points (see Methodology Notes).
- ➔ **Wide understanding that drugs and mental ill-health can contribute to offending:** Interviews and all testing indicated consistent agreement across demographics that drugs and mental health issues can cause offending, particularly cases like shoplifting or anti-social behaviour; even among those who were otherwise punitive or sceptical of justice reform. These views were often presented as obvious or common sense - in line with various polling that also indicates this is seen as a cause of offending (i.e. Howard League/Public First).
- ➔ **Even right-leaning audiences will support rehabilitation, when presented the right way:** From initial interviews through multiple rounds of testing, rehabilitation was seen as a common-sense option, particularly for young people & non-violent offenders. This was especially the case when framed as a practical or preventative measure, and connected to beneficial outcomes such as public safety or reduced reoffending, and using a firm, no nonsense tone, with a stress on accountability and personal responsibility (eg 'learn their lesson', 'not go down the wrong path'): rehabilitation framed not as forgiveness, but as a chance to take responsibility and do better through effort.
- ➔ **Soft language ('help') doesn't appeal, but 'treatment' and 'get them into work' lands well:** In Interviews, participants often agreed with the substance of support-based interventions, but rejected them where framing felt too soft, permissive or emotional, i.e. 'they need help'. Participants responded better to terms like 'sort the problem out', or 'get back on their feet', showing preference for active, practical language. In testing, more concrete, outcome-driven language was consistently more effective, particularly around work-related outcomes. Action over sentiment, with clear structure and accountability. For example, in Stage 2, brief exposure to a message that framed alternatives to prison as 'tough', reduced agreement with a pro-prison statement by 13 percentage points (see Methodology Notes).

Stage 1 Summary: AI Interviews

Initial Desk Research considered previous relevant work, including projects by Frameworks Institute on reframing crime and justice, and public polling studies. Analysis of these and media materials suggested potential areas of common ground where there was the most public support for alternatives to prison. We then wanted to understand what sorts of framing might be most successful at persuading right-leaning audience segments, so we undertook a qualitative research phase, aimed at identifying and understanding the views on crime and justice of a right-leaning 'challenging persuadable' audience who, though less supportive of alternatives to prison were not actively hostile and might be persuadable. This would enable us to prove it was possible to build wider support on this topic and identify approaches with potential.

Using an experimental AI interviewing Tool developed by Future Narratives Lab based on LSE Research (see Methodology section), 30 in-depth interviews of ~ 30 minutes each were carried out with individuals that research suggested were likely to hold views that made them suspicious, but not overly hostile, to proposals of reform, roughly corresponding with the NatCen 'Middle Britons' and 'Left Behind Patriots' segments. The interviews were structured to explore participants' views across four main aspects: 'Prison', 'People who offend', 'Crime' and 'Alternatives to prison'.

Stage 1 Results

The interviews showed that participants had complex and often contradictory points of view around the different aspects of crime and justice - and that even those who might be considered to have more punitive attitudes on some aspects, often recognised the challenges and limits of the current system, and could be open to alternative approaches when framed in a considered way. They produced a range of useful insights into the views held, as well as the reasons and rationale behind those views, which directly informed the selection and development of messaging options in subsequent rounds. For example, participants:

- ➔ Expressed consistent sympathy for younger people committing offences, particularly if non-violent, and the desire that they be given a chance to 'learn from mistakes'.
- ➔ Many were skeptical about the benefits of sending people to prison, seeing it as likely to make some people more likely to commit further crimes afterwards.
- ➔ Often showed an understanding of the health and social drivers of crime, in particular drug addiction and mental health.
- ➔ Were wary of 'soft' language about 'help' for those committing offences.

Stage 2 Summary: Initial Messaging Development & Testing

Based on the results of the AI Interviews, four different initial messaging options were developed that were judged as distinct viable routes for persuading the segment in question that alternatives to prison are a better way of cutting crime.

A. 'Youth' - an approach focussed on the importance of allowing young people who have committed crimes to have a chance to 'learn from their mistakes'
B. 'Breeding Ground' - critiquing prison directly, and particularly how it leads to an increase in crimes being committed and victims, rather than a reduction
C. 'Tough/Safety' - portraying a focus on the causes of crime as the only way to be 'tough' on crime, including a reference to public safety, and a jab at politics
D. 'Enforcement/Deterrent' - aiming to challenge the idea of prison as a deterrent, by proposing instead proactive policing, focussed on causes

They were tested with a segment of 1,000 individuals with the following demographics: White, Male, No Graduate Degree or higher, aged 30-65, UK Resident, and born in the UK - selected to further refine the 'challenging' persuadable criteria from the first stage. Using a digital Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) approach, an equal proportion were shown either one of the messaging approaches or no message (the control). Effectiveness was judged on two measures: reduced agreement with *"The best way to deal with crime, is to put more people in prison" (pro-prison statement)*, and increased agreement with: *"The best way to cut crime, is to tackle the things that cause people to commit crime" (pro-alternatives statement).*

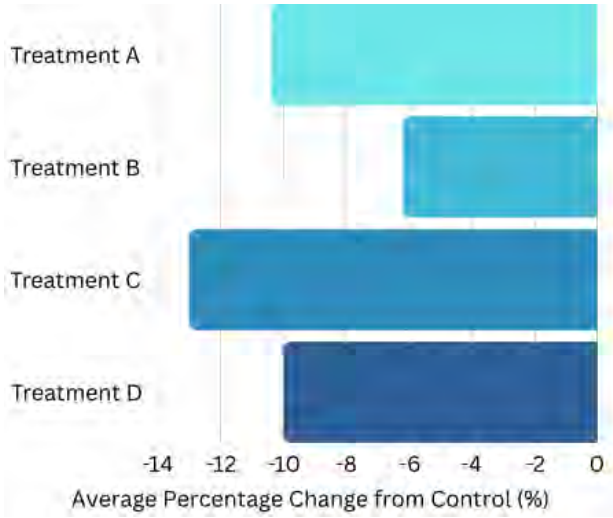
Results

- ➔ Measure 1: All four approaches successfully reduced agreement with a pro-prison statement compared to the control group, when controlling for demographic factors including age, education level, employment status, and whether the respondent or someone they know had been a victim of crime in the last 12 months.
- ➔ The largest effect on Measure 1 was observed from Approach C (Tough/Safety) with a 13 percentage-point reduction in expected support, followed by Approaches A (Youth) with a 10 point percentage reduction, followed by D (Enforcement/Deterrent), with Approach B (Breeding Ground) the least effective of the four. These are shown in the table and chart below.
- ➔ Measure 2: All four approaches increased agreement with a pro-alternatives statement but to a smaller degree. Agreement was already high in the control group, hence a more 'difficult to agree with' statement was added for the second measure in the next stage of testing.
- ➔ A further round of analysis that specifically excluded individuals who reported reading more left-wing media publications, reinforced the above results.

Summary of Mean Scores on Main Effectiveness Measures

Treatment	Mean Scores (1-5 scale) on Measure 1 (Agreement with pro-prison statement) – lower better	Mean Scores (on scale 1-5) on Measure 2 (Agreement with pro-alternatives Statement) – higher better
A (Youth)	2.58 ($p < 0.001$)	4.20
B (Breeding Ground)	2.79 ($p < 0.05$)	4.08
C (Tough / Safety)	2.45 ($p < 0.001$)	4.20
D (Enforce / Deter)	2.60 ($p < 0.001$)	4.20
E (Control)	3.10	4.09

Average % Change from Control (Measure 1)



Stage 3 Summary: Elaboration & Testing with Wider Audiences

Based on these results, a further round of elaboration and testing was carried out to check that they would also be effective with a wider public audience beyond the initial segment in our first round, as well as to further refine and answer outstanding questions. The following variations were created:

- ➔ All the approaches were adjusted to make the language more realistic for use by sector organisations, based on feedback from the partnership board.
- ➔ Two variations of the 'Youth' approach were created, to test if mentioning non-violent crime would affect results.
- ➔ Five variations of the 'Tough/Safety' approach were created to to establish which of its constituent elements made it effective, i.e. populism, public safety
- ➔ Two new approaches were included to test hypotheses, i.e. critiquing the contribution of prison to causes (prevention/deterrence), and more systemic language around structural causes, making a health analogy (public health).

Results

The 9 nine variations described above were again tested in an RCT-style study, against a control group, this time with a nationally representative (age/gender/ethnicity) sample of 2,000 UK residents. The main measures of effectiveness were the same pro-prison statement from Stage 1, and an updated more challenging pro-alternatives' statement, which directly advocated fewer people being sent to prison, and instead investing in programmes to tackle causes. Results were as follows:

- ➔ The most effective approach across both measures was a variation of 'Youth' that specifically mentioned non-violent offences.
- ➔ Also strong on both measures was the original 'Tough/Safety' message, followed by a variation that paraphrased with less direct language.
- ➔ A number of approaches scored well on one measure but not the other, for instance the Health/Systemic approach was strongly effective at reducing agreement with the pro-prison statement (Measure 1), but not at increasing agreement with our positive alternatives statement (Measure 2)
- ➔ Overall all nine approaches were effective at reducing agreement with the pro-prison statement (Measure 1), but not all were effective at increasing agreement with the pro–alternatives statement (Measure 2).
- ➔ All above results controlled for demographic factors, and whether the participant had been or knew a victim of crime etc.

Stage 4 Summary: Identity Compositions

The final round of testing sought to understand how different composite 'campaign' identity options, based on the results of the previous rounds of testing, might be received by different audiences in practice, across common mediums. Previous rounds of quantitative testing established that messages focussing on the problems with putting young people in prison, and on the 'tough' approach of focussing on crime's causes were most effective with all audiences.

Six mocked-up website variations were therefore created, each including a title, strapline, image, and paragraph, and other shared elements, to assess which elements and overall approach to include or develop going forward. These were then tested with a 'politically representative' (based on votes at the last election) sample of 1,000 individuals. Being primarily a qualitative round, intended mainly to gather feedback to inform selection and design of a campaign identity and its constitutive elements, the quantitative measures in this round were indicative rather than definitive, and should not be overemphasised.
The variations tested were as follows:

- **Variation A:** Campaign name "Chance to Change"; Silhouette Image
- **Variation B:** Campaign name "Chance to Change"; Face Image
- **Variation C:** Campaign name "A Lesson Learnt"; Silhouette Image
- **Variation D:** Campaign name "A Lesson Learnt"; Face Image
- **Variation E:** Campaign name "Cut Crime Coalition"; Crowd Image
- **Variation F:** Campaign name "At the Roots"; Crowd Image

Participants were invited to add feedback directly as 'comments' on the images, as well as score their overall likelihood of supporting the campaign variation they had viewed, and add further feedback in an open-text field.

Results

- ➔ Identity A (Chance to Change – Silhouette) generated the highest level of campaign support (64.13%), controlling for demographic factors. Qualitative analysis of comments suggests that participants exposed to Identity A expressed high support for the campaign because they responded to its themes of redemption, and the emotional abstraction of a silhouette.
- ➔ Broadly speaking, across this and other measures, reactions to the Identities based on the 'Youth' Frame, were on the whole more positive, than those based on 'Tough', with some exceptions.
- ➔ The title "Chance to Change," used in the identity that generated the most support, received the highest number of likes (79%) and participants cited a clear sense of compassion, redemption, and forward-looking optimism: *"People should be given the chance to be rehabilitated and I think this is a good title."*

Methodology Notes

The project was carried out by Future Narratives Lab collaborating closely with the Head of the Better Justice Partnership and the partnership board. The methodology was designed to be practical within the budget and to work through a series of iterative stages to arrive at a set of messages and potential campaign identities.

Stage 1: Interviews

About the AI Interviewing Tool

This tool, developed by Future Narratives based on an initial prototype developed by researchers at London School of Economics and Political Science, is able to carry out in-depth qualitative interviews with research participants, via the medium of a chatbot interface. The tool connects to any one of a number of standard LLM models (i.e. ChatGPT, Claude), through an API, adding a UI and data storage layer for the chatbot interface and storage of transcripts, guided by a briefing that equips the chatbot with both general instructions on how to carry out effective qualitative interviewing, and a specific briefing on the particular subject at hand. This briefing, while giving an overview of the main topics that the researchers wish to explore, and example questions, mainly focuses on the research objectives, allowing the AI tool to customise the experience for each participant, asking follow up questions as needed in response to the answers given, so as to best elicit the information required.

Interview Recruitment

Participants in the interviews were recruited through the research platform Prolific, based on a demographic profile judged closest to the intended target segment.

Stage 2 (Testing)

Approach A - Young People

"If you make a mistake when you're young and do something illegal, you should at least get a chance to learn your lesson.

Forcing young people into cells with older more serious offenders just makes it more likely they will get sucked into a life of crime.

We'd be better off getting them to deal with their issues, get a job, and learn to follow the rules. That way they can turn their lives around, not go down the wrong path."

Approach B - Breeding Ground

"If we actually want to cut crime, the last thing we should be doing is sending more people to prison. Prisons just breed crime and lead to more victims, especially when overcrowded.

The facts are clear - being in prison makes people more likely to commit more crime when they come out. Anyone saying that we should send more and more people to prison needs to face up to this, and own the consequences.

What actually cuts crime and stops reoffending is making people sort their lives out on the outside - get off drugs, deal with mental health issues, get a job. That's what works."

Approach C - Tough

"If we want to actually be 'tough' on crime, that means cracking down on what causes it, not just reacting afterwards.

For years we've had politicians chasing votes with short term, shortsighted approaches like long prison sentences even for some minor, non-violent crimes. We can all see this hasn't worked - it hasn't made our streets any safer. All it's done is packed more people into prisons that should just be for serious offenders, making them more likely to reoffend when they come out.

Real tough policies would break the cycle of reoffending by making people sort their lives out before we send them to prison - get off drugs, deal with mental health issues, get a job. That's what actually cuts crime, and keeps the public safe."

Approach D - Enforcement

"The fact is prison doesn't work as a deterrent. What does is people thinking they might get caught.

We need the police responding quickly every time, catching offenders early, and making them sort out the things in their lives that are driving them to commit crimes. Get off drugs, deal with their mental health issues, and get a job.

If we want to cut crime, we need to cut it off at source. Deal with the real causes, not pretend our already overcrowded prisons can do the job for us."

Testing Approach

Message options were tested with a segment of 1,000 individuals with the following demographics: White, Male, No Graduate Degree or higher, aged 30-65, UK Resident, and born in the UK. Using a digital Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) approach, an equal proportion were shown either one of the messaging approaches or no message (the control). Effectiveness was judged on two measures:

- reduced agreement with *"The best way to deal with crime, is to put more people in prison"(pro-prison statement)*,
- increased agreement with: *"The best way to cut crime, is to tackle the things that cause people to commit crime" (pro-alternatives statement).*

Stage 3 (Elaboration)

The 9 nine variations were tested in an RCT-style survey, against a control group, this time with a nationally representative (age/gender/ethnicity) sample of 2,000 UK residents recruited through Prolific. The measures of effectiveness were as follows:

- Agreement with a pro-alternatives statement: *“We would be better off sending fewer people to prison, and investing instead in programmes that tackle the causes of crime.”*
- Disagreement with a pro-prison statement: *"The best way to deal with crime, is to put more people in prison."*

Variation	Content
Youth	*“If you make a mistake when you’re young and do something illegal, you should at least get a chance to learn your lesson.* *Forcing young people into prison cells with people who have committed more serious offences just makes it more likely they will get sucked into a life of crime.* *We’d be better off sorting out the issues that led them to commit crime in the first place, like treating drug or mental health issues, or getting them into work. That way they can turn their lives around, not go down the wrong path.”*
Youth non-violent	*“If you make a mistake when you’re young and do something illegal, you should at least get a chance to learn your lesson.* *Forcing young people who’ve committed non-violent offences into prison cells with people who have committed more serious offences just makes it more likely they will get sucked into a life of crime.* *We’d be better off sorting out the issues that led them to commit crime in the first place, like treating drug or mental health issues, or getting them into work. That way they can turn their lives around, not go down the wrong path.”*
Tough original	*“If we want to actually be ‘tough’ on crime, that means cracking down on what causes it, not just reacting afterwards.* *For years we’ve had politicians chasing votes with short term, shortsighted approaches like longer prison sentences even for non-violent crimes. We can all see this hasn’t worked - it hasn’t made our streets any safer. All it’s done is packed more people into prisons that should just be for serious offences, making*

	them more likely to reoffend when they come out. *Genuinely tough policies would break the cycle of reoffending by sorting out the issues that led them to commit crime - treating drug addiction and mental health issues, or getting them into work. That's what actually cuts crime, and keeps the public safe."*
Tough w/o populism,	*"If we want to actually be 'tough' on crime, that means cracking down on what causes it, not just reacting afterwards.* *Short term, shortsighted approaches like longer prison sentences even for non-violent crimes haven't worked - they haven't made our streets any safer. All it's done is packed more people into prisons that should just be for serious offences, making them more likely to reoffend when they come out.* *Genuinely tough policies would break the cycle of reoffending by sorting out the issues that led them to commit crime - treating drug addiction and mental health issues, or getting them into work. That's what actually cuts crime, and keeps the public safe."*
Tough w/o safety,	*"If we want to actually be 'tough' on crime, that means cracking down on what causes it, not just reacting afterwards.* *For years we've had politicians chasing votes with short term, shortsighted approaches like longer prison sentences even for non-violent crimes. We can all see this hasn't worked. All it's done is packed more people into prisons that should just be for serious offences, making them more likely to reoffend when they come out.* *Genuinely tough policies would break the cycle of reoffending by sorting out the issues that led them to commit crime - treating drug addiction and mental health issues, or getting them into work. That's what actually cuts crime."*
Populism and safety w/o tough,	*"For years we've had politicians chasing votes with short term, shortsighted approaches like longer prison sentences even for non-violent crimes.* *We can all see this hasn't worked - it hasn't made our streets any safer. All it's done is packed more people into prisons that should just be for serious offences, making them more likely to reoffend when they come out.* *More effective policies would break the cycle of reoffending by sorting out the issues that led them to commit crime - treating drug addiction and mental health issues, or getting them into*

	work. That's what actually cuts crime, and keeps the public safe."
Causes of Crime	*"If we want to cut crime, what works is focussing on the causes, not just reacting afterwards.* *Short term, shortsighted approaches like longer prison sentences even for non-violent crimes haven't worked - they haven't made our streets any safer. All it's done is packed more people into prisons that should just be for serious offences, making them more likely to reoffend when they come out.* *More effective policies would break the cycle of reoffending by sorting out the issues that led them to commit crime - treating drug addiction and mental health issues, or getting them into work. That's what actually cuts crime, and keeps the public safe."*
Prevention & Deterrence	*"More and more prison sentences, even for non-violent crimes, is just not working as a deterrent.* *So many people ending up in prison have serious issues like drug addiction, mental health problems, or learning disabilities, which are often what's behind them making the mistake of committing crime in the first place.* *Being in prison only makes these problems worse, and people more likely to reoffend. If we want to cut crime, we need instead to intervene early, and tackle these issues head on with effective treatment and programmes. That's what actually cuts crime, and keeps the public safe."*
Public Health/ Systemic	*"Crime is like a disease - to really tackle it you have to deal with the conditions that cause it. Putting more and more people in prison, even for non-violent offences, is just treating the symptoms instead of focussing on a cure.* *If instead we tackle the issues that lead people to commit crimes, like drugs, mental health issues, racism and poverty, we can prevent offending, and crime overall.* *It takes government, communities and families working together to do this, for example by improving education, youth clubs and treatment for drug and mental health issues. That will reduce crime and keep everyone safer."*

Stage 4 (Identity Compositions)

The variations below were then tested with a 'politically representative' (based on votes at the last election) sample of 1,000 individuals. There were two primary ways in which the different identities were assessed by respondents:

1. Participants were shown an image of one of the campaign Identities, then given a **Feedback Prompt** that allowed participants to click anywhere on the image to indicate whether they liked, disliked, or had another reaction to a specific element, with the option to leave open-ended comments as well.

➔ Statement: *"Are there any elements shown in particular that you like, dislike, or have other comments on? Please add up to 5 notes directly to these elements by clicking on them, and explaining your thoughts."*

➔ Our aim was to assess the likeability of each element and identify the specific factors that elicited either positive or negative reactions from participants.

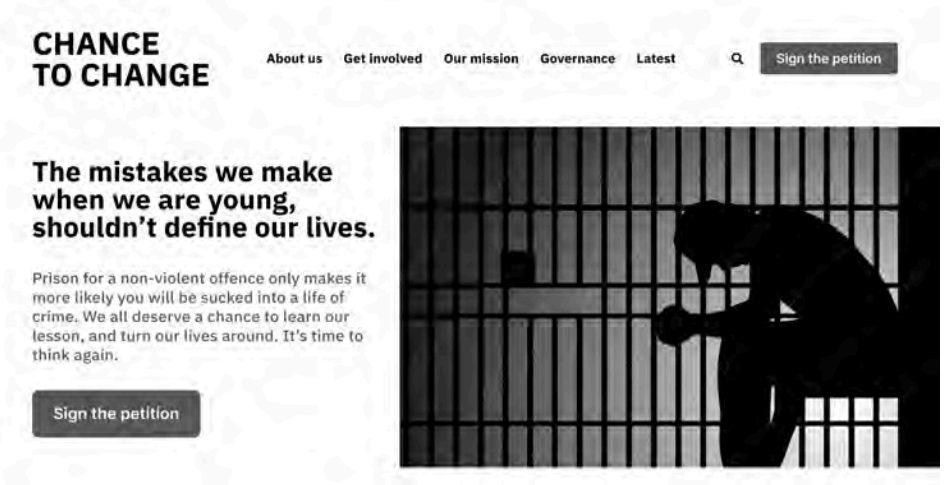
2. A simple **Effectiveness Measure** asking participants how likely they would be to support the campaign they had just seen, which they rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Very Unlikely to Support") to 5 ("Very Likely to Support").

➔ This was followed by an **Explanation Prompt** consisting of an open-ended question inviting participants to elaborate on the reasons behind their scores.

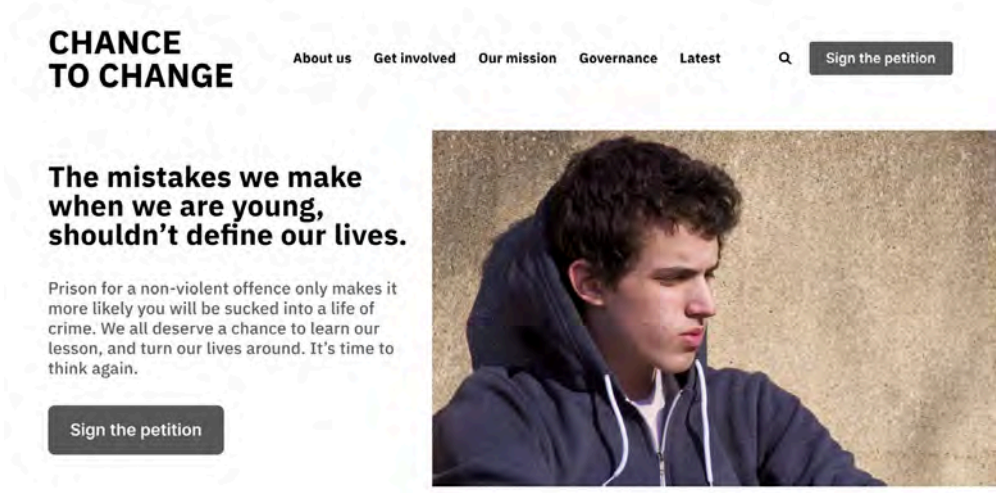
➔ These aimed to gather more general feedback, and give some level of comparable measurement of effectiveness of the approaches overall.

<u>Variations tested</u>

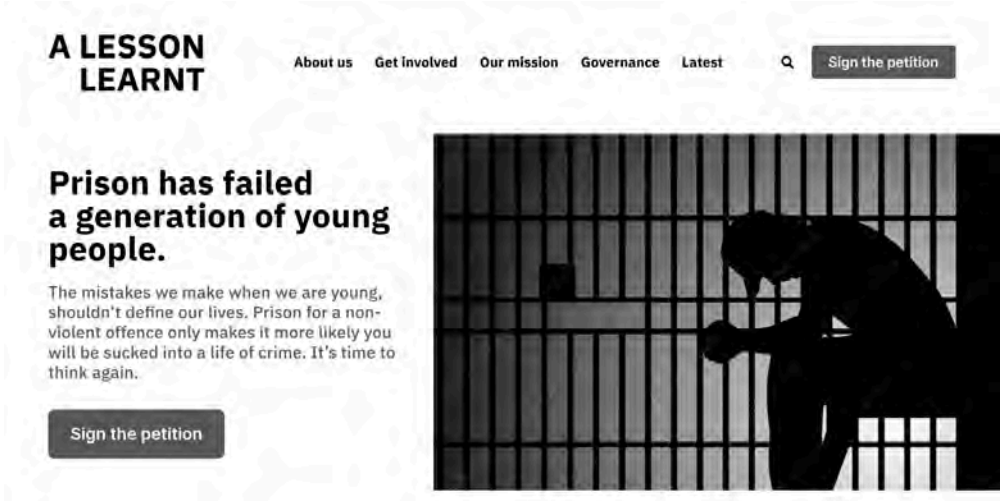
Identity A: Chance to Change – Silhouette



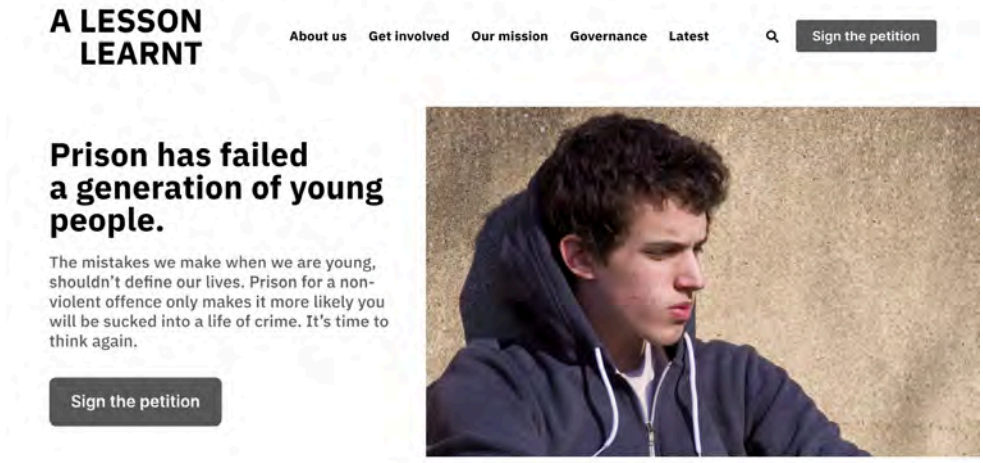
Identity B: Chance to Change – Face



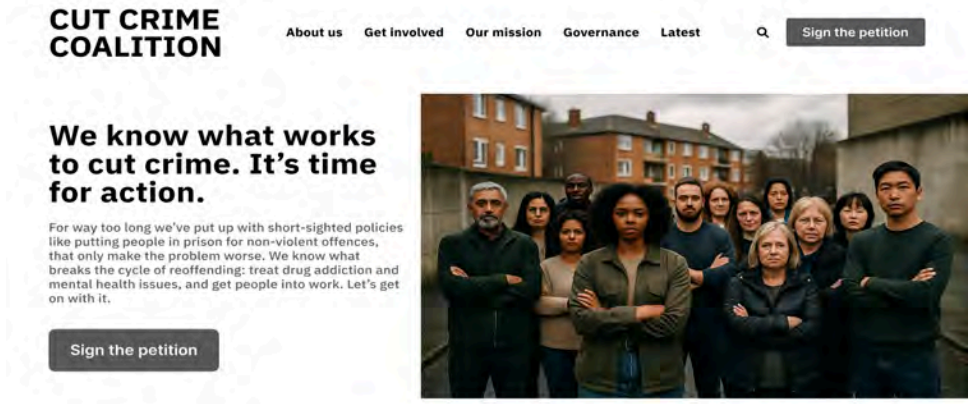
Identity C: A Lesson Learnt – Silhouette



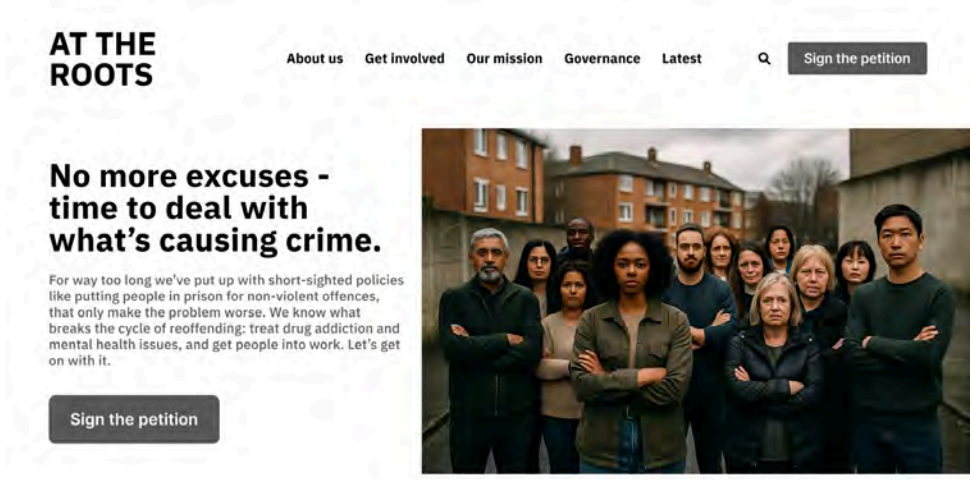
Identity D: A Lesson Learnt – Face



Identity E: Cut Crime Coalition



Identity F: At the Roots



Future
Narratives
Lab