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Anti-social behaviour strategies: finding a balance

The Government has attached great importance to tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB), and has introduced a range of new measures to deal with it. This study, by King's College London, looked at public attitudes towards ASB nationally and examined the problems and solutions in three case-study neighbourhoods with high levels of ASB. It found that:

- ASB has a significant impact on the lives of a minority of people in Britain, particularly in areas of social deprivation and inner cities. However, it has little or no effect on the quality of life of the majority of the population.
- Nationally, the general population tended to equate ASB with problems associated with young people, including graffiti, drug use or simple rowdiness. Two-thirds favoured preventive action over tough action against ASB perpetrators.
- In the three case-study neighbourhoods, people were mainly concerned with general misbehaviour by children and young people, visible drug and alcohol misuse, neighbour disputes and 'problem' families.
- Residents often regarded ASB as a symptom of social and moral decline. Local agencies tended to explain it in terms of social exclusion, especially of young people from deprived backgrounds. Some people, however, thought that much of the behaviour now labelled as ASB simply showed that 'kids will be kids'.
- These different perspectives on ASB implied different solutions. Those who saw it as a consequence of declining moral standards tended to favour tougher discipline. Those who saw it as a result of deprivation preferred prevention and inclusion.
- In all three case-study areas, local ASB strategies have been adopted. These balanced enforcement with preventive work, and emphasised the need for a graduated and proportionate approach to enforcement. This contrasted with the stronger national emphasis on enforcement.
- The researchers conclude that both national and local ASB strategies should aim for a balance between enforcement and prevention, and that more care is needed in defining ASB and determining limits on the use of civil law remedies.



Background

The Government has attached great importance to tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB), and has introduced a range of new measures, such as anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), dispersal orders and the Home Office's TOGETHER campaign, to deal with it.

To examine people's views on ASB and experience of it, the study commissioned an Office for National Statistics (ONS) national survey and looked at three case-study neighbourhoods with high levels of ASB.

Views on ASB: the national picture

For most people in Britain, ASB is not a big problem. For example, 61 per cent of respondents in the 2003/04 British Crime Survey (BCS) reported no bad effects from any of 16 types of ASB. On the other hand, ASB is an acute concern for a significant *minority* of people. Rowdy teenagers in the street had a fairly or very big effect on the lives of one in five respondents to the ONS survey commissioned for this study. ASB tends to be concentrated in deprived urban areas. A third (34 per cent) of BCS respondents in inner-city areas thought that levels of ASB were high in their area.

ASB can take many forms. Youth ASB appears to be the most visible and worrisome. For example, 27 per cent of the ONS respondents said that rowdy teenagers on the street or youths hanging around were the worst forms of ASB where they lived. Surprisingly, adults under 45 were more concerned about youth ASB than their elders, possibly because they may be more at risk. The ONS survey showed that other forms of ASB, such as vandalism, litter and rubbish, had a smaller impact on people's lives, though a larger proportion of the population was exposed to these less serious problems.

Asked about methods of tackling ASB, the ONS respondents were more likely to opt for 'preventive action to deal with the causes' than 'tough action against perpetrators'. Only 20 per cent chose the latter, compared with 66 per cent who opted for preventive action and 11 per cent who favoured both.

ASB in the three case-study neighbourhoods

To learn more about local views on experiences of ASB, possible causes of the problems and potential solutions, three neighbourhoods were selected on the basis of their high levels of ASB and apparently contrasting local strategies for tackling it. However, the similarities in the local ASB strategies turned out to be greater than the differences. In all three areas, graduated enforcement strategies culminating in the use of ASBOs

were combined with a range of preventive measures by different agencies. Some of these measures were funded through mainstream services and others through special initiatives.

In each of the neighbourhoods, interviews and focus groups were organised with residents and ASB practitioners. In all three areas, issues relating to children and young people caused particular concern. Residents and practitioners spoke about boisterous and rowdy behaviour by children, young people congregating, young people causing damage to property and the environment, and anti-social use of cars and motorbikes by children and young people. People were also concerned about drug and alcohol misuse, and the impact of neighbour disputes and 'problem families'.

Focus groups with residents showed how exposure to ASB can provoke a profound sense of powerlessness and lack of control over the social environment. People had real concerns about retaliation if they intervened, and felt that the statutory agencies were largely impotent in the face of serious misbehaviour by young people. This sense of powerlessness appeared to be both a consequence of ASB and a cause, as it increased the chances that worsening ASB would go unchecked.

Explaining and responding to ASB: three perspectives

When talking about the *causes* of local ASB problems, respondents largely focused on issues relating to young people. They tended to provide explanations rooted in broader conceptions of social and cultural change. Three main strands of thought or perspectives on ASB emerged, although these were by no means mutually exclusive or discrete:

1. **Social and moral decline** – ASB problems were seen as symptoms of wider social and cultural change, and more specifically a decline in moral standards and family values.
2. **Disengaged youth and families** – ASB was thought to be rooted in the increasing disengagement from wider society of a significant minority of children and young people and (in many cases) their families.
3. **'Kids will be kids'** – ASB was seen as a reflection of the age-old tendency for young people to get into trouble, challenge boundaries and antagonise their elders.

The first two perspectives assumed that problems of ASB are getting worse because of a generalised process of decline, or because of the increasing disengagement of a minority of British youth and/or their families. The third did not assume that problems of ASB are necessarily getting worse, but suggested that the context of youthful

misbehaviour is changing. As a result, people were more likely to perceive young people's behaviour as anti-social and to worry about it.

To some extent, the perspectives played out tensions between younger and older generations, with the older generation more likely to articulate the first (and possibly the second) viewpoint, and the younger to suggest the third. In contrast, ASB practitioners with social welfare and support roles tended to favour the second perspective and to a lesser extent the third.

Those who saw ASB as an issue of social and moral decline were often highly cynical about the effectiveness of the new range of provisions for tackling it, such as ASBOs and dispersal orders. However, they also saw little hope in alternative approaches other than, possibly, community mobilisation against ASB perpetrators. Those who largely viewed ASB in terms of 'disengagement' thought that early preventive intervention, intensive youth work and community partnership offered the most promise. From this perspective, enforcement was necessary, but had to be used selectively and with great care. The 'kids will be kids' viewpoint implied that diversionary activities for young people should be the cornerstone of local ASB strategies.

Implications for ASB policy and practice

The study pointed to various lessons for policy and practice concerning:

- the search for solutions to ASB;
- the management of local action on ASB;
- the handling of public opinion on ASB.

The search for solutions

The Home Office's TOGETHER campaign, with its implicit call for higher standards and tougher discipline to address ASB, points towards social and moral decline as the cause of ASB. On the other hand, the fact that ASB problems are concentrated most heavily in areas facing deprivation and poverty lends weight to the social exclusion viewpoint, in which the losers in a 'winner takes all' society create serious problems for others.

Research is unlikely to resolve definitively the arguments about the causes of ASB. Processes of social and moral decline are hard to demonstrate and even harder to disprove. However, the two differing perspectives of decline and exclusion point those in search of solutions in very different directions. The more ASB is regarded as one of the malign consequences of deprivation and social marginalisation, the clearer the need for preventive measures to tackle the roots of the problem.

The study found a sharp contrast between the push to prioritise enforcement, expressed at national level, and local-level concerns about the risks of enforcement, coupled with a commitment to preventive options. Local practitioners who took part in the study stressed the intractability of problems of disorder in deprived areas. They did not talk about ASB as simply a problem of perpetrators preying on the 'law-abiding majority', but as a form of conflict within communities with limited capacity for self-regulation. They regarded the perpetrators as usually young people with limited personal resources, living in areas offering limited opportunities. Not surprisingly, they tended to see enforcement as only one element within the set of remedies needed to rebuild these communities. They thought that enforcement tactics could provide a short-term solution to ASB. But for the longer term, they felt that enforcement needed to be balanced with measures promoting social inclusion, to encourage a disenfranchised section of society to feel that they had a stake in society again.

In areas most beset by ASB, ways need to be found of countering the sense of powerlessness – and accompanying entrenched pessimism – among residents. The task is to break the vicious circle whereby fears and expectations of ASB, fear of retaliation, lack of faith in the authorities' capacity to do anything, and incidents of ASB all reinforce each other. Visible enforcement action may provide the leverage to do so, though it seems likely that measures for building community capacity are also needed.

The national TOGETHER initiative is a time-limited campaign. It is intended to respond to public concerns, reduce the public's preparedness to tolerate ASB, increase public expectations about the level of response from local authorities and police, and spur these agencies into action. To communicate these messages clearly, TOGETHER has used simple, populist language justifying tough enforcement. As neighbourhoods respond and adapt to evolving circumstances, the national approach may also need to shift in acknowledgement of the potential benefits of a more balanced response to the issue, which considers both victims and perpetrators.

The management of local action on ASB

It is important to develop shared definitions of ASB. The TOGETHER campaign has tended to avoid doing so, not wishing to curb artificially the range of uses to which the new measures for tackling ASB could be put. Now that the need for action against ASB is more widely accepted, agencies have to be clearer about the scope of the term ASB. The reason for this is simple: if local authorities and police put in place strategies for dealing with ASB, they need to commit resources to these strategies,

clarify responsibilities across agencies, and manage the performance of those delivering the strategies. This cannot be done unless there is clarity about where ASB begins and ends.

There are other reasons for taking care with definitions. The new ASB remedies include some sweeping powers. Civil law measures such as ASBOs supplement the criminal law system of deterrent threat with personalised deterrent threats tailor-made to specific perpetrators. If these deterrent threats are ignored, the penalty can be heavy. So it is important to develop much more explicit rationales for justifying the use of such powerful civil law remedies, in order to set agreed limits to their use.

The handling of public opinion on ASB

The TOGETHER campaign appeals to the declining-standards perspective of ASB, and encourages the 'law-abiding majority' to take a stand. It offers images of the struggle between 'ordinary decent folk' and a tide of 'loutishness'. In reality, the factors underlying ASB are likely to involve complex interaction between social and economic policies that have borne down hard on Britain's most disadvantaged communities. It is therefore important to avoid an oversimplified political and media debate about ASB.

As a means of mobilising agencies to action, the TOGETHER campaign has much to recommend it. The public presentation of the campaign:

- resonates with real public anxieties about declining standards;
- cogently reshapes these worries into a sense of weakness in the face of pressing threats to social order; and

- presents the image of tough, resolute government action in response to these threats.

On the other hand, there are also minuses. Fuelling public concerns about social order in this way will pay off only if the tough, resolute response is fully persuasive. However, the 'declining standards' perspective is infused with a deep sense of pessimism about the scope for solutions of any kind, and in particular a well-entrenched cynicism about the likelihood of an effective response from local agencies. The media and presentational elements of the TOGETHER campaign could succeed in fuelling public anxieties, but fail to present a persuasive government response. The Government might do better to present its ASB strategies in ways that recognise the need to be not only tough on ASB, but also tough on the causes of ASB.

About the project

The research was undertaken by a team from the Institute for Criminal Policy Research, King's College London. In April 2004, they commissioned a suite of questions in the monthly Office for National Statistics omnibus national survey. The sample was representative of the British population aged 16 or over. There were 1,678 respondents; the response rate was 65 per cent. In each of the three case-study neighbourhoods, three or four focus groups were held with residents, comprising young people, parents and older people. In addition, 73 semi-structured interviews were conducted with community representatives and employees of key agencies, including police officers, ASB co-ordinators, housing officers and others.

For further information

For information about the Institute for Criminal Policy Research see: www.kcl.ac.uk/icpr.

The full report, **Anti-social behaviour strategies: Finding a balance** by Andrew Millie, Jessica Jacobson, Eraina McDonald and Mike Hough, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 763 4, price £13.95).

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