

Title: A tale of two cities: Young people, anti-social behaviour and localised public opinion

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Summary

Antisocial behaviour (ASB) by young people is often prominently featured in the media and political debates. There is a wide range of activities perceived as ASB, many of which aren't criminal acts, and there is also a limited understanding about actual public opinion on ASB. This article provides an analysis of a comparative public opinion survey of experiences and perceptions of youth ASB conducted in the UK which suggests that the general public's view is not as negative or as punitive as we may think.

Key Points

- ASB blurs the boundaries between civil and criminal law and in many instances is very subjective (pg. 154)
- When UK residents were surveyed about their ASB concerns, participants classified a diverse range of activities as ASB, including rubbish/ littering, teenagers hanging around, people using or dealing drugs, people being drunk or rowdy and vandalism and graffiti (pg. 155)
- ASB is not only conducted by young people, but political, media & public concern often focuses on young people & moral decline (pg. 155)
- Public opinion and perceptions on the youth 'ASB problem' or moral panic can often serve as evidence for the problem, creating an apparent and self fulfilling driver for change and 'evidence based' policy (pg. 155)
- The public opinion survey asked respondents to rate the relative seriousness of nine potentially problematic issues. Youth crime was perceived to be the most serious problem, followed by youth ASB. There were some significant local differences between the cities surveyed, including how they rates adult crime, poverty and unemployment (pg. 158)
- Timing may have an impact on how youth ASB was rated. If the survey was repeated now the economy may rate as a higher problem (pg. 159)
- Fewer younger people felt that youth ASB was a problem compared to the older sample (pg. 159)
- Survey respondents were asked about their experience with youth ASB and then asked to rate how bothered they were by it. For most specific youth ASB's less than half of the sample reported actually being bothered by it (pg. 161)

- Two specific behaviours, 'swearing' and 'being annoying', were perceived as being bothersome by more than 60% of the public, and certain sections of the public were more bothered by specific actions than others (pg. 161)
- The survey respondents were most in favour of individual deterrence (that is, preventing the same person from committing ASB again) as the key objective for responses to youth ASB (pg. 162). However, the majority of the survey respondents favoured both punitive, responsabilising responses as well as positive, promotional approaches (pg. 162)
- Female survey respondents had a more positive and constructive view of young people through being more likely than males to support helping young people behave and rewarding good behaviour (pg. 163)
- The older sample were significantly more likely to support responses focused on individual deterrence, encouraging young people to behave more responsibly, helping young people to behave, teaching young people respect and general deterrence (pg. 163)
- Males and the older sample were more likely to support punitive responses such as more severe sentencing, increasing Police numbers and the naming and shaming of offenders (pg 165).

Relevance to Local Government

There are significant differences between the large proportion of the public that have experienced youth ASB compared to the smaller number of people who were actually bothered by it. 'The generally low levels of expressed negative experiences of youth ASB would appear to run counter to the intolerable and popular punitiveness assumed by the general public by political and media led caricature of public opinion' (pg. 167). Local government work can often be driven by perceptions of local residents, councilors and other stakeholders. By gaining a better understanding of public perceptions of young people we are in a better capacity to develop rational, responsible, and appropriate responses to young people in local contexts

There was a diversity of public opinion in the two cities surveyed in the report. Perceptions of problems may vary over time and be impacted by wider socio-economic concerns as well as local issues and concerns. Some drivers of perceptions about youth ASB may be impacted by larger national issues rather than what is occurring in a local scene.

The report recommends that a detailed exploration of public perceptions of youth ASB and its relative importance to the community should be conducted, to;

- Map perceptions and experiences in particular locations, and understand the problem
- To evaluate the degree of congruence between public opinion and local responses to youth ASB
- Inform local policy and practice