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**Young people's
experience of
intolerance, antisocial
behaviour and keeping
safe in disadvantaged
areas of Glasgow**

July 2011

GoWell is a planned ten-year research and learning programme that aims to investigate the impact of investment in housing, regeneration and neighbourhood renewal on the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. It commenced in February 2006 and has a number of different research components. This paper is part of a series of Briefing Papers which the GoWell team has developed in order to summarise key findings and policy and practice recommendations from the research. Further information on the GoWell Programme and the full series of Briefing Papers is available from the GoWell website at: www.gowellonline.com

Summary

The view that intolerance towards young people is rife in the UK has been widely advanced. UK surveys show that a substantial minority of adults describe teenagers as a serious problem in their local area.^{1,2} The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recently singled out the UK for its '*general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children, especially adolescents*'.³ In this paper, we explore young people's own perspectives on intolerance and antisocial behaviour (ASB) using interviews and focus groups involving young residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Glasgow.

We found evidence that young people believed they were the object of conscious and unconscious stereotyping by adults. In addition, young people held negative perceptions of other young people in their neighbourhood and used similar stereotypes to the adults in the neighbourhood. We also found evidence of young people experiencing ASB and taking steps to secure their own safety within the neighbourhood. We conclude that while young people may be the object of adult intolerance, they are also actively developing their own social attitudes about their peers and community that at times appear unsafe to them.

Therefore, policy and practice in this area need to reflect two broad interpretations of young people's ASB: one that emphasises the involvement of young people in such behaviour and another that focuses on negative attitudes towards young people.



ABOUT GOWELL

Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, is receiving significant investment in regeneration aimed at improving and transforming disadvantaged homes, neighbourhoods and communities. GoWell is a research and learning programme that aims to investigate the impact of this investment on the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities over a ten-year period.⁴

In 2006 and 2008 GoWell researchers surveyed a combined total of around 10,000 adult householders, and also conducted a programme of qualitative research in 15 relatively deprived Glasgow neighbourhoods. We asked people to tell us about their homes, neighbourhoods, communities, health and wellbeing. One of the findings that stood out was that ASB in general, and young people hanging around in particular, were among the most commonly cited neighbourhood problems. We have explored these issues in more detail. In a previous briefing paper, we looked at quantitative findings describing the characteristics of householders who told us that teenagers were a serious problem in their local area.⁵ In this briefing paper, we

look at qualitative evidence from young people living in some of the GoWell areas. In an accompanying briefing paper, we describe findings from adult focus groups and explore the issues of ASB and intolerance towards young people.⁶

WHAT IS ASB?

The term 'antisocial behaviour' became widely used in the UK during the 1990s and has featured in UK legislation since 1998. The 1998 Crime and Disorder Act defined ASB as 'acting in a manner that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons not in the same household as (the defendant)'. This definition stipulated that the ASB must be an action or speech; it must be directed at someone who is not related to the perpetrator; and is likely to cause a negative response. The Antisocial Behaviour (Scotland) Act (2004) built on this definition and stipulated that the action must occur on at least two occasions and could adversely affect witnesses as well as direct victims.

The Home Office provided examples of the types of behaviour which could be antisocial: misuse of public space (begging, taking drugs, illegal parking), disregard for the community (noisy neighbours, drunken behaviour, and uncontrolled animals), acts directed at people (nuisance phone calls, bullying) and environmental damage (graffiti, damage to buildings, dropping litter).

The concept of ASB is controversial and has been challenged for being too vague and too subjective to be useful. A recent research report for the UK Home Office has emphasised that perceptions of ASB are a social problem in their own right and may be symptomatic of intolerant or divided communities.⁷

ASB and young people

Critical discussion of the term antisocial behaviour (ASB) has focused on how it is often used in association with population subgroups that are already disempowered, such as disadvantaged young people. Furthermore, some authors have argued that apparent examples of young people's ASB often include harmless activities such as 'free play' (hanging out with friends in the street).^{8,9} Without necessarily disputing the evidence that ASB often involves young people, the case has been made that young people are sometimes the object of intolerance even when their behaviour is not necessarily antisocial.

It is argued that social cues can often aid development of intolerance. Taking the example of the well-known antisocial subgroup 'neds' (or 'chavs' in England), research refers to the visual identifiers such as an individual wearing gold jewellery, tracksuits or certain designer brands.^{10,11} Also, if the individual is loud, brash and disobedient, this is also linked with the stereotype.

Young people's views

It is also important to remember that young people are not simply passive recipients of other people's opinions. They develop and share beliefs about issues related to community safety and ASB in their neighbourhood. A recent GoWell briefing paper has described how young adults (aged 16-24) from some of Glasgow's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods were more likely than elderly residents to report that local teenagers were a problem.⁵ Other UK studies have found that young participants consider their lives to be directly affected by territorial boundaries and fear of youth gangs.^{12,13} Young people may experience ASB directly, either as perpetrators, victims or witnesses. They may also be the victims of conscious or subconscious intolerance and discrimination from their elders.

The following discussion reflects young people's experiences and perceptions from three disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods in Glasgow. For the purpose of this paper, the neighbourhoods will be referred to as Glasgow West, Glasgow North and Glasgow South.



METHODS

Fifteen young people, aged between eight and 16 years old, spoke to us about neighbourhood problems. The research involved two focus group sessions and five go-along interviews (also known as walking interviews). The go-along interview took place while walking in the young person's neighbourhood and questions were led by what was visible in the landscape. All the participants were white Scottish, which is reflective of the ethnic composition of two of the neighbourhoods but less so the third (which was predominantly white Scottish, but also contained many asylum seeker households).

The results from the focus groups and go-along interviews were similar. Key themes emerging from these were: perceptions of adult intolerance; the conflicted view of other young people; and their personal and direct experience of ASB. These are discussed under their respective headings below.



FINDINGS

Theme one: adult intolerance

In general, the young people provided negative accounts of relationships between young and older members of their community. Poor intergenerational relationships

were depicted as being aggravated by what they saw as a tendency among adults to make assumptions about young people based on negative stereotypes. One girl from the Glasgow West focus group commented *“sometimes they expect you to be badly behaved”*. This expectation was commented upon by numerous participants.

The role of visual cues in forming negative stereotypes in people was an issue that was recognised by the participants. They stated that adults’ judgements of them ranged from avoiding eye contact on the street to calling the police when they were hanging around with friends on the local streets (where it could be perceived that they were in a ‘gang’). Two boys from the go-along interviews in Glasgow North wore tracksuits and felt this was negatively perceived in their neighbourhood. One commented that once passers-by saw his tattoos and tracksuit they immediately believed he was a ‘ned’. He felt this was an impression that would stay with people because *“once you get an impression, that’s the impression you get. No need to know me for me”*.

Poor social connectivity that many young people experienced also played a role in the construction of negative relations between adults and young people. Participants suggested that they had better relations with adults they knew personally. For instance, a female participant from the Glasgow South focus group when asked if she got on well with adults in the area replied: *“Depends like if you know them, then yes. But sometimes no if you don’t know them”*.

However, the young people were also prepared to make their own judgements about adults in their neighbourhood. When asked to describe the kinds of adults who did not get on well with young people, two male focus group members in Glasgow West provided a list of descriptors that included *“long hair, wrinkly, and about ninety years old”, and “people who are drunk that shout”*. On other occasions the descriptions are more empathetic – highlighting how young people believed adults may treat them badly because *“sometimes these people are just in a bad mood”*, or they have *“bad days”*, while old people may feel scared because they *“can’t defend themselves”*.

Theme two: young people’s view of young people

Young people’s accounts also included negative stereotypes of young people. When asked to name the worst thing about living in their neighbourhood, one female participant from the Glasgow South focus group answered *“neds”*. Two of the participants from that group explained that they were scared of walking down a particular path because *“that’s where all the neds are”*. For the young people in the focus groups and interviews, ‘neds’ were not just a negative stereotype based on clothing but rather a group of people known for ASB in their neighbourhoods. To be called a ‘ned’ is to be labelled as someone who participates in ASB and is perceived by others as dangerous.

Participants from all groups, and particularly the females, were also critical about youth gangs, who they tended to describe as consisting primarily of aggressive young males. However, the young people we spoke to were sensitive to a distinction

between friends hanging around together and gangs who were engaged in ASB. Furthermore, they expressed resentment towards adults who were perceived to be unable or unwilling to make this distinction. This often led to the young people being monitored or to the police being called when *“nobody was really doing anything”*.

Theme three: personal involvement

While the interviews provided evidence that young people in these neighbourhoods experienced negative stereotyping, the young people also gave examples of specific ASB they had experienced. Sometimes they described their own involvement as either perpetrators or witnesses.

Sometimes, the young people discussed being involved in ASB as a reaction against the behaviour of others. For example, believing that an adult holds a negative opinion or stereotype about them may lead the young person to react in kind. One Glasgow South focus group participant commented that she does not get on with adults as *“I just argue with them if they are horrible to me”*. Therefore the perception of others negative behaviour leads to a negative modification of their own behaviour. The theory that perceptions of ASB can lead to a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (whereby residents acting on their negative perceptions can inadvertently exacerbate the problems they perceive) has been widely advanced in the UK and elsewhere, and has been shown to operate at both individual and community levels.^{14,15}

Young people interviewed also spoke about peer pressure or matching the behaviour of other young people within the neighbourhood. One of the youngest boys in the Glasgow West focus group commented that other boys in his class would call him a wimp because he did not want to go to the park where all the gangs from school would hang out. The need for young men in these neighbourhoods to not be seen as ‘wimps’ and be prepared to fight could often lead to violence. For one young person in Glasgow North, the reaction to another young person’s behaviour could have had more serious consequences: *“I had someone go threaten me with a bat n all that, I ended up smashin’ one of them. I ended up carrying a blade about”*.

This reaction could also be seen as a negative modification of his previous behaviour (from fist fighting to knife carrying). However, he discussed being ‘caught’ by the police and had not carried a knife since that episode. During the interview, he discussed avoiding certain areas of his neighbourhood due to other people that occupied the space.

Even the decision to stay at home could not guarantee that the young people remained unexposed to ASB. Participants talked about being chased on the way home, and about listening to the sound of drunken singing in the streets at night. Some examples were more extreme. Witnessing ASB from the front door was discussed by the Glasgow South focus group: *“I’ve seen my next door neighbour battering on somebody”*. A go-along interview participant from Glasgow West reported witnessing the following from her window:

*“Uh-huh, I can watch [gang fighting] from the window of where I stay, but like, I don’t really watch them fight any more, because last year I saw a boy getting killed, he’s from [another neighbourhood]. So I don’t really like watch it out my window because of the ...eh... because of that happening”.**

It is important to note however, that not all of the ASB incidents described by participants necessarily involved teenagers as perpetrators. The age of perpetrators is not always clear and the overall impression is one of the young people feeling threatened by neighbours across a range of age groups.

CONCLUSION

We have analysed qualitative evidence to explore the issues of intergenerational intolerance and ASB from the perspective of young people living in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. We found that the young people felt that they were often judged based on their age or clothing. They discussed feeling as though they were being treated as ‘neds’ because of the tracksuits they wore or the places they hung out. For these young people, ‘ned’ was a group that they did not want to associate with. They were seen as a dangerous other, people that were involved in fighting and had no life aspirations past hanging out in the local parks. By distancing themselves from these people, we see certain young people aligning themselves with a more adult narrative – that young people are troublemakers.

In terms of intergenerational relationships, the young people spoke about both friendly and unfriendly adults. The dynamic often depended on whether there was an existing relationship between the young person and adult. For the youngest group, not knowing an adult was reason not to speak to them. For older young people, they commented that for adults that did not know them, they often felt they were judged before they were given the opportunity of a first impression. This need for respect and to be offered a chance to disprove the negative perceptions that adults hold was a thought that was held by many of the young people.

The overall picture is complicated but might best be summed up with the phrase ‘damned if you do and damned if you don’t’. Those young people who do participate in ASB are likely to find themselves further alienated within their community, which may increase the likelihood of them participating in ASB in the future. However, even young people who do not participate in ASB seem to experience negative reactions and stereotyping from adults, as their use of public space within their neighbourhood can easily be misperceived as something more sinister. Furthermore, they are likely

* We subsequently identified recent newspaper reports of armed gang violence at the location described by the participant, including reports of two teenagers charged with attempted murder for separate attacks.

to perceive peer pressure and at times hostility from young people who do identify themselves with behaviours considered to be antisocial. Finally, the young people we spoke to suggested that attempting to avoid ASB often involved limitations on their use of social space (eg due to gang territory), but even those who stayed at home could still be exposed to incidents that they (and we expect most people) would consider disturbing.

In conclusion, while young people may at times be the object of adult intolerance, they should also be seen as being active in developing their own social attitudes about where they stand in relation to their peers and the wider community, in a neighbourhood context that can at times appear to them to be unsafe and hostile. As part of this process, they must negotiate the draw of ASB and weigh the pros and cons of involvement in or avoidance of such behaviours.



POLICY MESSAGES

The United Nations special committee suggested that concern about young people's ASB was symptomatic of a general climate of intolerance towards children and adolescents in the UK.³ The young people interviewed were able to give examples of personal experiences which agreed with this conclusion. Nonetheless, we also argue that it is still reasonable for young people, adults, policymakers and the media to recognise that perpetrators of ASB do often fall broadly within the 'young people' age range. This point seems difficult to avoid, and is useful to the extent that policymakers need to have information about the characteristics of perpetrators in order to target prevention and response strategies. Therefore, we do not take issue with the 2010 UK Conservative, Liberal and Labour Party Manifestos or the Scottish Government for their tendency to refer to young people in statements about ASB.¹⁶ It is of course also essential that adult ASB, and adult behaviours that encourage young people's ASB are also widely recognised and addressed.

We support the view that policy and practice in this field needs to reflect two broad interpretations of young people's ASB: one that emphasises the involvement of young people in such behaviour, and another that focuses on negative attitudes towards young people. These interpretations need not be mutually exclusive. In fact, we suggest that negative perceptions and the 'reality' of young people's ASB co-exist and often leave young people in a position where they are 'damned if they do and damned if they don't'. This interpretation leads us to support prevention strategies that provide young people with opportunities that can divert them from the draw of ASB and lead to further improvements in their lives.¹⁷ Such strategies would, we feel, stand more chance of success if they tackled the problem of young people feeling 'damned' even when they try to stay clear of ASB – by ensuring that those young people had safe, welcoming places to socialise with likeminded friends, and that intergenerational cohesion was encouraged locally to reduce the incidence of adults misreading harmless behaviours as threatening.



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