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**Intolerance and
adult perceptions of
antisocial behaviour:
focus group evidence
from disadvantaged
neighbourhoods 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 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*'.¹ In this paper, we explore adult perspectives on intolerance and antisocial behaviour (ASB) using focus groups involving residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Glasgow. This study was conducted as part of the GoWell Programme which investigates experiences and impacts of urban regeneration in Glasgow. The findings were analysed to address four key questions summarised below.

What kinds of antisocial behaviours do the adults attribute to young people?

Adults attributed a variety of ASB to young people, including verbal and racist abuse, noise, hanging around, asking adults to buy alcohol, damage to property, drunkenness, drug misuse, theft and violence (further details are provided in Table 1 of the main report).

Are young people perceived to be the main or only culprits?

The overall impression is that ASB was assumed to be a problem caused by both adults and young people. Around half the ASB problems reported (Table 1) were attributed to both young people and adult perpetrators during the focus group discussions. However, it should be noted that 'young people' and 'adults' are overlapping categories (ie someone in their late teens or early 20s might meet both descriptions).

Are adult perceptions of young people's ASB informed by direct experience?

Participants were keen to emphasise that they had direct experience of ASB. However, the term 'experience' covers a range of exposures: being a victim, personally witnessing ASB, seeing the results of ASB (eg seeing vandalised property), or having someone very close to them experience ASB.

Is there evidence of residents being prejudiced against young people in general, or do they show signs of tolerance?

We would caution against assuming that adults from the disadvantaged neighbourhoods we sampled contribute to a 'general climate of intolerance' towards young people. We did find some examples of negative characterisations of the younger generation, which suggest that some of the adults who participated could hold prejudiced views against young people. However, most discussions of ASB tended to illustrate people's intolerance towards particular behaviours, rather than intolerance towards particular age-groups. The focus group discussions repeatedly acknowledged that most young people did not cause problems. We also identified evidence to suggest that adults could show signs of tolerance and empathy: eg by explaining young people's behaviours within the (perceived) contexts of poor environments and lack of amenities for 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.²

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.³ In this briefing paper, we describe findings from adult focus groups and explore the issues of ASB and intolerance towards young people. In a further paper we look at qualitative evidence from young people living in some of the GoWell areas.⁴



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.

ASB is a policy priority in the UK, and a frequently occurring topic in both the academic and popular media.^{5,6} It is often discussed in the context of young people's behaviour, and public perceptions of that behaviour.⁷ This apparent link between young people and ASB is reflected in crime data that suggests offenders are most likely to be aged in their mid-teens to early 20s.

The concept of ASB is controversial and has been challenged for being too vague and too subjective to be useful.⁶ 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.⁶



INTRODUCTION

Is there a 'general climate of intolerance' towards young people in the UK? The United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child claimed that there was, in a report published in 2008.¹ The Committee highlighted public perceptions of young people's ASB as exemplifying this intolerance. Using qualitative research methods, we explored how and whether this alleged climate of intolerance towards young people permeates public discourses on ASB. The findings are based on focus group data from adults living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Glasgow. In an accompanying briefing paper, we look at young people's perceptions of this issue.⁴



AIM OF THIS STUDY

The study explores adult perceptions of ASB in disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Glasgow. The purpose is to examine the extent to which adults' concerns about ASB seem to reflect a 'general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes' towards young people.



KEY QUESTIONS

We have analysed the data from 12 focus groups to shed light on the following questions.

- What kinds of ASBs do the adults attribute to young people?
- Are young people perceived to be the main or only culprits?
- Are adult perceptions of young people's ASB informed by direct experience?
- Is there evidence of residents being prejudiced against young people in general, or do they show signs of tolerance?



METHODS

The focus group data presented in this paper were collected as part of the GoWell Programme. Focus groups were appropriate for the study because we were interested in learning more about community responses to ASB: how people talk

about the issue when in the company of others from their community, rather than how people think about ASB in more private contexts. Participant names and the names of neighbourhoods have been anonymised.

SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT

Data was collected from 12 focus groups covering eight Glasgow neighbourhoods in autumn 2009. All the neighbourhoods were receiving regeneration investment. All the areas fall within Scotland's 15% most deprived neighbourhoods, ranked by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation's measure of income deprivation.

People were eligible to participate in the focus groups if they were over 18 years old and resided in a study area. For a sub-sample of focus groups, additional eligibility criteria were used: two focus groups were comprised entirely of parents or guardians of teenage children; one was comprised of asylum seekers or refugees; and three consisted of participants who in the previous 24 months had moved from flats scheduled for demolition to better quality social housing.

In the two focus groups comprised entirely of parents/guardians, the topic guides focused directly on questions relating to ASB and young people. Other focus group topic guides asked more generally about neighbourhood life or neighbourhood regeneration, to provide data related to research questions on these topics. In three such groups, the topic guides included occasional prompts about ASB, while topic guides for seven groups did not mention ASB. By analysing data from all these groups, we were able to consider whether or not participants discussed (youth) ASB only when directly asked about it, or whether they raised the issue as important to them with little or no prompting from the facilitator.

Professional fieldworkers from BMG Research were commissioned to recruit participants and facilitate focus groups. Focus groups were held in local neighbourhood venues (eg schools outside hours, and community halls) and lasted at least one hour.

RESULTS

Linking young people and ASB

The issue of ASB as a serious neighbourhood problem emerged in all focus groups. Even in the groups where the facilitator focussed on general questions about neighbourhood and regeneration, participants raised the issue of ASB themselves.

Unsurprisingly, the issue was discussed most by the groups who were asked about it.

Most of the focus groups linked young people with ASB. Often, participants said that local problems were caused by “kids”, “weans”, “children”, “teenagers”, “young ones”, “boys”, and (less frequently) “girls”. The problem of gangs was also referred to frequently in the context of young people’s ASB. One parent suggested the age-range of members of the local gangs ranged “from 12-year olds right up to 17-year olds.” Participants from other areas suggested similar age-groups, although one resident offered a broader range of eight to 18 years old.

Do adults label all young people as antisocial?

The adults we spoke to tended to describe ASB as something that some, but not all, local young people were involved in. There were, however, a few examples of strongly negative statements about young people in general. One participant complained that “*It’s the kids. They’re ruining the place*”. Others described young people as “*arrogant*”, “*absolutely disgusting*”, and “*feral*”.

More typically, focus groups highlighted variation in the behaviour of different young people. Some groups discussed the view that ASB in general, and young people’s ASB in particular, could vary by neighbourhood. One participant, who had recently moved house, described how the children in her new neighbourhood behaved in a way that contrasted positively with those from her previous neighbourhood:

“You don’t see the weans [children] all running about swearing, causing trouble, and setting fires and all that. It’s not like that. The weans are playing with their footballs and their bikes. It’s like they are actually being proper children, and acting like children.”

The focus groups also discussed variation by gender: they provide relatively few examples of girls being identified as antisocial compared to boys, and three participants stated directly that boys were more likely to be a problem.

Other participants were more explicit still in pointing out that the majority of local young people were not trouble makers. One resident said, “*There are an awful lot of good children about, you know? It’s the minority who cause the problems*”. Similar points were made in other focus groups. Furthermore, being on speaking terms with local young people seemed to help some adults see them in a positive light:

“There are your teens, and they are not troublesome. I mean, I know the bulk of them. The boys all talk to you. I think it’s like everything else, as they get all the young ones a bad name. 90% of them are ok.”

The above quote does, of course, have a flip-side: namely, that the participant thought around one-in-ten of the young people he knew were not ‘ok’. Another participant told us that knowing some of the local young people did help her feel safe.

She said she felt “ok” walking past groups of young people if she knew some of them, *“but if you don’t know who any of them are, you get a wee bit apprehensive”*.

Empathising with young people

Besides stating that the majority of local young people were not a problem, some participants attempted to empathise with young people by referring to their own childhood. This was particularly evident among parents who took part in the study: *“I think we’ve all done it”*; *“When I was younger, I hung about on corners”*; and *“The police used to come up all the time and chase us when we were younger”*.

The point was also made by parents that *“hanging around”* need not necessarily be viewed as antisocial: *“The police come and move them or fine them for sitting drinking in the streets or whatever. But it doesn’t mean to say that because they are there drinking they are fighting as well. They’re not causing any bother. You do get ones that are just sitting drinking, and you’ve got other ones that cause bother”*.

Participants from several of the focus groups believed that there was poor provision for young people in their neighbourhoods: *“There is nothing for them. They have not got a club here or anywhere else to go”*. Some of these neighbourhoods did (and continue to) have youth clubs or other amenities for young people, but some participants highlighted community safety as a barrier to access. Sometimes, the parents made this decision on behalf of their children: *“My eldest went to the youth complex for a while. Then I stopped him because there was drinking and fighting outside it”*. Others described their own teenagers as *“trapped”* at home by neighbourhood safety problems, and some parents found themselves transporting their teenagers to and from leisure amenities or else paying for taxis as they *“didn’t want them walking up the road”*.

Not just young people

Some participants told us that young people were not the only source of neighbourhood problems: *“It is not just teenagers who are the problem. It’s the adults as well”*. Table 1 summarises the neighbourhood problems that participants linked to either young people, adults or both (it is based on data from all the focus groups, including the groups that were directly asked to talk about ASB and those that were asked to talk more generally about neighbourhood and regeneration-related experiences). The Table shows that a minority of the problems cited were linked exclusively to young people and more than half of the examples of ASB were linked to both adults and young people, or just linked to adults.

When discussing specific incidents of ASB, participants were not always explicit about the perceived age of perpetrators. We found that, along with *“gangs”*, substance misusers were the most frequently named type of culprit. Participants generally did not mention the age of alcohol and drug misusers, so it is conceivable that they might have been referring to adults or young people or both. One participant did imply that

the problems caused by substance misusers were distinct from (and worse than) problems caused by children: *“Annoying children you can put up with. Drunks and junkies you just don’t want”*. Another stated that younger people were also troubled by substance misusers, and that this restricted their use of public spaces:

“The kids go to these parks like the new one they have just built. The kids can only stay in there for a certain amount of time before the junkies push them out.”

Adults were also held indirectly responsible for ASB. Notably, some adults were blamed for the misbehaviour of their children on account of poor parenting and in particular poor discipline:

“A lot of it has to do with the mums and dads. It isn’t the weans. It’s when the parents say, ‘no, it’s not my weans who are causing the trouble’. The parents are just as bad as the weans.”

Table 1: Problem behaviours perceived to be caused by young people and/or adults according to focus group participants (81 participants, 12 focus groups).

Antisocial Behaviour	Young people	Adults
Asking adults to buy alcohol for them	✓	
Verbal abuse / bad language	✓	
Hanging around outside shops	✓	
Racial abuse	✓	
Running through / damaging gardens	✓	
Theft	✓	
Vandalise buildings (including graffiti)	✓	
Arson	✓	✓
Damage to vehicles	✓	✓
Drug misuse	✓	✓
Fighting	✓	✓
Loitering in parks - deterring others	✓	✓
Loitering in communal areas of flats	✓	✓
Littering	✓	✓
Noisy parties	✓	✓
Public drinking / drunkenness	✓	✓
Fatal violent incidents / stabbing	✓	✓
Buying alcohol for children		✓
Dog fouling		✓
Drug dealing		✓
Fly tipping		✓
Unprovoked assault / mugging		✓
Untidy homes, common areas or gardens		✓

Where do adults say ASB occurs?

The participants reported that ASB was more likely to occur in specific places in the neighbourhood. Parks, shops and routes home from school were key examples, although only the last of these related exclusively to young people's ASB. On numerous occasions, public locations were identified as being dangerous and off-limits to both adults and children. Several of the focus groups also identified new amenities or other newly built features of the neighbourhood as being particularly likely to attract trouble. Again, examples included new parks, playgrounds, shops, and youth clubs. Residents complained that when new amenities opened these spaces were quickly "taken over" by groups of young people, who would hang around the entrances of these areas, deterring others and causing vandalism. Some residents even said newly built homes were a target, citing damage to fences, gardens and other external features (one of the most serious examples is described below).

"I moved into a new house. You gain entry with a special key. It's meant to be secure. Now they've come in and they've stolen the back plate of the key system. These are brand new houses and they've stolen the key plate off the back door so that anyone can come in the back entrance now. They have taken it off so that they can come through the back door whenever they want and sit and smoke."

DISCUSSION

General climate of intolerance?

In this paper we have used focus groups to explore adult perceptions of young people's ASB in disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Glasgow. The study found some evidence of intolerance, but not of a 'general climate of intolerance'. There were isolated examples of statements that negatively stereotype all young people. However, we also found evidence of the following adult opinions.

- The incidence of young people's ASB varied between different (but similarly deprived) neighbourhoods.
- ASB was limited to a minority of young people.
- Young people were themselves poorly served by poor local amenities.
- Hanging around drinking did not necessarily harm others in the community.
- Adults admitted that they behaved in a similar way when they were young.
- Poor parenting underpinned some young people's ASB.
- Both adults and young people found their use of local public space restricted because of perceived risks to their safety.
- Adults were also directly responsible for many neighbourhood problems.

Our participants identified a range of behaviours linked to young people and/or adults that they considered to be problematic. In many instances, participants told us they had personally witnessed the behaviours in question. Sometimes participants reported seeing the damage caused by ASB (eg vandalised property). Sometimes, they described incidents that had occurred to people close to them. Only a small number of the participants anecdotes were reported as local rumour (ie things that happened to a 'friend of a friend' or a generic 'someone').

The findings suggest that adult discourses on ASB usually (but not always) stress intolerance towards the behaviours themselves rather than to young people per se, and that this intolerance of certain behaviours is perceived to be underpinned by personal experience. We also found evidence that adults from disadvantaged areas discuss young people's ASB as something that occurs in the context of poor environments, poor parenting and poor adult behaviour. Furthermore, besides examples of adult residents' apparent intolerance towards young people's ASB, there is also evidence of empathy.

Connectivity

Low levels of community cohesion (ie neighbourhoods characterised by low levels of mutual trust and support, and by disharmony between different types of people) have been associated with high levels of perceived ASB.⁸ It has been suggested (eg in the recent research report for the UK Home Office⁶) that if residents established more social connections with local young people, community cohesion might be improved and perceptions of ASB might be reduced. This argument assumes that adults would be less likely to misinterpret young people's social cues and behaviours as threatening if they personally knew those young people. Through greater connectivity, residents might change their moral perspective, by understanding why young people (or other residents perceived to be antisocial) feel they have a 'need' or 'right' to behave the way they do. As a consequence, people may start to see such behaviours as 'less wrong'. As the Home Office research report put it:

'In essence, the more we know of those we share space with (say a group of young people), the easier it becomes for us to assess whether they pose a threat to us. By implication, the greater the connectedness of an individual, the less likely they would be to interpret any given behaviour as problematic ASB'.⁶

There was little evidence of intergenerational connectivity in the focus group discussions we examined. We found relatively few accounts in which participants said they knew local young people personally – except in cases where the young people referred to were family members. Therefore, we support the view that neighbourhoods such as these could potentially be improved by a strengthening of community cohesion and connectivity. How this might be achieved is less clear, so it may be timely to consider how community interventions might facilitate this process: perhaps by helping local people connect with one another within an organised setting, or helping isolated and excluded community members make one-to-one connections with sympathetic neighbours.

Nonetheless, connectivity is unlikely to be a panacea. For example, a strong theme from the focus group discussions was that residents were deterred from using public spaces because of perceived threats from people (of various ages) who hang around while intoxicated by alcohol or other drugs. Participants made it clear that they did not want to connect with the people in question (in fact, they actively avoided them), with several raising fears about the perceived threat that some substance misusers posed to people's personal safety. This is clearly a difficult issue, and one that raises the question of whether making social connections with a person or group perceived to be antisocial can always be assumed to be a positive or risk-free activity. Tackling the drink and drugs culture is a current political priority, and our study provides further justification for this. Here we see how that culture adds to perceptions of poor neighbourhood safety and acts as a barrier to social connectivity.

Tolerating behaviours

This leads to another question: whether some types of behaviour might be difficult to tolerate regardless of how 'connected' a resident is to the perceived perpetrator. We ask this, again, with reference to the Home Office research report, which has argued for the need 'to define the limits of unacceptable ASB in a more explicit manner that would need to include a discussion of tolerance, mutual understanding and respect'.⁶ Implicit to this argument is the idea that it may be possible to arrive at some consensus as to which types of behaviour are tolerable and which are intolerable, with the overall aim of discouraging the ASB label from being applied to activities that are not intended or likely to be problematic. Obviously, this is a value-laden exercise and we propose that it involves a discussion that ultimately needs to include the local communities themselves. However, we will enter the discussion here by suggesting that the following behaviours are difficult to justify tolerating, irrespective of the perpetrator's age:

- violence,
- vandalism,
- personal harassment / verbal abuse (including racist abuse),
- young people asking adults to buy them alcohol (particularly if the adults are verbally abused for refusing), and
- public drinking, drug taking and problem behaviours related to intoxication.

There were also some behaviours discussed by the focus groups that seemed potentially more tolerable, and indeed the groups themselves expressed conflicting views about whether 'hanging around' was really (or always) antisocial. Hanging around public places was sometimes portrayed as being linked to the less tolerable behaviours listed above, but sometimes described as harmless socialising among people lacking anywhere else to go.



LIMITATIONS

This study focused on a particular sub-group of the population: adults living in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods in one city. It does not explore tolerance/intolerance towards young people in other social groups. Nor does it examine organisations and institutions that contribute to public opinion such as the media or policy community. We only sampled adults, although we conducted a separate study of young people which is intended to provide information that will be relevant to the issues discussed in this paper.⁴



CONCLUSION

Young people's ASB is an often cited problem, particularly in disadvantaged urban areas. Policymakers and agencies involved with young people, community safety and regeneration have recognised the need to reduce perceptions of young people's ASB. The claim that such perceptions may be part of a 'general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes' towards young people has important implications for how agencies might bring about such a reduction. It might suggest that the key problem to be addressed is adult intolerance rather than the behaviours that adults express concern about. However, we recommend that concerns about ASB, including young people's ASB, should be taken seriously rather than assumed to be evidence of an age-intolerant society. We make this recommendation even though we assume, and have found some evidence to suggest, that some adults from disadvantaged areas do express negative and intolerant opinions about young people.

As stated above, some of the data we obtained indicates prejudice, intolerance and the potential to misconstrue non-malicious activities by young people as potentially threatening. These are genuine problems that seem likely to damage the cohesion of neighbourhoods and may lead to some young people being unjustly vilified and alienated. In a companion paper we have shown how strongly young people resent being treated in this way and how it may sometimes prompt them to respond with ASB.⁴ Strategies to improve community cohesion, including relationships between adults and young people, are therefore to be encouraged.

However, the focus group evidence we looked at suggests that adults can empathise with young people, and tend to think of the younger generation as a heterogenous group that includes many people who do not pose problems for the rest of the community. The findings also lead us to caution against assuming that the kinds of behaviours that do concern adults fit into a morally ambiguous category that people might potentially be encouraged to tolerate. The experiences of violence, vandalism, harassment and problems related to substance abuse reported by the

adults we spoke to suggest that negative perceptions are based on more than just a misunderstanding about the benign intentions of people ‘hanging around’. Therefore, the focus group evidence supports a multi-layered approach to tackling ASB: one that attempts to improve community cohesion and opportunities for disadvantaged residents, while reducing the incidence of ASB (particularly those behaviours that we suggest are unambiguously malicious and problematic).

When making recommendations about how to tackle ASB, or perceptions of ASB, it is worth noting that all the neighbourhoods we looked at in this study are recipients of various forms of regeneration initiatives – to improve people’s home and neighbourhood environments and support individuals and communities. Focus group responses suggest that regeneration can have both positive and negative consequences, in terms of residents’ reported experiences of ASB. People who relocated from neighbourhoods being cleared for demolition were often (but not always) positive about there being fewer problems with ASB in their new neighbourhood. However, some residents told us that newly built homes and other new amenities in the neighbourhood could sometimes attract crowds of young people and/or be a focal point for vandalism.

We recommend that these issues require further investigation, to establish the extent to which improvements are targeted by vandals and explore methods of prevention. Our findings suggest that neighbourhood renewal still needs to better address the issue of providing spaces/amenities for young people or else other improvements will be vulnerable to being ‘taken over’ or damaged by disaffected and spatially marginalised young residents. This is obviously extremely important to the success of many regeneration activities – as vandalism limits the extent to which investment in homes and neighbourhoods can lead to sustained improvements.

Finally, we note that while we have responded in particular to the UN Committee comments about intolerance towards young people in the UK, the ASB problems discussed in our focus groups also included numerous problems attributed to adults. It is important that we are clear that people from older age groups can cause serious neighbourhood problems, just as it is important to be clear that some young people also exhibit behaviours that add to the difficulty of living in a disadvantaged urban area.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings support a multiple approach to tackling ASB, aimed at improving community cohesion and opportunities for disadvantaged residents, while reducing the incidence of ASB (particularly those behaviours that should be regarded as being unambiguously malicious and problematic).

ASB can undermine efforts to regenerate neighbourhoods, as new neighbourhood spaces, features and amenities can become focal points for vandalism and loitering. Tackling this problem may involve further efforts to provide dedicated spaces and amenities for young people, including targeted interventions such as youth diversionary programmes, as well as policing, surveillance and crime prevention.



WHAT DOES THIS STUDY ADD?

This is, to our knowledge, the first study that directly addresses the UN claim that there is a ‘general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes’ to young people in the UK. However, it is important to note that this is not a UK-wide study. Its’ geographical scope is limited to disadvantaged Glasgow neighbourhoods.

Our findings lead us to advise against assuming, uncritically, that the UN statement accurately summarises general public attitudes towards young people. Even in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where perceptions of young people’s ASB have been found to be particularly high, we found evidence of both tolerance and intolerance. Residents’ discussions of ASB usually focused on their objections to specific behaviours rather than specific age-groups. Furthermore, the findings suggest that negative attitudes towards ASB perpetrators were underpinned by many personal experiences of behaviours that (we think) most people would consider unacceptable and problematic.



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