

Youth Victimisation

John Muncie examines the degree of over-control and lack of protection afforded to young people on the streets, in the home and in institutions.

The vast majority of research on youth and crime in the UK has focussed on young people as offenders rather than as victims of crime. Indeed, if victimology in general can be said to be in its infancy then a specific youth victimology is virtually non-existent. This article outlines some of the evidence regarding the victimisation, the degree of over-control and lack of protection afforded to young people on the streets, in the home and in institutions.

Victims of crime

One of the first attempts to focus directly on youth victimisation was Mawby's (1979) study of 11 to 15 year olds in two Sheffield schools. He found that 40 per cent had had something stolen from their person and that 25 per cent had suffered a physical assault. Overall 67 per cent said that they have been crime victims. Nevertheless it was not until the 1990s that the issue was given much sustained attention. Anderson et al's. (1990) pioneering work in Edinburgh established that criminal acts are committed against young people with "alarming frequency". They found that over a period of nine months half of their sample had been victims of assault, threatening behaviour or theft (Anderson et al., 1990, p.39). Moreover some 52 per cent of young women and 36 per cent of young men recalled that they had suffered from adult harassment, ranging from being 'stared at', to importuning and indecent exposure. Whilst for males such offences decreased as they grew older, for females they increased to the extent that 30 per cent of 14 to 15 year olds had experienced 'touching' or 'flashing' (Anderson et al., 1990, p.59). In a follow up study in Glasgow (Hartless et al., 1995), high

levels of victimization were again found to be common with 82 per cent of a sample of 208 12 to 14 year olds recalling they had been victimized in the previous year. 68 per cent of young women had been sexually harassed, whilst two thirds of young men had suffered from assault and theft. In contrast on average only a quarter of the sample admitted that they themselves had committed an offence, leading the authors to conclude that young people are 'more sinned against than sinning'.

Specific questions about youth victimization were not included in the British Crime Survey until 1992. From a sample of 1,350, in just six months a third of 12 to 15 year olds claimed that they had been assaulted at least once, a fifth had had property stolen, a fifth had been harassed by people their own age and a fifth had been harassed by an adult. Again it was notable that the risks of theft and assault were substantially higher than for the adult population, but that few incidents were reported to the police (Aye Maung, 1995). The 1998 British Crime Survey (Mittlees-Black et al 1998) confirmed that the risks of burglary or vehicle theft are greatest for those where the head of household is under 25, while the greatest risk of violence is experienced by young men aged 16 to 24.

Openly racist harassment and bullying is also reported to be endured by many black and ethnic minority children on a daily basis. Racially motivated violence (as reported to the police) increased by 250 per cent between 1989 and 1996, which means the UK has one of the highest levels of such incidents in Western Europe.

Victims of family violence

Significantly the British Crime Survey did not ask about experience of youth victimisation and violence in the home. This is perhaps not surprising. Within criminology little has been done to expose the routine of violence - from spanking and slapping to serious assault - endured by young people in their own homes. Nevertheless, what we do know is that children under one year are more at risk of being murdered than any other age group, with 44 deaths per million of population compared with a national average of 12 per million. The majority are killed by their parents or carers. In addition more

than 10 per cent of the 600 homicides in Britain each year are perpetrated by parents against their own children (under age 16).

The extent of domestic child abuse remains largely unknown although research by NCH Action for Children in 1994 based on reported incidents alone estimated that at least 750,000 children were growing up in an atmosphere of fear and violence. In the child sexual abuse investigations of the 1980s in Cleveland, Orkney and Rochdale blame was passed from parents to social workers for unnecessarily removing children from their families. Notions of family sanctity and privacy have always precluded widespread use of criminal prosecutions. A psychological, medical or welfare focus obscures the fact that criminal offences have been committed. Further ambivalence is created by a prevailing political concern that the publicising of child abuse and children's rights is likely to not only undermine respect for authority and self-discipline but also threaten family life itself. In addition, Morgan and Zedner (1992) draw attention to the fact that young people not only suffer from physical and sexual abuse and bullying but are witness to numerous and prolonged instances of parental violence in the home.

Victims of institutional violence

Just as alarming are the growing number of revelations about the extensive abuse of children who have been in the care of local authorities. Over the past decade there have been between 7000 and 11000 young people in residential care at any one time in England, Scotland and Wales. Their treatment has long been a cause for concern with allegations of systematic violence by residential staff surfacing throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Significantly such victimisation, even when proved, has tended again to be clouded in terms of 'abuse' and 'mistreatment' rather than criminal violence. Any resultant inquiries have either been hidden from public view or at best restricted to identifying a small number of individuals who have taken advantage of the powerless. The main policy response has been to tighten checks on applicants for residential posts, rather than to overhaul residential care policies.

However the issue came to a head

in 2000 with the publication of *Lost in Care* - the Waterhouse report which uncovered widespread and organised abuse of boys and girls in North Wales between 1974 and 1990. Waterhouse heard 259 complaints, named 200 workers in more than 40 homes and found evidence not only of daily physical assault but also of gross sexual exploitation and emotional abuse. It also attributed at least 12 deaths, by suicide or in suspicious circumstances, to the experience of being 'in care'.

Conditions in young offender institutions have also been a recurring cause for concern. Between 1972 and 1987, 31 prisoners under the age of 21 committed suicide, but there were 11 such deaths in the first 8 months of 1994 alone. In 1994-5 nearly a half of young inmates reported that they had been attacked or threatened in the previous month (The Guardian, 3 October 1996).

These publicised cases are arguably the tip of an iceberg of institutional violence, matched by adult complicity and indifference. They serve as a reminder of the dangers inherent in institutionalising and incarcerating young people whether in the name of care, of rehabilitation or of punitive training.

Policing and routine surveillance

Histories of police-youth relations are replete with examples of the proactive policing of young people's use of public space. For example, in Anderson et al.'s study of Edinburgh, 44 per cent of the sample of over one thousand 11 to 15 year olds had been 'moved on or told off', 13 per cent had been stopped and searched and 10 per cent had been arrested or detained in a police station in the previous nine months (Anderson et al., 1994, p.130). Afro-Caribbean and homeless youth are especially vulnerable to police surveillance and harassment. In England and Wales in 1998-99, Afro-Caribbeans were six times more likely to be stopped and searched by police despite the fact that self report studies suggest that they have no greater involvement in crime.

Despite such evidence of the overcontrolling of young people, police powers have over recent years been consistently expanded. For example, New Labour has consistently backed the idea that low level disorder, which may not necessarily be criminal, should be a

priority target. The 1998 Crime and Disorder Act introduced new Anti-Social Behaviour Orders to be applied in response to nuisances and incivilities. To date they have been applied almost exclusively to young people. The 1998 Act also introduced curfew restrictions to children under the age of 10 on the presumption, rather than actual committal, of crime. As a result all manner of myths and stereotypes about 'troublesome' people and places have come into play.

Coupled with these legal and discretionary powers there has been a significant contraction of spaces deemed to be 'public'. Malls and shopping centres have increasingly become semi-privatised, employing security guards to deter 'undesirables' and those who do not conform to images of the ideal consumer. Lacking consumer power, the presence of young people is viewed as a threat to the normal course of commerce.

Throughout all such attempts to regulate youth behaviour the role of the police is pivotal. Through routine surveillance, targeting and reporting practices the 'usual suspects' are identified. But such 'knowledge' is then passed on to other institutions, such as schools and social services, to 'calibrate the degrees to which the chosen few should be excluded from social life'.

Governing the young

Since the nineteenth century, children have been the focus of innumerable programmes designed to mould and shape their development. From birth through to the extended years of schooling and training, every aspect of their and their families' lives is subject to professional scrutiny. Much of this endeavour - in the form of health visitors, teachers, social workers, doctors, psychologists, training officers and so on - is legitimated by an ideology of humanity, benevolence and protection, but has little to do with recognising youth victimisation and affording young people's rights. Rather, Rose (1989) argues, its rationale is one of extending surveillance and control over the family. The effects of this can be found in much of contemporary social policy for the young. Shifts in employment, welfare and housing policy have created a situation in which young people have to negotiate a set of risks

unknown to previous generations. The old and predictable structures of labour markets and welfare systems are being dismantled and replaced by a series of uncertainties and contingencies.

Conclusion

The relative powerlessness of young people has always placed them at potential risk of adult victimisation. Such a risk is exacerbated at times when the potential of youth is subjugated to that of 'threat'. Seeking their greater regulation ensures that they are placed in positions of greater dependency often in those same family and institutional settings that are a key source of their victimisation. The problems facing young people are compounded when the prevailing political discourse becomes that of 'blaming the victim'. In such contexts the true nature and extent of youth victimisation will continue to remain stubbornly hidden from public view.

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