

# The Gangs of New Labour: jobs or just youth?

**Steve Taylor** argues that the current media discourse about 'anti-social behaviour' scapegoats teenagers.

**E**ighty years ago, when studying more than a thousand gangs in Chicago, the criminologist Frederic Thrasher noted how gangs of teenage boys could be transmuted into Boy Scouts, from icons of delinquency to symbols of respectability. Shifting the setting of a group's activities from the street to a Scout hall was one method Thrasher discovered for dealing with these gangs. A further approach was to break up the gang and work with its former members on an individual basis. Whatever the methodology, he states that: "The important point to be noted is that where the gang is broken up, the social world of the boy disintegrates and a new one must be substituted for it – not of the artificial type found in an institution, but one which will provide for a redirection of his energies in the habitat in which he must live" (Thrasher 1963).

The resonance of this to our present-day debate over 'anti-social behaviour' is tangible. The *Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003* gives police the power, *inter alia*, to disperse groups of two or more people from any public place if a police officer believes that they may commit an offence or cause alarm or distress to a member of the public.

A MORI poll commissioned by The Children's Society found that 78% of young people feel that this will cause tensions with police, who might be minded to move on groups of young people for – in the young people's eyes – no good reason, sentiments later echoed by the Association of Chief Police Officers (Police Review 2003).

## **Adults tend to perceive ASB to be young people hanging around on street corners; breaking the windows of derelict buildings; shouting abuse at older people.**

Young people committing anti-social behaviour (ASB) are the latest in society's long history of suitable enemies, a history that has in recent times included football hooligans, mobile phone thieves, muggers and 'joy riders'.

As Stanley Cohen says in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002), we need to have a group of people to fear in order that we can 'carry on panicking'. But having those who commit anti-social behaviour as the subjects of our fear is very clearly different from the other types of 'offender'. Being fearful of the mobile phone thief was, to many people, reasonable, and ditto for 'joy riders'.

The problem with fearing those who commit ASB is that it leads to fear and suspicion of almost all young people – and a significant number of adults, too. ASB has become a favourite topic of the government, and MPs highlight it as an issue filling their postbags. Parliament has approved legislation on the issue; the Home Office has set up a new department concerned solely with ASB; and the launch of the government's Action Plan by the Prime Minister and Home Secretary attracted a good deal of media attention. Based on the results of a one-day survey of ASB, the *Daily Mail* summed up the problem with a banner

headline: "66,000 YOB INCIDENTS IN ONE DAY" (15 October 2003).

In the history of respectable fears, anti-social behaviour is the dish of the day. That headline epitomises the misleading nature of 'anti-social behaviour'. Adults tend to perceive ASB to be young people hanging around on street corners; breaking the windows of derelict buildings; shouting abuse at older people. Young people see it as their peers causing trouble, and drunken adults staggering home from the pub. Few – if any – would regard prostitution as a form of ASB (even though it accounts for 1,011 of the 66,000 incidents reported in the *Daily Mail*); or 'animal related problems' (2,546 incidents); abandoned cars (4,994 incidents); or littering (10,686 incidents). The government has succeeded in attaching a label to a group of offences for which the only common factor is that the majority take place in public.

*The Sun* newspaper embarked on its latest 'name and shame' campaign last autumn – coinciding with the launch of the Action Plan – by publishing a series of full-page articles over a period of three weeks, encouraging their readers to 'Shop a Yob'. Printing posters of young people made the subject of an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO), the paper recommended that its readers keep an eye out for these 'odious yobs' and 'know their enemy'. And yet, as *The Sun's* recent 'Shop a Yob' campaign revealed, there aren't actually that many 'yobs' available for naming and shaming.

A significant number of those 'shopped' in recent months had previously appeared in similar campaigns, including three 'demon brothers' and the 'terror triplets'. These facts are irrelevant to those parts of the media who boost sales by stoking up fear of crime, at a time when youth crime appears to be falling. When I called *The Sun's* dedicated 'Shop a Yob' number, I was told they had received 'hundreds' of calls and had shopped 'a dozen or so' yobs as a result. Time and again we have seen the media's reporting of crime spark moral panic and even riots (Cohen, *ibid*; Silverman and Wilson 2002).

Only two years ago, the release of Thompson and Venables after spending eight years in custody for the murder they had committed as children, had the media (and not just the tabloids) threatening to 'track them down' and alluding to them being a danger to us all. The paedophile riots, beginning the day that the *News of the World* published names and addresses of sex offenders living in communities across the country, were, according to the editor at the time, a 'measured response' to the abduction and murder of Sussex schoolgirl Sarah Payne. The editor who sanctioned that campaign is now the editor of *The Sun*.



Young protestor, London, December 2003. Could any gathering of young people be interpreted as 'anti-social behaviour'?

The point about the current condemnation of ASB is this: further back even than 'Rat Boy' and 'Safari Boy' a decade or so ago, society has always had 'tearaways'; young people who were regarded as a symbol of the demise of society. Whilst the levels or types of offending might change through generations, the tearaway is omnipresent. The invention of anti-social behaviour as a catch-all heading under which we can categorise these tearaways reinforces notions that somehow things are worse now than ever before.

Shape is a coalition of children's charities (Barnardo's, The Children's Society, The National Children's Bureau, NCH and the NSPCC) and Nacro, funded by Rethinking Crime and Punishment, that have come together to raise the level of public debate and awareness in relation to young people and crime. Shape consults with young people about these issues, and working with young media representatives, empowers their voices and interests to be heard. One of our key messages – that communities need support to work together to prevent crime – is being echoed by the Government and the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit.

Louise Casey, the director of the Unit, is right to talk about the impact ASB can have on communities, and it was right that the launch of the ASB action plan didn't focus attention on young people as the sole perpetrators of ASB. But elements of ASB and the tone of media coverage means that young people are damned if they do; damned if they don't. Damned if they meet their friends on street corners or in the park; damned if they don't, and spend their evenings watching television or surfing the internet.

Legislating against young people hanging around on street corners without providing anything else for them to do shows a lack of empathy and consideration for young people – and it also shows the futility (as Thrasher highlighted eighty years ago) of dealing with the after-effects first rather than the causes.

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For further information on Shape, visit [www.shapedebate.org.uk](http://www.shapedebate.org.uk)

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