

Youth Crime and Relative Deprivation

Craig Webber illuminates the aspirations of young people in an 'outer-city' rather than 'inner-city' environment.

Youth studies have traditionally looked to the spectacular subcultures, such as the punks, skinheads and the various permutations of dance culture. As such young people tend to be cast as different and outsiders (see e.g. Hall and Jefferson 1976; Pearson 1994). Linked to this, the legacy of urban sociology in both America and the UK has led to a focus on inner-city deprivation.

This quest to study the most spectacular and the most deprived young people, albeit for conscientious reasons, limits the scope of our understanding and misses the very real deprivation suffered by many young people who live in the 'relatively' deprived towns that surround cities like London or Manchester. This article explores the need for such research into 'outer-city' young people, their identity and aspirations.

Relative deprivation refers to a perception of being deprived of something and is able to account for why some people, both young and old, living in a deprived environment do not engage in crime as well as why some do. Relative deprivation is not about blocked aspiration, but where the expectation of gaining something is blocked (for example a good career, respect or consumer goods).

Research on behalf of the Youth Justice Board into the role of young people in street crime demonstrated the role of relative deprivation (Fitzgerald, Stockdale and Hale 2003). Fitzgerald *et al* noted that many young people they interviewed expressed aspirations for legitimate careers but were unclear as to the means of achieving these aspirations.

Aspirations and expectations

Young people do not perceive deprivation in a straightforward way, there is no clear causal link between relative deprivation and crime as some have argued (Lea and Young 1984). The relationship between relative deprivation and crime is one that demands that we attend to both the emotive aspect of offending as well as the traditional focus on structural factors such as absolute poverty or access to education (Runciman 1966). Such an approach leads to a more rounded understanding of the vexed question of young people and crime. I carried out a study over the course of almost two years that involved observation and interviewing with a group of young people in a relatively deprived outer-

London town, here given the pseudonym Brushingwood. The young people articulated their aspirations to good careers, but more than this expected to reach these goals. They had bought into the ideology of the 'good job', all that was needed was to listen and encourage the aspiration. However, the focus for local agencies, such as the police, was very much on youth as a problem. Consequently, the young people were discussed with reference to their disruptive behaviour, energies were directed towards the goal of crime control. The following will demonstrate the problem with this.

Two sides of a coin?

One of the most interesting issues arising from this research was the way in which some of the young people, both boys and girls, were integrating tough, resilient identities with expressions of intelligence or smartness. Whichever facet of identity was uppermost depended on the situation and audience. An example from my research will help to explain this.

Johnny was a key respondent, 14 years old and at the core of the group under study. During a discussion at a youth club about future careers he told the head youth worker Hillary that he was going to be a chef. Johnny continued, "in McDonalds". Hillary laughed and then asked him again what he wanted to be. Johnny replied, "a gardener", before adding, "in Feltham". Feltham is the Young Offenders Institution.

However, when I interviewed Johnny alone, he became serious and outlined what he wanted to be on leaving school.

Craig Webber: "What are your plans?"

Johnny: "I wouldn't mind being something like a solicitor or something, they get paid a bit of money don't they? I don't know. I want to go college and university eventually after I leave school."

Johnny continued by telling me that he wanted to be an environmental engineer like his uncle and that he was "a brain". This was in contrast to a fight I witnessed when Johnny split another boy's lip and blackened his eye and the accounts of his fighting prowess told by his friends. I soon noted that many of the other young people also expressed their aspirations for good careers. These were not out of the ordinary aspirations, but the sort of careers you might hear if you asked any 14 year old.

For example, Jane, also fourteen said, "I want

to be a lawyer or a manager". In another interview with two boys called Nick and Carl, I asked the boys why they felt that they would not be unemployed after leaving school. Nick said "I'm clever!", he then turned to his friend and said "Carl, Carl, ain't I clever at school?". This response came amidst a previous discussion of gang rivalry, fighting and where their territory lay in relation to other gangs. This is the integrating of identities noted above. In the case of Johnny, those around him are doubtful of his chances of success as the following extract from an interview with one of his teachers will show. In order to appreciate what Johnny's teacher is saying it is necessary to keep in mind that Johnny wants to go to university. "Johnny is very bright and very disaffected. He's so busy being laddish, very important to Johnny being seen as cool, he's quite hard, he can fight... what Johnny needs is something to aim for, something that he knows he can do. And to say it's GCSEs, well that's not going to happen because he's not in school. Johnny will be, and I hate to say this, but he'll be a very good criminal and he'll probably do very well and earn more than you and I earn in the whole of our lives and he's clever enough to make a career of it. There are lots of career criminals out there."

Shifting the emphasis

If these comments represent a version of what the school predicts to be Johnny's future, then the degree of relative deprivation he will suffer is likely to be high. To be a career criminal is not yet a choice Johnny has made, he still aims for legitimate success. In an ironic role-reversal it is the school predicting the criminal choices and Johnny who is struggling for the legitimate means. Therefore, in Johnny's case feelings of relative deprivation with regard to his career prospects has not yet occurred, he has an aspiration that he expects to achieve. Johnny is aware of the blocks to his goals, but believes he can overcome them through his intelligence. Yet the focus for those with the power to make a difference in his life is his bravado and fighting.

Johnny's ambition, like that of the other young people in Brushingwood, is determined on a good education in an increasingly knowledge based economy. Among the young people in this study, there is an attitude with regard to education and intelligence that positively accepts and acknowledges its worth. They elevate 'cleverness' and make it a defining, positive, personal characteristic. But, this can coexist with the identity that politicians like to term 'yobbishness'. What I am highlighting is a note of caution. Policy makers must not be quick to assume that the tough talking and hard fighting expressed by some young people are the only qualities they have. Also, research with young

people should move outside the inner-city to give a voice to those who are not part of a spectacular subculture and not suffering in the depths of poverty. Young people in the latter category are important, but so too are those whose voices are in the majority, but rarely given an audience.

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References

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