

Understanding the demonised generation

Brian McIntosh and Annabelle Phillips challenge the view that young people are responsible for society's ills.

This article sets out to challenge the issue that sees young people, as a generation, defined primarily as a *problem* to society. While acknowledging that a minority of young people *do* engage in deviant and criminal acts (often persistently), this article argues, through drawing upon empirical research, that the majority of young people do not fit this stereotype, both in terms of offending behaviour but also in how they currently contribute to society. This article concludes by pointing out that the current coalition government have a major opportunity – through both shifting away from the more punitive vestiges of New Labour's law and order agenda as well as pushing the idea of the 'Big Society' – to take the lead in promoting a much more positive view of young people by recognising the contribution, rather than focusing on the problem, that this generation can, and do, make to society.

Youth on the margins

Groups of young people cast in the role of the archetypal societal folk devil are neither a new or unique phenomenon. As Geoff Pearson (1980) noted in *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears*, almost every decade has seen concerns over particular groups of youths, dating back to knife gangs in the nineteenth century. This point was echoed by Newburn (2007) who has stated that

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'for at least the last century the key representation of young people has been to see them as a "problem" – either as a source of difficulties, or as being "at risk"' (Newburn, 2007: 575). However, at the end of the twentieth century it was argued that the moral panic had evolved into a more pervasive form from one that focused on individual groups of young people into a *total panic* about young people *as a whole* (Brown, 1998). Put simply, young people, *as a generation*, were now seen as being *the* problem, posing a threat to the fabric of society. The most contemporary example of this shift towards total panic about young people can be seen in the

way in which New Labour's focus upon anti-social behaviour evolved into one that came to be seen in many ways as a focus upon anti-social young people. The introduction of measures such as dispersal zones, curfews as well as giving powers to local agencies to name and shame perpetrators all pointed to a disproportionate focus upon all young people as being *the* anti-social problem.

The following section explores the roots and drivers of perceptions of young people and also questions how accurately such accounts portray this population.

Perceptions of youth

The root of this general negativity has several bases, with the role of the

media being a particularly powerful driver. In particular, the media plays an important role in cultivating dominant perceptions of crime. We know from research, for example, that almost two-thirds of the general public feel that crime rates are rising informed by what they see on television (60%) and 46% from what they read in the papers. Importantly, alongside friends'/relatives' experiences of crime (89%), TV news and documentaries (87%), local newspapers (77%) and broadsheet newspapers (60%) are all considered, in and of themselves, to be trustworthy sources of crime information (Duffy et al., 2008). Such influence becomes particularly problematic for young people when certain media accounts, especially newspapers, contain a bias towards negative content. Ipsos MORI research analysing media content about young people found that such stories tended not only to be negatively skewed but also that 'in such stories, events are not presented as tragic one offs, or as news because they are unusual, but as a cause for concern for society as they signal underlying problems with "today's youth"' (Ipsos MORI, 2006). Research carried out on behalf of *Women in Journalism* found similar bias. This study found that, through tracking media coverage of young males over a 12 month period, over half of stories written about this group were related to crime as well as finding that the most commonly used terms associated with this group were 'yobs' and 'thugs' (Echo, 2009).

Importantly, these perceptions are far from benign. They influence both attitudes and fears, and as such provide a window of interpretation through which judgements are made of young people in general, especially by those who have limited or no direct contact with this generation. Where such gaps exist between image and contact, the spectre of hooded youths hanging around on street corners stimulates anxiety, despite being commonplace. The anticipated negative behaviour of young people, whether this be substantiated or not, is something that genuinely worries members of the general public. Research carried

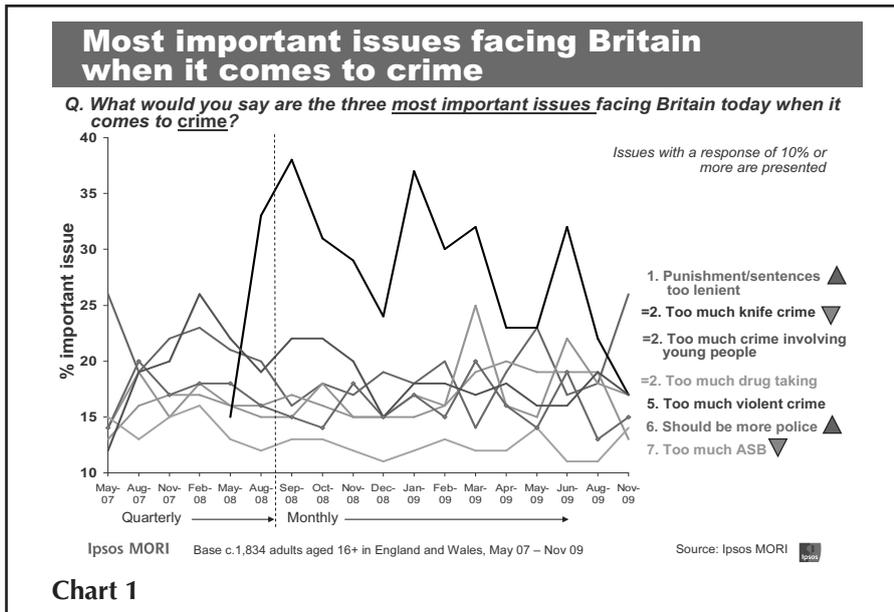


Chart 1

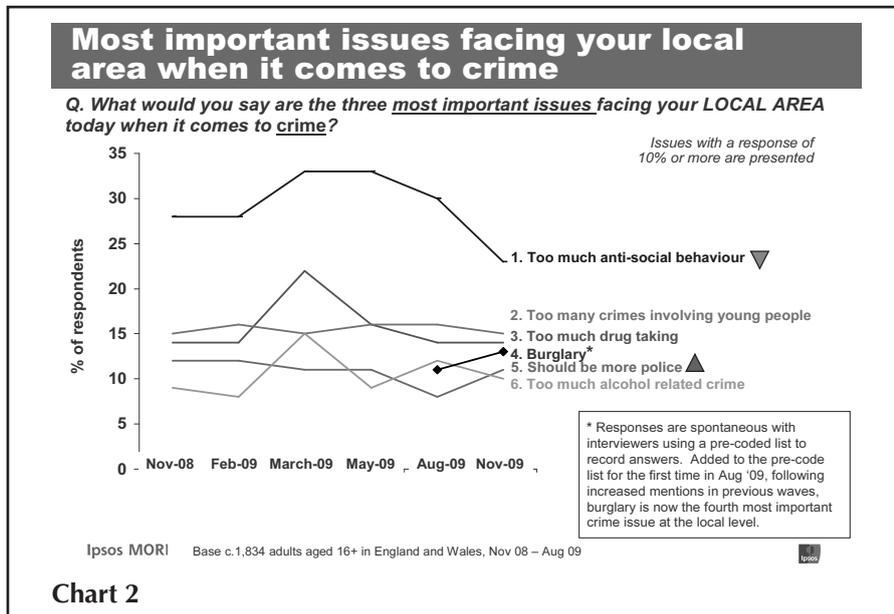


Chart 2

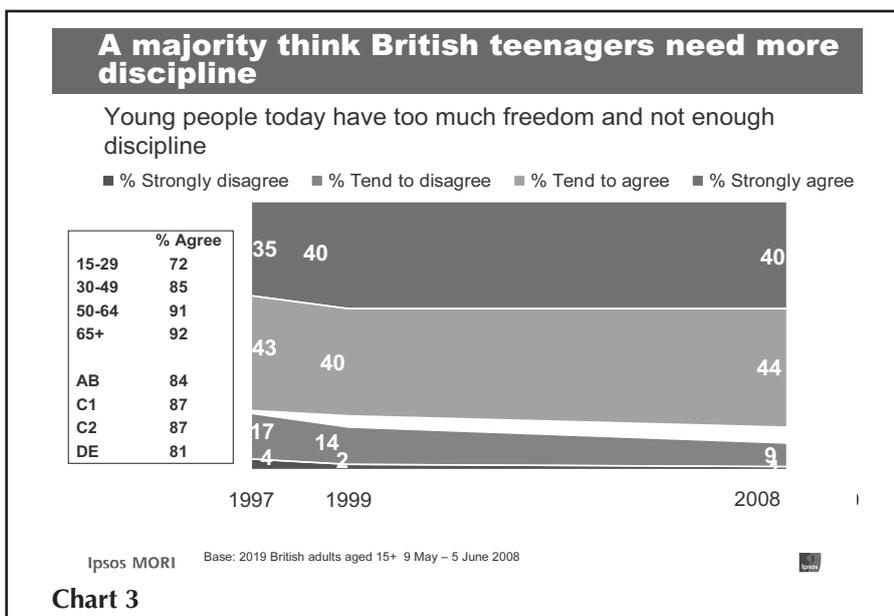


Chart 3

out by Ipsos MORI found that, nationally, 'too much crime involving young people' (17%) and 'too much knife crime' (17%) were two key concerns (see chart 1).

A similar picture also emerged in terms of local issues where too much anti-social behaviour (23%) and too many crimes involving young people (15%) were highlighted as issues (see chart 2).

Beyond specific offences and anti-social behaviour, further research demonstrates that much of the public do buy into the 'young-people-as-a-problem' viewpoint, with many believing that this population tend to have too much freedom and not enough discipline. Notably, this view becomes more popular as people get older with nine in ten of those aged 65 or over agreeing with this statement (see chart 3).

Young people: what's the problem?

However, while such negative perceptions of young people exist and persist, research also challenges such views. Further research conducted by Ipsos MORI – and indeed by other organisations – has shown that this is an unfair picture of young people in Britain today. Research conducted for the Ipsos MORI 2009 Youth Survey, undertaken on behalf of The Youth Justice Board, provided data that challenge the assumption that young people, as a group, are troublesome (Anderson et al., 2009). The Youth Survey involved classroom self-completion questionnaires completed by 4,855 pupils aged 11-16 in mainstream education, as well as 1,230 pupils of the same age range from Pupil Referral Units (PRU) (Anderson et al., 2010).

The key headline finding from this study was the relatively low amount of offending self-reported by young people. Those in mainstream education who reported that they had committed an offence in the last year amounted to just under one in five (18%), which was significantly lower than the 23% of pupils in mainstream education who reported doing so in 2008. However, this figure was substantially higher for

those pupils in referral units where over one in six young people stated that they had committed an offence in the previous year (64%).

A similar distinction existed between these two groups of young people in relation to individual offence type, with those in mainstream education more likely to have committed less serious forms of offending. The three most common single offences committed by those in mainstream education were fare dodging (49%), shoplifting (49%) and damaging or destroying someone else's belongings (40%). This compared to threatening/assaulting other in public (64%), damaging or destroying someone else's belongings (59%) and shoplifting (57%) being the most commonly committed by those in PRUs.

These findings resonate with the long known criminological fact that a small number of young people tend to commit a disproportionately high number of offences. Yet as argued above, the dominant negative image of young people as deviants and miscreants often overlooks such differences within this group as a *population*. In such circumstances, more positive contributions to society by young people tend to be both overlooked and overshadowed. However, once again, research findings challenge such negative stereotyping.

One area of society where young people *do* make a positive contribution is volunteering. Research carried out by Ipsos MORI on behalf of V, the national youth volunteering charity, surveyed 1,997 young people aged 16-25 in England found that two-thirds had carried out some form of formal or informal

volunteering in the last year (68%) (Pye et al., 2009). Furthermore, while a quarter of young people were in favour of a compulsory citizenship programme (40%), over half

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supported the introduction of an in-school citizenship programme (54%).

Volunteering was seen to appeal for a mix of practical and altruistic reasons, with just under one in six stating that they find the work

experience and training element of volunteering appealing (57%), while just under half were drawn by the aspect of helping others (46%) (Pye et al., 2009).

The above discussion, drawing upon primary research findings, paints a very different picture of young people and one which suggests that simply defining young people as a demonised population is, at the very least, simplistic if not inaccurate.

Final thoughts: where now for young people?

Since coming to power, the coalition have been forthcoming in setting out a new rhetoric around crime, justice and anti-social behaviour that focuses much more on rehabilitation than previous approaches; the impending abolition of the Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) being symptomatic of such a shift. In addition, much has been made of the 'Big Society' and encouraging greater local voluntary involvement by community residents. Research presented above shows that young people *do* want to get involved, and as such, have a strong contribution to make to the 'Big Society'. However, research findings also tell us that presenting young people universally as problematic is not without consequence, especially in the

way they are seen by others. Taken together, the shift towards a language of rehabilitation, combined with developing the Big Society provides the coalition government with an ideal opportunity to lead the way in changing both the tone and volume of how young people are thought of in society. ■

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Corrigendum

The article 'Understanding the demonised generation' by Brian McIntosh and Annabelle Phillips, first published in *Criminal Justice Matters* 83, March 2011 (DOI: 10.1080/09627251.2011.550157), contained a number of errors which the authors should like to take the opportunity to correct:

- The opening line of the article on p. 28 should read: 'This article sets out to challenge...'
- The second line of the first column on p. 30 should read: '...over six in ten young people stated that they had committed an offence in the previous year (64%).'
- The third line of the second column on p. 30 should read: 'Furthermore, while four in ten young people were in favour of a compulsory citizenship programme...'
- The 12th line of the second column on p. 30 should read: 'Volunteering was seen to appeal for a mix of practical and altruistic reasons, with just under six in ten stating that they find the work experience and training element of volunteering appealing...'

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March 2011

DOI: 10.1080/09627251.2011.583133