

Young People and Anti-Social Behaviour

Geoff Berry shows that anti-social behaviour is not associated with young people as often as some might assume.

It is a widely held premise that young people and anti-social behaviour (ASB) are synonymous. Before we make sweeping generalisations it might be prudent to think about definition. It may be that reality is somewhat different to the perceived nature of the problem of ASB and those who commit it.

First of all, what do we mean by the term 'anti-social behaviour'? In a recent study in three areas of the West Midlands region we identified 32 different offence types which were categorised as ASB. These included such categories as verbal abuse, dog fouling, fly tipping and even nuisance caused by industry. Only one category was common across all three sites, namely noise nuisance.

It could be argued that only half of the categories relate to the types of offences most often associated with young people (such as rowdy behaviour, nuisance behaviour and intimidation). Other categories include litter, street drinking, abandoned vehicles, hoax calls, animal problems and prostitution. To accuse young people of committing many of these offences is a problematic and even dangerous assertion.

On that basis, those offences most often associated with young people only make up 52% of the overall total. Even then, it is sweeping to say that all rowdy behaviour or noise nuisance is caused by young people.

There is little doubt that recorded incidents of disorder are on the increase, but is this a real increase or is it a function of a greater willingness to report and hence an issue of reducing tolerance or even a function of data recording processes?

From a tolerance perspective, Hope *et al* (2003) suggest that there is a greater propensity to report offences such as ASB in more affluent communities, leading to a greater number of calls per incident in such areas. There is a growing bank of evidence that this is the case and our research also supports this assertion.

From a recording perspective our work in the West Midlands region found that duplicate calls relating to single incidents accounted for up to 10% of all ASB reports. This relates to situations where the police might receive and hence record two or more calls for a single incident. When the data is further adjusted for abandoned calls, the 'inflation factor' rises to between 20% and 30%. In other words, in the worst situation, every 100 recorded incidents of ASB relate to just 70 actual incidents. The situation with regard to ASB may therefore not be quite as severe as the data might suggest.

A change in tolerance or variable tolerance across different sectors of the community might be a significant cause of the apparent increase in ASB in recent years. Against this background, it is somewhat sweeping to suggest that young people are responsible for ASB and the recent perceived increases. Young people are invariably seen as the main perpetrators of ASB. There is however a significant body of evidence which suggests young people are as likely if not more likely to be victims of ASB than other age groups.

It is interesting to note that recent studies, which we

completed on behalf of crime and disorder partnerships in Surrey and Hampshire, have suggested that young people gather in groups at night because it makes them feel more secure. Conversely, such gatherings are perceived by some communities and sectors of the community as being intimidatory and a significant element of ASB.

In summary, it is recognised that certain groups of young people are proportionately more likely to commit certain types of ASB but it is dangerous to root policy and interventions on such sweeping assertions. In the best case it can often lead to poorly thought out and ineffective responses, with little significant impact on the real problem. At worst, it can lead to the gradual alienation of a significant group of society, who feel that they are 'always being picked on'.

The key to dealing with the issue, as with any effective community safety activity, is to clearly identify the problem: is it ASB, whatever that may be; or noise nuisance; or fly tipping; or neighbour disputes or even gangs of rowdy young people? Once the type of problem has been identified, it needs to be analysed in greater detail, perhaps from a problem-solving perspective, considering features which might be driving it, for example, location, offenders and victims.

The key then is to ensure that policy and interventions in response target the actual problem and that progress is monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis. Not all young people cause nuisance; not all young people are rowdy and intimidating. Many feel just as victimised as those members of the community who report such offences, if not more so. It is important to recognise that and to target ASB responses on clearly defined problems. In that way, we can all benefit from a reduction in ASB, including young people.

References

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