

# Young People in the Media: a dangerous and anti-social obsession

Kathy Evans discusses the conflict between the fear of young people, the perceived need to 'name and shame' them and the protection of children's rights and freedoms.

Articles in this journal have previously discussed many aspects of the anti-social behaviour agenda, including its impact on children and young people.

The aim of this article is not to revisit the many issues concerning the imposition of orders and controls on children, such as curfews and ASBOs, although they form the background to the matters discussed here. The article will explore the public portrayal of children and young people, in particular in the media, and will go on to look specifically at the policy of publicising cases where children are given ASBOs, commonly referred to as 'naming and shaming'.

Panic and outrage about the threat posed to 'the law-abiding community' by today's young people appears as a regular theme throughout much of the local and national press. Tony Blair himself understood the common appeal of his rally cry for an end to tolerance of today's unruly children, when he said in his Labour Conference Speech in 2003:

*"We cannot say we live in a just society, if we do not put an end to the anti-social behaviour, the disrespect, the conduct which we wouldn't tolerate from our own children and shouldn't have to tolerate from someone else's".*

At the end of January this year, the Home Office released its most recent crime figures, showing decreases in overall crime rates (Allen *et al* 2005), alongside several smaller research studies (Wood, 2003, Hayward and Sharp 2003). Almost as one, the media looked straight past the official press releases and reported one thing only: that nearly one in four young men reported having committed multiple offences. This was widely described as 'serious and persistent offending', despite the fact that the majority of the behaviours young people reported were fare evasion or making noise in a public place. There was similarly little interest in balancing the coverage with another finding released that day, that children and young people are more than twice as likely as any other age-group to be the victims of crime.

## Youth crime decreases

The Youth Justice Board is keen to emphasise that there has been a steady decrease in youth crime over many years, to the lowest level in recent history, but this does not apparently make a popular news story. 'Young People Now' magazine has launched a 'Positive Images' campaign to try to turn the tide of negativity about young people in the press. Charities, campaigners, researchers, and the UK Youth Parliament have consistently tried to balance the rhetoric with fact, reason and pleas for tolerance, but to apparently little avail. The belief, or perhaps more accurately the *desire* to believe, that there is an unprecedented crisis in the state of our youth appears as strong as ever, and is particularly strong in the tabloid press. Crime

and anti-social behaviour are the strongest underlying themes, but the complaints and sweeping stereotypes also include binge drinking and drugs, bad language and insolence, slovenliness, computer games, offensive music and wanton underage sexuality.

## Moral panic

It is not to be denied that a minority of young people are getting into real trouble, and should be a cause for our concern and attention. The sad but greater truth is that such moral panic at the depravity of the young is as old as the hills, perhaps better understood as a common and predictable trait of adulthood than as any objective reflection upon a new generation. Hundreds, and even thousands of years ago, some of the most respected writers and philosophers of the day feared the next generation as harbingers of the end of civilisation. The following quotations, reminiscent of many of today's best-known tabloid feature writers, contain all of the same themes:

*"The children now love luxury; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in the place of exercise. Children are tyrants, not the servants of their households. They contradict their parents, chatter before company.... and tyrannise their teachers."* Socrates, fourth century BC.

*"They [young men] have no respect for their parents or old age. As for the girls, they are foolish and immodest and unwomanly in speech, behaviour and dress."* Peter the Hermit, eleventh century AD.

*"I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words."*

Hesiod, eighth century BC.

What is so worrying about our modern version of the age-old phenomenon of fear and loathing, is that an unquestioning acceptance of the fear of young people, and the need to be *seen* to be tough on them, are taking such high priority over the protection of children's basic rights and freedoms. This is nowhere more evident than in the practice of 'naming and shaming' children given ASBOs. Not only is the child's right to respect for their privacy being routinely ignored, so is their right to protection.

The need to protect children from the glare of negative identifying publicity, has, until recently at least, been a widely accepted child protection norm. In the criminal justice sphere, youth courts are closed, and reporting restrictions statutorily enforced (unless very exceptionally lifted), in recognition that



**The media looked straight past the official press releases and reported one thing only: that nearly one in four young men reported having committed multiple offences. This was widely described as 'serious and persistent offending', despite the fact that the majority of the behaviours young people reported were fare evasion or making noise in a public place.**

whatever a child may have done wrong, the stigma, notoriety and exposure of open publicity would be detrimental not only to their safety, but also to their effective rehabilitation.

### **Named, shamed, and harassed**

Harassment and 'vigilante' retributions have been targeted at some families following ASBO publicity, affecting not only the ASBO subject, but also their siblings and other family members. Some local press coverage and publicity has even encouraged members of the public to photograph and film children. Among the many safeguarding concerns about releasing children's photos, personal details and home locations to the general public, should be the concern that such information, combined with the encouragement of community members to monitor and record children's movements, could both enable and mask the targeting of vulnerable children by abusive and exploitative adults.

Despite Government assertions that publicity is critical to

the effectiveness of an ASBO, there is no evidence to show that 'naming and shaming' offenders has any positive impact on preventing or policing offending. New guidance (Home Office 2005) simplistically offers recommendations to 'consider' human rights within decisions about publicity, without any illustration of which rights may be at play, or how to balance them. The terms 'safeguarding' and 'child protection' are not mentioned, despite new duties under the *Children Act 2004*, which are meant to ensure that all agencies explicitly consider children's safety and welfare in their decision-making. Clearly, it would seem, children subject to ASBOs are excluded from the universal safeguarding aspirations of *Every Child Matters*.

Government enthusiasm for 'naming and shaming' children sits in inexplicable contrast to the sensible and principled resistance of public pressure for 'Sarah's Law', which would have publicised the personal details and whereabouts of convicted 'paedophile' offenders. The shocking inconsistency of these positions illustrates the particular disregard for children's rights within anti-social behaviour policies. Unfortunately, if the new guidelines are followed, media stories about 'thugs' and 'yobs' will continue to be illustrated with the faces and personal details of real, vulnerable children, alongside local leaflets disclosing their home location. It is to be hoped that the Government will not wait until such exposure gives rise to truly tragic consequences before being willing to rethink.

*Kathy Evans is Assistant Director, Policy, The Children's Society.*

### **References**

- Allen J., Dodd T., and Salisbury H. (2005), *Crime in England and Wales: Quarterly update to September 2004*, January 2005 (available on internet only at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/hosb0305.pdf>)
- Home Office, Anti-Social Behaviour Unit (2005), *Working Together: Guidance on publicising anti-social behaviour orders*, March 2005, London
- Hayward R. and Sharp C., *Young People and Anti-Social Behaviour: Findings from Crime and Justice Survey 2003*, Home Office Findings 245
- Wood M., *Victimisation of Young People: Findings from Crime and Justice Survey 2003*, Home Office Findings 246.