

Research Findings

Anti-Social Behaviour Interventions with Young People

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Concerns about youth anti-social behaviour have prompted intense political debate and reform, heralding the introduction of an array of measures to prevent its escalation. Some interventions, like the ASBO, have been the subject of much advocacy, comment and critique whilst others, such as the more widely used Acceptable Behaviour Contract (ABC), have largely evaded public scrutiny. The Coalition Government's recent White Paper, *Putting victims first - more effective responses to antisocial behaviour*, offers a timely attempt to streamline the diverse *ad hoc* powers that have been created in recent years. It also allows us an opportunity to take stock and draw on research findings to promote evidence-based policy and practice. A team based at the University of Leeds conducted an in-depth study of anti-social behaviour (ASB) interventions with young people in England. It focused on the use of formal ASB warning letters, ABCs and ASBOs and the inter-relations between these tools. The study found:

- ✓ Most work to tackle ASB occurs before recourse to the use of legal tools like the ASBO, but this is hampered by a lack of joined-up approaches within and between partners.
- ✓ The number of young people in receipt of ASB interventions varies widely across areas and does not correspond simply to population size or levels of deprivation.
- ✓ For many young people ASB interventions are not an early intervention sitting below the criminal justice system, but rather supplement or provide alternatives to youth justice.
- ✓ A preference for working preventatively with young people and parents, providing support alongside clear boundaries which specify possible sanctions for breach.
- ✓ Widespread and considerable variations in ASB policies and use of tools, influenced by local preferences for particular approaches, the nature of partnership relations, the willingness of key individuals to innovate and the availability of local support services.
- ✓ The availability of suitable support services is uneven and geographically contingent.
- ✓ A significant 'gap' between formal statements of local policies and the realities of what local front-line professionals did in practice.
- ✓ Inconsistencies over the implementation of, and commitment to, a tiered approach to ASB tools or 'ladder of interventions', which contribute to young people climbing the ladder at different speeds in different areas.
- ✓ Where not complemented by access to supportive services, overly punitive approaches can foster disengagement and undermine the capacity of young people and families to nurture the conditions necessary to secure long-term compliance.
- ✓ For young people, ABCs were most effective when they were issued in a fair and proportionate way in which the young person and parents felt listened to and respected.
- ✓ ASB interventions can help or hinder (whether intentionally or not) the capacity and willingness of parents and significant others to foster desistance and promote prevention.
- ✓ Experienced practitioners emphasised the importance of 'soft' skills, interpersonal relations and respectful procedures in working with young people and their parents.
- ✓ Concerns about differential experiences of 'justice by tenure', given that many ASB tools are either tenure specific or seen as more effective in relation to those in social housing.

Data and Monitoring Issues:

The research highlights considerable problems in data collection, management, sharing and use:

- Incompatible data management and IT systems often rendered partnership working problematic, exacerbated by inter-organisational differences in measurement and disparities in data storage.
- Inconsistent monitoring and a dearth of comparative, cross-institutional data prevent practitioners from assessing the impacts of their work on young people.
- As ASB, prevention and youth justice databases tend to operate in isolation little is known about young people's pathways through different interventions and interactions with youth justice.
- Data sharing remains one of the most intractable and contentious aspects of ASB practice. Technological and cultural barriers to data exchange stymie the effectiveness of ASB interventions and partnership work.
- Misunderstandings of data protection legislation are widespread and reluctance on the part of some partner agencies to share information remains a significant obstacle to effective work. Practitioners were uncertain about the circumstances and purposes for which data can and should be exchanged. Some formed arbitrary distinctions between what they were willing to exchange in face-to-face interactions and what they were prepared to share electronically.

Lessons for Policy and Practice:

The research highlights the need to:

- Ensure continuity of service provision and tracking of individuals across relevant agencies.
- Think strategically about how different tools and different (prevention, ASB and youth justice) systems of interventions interact, and about the principles that inform their implementation.
- Ensure that appropriate support services are available across areas and adequately funded.
- Improve the quality and comparability of data to inform decision-making and joined-up working. Good quality data collection, management and use matters because they:
 - Allow for joined-up provision and continuity of service over-time and between different providers;
 - Provide the capacity to track individuals and families through service provision and diverse interventions, and assess their trajectories and pathways;
 - Enable interventions to be used in a more strategic manner in which consideration is given to the relations between the various tools and how they interact;
 - Provide an evidence-base from which to assess effectiveness and to evaluate what works, for whom and in which contexts;
 - Ensure the best use of resources and facilitate best practice;
 - Afford opportunities to monitor performance and render services accountable and reviewable.

There are concerns that the Government's 'localism' agenda will serve to exacerbate the quality of data collection, amplify inconsistencies and increase differential practices and experiences of justice.

There are dangers that the proposed new crime prevention injunction will lower the threshold for court-based intervention and disrupt existing preventative pre-ASBO work by partner organisations.

About the Project

The research gathered data from a range of sources in four community safety partnerships in England, comprising two large northern cities and two London boroughs. Data were collected on the use of ASB interventions with all young people given a formal warning, ABC or ASBO between 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2010. The research sought to track their pathways back over time and over the 12 months after their intervention. Over 120 interviews and 18 focus groups were conducted across the fieldwork sites with professionals, young people and their parents.

A full report entitled *Anti-Social Behaviour Interventions with Young People* will be published by Policy Press. See: <http://www.policypress.co.uk/>. This project was funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

