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Perceptions and experiences of antisocial behaviour

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Tackling antisocial behaviour continues to be a major focus for government policy and is now a part of the Home Office's Public Service Agreement. Results from the British Crime Survey (BCS) have shown it to be an area of concern for a relatively large proportion of the population of England and Wales. A new set of questions included in the 2003/04 BCS aimed to explore what people's perceptions of problems were based on, the nature of experiences that informed perceptions and the impact for individuals and communities. The results are reported here.

Key points

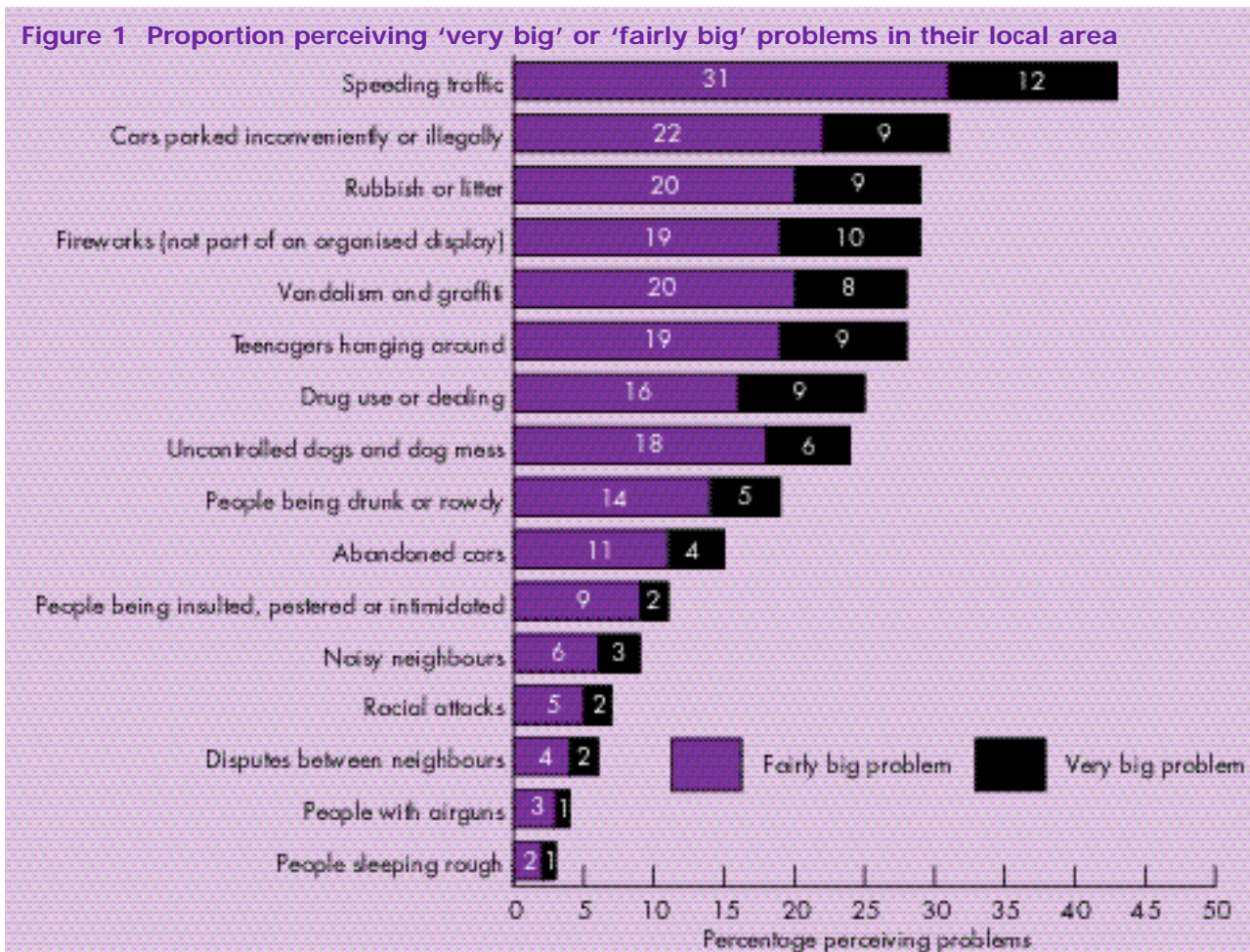
- Of those aged 16 or over in England and Wales, three-quarters (76%) perceived one or more of 16 types of behaviour to be a problem. Over a third (36%) said one or more was a 'very big' problem.
- The type of area where people lived was the strongest predictor of perceived high levels of antisocial behaviour. Those in 'hard-pressed' areas were far more likely to perceive problems than those in areas characterised by 'wealthy achievers'.
- A high proportion of those *perceiving* problems in their area had *experienced* problems in the previous 12 months. For many this experience was frequent. Despite this, only a small percentage of incidents were reported.
- The specific type of incident experienced varied widely. Although a large proportion resulted in general annoyance, serious offences were also experienced, particularly in urban areas.
- 'Offenders' were generally groups of young people of both sexes. The parties involved were often strangers, although from the local area.
- Serious emotional reactions to some experiences were reported. Even with low-level incidents, the impact on quality of life was cumulative (6% of the population reported a high impact and 11% a medium impact as a result of young people hanging around).
- The research suggests that initiatives which target 'hard-pressed' urban areas and focus on increasing the ability and will of a community to deal with local problems are more likely to be successful.

Extent of perceived antisocial behaviour problems in the local area

There were widespread perceptions of problems with antisocial behaviour (ASB) in residents' local areas. Of those aged 16 or over in England and Wales, three-quarters (76%) perceived one or more of 16 types of behaviour

to be a problem. Over a third (36%) said one or more was a 'very big' problem.

The most commonly mentioned problem was speeding traffic (43% of the population). Six other types of behaviour were each regarded as a problem by over a quarter of the population (Figure 1).



The significant numbers perceiving a wide range of problems (relating to misuse of public space, environmental damage, disregard for the community and acts directed at individuals) indicate that there is not a dominant feature to the nature of ASB. Between the 2002/03 BCS and the 2003/04 BCS, there were significant falls in the proportion of people perceiving problems. This followed gradual increases over the last decade (Dodd et al., 2004).

Patterns and risk factors for perceiving high levels of antisocial behaviour

The national average of 16% perceiving high levels of ASB (based on a measure that combined seven types of problem) masked considerable variation between groups. Area-based variables were particularly discriminating. More likely to perceive high levels of ASB were:

- those in inner city areas (34%)
- those in areas where respondents did not feel neighbours looked out for one another (33%)
- those in 'hard-pressed' ACORN areas (31%).

In terms of household and personal characteristics, those most at risk of perceiving high levels of ASB were living in

ACORN areas (copyright of CACI Ltd)

ACORN – A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods – is based on census and other data. 'Hard-pressed' areas include areas characterised by low-income families, residents in council areas and people living in high rise, inner city estates (see Wood, 2004 for more detail).

social rented accommodation (30%), were victims of crime (29%) and those in 'very bad' health (28%).

Underlying predictors of perceived high levels of antisocial behaviour

These findings are useful for looking at the pattern of perceived high levels of ASB resulting from the interplay of risk factors. However, it is not clear to what extent apparently strong associations actually reflect a direct link. For example, age may only be strongly associated with perceived high levels of ASB as a result of its association with another variable, such as type of area. To understand which factors are really important, risk factors that are predictive of high perceived ASB independently of other factors need to be identified. Multivariate analysis was carried out with this aim (see Wood, 2004 for more detail).

The type of area in which people lived was the strongest independent predictor for high levels of perceived ASB included in the analysis (Table 1). Those in hard-pressed areas had odds of being in the group with high levels of perceived ASB that were four times higher than those in 'wealthy achiever' areas. This suggests that interventions that target hard-pressed areas are more likely to be effective.

Collective efficacy

The term 'collective efficacy' was coined by Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) – it refers to the ability and will of a community to deal with local problems. A BCS question asked respondents about their view of whether neighbours

Table 1 Strong independent predictors of perceived high antisocial behaviour found in multivariate analysis

1	Living in a hard-pressed ACORN area
2	Being a victim of crime in the last year
3	High relative proportion of 10- to 24-year-olds in local population
4	Being a young person
5	Living in London or the South East
6	Low relative proportion of economically active people in local population

Note: See Wood, 2004 for more detail

look out for one another in the local area. The results have been used as a proxy 'collective efficacy' measure.

Collective efficacy was found to be the third strongest predictor of ASB after type of area and criminal victimisation. It was not included in the multivariate analysis summarised in Table 1 as it is difficult to establish whether high levels of ASB cause collective efficacy to be low or low collective efficacy causes ASB to be high.

Sampson and Raudenbush concluded that collective efficacy helped prevent disorder (as well as crime) and there is evidence to support this from the BCS. Therefore, interventions designed to increase the level of collective efficacy in an area are likely to have an impact on ASB.

Actual experience of antisocial behaviour: extent and frequency

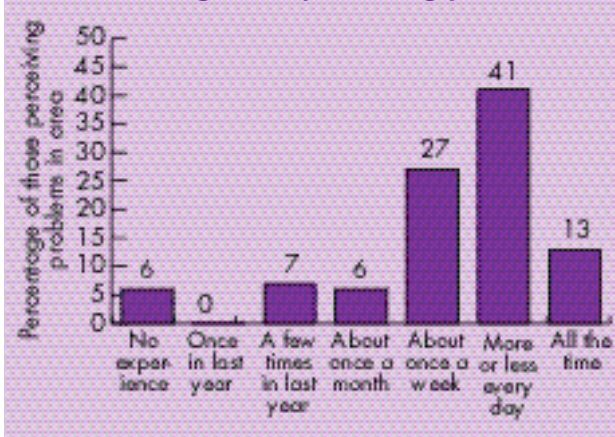
There are difficulties with counting incidents of ASB, particularly in terms of establishing clear definitions. Therefore, the BCS used perceived 'problems' in the local area as a measure. Further questions were asked to establish the extent to which perceptions of problems reflected actual personal experiences.

Among those *perceiving* problems in their local area, personal *experience* of those problems in the previous year was very common. The proportion of those perceiving problems who also had experience of them was:

- incidents with young people hanging around (94%)
- noisy neighbours (87%)
- drunk or rowdy behaviour (87%)
- vandalism and graffiti (85%).
- drug use or dealing (55%).

Among those who said there were problems in their area, experience of ASB was frequent. This contrasts with criminal offences where there is a low level of repeat victimisation (Dodd et al., 2004). 'Young people hanging around' was the type of behaviour experienced most frequently of those considered. Over half (53%) of those perceiving problems experienced this 'more or less every day' or 'all the time' and a further 27% experienced it 'around once a week' (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Frequency of young people hanging around among those perceiving problems



Reporting incidents

The vast majority of ASB incidents were not reported to any agency, nor were they resolved through an informal approach to those causing problems. The type of incident and its impact influenced whether someone reported or complained about the problem. Those experiencing noisy neighbours were more likely to have reported or complained about an incident in the previous year than those experiencing drunk or rowdy behaviour (54% compared with 20%).

In general, people felt that the parents of those involved or the police were responsible for reducing problems. Local people themselves were not widely felt to be responsible for reducing problems except in cases where there was a personal relationship between the parties.

The nature of incidents

The specific nature of ASB incidents within the broad categories varied widely within and between types of area. Concentrating on incidents relating to young people hanging around, the most commonly experienced behaviour was:

- being loud or rowdy on the street (48%)
- swearing (48%)
- drinking (31%)
- blocking the pavement (29%)
- dropping litter (24%)
- being abusive (17%).

It is debatable whether a gathering of young people in a particular place should be described as a 'problem' when they are 'just being a general nuisance' (43%) or when they are 'not doing anything in particular' (6%). In over a third of incidents (36%), those perceiving problems acknowledged that the young people were not deliberately being antisocial.

However, there are certain types of behaviour that seem to be more serious and more likely to be agreed to be problematic. One area is the environmental damage being caused by litter (24%), damaging property (5%) and writing graffiti (5%). More seriously, some types of behaviour are directly aimed at individuals, such as abuse (17%), intimidation (11%), physical assault (1%) and robbery (1%). People living in urban areas were more likely to experience this type of more serious incident.

In general, the behaviour experienced was not directly targeted at the respondent (this applied to only 10% of incidents where young people were hanging around). However, low-level incidents can still have an impact on individuals and communities, particularly where frequency of experience is high.

'Offenders' and 'victims'

The terms 'offenders' and 'victims' should be viewed with caution given the contested nature of ASB (the perspective is the victim's here). For the types of ASB considered, young people of both sexes (but especially males) were those seen to be behaving antisocially generally. Those involved in drunk or rowdy behaviour and drug use or dealing tended to be slightly older (usually around 18- to 20-years-old) than 'young people hanging around' and those involved in vandalism (more likely to be 13- to 15-years-old). Noisy neighbours were from a wider range of ages.

There was a feeling among respondents that the same offenders were responsible for a range of ASB, suggesting that targeting of particular offenders may have an impact on several problem areas.

Incidents mostly involved strangers, although offenders were largely thought to be from the local area. In hard-pressed areas, where perceived problems were at their highest, there was more likely to be a personal relationship between the parties. At the same time, there was some evidence that cultural gaps, particularly in relation to different age groups, may increase the perception that behaviour is antisocial. Interventions should take the negative effects of close proximity to offenders into account while also seeking to improve relationships within communities.

Impact

Although emotional responses to ASB were not as frequently acute as with criminal victimisation, serious emotional impact was evident for some. For example, 27% of those perceiving problems with noisy neighbours experienced serious emotional reactions. The wide and

frequent experience of ASB compared with crime means that emotional impact is to be taken seriously. An impact on behaviour, including how people use public space, was widespread even for people who had not personally experienced problems (some behavioural effect was reported by 47% of those perceiving problems with drunk or rowdy behaviour).

In total, 6% of the national population reported a high impact on their quality of life as a result of young people hanging around, with a further 11% reporting a medium impact (these proportions are higher when more than one type of ASB is considered). While these are small percentages, comparison with rates of criminal victimisation may give some perspective – only 2% experienced a burglary in the previous year (Dodd et al., 2004).

At particular risk of experiencing a high impact on quality of life were those living in areas they felt had low collective efficacy, and those in hard-pressed and inner city areas. Multivariate analysis showed that a high frequency of experience was the strongest predictor of high impact on quality of life.

Looking at the wider effects of ASB, its frequency and cumulative impact mean it has a 'signal' quality that disproportionately influences people's view of their area (Innes and Fielding, 2002). It was particularly strongly related to fear of violence and property crime and also to the basic extent to which people enjoyed living in a particular area.

Summary

There are widespread perceptions of problems with ASB in residents' local areas – these include a varied range of types of behaviour. Perceptions are commonly the result of frequent personal experience and, although the incidents are rarely serious in isolation, their cumulative impact is important for individuals and for communities. The evidence from the BCS suggests that initiatives targeted in hard-pressed urban areas which focus on increasing collective efficacy are more likely to be successful.

The British Crime Survey

The BCS is a face to face survey of people aged 16 and over living in private households in England and Wales. In 2003/04, the sample consisted of 37,931 respondents plus a boost of 3,463 black and minority ethnic respondents. The response rate was 74%.

References

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For a more detailed report see *Perceptions and experience of antisocial behaviour: findings from the British Crime Survey 2003/04* by Martin Wood (2004). It is available as Online Report No. 49/04 on <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/>

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