



Young people, crime and public perceptions: a review of the literature

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Introduction

Offending amongst young people has been at the centre of public and policy makers' attention in recent years. Media coverage of high-profile cases and the frequent portrayal of hooded teenagers terrorising communities would suggest that young people are becoming increasingly criminalised. The image of young people today appears to be under threat – indeed, one study found that 71 per cent of media stories about young people were negative and a third of articles concerned the issue of crime (Ipsos MORI, 2006). The consequence of this intense focus on young people's behaviour is that they are faced with the challenge of growing up in a culture that has widespread negative perceptions of youth (HM Treasury and DCSF, 2007).

Public perceptions matter – especially as government agendas and policies are inevitably shaped by the concerns and attitudes of society. But how accurate is this perception of worsening youth crime? Has offending amongst young people really scaled new heights? This review of literature on youth crime and public opinion attempts to establish the facts by asking the following questions.



- Has there been a change in the levels of youth crime in recent years?
- What is the current public perception of youth crime? Does the public's perception of youth crime correspond with actual levels of offending amongst young people?
- Where perceptions of crime differ greatly from the reality, what are the underlying reasons for this?

Looking beyond the newspaper headlines is essential if we are to find out where the genuine problems are. If youth crime really is on the rise, then more time and money should be invested in diverting young people from crime or working with those already exhibiting offending behaviour. If, however, it is the public's exaggerated fear of youth crime that is the biggest issue, then Government and local authorities may consider ways in which these concerns could be allayed. Of course, both are equally valid investments but in order to target resources appropriately, it is important to assess the reality of youth crime and how the public feel about it accurately.

Key findings: changes in overall crime levels

Before reviewing trends in youth crime, it is worth considering what has happened to patterns of crime generally over the past three decades. All the evidence indicates that crime levels have recently stabilised after a period of decline.

Evidence from self-report surveys

- The number of crimes increased through the 1980s and early 1990s, peaking in 1995. The levels of crime then decreased and have been stable since 2005/06 (Jansson, 2007).
- There has been an overall fall of 42 per cent since 1995, representing over 8 million fewer crimes (Jansson, 2007).
- The number of crimes is the same as it was 25 years ago (Jansson, 2007).
- Comparing 2005/06 with 2006/07, the British Crime Survey (BCS) shows no significant change in crime (for the second year running) (Nicholas *et al.*, 2007).
- Since 1995, violent crime has fallen by 41 per cent (Nicholas *et al.*, 2007).

What the official crime statistics tell us

Nicholas *et al.* (2007) report the following statistics.

- Recorded crime increased during most of the 1980s, reaching a peak in 1992. Crime figures then fell each year until 1998/2000 when there was a change in the Home Office counting rules.
- This was followed by the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard in 2002, which led to a rise in recording in 2002/03 and 2003/04.
- Recorded crime has since fallen by 10 per cent between 2003/04 and 2006/07.
- Crimes recorded by police in 2006/07 decreased by two percent, the third consecutive fall.
- Police recorded violence against the person fell by one per cent between 2005/06 and 2006/07, the first fall in eight years.

Key findings: trends in youth crime

Unfortunately, it is difficult to construct an accurate picture of youth offending, due to various data-collection issues (e.g. a lack of long-term, self-report studies) and changes to legislation that can affect the numbers of young people entering the criminal justice system. Indeed, one author writing on the subject conceded that the 'true facts' about youth crime are unknown in principle

the image of young people today appears to be under threat

(Muncie, 2001). It is surprising that more is not done to ascertain the reality of youth crime, given the apparent levels of public concern, as well as the time and resources invested in addressing what is commonly perceived to be a growing problem. The facts are that 'overall' crime levels are not rising (a fact supported both by the British Crime Survey and official crime statistics). 'Detected' youth crime shows signs of some increase in recent years (after a period of long-term decline) but this may be associated with factors unrelated to the actual crime levels (e.g. a political focus on antisocial behaviour and breaches of subsequent orders). In contrast, self-report studies do not indicate a rise in overall offending levels amongst young people. The evidence appears contradictory and it is easy, therefore, to see how statistics can be used to give an entirely false impression of crime levels – especially where the reader is not provided with context or made aware of other possible explanations.

What the official crime statistics tell us

- Between 1992 and 2002 the number of 'detected' offences fell by 21 per cent (Nacro, 2006).
- In 2006/07, the number of offences resulting in a disposal by children and young people aged between 10 and 17 years was 295,129. This was an increase of 7246 (2.5 per cent) since 2003/04 but a decrease of 6731 (2.2 per cent) from 2005/06. This rise could be associated with factors unrelated to actual crime levels, such as a police target to increase the number of offences brought to justice to 1.25 million by March 2008 (Youth Justice Board, 2008).

Evidence from self-report surveys

This review has identified three self-report offending surveys covering timeframes from 1992 to 1998 (Flood-Page *et al.*, 2000), 2001 to 2003 (Wilson *et al.*, 2006) and 2001 to 2005 (Phillips and Chamberlain, 2006). All three surveys concluded that overall offending levels remained stable during their respective data collection periods.

- Between 1992 and 1998, the proportion of those admitting offending in the preceding 12 months did not change significantly (Flood-Page *et al.*, 2000).
- Between 2001 and 2005, self-report offending levels remained relatively static. For example, in 2001, 25 per cent of young people admitted to having committed an offence in the last 12 months, compared with 27 per cent in 2005 (Phillips and Chamberlain, 2006).
- Between 2003 and 2005, the proportions of young people admitting to having committed an offence remained stable across the three waves of the survey (at around 25 per cent) (Wilson *et al.*, 2006).
- Similarly, between 2003 and 2005, the proportions of young people admitting to antisocial behaviour remained stable (Wilson, *et al.* 2006).
- Between 2003 and 2005, the proportions of young people who were victims of crime remained stable (Wilson *et al.*, 2006).

Key findings: public perceptions

A scoping of the literature has revealed that the public's view of youth crime is a relatively under-researched area, with little systematic attempt to define and measure public opinion. From the few studies completed, it can be said that there is a tendency for the public to overestimate the scale of youth crime (however, this is also true for crime generally).

- The 2006/07 British Crime Survey showed that, contrary to official recorded and self-report data, there was a general perception that crime was increasing. Nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) of respondents suggested that crime was rising nationally, whilst just over two-fifths (41 per cent) reported the view that crime in their local area had increased over the last two years.



- Hough and Roberts (2004) found that the majority of respondents in their sample had the tendency to overestimate young people's contribution to overall offending behaviour, echoing previous findings. Mattinson and Mirrlees-Black (2000), for example, reported that over a quarter (28 per cent) of 1998 BCS respondents believed that young people were responsible for most crime, whereas just less than a quarter of all known offenders who had committed indictable offences in 1997 were young people aged between ten and 17 years old.
- Ipsos MORI (2006) revealed a tendency for the public to overestimate the extent to which youth crime involved acts of violence. Respondents suggested that almost half of all youth crime involved violence, whereas recorded crime figures revealed an average of one fifth.

Interestingly, perceptions of youth crime are not always based on personal experiences. For example, Anderson *et al.* (2005) reported that respondents' actual experience of youth-related crime problems was lower than their portrayal of the extent of these problems in their local area. Hence, it was suggested that 'perceptions of prevalence tend to outstrip direct experience of youth crime'. This phenomenon also implies that external factors (such as media reporting) have a role to play in shaping the public's view of youth crime.

NFER conducted a separate piece of statistical analysis using public perception data from the Best Value User Survey 2006/07 and Youth Justice Board annual offending data 2005/06. No correlation was found between the two sets of data, which again suggests that there is no relationship between perceptions of youth behaviour and the actual prevalence of youth offences. For example, one would expect more negative perceptions in high-crime areas, compared to areas where recorded offences are low. As no relationship was apparent, factors other than direct experience of 'youth crime' may be responsible for contributing to a mismatch between the perceptions and reality of such behaviour.

Key findings: reasons for public perceptions

How can the disparity between public perceptions of youth crime and the actual reality of youth offending be explained? The literature pointed to a number of factors that may influence and shape public opinion. It is worth noting, though, that the literature tends to explore this issue with regard to crime generally, rather than youth crime specifically.

Media and information

According to the literature, media coverage would appear to be implicated in the mismatch between the perception and reality of youth crime.

- Hough and Roberts (2004) report that public opinion is systematically misinformed about youth crime, and that the media is responsible for a large proportion of this misinformation. In their survey, despite the overall trend of falling crime levels, three-quarters of respondents believed that there had been an increase in the number of young offenders. Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of these people cited media reports as their chief source of information.
- The media tends to be selective in its reporting of youth crime, focussing on the most violent and sensational offences – these are in the minority and not representative of the types of offences that make up the majority of youth court hearings (Hough and Roberts, 2004). A recent report by the Youth Justice Board (based on annual youth offending statistics 2006–07) recognised that a number of high-profile crimes committed by, and on, children and young people has affected the public perception of youth crime (Youth Justice Board, 2008).

- Generally, much media content relating to young people is crime related and conveys negative messages or imagery. A recent survey suggests that 71 per cent of articles involving young people are negative and a third are crime orientated (HM Treasury and DCSF, 2007).

Personal characteristics and circumstances

Elements of the literature suggest that perceptions of youth crime may result from individual and collective characteristics/circumstances.

- In terms of perceptions of crime overall, Lovbakke and Moley (2007) noted that women were more likely than men to think that national crime levels had increased 'a lot' over the last two years.
- Age was also seen as a key determinant, with respondents in 'older' age-groups perceiving that overall crime levels had increased, although it is apparent that those from younger age groups (16–24) were the most likely to have high levels of worry about specific types of crime, notably violent and vehicle crime (Lovbakke and Moley, 2007).
- Anderson *et al.* (2005) found that housing tenure and neighbourhood/location were significant factors in respondent's perceptions of youth crime. For example, 75 per cent of respondents living in the social rented sector suggested that the level of youth crime was higher than a decade ago, compared with 68 per cent of owner-occupier respondents. Similarly, 79 per cent of those in the most deprived areas, compared with 61 per cent in the least deprived areas, thought that youth crime had increased.
- A lack of knowledge and understanding about young people and 'youth culture' may contribute to the willingness to create and accept negative portrayals. For example, Anderson *et al.* (2005) note that a sizeable minority of all adults have little or no social contact with young people between the ages of 11 and 24. The implication of this is that those adults who have least contact with young people are consistently more likely to have negative views of them.

Approaches to youth and 'youth crime'

The literature suggests that public perceptions have been influenced by the way in which youth crime is approached by legislature and criminal justice agencies.

- It has been contended that the behaviour of young people may have become increasingly associated with the broader contexts of crime. For example, Waiton (2001) argues that interactions between young people and adults are viewed through 'the prism of danger and safety'. For example, non-school attendance, which might previously have been interpreted primarily as an educational welfare issue, might now be seen more in terms of (i) the risk posed by the truant to society, and (ii) the risks to which young people out of school are exposed (Ennals, 2003).
- Activities that may once have been regarded as 'merely immature or adolescent in the past are being seen as problematic and potentially leading to criminality' (Waiton, 2001). Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) have been identified as having a pivotal role in this. Bateman (2006), for example, explored the re-categorisation of crime and suggested that 'low-level disorder has become conflated with crime, evidenced by a near obsession with attending to anti-social behaviour'.
- Mooney and Young (2006) suggest that ASBOs reflected and contributed to the tendency to 'define deviancy up' and to potentially label as 'criminal' a whole range of subjectively defined activities. It is suggested that ASBOs have an element of predisposition, whereby a breach of an order will automatically criminalise an individual, thereby potentially supporting public perceptions and fears of increasing levels of juvenile crime.

how can the disparity between public perceptions of youth crime and the actual reality of youth offending be explained?



Conclusions and recommendations

Long-term, self-report offending surveys for measuring youth crime

It is generally acknowledged that official crime statistics are subject to many inherent limitations, such as changes to police recording practices and the absence of crimes unreported by the public. Therefore, in order to shed light on the realities of youth crime, alternative sources of information on youth offending behaviour are essential. Although self-report studies have been conducted, they have been intermittent and therefore it is difficult to make confident assertions about long-term trends in youth crime. The absence of corroborating evidence on youth crime means that it would be hard to evaluate the true impact of strategies or policies that seek to address youth offending. Levels of overall crime can be assessed through the large-scale British Crime Survey (a self-report victimisation survey), as well as official statistics. A similar long-term, self-report offending survey for young people would make a valuable addition to this analysis of criminal behaviour.

Better definition and measurement of public attitudes

An analysis of public perceptions of youth crime would benefit from more precise definition and measurement. For example, the research may show that the public wrongly attributes a large proportion of offending to young people or believes that youth offending has rapidly escalated – but is this simply a case of being misinformed or is the public genuinely concerned and fearful of youth crime? It may be that better dissemination of crime data is required so that the public is given accurate and understandable information. Alternatively, it may be that the public's overestimation of youth crime is symptomatic of a more serious concern, in which case, strategies would be needed to improve communities' sense of safety.

A balanced representation of youth people

In recent years, national priorities and local services have sought to tackle problems such as antisocial behaviour and youth offending. However, raising the public's awareness of these issues can convey a negative impression of young people as a whole. While such problems rightly deserve attention, there is the danger that young people can become labelled and 'demonised'. In order to avoid fuelling this negativity, local authorities perhaps need to evaluate their communication strategies and consider how they might affect the profile of young people in the area. For example, publicising steps to tackle antisocial behaviour may offer reassurance to some but equally, highlighting the problem could stimulate fear or concern in others. Local authorities need to achieve a balance between responding to youth crime concerns and profiling the positive activities of young people in the area.

Building bridges in the community

For those who lack direct contact with young people, it is easy to see how attitudes are shaped by external sources of information, such as tabloid newspapers and TV reporting. Unfortunately, media coverage tends not to present an entirely balanced picture of today's youth. Therefore, in order to counteract these negative messages it is important to bring together communities so that perceptions are based on direct personal experiences, rather than on exaggerated media representations. The need to build community cohesion has been recognised in Aiming High, the Government's 10-year strategy for positive activities: 'the level of fear and mistrust at play today undermines community cohesion and corrodes the stake young people need to feel they have in society' (HM Treasury and DCSF, 2007). It goes on to advocate the creation of positive activities, such as volunteering and intergenerational activities, to build better relations across different age groups.

Identifying and responding to public concern

Given that there is variation in how different members of the community view crime, it would be worth pinpointing those groups where concern is most prevalent. In this way, strategies to address public anxiety could be targeted most effectively. For example, public information campaigns regarding local authority plans to tackle antisocial behaviour could focus on particular localities, thereby reassuring residents that something is being done. Equally, community work to foster better relations could be directed towards residents who are likely to be most fearful of youth crime.

Final comment – challenges

As recognised by Anderson *et al.* (2005) the problem of youth crime is not simply related to an objective number of criminal actions. The 'problem' also depends on how we, as individuals and as a society, feel about it – and how we deal with it. Dealing with the problem will require a two-pronged approach. On one level, there is the need to reduce the incidence of youth crime and to divert young people away from criminal activity. On another level, the public's concern of youth crime requires attention – and as we have found, the degree of concern can be unrelated to the scale of crime. The recent Best Value User satisfaction survey (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007) found that 57 per cent of respondents reported young people hanging around on the streets as a big or fairly big problem (this percentage was higher compared to other antisocial behaviours, such as vandalism and littering). At the same time, only 23 per cent of people felt informed about what the council is doing to tackle antisocial behaviour. Clearly, there is some work to be done on responding to public concern and making sure there is accurate information both about the levels of youth crime/antisocial behaviour, and about strategies to tackle the problem where it exists.

the problem of youth crime is not simply related to an objective number of criminal actions

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More information

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