The drivers of perceptions of anti-social behaviour

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Anti-social behaviour (ASB) is a confusing term which has been variously applied to a wide spectrum of activity, from serious criminal violence and persistent ongoing intimidation and harassment at one end of the spectrum, to subjective feelings of unease caused by relatively minor and perhaps occasional environmental disturbances, such as litter, at the other. In this report the authors analyse ASB in terms of the seven-strand definition used to measure perceptions in the British Crime Survey (BCS). This definition of ASB tends towards a focus on the less serious end of the ASB spectrum.

The report proposes that perceptions of ASB ('PASB'), in the technical BCS definition mentioned, are a matter of *interpretation*. There is frequently a mismatch between an objective measure of ASB, and perceptions. Based on a review of available research studies, the authors model two processes of interpretation that seem to be fundamental in driving this, and suggest that the reason why people make different *interpretations* of behaviour rests in social connectedness. Consequently, interventions that hold the potential to deliver long-lasting reductions in PASB are rooted in processes of engagement targeted at building empathy and mutual respect.

Interventions

Action to ameliorate PASB can be implemented at both local and national levels, focusing on both the physical environment and social dynamics of neighbourhoods. Promising intervention strategies include the following.

Shorter term, neighbourhood level

- **Public information strategies** such as ensuring residents are **fully informed** about local patterns of crime and disorder in ways which may mitigate fear and promote individuals' sense of control over risk in their neighbourhoods, and fostering **positive media relations** (e.g. between the local authority and local newspapers) to encourage the dissemination of 'success stories' in tackling ASB, and positive stories about young people, and to discourage 'scare stories' and the misrepresentation of isolated or unusual instances of ASB as commonplace.

- **Public reassurance initiatives** such as neighbourhood wardens and community policing can, when perceived to be supportive and legitimate, send 'control signals' that suggest to residents that 'something is being done' about their local problems, thus reducing fear.

Contents

Keywords

Anti-social behaviour

Perception

Rapid evidence assessment

Disorder

Community cohesion

Home Office

- **Environmental interventions** work to reduce signs of neighbourhood physical decline in communities and can serve to reduce the likelihood that PASB will be equated with broader social decline.

Longer term, neighbourhood level

- Increasing **community cohesion and building trust** can diminish the tendency for people to operate with one-dimensional or stereotyped views of other people or groups, and increase mutual respect and empathy.

- Action can be taken to address **the concentration of socio-economic deprivation and crime problems within particular localities,** which help create the conditions for PASB (and ASB).

Shorter term, national level

- Policy should try to move away from subjective interpretations of what constitutes ASB (as enshrined in the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act) towards a **greater prescription and definition**.

Longer term, national level

- Policy should attempt to address the **social and economic conditions** that are associated with ASB and PASB, more specifically deprivation, poor social integration and inequality, as these structural elements are key determinants of PASB.

- **Government action to reassure anxious publics**. PASB may be lowered through action designed to mitigate a range of social anxieties and insecurities which act as mediating mechanisms that lead to PASB. These measures should aim to improve the quality of community relations in the longer term.