The drivers of perceptions of anti-social behaviour

Simon Mackenzie, Jon Bannister, John Flint, Sadie Parr, Andrew Millie and Jennifer Fleetwood

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

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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.

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Aims and objectives

To identify and explain the key drivers of people's perceptions of anti-social behaviour. The British Crime Survey asks about perceptions of seven strands of ASB and the authors use these as the basis of their definition of ASB.

Method

A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA), reviewing the post-1995 English language published research literature identified through systematic database searching, combined with a thematic review of other known relevant literature and expert consultation. Sixty-one studies formed the core of the REA, supplemented by other materials. Quality review protocols were implemented to ensure the quality of the evidence. Some key studies relied on were not British; inferences drawn from these studies must consider cultural and other contextual differences. The evidence gathered through these methods was further developed by way of the production of a framework for understanding the drivers of perceptions of anti-social behaviour (PASB), and the identification of examples of policy approaches which are consistent with this framework.

Main findings

This report presents findings of a Rapid Evidence Assessment of the drivers of PASB. A number of findings hold implications for policy makers and practitioners attempting to address PASB and ASB.

Some studies have highlighted that certain demographic and other 'background' factors are correlated to higher PASB. Younger people, women, and those with prior victimisation experiences (both real and vicarious) are more likely to have high perceptions of ASB, as are those living in more deprived, and in densely populated areas, and where there are high levels of violent crime.

Other studies look beyond these factors, and suggest that PASB is a matter of *interpretation* by people in the locality. There is frequently a mismatch between the objective measurement of ASB and how residents perceive ASB. Based on the research studies in this REA, the authors model two processes of interpretation that seem to be fundamental in driving this.

- First, people utilise the observation of a particular phenomenon (e.g. teenagers hanging around) as a 'shorthand' way to judge the level of disorder in an area.

- Second, PASB is linked to deeper seated anxieties about the state of society in general, and qualities of the neighbourhood in particular.

The reason why people make different interpretations of behaviour rests in social connectedness. The connectedness of an individual to both other users of particular spaces and to particular types of ASB is important in their evaluation of whether that behaviour is problematic or not. In essence, the more we know of those we share space with (say a group of young people), the easier it becomes for us to assess whether they pose a threat to us. By implication, the greater the connectedness of an individual, the less likely they would be to interpret any given behaviour as problematic ASB.

This model of 'interpretation' provides a theoretical framework for the drivers of PASB through which policy makers may develop interventions aimed at reducing both PASB and ASB. This framework indicates two broad areas of intervention – firstly influencing the physical environment of a neighbourhood and secondly influencing the social relationships and interactions between individuals within this environment. These interventions are aimed at addressing both PASB and the actual indicators of ASB, and comprise both short-term interventions and longer-term strategies.

Although the model presented in this report is based on the capacities of processes of social engagement to reduce PASB, it is important to note that ASB is a confusing term which has been variously applied to a wide spectrum of activity, from serious criminal violence at one end of the spectrum to subjective feelings of unease caused by relatively minor environmental disturbances such as litter at the other. In this report the authors do not address the more serious end of the ASB spectrum, but rather analyse ASB in terms of the seven-strand definition used to measure perceptions of it in the British Crime Survey. That definition does not include serious criminal violence, and the authors' findings apply only to 'lower-level' forms of ASB, in respect of which it is reasonable to suggest people may differ in their understandings and impressions. Almost all people would agree that the sort of serious criminal violence which is sometimes included in discussions of ASB is something that nobody should be expected to tolerate, and PASB does not present as an independent problem in relation to such crime. The BCS measure, on the other hand, defines and records ASB in terms of people's perceptions of it, and its seven strands of ASB are therefore clearly suited to a study which informs our understanding of their drivers in terms of the factors which raise or lower reported perceptions.

Interventions

The authors suggest some broad strategies that will improve PASB, and which warrant further research into their efficacy.

- **Shorter term, neighbourhood level:** public information strategies; public reassurance initiatives; and environmental interventions.

- **Longer term, neighbourhood level:** increasing community cohesion and building trust; and action to address the concentration of socio-economic deprivation and crime problems within particular localities.

- **Shorter term, national level:** development of a more prescriptive definition of ASB.

- **Longer term, national level:** attempts to address the social and economic conditions that are associated with ASB and PASB; and Government action to reassure the anxious public.

There is a continuing need for more research to improve our understanding of the connections between specific packages of interventions and improved PASB at the community and neighbourhood level. This is likely to require detailed case study work in localities where PASB has been improved. We need to understand the specific dynamics and drivers underpinning such improvements.