

Education Department Research Programme

Public attitudes towards young people and youth crime in Scotland

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As part of the 2004 Scottish Social Attitudes survey, an annual survey of 1,600 adults aimed at examining public opinion across a range of policy areas, the Scottish Executive funded a module of questions aimed at exploring public attitudes towards young people, with particular reference to youth crime.

Main Findings

- Those who know most or all of the young people in their area are much more likely than those who know none to have positive views of young people. But the most powerful predictor of general attitudes towards the young is level of deprivation in the local area, with a powerful association between greater deprivation and more negative views of young people.
- Adult perceptions of young people more generally are characterised by significant contradictions and ambivalence – for example, while almost half agree that young people have no respect for older people, over half agree that young people are helpful and friendly and 57% that most young people are responsible and well-behaved.
- Issues relating to young people figure prominently in adult accounts of the problems facing their own communities. The two most frequently mentioned problems both relate explicitly to young people ('lack of opportunities for children and young people', 37%, and 'young people hanging around the streets', 36%), while the next two ('alcohol and drugs', 34%, and 'crime and vandalism', 33%) do so implicitly.
- There was a widespread view that the amount of crime committed by young people is higher than a decade ago – 69% think this and just 2% that it is lower. Between a half and two-thirds of respondents also thought that each of a series of specific youth crime-related problems were either 'fairly' or 'very common' in their own area.
- But the proportion of respondents saying that they had been *directly affected* 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' is much lower for each crime type than the proportion saying it is 'very' or 'fairly common' in their area. In other words, perceptions of prevalence tend to outstrip direct impact.
- Relatively few adults say they would feel 'very worried or uncomfortable' (6%) or avoid walking past (6%) a group of teenagers in a shop doorway, but a further 40% say they would be 'slightly worried or uncomfortable' doing so.
- A majority of respondents thought it 'not very' (25%) or 'not at all' likely that they would directly challenge (29%) a group of fourteen year-old boys they recognised damaging a bus shelter or other public property in their area.

Introduction

Despite longstanding political and media debate around issues related to young people and youth crime, little systematic information is available on public attitudes in this area. As part of the 2004 Scottish Social Attitudes survey, the Scottish Executive funded a module of questions aimed at exploring public attitudes towards young people, with particular reference to youth crime. The research took a broad definition of 'young people' as referring to those between the ages of 11 and 24. For some questions, however, a distinction was drawn between 11 to 15 year-olds and 16 to 24 year-olds.

Contact between young people and other groups

A quarter (25%) of all adults (aged 18 and over) share their household either with someone aged 11 to 15 (11%) or aged 16 to 24 (17%), but such links are heavily structured by age and life stage.

Seven in ten adults (72%) say they know some or most of the 11 to 24 year-olds in their area well enough to speak to. On the other hand, the proportion of adults who know 'none' is significantly greater than the proportion who know 'most or all' - 44% of adults say that they know *none* of the 11 to 15 year-olds in their area, and 39% that they know none of the 16 to 24 year-olds.

The youngest age group (18 to 24 year-olds) are no more likely than the oldest (65 and over) to know most of the 11 to 15 year-olds in their area. They are, however, much more likely to know most of the young people aged 16 to 24.

Young people as a local problem

Before respondents were asked to focus specifically on issues relating to young people and youth crime, they were shown a list of problems that people might experience in their local area and asked to identify which three they felt were the biggest problems in their own area.

The results suggest that issues relating to young people figure prominently in adult accounts of the problems facing their own communities. The two most frequently mentioned problems both relate explicitly to young people ('lack of opportunities for children and young people', 37%, and 'young people hanging around the streets', 36%), while the next two ('alcohol and drugs', 34%, and 'crime and vandalism', 33%) do so implicitly. Issues relating to young

people and youth crime easily outscore other local issues in this context.

Respondents with higher levels of contact with young people are more likely to frame problems in terms of 'lack of opportunities' than 'hanging around the streets', as are those who have more positive orientations towards young people in general.

Broader views of young people in Scotland

Adult perceptions of young people are characterised by significant contradictions and ambivalence - while 60% of respondents disagree that the behaviour of young people is no worse than in past (i.e. think that it is worse than in the past) almost the same proportion agree that young people are not listened to enough. Almost half agree that young people have no respect for older people; but over half agree that young people are helpful and friendly, 57% that most young people are responsible and well-behaved, and 35% that *older people* have no respect for younger people.

Four attitude statements (two positive about young people and two negative) were combined to create a scale of general perceptions of the young. This was then divided into tertiles, representing the most positive, the least positive and an intermediate group. Those in the youngest three age groups were *more* likely to be in the 'least positive' group. It cannot be assumed, then, that older people will automatically have the most critical views of young people - 37% of those aged 65 and over were in the 'most positive' group, compared with just 25% of those aged 18 to 24.

Those who know most or all of the young people in their area were much more likely than those who know none to feature in the 'most positive' group (45% compared with 29%). But the most powerful predictor of general attitudes towards the young is level of deprivation, with a powerful association between greater deprivation and more negative views of young people.

There were mixed views about whether the media present a fair or unfair picture of young people in Scotland these days - while 42% of respondents felt that media portrayal of young people is fair, almost the same proportion (38%) feel that it paints an unfair picture. There was no significant variation here by newspaper readership.

Perceptions of youth crime and disorder

Despite evidence to the contrary from police recorded crime statistics, there was a widespread view that the amount of crime committed by young people is higher than a decade ago – 69% thinking this and just 2% that it is lower.

Between a half and two-thirds of respondents also thought that each of a series of specific youth crime-related problems were either 'fairly' or 'very common' in their own area – groups of young people hanging around the street (67%), vandalism/graffiti (49%), problems caused by young people who have been drinking (53%), problems caused by young people who have been using drugs (35%).

The oldest age group (65 and over) defied stereotypes by being less likely than the youngest (18 to 24) to see youth crime problems as common in their area. Based on a scale combining the four issues above, respondents in social rented housing (44%) and in the areas of greatest deprivation (53%) were clearly over-represented in the highest ('most common') quartile relative to the sample as a whole (25%), while owner-occupiers and those in areas of least deprivation were under-represented (20% and 10% respectively).

Respondents were also asked to what extent they had been *directly affected* by each type of behaviour during the previous 12 months. The proportion saying that they have been directly affected 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' is much lower for each crime type than the proportion saying it is 'very' or 'fairly common' in their area. In other words, perceptions of prevalence tend to outstrip direct impact.

Deprivation, tenure and degree of rurality are all correlated with being directly affected by each crime type, with those in areas of high deprivation and in social rented housing *more* likely to have been affected and those in remote rural areas *least* likely to have been.

Across all the types of youth crime and disorder mentioned, those with the 'most negative' attitudes towards young people in general were much more likely to say they had been directly affected.

When asked how they would feel about having to walk past a group of teenagers in order to get into a shop, relatively few adults say they would feel 'very worried or uncomfortable' (6%) or avoid walking past them altogether (6%), but a further 40% say they would be 'slightly worried or uncomfortable' doing so. Women were more likely than men - and older people more likely than younger people - to say they would be worried. Those in areas of greatest deprivation and those

with the 'most negative' views of young people in general also exhibited higher levels of anxiety.

A majority of respondents thought it 'not very' (25%) or 'not at all' likely that they would directly challenge (29%) a group of fourteen year-old boys they recognised damaging a bus shelter or other public property in their area. Respondents were much more likely to say that they would call the police (39% saying they would be 'very likely' to do so and 27% 'fairly likely'). Those who know most or all of the young people in their area are, however, much more likely to say that they would intervene at the time, or speak to the boys or their parents later on, as are those with the 'most positive' views of young people in general.

Conclusions

While there is still considerable scope for inter-generational contact between young people and sections of the adult population, a sizeable minority of all adults have little or no social contact with young people between the ages of 11 and 24. Such contact *does* matter: while there are more powerful predictors of attitudes towards young people and youth crime, those adults who have least contact with young people are consistently more likely to have negative views of the young.

The current political and media preoccupation with issues relating to young people is mirrored in adults' own talk about the problems facing their own communities. But adult views and perceptions of young people are by no means all negative – concern *about* young people is often balanced by concern *for* the young.

Contrary perhaps to expectations, the oldest age group (those aged 65 and over) is not necessarily the least sympathetic to young people. Those living in deprived, urban areas, with relatively little social contact with the young people in their own community are most likely to be concerned *about* young people and to have negative views of the young more generally.

Inter-generational contact between adults and young people appears to influence not only general orientations towards young people and youth crime but also actual willingness to intervene directly when confronted with problematic behaviour by young people. This suggests that, where possible, policy should avoid reinforcing stereotypes of and suspicion about young people and that there should be explicit attempts to foster inter-generational links.

The study reveals a widespread belief that the level of youth crime is higher than a decade ago and a view that youth

crime-related problems are very common in respondents' own areas – even if such attitudes are not necessarily supported by external evidence or data from the survey on the direct effects on respondents of young people's behaviour. Overall, the survey suggests that direct experience alone cannot explain levels of public concern.

The results as a whole remind us that the 'problem of youth crime' is both about actions (young people's behaviour) and

reaction (our individual and collective responses to such behaviour). Data on public perceptions of young people and youth crime are a valuable alternative index of the problem, in that they tell us something important about how our communities function and about the collective resources that can be drawn upon when problems with young people arise. In other words, public attitudes in this area should be seen as helping to *constitute* and not simply reflecting the problem of youth crime.

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