

Your space or mine?

The role of public space in the lives of young people



centre for research on families and relationships

Young people frequently use public space for social activity but their presence can be a source of suspicion and anxiety to members of the public. National and local policy on antisocial behaviour (ASB) and public attitudes to young people are both thought to be influential factors in this. This briefing, which draws on the experiences of young people growing up in a Scottish housing estate, explores young people's understanding and experiences of ASB and, in particular, how they use and relate to public spaces.

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Key points

- The idea of public space assumes that it is open to all, but many young people felt they were only welcome when they behaved in the 'correct' way.
- Young people were often grouped together in professionals' thinking, with little attention paid to differences or how experiences were shaped by social or contextual factors.
- The regulation of public space often focused on moving young people into spaces considered more appropriate by professionals, like parks and leisure centres. This didn't take into consideration the issues that might be affecting young people, such as age appropriateness, emotional preferences or any tensions between young people within the community. As a result, young people often returned to the places they were moved from.
- What professionals and policy makers defined as antisocial was frequently what young people saw as social behaviour. This conflict often resulted in hostility and resistance by young people towards ASB interventions.
- Public spaces were the site of many happy and positive interactions between adults and young people. This was in contrast to the way relationships between older people and young people are often portrayed.
- Young people felt that they faced greater risks than peers living in more affluent areas. Such risks were described both in terms of the quality of the public spaces available and the high levels of policing young people experienced when 'hanging out'.
- Efforts locally to improve public spaces were viewed with scepticism by many young people. Such improvements, they argued, did not engage with young people's own opinions on the types of public space they most enjoyed and the reasons why.

Background

Anxieties about young people's use of public space are closely connected to strategies aimed at tackling antisocial behaviour (ASB). In Scotland, legal measures were introduced through the Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004, which included police powers to disperse groups, impose parenting and antisocial behaviour orders. Legal interventions affecting young people were received with caution in Scotland and, in comparison to the rest of the UK, their use has been limited. In 2009 the Scottish Government conducted a review of ASB policies, signalling an official move away from punitive measures, towards a more holistic approach which balances enforcement with prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation.

While this may reflect a shift in policy thinking, social researchers have pointed to the enduring (and largely negative) legacy of the ASB agenda on how society views childhood. It is suggested that ASB policies have defined 'correct' forms of childhood and, in turn, legitimised the need to place controls over young people's activities. ASB policies have also, it is suggested, fuelled a public image of 'youth' as a source of anxiety and risk.

Arguments about the surveillance of childhood are well rehearsed, but there is little evidence on young people's own experiences of ASB policy and how this has influenced their relationship with public space. The limited research available suggests that the impact has been greatest for those growing up in the most disadvantaged parts of Scotland. Here, young people not only face greater environmental inequalities (such as violence, vandalism and poor quality public spaces) but are also more likely to experience adversarial relationships in public spaces and come into contact with interventions aimed at tackling ASB.

The study

The research was based within 'Robbierstoun' (a pseudonym): a predominantly social-housing estate in the suburbs of a Scottish city. Its location meant that it was possible to explore young people's experiences of public space alongside their experiences of living in a socially and economically 'disadvantaged' place.

The study was ethnographic involving the researcher hanging out with young people in their neighborhood. It also got young people involved as researchers — making observations,

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How does this research contribute to what we already know?

Accounts of young people's use of public space are often discussed in terms of anxiety and risk. This research looks beyond this one-dimensional categorisation of young people and instead attempts to highlight some of the complex ways that young people relate to, and with, public space. This makes a start in addressing the current lack of knowledge about young people's own experiences of public space and its interaction with ASB policy in Scotland.

walking about, taking photos and creating maps. In addition, 38 young people aged 12-25 (15 female and 23 male) took part in in-depth interviews, with a sample being selected to cover different ethnicities, friendship circles and experiences of public space and ASB. Locally based youth workers, police officers and ASB officers were also interviewed. The research was conducted across multiple sites, including youth clubs, local libraries and public spaces.

The findings

Living in a 'disadvantaged' place

Young people frequently described their neighbourhood as "shite". They talked about physical deterioration such as litter, graffiti, vandalism and derelict spaces/buildings. Several "empty" or "dead" spaces were also identified, including local playing fields, back greens (shared gardens) and undesignated areas of concrete. These spaces were thought to serve little function and, as a consequence, young people expressed little attachment to them.

The young people were aware that their neighbourhood had a "bad name" across the rest of the city:

"they think, oh it is junkies in here, drinkers in there, alcoholics. Just generally tramps and all that".

Several young people repeated this perspective, for example by comparing Robbierstoun to notorious locations (such as 'little Bosnia' and Iraq). Others made comparisons between everyday life in Robbierstoun and "posher" neighbouring locations where young people were considered "better off".

These descriptions had a powerful impact: young people understood their social position and the inequalities around them and these became part of who they were. At the same time, physical and social disorder had, for many, become an everyday part of life. As one young person concluded: "it's just life; you see it 'aw the time".

"It's a bad area but it is good too"

Although young people often talked about their area negatively, their feelings about Robbierstoun were very complex. Many of the negative descriptions were balanced by positive stories about young people's love of the area, their strong social networks and close connections with peers. What was most valued was "being close" to friends, family and local facilities, as well as "kenning [knowing] everyone around". Many young people described strong local networks and a belonging to place.

"They just see it all full of dog crap, rubbish over there, bonfires there, crappy buildings [...] We see people that we know, friends and family. And we see places, you know, like the places that we go"

Public spaces as a social arena

Public spaces were one of the key places where young people developed social networks. They operated as places

to meet, socialise and share stories with friends outside the family home. They were especially important to those young people who were unable to socialise at home (due to lack of space, relations with parents).

Many of the favourite places discussed by young people were those associated with freedom, excitement and experiences away from the adult gaze, such as overgrown green spaces, abandoned cars, empty housing and scaffolding. Other young people spent time in more built up areas, such as stairwells, street corners, shopping centres or school playgrounds. A common feature of these spaces was that their popularity changed depending on what the young people were doing, the time of day and who they were with. These favourite places were also frequently those considered by adults to be unimportant, unsafe or inappropriate.

Young people also talked about other acts, such as graffitiing stairwells, creating ad hoc seating or using their bodies to dominate the space (for example, by playing games, cycling bikes, making a noise), as ways of connecting them to a particular place. These non-conforming activities were often described by young people as normal and acceptable, despite being a source of complaint for local residents. Many young people complained that they were stereotyped as troublemakers, arguing that adults had "forgotten they were young once too".

A programme of environmental improvements, such as new fencing, community gardens and new play equipment, was on-going during fieldwork. However, many young people felt disenfranchised from this process, arguing that they hadn't been involved or had any opportunity to give their opinions on plans, which had resulted in many 'special' places being dismantled and removed from young people's use. Young people commented that newly developed spaces focused on the needs of younger children, while teenager's needs were overlooked. Other spaces, such as playing fields, had been privatised, which excluded those who couldn't afford to pay to use the facilities.

Fear and avoidance

Positive experiences of public spaces were not universal. For some young people the amount of time they spent "hanging out" in public spaces was limited, instead spending their leisure time at home (watching TV or playing computer games) or in organised activities. One of the main reasons for avoiding public spaces was safety, with other young people being the main source of fear. Several gave accounts of

victimisation. One young person talked about his experiences of racial harassment:

"I was scared (...) Just walking about basically. I didn't trust it, I didn't like going outside our flat even".

Another had been targeted by a group of young people from her school and avoided entering one part of the estate:

"And it's like, they basically assaulted me, why would they do that? It's like I don't even come down here anymore, unless it's for a good reason".

These young people used strategies for limiting the amount of time they spent in public spaces, including getting adults to accompany them to and from social activities, "running fast" or taking the bus short distances.

Some young people did not limit the time they spent in public space but rather employed a strategy of "keeping yur heid doon". Using knowledge of the local area and its residents, this involved deliberately avoiding locations associated with 'risky' individuals, groups or families:

"You need to think about where you are going, you can't go down a street just not caring. You need to know what peoples are down there".

Others successfully maintained friendly relations with those considered "hard" or "dodgy", thus allowing them to navigate public spaces without fear of victimisation. As one young person explains:

"everybody [on the street] is friendly enough, as long as you are friends with people".

Policing young people in public spaces

Local strategies for policing youth-related ASB were a key factor influencing young people's relationship to public space. Young people frequently complained about the high level of policing in Robbierstoun, particularly being moved on by ASB professionals when engaged in activities they considered social, such as chatting, cycling or playing ball games. Interventions were also influenced by general beliefs about where young people 'should' be. For example, the park was noted by one police officer as being "the best place" for young people. Another suggested that young people should go to the park or leisure centre where they would "obviously not be annoying anyone". Many young people resented tactics to move them on, arguing that adults did not ask them why they choose certain areas, or why they did not want to go to the park or youth club. After being moved on, young people would often return to their favourite places.

Those young people facing the greatest amount of policing were those known to ASB professionals due to previous involvement in youth disorder, and were most frequently young males. While young people acknowledged their prior behaviour, they still felt unfairly targeted by the police. Such targeting was considered to be discriminatory and fuelled

an existing mistrust and, in some cases, hatred, towards the police. Many of these 'antisocial' young people had been subject to formal interventions, including acceptable behaviour contracts, supervision orders and mentoring. These were generally ineffectual in changing where and how young people hung out. As one young person said: "they don't do anything and are pointless". Diversionary activities such as street football were well liked but failed to reproduce the same sense of togetherness that young people gained from 'hanging out'. Such activities were also highly gendered, often being based on assumptions about the sorts of activities are most appealing to females and males.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the complex, layered and temporary nature of young people's interactions with public spaces. This relationship is, critically, a social one and immediately pulls into question the effectiveness of interventions which attempt to split groups apart and enforce behavioural change on individuals.

The research also highlights the force of age as a concept. Often public spaces are defined and understood according to age – a park is for young people, while a shopping centre is for adults (and well behaved youths). Yet the young people in this research do not experience public space in a single, unilateral way. Variables such as gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and age intersect and shape young people's experiences, views and preferences. This is not to suggest that youth-related ASB is not a concerning issue. Rather, those working with young people in public spaces should look away from an age-based understanding of public space in favour of one which seeks to balance the access for all.

Policy and practice implications

- Many young people in this study were angry about their lack of involvement in regeneration but did not have the ability or desire to voice their opinions. Greater efforts should be made to encourage young people, particularly those most marginalised from public spaces, to participate in regeneration and community development.
- Any youth initiatives should give attention to the qualities of places young people value the most (places of freedom, excitement, risk-taking) and consider how they might be replicated.
- Experiences of public space are not homogenous, with different young people enjoying different kinds of public spaces, at different times. Interventions must therefore not simply think in terms of age, but rather consider what other factors (gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, peers) might intersect and shape young people's social practices.
- Community-based initiatives that emphasise tolerance between age groups and encourage the creation of public spaces which are inclusive, not exclusive, might be more effective in reducing ASB.



"As this research shows, the use of public space is determined by age, gender and social grouping, all of which enhances our understanding of factors we need to take into account in creating more inclusive public spaces."

Tam Baillie, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People