

Describing and assessing interventions to address anti-social behaviour

Key findings from a study of ASB practice

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This report explores how interventions for anti-social behaviour (ASB) are used in some local areas and the nature of the ASB. It pulls together two strands of work: a quantitative strand using data from local areas to look at Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships' (CDRPs)¹ use of ASB interventions and a qualitative investigation of the context in which ASB interventions are made, focusing on persistent adult perpetrators.

The study has provided information about those who receive interventions for ASB and what interventions were received. The findings are in line with other research, for example about half of those receiving interventions in the study areas were young people aged under 18 and most interventions were lower level with few people getting more than one intervention in the study period. The detailed consideration of cases of persistent ASB by adults highlights the complex needs of many of the perpetrators and the challenges faced by practitioners in dealing with these types of ASB.

¹ CDRPs have been renamed Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) since the research was carried out.

Both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the research raise issues for practitioners in effectively dealing with ASB.

- Current ASB data-collection practice does not tend to generate the kinds of data-sets which can underpin robust assessments of the effectiveness of ASB interventions, although there are practical steps which could be taken to help move ASB practice in a more focused (and perhaps cost-effective) direction.
- Data management systems were often not designed to enable easy access to information by multi-agency groups involved in ASB work. This could lead to delays in the decision-making process and duplication of service provision.
- Data sharing was one of the most contentious aspects of ASB practice. Not only were practitioners uncertain about both informed consent and the requirements of the Data Protection Act but also many commented on the reluctance of some partner agencies to share information.

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Keywords

Anti-social behaviour

Disorder

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- Practitioners were aware that a balanced response, incorporating elements of both enforcement and prevention, was essential, especially for perpetrators with complex needs. High-end interventions were more likely to succeed where they were combined with support services aimed at addressing the underlying causes of ASB. However, practitioners commented that lack of support services meant that many adult perpetrators experienced 'enforcement without support'.
- While local partnerships may adopt control, rehabilitative, restorative or other ideologies in their work, what they actually deliver may not always reflect the prevailing ideology, especially where access to specific services is limited.
- A strong emphasis on the front line in ASB work was seen as essential. ASB managers and co-ordinators recognised that many front-line workers (i.e. paid and voluntary workers working directly with service users in the community) would benefit from more effective training on the principles and practices of evidence gathering, building case files, steering applications through the legal process and supporting victims and witnesses.
- Practitioners were concerned that the needs of victims and witnesses should be addressed, particularly where vulnerable adults are concerned. More effective ways of eliciting the views and concerns of the most vulnerable individuals and groups in the community, who may be victims of ASB, need to be explored. This is particularly important in areas where members of the community are afraid to report ASB for fear of retaliation and/or need support throughout the court process when acting as witnesses.
- Practitioners felt that investment in permanent staff contracts would enable ASB managers to build trust in the local community and between partner agencies, develop inter-agency rapport and facilitate more effective long-term planning at both strategic and front-line levels.

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The term anti-social behaviour (ASB) covers acts of nuisance, disorder and crime. It includes such things as graffiti and noisy neighbours through to harassment and intimidation. All types of ASB can have an impact on the lives of victims and communities, particularly when repetitive or persistent.

This report explores how interventions for ASB are used in some local areas and the nature of the ASB. It pulls together two strands of work: a quantitative strand using data from local areas to look at Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships' (CDRPs) use of ASB interventions and a qualitative investigation of the context in which ASB interventions are made, focusing on persistent adult perpetrators.

The original aim of the quantitative strand was to build on previous work and to address some of the gaps in knowledge about the effectiveness of interventions, looking at ASB incidents, interventions and outcomes over time in local areas. Limitations in the range and quality of available data meant that this aim could not be met. However, the findings provide a useful supplement to previous research and the work undertaken to access the data in the local areas provided an opportunity to look at issues with ASB data-collection practice and identified a number of weaknesses in the systems used.

The qualitative strand focused on the context of ASB committed by adults, looking at those who were some of the most persistent perpetrators, and exploring through interviews and a sample of individual case studies the nature of the ASB and how practitioners use a range of interventions to address ASB.

Key findings

ASB interventions, perpetrators and incidents

In the quantitative study, data for the previous two to five years were collected from ten CDRPs. The sample consisted of 4,307 ASB interventions for 3,382 individuals. The areas were not selected randomly, but were broadly representative of CDRP areas nationally. The fieldwork was conducted between January and December 2009.

- The most common interventions were warning letters (44% of interventions) and Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) (22%). The more punitive interventions were less common with only nine per cent of interventions being Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBO) or ASBOs on conviction (CRASBO). Generally speaking, young people (under 18s) were more like to receive lower-end interventions like warning letters and ABCs, while adult perpetrators were more likely to receive ASBOs or CRASBOs.
- The vast majority of ASB perpetrators (83%) received only one intervention within the time frame covered by the study with very few having four or more (1%). Because of limitations with the data we can not say whether receiving only one intervention was due to a change in an individual's behaviour.
- How ASB was categorised varied considerably across areas; the most common behaviour was a generic disorder category which included incidents such as noise, disorder, trespass and loitering.
- Just over half (55%) of perpetrators in the sample were under 18 and nearly three-quarters were aged 25 or younger. Nearly two-thirds of perpetrators (63%) were male.

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- The gender split varied by type of intervention; similar percentages of males and females received housing-related interventions (49% and 51% respectively) and warnings (53% and 47%) whilst 85 per cent per cent of those who received ASBO/CRASBOs were male.

Data issues

Some of the most important findings from this part of the study were concerned with issues of data collection and data sharing in local areas. The management of ASB falls to a number of different agencies including the police, housing, and local authorities. The way in which CDRPs collect and store data concerning ASB and interventions varied widely across the areas. Most areas had some form of computerisation of records, with some areas having bespoke systems which allowed data sharing between partners; in other areas individual partners maintained separate databases. Some areas, however, did not have computerised records but hard copies of documents held in filing cabinets or practitioners relied on personal knowledge.

There was often no consistency within CDRPs in what data were collected. This sometimes resulted in key information on the incident (such as the type of behaviour or the date) and on the perpetrator (for example age, breach details and perpetrator's needs) being missing. Although some areas felt their systems were fit for purpose, other areas expressed concerns over the impact the data collection had on their ability to case manage ASB perpetrators. This was exacerbated in a number of areas by reluctance on the part of some partners to share information, which practitioners felt narrowed the scope for effective ASB practice. Poor data on outcomes as well as details of the perpetrator and the incident also limited any assessment of the effectiveness of ASB interventions, including attempts by this study to do so.

The report makes a number of recommendations for data collection in local areas. Including improving access and data sharing across agencies and standardising record keeping.

Nature, type and context of adult ASB

This strand explored, through interviews with ASB practitioners in 24 areas, their perceptions of the type, nature and context of ASB committed by adults. The researchers also looked in four areas at 33 case studies of adults displaying persistent ASB. The findings highlight the complex needs of many of the perpetrators and the challenges local ASB teams face when using ASB tools and powers.

Types of ASB

Two categories of adult ASB were identified. The first category was labelled 'transitional' ASB: practitioners felt that this ASB could arise when an individual encountered difficulties in adapting to life changes. These can include life course, geographical, institution to community and status transitions, with some individuals experiencing more than one type of transition at any one time. Practitioners tended to focus on the experiences and circumstances of individuals when describing transitional ASB, acknowledging the complexity of the issues and that ASB often needed to be understood in a wider socio-economic context.

The second category of 'entrenched' behaviour – refers to when a particular group, often members of the same family, in a specific locality, displays long-term, well-established behaviours that serve to instil a degree of fear in the surrounding community. Families who exhibited entrenched ASB often had complex needs including at least one member having mental health issues, living in an area of economic and social deprivation, experiencing multi-generational unemployment and having limited life skills and difficulties interacting with people from outside the family.

The authors also found that different behaviours and perpetrators were associated with different settings.

- Residential areas were more likely to have disputes between neighbours, threatening and abusive behaviour towards local retailers and problems caused by adults who had been displaced from central areas as a condition of an ASBO.
- Commercial areas saw rough sleepers, local day migrants, day trippers and night-time revellers as the main perpetrators of ASB.

Use and delivery of interventions

Many cases of adult ASB were linked to neighbour disputes that occurred across all types of housing tenure. Overall, the research findings suggest that housing landlords are generally in a good position to respond to ASB. However, there are clearly limited options available to address ASB in owner-occupied properties and practitioners found these neighbour disputes often became far more protracted.

Practitioners claimed that higher-end interventions, such as ASBOs, were particularly effective in dealing with problematic street behaviour in urban centres, although this could lead to displacement of the people and the problem to other areas. Practitioners also placed a heavy emphasis on a prevention-led approach by, for example, deterring rough sleepers from city centre areas by making the environment less conducive.

Practitioners considered the effectiveness of interventions with perpetrators were influenced by a range of factors including:

- the successful identification of the cause(s) of the ASB through intensive front-line work and appropriate information sharing by agencies;
- the nature and type of personality of the perpetrator, their motivation to change and the quality of the relationship established between the perpetrator and the practitioner;
- the effectiveness of inter-agency working and multi-agency policy and practice;
- the availability of appropriate local support services to tackle the issues underlying the behaviour and a commitment by those services to feed into the process.

Practitioners were aware that a balanced response, incorporating elements of both enforcement and prevention, was essential to deal with the ASB, especially for perpetrators with complex needs. However, practitioners commented that the limited availability of support services meant that many adult perpetrators experienced 'enforcement without support'.

Developing and maintaining a strong front-line emphasis in ASB work was seen as essential. ASB managers and co-ordinators recognised that many front-line workers would benefit from more effective training covering the principles and practices of evidence gathering, building case files, steering applications through legal processes and supporting victims and witnesses to ensure successful resolution.

Practitioners also felt that more needs to be done to address the needs of victims and witnesses, particularly where vulnerable adults are concerned. More effective ways of eliciting the views and concerns of the most vulnerable individuals and groups in the community, who may be victims of ASB and may be afraid to report ASB for fears of retaliation, need to be explored as practitioners felt these groups were most likely to be under-represented in public consultation meetings.

Conclusions

- Whilst this study was unable to fully explore the effectiveness of interventions to address anti-social behaviour, there is some evidence that the great majority of individuals responsible for incidents of ASB receive just one intervention.
- Good data management and data sharing is essential to strengthen service provision and feed into local thinking about effectiveness and value for money.
- Practitioners report the key to successful interventions is to incorporate elements of both enforcement and prevention, especially for perpetrators with complex needs.
- More work needs to be done to ensure the needs of victims and witnesses are adequately identified and addressed to ensure they continue to work with practitioners to secure a successful outcome to their complaint.