

young people, crime and public perceptions

a review of the literature

Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Contents

Acknowledgements	v
Executive summary	vi
Introduction	vi
Overall crime levels	vi
Trends in youth crime	vi
Public perceptions of youth crime	vi
Reasons for public perceptions	vii
Conclusions and recommendations	vii
Final comment	viii
1 Introduction	1
2 Trends in youth crime	2
2.1 How is crime measured?	2
2.2 Sources of data used in this review	2
2.3 Changes in overall crime levels	3
2.4 How has youth crime changed?	4
2.5 Making sense of the data	5
2.6 Concluding comments	5
3 Public perceptions of youth crime	7
3.1 The extent and nature of the literature on public perceptions	7
3.2 Public perceptions of crime generally	7
3.3 Is it as bad as we think it is? The literature on public perceptions of youth crime	8
3.4 NFER's analysis of youth crime and perceptions data	8
3.5 Youth crime: do people think it is getting worse?	9
3.6 Concluding comments	10
4 Reasons for public perceptions	11
4.1 Media and information	11
4.2 Personal characteristics and circumstances	12
4.3 Approaches to youth and 'youth crime'	13
4.4 Moving forward: what needs to be done	13
4.5 Concluding comments	14

5	Summary of key findings and implications	15
5.1	Trends in youth crime	15
5.2	Public perceptions	15
5.3	Reasons for public perceptions	15
5.4	Final comment	16
	Appendix 1 Best Value User Satisfaction survey questions	17
	References	18

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Executive summary

Introduction

Offending amongst young people has been at the centre of public and policy makers' attention in recent years. Media coverage of high-profile cases and the frequent portrayal of hooded teenagers terrorising communities would suggest that young people are becoming increasingly criminalised. The image of young people today appears to be under threat and public perceptions matter – especially as government agendas and policies are shaped by the concerns and attitudes of society. This review of literature on youth crime and public opinion attempts to establish the facts by asking the following questions.

- Has there been a change in the levels of youth crime in recent years?
- What is the current public perception of youth crime? Does the public's perception of youth crime correspond with actual levels of offending amongst young people?
- Where perceptions of crime differ greatly from the reality, what are the underlying reasons for this?

Overall crime levels

Evidence from different sources indicates that overall crime levels have recently stabilised after a period of decline. Self-report surveys such as the British Crime Survey (BCS) reveal that the number of crimes increased through the 1980s and early 1990s, peaking in 1995. The levels of crime then decreased and have been stable since 2005/06 (Jansson, 2007). In addition, comparing 2005/06 with 2006/07, the BCS shows no significant change in crime for the second year running (Nicholas *et al.*, 2007). These trends are echoed in the official crime statistics, which cover offences recorded by the police.

Trends in youth crime

Within this context, there are however, difficulties in presenting an accurate picture of youth offending due

to data-collection and recording issues, such as the absence of long-term, self-report studies and changes to legislation that can affect the numbers of young people entering the criminal justice system. 'Detected' youth crime shows signs of some increase in recent years (after a period of long-term decline) but this may be associated with factors unrelated to the actual crime levels, such as a political focus on antisocial behaviour and breaches of subsequent orders. In contrast, self-report studies do not indicate a rise in overall offending levels amongst young people. The evidence appears contradictory and it is easy, therefore, to see how statistics can be used to give an entirely false impression of crime levels – especially when viewed and interpreted in isolation from their broader contexts.

Public perceptions of youth crime

The literature has shown that the public's view of youth crime is a relatively under-researched area, with little systematic attempt to define and measure public opinion. From the few studies completed, it can be said that there is a tendency for the public to overestimate the scale of youth crime, the numbers of young offenders, the proportion of overall crimes committed by young people, and the seriousness (especially in terms of violence) of youth crime. The literature suggests that perceptions of youth crime are not always based on personal experiences and it has been suggested that 'perceptions of prevalence tend to outstrip direct experience of youth crime' (Anderson *et al.*, 2005). This phenomenon also implies that external factors (such as media reporting) have a role to play in shaping the public's view of youth crime.

NFER conducted a separate piece of statistical analysis using public perception data from the Best Value User Survey 2006/07 and Youth Justice Board annual offending data 2005/06. No correlation was found between the two sets of data, which again suggests that there is no relationship between perceptions of youth behaviour and the actual prevalence of youth offences. For example, one would expect more negative perceptions in high-crime areas, compared to areas

where recorded offences are low. As no relationship was apparent, other factors rather than direct experience of 'youth crime' may be responsible for contributing to a mismatch between the perceptions and reality of such behaviour.

Reasons for public perceptions

The literature identified a range of factors that may influence and shape public opinion and perceptions of crime levels, although much of this content does not have a specific focus on youth crime.

- Media and information – media coverage has a role to play in the mismatch between the perception and reality of youth crime through, for example, the selective reporting of the most serious and high-profile offences.
- Personal characteristics and circumstances – these may impact on the way in which certain people in certain contexts view 'youth crime'. Age, gender, location and socio-economic contexts may have a significant role to play.
- Approaches to youth and 'youth crime' – the way in which youth crime is approached by legislature and criminal justice agencies can impact on public perceptions. Certain behaviour and activities that may, in the past, have been considered to be less serious in nature may now be associated with criminality. A key development here is seen to have been the introduction of Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). It is suggested that ASBOs have an element of predisposition, whereby a breach of an order will automatically criminalise an individual, potentially supporting public perceptions and fears of increasing levels of juvenile crime.

Conclusions and recommendations

Long-term, self-report offending surveys for measuring youth crime

It is generally acknowledged that official crime statistics are subject to many inherent limitations, e.g. changes to police recording practices and the absence of crimes unreported by the public. Therefore, in order to shed

light on the realities of youth crime, alternative sources of information on youth offending behaviour are essential. Although self-report studies have been conducted, they have been done intermittently and therefore it is difficult to make confident assertions about long-term trends in youth crime. The absence of corroboratory evidence on youth crime means that it would be hard to evaluate the true impact of strategies or policies that seek to address youth offending.

A long-term, self-report offending survey for young people along the lines of the BCS would make a valuable addition to this analysis of criminal behaviour.

Better definition and measurement of public attitudes

An analysis of public perceptions of youth crime would benefit from more precise definition and measurement. For example, the research shows that the public wrongly attributes a large proportion of offending to young people or believes that youth offending has rapidly escalated – is this simply a case of being misinformed or is the public genuinely concerned and fearful of youth crime? It may be that better dissemination of crime data is required so that the public is given accurate and understandable information.

A balanced representation of youth people

In recent years, national priorities and local services have sought to tackle problems such as antisocial behaviour and youth offending. However, raising the public's awareness of these issues can convey a negative impression of young people as a whole. While such problems rightly deserve attention, there is the danger that young people can become labelled and 'demonised'. In order to avoid fuelling this negativity, local authorities perhaps need to evaluate their communication strategies and consider how they might affect the profile of young people in the area. For example, publicising steps to tackle antisocial behaviour may offer reassurance to some, but highlighting the problem in this way could stimulate fear or concern in others. Thus, local authorities need to achieve a balance between responding to youth crime concerns and profiling the positive activities of young people in the area.

Building bridges in the community

The attitudes and perceptions of community members lacking direct positive contact with young people, may be disproportionately shaped by external sources of information such as tabloid newspapers and TV reporting. The possible bias conveyed via such media may need to be addressed in order to counteract these negative messages. It may be beneficial to focus on strategies to bring together communities, so that perceptions and opinions are informed more by direct personal experiences, rather than on exaggerated media representations. The need to build community cohesion has been recognised in *Aiming High*, the Government's 10-year strategy for positive activities:

the level of fear and mistrust at play today undermines community cohesion and corrodes the stake young people need to feel they have in society.

HM Treasury and DCSF, 2007

It goes on to advocate the creation of positive activities, such as volunteering and intergenerational activities, to build better relations across the generations.

Identifying and responding to public concern

Given that there is variation in how different members of the community view crime, it would be worth

pinpointing those groups where concern is most prevalent. In this way, strategies to address public anxiety could be most effectively targeted. For example, public information campaigns regarding local authority plans to tackle antisocial behaviour could focus on particular localities, thereby reassuring residents that something is being done. Equally, community work to foster better relations could be directed towards residents who are likely to be most fearful of youth crime.

Final comment

The problem of youth crime is not simply related to an objective number of criminal actions. The 'problem' also depends on how we, as individuals and as a society, feel about it and how we deal with it. Dealing with the problem will require a two-pronged approach. On one level, there is the need to reduce the incidence of youth crime and to divert young people away from criminal activity. On another level, the public's concern about youth crime requires attention and, as we have found, the degree of concern can be unrelated to the scale of crime. Clearly, there is some work to be done on responding to public concern and making sure there is accurate information about both the levels of youth crime/antisocial behaviour, as well as strategies to tackle the problem where it exists.

1 Introduction

Offending amongst young people has been at the centre of public and policy maker's attention in recent years. Media coverage of high-profile cases and the frequent portrayal of hooded teenagers terrorising communities would suggest that young people are becoming increasingly criminalised. The image of young people today appears to be under threat – indeed, one study found that 71 per cent of media stories about young people were negative and a third of articles concerned the issue of crime (Ipsos MORI, 2006a). The consequence of this intense focus on young people's behaviour is that they are faced with the challenge of growing up in a culture that has widespread negative perceptions of youth (HM Treasury and DCSF, 2007).

Public perceptions matter – especially as government agendas and policies are inevitably shaped by the concerns and attitudes of society. But how accurate is this perception of worsening youth crime? Has offending amongst young people really scaled new heights? This review of literature on youth crime and public opinion attempts to establish the facts by asking the following questions.

- Has there been a change in the levels of youth crime in recent years?
- What is the current public perception of youth crime? Does the public's perception of youth crime correspond with actual levels of offending amongst young people?
- Where perceptions of crime differ greatly from the reality, what are the underlying reasons?

Looking beyond the newspaper headlines is essential if we are to find out where the genuine problems are. If youth crime really is on the rise, then more time and money should be invested in diverting young people from crime or in working with those already exhibiting offending behaviour. If, however, it is the public's exaggerated fear of youth crime that is the biggest issue, then Government and local authorities may need to consider ways in which these concerns could be allayed. Of course, both are equally valid investments, but to target resources appropriately, it is important to assess the reality of youth crime and how the public feel about it, accurately.

2 Trends in youth crime

This section of the report assembles evidence on levels of youth crime in order to answer the question: is youth crime becoming more prevalent? As background to this issue, the section also outlines the different ways in which youth crime can be measured, some of the difficulties associated with each data source and the problem of interpretation.

2.1 How is crime measured?

Before presenting the evidence on youth crime, it is important to understand where this information is drawn from. There are three principle sources: the official crime statistics, self-report offending surveys and self-report surveys completed by victims of crime (known as victimisation surveys). Although there is no shortage of data, there is the considerable problem of interpretation (Bateman, 2006). In his review of the statistical evidence, Bateman highlights five distinct but inter-related difficulties in making sense of the data.

- **What constitutes an offence varies over time.** For example, until 1998, it was presumed that a child under 14 years of age was incapable of differentiating between right and wrong sufficiently to justify criminal proceedings, unless the prosecution was able to provide evidence to the contrary. This presumption of *doli incapax* was removed by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, ensuring that large numbers of children aged 10 to 13, who would not previously have received a formal disposal, were exposed to the full rigours of the criminal law. Similarly, the recent focus on tackling antisocial behaviour means that behaviours that previously would have been perceived as a nuisance or irritation can now escalate to the level of a criminal matter (for example, in the event that an ASBO is breached), inflating the number of young people who are subject to formal intervention. Changes in policy and political focus, therefore, can impact on overall youth crime figures, regardless of whether offending amongst young people has actually altered.
- **Police recorded crime only gives a partial account of offending.** Around half of criminal

incidents are never reported. This is because they are regarded as not serious enough or no perceived loss is incurred. Hence, police recorded crime does not accurately reflect the true extent of offending behaviour.

- **A large number of offences have no obvious direct victim.** Crimes such as the possessions of drugs and unnoticed theft from the workplace are essentially 'victimless' incidents. As a result, they tend not to show up in police statistics or self-report victimisation surveys.
- **Variation in clear-up/detection rates.** For a large proportion of crimes, the offender is never apprehended, so it is impossible to attribute responsibility. This prohibits a thorough analysis of offender profiles, such as the proportion of crimes committed by those under 18.
- **Changes in legislation, policy or professional practice.** The volume of people processed through the criminal justice system can be influenced by factors unrelated to the level of crime. For example, the replacement of cautioning by the final warning scheme, expanded the use of formal measures to deal with matters that would otherwise been dealt with informally. This reform is likely to have inflated recorded youth crime while at the same time increasing the proportion of children prosecuted for relatively minor offences. Similarly, changes to police recording practices have also impacted on official statistics, for example the introduction of National Crime Recording Standard in 2002 to ensure better consistency of crime recording (see Bateman, 2006).

Because of these limitations, any single source of youth crime data could be subject to misinterpretation. However, by pulling together the evidence from several sources, it is possible to achieve some understanding of broad trends, especially where sources tell a similar story.

2.2 Sources of data used in this review

This review has sought to identify literature that documents and/or describes patterns of youth crime

over recent years. Before presenting the main findings, the key sources of data are summarised below.

- **The Annual British Crime Survey (BCS).** This is a large-scale victimisation survey (with a sample of 47,000 in 2005/06). As well as providing an indication of crime levels in England and Wales, the BCS also provides attitudinal measures such as public perceptions of changing crime levels, worry about crime, perceptions of antisocial behaviour, etc. The survey has been conducted for the past 25 years. It is generally regarded to reflect the true extent of crime because it includes crimes that are not reported to the police. The BCS count also gives a better indication of trends in crime over time because it is unaffected by changes in levels of reporting to the police and in police recording practices (Jansson, 2007). Furthermore, the methodology of the BCS has remained the same since the survey first began in 1982 – therefore it is the best guide to long-term trends (Nicholas *et al.*, 2007).
- **Annual criminal statistics.** These statistics cover officially recorded crime such as offences reported to the police and custodial sentences received. This data is reported in documents such as the Youth Justice Annual Workload Data, for youth crime specifically (Youth Justice Board, 2008) and *Criminal Statistics: England and Wales*, for overall crime, (Ministry of Justice, 2007). Police-recorded crime statistics provide a good measure of trends in well-reported crimes. They also provide the only measure of homicide and the only reliable measure of relatively rare crimes. However, they do not include crimes that have not been reported to the police, or offences that the police decide not to record (Nicholas *et al.*, 2007).
- **Offending, Crime and Justice Survey.** This self-report survey (Wilson *et al.*, 2006) focussed on youth offending, antisocial behaviour and victimisation amongst young people aged 10 to 25 in England and Wales. With a sample size of approximately 4000, it was conducted each year from 2003 to 2005.
- **MORI annual youth survey.** Another self-report survey (Phillips and Chamberlain, 2006), which covered both offending and victimisation amongst 11 to 16-year-olds in mainstream education. Approximately 5000 young people were interviewed each year from 2001 to 2005.

- **Youth Lifestyles Survey.** This was an earlier self-report offending survey, conducted from 1992 to 1998, with around 800 young people aged 14 to 30 (Flood-Page *et al.*, 2000).

2.3 Changes in overall crime levels

For contextual purposes, it is worth considering what has happened to patterns of crime generally over the past three decades. All the evidence indicates that crime levels have recently stabilised after a period of decline.

Evidence from self-report surveys

Long-term, self-report surveys provide strong evidence that crime levels have dropped and are now stable.

- The number of crimes increased through the 1980s and early 1990s, peaking in 1995. The levels of crime then decreased and have been stable since 2005/06 (Jansson, 2007).
- There has been an overall fall of 42 per cent since 1995, representing over 8 million fewer crimes (Jansson, 2007).
- The number of crimes is the same as it was 25 years ago (Jansson, 2007).
- Comparing 2005/06 with 2006/07, the BCS shows no significant change in crime, for the second year running (Nicholas *et al.*, 2007).
- Since 1995, violent crime has fallen by 41 per cent (Nicholas *et al.*, 2007).
- Comparing 2005/06 and 2006/07 BCS interviews, the number of violent crimes experienced by adults showed no statistically significant change (Nicholas *et al.*, 2007).

What the official crime statistics tell us

Whilst self-report methods are generally regarded as the most accurate measure of crime levels, it is interesting to see what the official statistics reveal and whether they show a similar trajectory. Nicholas *et al.* (2007) report the following.

- Recorded crime increased during most of the 1980s, reaching a peak in 1992. Crime figures then fell

each year until 1998/2000 when there was a change in the Home Office counting rules.

- This was followed by the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard in 2002, which led to a rise in recording in 2002/03 and 2003/04.
- Recorded crime has since fallen by 10 per cent between 2003/04 and 2006/07.
- Crimes recorded by police in 2006/07 decreased by 2 per cent – the third consecutive annual fall.
- Police recorded violence against the person fell by 1 per cent between 2005/06 and 2006/07 – the first fall in eight years.

Official recorded statistics, therefore, appear to corroborate findings from self-report surveys – crime levels have not worsened and, in fact, recent years have shown a decline in recorded crime. Let us now turn our attention to the specific issue of youth crime.

2.4 How has youth crime changed?

What the official crime statistics tell us

According to the official crime statistics, between 1992 and 2004 there was a significant fall of 21 per cent in 'detected' youth crime – that is, indictable offences committed by young people under the age of 18 (Nacro, 2006). It should be noted that these figures relate to the number of offences resulting in a court or pre-court disposal, rather than the number of young people offending.

Looking at the most recent figures, the number of offences resulting in a disposal in 2006/07 was 295,129. This was an increase of 7246 (2.5 per cent) since 2003/04 but a decrease of 6731 (2.2 per cent) from 2005/06. This rise could be associated with factors unrelated to actual crime levels, such as a police target to increase the number of offences brought to justice to 1.25 million by March 2008 (Youth Justice Board, 2008).

In terms of the profile of youth offending, the number of offences committed by young men fell by 2 per cent when compared to 2003/04. However, over the same period, the number of offences committed by young women rose by 25 per cent. Cases of violence against the person have risen by 39 per cent, criminal damage

by 32 per cent and robbery by 45 per cent, while motoring offences have decreased by 45 per cent (Youth Justice Board, 2008).

As signalled earlier, it is difficult to judge the extent and nature of youth crime properly from any single source of data. Official statistics do not include the large proportion of crimes that go unreported, police-recorded crime is subject to changes in counting/recording practices and the number of young people processed by the criminal justice systems can fluctuate according to current policy/legislation. Therefore, it is important to refer to other indicators of youth crime.

Evidence from self-report surveys

As an alternative source of crime information, the British Crime Survey is extremely valuable – it is a 25-year historical record of crime experienced by victims, its methodology has remained consistent, reports of victimisation are not susceptible to changes in recording practices, and it can help unlock the 'dark' figure of unreported crime. Unfortunately, in terms of assessing the extent of youth crime specifically, it can tell us very little. Victims are not required to specify the age of the offender (and it is unlikely they could do this accurately or even know who the offender was). Thus, the only other measure of youth crime is that which is captured through self-report offending surveys. Whilst these exist, they do not span long time periods, and therefore it is difficult to compare long-term trends in the official statistics with patterns of self-report offending behaviour.

Nonetheless, let us scrutinise the evidence which is available – this review has identified three self-report offending surveys covering timeframes from 1992 to 1998 (Flood-Page *et al.*, 2000), 2001 to 2003 (Wilson *et al.*, 2006) and 2001 to 2005 (Phillips and Chamberlain, 2006). All three surveys concluded that overall offending levels remained stable during their respective data collection periods.

- Between 1992 and 1998, the proportion of those admitting offending in the preceding 12 months did not change significantly (Flood-Page *et al.*, 2000).
- Between 2001 and 2005, self-report offending levels remained relatively static. For example, in 2001, 25 per cent of young people admitted to having committed an offence in the last 12 months, compared with 27 per cent in 2005 (Phillips and Chamberlain, 2006).

- Between 2003 and 2005, the proportions of young people admitting to having committed an offence remained stable across the three waves of the survey, at around 25 per cent (Wilson *et al.*, 2006).
- Between 2003 and 2005, the proportions of young people admitting to antisocial behaviour remained stable (Wilson *et al.*, 2006).
- Between 2003 and 2005, the proportions of young people who were victims of crime remained stable (Wilson *et al.*, 2006).

Thus, evidence from self-report surveys suggests that youth crime has shown little change in recent years and has certainly not escalated to any significant degree (at least during the time periods covered). The MORI annual youth survey, however, did find some movement for specific types of crimes (Phillips and Chamberlain, 2006). For example, since 2003, there was a gradual increase in self-reported violent offending (from 15 per cent in 2003/04 to 17 per cent in 2005). Whether or not this amounts to a significant and established trend is hard to say. The figures only represent a 2 per cent increase in violent offending, and in the years prior to this, there was a decline from 21 per cent in 2002 to 15 per cent in 2003. At the same time, this increase in violent offending corresponds with a rise in the proportion of young people who said they were threatened or physically attacked. Another possible development, highlighted by the MORI annual youth survey, is that those who do offend are responsible for a wider range of offences. The proportion of young people who said they had committed more than five types of offences rose from 34 per cent in 2002 to 45 per cent in 2005. However, the opposite is true for those admitting to committing just one type of offence, which fell from 28 per cent in 2001 to 17 per cent in 2005.

So far, we have presented the statistical data on youth crime, as derived from self-report surveys and officially recorded crime figures. However, as alluded to earlier, both are subject to limitations and misinterpretation. It is important to go beyond the numbers and consider explanations for possible patterns of youth crime.

2.5 Making sense of the data

Some authors have attempted to elaborate on the statistical facts and explain the trends apparent in the youth crime data described earlier.

Until recently, the official statistics indicated a decline in youth crime. Could this be linked to demographic change? If there are fewer young people then it is likely that youth crime would show a corresponding reduction. However, Nacro (2006) points out that the drop in youth crime actually appears sharper when expressed as a proportion of the youth population. For instance, the number of 15 to 17-year-old males cautioned, reprimanded or warned for an indictable offence was 7065 for every 100,000 in 1992, compared with 5479 in 2004 (Nacro, 2006). The fall in youth crime cannot, therefore, be explained by population changes.

The same author offers an explanation for the recent rise in detected offences. Nacro (2006) suggests this increase may well reflect changes in practice, rather than an escalation of criminality amongst young people. For example, government policy encourages agencies working with the criminal justice system to narrow the 'justice gap' between offences recorded and those brought to justice. Specifically, targets have been set for increasing the number of offences that result in a recognised 'sanction detection' to 1.25 million by 2007/08 (compared with 1.025 million for the year ending March 2002). As a consequence, offences that previously would have been dealt with informally may now attract a formal response, boosting recorded figures for youth crime.

Focusing on the issue of violent crime, Nacro points out the proportional rise in violent crime is due to a relative fall in the incidence of less serious offences, such as theft and handling stolen goods. Thus, 'the rise in absolute numbers of violent incidents is much smaller than the percentages figures might suggest' (Nacro, 2006). Nonetheless, whilst overall levels of offending may be no worse, it is possible that the balance of youth offending is shifting. For example, as mentioned earlier, between 2003 and 2005, there was a gradual increase in self-reported violent offending (from 15 per cent to 17 per cent). The problem is that without an ongoing self-report study, it is difficult to determine whether the type of youth offending is really changing. Currently, there is no historical evidence to reach a conclusion.

2.6 Concluding comments

What can we conclude from this analysis of youth crime levels? Unfortunately, an accurate picture of youth

offending remains elusive, because of the various data-collection issues highlighted. Indeed, one author writing on the subject conceded that the 'true facts' about youth crime are unknown in principle (Muncie, 2001). It is surprising that more is not done to ascertain the reality of youth crime, given the apparent levels of public concern, as well as the time and resources given to addressing what is commonly perceived to be a growing problem. The fact is that overall crime levels are not rising (a fact supported by both the British Crime Survey and official crime statistics). 'Detected' youth crime shows signs of some increase in recent years (after a period of long-term decline) but this may be associated

with factors unrelated to the actual crime levels, such as a political focus on antisocial behaviour and breaches of subsequent orders. In contrast, self-report studies do not indicate a rise in overall offending levels amongst young people. The evidence appears contradictory and it is easy, therefore, to see how statistics can be used to give an entirely false impression of crime levels – especially where the reader is not provided with context or made aware of other possible explanations.

The report now turns to this issue of perceptions, and reviews literature that deals with the public's view and understanding of youth crime.

3 Public perceptions of youth crime

This chapter reviews the literature on public perceptions of youth crime. It reports on the extent and nature of literature available, then considers how the public views crime in general, in order to provide a context for the focus on the specific issue of youth crime and the public's attitude towards it.

3.1 The extent and nature of the literature on public perceptions

Of the pieces reviewed, 14 made some reference to public perceptions of youth crime, although a smaller number explore and expand on this in detail. Several authors noted this apparent lack of coverage, including Hough and Roberts (2004) and Anderson *et al.* (2005), the latter commenting on the low level of 'systematic information' available in relation to perceptions and attitudes towards youth crime. Generally, the literature reveals that there has been little systematic attempt to define and measure exactly what it is that 'the public' are concerned about. Statements such as 'the public perception of youth crime is higher than the actual level of crime' are commonly reported, but only a small number of studies deal in detail with issues relating to public perceptions of youth crime.

Key pieces presenting interpretations of public perceptions of overall crime levels include:

- analyses of BCS content, such as *Attitudes to Crime and Criminal Justice: Findings from the 1998 British Crime Survey* (Mattinson and Mirrlees-Black, 2000)
- more recently, *Attitudes, Perceptions and Risks of Crime: Supplementary Volume 1 to Crime in England and Wales 2006/7* (Jansson *et al.*, 2007).

In addition, works focusing more on youth crime include the following.

- Hough and Roberts (2004) present the findings from 'the first survey to systematically explore public

opinion about youth crime and justice in Britain'. This involved analysis of responses to a block of questions posed during the Office for National Statistics Omnibus Survey in 2003. The survey obtained 1792 respondents aged 16 years and over across England and Wales.

- Anderson *et al.* (2005) present and discuss findings of a module included in the 2004 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, which explored public attitudes toward young people and youth crime (among 1600 residents).
- On a smaller scale, Haines and Case (2007) conducted a survey of 496 people, after identifying a need to expand on previous public opinion surveys, such as BCS, that were primarily concerned with adult crimes.

3.2 Public perceptions of crime generally

Before focusing on the specific issue of youth crime, it may be useful to provide some contextualisation in terms of how the public regards crime generally. The British Crime Survey of 2006/07 showed that, contrary to official recorded and self-report data, there was a general perception that crime was increasing. Nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) of respondents suggested that crime was rising nationally, whilst just over two-fifths (41 per cent) reported the view that crime in their local area had increased over the last two years. However, the proportion of people predicting that they were likely to be a victim of burglary, violent crime and especially vehicle crime had reduced since the previous survey.

Therefore, taking crime as a whole, public perceptions tended to be that levels of offending were higher than the 'reality'. The same survey also found that crime was reported to have had an impact on the quality of life for just over a quarter of respondents (27 per cent) and the fear of crime had an impact for over a third (37 per cent).

3.3 Is it as bad as we think it is? The literature on public perceptions of youth crime

As in the case of overall crime, generally, the picture presented in the literature is one in which public perception of youth crime is that it is worse than the statistics would suggest. Studies have found that there is a tendency for public perception to exaggerate the **volume** of crime committed by young people within overall crime levels and also the **type and seriousness** of the offences committed by young people. Further negative perceptions include the overestimation of the proportion of young offenders who will be convicted of further offences, suggesting a public view of entrenched, serious offending amongst young people (Hough and Roberts, 2004; Ipsos MORI, 2006b).

- Hough and Roberts (2004) found that the majority of respondents in their representative sample had the tendency to overestimate young people's contribution to overall offending behaviour, echoing previous findings. Mattinson and Mirrlees-Black (2000), for example, reported that over a quarter (28 per cent) of 1998 BCS respondents believed that young people were responsible for most crime, whereas just less than a quarter of all known offenders who had committed indictable offences in 1997 were young people (aged between ten and 17 years old).
- More recently, an Ipsos MORI (2006b) survey of 1001 adults found that young offenders (categorised as being aged between ten and 17 years old) were seen as being responsible for committing an average 47 per cent of crimes reported to the police. Over a third of respondents suggested that young people were responsible for over half of reported crimes.
- Ipsos MORI (2006b) also revealed a tendency for the public to overestimate the extent to which youth crime involved acts of violence. Respondents suggested that almost half of all youth crime involved violence, whereas recorded crime figures revealed an average of a fifth.
- Between half and two thirds of the 1600 people questioned in the module of the 2004 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey thought that crime-related problems often associated with young people, were either 'fairly common' or 'very common' in their own area. These behaviours and activities included groups of youths hanging around in the street,

vandalism/graffiti, and problems caused by young people who had been using drugs (Anderson *et al.*, 2005). Hence, it appears that young people's behaviour and presence, as opposed to classified criminal offences, formed a major element of respondents' perception of youth crime.

- The recent Best Value User Satisfaction Survey (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007) found that 57 per cent of respondents reported young people hanging around on the streets as a big or fairly big problem (this percentage was higher compared to other antisocial behaviours, e.g. vandalism and littering). At the same time, only 23 per cent of people felt informed about what the council is doing to tackle antisocial behaviour.

Interestingly, the literature also reveals a degree of disparity between people's perceptions of the extent of youth crime and their own experiences of it, suggesting that perceptions may not be grounded in accurate knowledge or personal experience. Anderson *et al.* (2005) suggests that 'perceptions of prevalence tend to outstrip direct experience of youth crime'.

3.4 NFER's analysis of youth crime and perceptions data

So far this report has presented evidence from the literature on youth crime and the public's perception of it. In order to investigate the relationship further between these two dimensions, NFER undertook a separate piece of statistical analysis.

Sources of data

Public perceptions data was derived from the findings of the Best Value User Satisfaction Survey 2006/07 (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007). It should be noted that the survey did not directly explore the public's perception of youth crime. For example, there were no questions such as: how concerned are you about the level of youth crime in your area, or, in your area, has the level of youth crime worsened in recent years? Instead, the survey included a broader set of questions that touch on the periphery of this issue and therefore could be taken as an indication of the public's experience and perception of youth crime/antisocial behaviour.

Examples of the types of data used are the percentage of residents who think that:

- parents not taking responsibility for the behaviour of their children is a very or fairly big problem in their local area
- teenagers hanging around on the streets is a very or fairly big problem in their local area
- vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage to property or vehicles is a very or fairly big problem in their local area
- people not treating other people with respect and consideration is a very or fairly big problem in their local area.

Appendix 1 provides a full list of the Best Value survey questions used in the analysis.

'Actual' levels of youth crime consisted of the figures obtained from Youth Justice Board annual statistics for 2005/06 (Youth Justice Board, 2007). These figures relate to offences resulting in a disposal (for those young people aged between ten and 17 years of age). Again, it must be appreciated that this data can only provide a partial picture of youth offending, as it does not capture offending which is undetected.

The analysis

Relevant survey questions were combined to produce factors for factor analysis and scores were created by summing these variables for each local authority. These scores can be taken as an indication (although not a precise measurement) of how the public generally feel about young people in their area. These scores were then correlated against the proportion of crimes within an area (total number of youth offences/total number of young people).

The findings

No correlation was found between the two sets of data, which suggests that there is no relationship between perceptions of youth behaviour and the actual prevalence of youth offences. For example, one would expect more negative perceptions in high-crime areas, compared to areas where recorded offences are low. As no relationship was apparent, factors other than direct experience of 'youth crime' may be responsible for contributing to a mismatch between perceptions and

realities of such behaviour, e.g. the impact of media reporting on the public's perception of young people.

When looking at each of the survey questions separately (as opposed to combined scores for the questions) there were two significant relationships between:

- the proportion of offences and the percentage of residents who feel very or fairly well informed about what the council is doing to tackle antisocial behaviour in the local area
- the proportion of offences and the percentage of residents who think their council acts on the concerns of local residents.

Both of these relationships are positive, which suggests that as one percentage increases so does the other. Hence, for example, areas with higher recorded offence rates are also the areas where a higher proportion of residents think their council acts on the concerns of local residents. This could suggest that even in areas of higher 'youth crime', local authorities are seen to be acting positively.

The next section of the report returns to the literature and examines whether the public believes that youth crime has worsened over time.

3.5 Youth crime: do people think it is getting worse?

The literature also contains references to changes over time, and trends in the perceptions of youth crime. The common theme presented throughout is that public opinion generally holds that youth crime is an increasing problem.

- From the analysis of responses to a block of questions administered in the Office of National Statistics Omnibus survey in 2003, Hough and Roberts note the disparity between the public's contention of the increasing numbers of young offenders (75 per cent of respondents thought that levels of youth crime had increased) and the actual reduction in the numbers of young people coming to the police's attention. This is taken as an indication that the public is ill-informed about youth crime trends (Hough and Roberts, 2004). In addition, the authors also reported low levels of knowledge of

wider youth-justice issues, such as the presence and role of youth offending teams. Hence, the public's view of youth crime can be seen to be associated with low levels of accurate knowledge and information.

- Mattinson and Mirrlees-Black (2000) contend that the 'widespread perception of increasing levels of juvenile crime is not supported by evidence from administrative criminal statistics'. For example, it was suggested that just over a tenth of cautioned or convicted offenders were aged between ten and 17 years old. However, over a quarter of (BCS) survey respondents suggested that young offenders were responsible for committing most crime.
- Anderson *et al.* (2005) note that despite evidence to the contrary, the widespread view across a sample of 1600 survey respondents was that youth crime was now higher than it was a decade ago. Only 2 per cent of respondents suggested that there had been a fall in youth crime over this time.

As a context for fears over increasing youth crime, it has been suggested that public opinion holds that young people are generally 'less respectful' than they used to be. Hough and Roberts (2004), for example, found that the majority of their sample thought that young people are less respectful now than previous generations. The authors conclude that the public holds a generally negative view of contemporary British youth. Various other reports present similar views of public perceptions of British youth, suggesting, for example, that in terms of a range of indicators – including behaviour, drugs and alcohol abuse – young people in Britain are seen as 'the worst in Europe' and the most likely to engage in offending behaviour (Margo *et al.*, 2006).

Mooney and Young (2006) cite BCS data for 2005 and recorded crime data to support the argument that the actual decline in overall crime levels has largely gone unnoticed and uncelebrated in public opinion. Significantly, they contend that responses contained in the BCS reveal increasing public concern over actions classified as antisocial behaviour, which is often associated with young people.

3.6 Concluding comments

Much of the work considered in this review alludes to an imbalance between 'actual' levels and the public's perceptions of levels of 'youth crime'. Generally speaking, 'the public' has an impression that youth crime is more prevalent than recorded figures or self-report surveys would warrant. This is perhaps not surprising, given that people also tend to misjudge the scale of crime overall.

However, a comprehensive analysis of the problem is rare in the literature. If it is true that perceptions of youth crime do not match the realities of offending behaviour, then there is a need to find out why this is the case. Large-scale quantification of perceptions may be needed in order to gauge which sections of 'the public' hold which type of views about which types of offending behaviour, carried out by which types of offender, in which locations. In this way, resources could be more efficiently directed to reduce public anxieties about youth crime.

In order to tackle the problem effectively, it is also necessary to understand the factors that influence public attitudes. This is the topic of discussion for the next chapter.

4 Reasons for public perceptions

This chapter explores the factors identified in the literature that may have a bearing on the disparity between public perceptions and the actual extent of youth crime. These include media and information, personal characteristics and circumstances, and approaches to youth and youth crime.

4.1 Media and information

The media is seen to be a significant element in the possible mismatch between the perception and reality of youth crime. There has been a long history of media influence in relation to ‘folk devils’ and ‘moral panics’ (Cohen, 1972). Without pursuing the technicalities of this debate, the media’s role and impact can be seen to have direct and appropriate resonance in the contemporary youth crime debate.

Hough and Roberts (2004) report that public opinion is systematically misinformed about youth crime, and that the media is responsible for a large proportion of this misinformation. In their survey, despite the overall trend of falling crime levels, three-quarters of respondents believed that there had been an increase in the number of young offenders. Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of these people cited media reports as their chief source of information. Others said that their opinions were influenced by:

- crimes committed against me or people I know (18 per cent)
- what other people say about crime (16 per cent)
- personal observation/direct experience (9 per cent)
- government statistics (5 per cent).

Suggestions have been made that young people are growing up in a culture that has widespread negative perceptions of them, and that the media has a role to play in this (Waiton, 2001; HM Treasury and DCSF, 2007; Ipsos MORI, 2006a). Ennals (2003) contends that the emphasis on the association between young people, crime and disorder has resulted in young people being ‘vilified in the popular press and public discourse’. The media has been identified as influential in the following ways.

- The media has a tendency to report on the **most violent and sensational crimes** – these are in the minority and not representative of the types of offences that make up the majority of youth court hearings (Hough and Roberts, 2004). Similarly, much media content relating to young people is crime related and conveys negative messages or imagery. A recent survey suggests that 71 per cent of articles involving young people are negative and a third are crime orientated (HM Treasury and DCSF, 2007).
- The media can be selective in its reporting of youth-crime issues and can fail to contextualise actual offending levels. Mattinson and Mirrlees-Black (2000) note that the reduction in domestic vandalism and shoplifting between 1995 and 1997 was not accompanied by associated falls in public perceptions of youth crime. It is suggested that media portrayals of persistent juvenile offenders, and the influence of **high-profile crimes**, such as the James Bulger murder (BBC, 1993) still impacted on the ‘public psyche’. A recent report by the Youth Justice Board (based on annual youth offending statistics 2006–07) recognised that a number of high profile crimes committed by, and on, children and young people has affected the public perception of youth crime (Youth Justice Board, 2008).
- The impact of media portrayal is accentuated when **combined with other socio-economic, demographic and cultural influences**. Lovbakke and Moley (2007) note that newspaper readership influenced the degree to which respondents perceived increases in offending and crime rates. National tabloid readers were shown to be twice as likely as broadsheet readers to suggest that crime had risen ‘a lot’ nationally in the last two years.

However, the extent of the media’s impact has been questioned by some. Waddington (2005), for example, suggests that claims of media influence on public perceptions are misguided and not based on research. Anderson *et al.* (2005) also found that there was a division within their sample in terms of how people believed the media presented young people. Whilst 42

per cent of the respondents thought that media portrayal of young people was 'fair', 38 per cent suggested unfair representations. This reinforces the point that just because a message or image is conveyed, 'the public' still has the choice to accept or reject it.

4.2 Personal characteristics and circumstances

Elements of the literature suggest that perceptions of youth crime may result from individual and collective characteristics/circumstances. Haines and Case (2007), for example, conducted a small-scale study examining the influences and factors contributing to individual differences in public opinion about youth crime and justice in Swansea. They found that a range of personal attributes, such as age and gender, can have an impact on people's overestimation of the quantity and nature of offences committed by young people. Lovbakke and Moley (2007) note that socio-demographic characteristics, especially the type and location of the area where respondents live, are strongly associated with the nature of their perceptions of crime as a whole (not specifically youth crime). A multivariate analysis, involving a range of lifestyle factors, demographics and socio-economic measures, was used in relation to respondents who had perceived crime to have increased 'a lot' in the previous two years. The main factors identified (by Lovbakke and others) as having a possible impact on perceptions of crime were demographic characteristics and the interaction between young people and 'the public'.

Demographic characteristics

In terms of perceptions of crime overall, Lovbakke and Moley (2007) noted that **women** were more likely than men to think that national crime levels had increased 'a lot' over the last two years.

Age was also seen as a key determinant, with respondents in 'older' age-groups perceiving that overall crime levels had increased, although it is apparent that those from younger age groups (aged 16 to 24) were the most likely to have high levels of worry about specific types of crime, notably violent and vehicle crime (Lovbakke and Moley, 2007). Haines and Case (2007) also found that in relation to youth crime, survey respondents from the younger age groups overestimated the extent of violent and vehicle-related

crimes in their area. This could be because younger people may have felt that they had an increased likelihood of falling victim to these types of crimes.

Ethnic background was a significant element in BCS respondents' perceptions of increasing local crime rates (all crime, not youth-specific). People from Black and Asian backgrounds were more likely than those from White backgrounds to say that local crime had increased 'a lot'. Alongside this, people from White ethnic backgrounds were the least likely to have perceptions of high levels of antisocial behaviour in their areas (Lovbakke and Moley, 2007).

Anderson *et al.* (2005) found that **housing tenure and neighbourhood/location** were significant factors in respondents' perceptions of youth crime. For example, 75 per cent of respondents living in the social rented sector suggested that the level of youth crime was higher than a decade ago, compared with 68 per cent of owner-occupier respondents. Similarly, 79 per cent of those in the most deprived areas, compared with 61 per cent in the least deprived areas, thought that youth crime had increased. Lovbakke and Moley (2007) also linked social-spatial and economic characteristics with variability in perceptions of crime – those living in 'wealthy achiever' areas were less likely than those living in other areas to believe that crime locally had increased 'a lot'. Similar findings were evident in relation to the factors and activities associated with antisocial behaviour. Lovbakke and Moley found that the odds of people living in a 'hard pressed' or 'moderate means' area perceiving high levels of antisocial behaviour were around four times higher than those of people living in a 'wealthy achiever' area, after all other factors had been taken into account.

Interactions between young people and 'the public'

In *Aiming High for Young People*, it is suggested that there is a need to 'dispel negative perceptions of young people by building better relations between the generations' (HM Treasury and DCSF, 2007) The extent and nature of interactions between young people and 'the public' has indeed been identified as a factor influencing public perceptions. The literature contends that public perception is not always grounded in people's actual contact or interaction with young people.

A **lack of knowledge and understanding** about young people and 'youth culture' may contribute to the willingness to create and accept negative portrayals. Anderson *et al.* (2005), for example, note that a sizeable minority of all adults have little or no social contact with young people between the ages of 11 and 24. The implication of this is that those adults who have least contact with young people are consistently more likely to have negative views of them.

Mattinson and Mirrlees-Black (2000) suggest that it is necessary to identify those with the poorest level of knowledge of young people in order to improve perceptions of the actual (recorded) levels of juvenile offending. Logistic regression was used to identify those characteristics which were most closely associated with poor levels of knowledge about juvenile crime. The key determinants were identified as including:

- education (low)
- tenure (private renters)
- those who regarded teenagers hanging around the streets as a very big problem
- financial status (income under £30,000)
- sex (female)
- age (middle aged or older people)
- social class (non professionals).

4.3 Approaches to youth and 'youth crime'

The way in which activities and behaviours are considered, conceptualised, labelled and approached by legislature and criminal justice agencies has been seen to have had a major impact on influencing the public's perceptions of 'youth crime'.

It has been contended that the behaviour of young people may have become increasingly associated with the broader contexts of crime. Waiton (2001) for example, argues that interactions between young people and adults are viewed through 'the prism of danger and safety'. There are two key elements of this. Firstly, young people may be seen to be at more risk of becoming victims – of each other, and of adults. Secondly, young people and their behaviour can be seen in terms of potential criminality. For example, non-school attendance, which might previously have been

interpreted primarily as an educational welfare issue, might now be seen more in terms of (i) the risk posed by the truant to society, and (ii) the risks that young people out of school are exposed to (Ennals, 2003). Similarly, activities that may once have been regarded as 'merely immature or adolescent in the past are being seen as problematic and potentially leading to criminality' (Waiton, 2001). ASBOs have been identified as having a pivotal role in this. Bateman (2006), for example, explored the re-categorisation of crime and suggested that 'low-level disorder has become conflated with crime, evidenced by a near obsession with attending to antisocial behaviour'. Some representatives of those associated with youth criminal justice systems have presented similar views, suggesting the 'demonising' impact of court-based approaches for relatively minor 'offences' (BBC News, 2006).

Mooney and Young (2006) suggest that ASBOs reflected and contributed to the tendency to 'define deviancy up' and to label as 'criminal' a whole range of subjectively defined activities. It is suggested that ASBOs have an element of predisposition, whereby a breach of an order will automatically criminalise an individual, potentially supporting public perceptions and fears of increasing levels of juvenile crime. Lewis (2005) suggested that 'for the vast majority of British people the fear of antisocial behaviour is far more damaging than any actual contact with it'. The implication of this is that attention may be diverted from the real issues of improving the quality of life for people in particular areas by focusing on delivering short-term, visible outputs in relation to 'crackdowns' on certain activities (Lewis, 2005).

4.4 Moving forward: what needs to be done

The literature reveals several suggestions as to how the mismatch between public perceptions and 'realities' of youth crime may be tackled.

Improved public information

Through the literature, we know that the general public tends to overestimate the scale of youth crime. Hough and Roberts (2004) highlight the 'pressing need to improve the quality of information available to the public about ... youth crime and justice'. The public must receive an accurate account of crime and, given the difficulties of interpretation highlighted in Chapter

2, statistics must be carefully reported, with some attempts to explain what they really mean.

Responsible media

Several authors have expressed the notion that the media has a role to play in changing the ways in which young people are understood by the general public. Anderson *et al.* (2005) detailed the need to promote positive messages and perceptions that the public may have about young people, while Ennals (2003) highlighted the work of a coalition of partners united by the common concern over the negative and crime-focussed portrayals of young people. The coalition aimed to re-shape the debate about youth and youth crime into 'an intelligent and useful discussion'.

Tolerance and understanding

Suggestions have been made that in order to bridge the gap between the reality and public perceptions of youth crime, it is necessary to re-examine the drivers of these perceptions from young people's perspectives. For example, the street gang in the public's psyche and media's portrayals may be interpreted as a means of intimidation, violence and crime generation. However, from its members' perspective, it may be a social network 'the youth gang was a more complex and multidimensional phenomenon than may hitherto have been assumed' (Nayak, 2003). Similarly, other symbolism such as the notorious 'hoodie' may just be a functional item of fashion rather than a prerequisite uniform of crime. It is possible that much of the fear around youth crime is generated by aspects of youth culture that are essentially misinterpreted or misunderstood by the general public.

Intergenerational contact

Misinformation and negative portrayals of young people may adversely impact on the nature of interactions between young people and other members of the public. Anderson *et al.* (2005) suggest that policy and approaches to youth crime should focus more on attempts to foster intergenerational links. Bringing together different strata of the community could help reduce suspicions and challenge stereotypes. A large proportion of the public would then be in a position to base their views of young people on real life experiences, as opposed to media representations.

4.5 Concluding comments

A series of contextual factors influence an individual's perception of the extent of youth crime. From the literature, it is apparent that combinations of factors, characteristics, experience and contexts contribute to underpinning individual members of the public's perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the extent of youth crime. Who you are, where you live, where you get your information and what you earn may all influence your experience and your perceptions of crime. However, it must be noted that even though people's perceptions and fears may not correspond to their experience of youth crime, and their risk of victimisation, the implications and impacts of these perceptions should not be underestimated. The fact that the fear is not supported/validated by officially recorded trends does not make it any less real for those involved. Perhaps this is an area for attention and the direction of resources – we could make people feel safer by tackling some of the root causes or sources of information that contribute to the mismatch between the perceived and the actual extent and experience of youth crime.

5 Summary of key findings and implications

This literature review has explored the dynamic between youth crime and the public's perception of it. In this closing section, a summary of the key findings are presented followed by some possible implications.

5.1 Trends in youth crime

Between 1992 and 2002 the number of 'detected' offences fell by 21 per cent. In more recent years, there has been a rise in detected offences, although this increase could be associated with factors unrelated to actual crime levels (e.g. government targets for increasing the number of offences that result in a recognised 'sanction detection'). Other sources of evidence, namely self-report studies, found that offending behaviour remained stable during the period of data collection.

Implications for measuring trends

It is generally acknowledged that official crime statistics are subject to many inherent limitations (e.g. changes to police recording practices and the absence of crimes unreported by the public). Therefore, in order to shed light on the realities of youth crime, alternative sources of information on youth offending behaviour are essential. Although self-report studies have been conducted, they have been done so intermittently and therefore it is difficult to make confident assertions about long-term trends in youth crime. The absence of corroborative evidence on youth crime means that it would be hard to evaluate the true impact of strategies or policies that seek to address youth offending. Levels of overall crime can be assessed through the large scale British Crime Survey (a self-report victimisation survey), as well as official statistics. A similar long-term, self-report offending survey for young people would make a valuable addition to this analysis of criminal behaviour.

5.2 Public perceptions

A scoping of the literature revealed that the public's view of youth crime is a relatively under-researched area, with little systematic attempt to define and

measure public opinion. From the few studies completed, it can be said that there is a tendency for the public to overestimate the scale of youth crime (however, this is true for crime generally). Interestingly, perceptions of youth crime are not always based on personal experiences, which implies that external factors (such as media reporting) come into play.

Implications for communication with the public

An analysis of public perceptions of youth crime would benefit from more precise definition and measurement. For example, the research shows that the public wrongly attributes a large proportion of offending to young people or believes that youth offending has rapidly escalated, but is this simply a case of being misinformed or is the public genuinely concerned and fearful of youth crime? It may be that better dissemination of crime data is required so that the public is given accurate and understandable information. Alternatively, it may be that the public's overestimation of youth crime is symptomatic of a more serious concern. In which case, strategies would be needed to improve the community's sense of safety.

5.3 Reasons for public perceptions

Perceptions of crime have been found to be affected by various demographic factors, e.g. age, gender and socio-economic level. However, most research has looked at the impact of these factors in relation to crime generally, rather than youth crime specifically.

One study found that a sizeable minority of adults have little or no social contact with young people between the ages of 11 and 24. The implication of this is that those adults who have least contact with young people are consistently more likely to have negative views of them.

According to the literature, media coverage would appear to be implicated in the mismatch between the

perception and reality of youth crime. The media tends to be selective in its reporting of youth crime, focusing on the most violent and sensational offences.

The literature also suggests that public perceptions have been influenced by the way in which youth crime is approached by legislature and criminal justice agencies.

Implications for tackling public perceptions of youth crime

Given that there is variation in how different members of the community view crime, it would be worth pinpointing those groups where concern is most prevalent. In this way, strategies to address public anxiety could be most effectively targeted. For example, public information campaigns regarding local authority plans to tackle antisocial behaviour could focus on particular localities, thereby reassuring residents that something is being done. Equally, community work to foster better relations could be directed towards residents who are likely to be most fearful of youth crime.

For those who lack direct contact with young people, it is easy to see how attitudes are shaped by external sources of information such as tabloid newspapers and TV reporting. In order to counteract these negative messages it is important to bring together communities, so that perceptions are based on direct personal experiences, rather than on exaggerated media representations. The need to build community cohesion has been recognised in *Aiming High*, the Government's 10-year strategy for positive activities: 'the level of fear and mistrust at play today undermines community cohesion and corrodes the stake young people need to feel they have in society' (HM Treasury and DCSF, 2007). It goes on to advocate the creation of positive activities, such as volunteering and intergenerational activities, to build better relations across the generations.

Responsible media reporting is imperative if the public is to be accurately informed about the true extent of youth crime. More generally, any coverage of young

people needs to be even handed, with perhaps more attention given to their positive activities in the community. Local authorities, in line with the recommendations of *Aiming High*, need to look for opportunities to celebrate the achievements and contributions of young people in their region.

In recent years, national priorities and local services have sought to tackle problems such as antisocial behaviour and youth offending. However, raising the public's awareness of these issues can convey a negative impression of young people as a whole. While such problems rightly deserve attention, there is the danger that young people can become labelled and 'demonised'. In order to avoid fuelling this negativity, local authorities perhaps need to evaluate their communication strategies and consider how they might affect the profile of young people in the area. For example, publicising steps to tackle antisocial behaviour may offer reassurance to some but equally, highlighting the problem could stimulate fear or concern in others. Thus, local authorities need to achieve a balance between responding to youth crime concerns and profiling the positive activities of young people in the area.

5.4 Final comment

The problem of youth crime is not simply related to an objective number of criminal actions. The 'problem' also depends on how we, as individuals and as a society, feel about it – and how we deal with it. Dealing with the problem will require a two-pronged approach. On one level, there is the need to reduce the incidence of youth crime and to divert young people away from criminal activity. On another level, the public's concern about youth crime requires attention and, as we have found, the degree of concern can be unrelated to the scale of crime. Clearly, there is some work to be done on responding to public concern and making sure there is accurate information about both the levels of youth crime/antisocial behaviour, as well as strategies to tackle the problem where it exists.

Appendix 1 Best Value User Satisfaction survey questions

The following information from questions in the Best Value User Satisfaction survey 2006/07 was used in the statistical analysis of offending and perception data (see Chapter 3).

- Percentage of residents who think that parents not taking responsibility for the behaviour of their children is a very or fairly big problem in their local area
- Percentage of residents who think that teenagers hanging around on the streets is a very or fairly big problem in their local area
- Percentage of residents who think that vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage to property or vehicles is a very or fairly big problem in their local area
- Percentage of residents very or fairly satisfied with their local area as a place to live
- Percentage of residents who think that people not treating other people with respect and consideration is a very or fairly big problem in their local area
- Percentage of residents who think that noisy neighbours or loud parties is a very or fairly big problem in their local area
- Percentage of residents who think that people being drunk or rowdy in public spaces is a very or fairly big problem in their local area
- Percentage of residents who think that abandoned or burnt out cars is a very or fairly big problem in their local area
- Percentage of residents who think that people using or dealing drugs is a very or fairly big problem in their local area
- Priorities for improvement in terms of making somewhere a good place to live
- Percentage of residents who feel very or fairly well informed about what the Council is doing to tackle anti-social behaviour in their local area
- Percentage of residents who think their council is working to make the area safer
- Percentage of residents who think their Council acts on the concerns of local residents

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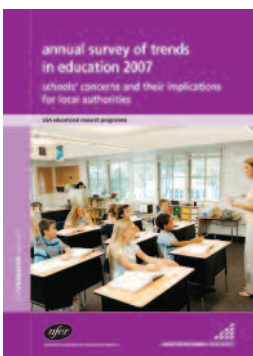
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