Public attitudes to youth crime
Report on focus group research

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CONTENTS

Summary

This paper reports the findings of a series of focus groups set up to explore public attitudes to youth crime. The topics included the respondents' views of:

- the extent of crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) in the local community and the perceived causes of these;

- restorative justice; and

- volunteering and the role of the community in preventing crime and in supporting youth justice.

One hundred and twenty five participants took part including: 57 men and 68 women aged 18-76 years old. Around one-third were parents of secondary school-aged children and just over two-thirds were White. A focus group methodology was used to look at the range and diversity of public attitudes to youth crime, and the reasons behind these views. The findings are not representative of the general population, but explore complex issues across a broad cross-section of the general public.

Local problems of youth crime and anti-social behaviour

In the first part of each discussion participants were asked about their neighbourhoods and what they perceived to be the main problems of youth crime and ASB. They spoke mostly about two issues. First, they talked about the intimidating presence of groups of young people on the streets and in parks. These groups were not seen as 'gangs' but rather as informal groups that participants found intimidating. The extent and nature of the problems ascribed to these groups varied, but primarily participants spoke about relatively minor nuisance and disruptive behaviour, or behaviour that could be deliberately threatening and abusive, but that did not tend to develop into outright violence. The second issue was vandalism and other criminal damage committed by young people. Participants spoke of graffiti, damage to cars, and smashed windows. Many participants believed that this had a corrosive impact on the physical environment and on how people felt about their neighbourhoods.

Participants tended to argue that parents, schools and society have failed to discipline children and that this is the primary cause of youth crime and ASB. Poor parenting was highlighted as a key issue in all focus groups. Participants felt that an absence of discipline meant that children are 'running wild'; growing up without respect for authority or an understanding that their actions have consequences. A weak, ineffectual criminal justice system was also seen, by some, as part of the overall picture of poor discipline, as was a

wider breakdown in the sense of community and associated informal control. Other factors said to contribute to problems of youth crime were: boredom and lack of constructive activities (although some strongly disputed this point); peer pressure; the ready availability of drugs and alcohol; and the desensitising effects of the mass media and electronic games.

Responses to four youth crime scenarios

Focus group participants were presented with four scenarios of youth crime and asked to select a 'disposal' for each from a menu of formal and informal options. Disposals are sanctions applied either by the police or the court to an individual following a guilty plea or verdict. In this instance disposals comprised:

- informal police warning;
- informal restorative work with the police;
- police warning/reprimand;
- fine;
- community sentence; or
- prison.

There were mixed views from participants about which of these sanctions were most appropriate. Their complaints about poor discipline as the root causes of youth crime did not translate into highly punitive responses to the scenarios. Rather, their responses revealed a substantial degree of support for tackling low-level offending without resort to formal prosecution. For the first three scenarios, which included criminal damage, ASB and shoplifting, most participants selected a pre-court disposal: informal warning; informal restorative work; formal police warning/reprimand; or some other pre-court option. Only the scenario involving violence against a person provoked widespread calls for prosecution and relatively tough punishment.

Four themes recurred in participants' comments about these scenarios:

- Participants felt it was important for young perpetrators of crime and ASB to be taught to understand the consequences of their actions and to make amends.
- Many participants were concerned about the potentially damaging long-term impact of a criminal record on a young person's prospects, and saw this as a reason for adopting informal rather than formal responses.
- Participants often considered that a first offence merits an informal or lesser formal response by the authorities, but that tougher action is required for repeat misdemeanours.

- Lastly, some participants wanted young offenders to experience a degree of 'embarrassment' or 'humiliation' as part of the disposal that they receive.

Restorative justice

A general discussion of whether restorative justice is a useful approach to tackling youth crime followed. Most participants appeared to be broadly positive about restorative justice. However, many qualified their support by stating that it is mostly, or only, appropriate for tackling low-level offending, offending by the very youngest perpetrators or first-time offenders. Restorative justice was thought to be most effective and most fair under these circumstances. More persistent or serious offenders should face more overtly punitive responses. Some participants felt that the value of restorative justice was that offenders have to face their victims, and understand the consequences of their offending. This may have a profound, transformative effect on their behaviour.

Community justice

In the final part of each discussion participants were asked about their views on volunteering, community justice and the Big Society in relation to youth justice. Although some participants did volunteer in their community, some raised practical concerns about the challenge of volunteering with young offenders and people who were perceived as hard to reach. Other barriers to volunteering included time constraints, bureaucracy, Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check, insurance, liability and the feeling that professionals were best placed to work with young offenders or children at risk. There was also doubt about the feasibility of reviving a sense of community. There was some lively debate on the question of whether local communities today are so fragmented that there is little prospect of a renewal of community spirit. Some participants argued that people may yet be persuaded to work together to improve their communities.

Although there was some scepticism about the political motives underlying the Big Society, generally participants felt that community justice was a good idea in theory. However, they were unsure about its practical application. They felt that although members of the community may be willing to support community justice, this would only work if there was a strong infrastructure to support such schemes.

1. Introduction

This report examines qualitative research into public attitudes to youth crime. The aim of this research was to explore the public's views on youth crime and justice, restorative justice and community approaches to tackling youth crime.

Methodology

Focus group methodology was considered appropriate for researching attitudes to youth crime. This is a complex topic that provokes diverse views that are often strongly held and expressed, but can also be nuanced and ambivalent. These views can be closely scrutinised during focus group discussions, allowing participants to reflect upon the issues, challenge one another's views and, possibly, revise their opinions.

However, there are limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from focus group research as the findings are not derived from a representative sample of the general public. Focus groups also provide limited scope for exploring the impact of social and demographic variables on public perceptions. They do not allow the views of specific individuals to be tracked across different issues.

Recruitment and composition of focus groups

Fifteen focus groups were conducted, three in each of five neighbourhoods. The areas in which the groups were held were a mix of urban, suburban and semi-rural localities, and each was in a different region of England.[1] In each neighbourhood, the three groups were structured by age and parental status as follows:

- 18 to 24 year-old non-parents;
- parents with at least one child in secondary school; and
- individuals aged over 25, at least 3 of whom were over 60, and none of whom had any children living at home.[2]

The groups also had selection criteria based on gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status, to ensure that they broadly reflected the local population. Participants were screened and recruited by a market research agency in public places within the research sites. Individuals

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[1] The five regions were: London, East of England, West Midlands, North West, and Yorkshire & Humber.
[2] This group included both parents (with adult children) and non-parents. For the sake of brevity, this group will be referred to as the 'older and non-parent group'.

who met the selection criteria were invited to attend the groups and offered an incentive payment of £35. All focus groups took place in April and May 2011.

Groups had seven to ten members (n= 125 participants), of whom:
- n=57 were male; and n=68 were female;
- n=49 were aged 18 to 30; n=45, aged 30 to 49; and n=31 were 50 to 76;
- n=85 were White; n= 22 Asian; n= 15 Black; and n=3 Mixed ethnicity;
- n=79 were employed; n=17 students; n=13 unemployed; n=9 retired; and n=7 housewives/carers.

Structure of the discussions and report

Participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire prior to the discussion. This comprised questions about their backgrounds and attitudes. The aim of the questionnaire was to gain an insight into participants' initial views on youth crime and to gather basic socio-demographic data, please see Annex A.

The discussions lasted around 80-90 minutes, were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Focus group discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of four main parts:
- To set the context for the discussions participants were first asked to describe what they perceived to be the main problems of youth crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) in their neighbourhoods, the causes of these problems, and their impact.
- Secondly, participants were given a practical exercise. They were presented with four youth crime scenarios and asked to select an appropriate disposal for each from a menu of formal and informal options. They were also asked to give the reasons for their choice of disposal.
- The third and fourth parts were the group discussions focused specifically on their views on the different approaches to tackling youth crime: restorative and community justice respectively. The principles of restorative justice were explained and participants were asked if they thought that it was likely to be an effective means for tackling youth crime. Finally, participants were asked whether, and under what circumstances, community justice could be used to tackle youth crime, and any perceived barriers to volunteering.

This report discusses the focus group findings with respect to each of the four topics in turn.

2. Local concerns

Participants were asked for their views on levels and types of youth crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) in their local area. They were asked to consider:

- What the most significant problems were in relation to crime and ASB in their area?
- To what extent were local crime and ASB committed by young people?
- Why were some young people in their area involved in crime and ASB?

Problems of youth crime and anti-social behaviour

There were two main issues that emerged from the initial debate: intimidating and sometimes abusive behaviour by groups of young people and vandalism, graffiti and other criminal damage.

Participants talked, often at length, about the disruptive and threatening presence of groups of young people in their neighbourhoods. On occasion reference was made to 'gangs' but more often concerns were about informal groups 'hanging about' the streets or parks. The extent and nature of problems ascribed to these groups varied. However, participants predominantly spoke about relatively minor nuisance behaviour, or behaviour that could be threatening and abusive but did not tend to develop into outright violence.

"Throwing beer bottles. Making balls out of something and lighting them and playing footie with them, so they're kicking them all over the place, and they're on fire. Standing in the road and dodging cars on purpose, stopping traffic and upsetting the drivers."

[Male participant, parent group]

Some participants stressed that gatherings of young people can be intimidating simply by their very presence, regardless of intent to do harm. Part of the problem, a few suggested, is that sensationalist media reporting of crime generates suspicion of young people.

"The kids these days ... they're only like 14 years old but they're as big as me, and they're taller, and they've got hoods and stuff, and if I'm walking down the road, I have to look twice, not for fear, but just to make myself feel satisfied, have I checked this group of people out, do they look suspicious? ... And I look at them, and they're only little kids playing gameboys or whatever it is, and I'm thinking: Why am I thinking this way? It's because of what I'm hearing, and what I'm seeing, and what surrounds me in the media and the news."

[Male participant, older and non-parent group]

In nearly all the focus groups, participants said their neighbourhoods were affected by vandalism and other criminal damage committed by young people. They spoke of graffiti,

damage to cars, and smashed windows. The corrosive impact on local communities was made clear.

While criminal damage and intimidating behaviour by groups were the two problems most frequently mentioned by participants, a range of other local concerns also emerged. Participants referred to under-age drinking and drug use (generally cannabis where under-18s were concerned) and their associated problems of crime and ASB. Thefts, muggings, fights and car crime were occasionally discussed. At the most serious end of the spectrum some mentioned problems of knife crime.

The focus group participants' concerns about local problems reflect the findings of other research on attitudes to crime and ASB. In the most recent British Crime Survey (BCS), 25 per cent and 21 per cent of respondents felt the teenagers hanging around on the street and damage to property, respectively, were big problems in their local area (Chaplin et al., 2011).

Impact of youth crime and anti-social behaviour

Participants' views on the impact of youth crime and disorder were evident from some of the above discussion. Criminal damage was said to degrade the local environment and undermine efforts to improve it. ASB by groups of young people was said to make local people feel anxious and uncomfortable. During the discussions some participants spoke of youth crime and ASB causing disruption to their day-to-day lives.

"A group can be intimidating; a loud group can be very intimidating. If you walk towards them there's no give, they don't open up to let you pass to walk on the pavement, they just stand there, so you've got to walk sideways, or nudge or bump, and that's the intimidating thing. And that was all right a couple of years ago, but now I've got the stick to walk with, it's hard work walking sideways; so it's not so much intimidating, they're just damn awkward."

[Male participant, parent group]

Some of the strongest statements about fear of crime were voiced by participants talking of their fears for their teenage children, or of their teenage children's own fears.

> *"I picked up my 18-year-old last night, he was out with his friends, and as we came home there were four lads at half-twelve hanging out, and he went, 'Oh thank God you picked me up, Mum, I wouldn't have known what I would have had to do if I walked past them.' ... Automatically he thought something would have happened – that's how they think. It's really quite sad, isn't it?"*
>
> [Female participant, parents group]

Some participants spoke in more practical terms about the impact of youth crime on their neighbourhoods. They complained that it can bring down house prices and increase insurance premiums in areas that develop a 'bad name'.

The significance of relatively minor crimes and incidents of ASB for people's feelings about safety and their local areas has been highlighted by other research (Innes and Fielding, 2002 on signal crimes). These studies found that some crimes, which are not necessarily serious, can have a disproportionate effect on an individual's and a community's sense of security.

Causes of youth crime and anti-social behaviour

Many of the participants argued that the failure of parents, schools and society to discipline children is the primary cause of youth crime and ASB. Poor parenting was highlighted as a key issue in all focus group discussions. While sometimes participants' comments on parenting focused more broadly on the perceived failure of parents to care for and provide guidance and support for their children, lack of discipline was the main concern.

> *"If you're brought up in a proper manner, to be honest, to be gentle, kind, thoughtful, you don't finish up in court. It's their upbringing, it's what happens in their early part of life, how they're treated when they're little, and some kids go through hell don't they? ... They don't know how to say please, they don't know what thank you is or please is, some of these kids nowadays."*
>
> [Male participant, older and non-parent group.]

Schools were also a focus of participants' complaints about discipline, and calls for corporal punishment to be reinstated in schools were common. The support for corporal punishment voiced by many participants is reflected in the wider population. According to a recent survey commissioned by the *Times Educational Supplement*, 49 per cent of parents favoured the re-introduction of corporal punishment for very bad behaviour in schools (Stewart, 2011).

> *"A lot of it's related to the discipline within school, and we seem to have lost that as well ... I got smacked at primary school ... If I look at it now, I don't see where the punishment, I don't see where the discipline comes in at school."*
>
> [Male participant, older and non-parent group]

The pre-discussion questionnaire findings (see Annex A) indicate that most participants were not particularly dissatisfied with how youth crime is tackled by the key statutory services. However, vehement criticisms of the criminal justice system were voiced in many focus group discussions. Consistent with the findings of other research in the area (Hough and Roberts, 2004), a sizeable minority of participants evidently regarded poor delivery and administration of justice as part of the overall picture of poor discipline. Some felt that children and young people no longer fear the police;[3] the courts were said to do little more with young offenders than give them a 'slap on the wrist'; and prisons were also criticised for being 'too soft'. Around two-thirds of respondents to the 2010/11 BCS survey felt that the way in which the police and courts dealt with young offenders was too lenient (Chaplin *et al.*, 2011).

Several participants referred more broadly to a breakdown of the sense of community and associated informal social control. The absence of discipline meant that children were 'running wild', growing up without any respect for authority, or understanding that their actions have consequences. Participants' comments on these issues were imbued with a strong sense of things having been much better "when we were kids", although given the mixed ages of participants, this period ranged from a few years to several decades. This kind of 'narrative of decline' is extremely common in public discourse about youth crime, ASB and their causes (Millie *et al.*, 2005) and recurs with great frequency in the media. This was evident most recently in reporting on the August 2011 riots.[4]

While lack of discipline was cited as the primary cause of youth crime and ASB, some participants also argued that boredom and limited access to constructive activities contributed to these problems. However, others strongly disputed these claims stating that young people today have more to do than they ever did before, yet were more inclined to misbehave. Other factors contributing to youth crime were said to be peer pressure; the ready availability of drugs and alcohol; and the desensitising effects of violent television programmes, films and electronic games.

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[3] It should be noted, however, that some participants spoke favourably of having recently noticed an increased police presence in their local area.

[4] The focus groups took place before the riots in England in August 2011.

As noted above, some participants argued that problems of youth crime are sensationalised by the media. A related concern was that exaggerated public anxiety about youth crime resulted in over-policing and general intolerance of children and teenagers. This latter issue was raised more commonly in the focus groups comprising younger participants.

"You've done nothing wrong in your life, but then you're wearing a hood and you get victimised for it."

[Male participant, younger group]

Summary

Participants were primarily concerned about young people 'hanging around' and acts of vandalism. Poor discipline was perceived to be the main reason for young people's offending and ASB, but a range of other causes were discussed. Participants felt that youth crime and ASB had a destructive effect on their neighbourhoods and caused feelings of insecurity.

3. Participants' views on four scenarios of youth offending

In order to explore participants' views on appropriate disposals for first-time offending among young people, participants were presented with four scenarios of youth crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB). The hand-out also included a menu of possible disposals.

Menu of disposals

- **Informal police warning:** Police officer talks to young person and takes no further action.

- **Informal restorative work with the police:** Police help the young person understand the consequences of his/her actions and take action to make amends for the harm e.g. by apologising to the victim, or helping the victim or the community in some way. The young person is not arrested or charged.

- **Police warning/reprimand:** The young person is arrested and taken to the police station where s/he receives a formal warning or reprimand.

- **Fine:** The court imposes a fine on the young person. If the young person is aged under 16, his/her parents or carers are responsible for paying it.

- **Community sentence:** The court imposes a community sentence on the young person, involving any combination of various elements, e.g.:

    - formal restorative work - making amends for offending
    - a curfew, with an electronic tag
    - supervision by a Youth Offending Team
    - treatment for drug or alcohol problems
    - unpaid work ('community service'), if the young person is aged 16 or 17

- **Prison sentence:** The court imposes a prison sentence.

For each of the four scenarios, participants were asked to select the disposal they considered most appropriate and to explain why. If they asked whether the perpetrator had previous convictions, they were told to assume that this was their first offence.

Scenario 1: Criminal damage

James, 14, was found by the police whilst spraying graffiti on the outer wall of an office block. Several windows of the property had also been broken. He was with three others of a similar age.

The most popular disposal for this scenario was informal restorative justice work with the police. Most stressed that James should clean up and repair the damage he had caused, and perhaps apologise as well. This was considered an appropriate response to his offence because it would make him aware of the consequences of his actions, and make him take responsibility.

> *"It's just direct consequence. So they've done the graffiti and it's you know straight away this is the consequence of doing it – you clean it off."*
> [Male participant, older and non-parent group]

A key issue that arose in discussion of this first scenario, and which recurred as subsequent scenarios were considered, was the impact on a young person of a criminal record. Many participants were concerned that giving a young person a criminal record is counter-productive, as it might damage future prospects for education and employment. For some, this justified an informal restorative justice response.

> *"I think informal [response] because if it's associated with going to court for a start, it would just be too heavy – outweigh the benefit of it. And, you know, he's 14, he's probably made a mistake; if you put that on his record for however long ... he can't get a job or anything."*
> [Male participant, younger group]

Some participants made it clear that while an informal restorative disposal would be appropriate if James had not been in trouble with the police before, they would favour a tougher, more formal response if he was developing a pattern of offending. However, others wanted a formal disposal for criminal damage regardless of prior offending. They argued that only a formal response would convey the seriousness of what he had done, and ensure that he was held accountable. For this scenario, the only disposal *not* selected by any of the participants was prison. Among those who selected a fine, some argued that it would be good for James' parents to pay it (as would necessarily be the case since James was under 16 years old). This would alert them to James' behaviour, and push them to take greater responsibility. Others challenged this viewpoint, arguing that fining the parents was pointless.

Scenario 2: Harassment

> **Ashley, 16, was reported to the police for harassing a family on the street where she lives. She had thrown stones at the front window of the property and had made verbal threats to the two children in the household who are both of primary school age.**

Many participants had trouble determining the appropriate disposal for this case of harassment. They wanted more information about the circumstances of this offence, which might include a degree of provocation of the perpetrator. Some felt mental health or family problems were likely to be at the heart of her behaviour. Nevertheless, many ultimately selected a formal warning while some opted for a community sentence. The others were mostly split between informal restorative work, an alternative disposal to those on our list, or remained undecided. Just a handful wanted a fine or custody.

The relative popularity of formal sanctions for this case reflected widespread concerns about the potential harm that Ashley's behaviour was causing, especially given that two of the victims were young children.

"She's been threatening kids who are in primary school; they're going to be really scared now, and I mean, 16-year-olds more than know better than threaten little kids."
[Male participant, younger group]

However, the fact that the least severe of all formal sanctions was selected more often than any other indicates that most felt that the behaviour was not yet serious. Again, it was suggested that a first offence should be treated differently to subsequent offences, since "everybody's allowed to make a mistake once".

What emerged most clearly from the range of views expressed on this scenario was that, on the whole, participants felt that the most important challenge for the authorities was to understand and address the causes of Ashley's behaviour, in order to prevent an escalation of the problem. This might include therapeutic help for Ashley and her family, or possibly engaging both Ashley and the victims in an effort to resolve the issue. A recent publication (Youth Justice Board/Ministry of Justice, 2012) found that nearly half (45%) of respondents felt that "rehabilitation through help and support" should be the main aim of the youth justice system.

"The whole point is to rehabilitate her and sort her out. Obviously something's not right with the child, is it, that's doing it? She's 16, she's only a child herself ... She needs to be re-educated."

[Female participant, parent group]

Scenario 3: Shoplifting

Si, 15, stole a pair of tracksuit bottoms from a local sports store. The total estimated value of this item is £30.

The shoplifting scenario gave rise to a wide range of views encompassing all potential disposals except prison. Some sought a response that was not on the list of disposals, such as an on-the-spot fine. In a recent study, which used a similar vignette, over half of respondents (56%) felt that a caution or warning was the appropriate action to be taken for a minor theft. Around a quarter (23%) felt that a community sentence should be given, while a minority (2%) felt that the young person should be sent to custody (*ibid.*).

While participants in the present study had differing views on the appropriate disposal for shoplifting, they tended to agree that there was a need for a firm and unambiguous, although not necessarily very harsh, response. They wanted Si to "pay for" what he had done. For some, this meant "paying for it" literally, through a fine and/or compensation to the shop. Others wanted him to apologise and make amends in other ways. Some felt that it was important for him to experience the indignity and discomfort of being arrested and brought to the police station.

Several participants pointed to the fact that shoplifting is relatively common among young people, sometimes referring to their own or their own children's experiences of going through such a 'phase'. But they noted there was a risk that relatively minor offending can develop into something more serious. This affirmed the importance in their eyes of a firm, but proportionate, response to Si's offence. Concerns about the negative impact of a criminal record were also prominent in discussions about this scenario.

"That could be his first offence; the thing is, what you need to do is nip that in the bud ... From little acorns, big oaks grow. You've got to nip this all in the bud before it gets out of hand."

[Female participant, parent group]

Several participants said that Si should be banned from the shop, and maybe other nearby shops. Some also argued there should be an element of "embarrassment" or "humiliation" to whatever penalty was given, a theme that had also emerged, to a lesser extent, in relation to the first scenario.

> *"I think that would be more humiliating for them anyway, having to travel through the store, with a policeman, and then apologise ... To me, oh God, I think that would horrify me."*
> [Female participant, parent group]

Scenario 4: Violence against the person

> **Leon, 17, had spent the evening drinking strong cider in the park with a group of friends. In the early of hours of the morning he assaulted a 19 year old male who was unknown to him. The victim sustained a black eye and a cut above his eye which needed five stitches.**

Responses to the violence against the person scenario were quite uniform. Because of the injuries caused to the victim, it was seen as considerably more serious than the preceding scenarios, and all but two participants selected a community sentence or custody.

Many who opted for a community sentence specified that it should include punitive elements, in recognition of the seriousness of the offence; usually a curfew and/or unpaid work. A curfew was seen as important on the grounds that it could help prevent repeat offences, since the first one was committed in the early hours of the morning. Although there was an emphasis on punishment, participants frequently called for a treatment or support element to the community sentence, for example, in the form of supervision or alcohol treatment.

Participants who wanted custody argued that this was required on public protection grounds, as a deterrent, or in recognition of the impact of the offence on the victim. The length of the desired sentence ranged from a few days to 18 months. In some groups, there was a vigorous debate about the appropriateness of a custodial sentence for this offence. Some argued that it would make the offender more prone to re-offend in future, or was too harsh given the nature of the offence.

> F1:   *"You've got to think of the risk he poses to society as well and that's what the judge would think. He would think, 'Well, am I better off keeping him out of the way because he might do it to somebody else and it might be a little old lady next time?' That's where –"*
> F2:   *"So if that was your 17-year-old who'd gone down the park, got drunk with his mates*

and punched a 19-year-old that went by and cut his eye, you'd want your kid to go to jail for three years? Seriously? Seriously? ... But would you want to know why he did it? And get down to why –?"

F1: *"Because he was drunk."*

F2: *"Exactly. Exactly. So wouldn't you want to sort out his alcohol problem? And get down to it that way?"*

[2 female participants, parent group]

Summary

Overall, these findings show that participants' bitter complaints about poor discipline as the root causes of youth crime and ASB during discussions of local concerns did not translate into highly punitive responses to the four scenarios presented for discussion. Responses to the scenarios revealed a substantial degree of support for tackling low-level offending and ASB without resort to formal prosecution. These findings support prior research in the area. Haines and Case (2007) examined public opinion and youth crime in Swansea. They found that despite 79 per cent of respondents saying that the courts were too lenient on young offenders, they wanted young offenders to be sentenced more leniently than adults, and favoured individualised community sentences over custodial options. Similarly two-thirds of respondents to an Office for National Statistics (ONS) survey preferred preventative, rather than punitive, action towards ASB perpetrators (Millie *et al.*, 2005).

This study also echoes the findings of others that have used scenarios to elicit attitudes. Typically, respondents who tend to argue that the courts are too lenient will opt for sentences that are similar to, or more lenient than, those passed by the courts when asked to sentence specific cases (Roberts and Hough, 2005)[5].

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[5] See Roberts and Hough (2005) for an overview of research on attitudes to sentencing.

4. Restorative justice

Restorative justice has grown in prominence in criminal justice policy in recent years, particularly within the youth justice field. It is seen as a process that brings a range of benefits.

> *"Restorative processes provide opportunities for victims, offenders and the community to communicate and agree how to deal with an incident. Although restorative processes typically result in practical reparation, the communication between victim and offender can also produce powerful emotional responses leading to mutual satisfaction and socially inclusive outcomes."*
> *(Youth Justice Board, 2011[6])*

It is widely agreed that the advantages of restorative justice are that it allows offenders to take responsibility for their actions and 'make amends', while giving victims and communities an active role in the process (Cunneen, 2006; Liebmann, 2008; Independent Commission on Youth Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour, 2010). It can take a variety of forms, including restorative conferencing, victim–offender mediation, reparation to the victim or community, and victim awareness programmes. According to the Youth Justice Board, restorative justice is "an important underlying principle for all youth justice disposals" (Youth Justice Board, 2011).

Participants' views on restorative justice were explored through discussion of the scenarios, since 'informal restorative work with the police' was one of the disposal options. It was also made clear that other disposals could have restorative elements. Overall, the restorative options were viewed quite favourably by participants. A majority selected the 'informal restorative work' option for the criminal damage scenario, while there were aspects of restorative justice in disposals selected by many participants for other scenarios; for example, some referred to the importance of apologising to victims.

In order to examine participants' attitudes towards restorative justice in greater depth, they were questioned about whether restorative justice is a useful approach to tackling youth crime and under what circumstances it is appropriate. Participants were also asked whether they were aware of any restorative justice initiatives. Many participants had little or no prior knowledge about restorative justice, although some were familiar with it and a few mentioned having seen television documentaries or reports about specific initiatives. In most of the focus groups there was broad support for using it in at least some circumstances. In

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[6] http://www.justice.gov.uk/youth-justice/working-with-victims/restorative-justice

some groups, however, participants gave a predominantly negative or dismissive response to general questions about restorative justice.

A role for restorative justice in tackling youth crime

Most participants were broadly positive about restorative justice as a general approach to youth crime. However, many qualified their positive comments by stating that restorative justice is mostly appropriate for low-level offending, offending by the youngest perpetrators (such as those in their early teens), or first-time offenders. They argued that in such circumstances restorative justice is most likely to be effective or is a fair response because it offers the perpetrator a 'second chance' but more persistent or serious offenders demand more overtly punitive responses.

A minority of participants saw a wider role for restorative justice, arguing that it could potentially have a profound, transformative effect on many different offenders. These participants felt that meetings between offenders and victims can play a particularly important part in the process of rehabilitation.

M: *"You put a face to the crime and to the people that you're hurting, and if you smash a window mindlessly then it doesn't mean anything, but if you're face to face with the person who's got to replace it, and they can't afford to replace it, and all the inconvenience it's caused and everything, you might think twice before you do that again."*
F: *"And I think facing the victim, they're going to be ashamed of what they've done."*

[Male and female participant, parent group]

One participant took these positive comments one step further, asking whether people should be thinking not only about the young person's obligation to apologise, but also about society's obligations towards the young person.

"We're saying these people should be sorry but then, have we let them down – society – because we're not providing anything for them? I mean, if you look at the papers now, all the youth funding has been taken away, so ... there's no play areas, there's no youth centres."

[Male participant, older and non-parent group]

Scepticism about restorative justice

While most of the participants believed that restorative justice has at least some role to play in addressing problems of youth crime, a substantial minority were sceptical. The sceptical minority included more participants from the 'younger' groups. There is no obvious reason

for the younger participants' more negative attitudes towards restorative justice. However, in one of the 'younger' groups, two participants spoke of having been bullied as children, and linked their mistrust of restorative approaches to their evidently still painful memories of these experiences.

"When I was Year 4 or 5, I got literally attacked with a screwdriver for no real reason, and I wouldn't have wanted him to say sorry, you know, because what's sorry going to cover for someone doing something like that, there's no excuse for it."

[Male participant, younger group]

Most sceptical participants argued, simply, that restorative justice is unlikely to make a difference to young offenders who 'wouldn't care' if they were told about the harmful consequences of their behaviour and asked to make amends. They argued, in some cases talking from personal experience, that most victims of crime are highly unlikely to want to meet the offender in order to receive an apology. In doing so they might risk further victimisation or they might agree to such a meeting for the purpose of exacting revenge.

"I'd rather like an actual punishment instead of just sort of being nice to them and showing, well this is what you've done, and stuff like that – I think it's just too nice."

[Male participant, younger group]

Some participants saw little value in restorative justice work unless it had an element of "naming and shaming", a theme that also emerged in some comments about the scenarios. From this perspective an offender's apology could be important, not so much because it reflects remorse, but because it is embarrassing or humiliating for the individual. These participants also argued that publicising offenders' wrongdoing brings benefits.

"What's the harm in naming and shaming? If he feels ashamed then he will think twice about re-offending as far as I'm concerned. And if his family feels shame, well, that's down to him, that's not down to anybody else ... and he might think twice; in fact, he mightn't even have to think, he might just get on with being a decent member of this society."

[Female participant, parent group]

Summary

There were mixed views on the topic of restorative justice. Many of the participants felt it had a place in youth justice, especially for very young offenders, first-time offenders and low-level offenders. Previous research has shown that the public are amenable to using

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restorative justice as a method for tackling youth crime. Participants in Hough and Roberts' (2004) study of public attitudes to youth crime wanted young people to apologise, show remorse and carry out reparation. A survey in Northern Ireland, where restorative conferencing has been placed at the heart of the youth justice system, found that more than two-thirds of the public supported this as an approach to youth offending (Youth Justice Agency of Northern Ireland, 2007).

5. Community involvement in youth crime and justice

The final part of the focus group discussions centred on community involvement in tackling youth crime and justice. Community justice is closely tied to the Government's vision of engaging individuals to help them to make their neighbourhood a better place to live. Participants were told that the Government is keen to encourage people to volunteer in their communities in all kinds of roles, this might include becoming a special police officer, acting as a mentor for young people who are at risk of offending, or sitting on a panel to liaise with the police, and that this policy was called the 'Big Society'.

Participants were asked about their views on the Big Society and its application to criminal justice, including youth justice, specifically:

- What they thought of the idea of encouraging people to get involved in tackling youth crime as part of the Big Society?
- What sorts of things communities can do to help tackle youth crime?
- Whether they would be interested in doing this kind of voluntary work?
- And if not, why not, and would anything encourage them to get involved?

Volunteering

A substantial minority of participants spoke of previous or current volunteering experiences. They described helping with activities in which their children were involved; helping their neighbours or local community in informal ways; or occasionally other voluntary activities such as mentoring young people or providing sports training. Some participants expressed a willingness to do voluntary work in the future, but usually with the provisos that volunteering opportunities were made more accessible, would be helpful career-wise, or would tie in with their personal interests.

Many participants stated their broad support for volunteering and community justice in principle, but tended to be doubtful that they could be successfully put into practice. Others were dismissive.

Many participants were broadly positive about the idea of the Big Society but argued that the greatest practical obstacle was that most people don't have time to do voluntary work given the demands of work and family life. The latest citizenship survey found that only a quarter of respondents reported that they had formally volunteered at least once a month in 2010–11 (Department for Communities and Local Government [DCLG], 2011). A more in-depth survey by DCLG on volunteering found that lack of time was the main barrier given, with 58

per cent of adults citing work commitments and 31 per cent stating they had to look after the children and/or home (Drever, 2010). In a difficult economic climate people might be working longer hours to make ends meet and therefore have even less time to volunteer, while others who are out of work might not be in a position where they feel willing or able to help the wider community. Eighteen per cent of respondents who had never worked or were long-term unemployed regularly volunteered according to the topic report on volunteering mentioned above. This is lower than the population as a whole.

"I think it's a wonderful idea in a good economy, but when no one has a job and you're saying, oh, work for free now as well, I just think, like you're having a laugh. No chance, it wouldn't work."

[Male participant, younger group]

Many participants were sceptical that the concept of the Big Society could be successfully applied to criminal justice, particularly youth justice. They commented that working in any capacity with young offenders is difficult and challenging, and something best left to the 'professionals' or 'experts' not ordinary members of the community.

"I think [to have volunteers working in youth justice is] quite a big ask, to be honest, because that could be quite dangerous. If you get it wrong, and you've sort of tried to help that child or whatever, you could leave them with ... more damage ... I think you should leave it to the experts."

[Female participant, parent group]

One participant questioned the motives of people who would want to do voluntary work with young offenders.

"So [if] they're using regular people who want to give up their time, their motivations to give up their time are going to be varied, and they're going to be: because ... 'I was a victim of crime so I want to teach this little git a real lesson'; or 'I believe everybody should go to church more, I'm going to start giving him my religious views', or whatever. So it's a powder keg, and the benefits you're going to get are going to be severely restricted – much less than what you'd get if it was a professional approach where everybody reads from the same hymn sheet."

[Male participant, parent group]

The safety of volunteers working in youth justice was another source of concern. Several participants spoke in more general terms about being personally too scared to get involved, formally or informally, in tackling youth crime. In a context in which fear and a sense of

intimidation is common, they evidently regarded notions of community involvement in youth justice as very idealistic. Participants also identified other risks of tackling youth crime as an ordinary citizen. At the less serious end, participants said that they did not want to be accused of 'interfering'; more seriously, some spoke of how those who try to confront offenders can themselves end up facing criminal charges.

A related concern was the bureaucracy associated with volunteering, particularly when the work involved children or young people. There were complaints about Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), health and safety, and insurance requirements, all of which can make community involvement feel like more trouble than it's worth.

> *"I was in a voluntary group and we used to work with young people. I spent ten years in ... and it was going fine – I mean, before the Big Society – but what we found just before I left, is when they brought in this CRB check and everything, that really scuppered a lot of things we could do, because then you have to talk about insurance, supervision. Some people used to volunteer out of the goodness of their hearts, and we had to put them on training courses and things, and you just didn't have the money. So it's OK saying Big Society, but Big Society with funding, with training, with insurance ... You're thinking: Well, it's not worth it, and you'll walk from the Big Society, because it's too much of a headache."*
>
> [Male, older and non-parent group]

Community justice

Some participants perceived a more fundamental obstacle to community justice than people's lack of time and willingness to volunteer. Participants argued that if the Big Society is all about generating a sense of community, it may be too late for this; communities have already broken down and cannot be revived.

> M: *"It's going to take a long time this, it's got to come from the grass roots, it's got to come through the family, it's got to be –"*
> F1: *"I don't think it will; I think it's gone too far."*
> F2: *"It's gone too far, yes."*
> M: *"Well ... I don't want it to get worse when it can get better ..."*
>
> [One male, two female participants, older and non-parent group]

Others thought that the task of regenerating community was bound to be very difficult, but not impossible and that it was well worth working towards that goal.

F: *"What is a community? Isn't that a thing of the past?"*

M: *"No! ... We're all part of a community, aren't we?"*

F: *"Yeah, but have you ever known anybody muck in together?"*

M: *"Yeah. I'll give you a real good example ... When we had that big fall of snow, right? The street was cut off. Nobody could get down, nobody could get in. So, I went out with my shovel outside – I thought, I'm not going to get my car out unless I start doing something ... And I got about half way down the street and then somebody else came out and said, 'Oh, do you want a hand?' So then he came out, and then another person came – and there was about eight of us in the end. And we dug the whole street out and everybody did it."*

[One male, one female participant, parent group]

An audit on the Big Society (Civil Exchange, 2012) found that there was a growing sense of community belonging in the UK during recent years, and that the picture was improving. However, it noted that there was a gap between the most and least privileged neighbourhoods.

A substantial number of participants were dismissive of the general idea of the Big Society arguing that it is little more than a ploy by politicians to manipulate public opinion.

"I don't think anyone can argue with the fact that, yes, it'd be great to have people involved and doing things in the community ... I think the way it's been put over is just a political gimmick almost, because it's trying to do something that you know everybody would like to have done but they're going to try and get credit for it."

[Male participant, older and non-parent group]

In particular, the promotion of the Big Society was said to be the Government's attempt to avoid taking responsibility for public services, and a 'cover-up' for its spending cuts. While participants tended to assume that the need to cut public spending is a large part of the Government's rationale for the Big Society, several also stressed that spending cuts in fact undermine the likelihood that the Big Society will be achieved. They argued that even if people are willing to give their time for free in an effort to improve their communities, the impact of volunteering will be limited unless it is supported by some degree of funding and a strong public and voluntary services infrastructure.

"You do need funding for this Big Society to work, because you can't create something out of nothing ... It's hard enough to get by from one week to another as it is these days with everything going up, to suddenly say, right, OK, I'll take these kids [on an outing] on my own, and pay £50 on petrol."

[Female participant, parent group]

Summary

Participants held a variety of views on community involvement in youth crime and justice and, more generally, the Big Society. There were some practical concerns about the difficulties of volunteering, in particular with young people who were perceived as difficult to work with. There were more fundamental concerns about the feasibility of reviving communities, and scepticism from some quarters about the notion of the Big Society in relation to community justice. However, some had positive feelings about rebuilding their neighbourhoods and felt that the Big Society was a worthwhile aim.

An Ipsos MORI (May, 2011) survey showed that 41 per cent of British adults thought that the Government's plans for the Big Society would be a good thing for their local area, while 39 per cent thought they would be bad. The Institute for Insight into Public Services' 'What the Citizen Wants' survey (Harrison, 2010) found that 67 per cent of people thought that getting involved in local services would improve them and 58 per cent would be likely to get involved in policing and crime prevention. Only two per cent of respondents thought that getting involved in the community wouldn't change things.

6. Conclusion

This report presents findings from focus groups that explored public attitudes to youth crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB). The findings are in line with other research in the area. The study participants were primarily concerned about two kinds of problems in their neighbourhoods: first, the disruptive and often intimidating presence of young people 'hanging about' in groups; secondly, vandalism. Participants spoke of feeling anxious and intimidated by this behaviour and complained of the degradation of the local environment.

Participants' perceptions of youth crime and disorder, and its impact, are in line with public attitudes found by other research such as the British Crime Survey (Chaplin *et al.*, 2011). The reported public concerns about youth crime and ASB have given rise to wide-ranging government initiatives to tackle ASB and to make policing more responsive to local issues.

The failure of parents, schools, and society in general to discipline children was seen by most participants as the main cause of youth crime and ASB. Some also regarded poor delivery of justice as part of the overall picture of poor discipline and several participants referred more generally to a decline in the sense of community and associated informal social control.

Participants' vehement complaints about poor discipline as the root causes of youth crime and ASB did not translate into highly punitive responses to the four youth crime scenarios presented. Rather, these responses revealed a substantial degree of support for tackling low-level, first-time offending and ASB without resort to formal prosecution; constructive and informal approaches were favoured. For three out of four of the scenarios more than half of participants selected a pre-court disposal for the young person. These preferences reflected, in part, participants' concerns about the potentially damaging long-term impact of a criminal record on a young person's prospects and their belief that young perpetrators should be taught to understand the consequences of their actions and to make amends, where possible. Only the scenario involving violence against the person provoked widespread calls for relatively tough punishment.

The participants' views on disposals for young offenders, against a backdrop of considerable anxiety about local problems and deep-rooted concerns about social breakdown, are reflective of wider research on public attitudes to youth justice (Hough and Roberts, 2004; Millie *et al.*, 2005; Haines and Case, 2007). The research indicates that the public are likely to be broadly supportive of diversionary and preventative work within the youth justice system and to favour disposals that emphasise education and rehabilitation, and not simply

punishment. Restorative justice, which in recent years has become increasingly prominent across the youth justice system, was being cautiously welcomed by the public as a constructive approach to working with offenders, or at least those engaged in relatively low-level or first-time offending. However, public support or tolerance for diversion, restorative justice and other less punitive solutions will only be sustained if they are seen to be effectively implemented.

Although there was some support for volunteering and some participants did volunteer, there were practical concerns about undertaking voluntary work with young offenders. There were many challenges associated with the task of promoting community involvement in tackling youth crime among the general public. This research suggests that resistance to community involvement, and to the wider concept of the Big Society, is largely rooted in pragmatic considerations and some scepticism about the politics underlying the policies. However, some participants were ready to argue with others that attempts to regenerate communities via the Big Society are a worthwhile endeavour.

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Annex A

Pre-discussion questionnaire findings

The questionnaire explored participants' levels of satisfaction with how statutory services, the police, the local authority and the courts respond to youth crime and disorder. Participants had the highest level of satisfaction with the police. A total of 38 per cent of participants were very satisfied or satisfied, while just 13 per cent were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, see Table 1. Much lower levels of satisfaction with the courts were reported. Less than a quarter of participants were satisfied/very satisfied (22%) while over a third were dissatisfied/very dissatisfied (36%). However, with respect to both the police and the local authority, the largest proportion of participants, almost a half in both cases, were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'.

Table 1: Satisfaction with how youth crime and disorder is dealt with by the police, the local authority and the courts*

	Very satisfied (%)	Satisfied (%)	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (%)	Dissatisfied (%)	Very dissatisfied (%)
Police	2	36	44	11	2
Local authority	1	28	46	17	3
Courts	2	20	36	29	7

*N=125. Valid percentage used (missing responses ranged from 4 to 5 per cent).

Respondents were also asked how safe they felt in their local area in two circumstances: walking alone after dark and walking past a group of young people. The majority of men but only a minority of women reported feeling safe, see Table 2.

Table 2: Fear of crime in local area*

	Men		Women	
	Safe (%)	Unsafe (%)	Safe (%)	Unsafe (%)
Walking alone after dark	80	20	37	63
Walking past group of young people	66	34	36	64

*N=125. Valid percentage used (missing responses ranged from 1 to 2 per cent).

Feelings of safety did not vary according to ethnicity. Age also appeared to have little impact overall. However, as Table 3 shows, the older participants were less likely to feel safe when walking past a group of young people than the younger participants (52% and 43%

respectively). The citizenship survey (2011) found that just over three-quarters of adults in England and Wales said they felt safe ('very safe' or 'fairly safe') walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark (76%), an increase on previous years. This contradicts the findings above except for results from male participants.

Table 3: Fear of crime in local area, by age

	Reporting that they feel unsafe (%)		
	Under 30 years	30–49 years	50+ years
Walking alone in local area at night	47	36	45
Walking past a group of young people	43	55	52