

Truth about Youth: Issues relating to the media and to policing

This was the second of two roundtables exploring the issue of the negative stereotyping of young people. Given the prominence of the issues of policing and the media during the first roundtable¹ it was agreed that these issues warranted more specific discussion. This policy brief summarises points raised in relation to these issues at the first roundtable and provides some context for the discussion at the second.

Summary of views expressed on the subject of young people and policing and young people and the media at the first policy roundtable on young people and negative stereotyping.

In the course of the discussion at the first roundtable many

participants provided examples of where young people had received negative attention in the media and warned about the impact of this on public attitudes and government policy. Some participants argued that there was more positive coverage of young people in the local (Northern Ireland) press than in the national media. Interestingly, research in Britain by Ipsos Mori (2005)², concluded that local papers present the most polarised view of young people. There was discussion of some of the projects and initiatives which had been developed, some collaboratively with the media, to address the problems. Examples included: The Positive Image Awards, which aim to encourage the media to take the lead by looking for positive story angles when reporting on

young people and youth issues, and to encourage youth groups and local authorities to be proactive in publicising positive images of young people; in Wales the Welsh Assembly Government has produced a toolkit which aims to support children and young people maximise the media opportunities to tell their positive stories in print on air or on the worldwide web³. Specific examples of projects in Northern Ireland included projects by Youth Net, Include Youth, Public Achievement and the Headliners project in Belfast and Derry.

One of the themes that emerged early on was the perception of young people by the police. This was also linked to discussion of the media in

¹ Gray, AM, Horgan, G, Leighton, A and Tood, D (2014) Truth about Youth
<http://www.ark.ac.uk/pdfs/policybriefs/policybrief7>

² <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Archive/Polls/young-people-now.pdf>

³ http://www.childreninwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Media-Exploring_En.pdf

terms, for example, of how the media covered anti-social behaviour. Reference was made to a Home Office report on public attitudes to youth crime⁴ which highlighted stereotypical ideas and perceptions of young people and explored how these impacted on police responses. What emerged was a picture of the police and the public being suspicious about the motives and activities of young people when there was no justification for this. One example given was that if a number of young people congregated in an area the police automatically felt they had to do something about it. Roundtable participants agreed that it would be useful to have a better understanding of the views of the PSNI towards young people. While some were aware that some survey work had been conducted in some districts there was no clarity about what findings were emerging or how these were being responded to. Issues relating to policing were also linked to the conflict and the continuing presence of paramilitaries in local communities.

Roundtable Two: summary of research context

There has been a number of studies, largely focusing on particular areas, in the past decade looking at the relationship between young people and the police in Northern Ireland. In 2005 research conducted by the Institute for Conflict Research in Belfast for the Northern Ireland Policing Board reported that relationships between the police and young people in north Belfast were a cause for concern with many young people feeling harassed by the police, citing their age and appearance as the reason⁵. More than ten years after the publication of the Patten report on Policing in Northern Ireland Byrne and Jarman reported that many young people's perceptions and experiences of the PSNI remained negative⁶. A report on the review of the youth justice system in Northern Ireland published by the Department of Justice in 2011 noted that much has changed in policing policy in Northern Ireland over the past decade including how the police relate

to young people and that there is some awareness of the importance of engaging with young people in a way that promotes mutual respect and understanding. However, the report concluded that overall there had been a lack of progress reporting that 'this appreciation is not reflected in the Policing Plan, nor does it positively influence the attitudes and behaviour of police officers on the ground. There is still a large minority of young people who distrust the police and too many police officers who adopt a judgemental, prejudicial and antagonistic attitude towards them'.⁷ Recent work commissioned by the Policing Board looking at the relationship between PSNI officers and young people in north Belfast⁸ notes that all PSNI survey respondents reported experiencing incivility from young people in their policing area at time with over half (55%) saying that it happened during each shift. Participants did stress that the proportion of young people involved in crime was low and involved a small number of repeat offenders.

⁴ Jaconson, J and Kirby, A (2012) Public attitudes to youth crime, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/116266/occ105.pdf

⁵ http://www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/human_rights_thematic_enquiry_children_young_people_final_pdf.pdf

⁶ Byrne, J. and Jarman, N. (2010) *Ten Years after Patten Young People and Policing in Northern Ireland*, Institute for Conflict Research and University of Ulster

⁷ <http://www.dojni.gov.uk/index/publications/publication-categories/pubs-criminal-justice/report-of-the-review-of-the-youth-justice-system-in-ni.pdf>

⁸ This area was selected for the research as an Omnibus survey had shown it to have the lowest level of confidence in policing

Research findings suggest that young people feel public and media attitudes towards them are predominantly negative. In Northern Ireland, this includes survey data from the 2010 Young Life and Times Survey⁹ and qualitative research (McAlister et al, 2010¹⁰) which found that young people considered the labelling of their behaviour as ‘antisocial’ or ‘criminal’ by sections of the media to be an unfair and unfounded misrepresentation. In Britain, Egan’s (2012) research looking at the narrative in policy documents and the media found that the anti-social behaviour narrative has largely focused on young people in disadvantaged areas. Tracking newspaper stories about teenage boys across the national and regional press in England over a period of a year. They found coverage was unrelentingly negative and focused disproportionately on crime.

The issue has also attracted international policy attention. The United Nations Committee

⁹ Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (2011) Young people’s thoughts about and experiences of age-related negative stereotyping. An analysis of questions from the Young Life and Times Survey 2010

http://www.niccy.org/uploaded_docs/2011/Publications/Findings%20of%20YLTS%202010%20negative%20stereotyping%20questions.pdf

¹⁰ McAlister, S., Scraton, P and Haydon, D. (2010) *Childhood in Transition: Experiencing Marginalisation and Conflict in Northern Ireland* Belfast: Queen’s University, Save the Children, The Prince’s Trust

on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2008¹¹) in its report on progress with regard to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child across the UK, referred to a ‘general climate of intolerance’ stating that ‘... negative public attitudes towards children – especially adolescents which appears to exist in the UK, including in the media ... may be often the underlying cause of further infringements of children’s rights’. The Committee also expressed concern that young people maligned in the press have little recourse for justice, especially those from more vulnerable backgrounds.

While age-based discrimination is already included in the editorial principles of certain newspapers and the National Union of Journalists Code of Conduct contains clauses relating to age and reporting critics argue that this has had limited impact. Twenty five organisations endorsed a submission to the Leveson Inquiry highlighting discriminatory practice by the print media against children and young people (Giner and Jones,

¹¹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2008) Concluding Observations. United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, paragraph 24.

2013¹²) which calls for age to be included as a classification in Clause 12i (the clause under the discrimination article of the Editors’ Code) and that a new clause be added both to the Editors Code and the NUJ Code of Conduct that reflects the damage caused by negative generalisations about children and young people.

Follow-up Roundtable

The second policy roundtable focusing on the media and on policing brought together representatives from local newspapers, the National Union of Journalists, the PSNI, the Policing Board, a number of youth organisations and other NGOs working on related issues. Officials from OFMDFM, Belfast City Council and academics working on related issues also took part in the discussions. The roundtable was chaired by Mandy McAuley from BBC Spotlight. The discussion was conducted under the Chatham House Rule.

Formal input was provided by Dr Jonny Byrne¹³ and Dr Faith

¹² Giner, S and Jones, R (2013) *Submission to the Leveson Inquiry - children, young people and the UK Press*, London: Youth Media Agency

¹³ Dr Johnny Byrne is a Lecturer in Criminology in the School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy at the University of Ulster

Gordon¹⁴. Dr Byrne began by giving an overview of recent research on young people and policing looking at young people's views, perceptions and experiences of policing and police behaviour, and at the views and perceptions of the police towards young people. He spoke of how young people reported being targeted by the police, that in their view their guilt was presumed and their rights infringed by stop and search being used with limited and no justification. A phrase often used by young people was that they were having to justify their reason for 'just being there'. They were also critical of the style of policing referring to bad manners, abusive language and condescending attitudes. He went on to describe a lack of confidence in police and policing, including fears about confidentiality being respected and a belief that people were treated differently by the police depending on where they lived, their religion and their gender. Young people linked how they felt they were treated by the police to their marginalised status within the community. Issues raised by police included

incivility on the part of young people, the negative environment in which some policing takes place, a legacy of suspicion and mistrust of the police and the reactive nature of policing in Northern Ireland. Police felt that the relationship with young people was negatively affected by a more general alienation. Dr Byrne also argued that, going into the future there will be issues arising from public order issues policing including the fact that young people are being criminalised through public order and rioting. Some positive developments were acknowledged including pilot projects aimed at improving the relationship but generally there is a tendency for the police to look at issues 'through an adult lens'. Dr Byrne ended by pointing to the lack of baseline indicators on young people and policing confidence and called for identification of what should be included in baseline indicators.

Dr Faith Gordon discussed findings from her research over a number of years looking at the media and young people based on a comprehensive content analysis of media coverage, including social media. Her work has involved extensive

engagement with diverse groups of young people, and a current ESRC Knowledge Exchange Partnership involves NGOs and media representatives. She discussed the consequences of what she argues is the generalised and largely negative portrayal of children and young people and how it resulted in the labelling and marginalisation of young people which in turn impacts on public reaction and policy and agency responses. She spoke of the 'demonisation' of young people by the media citing examples of contemporary media images and language employed by the media with words like 'thugs' commonly used to describe young people. The negative focus was so pervasive, she argued, that even when the media covered good news stories such as Northern Ireland young people performing well in GCSE and A Level examinations this was accompanied or followed by negative stories about post exam result celebrations, with phrases such as 'Exam teens get wasted' and 'Scandal of exam result celebrations'.

The outcome is a loss of identity for children and young people who become perceived

¹⁴ Dr Faith Gordon is a post doctoral research fellow in the School of Law, Queen's University, Belfast.

as 'problems' and as separate from their communities, creating and sustaining a culture of fear surrounding children and young people. This media discourse turns the 'exceptional into the normal' – that all young people are potential threats.

Roundtable Discussion

Young People and Policing

Many participants agreed that one of the most important aspects of the debate was how to change the relationship between the police and young people. The question of how much of the problem was about legacy and how much about perception was raised with the view that perceptions are important because they are hard to shift.

Reflecting on the points raised by Dr Byrne, one participant noted that while much of the focus on police and young people was on urban areas, different issues arose in some rural areas. Citing the example of south Armagh, he outlined some of the factors which impacted on young people's experience of the police. These included the fact that police don't live in areas like south Armagh so young people do not relate to them as members of their community and there is a

lack of police role models. Other participants drew attention to issues which perhaps tended to receive less attention including research showing that young people who had a member of their family in prison reported feeling victimised by the Police. There was also a warning about the overwhelming focus on young men in discussions about policing and young people arguing that there are implications of excluding young women from the debate. In many ways, it was pointed out, young women's perceptions or experiences of police and policing in Northern Ireland may prevent or hinder them from reporting issues to or seeking help from the police.

A number of participants expressed concern and frustration at the lack of progress in addressing the issues surrounding policing and young people given that evidence over a number of years has consistently highlighted the problems. Those engaged in work with young people expanded on the issues raised by the research and linked them to experiences of the young people they work with. They questioned the extent to which research findings influenced the Police board and the Police

Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) training and operations. There is also a question of how the research can be used to respond to issues arising from the broader societal context and strong support for the view that the way in which young people are policed is symptomatic of how young people are viewed in society.

There was much agreement about the need to change the dialogue around the negative perceptions of young people held by the police. This message, it was argued and its importance in the context of Northern Ireland, needs to be clearly understood, prioritised from the top and communicated widely. One problem argued to need more recognition was the complex situation created by the PSNI being subject to negative perceptions, the negative perception of young people in local communities and young people's lack of trust and confidence in policing. It was described how this mix of factors resulted in issues being dealt with inappropriately. A practical example cited was of local people making a complaint about young people's behavior when there was really little or nothing to complain about (young

people just hanging around for example) but because the PSNI are concerned about being criticised for not taking action they are not confident enough to challenge complainants where they are no grounds.

There was a frank discussion of the research findings relating to the incivility and lack of respect shown to young people by the police and the police 'justification' which was that they were reacting to persistent incivility from young people. The argument was strongly made by PSNI representatives that the solution was not to 'respond in kind', that police officers were professionally trained and should be taking a different approach. The debate about this point led to discussion of the importance of issues of personality and culture but also about the disconnect between the training received by PSNI and what actually happens when they are out on the ground. There was also a reminder from one participant that it is not just about 'young people not being in trouble with the police' – but about a different kind of relationship being established. These issues, it was argued, warranted much more consideration.

Examples were provided to illustrate that the Policing Board and the PSNI recognised that a more positive relationship had to be achieved and that they were open to a different approach. The Policing Plan for 2014-2017 has committed to identifying robust methods of measuring confidence levels of young people in order to improve quality of engagement with younger people¹⁵.

The point was made though that it was misleading to think that the solution could be provided solely by the police or by any one government organisation or department; community attitudes are an important factor. One final and telling point was made -that we need to address the legacy issues as these are so interwoven with everything else in society.

Young People and the Media

This discussion began with a strong exchange of views about whether and how the media in Northern Ireland portrayed young people in a negative light. There were questions from some of the media representatives present

about the generalisability and robustness of the research on young people and the media. Some participants argued that the overwhelming view of young people in the Northern Ireland press is positive. Researchers on the issue defended the research findings, arguing that the findings were not a snapshot but were the culmination of work over a number of years and that there was consistency across a number of studies. The value of some qualitative research was questioned but this was refuted with explanations of the importance of conducting more in-depth work to properly understand young people's views and perceptions and the impact of media coverage.

As with the debate about policing there was debate about the extent to which the media portrayal of young people is related to broader societal views. This led, some participants argued, to an over emphasis on negative stories. It was accepted that there were some recent examples of very positive reporting including the Belfast Telegraph week long focus on young people and the use of young editors– although some participants urged that this needed to be more inclusive of a broader range of young

¹⁵ The Northern Ireland Policing Board and The Police Service of Northern Ireland Policing Plan 2014-2017 http://www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/35865_nipb_policing_plan.pdf

people and to extend beyond 18 year olds. There were other examples of very good journalism with Opportunity Youth and Faith Gordon from QUB developing case studies demonstrating these positive examples.

The point was made that the media can celebrate some young people while vilifying others – and that in some cases these young people can be the same. This was illustrated through discussion of the vulnerability of young people coming out of care and how they are at greater risk of experiencing housing difficulties, unemployment and contact with the criminal justice system. While, it was argued, the media generally take a sympathetic approach to issues such as young people in the care system they do not tend to take the same approach to those who end up in the criminal justice system. It was agreed, including by media representativeness present, that many in the media would not be aware of such issues, that the vulnerability of young people is not always appreciated and that they should be open to achieving more understanding of these young people. It was also suggested that organisations

should be proactive about contacting the media with issues to be covered.

The question was raised as to why, despite the existence of Codes of Practice, there continues to be problems with some media reporting? This was attributed to a number of factors including the lack of training on the part of some journalists and the fact that a small number of newspapers do not subscribe to the Editors' Code of Practice and the Press Complaints Commission. The point was made that the National Union of Journalists does have a Code of Conduct and most of the journalists in the National Union of Journalists do subscribe to this. However, not many people complain and the NUJ Ethics Council needs a complaint if it is to investigate. While there was some discussion of the need for young people to be more proactive in complaining to the media about misreporting or misrepresenting young people it was argued that media complaints procedures are not very youth friendly. This point was supported by a number of NGO representatives present who felt that many people would not be aware of how to complain or of how complaints would be dealt with.

Media representatives provided some information of how issues could be raised and strongly encouraged people to use the processes.

Many participants felt that we should be concerned about the absence of young people's voices in the media which was attributed in part to the existing structure of hierarchy of access to the media resulting in a conformity of certain views and stereotypes. There were calls for more to be done about this.

There was broad agreement among those present on a number of issues: that there are issues for the media to address but that others have to meet the media halfway; there are some examples of good practice and these can be built on and there needs to be greater sharing of knowledge in terms of research which is carried out on this issue and more collaboration on what actions could result. There was also much agreement about the potential benefits of social media. It was argued that too often social media is referred to in the context of orchestrating riots etc but this is a gross misrepresentation of the way in which social media is used by young people and that we need to look carefully at how it can be used positively.

The concluding points were that the roundtable had provided the opportunity for groups working with young people to make contact with media representatives and to establish a basis for future collaboration. There is a need for more productive and proactive engagement with the media and media representatives indicated that they would welcome further opportunity to take forward some of the issues discussed. One suggestion was that the media representatives could be involved in a workshop looking at better engagement with the media. Overall, it was agreed that there needs to be an investment in relationship building between young people and their organisations and both the PSNI and the media.

The Ark Policy Unit works to develop a facility for a critical appraisal of policy which is based on knowledge and evidence and to encourage public engagement with Social Policy.

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