

# Anti-Social Behaviour and Respect: An ESRC Seminar Series

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*In a little over a decade*, a plethora of new powers and tools has been introduced to tackle anti-social behaviour (ASB). The ASB agenda (launched in 2002) and Respect Taskforce (launched in 2005) have seen questions about civility and tolerance move to centre stage. However, the use of the new powers has differed widely from place to place and region to region. To date, there has been little engagement and dialogue between practitioners and researchers about the evidence base for, and effectiveness of, many of the recent reforms. A report, led by the Centre for Criminal Justice Studies at the University of Leeds and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), summarizes the 'findings' of a series of seminars that brought together practitioners and researchers to explore best practice and the research evidence base for ASB interventions, their use and impact. The Findings were initially launched at a dissemination conference held in London on 22 April 2009 attended by over 80 researchers, practitioners and policy-makers (including the head of the Youth Taskforce, Anne Weinstock). Findings were also presented at the National Community Safety Network Annual conference in Leeds on 9 June 2009.

## The Findings

The ESRC findings highlight that across the UK there exists significant variations in provision and approaches to ASB. Some parts of the country saw quite widespread use of ASBOs. In other areas, especially Scotland, there was a far more cautious approach to the legislation and there were concerns about the use of enforcement against young people and the stigma which would be attached to those with an ASBO. Some areas have relied more heavily on voluntary agreements such as acceptable behaviour contracts (ABCs) and family interventions to foster behavioural changes. Variations in the recourse to formal powers, however, have not been linked directly to differences in the extent or type of local problems, but often appeared to be due, in large part, to: local preferences for particular approaches to the balance between enforcement and support; the willingness of key individuals to experiment with new tools; and the capacity of local interests to organise and promote an enforcement-led or alternative responses. Furthermore, the use of the powers has also changed over time. There has been a quiet shift away from enforcement, towards early intervention, prevention and support for young people and families.

The uncertain and elastic definition of ASB encourages differential implementation and inhibits coherent measurement of the extent of the problem, trends over time and the effectiveness of interventions. It creates considerable difficulties for partnership working, undermines the standardisation of data collection and inhibits research evaluations. Many practitioners have argued for the development of a common definition of ASB with scope to distinguish between different forms of ASB. The lack of shared definitions undoubtedly impedes data collection and allows incompatible recording systems to persist both between areas and between partner organisations working within the same locality.

While effective partnership working is vital for identifying local problems and targeting preventive solutions, and there have been recent improvements in this regard, there is evidence of a lack of

joined-up working among strategic partners and insufficient coordination of local service delivery – in particular in managing the tensions between victim and community interests and those of suspects and offenders. Research findings emphasise the importance of tailoring interventions to the needs of individuals in ways that are sensitive to the conditions in which people live and responsive to individuals' capacities for behavioural change; and of engaging with young people and their families through voluntary interventions in ways that accord importance to procedural fairness and mutual respect.

## **Conclusions**

Despite British Government commitments to “evidence-based policy”, it is clear that relations between policy, research and practice are not as constructive as they could or should be. It has been rare that new ASB policy initiatives are grounded in, and arise from, experiences that have been rigorously evaluated before being nationally implemented. Much of the policy preoccupation to date has been accorded to quantifying public perceptions of ASB (as recorded by the British Crime Survey) rather than measuring the extent and impact of different forms of behaviour. There has been far greater concern given to recording the numbers of times that new powers have been used (via annual CDRP surveys), than to evaluating the impact of given tools on different groups of people. In this regard, the greater emphasis on research evidence in the Scottish Government's *New Framework* offers possibilities for a more constructive relation between policy and research. Nevertheless, the ESRC Findings conclude that there has been insufficient evaluation research into the use and impact of ASB powers and interventions, and there is a need for improved and standardised data collection systems that allow for better monitoring and evaluation, in particular with regard to factors of age, gender, ethnicity, location of residence and tenure-type.

Some of the papers presented during the research seminar series will be published as special issues of the journals *Criminology and Criminal Justice* (2009(4)) and *Social Policy and Society* (2010(1)). A round table session will be held at the British Society of Criminology conference in Cardiff to discuss further some of the implications of the Findings and how the research network established via the seminar series might be maintained.

For further information about the ESRC seminars series and a copy of the Findings please visit the series website [www.law.leeds.ac.uk/esrcASB/](http://www.law.leeds.ac.uk/esrcASB/) or contact Anna Barker on [law6ab@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:law6ab@leeds.ac.uk).