Research in Practice

Key issues in antisocial behaviour

Amanda McAtamney and Anthony Morgan

The term antisocial behaviour incorporates a range of behaviours from minor offensive or harmful acts, to more serious criminal activity. Although a common problem in many communities in Australia and overseas, there is evidence of a growing public perception that crime and antisocial behaviour, particularly among young people, is becoming worse (Roberts & Indermaur 2009). Antisocial behaviour is of serious concern to government, non-government organisations, the private sector, communities, families and individuals for several reasons:

- Antisocial behaviour can have a negative impact on community perceptions of safety and people's quality of life.

- Antisocial behaviour threatens the establishment and maintenance of a safe and secure community, which is an important prerequisite for community wellbeing and cohesion as well as sound economic growth through continuing business activity and investment.

- Individuals who engage in antisocial behaviour risk becoming excluded from important support mechanisms such as school, their families and service providers. They also risk coming into contact with the criminal justice system.

- Involvement in antisocial behaviour can persist throughout adolescence into adulthood, becoming a more significant social issue with long term negative consequences for the individual, their family and the wider community (Armitage 2002).

Research has attempted to identify potential indicators of, and contributors towards, the development of antisocial behaviour, particularly among young children and adolescents. This paper provides a brief overview of the different types of behaviour regarded as antisocial, important related risk factors and the issues that need to be considered in developing effective crime prevention strategies.

What is antisocial behaviour?

There are a number of different definitions of antisocial behaviour. Western Australia Police define antisocial behaviour as any 'behaviour that disturbs, annoys or interferes with a person's ability to go about their lawful business' (WA Police nd). Another widely used definition of antisocial behaviour is based on UK legislation, which defines it as 'behaviour which causes or is likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more people who are not in the same household as the perpetrator' (Squires 2008: 7). This definition, which has underpinned a broad range of preventative action in the United Kingdom, has been criticised for being too generic.

However, forming a more precise definition of antisocial behaviour is difficult as there are variations with respect to what different communities define as being antisocial, which will be based upon perceptions of what they believe to be a problem in that particular local community (Squires 2008). Definitions vary across contexts and cultural social norms and values, and new issues can emerge over time.

An important step in developing effective interventions is identifying specific behaviours that are a problem within a local community. It is then easier to develop a more

precise understanding of the nature and extent of any problems, who is involved, the impact of these behaviours and how behaviours are perceived by the community. Armitage (2002) suggests that there are several benefits to developing a local definition:

- Using terminology and issues relevant in a local context allows for a more useful, widely understood and agreed definition.

- Individuals and/or organisations who assist with defining problems may feel an increased sense of ownership and may be more likely to actively engage in strategies to address problems, leading to enhanced results.

- Definitions agreed upon by all agencies involved may lead to more consistent monitoring practices which may better inform program improvement, leading to more effective preventative strategies.

Antisocial behaviour may also be defined by the types of behaviour it includes. Such behaviours may range from minor socially unacceptable behaviours, for example swearing and noisy behaviour, to quite serious criminal acts such as physical assault or property offences (Smart et al 2004). Some behaviours, such as skipping or 'wagging' school (truancy), may be considered antisocial because of the other behavioural problems that may be associated with it or because it represents a deviation from social norms (Morris, Sallybanks & Willis 2003). Table 1 outlines the range of behaviours that can be classified as antisocial.

It is important that the implications of defining and categorising specific behaviours together as antisocial are considered. Communities and local law enforcement agencies sometimes criminalise acts which could be classed as socially unacceptable antisocial behaviours rather than crimes. This is particularly the case when criminal behaviours (such as property damage) are grouped together with less serious behaviours (such as noisy or rowdy behaviour).

How prevalent is antisocial behaviour?

It is difficult to obtain accurate figures on the nature and prevalence of antisocial behaviour. Current methods through which data on antisocial behaviour are gathered include self-report studies, victim surveys and data gathered through police, courts and other criminal justice agencies (Vassallo et al 2002). While these are useful sources of information, they are limited in their capacity to provide an accurate description of antisocial behaviour, as it often involves incidents that do not result in contact with the criminal justice system or are difficult to detect, thereby going unrecorded. Further, prevalence rates for antisocial behaviour ultimately depend upon the type of incident being examined.

Young people's involvement in antisocial behaviour

Research has found that a certain level of involvement in antisocial behaviour is common among Australian adolescents (Smart et al 2004). However, not all youth are involved in antisocial behaviour all the time (Morris, Sallybanks & Willis 2003). An analysis of key indicator data for antisocial behaviour by Morris, Sallybanks and Willis (2003) suggests:

- Male youths commit more offences than female youths, but the level of offending among males has decreased over time, whereas the rate of offending by females has increased.

- Many young people experiment with drugs, particularly alcohol, tobacco and cannabis, and a smaller number of youth regularly use drugs.

Table 1 Range of antisocial behaviours				
Misuse of public space	Disregard for community safety	Disregard for personal wellbeing	Acts directed at people	Environmental damage
Vehicle related nuisance and inappropriate vehicle use (eg illegal parking)	Hooning and dangerous driving	Drug use	Bullying	Graffiti in public places
Teenagers loitering and obstructing others from using space	Noisy or rowdy behaviour and intimidation (includes shouting, swearing, fighting etc)	Binge drinking and drunken behaviour	People being insulted, pestered or intimidated	Property damage and vandalism
Drug use or dealing	Drunk or disorderly behaviour, including house parties	Skipping or truanting from school	Aggressive, threatening or obscene language and behaviour	Rubbish, litter and failure to maintain property
People sleeping in areas such as park benches, under trees, or in alleyways	Noisy neighbours		Aggression or hostility towards minority groups	Abandoned cars
Fighting or acts of physical violence	Loud noise and music		Disputes between neighbours	
Consuming alcohol in the street	Urinating in public			
Prostitution	Uncontrolled animals			

Source: Based on Harradine et al 2004; Smart et al 2004

- Delinquent and aggressive behaviours are the most common behavioural issues reported by young people as being related to mental health problems.

Research into the prevalence of antisocial behaviour has often used self-report data in which young people identify what types of behaviour they have engaged in over a predefined period. While there are limitations to this approach, it provides valuable information on the extent, nature and patterns of antisocial behaviour over an extended period of time (Smart et al 2004). Victorian longitudinal research followed the progress of more than 1,000 adolescents, interviewing them at 13–14 years of age (early adolescence), 15–16 years of age (mid adolescence) and finally at 17–18 years of age (late adolescence). Participants were asked to identify the types of antisocial behaviour they had engaged in over the preceding 12 months. Analysis of their responses concluded:

- The most prevalent types of antisocial behaviour in early adolescence include fighting (32% of respondents), alcohol use (25%), theft (16%) and property damage (14%).

- These behaviours continued into mid-adolescence, along with high rates of cigarette use (28%) and skipping school (27%).

- In late adolescence, alcohol use (84%), skipping school (43%), cigarette use (39%), fighting (23%), property damage (20%), marijuana use (19%) and driving a car without permission (15%) were the most common types of antisocial behaviour.

- Some acts, such as alcohol or cigarette use and skipping school, were so common as to almost appear normal.

- Around half of all adolescents reported involvement in at least one form of antisocial behaviour in the preceding 12 months, although only a minority engaged in multiple types of behaviour.

- Males were significantly more likely to engage in almost all types of antisocial behaviour, particularly violent behaviour, although there were no differences in substance use between males and females.

- While the majority of respondents (80%) were classified as low or non-antisocial individuals, 12 percent of individuals were involved in persistent antisocial behaviour and the remaining eight percent of individuals were involved in experimental antisocial behaviour (ie the behaviour desisted over time).

In most cases, involvement in antisocial behaviour is a transient period for teenagers, with a small proportion of individuals continuing on and committing further or more serious offences into adulthood (Smart et al 2004). Researchers have sought to distinguish between those individuals who are only involved in antisocial behaviour for brief periods and more long term offenders. Moffitt and Caspi (2001) distinguished between adolescents who engage in antisocial behaviour for a short period of time (classified as *adolescent limited*), and those who persist with antisocial behaviours from early childhood through to adulthood (*life course persistent*). These distinctions are useful in directing investment in crime prevention to target those individuals who are likely to have continuing involvement in antisocial behaviour.

Perceptions of antisocial behaviour

Another important dimension to understanding the prevalence of antisocial behaviour is public perception. People often overestimate the level of crime and antisocial behaviour that occurs within their neighbourhood. Findings from recent Australian research, consistent with other research from both here and overseas, demonstrates that the Australian public frequently perceives crime to be increasing, regardless of the actual rates of offending, and overestimates the proportion of crime involving violence (Roberts & Indermaur 2009). Nevertheless, understanding how people perceive crime and antisocial behaviour is important as it has significant implications for perceptions of safety and quality of life.

According to the ABS (2006) *Crime and Safety Survey 2005*, approximately 70 percent of persons aged 15 years and over perceive that there are problems relating to crime and/or public nuisance in their local neighbourhood. Some of the most commonly perceived problems are:

- dangerous or noisy driving (40% perceived this as a problem)
- housebreaking, burglaries and theft from homes (33%)
- vandalism and graffiti (25%)
- car theft (17%)
- louts/youth gangs (15%)
- drunkenness (13%).

While care should be taken in extrapolating the following findings to the Australian community, an analysis of responses to the British Crime Survey produced the following findings with respect to perceptions of antisocial behaviour:

- Perceptions of antisocial behaviour vary according to people's background and the area in which they live, with the likelihood of perceiving problems of antisocial behaviour higher among:
  – those people living in areas with high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage
  – people living in places with low levels of community cohesion
  – younger people, who may be more likely than older people to observe incidents of antisocial behaviour when it occurs

– those individuals who had experienced victimisation in the past 12 months

- There was a relationship between perceptions and experience of antisocial behaviour but this varied according to the type of behaviour. Those who perceived problems with young people loitering or being drunk and rowdy had more frequently witnessed the behaviour previously, compared with those who felt that drug use and dealing was more of a problem.

- The majority of antisocial behavioural incidents went unreported, although this varied depending on the nature of the behaviour, and those who had complained generally felt that there was little improvement in the situation (Flatley, Moley & Hoare 2008).

It is important to understand why young people are more likely to engage, or to be seen to engage, in antisocial behaviour. According to White (1999) the nature of young people's involvement in antisocial behaviour is related to their use of public space, specifically:

- Young people tend to congregate and socialise in groups.

- The public congregation of young people makes them, and the behaviours they engage in, more visible and therefore easier to detect.

- Young people are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour in their own neighbourhood, which increases the likelihood that they will be recognised by other users of the space.

- The precise social dynamics of antisocial behaviour mean that it is frequently public and attention seeking in nature.

- Antisocial behaviour among young people is frequently episodic and opportunistic and often occurs in locations where there is a high degree of surveillance, be it natural or electronic.

Table 2 Risk and protective factors for antisocial behaviour		
Context	Risk factors	Protective factors
Individual	Prenatal and postnatal difficulties	Social competence and good social skills
	Antisocial personality: including impulsiveness, belief system & attitudes which favour deviancy, restlessness, risk-taking, aggressive behaviour	Attachment to family
		Problem solving skills and good coping style
	Early signs of antisocial behaviour, including displays of aggression	Internal locus of control
	Alcohol and drug use	Moral beliefs and values
Family	Parental criminality	Supportive, caring parents
	Poor family management practices (ie lack of supervision, harsh/inconsistent discipline)	Family harmony
		Responsibility for chores or required helpfulness
	High levels of family conflict	Secure and stable family
	Lack of parental involvement (neglect, low parental warmth)	Small family size
	Economic stressors	Strong family norms and morality
School	Academic failure	Positive school climate
	Truancy and low commitment to schooling	School achievement
	Frequent school changes	Responsibility and required helpfulness
	Expulsion or suspension from school	Sense of belonging and bonding
	Bullying	Opportunities for success at school and recognition of achievement
		School norms around violence
Peers	Poor social ties (few social activities, low popularity)	Pro-social peer group
	Mixing with delinquent siblings and peers	Friends and peers with positive moral beliefs and attitudes
	Gang membership	Participates in social activities or sporting events
	Peer rejection	
Community or neighbourhood	Low socioeconomic areas	Access to support services
	Community disorganisation	Community networking
	Availability of firearms and drugs	Attachment to community
	Exposure to violence and crime within the community	Participation in church or other community group
	Urban area	Community and cultural norms against violence
	Media portrayal of violence	Strong cultural and ethnic pride
	Lack of support services	
	Social or cultural discrimination	

Source: Bor, McGee & Fagan 2004; Homel et al 1999; Morris, Sallybanks & Willis 2003; Vassallo et al 2002

Although most incidents of antisocial behaviour are not particularly serious, they often take place in public spaces and are therefore more visible, which contributes to increased community perceptions of the prevalence of antisocial behaviour (White 1999). Antisocial behaviour can also be understood as an attempt by adolescents, during a period of their life that is highly experimental, to break away from social norms of acceptable behaviour and engage in risk taking behaviour (White 2007). However, the level of involvement in antisocial behaviour for certain individuals remains significant and requires an appropriate response.

Involvement in antisocial behaviour

There are many reasons why individuals might engage in antisocial behaviour. Risk factors refer to those characteristics that have been shown to increase the likelihood that an individual or group will engage in antisocial behaviour (Hemphill, Toumbourou & Catalano 2005). Conversely, protective factors can be described as those that, when present, reduce the likelihood of antisocial behaviour developing (Hemphill, Toumbourou & Catalano 2005). Risk and protective factors can be categorised into individual factors, family factors, school related, peer networks and community and neighbourhood factors (Homel et al 1999).

Table 2 outlines some of the more important risk and protective factors for young people that research has found to be related to the level of involvement in antisocial behaviour. There are a range of common factors among those at risk, many of which co-occur, which is indicative of the complex nature of antisocial behaviour and the need to target multiple factors in prevention projects.

Many of these factors are also present among those individuals who go on to engage in more serious criminal behaviour, highlighting the importance of intervening early in the lives of individuals to minimise the risk that they will go on to commit more serious offences. This is the basis of developmental crime prevention, which aims to eliminate risk factors and enhance protective factors that impact upon the likelihood a young person will engage in future offending behaviour (Homel et al 1999). Evidence from a small (but growing) number of rigorous experimental evaluation studies has demonstrated the long term effectiveness of early intervention in achieving significant reductions in involvement in crime and antisocial behaviour, as well as improvements in areas such as educational performance, child maltreatment, workforce participation, child and youth behaviour, income and substance abuse (Hawkins et al 2007; Homel 2005; Homel et al 2006; Schweinhart 2007).

It is also important to understand the situational and environmental factors that can increase the risk of antisocial behaviour. For example, poorly designed spaces where people can loiter under minimal natural surveillance can create opportunities for individuals and groups to engage in antisocial behaviour. In contrast, public spaces designed in consultation with the local community, particularly young people, can create spaces that welcome a variety of users and encourage social inclusion and the development of communal wellbeing (Sutton, Cherney & White 2008). There is also a body of evidence which suggests antisocial behaviour can be reduced by targeting youth boredom and the amount of unsupervised leisure time (Morris, Sallybanks & Willis 2003).

Levels of alcohol and illicit drug use among young people, and the relationship between substance use and antisocial behaviour, are a particular concern. Research by McAllister and Makkai (2003) found that nearly one in 10 young Australians had been involved in some form of antisocial behaviour in the preceding 12 months while under the influence of illicit drugs. The most common of these behaviours were verbally abusing someone, creating a public disturbance and damaging property. Similarly, there is strong evidence that alcohol and binge drinking increases risk taking and impairs decision making. Young and inexperienced drinkers may be particularly susceptible to engaging in risky or antisocial behaviour they would otherwise not engage in while under the influence of alcohol (Graham & Homel 2008).

Implications for policy and practice

The causes of antisocial behaviour are complex and numerous. Once a problematic behaviour has been identified, it is important for both the symptoms and causes of the behaviour to be examined. It is also important to determine who is affected by the behaviour, why it is a problem and what the real impact of that behaviour is.

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that approaches to reducing antisocial behaviour should involve:

- a mix of interventions, including proactive crime prevention strategies and enforcement
- interventions targeted at three distinct levels, specifically:
  - universal interventions directed at whole populations with a view to preventing antisocial behaviour before it occurs
  - high risk locations and situations
  - individuals that have been identified as being at risk of engaging in antisocial behaviour
- interventions that draw on developmental approaches to crime prevention and target both risk and protective factors to generate long term, sustainable reductions in antisocial behaviour.

Acknowledgement

References

All URLs correct at 20 July 2009

Armitage R 2002. *Tackling anti-social behaviour: what really works*. Community safety practice briefing. London: Nacro. http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/antisocialbehaviour/antisocialbehaviour11.pdf

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006. *Crime and safety, Australia, Apr 2005*. ABS cat. no. 4509.0. Canberra: ABS

Bor W, McGee TR & Fagan A 2004. Early risk factors for adolescent antisocial behaviour: an Australian longitudinal study. *Australian and New Zealand journal of psychiatry* 38(5): 365–372

Flatley J, Moley S & Hoare J 2008. *Perceptions of anti-social behaviour: findings from the 2007/08 British crime survey*. London: Home Office. http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs08/hosb1508.pdf

Graham K & Homel R 2008. *Raising the bar: preventing aggression in and around bars, pubs and clubs*. Oregon: Willan Publishing

Harradine S et al 2004. Defining and measuring anti-social behaviour. *Home Office development practice report* no. 26. London: Home Office. http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/dpr26.pdf

Hawkins D et al 2007. Promoting social development and preventing health and behaviour problems during the elementary grades: results from the Seattle social development project. *Victims and offenders* 2(2): 161–181

Hemphill S, Toumbourou J & Catalano R 2005. *Predictors of violence, antisocial behaviour and relational aggression in Australian adolescents: a longitudinal study*. Canberra: Criminology Research Council. http://www.criminology researchcouncil.gov.au/reports/200304-26.html

Homel R 2005. Developmental crime prevention, in Tilley N (ed), *Handbook of crime prevention and community safety*. Devon, UK: Willan: 71–106

Homel R et al 2006. *The pathways to prevention project: the first five years, 1999–2004*. Brisbane: Griffith University

Homel R et al 1999. *Pathways to prevention: developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia*. Canberra: National Crime Prevention, Attorney-General's Department

McAllister I & Makkai T 2003. Antisocial behaviour among young Australians while under the influence of illicit drugs. *The Australian and New Zealand journal of criminology* 36(2): 211–222

Moffitt T & Caspi A 2001. Childhood predictors differentiate life-course persistent and adolescence-limited antisocial pathways among males and females. *Development and psychopathology* 13(2): 355–375

Morris L, Sallybanks J & Willis K 2003. *Sport, physical activity and antisocial behaviour in youth*. Research and public policy series no. 49. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/current series/rpp/41-60/rpp49.aspx

Roberts L & Indermaur D 2009. *What Australians think about crime and justice: results from the 2007 survey of social attitudes.* Research and public policy series no. 101. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/current series/rpp/100-120/rpp101.aspx

Schweinhart L 2007. Crime prevention by the High/Scope Perry preschool program. *Victims and offenders* 2(2): 141–160

Smart D et al 2004. Patterns of antisocial behaviour from early to late adolescence. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 290. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/current series/tandi/281-300/tandi290.aspx

Squires P (ed) 2008. *ASBO nation: the criminalisation of nuisance*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press

Sutton A, Cherney A & White R 2008. *Crime prevention: principles, perspectives and practices*. Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press

Vassallo S et al 2002. *Patterns and precursors of adolescent antisocial behaviour: the first report December 2002*. Melbourne: Crime Prevention Victoria. http://www.aifs.gov.au/atp/pubs/cpv/report1.pdf

WA Police nd. *Anti-social behaviour reduction strategy*. http://www.police.wa.gov.au/LinkClick.aspx?link=PDFs%2fAntisocial_Behaviour_Reduction_Strategy.pdf&tabid=1525

White R 2007. *Youth gangs, violence and antisocial behaviour: evidence into action*. West Perth: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. http://www.aracy.org.au/publicationDocuments/TOP_Youth_Gangs_Violence_and_Anti_Social_Behaviour_2007.pdf

White R 1999. *Hanging out: negotiating young people's use of public space (summary volume)*. Canberra: National Crime Prevention, Attorney-General's Department. http://www.crimeprevention.gov.au/agd/www/Ncphome.nsf/Page/EE1704CB5FC84378CA256B43001DE51C?OpenDocument