Your space or mine?: The role of public space in the lives of young people

Young people frequently use public space for social activity but their presence can be a source of suspicion and anxiety to members of the public. National and local policy on antisocial behaviour (ASB) and public attitudes to young people are both thought to be influential factors in this. This briefing, which draws on the experiences of young people growing up in a Scottish housing estate, explores young people’s understanding and experiences of ASB and, in particular, how they use and relate to public spaces.

Key points

- The idea of public space assumes that it is open to all, but many young people felt they were only welcome when they behaved in the ‘correct’ way.
- Young people were often grouped together in professionals’ thinking, with little attention paid to differences or how experiences were shaped by social or contextual factors.
- The regulation of public space often focused on moving young people into spaces considered more appropriate by professionals, like parks and leisure centres. This didn’t take into consideration the issues that might be affecting young people, such as age appropriateness, emotional preferences or any tensions between young people within the community. As a result, young people often returned to the places they were moved from.
- What professionals and policy makers defined as antisocial was frequently what young people saw as social behaviour. This conflict often resulted in hostility and resistance by young people towards ASB interventions.
- Public spaces were the site of many happy and positive interactions between adults and young people. This was in contrast to the way relationships between older people and young people are often portrayed.
- Young people felt that they faced greater risks than peers living in more affluent areas. Such risks were described both in terms of the quality of the public spaces available and the high levels of policing young people experienced when “hanging out”.
- Efforts locally to improve public spaces were viewed with scepticism by many young people. Such improvements, they argued, did not engage with young people’s own opinions on the types of public space they most enjoyed and the reasons why.

Background

Anxieties about young people’s use of public space are closely connected to strategies aimed at tackling antisocial behaviour (ASB). In Scotland, legal measures were introduced through the Anti-Social Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004, which included police powers to disperse groups, impose parenting and antisocial behaviour orders. Legal interventions affecting young people were received with caution in Scotland and, in comparison to the rest of the UK, their use has been limited. In 2008 the Scottish Government conducted a review of ASB policies, signalling an official move away from punitive measures, towards a more holistic approach which balances enforcement with prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation.

While this may reflect a shift in policy thinking, social researchers have pointed to the enduring (and largely negative) legacy of the ASB agenda on how society views childhood. It is suggested that ASB policies have defined ‘correct’ forms of childhood and, in turn, legitimised the need to place controls over young people’s activities. ASB policies have also, it is suggested, fuelled a public image of ‘youth’ as a source of anxiety and risk.

Arguments about the surveillance of childhood are well rehearsed, but there is little evidence on young people’s own experiences of ASB policy and how this has influenced their relationship with public space. The limited research available suggests that the impact has been greatest for those growing up in the most disadvantaged parts of Scotland. Here, young people not only face greater environmental inequalities (such as violence, vandalism and poor quality public spaces) but are also more likely to experience adversarial relationships in public spaces and come into contact with interventions aimed at tackling ASB.

The study

The research was based within ‘Robbiestoun’ (a pseudonym): a predominantly social-housing estate in the suburbs of a Scottish city. Its location meant that it was possible to explore young people’s experiences of public space alongside their experiences of living in a socially and economically ‘disadvantaged’ place. The study was ethnographic involving the researcher hanging out with young people in their neighborhood. It also got young people involved as researchers — making observations,
walking about, taking photos and creating maps. In addition, 38 young people aged 12-25 (15 female and 23 male) took part in in-depth interviews as a sample been selected to cover different ethnicities, friendship circles and experiences of public space and ASB. Locally based youth workers, police officers and ASB officers were also interviewed. The research was conducted across multiple sites, including youth clubs, local libraries and public spaces.

The findings

Living in a ‘disadvantaged’ place

Young people frequently described their neighbourhood as “shite”. They talked about physical deterioration such as litter, graffiti, vandalism and derelict spaces/buildings. Several “empty” or “dead” spaces were also identified, including local playing fields, back greens (shared gardens) and undesignated areas of concrete. These spaces were thought to serve little function and, as a consequence, young people expressed little attachment to them. The young people were aware that their neighbourhood had a “bad name” across the rest of the city; “they think, oh it is junkies in here, drinkers in there, alcoholics. Just generally tramps and all that.”

Several young people repeated this perspective, for example by comparing Robbiestoun to notorious locations (such as ‘little Bosnia’) and said their comparisons were between everyday life in Robbiestoun and “posher” neighbouring locations where young people were considered “better off”.

These descriptions had a powerful impact: young people understood their social position and the inequalities around them and these became part of who they were. At the same time, physical and social disorder had, for many, become an everyday part of life. As one young person concluded: “It’s just life: you see it at the time”.

“It’s a bad area but it is good too”

Although young people often talked about their area negatively, their feelings about Robbiestoun were very complex. Many of the negative descriptions were balanced by positive stories about young people's love of the area, their strong social networks and close connections with peers. What was most valued was “being close to friends, family and local facilities, as well as ‘kennin [knowing] everyone around’”. Many young people described strong local networks and a belonging to place: “They just see it all full of dog crap, rubbish over there, bonfires there, crappy buildings […] We see people that we know, friends and family. And we see places, you know, like the places that we go”.

Public spaces as a social arena

Public spaces were one of the key places where young people developed social networks. They operated as places to meet, socialise and share stories with friends outside the family home. They were especially important to those young people who were unable to socialise at home (due to lack of space, relations with parents). Many of the favourite places discussed by young people were those associated with freedom, excitement and experiences away from the adult gaze, such as overgrown green spaces, abandoned cars, empty housing and scaffolding. Other young people spent time in more built up areas, such as stairwells, street corners, shopping centres or school playgrounds. A common feature of these spaces was that their popularity changed depending on what the young people were doing, the time of day and who they were with. These favourite places were also frequently those considered by adults to be uninhabitable, unsafe or inappropriate.

Young people also talked about other acts, such as graffiting stairwells, creating ad hoc seating or using their bodies to dominate the space (for example, by playing games, cycling bikes, making a noise), as ways of connecting them to a particular place. These non-conforming activities were often described by young people as normal and acceptable, despite being a source of complaint for local residents. Many young people complained that they were stereotyped as troublemakers, arguing that adults had “forgotten they were young once too”.

A programme of environmental improvements, such as new fencing, community gardens and new play equipment, was underway during fieldwork. However, many young people felt disenfranchised from this process, arguing that they hadn’t been involved or had any opportunity to give their opinions on plans, which had resulted in many ‘special’ places being dismantled and removed from people’s use. Young people commented that they had been left out of the conversation as adults decided where the property should go. Others suggested that young people should go to the park or leisure centre where they would “obviously not be annoying anyone”. Many young people resented tactics to move them on, arguing that the police did not ask them or consider whether they might be replicated.

Policy and practice implications

• Many young people in this study were angry about their lack of involvement in regeneration but did not have the ability or desire to voice their opinions. Given there is a need to encourage and support young people, particularly those most marginalised from public spaces, to participate in regeneration and community development.

• Any youth initiatives should give attention to the qualities of places young people value the most (places of freedom, excitement, risk-taking) and consider how they might be replicated.

• Experiences of public space are not homogeneous, with different young people enjoying different kinds of public spaces, at different times. Interventions must therefore not simply think in terms of age, but rather consider what other factors (gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, peers) might intersect and shape young people’s social practices.

• Community-based initiatives that emphasise tolerance between age groups and encourage the creation of public spaces which are inclusive, not exclusive, might be more effective in reducing ASB.