

Generation blame: How age affects our views of anti-social behavior

January 23 2014

A study of interpretations of anti-social behaviour (ASB) found a significant gap between the views of different age groups - with older people more likely than younger people to interpret public behaviour as anti-social, particularly when associated with young people.

More than 80% of adults thought swearing in a public place was ASB compared with less than 43% of young people, and more than 60% of adults listed cycling or skateboarding on the street compared with less than 8% of young people.

40% of adults saw young people hanging around as ASB compared with 9% of teenagers.

Lead researcher Dr Susie Hulley, from Cambridge's Institute of Criminology, compared views of teenagers at a secondary school with those of adult residents in the same part of Greater London, and believes that perceptions of risk may influence adults' views of young people.

"It is notable – and worrying - that young people's presence in public places, regardless of their behaviour, was considered to be an ASB by four in ten adults," said Hulley. "The information that adults have about young people, for example from their negative portrayal in the media, often defines them in terms of the threat that they allegedly pose to adults."

In making a direct comparison between younger teenagers' perceptions

about particular (so-called) anti-social behaviours with those of adults - as both groups completed the same questionnaire - the research was the first of its kind, and could offer valuable pointers to policy-makers looking to foster more cohesive communities during a time when the generation gap appears to be widening, says the study's author.

"In the context of increasing distances between generations, between 'them' and 'us', efforts should be focused on improving social connectedness by bringing adults and young people together so that adults can get a better understanding of young people and their behaviour," said Hulley.

"For example, previous research shows that young people gather in public places, which adults use, to feel safe and that adults often don't know the local young people, whose behaviour they are interpreting and who they perceive as a risk."

The research, carried out while Hulley was studying at University College London, is published online today in the journal of *Crime Prevention and Community Safety*.

Hulley compared the views of 185 teenagers (aged 11-15) at a Greater London comprehensive school in 2006 with those of over 200 adult residents in the same area, in order to establish whether there are significant age-related differences. The questionnaire listed 18 different behaviours (from 'assaulting a police officer' to 'young people hanging around in streets/parks') and set out a series of vignettes to capture the views of the two groups.

The results showed that a wide variety of behaviours were identified as anti-social. Acts defined as ASB ranged from serious crimes to everyday behaviours such as gathering in groups and playing football in the street.

The majority of adults and young people agreed that murder, assault, burglary and shoplifting were anti-social behaviours. These were the only behaviours that were interpreted as ASB by at least 93% of adults and young people, with no significant differences between the groups.

At the lower end of the spectrum there was no such consensus, with adults significantly more likely to interpret all other behaviours presented to them as anti-social when compared with young people, including: young people hanging around; dropping litter and chewing gum; swearing in a public place; dumping rubbish or waste; scratching names or comments on bus windows; spray painting on walls; illegal parking.

In comparing the responses to the vignettes contained in the questionnaire, Hulley found that, not only did the age of the person defining the behaviour affect interpretations, but so did the age of those perceived to be the 'perpetrators' and the 'victims' of particular behaviours.

A group of young people blocking the pavement were more likely to be said to be behaving anti-socially than a group of middle aged women with pushchairs who were also blocking the pavement by both adults and young people. Still, more adults than teenagers identified the young people as anti-social.

A group of girls shouting insults at an elderly lady were defined as ASB by all adults and all but five young people, but only 60% of [adults](#) and 76% of young people defined an elderly man shouting insults at a group of teenage boys as anti-social. In conversation, adult participants surmised that the boys must have provoked the elderly man and some commented that he was 'brave' to confront them.

"The results of the study show that, in practice, the identification of

behaviour as anti-social involved an interpretative process that is not based simply on the behaviour itself but on the age of those involved," said Hulley.

"My research confirms that [young people](#) are particularly likely to be labelled perpetrators of ASB - especially by adult observers - and are less likely to be recognised as victims of ASB."

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Generation blame: How age affects our views of anti-social behavior (2014, January 23) retrieved 2 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-01-blame-age-affects-views-anti-social.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.