

What is antisocial behavior? According researcher, no one really knows

March 29 2023, by Kirsty-Louise Cameron



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Prime Minister [Rishi Sunak has unveiled plans](#) to crack down on antisocial behavior. The proposals include making offenders [wear hi-vis jackets to wash police cars and clean up vandalism](#), within 48 hours of being served a court order. Offenders may have to do other unpaid work in their local communities.

[Labour has also released plans](#) to make individuals clean up fly-tipping and graffiti. And they've proposed expanding mandatory parenting classes for parents of young offenders.

Clearly, politicians of all stripes agree that stopping antisocial behavior is important. But what exactly counts as antisocial?

The term antisocial behavior is used to refer to a range of actions, from noise nuisance and untidy gardens, to drug dealing and physical violence. It was first introduced into [government policy](#) in the 1990s. Tony Blair's government [broadly defined it as](#) behavior that causes [nuisance, annoyance, alarm or distress](#). They introduced several measures to manage antisocial behavior, including social housing evictions and asbos—[antisocial behavior orders](#).

The [Anti-social Behavior, Crime and Policing Act \(2014\)](#) provides the most recent policy definition for antisocial behavior. There, it is defined as conduct likely to cause harassment, alarm, distress, nuisance or annoyance.

What legal definitions and government documentation often leave out is a specific list of behaviors that are antisocial. The [current proposal](#) does not appear to have a specific list of behaviors either, although Sunak referred to vandalism and broadly, behavior that ["disrupts people's daily lives"](#).

Even [the Blair government's own policy documents](#) had conflicting definitions.

For years, researchers [have highlighted](#) how the broad definition in policy could lead to almost any behavior being [seen as antisocial](#). For example, as I found in my Ph.D. research, a tenant was sent a [warning letter](#) for noise nuisance after flushing the toilet at night.

I interviewed five staff working in four different housing associations and local councils about what antisocial behavior means. I also spoke with 15 social housing tenants who had been accused of antisocial behavior about how the interventions affected them.

Antisocial behavior officers told me the definitions in law and in social housing tenancy agreements were self-explanatory. However, half of the perpetrators I interviewed said it was "hard to define," or simply that they didn't know what antisocial behavior covered. Most felt antisocial behavior would be defined differently by everyone, applying to almost any behavior.

How allegations affect perpetrators

The alleged perpetrators gave examples of complaints that had been made about them. These included a neighbor being "offended" as the tenant said hello to them in the street, having a soft drink can in an upstairs window and using the front rather than rear communal door. Two housing officers gave examples of tenants who needed to use communal stairs or household appliances at unsociable hours due to their working hours.

In response to these instances, tenants received home visits and warning letters referring to the possibility of eviction. These examples suggest that a lack of clear definition leads to mundane behaviors being treated as antisocial, with the dire consequence of tenants possibly losing their homes.

Tenants told me that staff within the same housing providers had different definitions of antisocial behavior. Two tenants said they received warning letters for having CCTV for which they had previously been given permission. One tenant reported that while one officer told her there was no evidence of antisocial behavior, another served her an

eviction notice without further incidence or evidence gathering.

This uncertainty and inconsistency had serious, detrimental impacts on tenants. Many reported a [negative impact on their mental health](#), including suicidal thoughts, after receiving antisocial behavior interventions.

Punishing vulnerable victims

I also found victims of domestic abuse being [treated as perpetrators](#) of antisocial behavior. Four women I spoke to experienced domestic abuse and reported being "punished" for it by their social housing landlord.

One reported receiving a warning letter when a violent ex-partner attempted to forcibly gain entry to her home. Another woman showed me her eviction notice, which listed examples of violence and intimidation towards her as examples of her own misconduct.

A [2019 Australian study](#) also found that (female) victims of domestic abuse were routinely punished through antisocial behavior interventions.

The broad definitions in policy can lead to a number of problems in managing antisocial behavior. The experiences of the tenants I interviewed show that mundane, everyday behavior can be treated as serious antisocial behavior. And [domestic abuse](#) can be treated as a failure of the victim to prevent nuisance to their neighbors.

Introducing more visible or stronger punishments for antisocial behavior, as the government hopes to, is unlikely to fix a problem that is poorly defined in the first place. Serious [antisocial behavior](#) can of course have a significant, negative impact on individuals, households and communities. But it is not always serious behavior that is punished through these measures.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: What is antisocial behavior? According researcher, no one really knows (2023, March 29) retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-03-antisocial-behavior.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.