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British young people's understanding of crime and violence in the local context: Reality or myth?

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Abstract

This paper explores British young people's specific concerns about local violence and crime in two locations: London and Devon. The findings come from the ECRP Future Citizens project which explored young people's hopes and fears for the future and their understanding of social and global issues. We discuss the concerns raised by British young people in both their quantitative and qualitative responses to the survey and in the focus group discussions.

Echoing research with British adults, fears relating to local violence and crime predominated the British young people's responses. We explore their experiences and understanding of violence and crime, which in Devon tended to relate to petty crime and graffiti, while in London, it related very specifically to gun and knife crime. We go on to suggest some of the contributing factors to young people's overwhelming concerns about crime and violence. The media plays an important role in influencing and shaping young people's narratives, as does their real life experiences and their parents' perceptions. While crime rates continue to fall, the perception remains that crime and violence are increasing. We situate this concern for knife and gun crime in relation to media reports common at the time of the research, highlighting the 'epidemic' of knife crime among teenagers in London, and argue that media plays a key role in influencing and shaping these narratives. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for policy makers and teachers.

Introduction

The findings reported in this paper come from the ECRP Future Citizens project which explored young people's hopes and fears for the future and their understanding of social and global issues. Research was conducted in both cities and more rural areas in each of four European countries: Britain, Spain, Turkey and Poland. In each country young people aged 11, 14 and 17 completed a survey, while a smaller number also participated in focus group discussions.

This paper focuses on the data collected in Britain. More than 600 British young people in London and Devon participated in the study. This paper will focus on their specific concerns about violence and crime in their local area. We draw on the survey questions about hopes and fears for the future of their local area and the extent to which they thought violence and conflict in the area would worsen or improve, and qualitative data collected through focus group discussions.

We begin by briefly exploring data from all four countries, but move on to focus on how crime and violence featured most prominently in British young people's concerns for their local area. We explore their experiences and understandings of local violence, before going on to suggest some of the contributing factors to young people's overwhelming concerns about crime and violence. The media plays an important role in influencing and shaping young people's narratives, as does their real life experiences and their parents' perceptions. British young people's concerns for violence mirror those of adults; while crime rates continue to fall, the perception remains that crime and violence are increasing, fuelled by the reporting of the subject in the media. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for policy makers and teachers.

Violence and conflict in the local area: a look across the data

The survey asked young people to say whether they thought there would be more or less violence and conflict in their local area in the future. On the whole, young people across all the countries were fairly pessimistic. Two thirds of pupils across all the countries felt that the level of violence and conflict in their local area would get worse or at least stay the same in the future. Older pupils were more likely to say that the area would be more violent in the future than younger pupils. There were also variations by country, with young people in Britain being most likely to say the area would be more violent in the future (43%). Only 21% of British pupils indicated that levels of violence and conflict in their local area would improve, compared to 42% of Turkish and 36% of Spanish young people.

Figure 1: Will there be more or less local violence and conflict in the future than there is today? (By country)
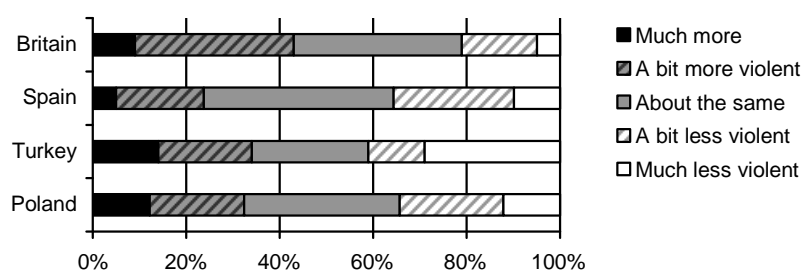
If we look specifically at British data from the qualitative part of the survey relating to hopes and fears for the future of the local area, it is clear that concerns for crime and violence featured highly. Half of their fears related to crime and violence, as did more than a third of their hopes. As Figures 3 and 4 below show, there were also differences by location, with crime and violence concerns being more frequently mentioned by young people living in London than those living in the rural area of Devon.

Figure 3: British hopes for the local area (London and Devon 2008 and 2009 data combined).
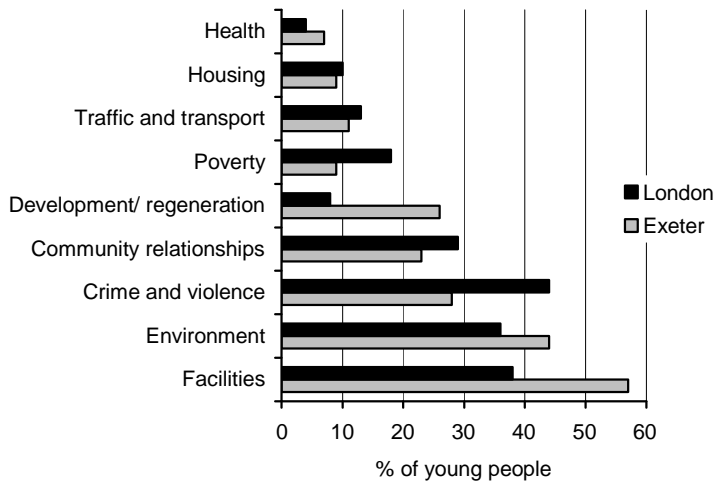
Figure 4: British fears for local area (London and Devon 2008 and 2009 data combined).
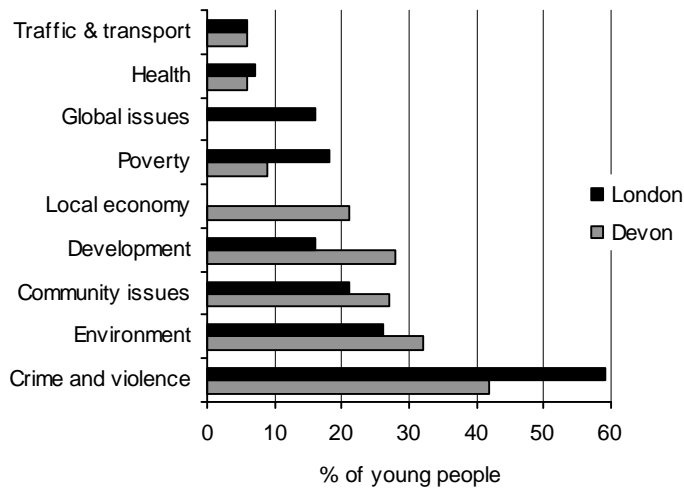
As Hicks (1996) notes, young people's hopes and fears for the future are shaped by their experiences of the present, and can be seen as a 'mirror' of their current experiences. As far back as 1994, British young people were expressing concerns about the rise in violence and crime in their local area. Hicks and Holden, surveying over 400 young people aged 7-18, found that the most frequently mentioned concerns for their local community related to more crime or violence, with over 40% of eleven year olds mentioning this, rising to 60% of secondary school students. Many thought that levels of crime and violence would increase in the future, citing unemployment, lack of police action, alcohol and drugs as causes. Some of their concerns reflected issues in the news

at that time, for example children worried that violence perpetrated by the IRA and armed conflict in Bosnia might spread to their community.

Ten years later, Holden (2007) repeated this survey, using many of the same schools. When considering violence in their local area the 2004 young people were slightly more optimistic than their counterparts in 1994 that crime rates would go down, which may reflect a lower crime in 2004 than ten years earlier. The issues, however, were very similar. Three quarters of the primary children were worried about mugging, rape, murder, paedophiles, drunks, drug dealers, gangs, 'people with knives and guns' and those who commit vandalism or 'do graffiti'. Children again feared that the violence they had witnessed on the media would spread to their local area, with one boy being worried about 'terrorists' while another hoped 'that Bin Laden don't bomb Bristol' (his home town). Secondary pupils shared similar concerns. They wanted 'less drunks', 'less addicts and dealers' and feared an increase in vandalism, gangs and murder.

Such concerns remained among the young people in 2008/2009. However, there was a much greater emphasis on street or youth crime and violence associated with weapons such as knives and guns, and involving gangs, which we will now explore in detail.

Gun and knife crime

There was a perception amongst British young people that violence was worsening in their local area. When asked in the focus groups why this might be they replied 'cos of all the stabbings' (11 year old, London), 'gun shootings' (17 year old, London), and because 'knife crime has so escalated' (17 year old, London). A London 11 year old claimed, when asked what they understood by 'violence', that 'it means when people in, well mainly in Britain, like in London, when people stab each other'.

In Devon, young people also expressed fears of violent crime, and here too there was a sense that such crimes were specific to cities such as London and thus did not directly affect them; a 14 year old in Devon said, there is a lot more violence in 'city areas like London'. An eleven year old boy feared 'people carrying knives', while a 14 year old girl feared 'too many people turning to violence (knife crime, etc)'.

A fear of not being safe due to gun, knife and gang crime appeared to be particularly prominent among younger boys. An 11 year old London boy summed up just how insecure some of the young people felt in their community. He feared:
1) For it to get rough; 2) scary and creepy; 3) and for everyone to be so scared they don't go out their front doors. (Boy, 11, London)

A 17 year old London girl also echoed these concerns, fearing 'that it is too dangerous to go out and have fun'. These fears were fuelled by perceptions of high crime levels, drug use, vandalism and graffiti, and the perceived threat of violence from gangs and interestingly from other teenagers, and 'hoodies'[1], which together contributed to their lack of feeling secure.

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[1] A 'hoody' in this sense is used to refer, not to an item of clothing, but to a young person, often a teenager, who presents yobbish, anti-social behaviour and wears a hooded top.

A significant proportion of 11 year old girls mentioned fears relating to paedophiles, stalkers and murderers in their local area ('getting followed down the street by adults', Girl, 11, London), which further contributed to feelings of insecurity.

Research suggests evidence of a general rise in mistrust of others among young people (Park et al, 2004; Hume, 2008) which data from young people in London confirms; their perceptions of the severity of gun and knife crime raised concerns about being able to trust others. For example, a 17 year old in London concluded:

> I was speaking to my friends the other day and one of my good friends; she said, 'nowadays if you look at someone the wrong way you are going to get stabbed.'

Perceptions of crime versus reality: levels of crime in the UK

In expressing such views, young people are to an extent mirroring the concerns of adults within their particular countries. Britain has a comparatively high rate of recorded crimes when compared with Poland and Spain (Eurostat, 2007). The most recent Eurobarometer (72, 2009) also shows that crime was of a far greater concern for those in the UK than for those in Europe as a whole; 36% of UK respondents identified crime as one of the two most important issues facing the country, in contrast to 19% of Europeans as a whole, 10% in Poland, 11% in Spain, and 6% in Turkey).

However, while crime is of great concern to British adults, and rates of crime are higher in Britain than elsewhere, previous research in Britain has shown that there is also a tendency for the general public to overestimate the scale of crime. For example, the British Crime Survey found that more than half of people surveyed believed that knife crime, gun crime and people being 'beaten up' had increased nationally (Walker et al, 2009). However, rates of crime within Britain have actually decreased in recent years; the number of police recorded crimes fell by 5% between 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 (Home Office, 2010), while data from the British Crime Survey shows that violent crime has decreased by 43% between 1995 and 2005/06 (Jansson, 2007). There is a similar tendency on behalf of the public to overestimate the extent to which youth crime involved acts of violence. Respondents to an Ipsos poll suggested that almost half of all youth crime involved violence, whereas recorded crime figures revealed an average of one fifth (Ipsos, 2006).

Such overestimation is also found among young people. More than six in ten (62%) young people aged 16-24 who completed a Youthnet survey (2008) about fears and hopes said they were afraid of being a victim of crime. The same survey found that while more than half had been victims of some sort of crime, fewer than one in ten were a victim of violent crime. Similarly the 2006 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey found 26% of young people aged 10-25 have been a victim of theft or assault, but most common was assault without injury or personal theft (Roe & Ash, 2008). Allen (2010) shows how the fear of becoming a victim of violence and crime (either in the form of an attack, bullying or being hurt by others) was also played out in British young people's responses in relation to their personal future.

Cockburn (2008) claims young people are the most fearful of violent crime compared to adults (he cites the 2004-05 British Crime Survey in which 22% of 16-24 year olds claimed to be very worried about violent crime compared to 11% of all respondents).The actual risk of being a victim of violent crime is more like 3% according to the BCS (2009). The UK has one of the lowest youth homicide rates globally (0.9 per 100,000 people aged 10-29; Krug et al, 2002).

Sources of information

So where do young people's perceptions of crime come from? Why are concerns about crime and violence greater in the UK than elsewhere? And why are perceptions of the levels of crime greater than the reality?

Our survey and focus groups also asked young people where they got their information about violence and conflict from. As figure 4 shows, the most commonly cited source from which young people in London said they derived 'a lot' of their information on violence and conflict was the media in the form of TV/cinemas and newspapers. It should be noted that school was ranked second-last in terms of the information it provided to pupils on this area (for more on this data in relation to the study as a whole see Ross and Dooly, 2010). Figure 6 shows that older pupils were even more likely to cite newspapers, TV and the internet as their main sources of information on violence and conflict.

Figure 5: Main sources of information about violence and conflict (London)
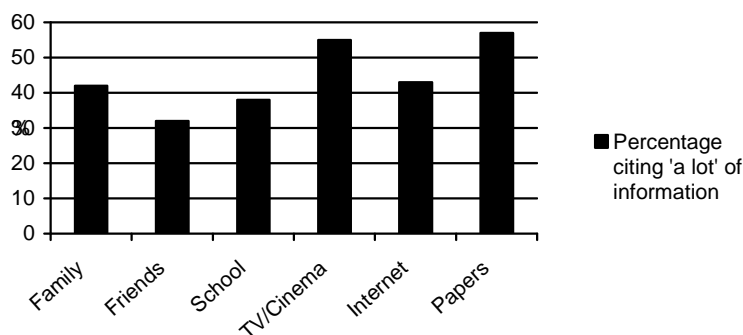
Figure 6: Main sources of information about violence and conflict by age (London)
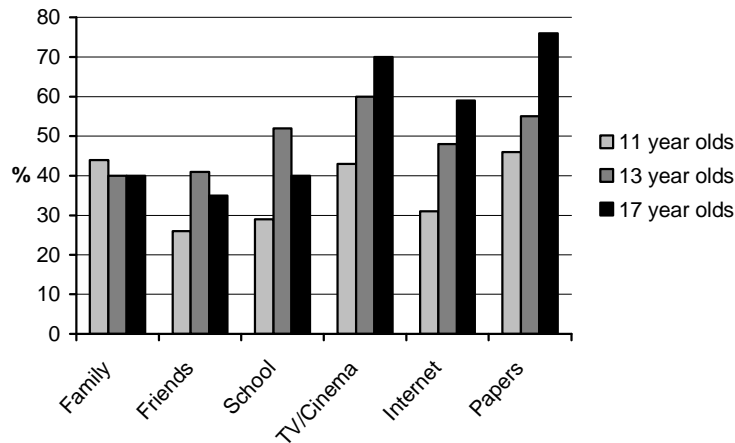
Young people participating in focus group discussions elaborated on the role of the media in generating their perceptions of crime and violence. It was common for young people in various different countries to claim that the 'mass media' in general had an influence on the rising levels of violence in society, for example through proliferation of violent films and video games. As a 14 year old in Devon said, 'everything seems to encourage violence these days', referring to the media and 'shoot 'em up' video games.
It was common for British young people to cite the 'newspapers' or the 'news on TV' as their main source of information about violence. In a focus group, a 14 year old in Devon said their knowledge was from:

> Seeing all the news reports and everything like that's all been about teenagers ganging up on different strangers: there's a lot more of it on the TV than there was a few years back.

In another focus group 11 year olds in London revealed that they thought the number of killings of teenagers by 'stabbing' was rising because it was 'on the news' 'every couple of days'. Certainly, in 2008 and, to an extent, 2009, when this research was conducted, the British press, particularly local press in London, focused on a number of high profile killings of teenagers who were stabbed by other teenagers in London. This led to a flurry of media articles on youth knife crime; indeed several national newspapers referred to an 'epidemic' of knife crime (Hope and Tibbetts writing in the Daily Telegraph, 2008; Daily Mail, 2008; Owen in the Independent on Sunday, 2008). In September 2008 The Daily Mirror newspaper organized a march in London called 'Stop knives, save lives' in protest at the number of teenage stabbings, particularly in response to the murder of London teenager Ben Kinsella. It is highly likely that such stories influenced young people's perceptions of knife crime in London.

Previous research shows that much of the media related to young people is crime related (Halsey and White 2008), and many commentators argue that this misconception about violent crime has a lot to do with the media's negative portrayals of youth. For example,

a content analysis of references to teenage young men in the UK national press in 2008, at the same time as our research, found 8,269 stories involving teenage males. More than 60% of these were about crime, and 90% of these portrayed young men negatively, split fairly evenly between burglary/robbery, knife crime, gun crime and murders. Teenagers were referred to variously (in descending order of frequency) as yobs (591 mentions), thugs (254), sick (119), feral (96), hoodies (60), louts, heartless, evil, frightening, scum, monsters, inhuman and threatening. There were very few positive stories involving teens to balance the bad ones. (Guardian, 2009 and see Halsey and White, 2008 for similar findings).

There is some evidence that this negative portrayal informs young people's own perceptions of crime and violence. In a survey of young people by Youthnet (2008), despite more than four in ten (42%) respondents agreeing that the problem of 'gang warfare' in the UK is exaggerated in the media, the majority (69%) agreed that youth-on-youth violence is 'out of control'. Eight in ten (79%) agreed that there should be tighter controls on weapons in the UK.

Nevertheless, the British young people we spoke to recognised the influence of the media's portrayal of young people on people's perceptions of knife crime and of teenagers more generally. This was particularly the case amongst the older pupils, who were critical of the media's portrayal of teens and their association with crime and violence. Some questioned the differences between their own experiences and those which were reported in the press. A Devon 17 year old said 'You only hear the bad things in the press about youth today, 'cause the people I know just aren't like that'. Similarly, a 17 year old in London admitted that they had never really come across such crime and violence personally, and only on the news: 'I don't really think about it that much because I've never really seen one or heard about one really, except on the news'.

In contrast, a significant minority of younger pupils in London expressed fears of teenagers. Comments included: 'more teens causing trouble' (Girl, 11, London); 'teens taking over' (Boy, 11, London); and 'drunk teenagers hurting people' (Girl, 11, London).

In terms of media portrayals of violence and crime, the older pupils were able to speak quite knowledgably and astutely about the facts, recognising that certain groups are more at risk of being victims of crime and violence than others. One group discussed how, statistically, young people aged 16 to 21 are most at risk, and another pupil argued:

> People say that it only affects people from estates and stuff; it affects everyone within a certain age group but, yeah, it does affect people who live on the estates more because they see it more. (London 17 year old)

However, other London 17 year olds claimed that the papers have 'escalated' the hype about knife crime. A conversation between them went as follows:
- Yes the papers make it worse
- The papers make it worse; [they say] that is true
- It's not like that in my area
- Maybe where I live is more violent.

It can also be seen from this conversation that clearly not all young people were in agreement and many were very critical of the media which enabled them to distinguish between their personal experiences and media hype.

There was some evidence from the focus groups, however, that young people in London, particularly the 17 year olds, spoke from personal experience. In one discussion group, several recounted instances of violent crime in their immediate local area:

> In the last six months in my estate alone I know of three or four people who have got stabbed and two people who have got shot. And that is 20 yards from where I live. 100 meters from my door someone got shot twice, 100 meters from my door!

It was common for those young Londoners who regularly witnessed violence in their neighbourhood to feel hardened and desensitised to such incidents of violence, One 17 year old said 'If someone was to come in today and say "ah did you hear about that boy that got stabbed?" - it wouldn't really affect us because its something we hear about everyday'. And in another group a 17 year old said, 'someone got stabbed in my block, someone got stabbed in my local football pitch; it just happens all the time'. Another said:

> If you were to see a shooting that would shock you, but for me, because I have grown up around here and seen it, [it] doesn't bother me. (London 17 year old)

Some also expressed a sense of helplessness in relation to gun crime, such as this 17 year old:

> Obviously I know its wrong but, like, it doesn't bother me anymore. It's just got to a point where I know it's never going to stop.

Implications for policy and teachers

The findings of this research show a very real concern for crime and violence amongst British young people, particularly those in London, who expressed a distinct preoccupation with levels of safety, linked to a perception of rising crime rates in their local areas. We have shown that levels of crime and violence are in fact over-estimated by both young people and adults. As Hume argues, 'panic and fear about young people and knives is far more pervasive and powerful than the risk of crime itself' (Hume, 2008 p.3).

For some of the young people in our study, such concerns were in part as a result of their own personal experiences, while the perceptions of others were formed by media focus and hype on gang, gun and knife crime in the national and local press. British young people reported receiving the bulk of their information about crime and violence from the media, with school ranked second last as a source of information.

The continuing concerns of young people around violence and conflict have implications for the curriculum. It may be that some of students' anxieties around violence and crime

are media imposed and that there is work to be done on helping them distinguish between myth and reality (e.g. danger from paedophiles, actual levels of crime in their area). There is certainly a need for time in the curriculum for both primary and secondary students to develop further skills in understanding how the media works and to explore representations of young people in the media. Linked to this is the need for young people to learn about local and national organisations working to end crime and violence and the part they themselves can play.

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32

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