

Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)

Remarks on anti-social behaviour (ASB) from a speech by Denis O'Connor, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary, at the launch of My Police, Wednesday 10 March 2010

Anti-social behaviour is one of the top issues raised by the public. It deeply troubles them. The public struggle to see the difference between ASB and crime. That's not surprising – the boundaries between the two are blurred, even for police forces.

Repeated ASB, particularly where a solution looks unachievable, can blight people's lives. We believe this has repercussions beyond the individual and that ASB does significant harm to confidence in communities and fear of crime. At a future stage we intend to look at the comparative impact of ASB and crime.

Some 3.6 million reports of ASB were made in 2008/09. By comparison there were 4.6 million crimes reported in the same period.

ASB and particularly repeated exposure to ASB has a significant impact on public confidence in the police.

There is no agreed operating framework on ASB that draws together the best that is known about how police systems, the impact of ASB on individuals and public confidence interact.

The police database of information about ASB incidents is inadequate and should be improved as a matter of urgency. We carried out reality testing on police systems, including speaking to victims. We looked at two issues: police systems for dealing with repeat victims and the impact on these individuals

Our initial work suggests that police systems vary in their ability to identify repeat victims and vulnerable victims. Over half cannot identify repeat victims via automatic IT systems and rely on manual trawls. Almost all forces are unable to automatically identify victims who have previously been deemed vulnerable. Consequently officers attending reports of ASB may not be aware of the previous history. This is likely to affect the way the incident is dealt with.

We also spoke to 765 people across all force areas in England and Wales who have reported suffering repeated ASB¹. There is real evidence, underpinned by the British Crime Survey that, as exposure to ASB increases, confidence in the police declines. In talking to the victims we have been reminded of the impact ASB has on them. Some 4 out of 5 told us the ASB was having a high impact on their quality of life. However, 59% said they were satisfied with the way the police dealt with their report of ASB.

¹ The HMIC Repeat Victim Survey – January 2010

Whether or not the police attend a report of ASB also turns out to be a critical decision in relation to confidence. Police attended about 77% of ASB incidents we sampled and almost all of those victims reported high confidence in the police (90%). Of the 23% not attended, almost all victims said they were dissatisfied with the explanation given (93%).²

It may be necessary to challenge some myths that have grown up around ASB. Evidence shows that ASB matters as much, if not more, to young people as it does to older people because they use public spaces more. ASB is not simply about intergenerational differences.

There are partnership issues here. People turn to the police as an agency of last resort on occasions. 50% of repeat victims we spoke to didn't know that other agencies could help them.

Our work has confirmed that repeat victims are less likely to be confident in the police and in the system in general. As confidence reduces, reports of ASB also reduce. Over time this could mean that forces would have less understanding of the issues in their area and increasingly lack the data to target key problems. The incident rate (ie the reports) alone is therefore not a good measure of performance. Evidence also shows that tolerance levels to ASB differ in different areas. This is a complex issue that requires a real understanding of how decisions by the police and other agencies affect people.

We have also established that disability featured substantially in our sample of repeat victims. 1 in 5 classed themselves as disabled. This may be a key issue and requires further work.

We can see that ASB is one of the key determinants of confidence in the police generally.

We intend to look further at those police systems and sample more extensively in every police force area in the country.

Working with Professor Martin Innes of the Cardiff University Police Science Institute, who has background in this field, and Ipsos MORI we will be looking at opportunities to develop a framework to assess ASB performance in the near future.

The purpose of this will be to integrate the best research on victims and ideas as to how the police can develop a framework to operationalise that knowledge.

A number of forces have made this issue a very strong priority. We commend that.

In the meantime we draw attention of police authorities and chief police officers to repeat victimisation, vulnerability including disability, and decisions around attendance, and invite them to be intrusive.

² Unpublished HMIC data from The HMIC Repeat Victim Survey – January 2010