Young People, Violence and Media

Crime, violence and young people out of control – is this the true story of Britain or is it a media exaggeration of problems we have always had? Here is a simple test. As a researcher, I am aware that all the people I know, plus the ones that they know actually constitute a very large sample if I chose to ask them questions. It is a rough and ready sample and distorted in some ways, but it will still illustrate trends. I don’t know anyone who has been in an air crash, but if I ask about car accidents, then almost everyone has a story. From this I can deduce that one is much more likely than the other. Now try crimes of violence. Here are some of the ones I know about: A young relative of mine was attacked on the council estate where he lived; in the street behind me a local boy was attacked outside his house by a wandering gang; the son of another neighbour was beaten by a group of boys in a local village; a colleague at work told how her son was beaten by a group of boys who wound belt buckles around their fists; the son of another work colleague was chased and stabbed in the face by a group of skinheads; my daughter described how the brother of a close friend was killed. He was standing in a taxi queue and a stranger apparently on drugs and drunk struck him on the head with a baseball bat. A boy from a local school stabbed a relative to death, another with his father kidnapped a drug addict and brutally assaulted him. Gang fights now spill over into the school. A teacher told how a terrified boy had taken refuge in the staffroom while the gang trying to attack him was in the corridor outside (shouting ‘get a knife’). I mention these to friends and they give their own catalogue of horrors. Their children speak freely of the dangers they face. In London, the night 29 bus is spoken of with awe as the one you do not go on alone. Word of mouth is not necessarily more reliable than media accounts. Stories must be checked, but direct experience does have a certain power to convince.

I grew up in south east London on the borders of Bexleyheath and Erith. In the 60s, I walked about places like Abbey Wood with my friends or alone, and at weekends wandered all over London. I was once pushed by a guy who was showing off to his pals, but that was about it. There were no knives or guns and no gangs that I, or any of

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1 This paper was presented at the conference ‘Television News, Young People and Politics: Generation Disconnected?’ held at the BFI in London, 7-9 December 2007.
my friends saw. There were remote tales of mods and rockers fighting but these were largely media constructions\(^2\). So my experience is of a quite decisive change and the available statistics bear this out. Between 1979 and 1997 recorded crimes of violence increased by two and half times. In the following ten years they doubled again.\(^3\) The figures need qualification because sometimes different crimes are being counted and some types may be going down- for example, domestic violence if women are leaving abusive relationships earlier. But the trend has been clearly upward with well over a million recorded offences in 2005-6 with young males most at risk. So what has happened?

Important changes came in the 1980ies with the rise of new right politics and the release of the free market. This signalled the movement away from regulation and planning by the state in what was seen as the public interest, to a new philosophy which reduced the role of government and focused on the encouragement of individuals to make money and prosper. The ‘wealth makers’ would pay less tax and their enrichment would supposedly trickle down to benefit others. This political approach very rapidly divided Britain into a society of winners and losers, and exacerbated the economic difficulties which already existed. The traditional industries were already in decline but without state organisation and investment the decline became terminal. This laid waste many communities and produced sustained, structural unemployment. Children experienced growing up in families where no-one had officially worked - parents or grandparents. Currently, about 11% of 16-18 year olds are not in employment education or training\(^4\)( estimates put the figure for 16-24 year olds at 1.2 million people). As apprenticeships and links to industry declined, school became increasingly irrelevant to many working class children. Classroom discipline problems come in part from the inability of teachers to link good behaviour to future references and the possibility of jobs. One teacher described how some 16 year old boys are only in the classroom because they are being paid around £50 a week by the local authority to be there. They have no interest in the school, are

\(^2\) See the account by Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Routledge, 2002
\(^4\)Department for Education and Skills, Departmental Report 2007, TSO
disruptive and sometimes violent. But they cannot be excluded, for as the teacher put it: “their parents are desperate for the money, for drugs, so if you stop them coming the parents will wait to get you as you leave the school”.

There was an instability produced by the displacement and movement of populations. In the 1980ies, youth unemployment meant that young people were targeted for cuts in benefits and were pressured to move in search of work. The transient population also included new migrants moving from the poor to the rich world – a process intensified by the de-regulation of the international economy and the effects of conflict and war. The free flow of capital is followed by the flow of labour as people search for jobs, and the children of migrants and disadvantaged groups grow up in the poorest areas of cities like London. The vulnerable population was then added to by the policy of emptying the traditional long term mental health facilities, which in practice left many people on the streets or moving in and out of prisons.

In the new service economy, those with money and property or who traded in these did well. The top 1% doubled their wealth between 1996 and 2002. But by 2002, the bottom half of the population owned only 5% of the total wealth (down from 10% in 1986)⁵. Some unskilled, low income groups were effectively excluded from the mainstream economy. One response to this amongst young people is depression and anxiety, so suicide rates especially for young males rose sharply. But this excluded class can also generate an alternative economy with its own entrepreneurs – people trading in fake designer clothes, car parts or drugs. Another response in the council estates and low income areas is the traditional human behaviour of forming into groups and fighting for what resources and territory do exist. Success goes to the toughest young males who lead in the culture of aggression and machismo. Gangs, guns, knives and drugs then tend to overlap. Research from the University of Leicester shows that gang members are more likely than non members to deal in drugs and are five times more likely to carry a gun – though street gangs are more likely to prefer knives⁶.

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⁵ Office for National Statistics, Social Inequalities, December 2004, HMSO
Another de-stabilising factor was the increased availability of cheap alcohol and drugs, and the targeting of young people by the drinks industry. In the eighties and nineties, the tourist areas of Spain, Ibiza and Crete showed the possibility of having whole villages largely filled with young people drinking. In my youth I would probably have favoured the idea of drinking a large amount and misbehaving with my friends in my local pub. But the adults there would have thrown us out. The drinks industry solved this problem by putting loud music in the bars to drive away the grown ups and packing young people vertically, into what were streamlined alcohol delivery systems. This, together with the growth of violent subcultures turned town centres into the Wild West, and quaint old pubs in St Albans now have bouncers on the door.

I want to finish by commenting on some of the points that have been raised in this conference. It has been mentioned that people sometimes look back to a golden age that perhaps never existed. The suggestion is that current concerns about the young and violent crime are influenced by such rose tinted views, while in reality the same sorts of behaviour are with us all the time. I don’t accept this argument. My view is that behaviour changes in relation to a variety of social and economic conditions and these can be affected by political policy. It is not true that people always look back to a mythical past in which times were thought to be better. Look for example at the end of the nineteenth century, when British society was seen to be calmer and more settled than in earlier periods of industrialisation. The Criminal Registrar noted in 1901 that, since the 1840ies, ‘we have witnessed a great change in manners: the substitution of words without blows for blows with or without words…a decline in the spirit of lawlessness’.

There has also been discussion here about the accuracy of media portrayals of young people and crime. I was interested in a comment made by one delegate that there had been a long campaign in his area for a youth club, but it was only when someone was stabbed that anything was done about it. Many other people complained about the persistently negative images given in the press and on television. But is there not a

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contradiction here? Media reports of a knife attack can actually push politicians into thinking about the problems of young people and solutions such as setting up youth clubs and other facilities. We need to face the issue that there really are problems which have to be dealt with. On the other hand I accept that there are issues of balance in representation. To present only negative images would lead to a false stereotyping of very large numbers of young people (and play to right wing political solutions such as simply building more prisons). So there is a need for a more sympathetic account in the media of what is happening in youth culture and how young people think, believe and act. There is a great lead in this being given by local media groups such as The Mouth That Roars (www.mouthatroars.com).

My main point is that the changes to our culture, which I have spoken of here, are not a media fiction. In fact the bulk of violent acts are not covered. They become like car crashes – horrific, but just too many to report. Another key conclusion is that the changes are a result of political and economic policy. The negative consequences were not always intended, but they are the result of bad government. Gangs and violence did not begin in the 1980s – people have attacked each other with knives and other weapons for long periods of our history. But decisive intervention by the state and the building of alternative cultures has at times markedly reduced this. The challenge for social scientists is to identify possible solutions for the problems which we now face. Some of these will require a large scale re-allocation of resources and good planning. Those who worry about the nanny state and regulation forget that we either plan or put up with what the jungle delivers.

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7 December 2007