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The
Crime and Deviance Channel

Updates: Gangs and Safety

"Parenting and Children's Resilience in Disadvantaged Communities": Peter Seaman, Katrina Turner, Malcom Hill, Anne Stafford and Moira Walker (National Children's Bureau, 2006)

Background Young people hanging around in groups often get labelled as 'gangs' and are seen as troublemakers. New research by a team of researchers in Scotland corrects that impression by arguing that young people are often in groups for **self-protection**. The research found that although young people are aware that older people, and even other young people, may see such groups as threatening, they are an effective way of staying safe and looking after friends.

This finding came out of research by M**alcolm Hills'** team looking at how parents and children cope with the risks of growing up in disadvantaged communities in Scotland.

Methods The research focused on four neighbourhoods of Glasgow which have high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, measured by high unemployment, high crime and high numbers of children receiving free school meals. Questionnaires, discussion groups and individual and couple interviews were used.

Findings People in these relatively deprived communities were aware of youth gangs and of adults with drink or drug problems as sources of aggression and of a risk of being drawn into anti-social behaviour. Own peer groups, however, were very positive as a way of keeping safe. Friends provided safety, support and monitoring (for example, through using mobile phones to check all was well).

The researchers argue that the young people were the experts on their neighbourhoods and on the risks involved, and as well as staying in groups used a range of other ways to keep safe, such as avoiding people and places known to be risky.

They used their detailed knowledge of the neighbourhood to assess risks about where to go, when and with whom. This could, however, mean avoiding facilities such as parks and sports centres that ought to have been valuable in their lives.
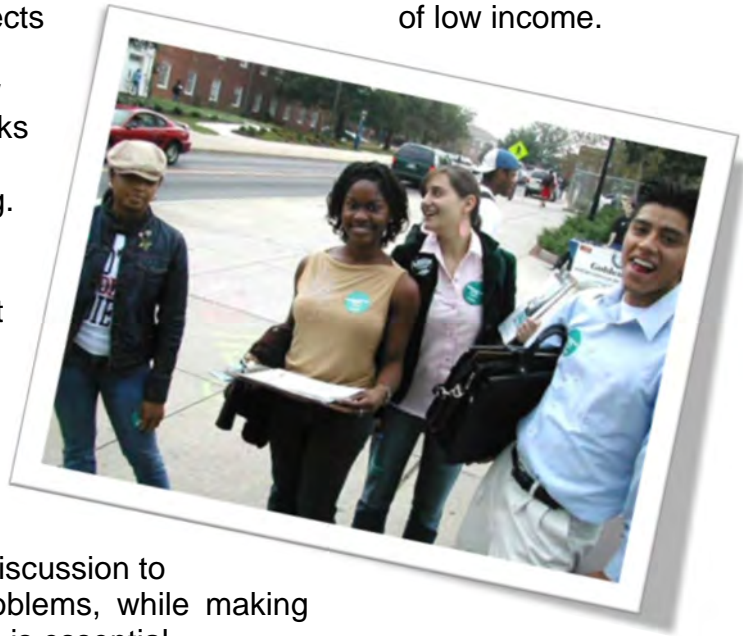
Another important finding of this research was that parents were usually open and democratic in working with their children to keep them safe, negotiating rules and setting guidelines which the children used respected because they were recognized to be based on justified concern. Parents used discussion and 'grounding', but regarded both physical punishment and ignoring wrong behaviour as ineffective.

Conclusions This research contradicts the widely held perception that there will be parenting problems in disadvantaged areas. Parents arranged organized activities for their children, seeing these as safer and more positive for skills and relationships than unsupervised leisure. The parents also had high aspirations for their children, and showed a high degree of skill in protecting children from the effects of low income.

Both parents and children saw schools as a haven from the risks of the local neighbourhood, despite some reports of bullying.

The researchers argue that there are a number of important policy implications from their findings, including challenging the assumptions of poor parenting and anti-social peer group activity. Schools can also make greater use of the parents' commitment to using discussion to solve anti-social behaviour problems, while making leisure facilities safe at all times is essential.

This research not only goes some way to contradicting popular media stereotypes of disillusioned anti-social youth in contemporary society. It also raises questions for sub-cultural theory and the strand of Interactionist theory that suggests that negative labelling will lead to anti-social attitudes and behaviour.

Jonathan Blundell

A summary of the report "Parenting and Children's Resilience in Disadvantaged Communities" is available from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Download summary (pdf format)

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