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 The policing and regulation of young people in two coastal resorts

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Article

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This article reports upon one of the key findings from my recent doctoral research which explored and analysed the ways in which young people conceptualised and experienced policing, crime, safety and security in two coastal resorts. The two resorts were consciously chosen to explore how class might frame young people's experiences and perceptions. By selecting one relatively affluent and one disadvantaged coastal resort the thesis revealed significant differences in how young people were policed. This article aims to pose some important new questions, notably in relation to the differential (and perhaps counter-intuitive) experiences of 'being policed' by two groups of young people in contrasting settings.

Introduction

The governance of young people, and particularly youth justice systems, are driven by ever changing policy rationales. In addition to this, the criminalisation of young people's behaviour – even their very presence – in public space is still highly contested (Crawford and Lister, 2007; Crawford, 2009; Jamieson, 2005; Stephen 2009; Smith, 2006). This has raised a host of concerns with regard to due process, the discretion accorded to the police and the infringements upon an individual's rights (Jamieson, 2005). Consequently, attention has tended to focus on concerns *about* young people rather than concerns *for* them (Squires and Stephen, 2005). In this way, the dominant political discourse tends to construct young people as actual or potential offenders and very little attention is paid to young people's own anxieties, fears, victimisation and need for protection (Deakin, 2006; Goodey, 2005; Muncie, 2004). This paradoxical situation, in which young people are both feared and, at the same time, vulnerable (Goldson, 2002), poses important questions, particularly with regard to how young people are 'policed' and 'protected'.

The Crime and Disorder Act (1998) transformed a number of incivilities into criminal offences. Youthful behaviour was (re)conceptualised as 'problematic' and more punitive sanctions became available to the police (Hancock and Matthews, 2001:103). A 'climate of intolerance' (Bannister and Kearns, 2013: 391) towards young people (re)evolved whereby their very presence in public space began to be constructed as 'anti-social' (MacKenzie et al., 2010; Burney, 2005; Squires, 2008; Crawford and Lister, 2007; Waiton, 2008) and sharpened tensions between young people and the police (see MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007; Sutton et al., 2007).

The centrality of the anti-social behaviour rhetoric to 'the new securitisation agenda' (Brown 2013) has been critical in justifying new forms of policing that serve to portray young people as a particularly 'undesirable group'. This popular imaginary of young people as the key perpetrators of anti-social behaviour has been fuelled by 'sensationalising media reports about the reign of terror that young people were exacting over public spaces' (Brown, 2013: 540). In turn anti-social behaviour policy has reciprocally fed back into 'negative stereotypes of youth and positioned young people as a metaphor for deeper social malaise' (Bannister and Kearns, 2013: 380). Young people in particular have been excluded

from public spaces through a range of explicit and implicit measures, most notably Dispersal Orders[1] that again exacerbate concerns over young people's presence in public space.

'Threatening youth' in public space?

'Moral panics' continue to recur regarding young people's 'disruptive' use of public space in parks, on housing estates, playing fields, shopping centres and street corners (see Loader, 1996; Watts and Stenson, 1998; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Increasingly, the corporate branding of public space for the 'leisured classes' means that 'skaters, goths, Big Issue vendors, beggars and buskers are regarded as unsightly and unwanted' (Coleman, 2005: 139). In particular, young people are not granted the same rights to occupy public space (Coleman, 2005). In commercialised spaces the growth of private policing and surveillance has increased (see Coleman, 2005) as the visibility of young people and 'behaviours associated with non-consumption have been singled out' as problems (Coleman and McCahill, 2011: 85). In particular the importance of localities' image is paramount in promoting places as 'desirable' (Coleman and McCahill, 2011: 85). Not only has the policing of young people intensified in such spaces, the classification and identification of all youth in certain locations deemed not socially acceptable has intensified. Indeed, as Banister and Kearns (2013: 387) argue, their presence is considered to be problematic to the extent that 'young people occupying public space is taken as a visual indicator of the incapacity of the community to address disorder'.

At the level of community and neighbourhood, policies to exclude forms of youthful behaviour from public space tend to dominate 'rather than any attempt to address the drivers or perceptions that lead us to suggest that this approach may have provoked a cycle of intolerance' (Bannister and Kearns, 2013:391). The re-problematising of 'anti-social behaviour' as 'crime' can further compound exclusion and intolerance (Squires and Stephen, 2005), and doing so within a punitive paradigm (Hancock and Matthews, 2001; Tonry and Bildsten, 2009) might provoke communities to display increasing intolerance towards youthful behaviour.

Challenging the conventional?

Deemed to have overcome and resisted decline in the tourism trade, Sandton[2], an affluent coastal resort in England, was a prime example of this trend. The young people reported feeling over-policed and harassed rather than protected by the police and on the whole felt less tolerated in their community. Interestingly, and perhaps counter-intuitively, the young people in Rockford, a disadvantaged coastal resort in Wales, conceptualised the police as a positive presence, were policed less intensively, and encountered policing practices that were more *engaging* than those experienced by the young people in Sandton.

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[1] Part 4 of the (2003) Anti-Social Behaviour Act (section 30-36) gave 'the police in England and Wales new powers to disperse groups of two or more people from areas where there is believed to be persistent ASB and a problem with groups causing intimidation' (Crawford and Lister, 2007:5).
[2] Particular care has been taken not to include data that would identify the study sites and pseudonyms have, therefore, been used for each coastal resort. 'Sandton' refers to the case study site in England and 'Rockford' for the Welsh locality.

In this respect the young people in Rockford felt that the police 'engaged' with them positively through police led project work in the community. The police project served not only to build relationships with young people but also, potentially to improve the reputation of young people within the wider community. In addition, the role of the police officer in and outside of the school environment - through acting as supportive figures with bullying issues - led to more positive conceptualisations of the police that were distinctive and not reflected in Sandton. In contrast, the young people in Sandton reported regular encounters with the police in hostile and negative terms because they were always perceived to 'be doing wrong' and were regularly 'stopped and searched' 'moved on' or 'dispersed' from popular tourist hotspots.

The young people's narratives in both coastal resorts challenges existing academic research which suggests that young working class (males) with an active street life are more likely to experience adversarial contact with the police (Newburn, 2011; Flood-Page et al., 2000; Ellison, 2001; Anderson et al., 1990; McVeigh, 1994; McAra and McVie, 2005; Loader, 1996). It also asks us to question the continuation of the policing and governance of young people which 'continue(s) to fall disproportionately on young, working class males' (Coleman and McCahill, 2011: 83). In Rockford the working class young people conceptualised and experienced policing more positively, largely in pastoral terms whereby the police - in schools and in the community - were seen to provide a source of protection and comfort. Consequently, the police were more tolerant of young people's behaviour and recognised the limited resources of the locality.

It is worth noting that whilst both coastal resorts were affected by the economic recession and cuts to public spending, Sandton did not have the social and economic problems that Rockford had acquired. Indeed Rockford, ranked as one of the most deprived areas in Wales (Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation WIMD 2000), was an area beset with multiple 'social problems'. The difference in socio-economic factors between the two coastal resorts accounted for the differences in policing styles. Namely that Sandton invested substantial resources into attracting visitors, which subsequently impacted negatively upon the young people who lived there. Whereas in Rockford police-youth relations were more conciliatory and greater levels of tolerance and appreciative understanding prevailed.

The consequences of 'intensive' policing

The impact of being policed intensively in Sandton resulted in antagonistic relations between the young people and the police. The findings revealed that interaction and engagement between the police and young people can have long-term implications (Cleghorn et al., 2011; Clayman and Skinns, 2012). Being 'dispersed', 'moved on', or 'stopped and searched' by the police was the most common encounter between the police and the young people in Sandton and resulted in tensions with, and negative perceptions of, the police. Echoing findings from Flood-Page et al's (2000) research that repeated encounters with the police served to reinforce hostility towards them, the narratives of the young people in Sandton suggested that their experiences undermined trust and confidence in the police. Young people in Sandton felt that because of their age and visibility in public space they were disproportionately targeted by the police and were

resentful of the attention that they received. Regardless of class, the presence of young people in public space was problematised and tensions existed.

Conclusion

The targeting of young people by policing agencies in urban centres (see Coleman, 2004; Norris and Armstrong, 1998; Beck and Willis, 1995; Oc and Tiesdell, 1997) is linked to presumptions about and 'perceptions of disorder... particularly in the context of urban revitalisation and the creation of safe shopping zones' (Coleman 2004: 186). Hancock (2001: 128) suggests regeneration initiatives are 'not really aimed at local residents. Rather, they wish to attract people from beyond the town to the cultural amenities and tourist facilities that were being developed'. Paradoxically, therefore, the policing of largely middle class young people in Sandton reflected elite interests, to satisfy the needs of potential investors and to create 'safe aesthetically pleasing spaces' for the purpose of attracting visitors (Raco, 2003: 1870).

This brief article therefore reports on findings that provided evidence of a highly policed consumption space, namely an affluent coastal resort, that excluded young people in order to make it 'safer' and more desirable for the consumer (see Alder, 1990; Coleman, 2004). In summary, policing in Sandton was primarily concerned with providing a safe and popular place for wealthy tourists to visit. Policing was driven by tourism and consumption and the young people were policed accordingly. The safety of young people was not a key concern, the focus was *about* young people's visibility in public space, and how to regulate and control their presence. This raises important questions about the 'policing' of young people in public spaces. It also further emphasises the more generic problematisation of the presence of young people in public space deriving from constructions of 'threatening youth' that are so prevalent in the populist[3] imagination.

Author Biography

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[3] Within this context, the 'populist imagination' refers to appealing to the interests of the general public, within the populist punitive (Muncie 2005) culture that exists today.

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