Youth Justice

'You Just Don't Grass': Youth, Crime and 'Grassing' in a Working Class Community

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Abstract

This article draws on ethnographic research conducted into youth and crime over a 20-month period. It explores the meanings that young people, residing in a marginalized community, attached to what Evans et al. (1996) have described as the 'neighbourhood dogma' of 'not grassing'. By unpacking and analysing the meaning of the term 'grassing' and by listening to the voices of young people the article examines a range of factors which underpin the 'no grassing' rule.

Keywords: community, crime, grassing, trust, youth

Introduction

Building confidence in the criminal justice system has become a key issue in New Labour law and order discourses (Office for Criminal Justice Reform, 2004: 8). This article draws on ethnographic research[1] that unearthed a number of key issues relating to young people's confidence in the criminal justice system. The research itself was conducted into the meanings associated with 'crime' by young people living in a marginalized and disadvantaged community. The community was physically and symbolically located on the edge of a large northern city and will be referred to as 'the Estate'. The findings presented relate to young people's lack of confidence in the criminal justice system that led to reluctance to engage with the authorities. It is argued that the importance of the 'neighbourhood dogma' (Walklate and Evans, 1999) of 'not grassing' for young people residing in neighbourhoods such as this must be understood in relation to their 'lived experience' (Evans et al., 1996) of adolescent transition in communities which suffer a high degree of poverty and social exclusion.

It is argued that the 'no grassing rule' acts as a mechanism to negotiate some of the pressures young people face growing up and 'getting by' in the economic hinterlands of 21st century Britain. By listening to their accounts and giving voice to their

experiences, the article explores the reasons why the young people attached so much significance to 'not grassing'. Such perspectives are largely silenced in the hegemonic orthodoxy that currently pervades discourses around youth and crime (Yates, 2004; Brown, 2005). Thus the article explores some of the obstacles which will need to be negotiated if governmental commitments to building confidence in the criminal justice system are to be extended to young people living in marginalized and socially excluded communities.

Community on the Estate: Perceptions and Reality

What do you want to go up there for – it's a fucking war zone. I tell you mate it's a fucking battle zone, I won't even pick up there. I'll drop you off though.

(RJ: 0803)

This comment was made by a taxi driver when I asked him to drop me off in the centre of the Estate on one of my early visits. The comment is indicative of the negative way in which the specific community was perceived across the wider city and gives a sense of the Estate's enduring reputation as a 'problem area', which was widely perceived as 'one of those throwaway places' where people don't go unless they have to (Campbell, 1993: 48). It was apparent that these negative views impacted on the young people's definition of their location within the social space and indeed the wider community of the city, reinforcing a negative self image, which in turn reinforced both individual oppositional identities (Massey and Denton, 1993) and a broader collective oppositional culture. One young person reflected on how 'outsiders' viewed the community:

A lot of people who aren't from the Estate think that this is a dump, they think we're all tramps scroungers, you know – skivers robbing off each other and stuff. They think the Estate is just full of TWOCkers[2] and thieves. I just think fuck 'em, I'm from here and I don't care what they think

(YR: 04)

According to official data sources[3] the Estate had a high incidence of youth crime, and suffered from a range of problems associated with disadvantaged inner city urban areas. These included a higher than average unemployment rate, a higher than average crime rate, poor levels of educational achievement and a high rate of teenage pregnancy. It was portrayed as the archetypal inner city 'dangerous place' (Campbell, 1993) which was 'disorganized' and lacking in community cohesion. Indeed in many respects the Estate embodied the 'socially and politically unacceptable face of contemporary British society' (Walklate, 2002: 79). Professional discourses relating to the reasons that lay behind these problems on the Estate resonated with the tendency to locate the causes of crime and the problems which beset socially-excluded communities primarily in the domain of the individual (Armstrong, 2004; Goldson, 2001; Pitts, 2003). Crime within this community was, therefore, considered to be the culmination of a number of decontextualized 'criminogenic' risk factors (Goldson, 2001), which were primarily located in the domain of the individual (Armstrong, 2004). It was clear that in the context of the Estate this served to separate the problems that beset the local community from broader contextual factors such as structural inequality, poverty and social exclusion.

The Estate had an enduring reputation, both nationally and locally, as a 'problem area' and a 'hard to police area' and as a result has been a pilot site for a range of new initiatives designed to 'get tough' on youth crime. These included a range of situational measures aimed at designing crime out of the urban environment including a CCTV network and traffic calming measures. The Estate was also the first area in the city to be targeted by a local Anti Social Behaviour initiative, which coincided with the commencement of this research.

It was apparent that initiatives aimed at addressing 'anti social behaviour' were primarily targeting youth and the perceived 'anti social behaviour' of young people. A number of professionals identified a major barrier to the 'success' of these initiatives as the reluctance of the local community to engage with the authorities – described by one professional as the 'us and them tribal view' of the residents. Thus, in line with right 'realist' discourses (Walklate, 1998) residents, and in particular young people, were seen as 'other', not with reference to their economic disadvantage but rather in respect of judgements pertaining to a sense of flawed morality (Murray, 1990).

Community Safety

The majority of the young people acknowledged that the Estate had its problems. However, they also stated that whilst the Estate has got a reputation as a 'bad place' it was not as 'bad' an area as people made it out to be. On the whole young respondents, whilst acutely aware of the problems faced on the Estate, also identified the area as having a complex set of support networks. It was also apparent that the community had a significant degree of social organization and that complex social networks of trust underpinned a strong, albeit relatively hidden, sense of community cohesion. In turn this appeared to facilitate, for many young people, a feeling of relative safety within the social space of the Estate, which they did not feel in other areas. One young female respondent noted:

> *Like when I go to my Nonna's [Grandmother] – I feel safer round here than I do there and that's like a little village and I feel safer here, like when I'm walking around alone at night I feel safer here. There I wouldn't – and that's just a little village.*
>
> (YR: 10)

She then went on to identify the importance of established family networks in facilitating this feeling of safety on the Estate:

> *My Dad was born here and I grew up here all my life. We know people . . . like my Dad's born and bred so everyone knows him here . . . when all the criminals walk past you, because you know them and they know you're family, you just say 'ay up' and they just leave you alone. But like if a new person comes in here then the criminals are just bigging it up and like start trouble and stuff.*
>
> (YR: 10)

There was, therefore, a difference between the young people's views of their own community and those expressed in official discourses. Indeed there appeared to be a degree of trust in the community that facilitated a feeling of security, which clearly

reflects Walklate's observation that 'High crime areas can be experienced as highly ordered and safe places for the people who live there' (Walklate, 2002: 84). Indeed for some of the young people the Estate was experienced as a safe place, despite the area being 'geo-mapped' (Morgan, 2000) as a crime hotspot. This appears to lend support to Sparks' assertion that 'the place of fear and security in everyday life can only be grasped "in situ"' (Sparks et al., 2001).

However, whilst some young people felt 'safe' on the Estate, this was contingent on a number of factors which placed them in complex networks of 'belonging' (Walklate and Evans, 1999), such as who they knew, and their length of tenure on the Estate. Newcomers, or those who did not 'fit in', and were subsequently perceived as 'other', were often treated with suspicion as they were not seen as being part of the community's established relationships of trust and belonging. As one professional respondent noted:

> *Either you've been here forever or you've not and if you've not been here forever then I think it's very difficult for people to break into the psyche which is the Estate . . . either you were born here or you weren't . . . if you're an incomer you are allowed so far into the kind of great big hidden community which doesn't show itself very much . . . you've got to work at building trust – newcomers can be seen as a bit of a threat really . . . they've got to try to fit in to get by on the Estate.*

(PR: 10)

The portrayal in official discourses of communities such as the Estate as fearful, distrustful, disorganized places which lack any level of cohesion is, therefore, at odds with the complex functioning of social networks of trust on the Estate itself.

The majority of professional respondents identified 'poor parenting' and a lack of community cohesion as a major problem. However, the majority of young respondents identified family networks and the proximity of extended family members as being a particularly good thing about living there and a major factor in ensuring that they felt 'safe'. As one young person observed:

> *You have friends and family around you all the time – I've got a lot of family and friends around who will look out for me.*

(YR: 04)

Another commented:

> *The good things are the people who live around here, cos like everyone knows each other so you feel safer – there's always people who will watch your back, they look out for you, they always talk to you, they're not mardy and miserable . . . just ordinary good people.*

(YR: 10)

Young people identified an element of community cohesion on the Estate intrinsically linked with traditional working class extended family networks that facilitated a feeling of safety and arguably an element of solidarity in the face of the negative regard in which the Estate was held. The professionals most deeply 'embedded' in the social fabric of the community, who had worked there for a number of years, identified these

networks as a resource of central importance and attempted to utilize them in increasing the efficacy of their projects.

As in the work of Evans et al. (1996), trust was of central importance in maintaining young people's perceptions of their own 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991, cited in Evans et al., 1996). Due to the marginalized nature of the community and levels of crime on the Estate, how young people negotiated crime and incidents of criminality without breaching trust was of central importance in maintaining and facilitating feelings of safety and security on the Estate. As such, the rules associated with 'grassing' were of particular importance.

The Importance of 'Not Grassing'

'Grassing' and 'Grass' are terms that were widely used by young people on the Estate to describe individuals who inform the authorities about the behaviour of other members of their community. On a national level the culture of '*not grassing*' has been identified as problematic for agencies of social control in relation to the extent to which certain communities can be effectively policed (Evans et al., 1996), how public services respond to them (Casey, 2004) and the functioning of the criminal justice system (Fletcher, 2006). However, in order to understand why young people living in marginalized communities do not inform the authorities of the problems affecting them – or in their vernacular 'grass' – an appreciation of the reasons which underpin this phenomenon is necessary.

The prevalence of the 'no grassing rule' within sections of working class communities is not new. Evans et al. (1996) identify 'grassing' as having its origins in Cockney rhyming slang, which dates back to the Victorian period when the police were widely referred to as hoppers,[4] leading to the term 'grass hopper' and then ultimately 'grass' for someone perceived to be close to the police. Storch (1981) and Cohen (1981) provide insights into the fraught relations with the police in working class communities during the 19th century, providing the historical backdrop for the development of 'not grassing' as a 'cultural norm'. Behan (1958) in his autobiographical account *Borstal Boy* illustrates the importance of not grassing in the sub-cultural milieu of the Borstal. The 'no grassing rule' is, therefore, not a new phenomenon – it has a historical context and it is apparent that it has particular resonance for people in marginalized communities which suffer a high degree of social exclusion. It therefore needs to be considered in relation to its socio-economic context along with how this relates to definitions of crime in local communities as 'social' or 'anti social' (Lea, 1999), different degrees of tolerance, and the historical tensions between members of working class communities and the police (Cohen, 1981; Storch, 1981).

After gaining sufficient immersion on the Estate and successfully establishing trust with key respondents, it became clear that there was a strong ethos of not informing the authorities about the activities of other residents.

> *There is a culture here on the Estate, where people don't want to be seen, or are afraid to be seen as a grass. If you're a grass or if you are seen as a grass . . . well people see that as a risk really . . . it's somewhere a lot of people don't want to go.*
>
> (PR: 15)

This 'unwritten rule' regarding 'grassing' has been described as a 'sacred norm of street etiquette' (Jacobs, 1998: 165) and the salience of this 'sacred norm' was evident in the youth cultures on the Estate. In the words of one young person:

> *. . . you just don't grass, it's not the done thing if you know what I mean.*
>
> (YR: 04)

The Process of Being Labelled a 'Grass'

Understanding what this young man did 'mean' required an appreciation of the process of being labelled as a 'grass'. The use of this term by young people on the Estate primarily related to its power as a label to signify perceived or actual relationships individuals had with not only the police but also other figures of authority such as housing departments. The latter arguably reflected the increasing profile of housing departments as an agency of social control in working class communities (Brown, 2004). It was evident that the application of the label 'grass' signified untrustworthiness and this could have potentially negative consequences for the individual involved and possibly their family. Being labelled as a 'grass' carried risks both physically and socially as it jeopardized the networks of trust embedded on the Estate.

It is important to note here that the application of the label 'grass' to an individual was often at odds with the reality of what a person had said, or not said, to the authorities. The process was clearly related to the power and status of the individual applying the label, the power of the individual to whom the label was being applied, the perceived efficacy of their kinship and friendship networks, and the type of behaviour to which the incident related. Indeed the successful application of the term 'grass' to an individual was the result of a complex interplay of factors and did not solely reflect whether they had, or had not, reported an incident to the authorities. There was also evidence that it was extremely difficult for the label 'grass' to be successfully applied to members of the powerful families on the Estate, despite specific occasions on which they had informed. It was also apparent that newcomers, or people on the Estate who were perceived as outsiders, and subsequently had less status, were more readily labelled a 'grass', irrespective of whether they had, or had not, informed.

Young People's Voices: Reasons for 'Not Grassing'

Despite research indicating that 10–25 year olds are the group most likely to be the victims of crime (Home Office, 2003), young people have been identified as one of the groups least likely to report it (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). It has been argued that within criminology there has been a failure to fully consider the 'high proportion of criminal acts committed against young people' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 92). However, whilst we know that 'crimes against young people are a common occurrence, few incidents are reported to the police' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 92). Young people on the Estate offered a number of reasons for this presented within the framework of the 'no grassing rule'. The extract from a conversation with a young man below identifies some of the key reasons young respondents identified for their reluctance to report crimes committed against them to the police or in their words, why they did not 'grass'.

> *Interviewer – Would you involve the police if someone was committing crime?*
> *Respondent – Nah, would I fuck, I'm no grass.*
> *Interviewer – Why?*
> *Respondent – 'Cos you don't grass, it's not done.*
> *Interviewer – What about if it happened to you?*
> *Respondent – Nah, no way – just sort it out yourself init . . . like the other . . . and that? [the young man had been assaulted by an adult known to him and had his phone stolen in front of witnesses].*
> *Interviewer – Yeah, like that for example*
> *Respondent – Nah, 'cos I'm no grass and there's no point, what the fuck are they [the police] going to do about? Like fuck all. They'd probably start taking the piss . . . anyway I was pissed and the phone was robbed – I just think it fuckin ain't worth it. I was more pissed off by the cunts that fuckin ran off [his friends] when he was having a go. I'd get it sorted myself an' that but he's a nutter – it's not worth it. I'll just get a new phone.*

<div align="right">(YR: 09)</div>

The points made by this young male clearly identify a number of reasons for not 'grassing'. These related to the import of the 'no grassing' rule in the local community, the relationship between 'grassing' and the informal economy, the feeling that young people's complaints would not be taken seriously, lack of confidence in the system and distrust of the police and the perception that the authorities were unable to deliver desirable outcomes.

'Not grassing' as a cultural norm

Central to understanding the importance of the 'no grassing rule' on the Estate is the need to appreciate its significance as a cultural norm. Young people were socialized about the cultural taboo of grassing through the informal community networks on the Estate;

> *You just don't grass, everyone knows it . . . you know if you grass you're going to get fucking battered. Like who wants to be called a grass and get terrorised . . . you know from growing up, you know from your mates, people around you.*

<div align="right">(YR: 05)</div>

Young people were effectively socialized into the culture of not grassing through their peers, families and a variety of other social networks on the Estate. Indeed there was evidence that there was a tradition of 'not grassing' on the Estate, which was rooted in a deep seated distrust of the authorities, a fear of physical retribution and also the social consequences of being labelled a grass.

The cultural norm of 'not grassing' informed how young people orientated themselves in the social space of the Estate and also how they responded to events such as witnessing or knowing about crime. As such the neighbourhood dogma around 'grassing' not only indicated the importance of one's relationship with crime but it also served as a form of sub-cultural guide which informed young people's responses to crime and how they interacted with the authorities. This enabled them to operate within the milieu of the Estate and maintain their own position in the complex networks of

trust and safety in a community, which suffered a high degree of social exclusion and where crime played a major role in the informal economy.

'Social' and 'anti social' crime: grassing and the informal economy

Growing up on the Estate, young people were immersed in the sub-cultural norms governing crime, its definition being both 'social' and 'anti-social' (Hobsbawn, 1959) and the blurring between these (Lea, 1999). The 'no grassing rule' informed how young people navigated a course through the complexities of what was considered 'social' and 'anti-social' on the Estate and when, or to what activities, people would or should 'turn a blind eye' (Hay et al., 1975, cited in Lea, 1999). In turn this appeared to influence how young people interacted with the authorities, who are seen as operating on definitions which differ from those widely deemed as acceptable within the socio-economic context of the Estate. It was also apparent that the enforcement of these 'alien' state definitions, in the form of 'crack downs' on certain types of behaviour, could potentially jeopardize the 'social' functions of some forms of crime in the local community and in particular those crimes which played a role in the informal economy, for example the market in stolen goods.

Whilst this is not to say that the views of young people or the adults on the Estate were radically different from the rest of the 'law abiding' population as promoted by right 'realist' theorists such as Murray (1990), it does indicate that making the distinction between what is 'social' and 'anti social' is indeed subjective and needs to be considered in relation to levels of tolerance in different localities. In doing this, it was important to consider the socio-economic and material conditions and the Estate's status as one of Britain's 'throwaway places' (Campbell, 1993), where residents experienced a wide range of problems associated with acute deprivation and intergenerational poverty (Morgan, 2000).

It was apparent that on the Estate certain types of crime were seen as acceptable, making 'getting by' more bearable. As Lea argues:

> *The types of crime most tolerated in communities with high levels of social exclusion are likely to be those which conform to the 'survival' rather than the protest model of social crime; activities such as shoplifting, tobacco and alcohol smuggling and much social security fraud.*
>
> (Lea, 1999: 318)

This level of tolerance can be identified in the quote from a young adult who commented:

> *Like that's what you need in the run up to Christmas, you're watching your pennies so you think yeah so and so, or me Nonna, would love that for Christmas in her stocking, normally I wouldn't be able to afford that, I don't ask any questions, but I know it's not from someone's house – it's in the box.*
>
> (RJ: 0712)

This example clearly identifies the function of the alternative economy and the way in which it is tolerated and indeed legitimated in the local community. It provides a 'social function', in its capacity as a form of 'surrogate capitalism of stolen property' (Lea, 1999). It facilitates access to commodities that under normal circumstances would not be affordable. Also the goods are 'in the box' indicating to this respondent they have

not been stolen from somebody's house which would be considered 'anti-social'. Whilst this could be seen as a 'guilt-neutralization technique' (Sutton, 2005: 297), it can also be seen as echoing the findings of Evans et al. (1996) regarding the importance of not 'robbing off your own' in working class communities.[5] Thus certain forms of crime such as buying goods stolen in commercial burglaries and buying contraband cigarettes and alcohol appeared to be 'tolerated illegalities' on the Estate (Foucault, 1977: 82 cited in Lea, 1999). However, as Lea argues, there was no clear distinction between 'social crime' and 'anti-social crime'; the categories were blurred. This blurring can be clearly seen in the account of the respondent above, when we consider that she had previously condemned the activities of the 'TWOCkers' on the Estate due to their involvement in 'rallying' stolen cars. However, the goods she purchased from the local 'fence' had been stolen by this very group. This clearly illustrates the blurring of the boundaries between 'social' and 'anti-social' crime and the complex nature of tolerance and its relation to socio-economic context. It also reflects Rule's (1979) observation (cited in Lea, 1999) that the most important characteristic of social crime lies in 'positive popular sanction'.[6] Indeed it was apparent that the TWOCkers' activities are social when they steal a van full of goods, which find their way into the informal economy. However, they were perceived as being anti-social when they 'rallied' the stolen vehicles around the Estate. The social nature of crime, therefore, appeared to be linked to whether or not it contributed to the economic well-being of the Estate.

It is also important to note that the alternative economy was not a philanthropic endeavour. Indeed it was apparent that it was aggressively entrepreneurial embracing 'capitalist market relations rather than resisting them' (Lea, 1999: 2). It was also clearly linked to adult hierarchies within the Estate whose activities encompassed 'fag houses' where smuggled cigarettes and alcohol were sold, the distribution of stolen goods from commercial burglaries and money lending. Indeed the activities of these 'bourgeois proletarians' (Hobbs, 1988), whilst providing a 'service' – money lending in an area with the highest level of county court judgements in the city – was itself a 'capitalist exercise' (Lea, 1999). Young people were involved in some of these activities but their involvement was peripheral and it was apparent that whilst they made 'a raise' (some money), to fund their 'good times' (Parker, 1974), this was negligible compared to money made by the 'real players' on the Estate.

Thus the cultural import of the 'no grassing rule' and its relevance can be seen as reflecting the importance of crime and the informal economy in young people's experiences of growing up on the Estate. As one young male respondent stated:

> . . . *crime's been a big part of growing up round here . . . it's part of living here – you just have to learn to deal with it.*

<div align="right">(YR: 12)</div>

As such how young people dealt with, or more specifically, how they learnt strategies to negotiate crime and how it interacted with the alternative economy, was an essential part of 'getting by' in the cultural milieu of the Estate. It was apparent that on the Estate 'your place in relation to crime places you in a community of belonging and exclusion' (Evans et al., 1996: 379). It was also evident that 'grassing' played a role in maintaining an individual's place within these complex networks.

'They wouldn't take any notice anyway'

Another reason identified by young people for 'not grassing' was the feeling that the authorities would not take any notice and that complaints would not be taken seriously. It was apparent that many young people had very little confidence in the system and felt that they would not be taken seriously if they reported offences and that they may get into trouble themselves. Thus it appeared that young people were aware that whilst they are 'eagerly ascribed their status as offenders' they 'have to earn their status as victims' (Brown, 2005: 96).

Goldson (2002: 685) argues that New Labour has 'resurrected' the 'specious', but 'well established schism' of the 'deserving' (troubled) and 'undeserving' (troublesome) child. There was evidence of this schism in professional discourses relating to children and young people on a local level. However, due to the enduring reputation of the Estate as a 'problem area', a blanket label of 'undeserving' and 'troublesome' was applied to young people on the Estate. Whilst this undoubtedly reflects moral ambivalence towards working class children, which is nothing new (Humphries, 1981; Pearson, 1983; Haines and Drakeford, 1998) it also provides some insight into why young people on the Estate did not feel that they would be taken seriously.

A raft of statute including the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and subsequent legislation relating to youth justice has been employed to crack down on youth and in particular working class young people, who are portrayed within these discourses as being synonymous with 'yobbish' and 'anti social behaviour' (Muncie, 1999; Squires and Stephen, 2005). It has been forcibly argued that the New Labour agenda has responsibilized children at earlier stages (Bandalli, 2000; Muncie, 2004), has been 'tough on crime and nasty to children' (Jones, 1996) and has introduced policies which are as much driven by political expediency as evidence of what is effective (Goldson, 2001; Pitts, 2003). It is also important to note here that within these discourses particular sub-sections of the youth population are singled out for special attention and more intrusive forms of social control (Squires and Stephen, 2005). There is considerable evidence that marginalized young people, such as those residing on the Estate have borne the brunt of the criminalizing effects of the 'new youth justice' (Goldson, 2005).

Confidence in the system: distrusting the police

As noted earlier a number of studies have chartered the somewhat fraught relationships between the police and working class communities (Storch, 1981; Cohen, 1981). A strong general distrust of the authorities by young people on the Estate came through as a consistent theme in observations and interviews. The following extract encapsulates this:

> *Like fuck the police and the council and all of them pricks, I don't like them and I don't trust them. The police come up here larging it up, thinking it's their control and they can do what they want. Like if anything goes off I wouldn't tell them fuck all. I'll just sort it out myself mate, I don't need them – ways and means – ways and means init.*

(YR: 04)

A number of young people cited brutalization at the hands of the police as being a reason for distrusting the authorities and therefore 'not grassing'. One respondent stated:

They come up here and that – being mardy and that then they think they can do what they want. Get you in the back of the car give you a slap or take the piss out of you. If you say anything back – you know take the piss back you're getting slapped mate.

(YR: 12)

In this respect young people who stated that they had been assaulted or witnessed assault at the hands of the police had an apparently logical reason for not trusting them and, therefore, not reporting offences. A significant number of the young people explained that this distrust of the police was based on their experiences of physical assault or witnessing other young people being brutalized. They were, therefore, unwilling to 'grass' as the police were not seen as playing an integral role in maintaining their safety (Walklate and Evans, 1999). Indeed in this respect the police could be seen as threatening young people's safety.

It is also important to note here that this was not a one-sided relationship and there was evidence that the authorities distrusted the local community on the Estate. Indeed when an anti-social behaviour team established an office in a house on the Estate the local media[7] reported:

Look at the council property and you will see it is a fortress . . . Four infra-red surveillance cameras watch the comings and goings around the house. Its doors are made of steel, the windows have been reinforced, and it has a sophisticated alarm system. Even nearby manholes are locked so flammable liquids cannot be poured down them and set alight, threatening the house through its drains.

The authorities being unable to deliver desirable outcomes

There was evidence that young people felt that the authorities did not play a major role in ensuring they were 'safe'. It was apparent that this was linked to young people's feelings that they would not be taken seriously by authority figures as well as their experiences of police assaults identified above. However, there was also evidence of an entrenched view that the police and the authorities were unable to deliver desirable outcomes. Young people were very aware of the negative way they and their community were portrayed and their ascribed status as members of the 'undeserving poor'. It was apparent that a significant number of young people had internalized these negative images and this was linked to their perceptions of whether they would receive a desirable outcome if they did inform the police of an offence committed against them. An example of this can be seen in the following extract from a conversation with a male respondent about the law and the police:

Respondent – I fucking hate it, but it's good in one way, like if you get burgled you can get the coppers in.
Interviewer – You've been burgled?
Respondent – Yeah.
Interviewer – and the police were involved?
Respondent – Yeah me mum called them, 'cos that's like a dwelling, it's out of order.
Interviewer – What did the coppers do?

> *Respondent – They did nowt cos of my family name, and living on the Estate and that. They*
> *did fuck all but maybe like for others they'd do more.*
>
> (YR: 04)

Indeed there was evidence from a significant number of young people that they felt the crimes they reported would not be treated seriously because of where they lived, in the words of one young respondent the 'shit reputation' (YR: 09) that the Estate had and that this would impact on whether they would receive a desirable outcome from the police. Clearly for this young man there was something of a double jeopardy, or what Fitzpatrick (1999, cited in Goldson, 2003) describes as a 'double disadvantage', in this case being a known family on an area with a reputation of being problematic. Several young people went as far as to state that discriminatory treatment meant that they would use relatives' addresses outside the area, if they were applying for jobs, fearing that the Estate's negative reputation would disadvantage them.

'Getting it Sorted Out Yourself': Community Justice Estate Style

For the range of reasons discussed above young people on the Estate identified a strong feeling that it was better to 'get things sorted' (YR: 09) themselves by drawing on family and kinship networks and their 'mates', rather than involving the police or the authorities. This seemed to be evident in the accounts of young people irrespective of their age, gender or their self reported involvement in criminal activity. On the whole there was a consensus that the police and the authorities would not 'get things sorted' and involving them could make matters worse. Because young people did not see the authorities as playing a significant role in maintaining their safety, 'space' was opened up (Walklate and Evans, 1999) for other more informal and 'community based mechanisms' to come into play.

   This took the form of a distinct form of 'community justice' operating on the Estate. This was more 'hands on' in some respects – with violent retribution playing a central role in 'community justice' and in policing the no grassing rule – it also at times operated in parallel to formal criminal justice responses. Thus a young person who was involved in the death of a member of a powerful local family in a car accident, was sentenced to a lengthy prison sentence. However, he was informed that on release if he returned to the Estate he would face further 'punishment'.

   Williams (2005) points out that there is a distinct lack of consensus regarding what is meant by community justice. However, he argues that:

> *Community justice implies a preference for solutions at the neighbourhood level and a rejection*
> *of remote, bureaucratised approaches which are dominated by statutory agencies.*
>
> (Williams, 2005: 32)

The 'informal' community justice on the Estate reflected this preference for 'neighbourhood level' solutions and a rejection of formalized methods of social control. On the Estate this was rooted in a lack of confidence and a distrust of the authorities that was particularly acute amongst young people. Therefore informal 'Estate style' community justice was perceived as being more legitimate and in many respects more

effective; there was a clear emphasis on regaining power over the 'property' of 'conflict' (Christie, 1977).

Community justice on the Estate was, as in mainstream community justice initiatives, heavily influenced by power hierarchies (Williams, 2005). This directly affected how community justice was dispensed and who had access to it. It was also apparent that the relationship between power, status and capacity to dispense community justice also had a deterrent effect. As one young person noted:

> *. . . you know there's people you don't fuck with, houses and cars that you wouldn't go near.*
>
> (YR: 12)

As noted earlier, hierarchies of power on the Estate clearly reflected power hierarchies in wider society and as such should be considered to be a part of them although configured in an oppositional manner reflecting the specific socio-economic and cultural context of the Estate. This locates crime on the Estate and, indeed, 'community justice' responses to it, not as a proto-political process but within wider societal hierarchies of inequality.

It was also apparent that young people were often on the receiving end of this type of community justice. As one professional respondent noted:

> *A little girl was nearly knocked over. One of the people was outraged and went around to the youngster's house and was like if you touch my granddaughter again or even go near my granddaughter I'll do you. These lads were like . . . really scared. That power was used because one of their family had nearly been hurt.*
>
> (PR: 11)

As the quotation implies, access to 'ways and means' of 'community justice' was linked to power and status and as such reflected powerful hierarchies within the local community. For those perceived to be 'outsiders', however, this presented problems.

Conclusion

In contemporary discourses around criminal justice it is apparent that the voices of marginalized youth are often sidelined and ignored (Brown, 2005). Arguably this is the case not only in relation to policy discourses (Muncie, 1999) but also within criminological discourse that remains dominated by governmental agendas. In this respect, as Maguire (2000: 149) argues, 'it is all too easy for those studying crime to lose their sense of reality' and begin to perceive offenders not as people, but merely as 'problems' or 'numbers' thus sidelining the importance of context and lived experiences. Bottoms (2000: 30) has argued that:

> *. . . a particular strength of the ethnographic tradition, rarely found in other types of criminology, [is] its ability to uncover some of the deep cultural meanings and normative bonds which are so important in everyday life.*

The findings presented in this article illustrate how the use of ethnographic methods unearthed some of the 'deep cultural meanings' associated with 'grassing', which in turn

highlights the lack of confidence young people have in the criminal justice system in one of society's 'stigmatically deprived symbolic locations' (Morgan, 2000: 64). At present, young people residing in these communities have become the target of what Goldson (2005) has identified as increasingly coercive criminalizing modes of social control. This clearly raises questions as to whether these initiatives will instil confidence in the system in young people or further erode it. Indeed these initiatives arguably have the capacity to exacerbate tensions between young people and the authorities and have the potential for reinforcing rather than undermining the reasons young people have for 'not grassing'.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   For an outline of the methodological approach employed see Yates (2004).
2   This is an acronym for the offence of 'Taking Without the Owner's Consent'.
3   References have not been included due to the confidentiality afforded to respondents and the research site.
4   This may well also be linked to the description of the police as 'Blue Locusts' in the mid-1800s as identified by Storch (1981).
5   Arguably this value was in decline on the Estate. Respondents linked this with an influx of newcomers and crack cocaine users that had disrupted relationships of trust on the Estate.
6   It is important to note here that young people identified that they would report what they classed as serious offences to the police such as rape, murder and child abuse. It was apparent that these offences did not receive 'positive popular sanction' but were classified as clearly 'anti-social'. As such it was seen as acceptable that the authorities were informed about these offences. However, a number of respondents also identified that the perpetrators of such crime would also be 'dealt with' by the community.
7   Reference removed to maintain confidentiality.

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