NARRATIVES OF DECLINE
Youth, Dis/order and Community in an English 'Middletown'
IAN LOADER, EVI GIRLING and RICHARD SPARKS

The paper is concerned with how adult residents of one medium-sized, moderately affluent English town which is generally regarded as having a relatively low crime rate interpret and respond to teenage 'incivilities'. We begin by locating the conflicts over teenage misbehaviour that occur across many of the town's diverse areas and assessing how the intensity of adult response varies according to people's relationship to place. We then examine the kinds of discourse that such misbehaviour prompts, discourse that frequently slips away from the locality as such and speaks to the condition (and decline) of the 'national community'. Finally, we consider some of the responses people make to teenage misbehaviour in their own immediate neighbourhoods. By connecting people's 'crime-talk' to their sense of place, we tease out a contradiction between the obligations that people acknowledge to troublesome local youth and their more punitive, exclusionary utterances about 'youth in general'.

It has in recent years become a criminological commonplace to assert that petty crime and low-level disorder are in the main activities of the young and that what has come to be called 'fear of crime' attaches itself in large measure—among adults at any rate—to these 'incivilities'. The gathering of male and female teenagers, unsupervised, in public spaces—on front walls, street corners, in town centres, by the local shops—is said to prompt anxiety and unease among local residents and other (potential) users alike. Such a preoccupation with the activities of the young (and associated calls for somebody to take 'tough action') certainly comprises the staple diet of much party political and media discourse on 'law and order'.

In revisiting this well-trodden ground, we want in this paper to re-orient both the substantive and theoretical terms that have hitherto tended to dominate popular—and to some extent criminological—discussion of relevant issues. In respect of the former, we want to shift the focus of attention away from the familiar criminological territory of the metropolis (and its crime-blighted inner-cities and peripheral estates) towards the rather more neglected terrain of the English 'middletown'. We set out to investigate the place that crime occupies in the social relations of one such town: Macclesfield, in Cheshire. A place of some 49,000 inhabitants tucked away in the north-east of the
county between the Pennine uplands and the Cheshire Plain, Macclesfield lies some 15 miles south of Manchester, the nearest conurbation. Once a working-class mill town dominated by the silk industry, it has in the post-war period undergone a profound restructuring which has seen a pronounced influx of middle-class commuters and the arrival from the 1960s onwards of the multinational pharmaceutical giants (especially Zeneca and Ciba-Geigy) which now dominate the local economy, together inevitably with their professional workforces. Macclesfield in the late 1990s is thus—in terms of social class at least—a diverse place (it remains an almost exclusively white town). Within and around its borders, sometimes standing squarely adjacent to one another, one finds the exclusive enclave of Prestbury ‘village’ (home to the highly rewarded success stories of commerce and the professions); the terraced streets of nineteenth-century weavers’ cottages that encircle the town centre (now partially gentrified and occupied by a mix of established working-class residents and young, professional incomers); the middle-class commuter developments of Tytherington, Kennedy Avenue and Broken Cross; and five council-built estates which themselves range from the locally notorious, CCTV-protected Victoria Park flats, to the seemingly more stable and integrated areas of Hurdsfield, the Weston, Upton Priory and Moss Rose (see Figure 1). As one long-standing middle-class resident put it: ‘It’s a perfect cross-section of social standing. You’ve got the deprivation. You’ve also got a lot of money and big houses.’

We have conducted within Macclesfield what we have chosen to call—using Bourdieu’s (1984) elaborated sense of that term—an ‘ethnography of anxiety’. This has comprised the following modes of enquiry: (i) an analysis of publicly available information on economic, social and demographic change within the town, and of patterns of crime and demands for policing; (ii) an analysis of local representations of crime-related matters as contained in the local press and crime prevention literature; (iii) a total of 26 focus group discussions with different sections of the local population—ten with middle-class residents, one group from each of the town’s council-built estates, four with teenagers and seven in Prestbury; (iv) a small number of in-depth biographical interviews with local residents; (v) nine individual and six group discussions with criminal justice professionals and other local interest groups and ‘opinion-formers’, including police and probation officers, youth workers, magistrates and publicans; and (vi) numerous hours devoted to informal conversations, observation and attendance at meetings, including observational research with the police, the active participation by one of us (Evi Girling) in the local crime prevention panel, and a period of voluntary work/observation by another (Ian Loader) at Prestbury youth club. Evi Girling resided in Macclesfield throughout the two-year duration of the project, and Ian Loader for one year; Richard Sparks continued to live nearby.

Theoretically, our concern is to elucidate how adult ‘crime-talk’ (Sasson 1995) about local forms of teenage disorder is connected with and indeed helps to constitute people’s sense of the ‘communities’ they inhabit, whether that be their street, neighbourhood, town or nation. Our contention is that people’s everyday talk about crime and order (its intensity, the vocabularies they use, the imagery that is mobilized, the associations that are made) depends not only on how they assess their place within these various communities (and their respective hierarchies), but also on what kinds of places they believe these communities have been, ought to be, or are in danger of
3 This is not to deny that people's worries about youth crime are powerfully felt (indeed it is to acknowledge precisely how this is so), still less is it to deny that the risks they face aren't real. As Mary Douglas (1992: 29) has trenchantly put it: "This argument is not about the reality of the dangers, but about how they are politicized.'

We are thus not concerned with examining the relationship that might exist between people's concerns and worries about youth crime and disorder, and their antecedent levels of 'objective' risk (lest we lapse back into the familiar and often rather unhelpful terms of discussion about the 'rationality' or otherwise of people's

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3 In pursuing these concerns we hope to contribute not only to that burgeoning body of literature which seeks to transcend the received parameters of the 'fear of crime debate' (Taylor 1995; Evans et al. 1996; Holloway and Jefferson 1998), but also to extend recent analyses of the 'appeal to community' within political and professional discourse about criminal justice (Crawford 1995; Lacey and Zedner 1995) to the realm of lay understandings of crime.
fears). Rather, our interest lies elsewhere; in exploring the frames of meaning people mobilize to talk about—in this case—teenage ‘incivilities’, and in investigating the ways in which people register their entanglement with other aspects of economic, moral and social life.¹

The paper is organized in the following way: we begin by locating the conflicts over teenage misbehaviour that occur across many of Macclesfield’s diverse areas and assessing how the intensity of adult response (sometimes to the same ‘objective’ problem) varies according to people’s relationship to place. Secondly, we examine the kinds of discourse that such misbehaviour prompts, discourse that frequently slips away from the locality of Macclesfield as such and speaks to the condition (and decline) of the ‘national community’. Finally, we consider some of the responses people make to teenage misbehaviour in their own immediate neighbourhoods. By so connecting people’s ‘crime-talk’ to their sense of place, we are able to tease out a contradiction between the obligations that people acknowledge to troublesome local youth (and a desire to find ways of re-incorporating them into ‘the community’) and their more punitive, exclusionary utterances about ‘youth in general’.

_Disorder and the Sense of One’s Place:_

_ Locating Adult Talk about Teenage ‘Incivilities’_

Macclesfield is not the kind of place that generally springs to mind when the conversation turns to crime. In national terms the town experiences a relatively low recorded crime rate (4,150 offences were recorded for the town in 1995—see Table 1 below), and for the most part our interviewees and focus group participants did not view Macclesfield as having a significant crime problem; some even expressed surprise as to why anyone would want to study crime in such a place at all.²

The town is however considered to have what one resident described as a ‘youth problem’. When asked in our focus groups about local crime, the (often heated) talk of Macclesfield’s adult residents concerned the noise, nuisance, vandalism, under-age drinking, drug-taking and the like that they associate with groups of unsupervised teenagers hanging around in public spaces—something that impacts significantly on many people’s sense of Macclesfield as a ‘liveable’ place (cf. Baumgartner 1988: 110–15; Shapland and Vagg 1988: 51–4). The following two extracts illustrate this well. The first is taken from a focus group of middle-class residents living around Kennedy Avenue:³

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¹ A fuller account of the theoretical premises of our perspective on everyday ‘crime-talk’, and the connections between our work and the preoccupations of current social theory with the transformations of place in late modernity, can be found in Girling et al. (1998a).

² In so far as people did express concern about crime, burglary and car crime figured most often on their inventories of offences that afflict the town. Interestingly, such offences are viewed in the main not as the work of other townspeople (even young ones) but as largely the responsibility of professional and semi-professional outsiders. The nearby conurbations of Manchester and Liverpool are the favoured ‘dens of thieves’ in people’s accounts of what the local police designate as ‘travelling crime’ (see further, Girling et al. 1999: ch. 4).

³ We agonized long and hard over the use of real place-names or pseudonyms in this research, before concluding that work which claims to be grounded in a sense of place cannot credibly pseudonymise place-names without special and compelling reason to do so. We have however taken all reasonable steps to ensure that individuals quoted in the paper (whose names have been changed) cannot be identified.
You don't get much in the way of crime from the more adult people in the town. There's undoubtedly a section of criminals in every town or city in the country, but the main bulk of aggravation comes from the young people, yobbos, schoolchildren, and they're very intimidating if you try to interfere in any way.

The second is from an elderly woman living on the Upton Priory estate:

They seem to feel that anything goes and people just do not count, these youngsters; some of them, not all of them, seem to have a great disrespect for authority in general. They go about in these groups, and I know a lot of it is bravado, but they're a frightening sight sometimes.

Across Macclesfield's diverse neighbourhoods it is possible to identify a number of 'hot spots' (Sherman et al. 1989) where groups of youths routinely gather, where local residents are routinely annoyed, and to which the police are often called (see Table 1). Such locations can be found on some (though by no means all) of the town's council-built estates: at diffuse sites on the Moss Rose, and at the shops on Upton Priory and the Weston. But they also extend to the principally middle-class commuter development at Tytherington, where the shopping parade, children's playground and local woods have begun to attract teenagers; and to the partially gentrified area of weavers' cottages around the old High Street where, again, local shops and a children's playground act as the main 'honeypots'. In the nearby 'village' of Prestbury, teenagers gathering around the church on the main street represent a major source of anxiety both to local residents and the Parish Council.

It is thus clear that people from across many areas of Macclesfield face problems (of low-level disorder and petty crime) caused by groups of teenagers hanging around, albeit differentially so (Beat 3, which includes Moss Rose and the old High Street, exhibits the highest levels of both recorded crime and calls to the police). Yet it is also evident from our research that residents interpret the presence of these teenagers (and their misbehaviour) in contrasting ways and invest it with varying degrees of significance; and these interpretations cannot simply be read off from actual levels of disorderly or criminal activity. They also appear to depend on which of Macclesfield's

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<td>1 Upton Priory/Kennedy Avenue</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>64 (13% of total calls)</td>
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<td>2 Tytherington/Hurdsfield</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>542</td>
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<td>3 Moss Rose/High Street</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>176 (20%)</td>
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<td>4 Weston</td>
<td>789</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>69 (13%)</td>
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<td>5 Town centre (east)/Victoria Park</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>55 (9%)</td>
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<td>6 Town centre (west)/'old town'</td>
<td>769</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>4150</td>
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<td>17 Prestbury</td>
<td>233</td>
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* Authors' category. Includes calls reporting youths causing annoyance or behaving suspiciously.
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composite areas one is talking about (their respective histories, demographies, internal relations, trajectories and so on), and on the biographical relationship its inhabitants have to the place they reside in—how it fits into their past, present and possible futures. So how do local residents make sense of and respond to the congregations of 'disorderly youths' that hang around in different locations across Macclesfield? And what do their responses tell us about the kinds of 'communities' that constitute the town?

The people who tend to speak most emphatically about groups of teenagers hanging around (and in ways that connect their presence to some or other narrative of local decline) are those who possess the greatest levels of emotional and/or material investment in 'their area'. The former can stem from a number of sources. It may be the product of being 'tied' physically to the home or locality by reason of age or status. Or it may flow from long-standing residence and an ensuing sense that one's personal biography is deeply entwined with that of one's community. For such people—most often the senior citizens among our respondents—'place matters'; and they often bring to issues of teenage misbehaviour a sustained contact with and knowledge of the youths involved (and their families), their memories of that community (and in particular a reconstructed sense of its better past), and a heartfelt concern for the future prospects of what they regard as 'home'. The following exchange between established residents of the Moss Rose estate captures well this sense of both 'community' and its decline:

*Dot*  We're having more trouble with youngsters now than we've ever had, than I can ever remember on the Moss.

*Peter*  Tonight was an example, wasn't it? [a group of children had spent the early part of the focus group throwing stones at the building we were meeting in]

*Dot*  Yes. I mean it's all the time, non-stop, from morning right through to late at night, somewhere is being vandalised at all times.

*IL*  Is that a new thing do you think?

*Dot*  It hadn't used to be. I tell you, when I lived on the Moss before. When I was young and I lived on the Moss, alright, we had us cheeky devils, but that existed to nipping in somebody's garden and pinching their apples, or knocking on the doors and running off and hiding behind hedges. You didn't get the very bad. Occasionally, you'd get a bike pinched, but it were quite rare. It were the talk of the Moss if somebody had had their bike nicked. Can you remember that far back? It was.

The council-built estates of Moss Rose, Upton Priory and the Weston all represent areas within Macclesfield where teenage disorder is often viewed through the prism of such emotional attachment to place (in all three areas the tenants' associations—who do most to lobby around these issues—are run by older and for the most part retired residents). So too, though in a markedly different sense, does Prestbury, where established, affluent residents are immensely proud of 'their village' and its reputation for a certain kind of pastoral 'Englishness', and where the Parish Council has done much to articulate the concerns of those who believe this to be threatened by the activities of local teenagers congregating in the main street.\(^7\)

\(^7\)The 'anxieties of affluence' that obtain within this particular English 'village' are discussed in Girling *et al.* (1999: ch. 6). See also, on disorder in villages, Shapland and Vagg (1988).
These areas also serve as instances where emotional attachment intersects with material considerations. On Moss Rose, Upton Priory and the Weston, (ex-)tenants who have since 1980 purchased their houses from Macclesfield Borough Council now—as local estate agents will readily testify—find it difficult to sell their (often improved and lovingly cherished) properties. Against this backdrop, noisy congregations of teenagers not only impinge detrimentally on the quality of people's lives, they can also come to be seen as a threat to the value of newly acquired assets.\(^8\) It is thus in these areas—on the fragile lower-borderline of 'respectability' yet still worth defending, and where people neither wish nor easily feel able to leave—that one tends to encounter the most powerfully felt expressions of intensity towards teenage 'incivilities'.\(^9\) Similarly again in Prestbury, where the exclusivity and high property prices can encourage among some the belief that they have 'bought themselves out' of the problems that bedevil the world beyond. The following exchange between parents from the 'village' captures this well:

*Terry* When they [our teenage children] do get free time we try and keep them away from Prestbury, and that shouldn't be, that shouldn't be!

*Pam* No, the whole point of being in the village...

*Terry* We're paying a healthy premium to live in Prestbury to start with. We're paying £50,000 or £60,000 more to live in a house in this area than we would if we lived in another area, so why should we be penalized?

In some contrast stand those relatively affluent, often socially and geographically mobile residents who are somewhat thinly attached to 'place' (cf. Gans 1995). In Macclesfield, this description perhaps best fits those young, childless professionals who commute to work in Manchester or other parts of Cheshire; who are prone to spending long hours away from their place of residence (including, for some, evenings and weekends), and who thus have little reason to identify with the place they reside in. Notwithstanding that they have often chosen to live where they do (and are in certain respects concerned with the quality of life that it offers), such people have relatively few attachments to their community, and the greatest sources of identification (job, friends, family and so on) beyond it. They lack a history in the locality and, as people whose careers might at short notice demand that they move elsewhere, will in all probability lack a future in it. Richard Hoggart (1993: 45) captures something of all this in his portrait of middle-class Farnham in Surrey:

For most of these executives their professional life could have landed them in any one of a thousand similar developments of similar housing. And tomorrow they may be required to move on, two hundred miles, to another similar estate. In such circumstances, you do not carry much idea of a collective memory; your history starts a short-time back, is captured not in books, but in

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\(^8\) This situation less obviously applies in Hurdsfield which is generally considered to be the 'best' of the town's council-built estates (and which at the time of the research was not a location in which young people routinely congregated), and (for different reasons) in Victoria Park, where not a single tenant has purchased their flat since the Conservative government introduced the 'Right to Buy' scheme in 1980.

\(^9\) We have argued elsewhere that an outbreak of 'vigilante' activity on the Weston estate in June 1993 may be explicable in precisely these terms; as the actions of people with nowhere else to go, desperate to prevent their estate sliding from its fragile respectability (Girling et al. 1998b).
framed wedding and onwards photos on the mantelpiece and coffee table, is the history of your 
nuclear family.

It is these among Macclesfield’s residents who—so long as the ‘problem of youth’ 
doesn’t impact upon house prices, and in middle-class areas of Macclesfield it 
generally doesn’t—seem most able to speak about the teenagers hanging around 
their area in abstract, dispassionate terms, to sever its connection with wider 
meanings and chains of significance, and to generally downplay its importance. So it 
is that a resident of Kennedy Avenue can describe the youths at the local supermarket 
(an issue that deeply vexes the tenants’ association on the adjacent Upton Priory 
estate) as a problem one learns to live with: ‘There’s not a great deal you can do about 
it personally. If you get the police involved, there’s only so much they can do.’ So it is 
too that a member of a Tytherington neighbourhood watch scheme can sum up their 
‘youth problem’ thus:

It’s not a regular problem, it seems to go through phases. Children will congregate either around 
shops near the off-licence, there’s a [grocer’s] shop, or in the woods, in large groups. They create litter, 
and they break branches off the trees, but we don’t have any serious problems. I’ve not heard of anyone 
getting beaten up there, or any neighbour having a brick thrown through the window, or anything like 
that.

And so it is that a young professional woman, newly resident in High Street, can 
describe activities that had driven her more established, older neighbours to distraction 
in the following dead-pan terms:10

When I’ve been to the shop I have seen a group hanging around on the opposite side to the shop. I 
don’t go to the shop that often. When I was walking back along High Street a couple of days before 
bonfire night, the other week, I noticed that there were a lot of kids in the children’s play area, and 
somebody had set off a rocket which had gone into the wall on the opposite side and narrowly missed a 
lady walking past. That’s about it, the biggest incident that I have seen or heard.

The intensity and type of identification individuals make with ‘fear of crime discourse’ 
(Hollway and Jefferson 1998) arises then not only from their direct or indirect 
experiences of victimization. It also intersects with people’s sense of their place within 
prevailing social hierarchies and their resulting relationship to a particular 
geographical community: how much time one spends there, the kinds of emotive and 
financial investments one has in it, the ‘thickness’ of one’s social networks, whether or 
not one has children, how long ago one arrived, and the extent that one feels 
able—should the need arise—to up and leave. Thus it is that people living in the same 
street, or even in adjacent houses, can draw very different conclusions from, and attach 
varying kinds and levels of significance to, the appearance of the same group of 
‘problem youths’. As Patrick Wright (1985: 237) has observed, people can share the 
same locality, but live in different worlds.

10 A fuller account of residents’ disparate levels and kinds of concern about teenage disorder in the High Street area can be found 
in Girling et al. (1998a).
In Disorder and Decline (1990) Wesley Skogan sets out what has in recent years become an influential thesis within criminology: that (unchecked) teenage 'incivilities' are read by residents as signs of neighbourhood decline and prompt responses (such as a desire to leave the area, or an unwillingness to regulate the behaviour of the young) whose effect is in fact to engender such decline (cf. Wilson and Kelling 1982; Lewis and Salem 1986). There is of course a cavernous gulf separating even the poorest parts of Macclesfield from the structurally disadvantaged neighbourhoods of North American cities that routinely figure in this literature. This though—as we have seen—does not prevent many of the town's adult residents from similarly viewing the mis/behaviour of the young as signalling some kind of decline in the spirit or—to use Lewis and Salem's (1986: 99) term—'moral reliability' of their community.

Yet the 'environmental cues' provided by 'disorderly youths' are not merely taken as signs of neighbourhood decline. They are also read more broadly—and politically—as issues that are deeply entangled with other aspects of economic, social and moral change (or, more specifically, decline), and as matters that call up questions of authority and, ultimately, government (cf. Dowds and Ahrendt 1996). Though the problems created by 'disorderly youths' may seem pressingly local, adult residents often account for them in terms that stretch far beyond the boundaries of their locality (or indeed Macclesfield) as such. Such problems speak it seems to the condition of both the wider 'national community' and the world beyond. But what frames of meaning are invoked in this regard? What aspects of the wider world are young people's attitudes and behaviour thought to be entangled with? What (national and global) pressures are seen as acting upon the locality, in what ways and with what effects?

Some among our respondents explicitly framed the 'problem of youth' in terms relating to the job market and, in particular, to dislocations in the kinds of opportunities that were once open to the working-class young men of post-war Britain: 'When I left school, you left school and you went into an apprenticeship or whatever it was, some sort of job. You went through a process. You sort of met a girl, you got engaged, you got married and had children, and on it went. It was a sort of unbreakable cord, but it isn't any more.' Sometimes this position—which roughly corresponds to what Sasson (1995) terms the 'blocked opportunities' framework—takes on a more local idiom as a commentary upon some of the recent fortunes and possible futures of the town. Consider the following exchange between two established middle-class residents from the Broken Cross area:

Joan These young people with perhaps not very many brains, let's face it, and not very well brought up, would go into hard physical labour when they were young. Those jobs don't exist now. They would be in foundries and mills, and they would be too tired to be so awkward. This is a lot of the problem, they haven't the brains to keep up with society, like your son going to Oxford. But there's nothing else for them to do. What else can they do, where can they go? So they're hanging about, they're getting into drugs, they're looking for trouble. They were too tired before. They were rotten jobs, I'll admit, but it gave them something to do, it gave them a wage packet, it gave them a community to belong to of these other people working there. They haven't got that now. What have they got? They've not got a lot have they really to look forward to.

Tony That's generalizing Joan.
Tony’s objections to Joan’s couching of troublesome teenagers in terms of jobs flow from his attachment to a second, more prevalent, and often more forcefully expressed, mode of explanation: what one might call the ‘crisis of the family’. Under this umbrella, our focus group participants would—in terms that resonate closely with many current tropes of media and political discourse on ‘law and order’—connect juvenile crime and disorder with a number of valued components of social life that had—as one participant in our Moss Rose focus group put it—‘gone by the board’. On occasions this would take on a sympathetic form, a reference to parents struggling to cope, or else quite innocently unaware of the problems their children cause. As one established male resident put it in respect of High Street: ‘I’m very, very sure that most of the parents of the teenagers that congregate outside our house don’t know what they’re doing at all, they’re oblivious to the fact that they’re creating damage.’

More often, however, discourse on the family was invoked in a spirit of blame, as residents from across Macclesfield bemoaned variously: the decline of ‘parental control’, the inability of parents to ‘chastise their children’, the collapse of ‘discipline’, the disappearance of appropriate (male) ‘role models’, and a culture of questioning that has encouraged children to know of ‘rights’ but not ‘responsibilities’. Tony interjects this line of argument into the above discussion thus:

I think what we’re coming round to, we’re coming round to the main subject in a way. This is about upbringing, it’s about parents. Nothing else, it’s about parents. It’s not where you live, what the house is like, it’s about the attitude of parents. The word that is missing today is respect. That’s what’s missing today. Nobody has respect for anybody or anything else, apart from themselves. It shows up in all sorts of different areas.

A third ‘frame’ within which adult residents accounted for teenage mis/behaviour is one that brings into sharper relief the values and outlooks of young people themselves. Here attention focuses, not so much on jobs and family life (though these remain pertinent), but on some seemingly more diffuse and difficult to grasp mutations in the cultural and moral order (in fields such as education or the media for instance) that are felt to have impacted detrimentally on the dispositions of ‘the youth of today’. The means by which people routinely ‘condense’ these changes and their effects into a readily graspable form is to speak of the young lacking ‘respect’: respect for parents, teachers, police officers, for their elders generally—in short, ‘respect for authority’. As

According to a survey recently conducted by Cheshire County Council (1996), 54 per cent of Macclesfield Borough respondents considered that ‘family breakdown’ was a ‘very significant’ cause of youth crime. This compared with 26 per cent for ‘young people not involved in community activities’, and 20 per cent for ‘lack of moral teaching/no respect”. All of these are implicated in the ‘social breakdown’ frame which Sasson (1995) found to predominate among his respondents in Boston, Massachusetts.

Like that of employment, this discourse too is susceptible to local application, able to operate as a commentary on the strained social relations of both council-built estates like Moss Rose and the Weston and affluent enclaves such as Prestbury. Thus it is that accounts couched in terms of the family often attach themselves to those (by definition ‘bad’) parents who seem content to let their kids roam unsupervised in the neighbourhood (or, as is alleged in Prestbury, drop their teenage children off in the village ‘in their Jaguars’). Indeed the frequency with which such charges were laid in our discussions leads one to conjecture that the principal intra-community cleavage opened up by teenage disorder is not so much between young and old, but between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parents; those who care about their children and their community, and those who allegedly don’t.
an established female resident of the High Street area put it (in response to a general question about how Macclesfield had changed): 'Children have got no respect for a start off... Years ago, if children were causing disturbances or what not, you said something to them: "Go away!"; they went, there was no mother. Now they won't. [They say] "What are you going to do about it?"'.

Among elderly residents of the town questions of 'respect' were most often invoked using terms that suggested its steady erosion and loss. While such residents often conceded that neither they nor their own children had been angelic teenagers, they nonetheless reconstructed their pasts (and by extension the wider local and national past) as a time that was (more) disciplined, socially harmonious and civil (cf. Pearson 1983). As the following discussion between middle-class residents of Kennedy Avenue illustrates, these powerfully felt 'social memories' (Fentress and Wickham 1992) draw upon both reconstructed personal experience (of past and present) and widely available, mass-mediated modes of talking about the fate of post-war England (and its youth):

**Jimmy** Let's be honest the days have gone when... it's not parental authority these days, the police have no authority, and that authority they have got is insufficient to deal with the problem.

**Audrey** Teachers have no authority.

**Jimmy** No, teachers have no authority.

**Miriam** There's no deterrent.

**Jimmy** In our day if we misbehaved the schoolmaster gave you a clip round the earhole, that was it, it did you a lot of good. There was no question of complaining to the police or the authorities about it because he was perfectly within his rights. It certainly helped, I think, to keep... Nowadays there's nothing.

These sentiments were not however confined to the elderly among our respondents; nor were they always obviously invoked in a spirit of wistful nostalgia. Among those who took a generally more benign (or even welcoming) view of the social and cultural changes of recent decades (and who certainly evinced little enthusiasm for 'getting back to how it used to be'), it was often still felt that such change had (for better and worse) made more complex and contested some hitherto taken-for-granted aspects of inter-generational relations. Some chose 'the pendulum' as the metaphorical device which best captured their ambivalence towards such alterations (as in 'the balance has swung too far to the other side'); others preferred to speak in terms of key turning points: 'Don't you think the trouble started in the sixties when the school teacher said call me Charlie instead of Sir?' In either case, an unspoken acceptance of the need for and benefits of change is coupled (uneasily) with the felt sense that the resulting 'question everything' culture has produced children and young people who know 'their rights, but not their responsibilities', have 'lost a healthy fear of doing wrong' and who seemingly lack the discipline in which the previous generation had been schooled. As one retired middle-class woman put it: '30 years ago they had to be prepared to put more effort in. I grew up when if you hadn't got the qualifications you went to night school and you did... They'd laugh at you now if you suggested that.'

These accounts demonstrate how locally occurring forms of teenage mis/behaviour prompt discourse that slips away from the locality (as both its referent and locus of
explanation) and accounts for 'the problem' in terms of the economic or social or cultural or moral decline of 'the nation'. Thus framed the youth question fairly readily prompts responses that fit snugly with, and borrow terminology from, dominant media discourse and political rhetoric on 'law and order'; with all its angry denunciations of 'permissive' child-rearing, 'ineffective' policing and 'soft' punishments, and its attendant calls for someone to take 'tough action'. It seems that when 'teenage disorder' comes to be framed and spoken about (in abstract terms) as a problem pervasive in and endemic to contemporary English society as such (not to mention one from which 'our town', or 'our area', or 'our street', or 'our kids' are no longer able to exempt themselves), the resulting feelings of what Giddens (1991:193) calls 'engulfment' make 'firm measures' (taken at the national level) seem like the only viable solution.

Disorder and Local Decline: What's Happening to 'Our Kids'?

Yet these punitive, often criminal justice-centred, impulses have seemingly little to do with the concerns people voice about the condition and fate of their own community. When Macclesfield's adult residents speak about locally occurring teenage mis/behaviour, they rarely evince a desire to banish or exclude young people, to place them somehow beyond the boundaries of 'community' (though their 'social memories' do of course operate as exclusionary devices, distinguishing those who recall a 'better past' or who embody its values, from those who don't). Indeed, with the partial exception of the area around the old High Street (Girling et al. 1998a), residents mostly acknowledge the young people occupying local public spaces as 'our kids', and as 'belonging' to 'our community'. Their demands are thus not for measures that risk accentuating difference and division still further; but for those which might 're-incorporate' the young, thereby restoring to local social life a lost cohesion, discipline and civility. This is most clearly so among those whose response to teenage disorder is a seeming wish to strike up a dialogue with young people about what it is that causes them to hang around the streets and what might be done about it. The following exchange from one of our two High Street focus groups is especially interesting in this regard, not only because the discussants are keen not to come across as 'soft' on youth crime (hence demonstrating the currently marginal status of such a position), but also because of the evident doubt as to whether received forms of youth provision are in fact what 'today's teenagers' really want:

Peter Nobody is bothering to say, I'm not defending the kids, but say why they are doing it in the first place. There's nothing, there's just nowhere to go, nothing to do. I'm not saying it should be given to them on a plate, but there isn't anything at all, no facilities . . .

EG What would you say that the younger people in Macclesfield would want?

David It's a bit difficult because attitudes have completely changed from what it was ten years ago. They seem to grow faster, they seem to be doing a lot of the things that we used to do when we were 18. When they're 12 and 13, they seem to be smoking. I'm not saying we should give them what they want, but we should ask them what they want first.
It is also evident among those who bemoaned what they saw as the dearth of facilities available to young people in the town and who viewed this, not only as being causally implicated in teenage disorder, but as indicative of some widespread lack of concern for youth among townspeople and local decision makers alike. Having noted how Macclesfield's young have been ignored during what she called 'all this building and progress', one Weston resident continued thus:

*Helen*  They're just roaming the streets like lost souls until it's time to go in at night time. And when they go to school in the morning: 'what did you lot do last night?' 'Oh we walked up and down so and so.' But saying that, on the other hand you get what we've had to put up with here.

*IL*  We'll come on to that soon.

*Helen*  I think basically what it is, it's very unfair that they're not . . . they're so busy about filling their own purses, the oldies, my generation, and they don't give a sod about the young ones. Do they care about the young ones? 'No'.

This confluence of irritation with and concern for young people was amply demonstrated at a public meeting on the Weston which took place one Friday evening in July 1995. The meeting was called by the tenants' association (TA) following a story in the *Macclesfield Express Advertiser* suggesting that the TA was about to enlist the services of a private security firm to patrol the estate (it turned out that the association had no such intention). Some 60 residents (mainly aged over 35) packed the community centre for the start of the meeting, along with a couple of teenagers and a local social worker. The residents listened (impatiently, as if fearing they had been lured along under false pretences) to speakers from the TA, Borough Housing Department, and the local police inspector, before finally launching into their questions. Incidents were recounted, and action demanded, about youths in people's gardens, noise and aggravation around the shops, and cars 'hurtling' up and down the main street. One woman argued ill temperedly with the inspector about what the police counted as an 'emergency', while another loudly demanded that a private security firm be brought in (her request was heavily defeated on a show of hands, one resident proclaiming it would give the estate 'a bad name'). Two of the teenagers (and the social worker) attempted to defend themselves and then left. The chorus of complaint about teenage crime continued, though several speakers (including those from the TA and the police) were at pains to point out that this applied to only a minority of youths, and that most kids on the estate were 'alright'.

After about an hour a group of around six or seven male and female teenagers (who had previously been walking up and down outside, prompting some occasional accusatory pointing from those inside) entered the meeting. They sat down, lit up cigarettes and listened. After a while one of their number spoke up. He said they had nowhere to go, didn't cause all the trouble on the estate, and were often attacked themselves (either by teenagers from other estates, or by drunken men leaving the local pub). The mood of the meeting was transformed in an instant. Questioning shifted to what the 'local' youths wanted and to how they could be protected, and a

13 It was on this estate, some two years earlier, that a suspected teenage car thief was apprehended, stripped and tied to a lamppost by a group of local 'vigilantes' (see on this, Girling *et al.* 1998a).
constructive—albeit still tense—dialogue ensued. The residents’ anger and frustration had evaporated in the face of ‘real’ teenagers. A meeting between the TA committee and the young people was set up for the following day, and a ‘follow-up’ public meeting for six weeks hence; seven people turned up.

If this suggests that adult residents often want to do something for (rather than merely to) local teenagers as a response to disorder, it is also apparent that they wish to control the nature of that ‘something’; to re-incorporate the young on terms laid down by the adult community. This for the most part means trying to ‘contain them in institutions run by “respectable citizenry’” (Brown 1995: 23); something that has in recent years led to frequent confrontations between Macclesfield residents and the youth service over who controls local youth clubs (those on Moss Rose, Upton Priory and Prestbury have for periods shut down at least in part as a result of such disputes). For while residents (and particularly tenants’ associations) strongly support the idea of youth clubs, they are in practice unimpressed by the ‘licence’ such clubs appear to grant young people, and endeavour instead to run places where teenagers have regulated ‘fun’ under (non-negotiable) adult rules, and where respect for authority might be (re)instilled.

Much of the disquiet felt by residents surrounds the qualities possessed (or lacked) by the professional youth workers appointed to run these clubs (it is a condition of Council funding that such an appointment is made). At one meeting between the Tenants’ Federation and local agencies in November 1995 (called to discuss ‘anti-social behaviour’ on Macclesfield’s estates) one representative accused local youth workers (in front of the team leader of Cheshire County Council youth service) of exhibiting ‘a high-minded attitude’, of ‘thinking they’re God Almighty!’ and of being ‘unwilling to take advice from local parents’. Others we spoke to commented on youth workers being ‘too young’ or as ‘having university degrees but no experience’. Yet another claimed they were ‘too familiar with them [young people] to command their respect’. In short—as one member of our Upton Priory focus group put it—youth workers are seen as lacking the experience, skills and disposition that the ‘required’ task—that of exercising control—demands:

It’s like in the youth club for the 13 to 19-year-olds. You provide them with equipment, we’ve recently had two pool tables donated, decent pool tables. What do they do in front of the youth workers? They let the fire extinguisher off all over the pool tables, all over everywhere. The youth workers don’t stop them. They say ‘Oh it was an accident’. 

It seems then that what older residents desire in respect of local teenage disorder is not simply a ‘tough’, exclusionary response from the criminal justice system (their demands

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14 Although, significantly, the category of ‘minority troublemaker’ continued to permeate residents’ talk, shifting itself on to absent Others. Residents found it difficult to entertain the idea that they might in fact be conversing with this ‘minority’, who only half an hour before had been the butt of their accusations. Once in the room and talking the youths became ‘alright’ kids; ‘troublemakers’ remained elsewhere.

15 Needless to say the youth workers we spoke to saw matters differently; not least in respect of residents’ objections to them delivering the youth service curriculum (one reported that members of his management committee had systematically removed from the walls of the youth club educational posters on ‘safe sex’ and drugs). One youth worker we interviewed summed up his reasons for (reluctantly) leaving his post at one of Macclesfield’s youth clubs thus: ‘I may as well bang my head against the wall, there was no getting through to them [the management committee]. I mean, I admire them for what they were trying to do and everything, but then they wouldn’t give the young people any freedom or respect. I really feel that older people think that respect should just be given, adults basically feel that respect is their God-given right.’
for more policing amount largely to a wish to have a 'bobby' keep a regular pastoral watch over local teenagers (see further, Loader et al. 1998)); but that the (unruly) young are re-integrated into 'the community' under the protective, unbending wing of adult rules and prescriptions. It may be (as the youth workers we spoke to suspect) that the kind of 'community' they yearn for (and the conditions they set for young people's admission to it) is untenable, offering little basis from which to establish new forms of inter-generational trust within localities. But such a response at least lends some support to an oft-repeated criminological claim (most famously outlined by Nils Christie (1977) and subsequently developed in work on mediation and family group conferences (Smith et al. 1988; Braithwaite and Mugford 1994)) that is all too often effaced in the punitive scripts of dominant media discourse and political rhetoric on youth crime: namely, that people respond in more modulated and complex ways to events and issues in which they are personally implicated than to those of which they are more abstractly aware.

References

NARRATIVES OF DECLINE


