

Young people and territoriality in British cities

Findings
Informing change

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This study investigates territorial behaviour by young people to see whether this imposes significant constraints on their lives, and to consider the implications of this kind of behaviour for communities.

Key points

- Territoriality was part of everyday life for young people in the six areas examined. Territorial behaviour emerged where young people's identity was closely associated with their neighbourhoods and they gained respect from representing them.
- Territoriality was found to be a cultural expectation, passed down to young people from older generations, often with deep historical roots.
- Boys aged 13-17 years old were most involved in territorial behaviour; girls and younger children less so. Men aged in their 20s also showed territorial behaviour, particularly where it was associated with gangs and criminality.
- Young people often had positive motivations for becoming involved in territorial behaviour, such as developing their identity and friendships. But territorial identities were frequently expressed in violent conflict with territorial groups from other areas.
- The negative impact of territorial behaviour on young people included constrained mobility, problems with access to amenities, and the risk of violent assault and criminalisation.
- This negative impact was felt most heavily by boys and young men who had a core involvement in territorial conflict. However, other young people, including those with no active involvement, also experienced problems.
- There was evidence in some places that low-level territorial behaviour could be the foundation of criminal gangs involved in violent crime and distributing drugs.
- The authors conclude that territoriality should be considered significant when designing policies and programmes relating to the social exclusion of young people, community safety and neighbourhoods.

The research

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Background

This study attempts to better understand territoriality among young people across different parts of Britain. For the purposes of the study, territoriality was defined as ‘a social system through which control is claimed by one group over a defined geographical area and defended against others’.

There has been considerable media and policy attention given to particular aspects of territorial behaviour – for example, ‘gang’ membership, ethnic segregation and anti-social behaviour. Territoriality is a kind of ‘super place attachment’; while there may be benefits of mutual support by getting involved there is also a darker side, which potentially leads to violence and isolation from the wider community.

This study aimed to better understand the manifestations and significance of territoriality, and its origins and geography; who was involved and their motivations; its impact on young people and their communities; and the appropriateness of current responses.

The research examined six case study projects in Bradford, Bristol, Glasgow, Peterborough, Sunderland and Tower Hamlets, where key stakeholders were interviewed and focus groups were held with young people.

The manifestations and significance of territoriality

The case studies showed that territoriality was important in the lives of many young people, although it was manifested in various forms – from young people who socialised on the streets; to groups with a stronger territorial affiliation, some of whom identified themselves as a gang; to more highly organised, criminally-oriented territorial gangs. Territoriality often gave rise to physical conflict between groups of young people.

Conflict featured in all six areas, although the frequency and level of violence varied. Mostly, conflict occurred on boundaries between residential areas (typically defined by roads, railways, vacant land or other physical features), or where there were incursions by one group into another’s territory. There was also evidence, in one of the cities, of conflict being played out in the city centre between groups from different areas. The level of organisation of territoriality appeared

to vary considerably between places; in some places territoriality encouraged the formation of gangs. In each location, territorial behaviour was associated with other types of anti-social behaviour such as drinking, taking drugs and minor theft.

Origins and geography

Territorial behaviour was often associated with very tight boundaries, and frequently identified as longstanding and ‘generational’. This research found that territoriality was learned behaviour for those concerned and that the stories told to them by older generations, when combined with their own limited horizons, had a significant part in transmitting their territorial culture between generations.

The research also suggested a strong interrelationship between territoriality and disadvantaged areas. Some of the case studies showed connections between poor housing conditions and often difficult family backgrounds, and territoriality. Territorial behaviour appeared for some to be a product of deprivation, a lack of opportunities and attractive activities, limited aspirations and an expression of identity. It could be understood as a coping mechanism for young people living in poverty, who were thus provided with leisure, excitement and an alternative focus of association outside their households.

In some places, tensions between or within areas arising from people’s attachment to the place where they lived reflected, or were linked to, other divisions between groups. By far the most influential division was ethnic origin, and this division existed to some degree in all the English case studies.

Who was involved

Boys aged 13-17 years old were the most active in territoriality and certainly most visible. They were also most likely to carry weapons. Girls were seldom involved in conflict and were less affected by territoriality, feeling safer to travel outside their home neighbourhoods. However, girls and relationships could be a source of conflict between different groups of young men.

Younger children often closely identified with territorial boundaries and in some areas they were involved in territorial behaviour. Men in their late teens and 20s also engaged in territorial behaviour in some places, particularly where territoriality was also associated with selling drugs and other criminal behaviour.

Motivations

The study identified a large number of factors that motivated young people to participate in territorial behaviour:

- Territorial affiliations were a source of friendship and group solidarity that provided an alternative to household and family affiliations.
- Young people sought recognition and 'respect' among their peers.
- Participation in territorial conflict was sometimes motivated by a sense of ownership over the area, and the desire to protect the area or oneself. Simply crossing a boundary into a neighbouring territory was regarded as an insult and could lead to conflict.
- As male teenagers became sexually aware, territoriality was intensified by the protection, or perceived ownership, of girls and young women in that area.
- In some places, territoriality was a leisure activity, a form of 'recreational violence' where 'gang fighting' was ritualised.
- Territoriality was sometimes associated with material crime for financial gain.

The impact on young people and communities

Many young people felt unable to cross territorial boundaries. Territoriality placed limits on young people's freedom to go to areas outside their own, especially in the evenings and at weekends. The extent to which territoriality restricted their mobility and access to opportunities and facilities varied according to their level of involvement in it, and varied between sites. Territoriality had a negative impact on young people's access to education, leisure and relationships. For some, mainly those who were involved in conflict, the fear of violence when outside their own areas was so strong that even when transport to leisure facilities was provided they were unwilling to travel to access them.

The impact of territoriality extended beyond those directly involved. Even those young people who were not active in territorial groups sometimes faced restrictions on their movement because of where they were from. The case studies revealed many examples of 'innocent' young people being caught in 'the wrong place at the wrong time'.

In areas of mixed ethnicity, territoriality was sometimes exacerbated by ethnic differences; some areas were perceived as belonging to one group, despite having residents from more than one group. This had a negative impact on young people, who were all the more easily seen to be in the 'wrong area'.

Territoriality was associated, in all six locations to some degree, with violent confrontation with rivals from other areas. The risk of harm, or even death, appeared to be much higher for those actively involved in territorial gangs compared to non-participants, as they were involved in fighting more frequently or were likely to be victims of revenge attacks. Territoriality could involve anti-social behaviour, including carrying weapons and violence, and often led to young people entering the youth justice system – both likely to provide barriers to future employment or other opportunities.

Three of the case studies indicated that low-level, routine territorial behaviour could be a foundation for the formation of criminal gangs involved in distributing drugs and gun-related crime.

Territoriality also had a wider impact on communities. Problematic territorial behaviour by some young people often led the wider community to 'demonise' all young people, so that any group of boys or young men was viewed with suspicion. Family members also sometimes got caught up in violence.

Current responses: 'anti-territorial' projects

This research identified over 200 local projects across Britain which could be described as 'anti-territorial' in some sense, funded from a wide range of government and charitable sources. These organisations carried out a whole range of activities linked to particular local concerns, including:

- diversionary activities (such as sport and leisure);
- education (e.g. about the consequences for young people);
- association (to break down boundaries between communities by increasing contact); and
- conflict resolution techniques (for more serious conflict).

The projects in the six case studies appeared to play an important role in tackling young people's motivations for involvement, such as boredom and peer pressure. But they were not really able to tackle underlying problems, such as deprivation or unemployment. These projects faced a number of challenges including reaching out effectively to those most affected, and were hindered by limited capacity and access to funding. On the whole across Britain these schemes appeared opportunistic, temporary and somewhat randomly distributed.

Public policy and research implications

Territoriality has the potential to be a significant factor for several themes in social and urban policy. However, recognition and understanding of it in policy circles appears to be at a fairly early stage.

This study indicates that there are substantial 'social exclusion' disadvantages for young people because of restricted mobility and conflict caused by territoriality, therefore it merits being taken seriously as an important problem in its own right. Because territoriality can be associated with disadvantage, programmes that are designed to create alternative opportunities for young people and offer them positive ways of affirming themselves other than on the streets appear to offer a solution. Projects that help young people build bridges to other communities and break down their isolation should be especially helpful.

This research supports the idea that some of the most violent gangs have territorial origins. The local and wider significance of gang violence indicates that it would be useful to consider the causes of gang formation and to concentrate resources on prevention and conflict resolution, as well as tackling criminal behaviour by existing gangs. A clearer understanding, however, is needed of the links between low-level territorial

behaviour and the formation of criminal gangs. It would also be useful to more closely identify the scale and scope of young people's involvement in territorial behaviour.

The evidence of territoriality originating in historic patterns of residential differentiation creates concerns about the settlement of migrant groups and how this might interact with territorial and gang behaviour. Thought needs to be given to the provision of services and support for migrants and existing communities affected by incomers in light of these issues.

This research also suggests that addressing problematic territoriality would support the current theme in planning and housing policy to encourage social mix in both existing and newly developed residential areas and, within them, to consider the institutions and spaces that are necessary to allow social mixing to occur.

Finally, there are many useful anti-territorial projects across Britain, which need to be evaluated in more depth to promote good practice.

About the study

The researchers conducted six case studies based on 'anti-territorial' projects in Bradford, Bristol, Glasgow, Peterborough, Sunderland and Tower Hamlets. The study draws on over 40 interviews with key local stakeholders and 15 focus groups with young people, including those who were involved with the 'anti-territorial' projects and those who were not. In addition, six interviews were held with national-level stakeholders involved in policy.

Further information

The full report, **Young people and territoriality in British cities** by Keith Kintrea, Jon Bannister, Jon Pickering, Maggie Reid and Naofumi Suzuki, is available for free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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