

The Home Office describe antisocial behaviour in the following way: ‘Anti-social behaviour **is any activity that impacts on other people in a negative way**. Despite a 39% drop in the incidence of crime since 1995, anti-social behaviour remains a serious issue with around 66,000 reports of ASB made to authorities each day.’ (Source: One day count of anti-social behaviour: September 10 2003).

The number of people who think ASB is a big or fairly big problem has reduced from 20.7% in 2002/03 to 16.7% at the end of 2004 but there still is much more we can be doing together to tackle the problem. (Source: British Crime Survey).’

Whilst the Public generally do not see such a massive problem with anti-social behaviour, the Government do. No doubt such draconian invasions of our lives and making laws to Govern how we act have a deeper reason for existing than the Public’s well-being.

The Public now face a law that is, as the Home Office admits, **any activity that impacts on other people in a negative way**. Does this include the activities of our Judiciary and Government?

Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 gives the State the right to order closure of premises, injunctions, parenting orders, parenting contracts, powers to disperse groups, [Penalty notices for graffiti and fly-posting](#), [Graffiti removal notices](#), powers to impose curfews and also supervision orders.

UK National Audit Office publications; Work in Progress: Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour; The Home Office estimates there are more than 66,000 instances of anti-social behaviour each day, at a direct cost to the victims and the criminal justice system of £1.3 billion a year. Since 1997, the Home Office has introduced new legal powers for the police and local authorities to deal with anti-social behaviour. The Home Office set up the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit in 2003 to co-ordinate its strategy in the Together Campaign, which has an annual budget of £24 million.

The National Audit Office study will investigate the use of a range of anti-social behaviour interventions, and will be the first research on the cost-effectiveness of individual interventions with the perpetrators of anti-social behaviour. Such interventions include Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, Acceptable Behaviour Contracts and Fixed Penalty Notices. An NAO study on this topic will provide local practitioners with reliable data on the costs of interventions and their impact on the behaviour of perpetrators, allowing them to target their resources more effectively. Our methods will include a review of case files, interviews with Anti-Social Behaviour Co-ordinators, and focus groups with local communities.

Sheffield Hallam University study found some 80% of children involved in anti-social behaviour came from single mother headed households.

A plethora of research is now available trying to define reasons and justifications for anti-social behaviour yet the observer may be wise to question the material e.g.

Relationship between antisocial behaviour, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and maternal prenatal smoking *The British Journal of Psychiatry* (2005) 187: 155-160

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Background There is substantial evidence that maternal smoking during pregnancy is associated with both antisocial behaviour and symptoms of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in offspring. However, it is not clear whether maternal smoking during pregnancy is independently associated with antisocial behaviour or whether the association arises because antisocial behaviour and ADHD covary.

Results Maternal prenatal smoking contributed small but significant amounts to the variance of ADHD and of antisocial behaviour. The best fitting bivariate model was one in which maternal prenatal smoking had a specific influence on each phenotype, independent of the effect on the other phenotype.

Conclusions Both antisocial behaviour and ADHD symptoms in offspring are independently influenced by maternal prenatal smoking during pregnancy.

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Tests to reveal ASBO babies

LOUISE GRAY SCOTTISH POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

- Scottish scientists develop test to determine child behaviour
- Test claims to highlight mother/child bonding problems
- Pilot testing to be conducted in deprived areas of Fife

Key quote "If the mother is unresponsive to the infant or her behaviour is repeatedly frightening to the infant, then there is a risk that the brain networks that help the child to deal with stress become unbalanced and that has been shown to lead to both mental health and other types of health problems in later life" - *Dr Bjarne Holmes, the psychologist who is leading the research*

Story in full A TEN-minute test which identifies babies at risk of developing antisocial behaviour has been created by Scottish scientists.

The psychological test, designed for women with children under six months of age, will enable health workers to pick out mothers who are failing to bond properly with their child.

International studies have shown that such babies are at significantly increased risk of having borderline personality disorder as teenagers.

Researchers said the tests would enable health workers to target mothers who needed more support. But children's groups were cautious of using any test that could "stigmatise" young mothers.

The tests, developed by the Family and Personal Relationships Laboratory at Heriot-Watt University and funded by the Scottish Executive's Centre for Integrated Healthcare Research, come amid increasing pressure on ministers to tackle antisocial behaviour.

The research is broadly in line with an announcement by Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, stating families in deprived areas who are more likely to face problems should be identified earlier and given support - a move quickly labelled as "baby ASBOs".

The Scottish researchers are to pilot the tests with 70 mothers in deprived areas in Fife in November. The next step in the research is to look at the most successful interventions for mothers with problems.

Eventually it is hoped the results will be used by health visitors, most likely in the highest 20 per cent of deprived areas.

The new test works in two stages: first, the mother is given a ten-minute psychological questionnaire on her own personality to assess how she will relate to her own child.

If mothers are judged to be at risk then videotaping her with her child can be the next stage. Psychologists then "code" the tape to assess the health of the relationship.

Dr Bjarne Holmes, the psychologist who is leading the research, said a child's mind is developing in the first 18 months of life but becomes more fixed after the age of two, and so it is essential to ensure the mother develops a healthy relationship.

"At such an important developmental time, a mother or caregiver can buffer the negative effects of adversity on the infant by providing consistent, loving and nurturing care and being responsive to the infant in times of need," he said.

"If the mother is unresponsive to the infant or her behaviour is repeatedly frightening to the infant, then there is a risk that the brain networks that help the child to deal with stress become unbalanced and that has been shown to lead to both mental health and other types of health problems in later life."

Dr Holmes said there are already intervention programmes, but there has been no standard test for easily identifying which families are most at need until now. With government plans to divert more money to the families who need support the most, he said a test would significantly help direct resources to those families.

"We believe that money spent by Scottish society early in the life of some mothers and infants will not only benefit the future of those families, but will benefit our society at large through a healthier and happier public," he said. "Our long-term vision for this research in Scotland is to be able to look back 40 years from now and say that we were able to make a difference in altering the developmental pathways of some families."

However, Dr Holmes emphasised the point was not to blame parents, but to provide support.

John Watson, the policy officer for the charity Barnardo's Scotland, welcomed research on developing interventions, but warned against labelling children. "Many families experience difficulties at some stage but what they need is help, understanding and encouragement rather than being seen as a problem or being condemned," he said.

Ruth Howard, a post-natal tutor with the National Childbirth Trust, was wary of any test in the first six months in case of stigmatising mothers. "I have a slight worry about tools of this kind if it adds to feelings of guilt. You cannot change the fact you did not bond with your child. If that is what you felt, then that is what you felt and thinking about the future effects on your child can make it even harder."

However, Ms Howard did support a test if intervention and support is offered straightaway.

Belinda Phipps, the chief executive of the National Childbirth Trust, said mothers should not be made to feel guilty if they were having problems bonding with their baby.

"At the moment mothers do not have to accept any tests on themselves or their babies and that must stay the case if this new test is introduced," she added.

Kenny MacAskill, an SNP MSP, backed the test as long as it is carried out by social workers and followed up by support. "Parenting is a hard job, especially for a single parent, and anything that can be done to help is sensible as long as it does not stigmatise parents but helps them," he said.

The Scottish Executive would not comment on the research but said it already supported intervention at an early stage to stop antisocial behaviour.

Test for mothers

THE initial stage of the test is a questionnaire for the mother on her relationships with other people. It will include questions on whether she feels valued in relationships or finds it easy to trust people in order to assess the relationship she may develop with the child.

If the mother is deemed to be at risk, video may be used to record the interaction between mother and child, which can be "coded" by psychologists to assess the relationship.

Examples of early maternal behaviours that can lead to problems later include:

- Hostile behaviours towards the infant (mocking or teasing).
- Pulling by the wrist.
- Failing to comfort a distressed infant.
- Being frightened by the infant.

SEX DIFFERENCES IN ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR: Conduct Disorder, Delinquency and Violence in the Dunedin Longitudinal Study by Terrie E. Moffitt, Avshalom Caspi, Michael Rutter, Phil A. Silva CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS (2001) ISBN 0521010667

The antisocial activities of males and females are especially alike when alcohol and drugs are involved, near the time of female puberty, and when females are yoked with males in intimate relationships.

Why do some members of our communities, especially children and adolescents, commit antisocial acts? And why, in particular, do boys and men transgress in this way more than girls and women?

To answer these fundamental questions, this scholarly study - published in a respected monograph series edited by Alfred Blumstein and David Farrington - makes use of fresh data drawn from following the lives of 1,000 males and females born in 1972 to 1973 in Dunedin, New Zealand, and assessed at nine points between the ages of 3 to 21. Different measures of antisocial behaviour were used at each point, not least because 'whereas biting peers may have disappeared by adolescence, car theft has not yet emerged in childhood.'

The novelty afforded by the 20 year archive in the slow-burning Dunedin Study lies in its tracking of age and gender: 'Unlike previous studies of sex differences, we incorporate information about how antisocial behaviour changes with age over the first two decades of life, a stage when it emerges, peaks, and consolidates into antisocial disorders and serious crime. Unlike previous studies of age effects on antisocial behaviour, we incorporate information about sex differences.' This is key as there is much research literature which focuses on just one sex (often males), but 'single-sex studies cannot address the sex-specificity of their findings.' This novelty is underlined by the point that the first epidemiological study of childhood antisocial behaviour - the Isle of Wight Study - was conducted as recently as the 1960s.

One of the four authors is Director Emeritus of the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Research Unit; the other three are all professors at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College, London (two of the latter also holding posts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA). The academic disciplines which meet in this hugely impressive scholarly study are developmental psychology, psychiatry and criminology. Indeed, this interdisciplinary fusion will leave 'monofocal' approaches looking embarrassingly exposed.

This interdisciplinarity is reflected in the two basic explanations for antisocial behaviour which the book proffers. On the one hand, the authors identify 'a disorder having neuro-developmental origins that, alongside autism, hyperactivity, and dyslexia, [which] shows a strong male preponderance, early childhood onset, subsequent persistence, and low prevalence in the population'. We learn that 'extreme sex differences are linked with this form'. On the other hand, the authors assert that 'the bulk of antisocial behaviour, especially

by females, is best understood as a social phenomenon originating in the context of social relationships, with onset in adolescence, and high prevalence.'

Here we learn that 'sex differences linked with this form are negligible; for example, the antisocial activities of males and females are especially alike when alcohol and drugs are involved, near the time of female puberty, and when females are yoked with males in intimate relationships.'

This means that although common sense and empirical research may highlight male transgression of social rules, 'the overarching conclusion' of this book is that 'females' antisocial behaviour obeys the same causal laws as males' '. In other words, 'females are unlikely to develop the neuro-developmental form because they are unlikely to have the risk factors for it, whereas they are as likely as male to develop the socially influenced form because they share with males the risk factors for it.' Such findings are striking in the context of a broadsheet concern for the apparent alienation experienced by large numbers of adolescent boys and young men in our society.

Indeed, as each chapter - concluding its academic prose with nugget-size 'take-home messages' and 'unanswered questions' - was consumed as I travelled back and forth every day on the train past the Feltham Young Offenders' Institution, I find it hard to overemphasize its pertinence.

The book leaves one with a strong sense of the interconnectedness of genders and generations in the patterns of antisocial behaviour: 'Both antisocial males and females were highly likely to become intimate with an antisocial mate, to produce babies while they were still in their teens, and to engage in domestic violence in their homes, thus setting the stage of risk for the next generation.' A take-home message for a take-away generation, perhaps. But one which invites us to stomach the unanswered question of how to break such a cycle. 'Work in progress', or regress, depending upon one's end of the social policy telescope.

NICHOLAS WHITE

Dr. Nicholas White is senior lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London, and author of publications on the family in literature, including *The Family in Crisis* (Cambridge, 1999).

Cartoons depict the effects of such a law;

http://www.cartoonstock.com/newscartoons/directory/a/anti-social_behaviour.asp

When home's a prison

The political debate on Anti-Social Behaviour Orders may be clear - they either cut crime and mend society, or betray socialism and civil liberties - but what do they really mean for the families hit by them? Decca Aitkenhead finds out

[Read part two of When home's a prison here](#)

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[The Guardian](#)

One of the unusual things about a boy with an Anti-Social Behaviour Order is that everybody knows where to find him. When a child is convicted of a criminal offence, the anonymity to which young offenders are ordinarily entitled prevents you and me from discovering his name, what he looks like, or where he lives. This protection has a long legal tradition. Had Michael Talbot therefore been prosecuted for, say, burning

down a house, I would never have found him. But as the subject of an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (Asbo), the 13-year-old's name had been made public property. It was simply a question of knocking on his door.

His mother opened it. Susan Ashton is a small, fiery Mancunian with bright, indignant eyes and a great deal to say. She was so angry that the words came tumbling out in a chaotic fury - and to anyone with misgivings about the justice of Asbos, it was precisely the kind of story that will worry them.

Early last year, the council applied for an Asbo against Michael. He had been accused by neighbours of trespassing in gardens, tormenting residents, vandalising property and shouting abuse. A court heard the complaints - some submitted anonymously - and granted an Asbo banning Michael for two years from areas of the north Manchester estate where he lives. Asbo cases are heard in civil courts, so the complaints against Michael did not have to be proven beyond reasonable doubt, but merely judged on the balance of probability. Yet now, if Michael - who has never been convicted of, or even charged with, a single crime - is caught simply standing in a forbidden street, he will be committing a criminal offence that can carry a sentence of up to five years.

"And all that for knocking on doors and running through gardens! Isn't that what kids do? That's not anti-social behaviour." Susan Ashton stabbed a finger. "The courts are full of shit. Put that down. I mean, it's not as though he comes from a bad home! We've worked all our life. You name it, he's got it." She pointed around the immaculate lounge, at its plump sofas and faux-marble fireplace. "But they can be telling a pack of lies about you once these allegations have been made, and you've got no say in the matter."

Michael came down from his bedroom. He is a slight, dark-haired boy, handsome but awkward, poised between childhood and adolescence. "I probably shouldn't have done some of the stuff I did," he mumbled. "But you know, they were, like, childish things, like knock-a-door run or ghost knock, where you tie a bit of string. Really childish things."

Michael's cousin was being threatened with an Asbo as well. The courts were handing them out "like hot dinners", his mother claimed. "These neighbours, they're all people who are old and they want children to be seen and not heard - but you can't bring them up like that. This is just a kid growing up and getting a little bit giddy and learning by his mistakes. They aren't naughty. They're just little boys growing up."

Susan Ashton works as a cleaner for the council. She is not a student of jurisprudence, but she has a powerful instinct for the legal anomaly of her son's situation, so her fury is sustained by bewilderment. How can it be that her son has never been charged with a crime, yet faces the threat of prison for doing something not even illegal? "I've lived here all my life. I've voted Labour all my life. What's going on?"

Labour runs Manchester City Council. Since Asbos were introduced five years ago, Manchester has issued more than 300 orders - almost twice as many as any other city in the country - and has led the field not only in numbers, but in the imaginative audacity of its Asbos. Some orders have included a ban on riding a bicycle in the city centre, on meeting more than three non-family members in public, on wearing a balaclava in the street, on wearing a single golf glove. One Asbo received nationwide coverage in January for its ban on a 14-year-old boy saying the word "grass" anywhere in England or Wales until 2010, and in April a city magistrate served what was believed to be a first, banning a 16-year-old boy from misbehaving in school. If he disrupts a class, he can now be sent to prison.

These restrictions are difficult to enforce unless the local community is made aware of them, so Manchester has printed almost 200,000 leaflets, delivered through neighbours' doors, each one listing an Asbo's prohibitions and urging residents to report any transgression. "Not Wanted" posters have been put up on some streets and the Manchester Evening News has assisted by publishing on its front page the names and photographs of the "yobs". The police are delighted, and the naming and shaming is hugely popular with

residents, who sense that their quality of life is finally being taken seriously.

The man responsible for stretching Asbos to their legislative limits is Basil Curley, Manchester's executive member for housing. A gruff, lifelong Labour man, he is proud of his record as the Asbo pioneer and tired of "people who live in Surrey" talking to him about civil liberties. Curley has no patience with the suggestion that Manchester is instituting a kind of authorised vigilante justice, or effectively writing its own laws, jailing people for offences that no parliament would make punishable by prison.

"We could prosecute all these yobbos in a criminal court if we liked," he told me. "But because we're a caring council, we want to give everyone an opportunity to change. We're not about criminalising people, we're about getting them to change their behaviour, and this is a warning system."

Was he worried about putting 10-year-olds' faces on the front page of newspapers? "If kids are capable of going out and robbing someone in their 80s, they've made a decision about that, haven't they? It's about decisions and free will. You know," he sighed, "it's not about middle-class people setting rules or standards for working-class people. A lot of us came from poor backgrounds; I know lots of people whose parents split up, and they didn't go round putting fireworks through people's doors or wrecking people's cars. Deprivation isn't an argument. The people who come to us to demand improved standards are working-class people."

Deep inside Manchester town hall, a gothic cathedral to municipal socialism, Curley and his team believe they are fighting for the left, and winning. "Do you understand what we're doing?" his deputy appealed. "We're dealing with Mrs Thatcher's grandchildren. We're dealing with the children of the people who grew up under Mrs Thatcher, and were brutalised. We're recreating society. Putting back some of the social glue. We have nothing - nothing - to be ashamed of as socialists. If you're rich, you can buy yourself out of it, but these things take place among deprived communities. They want social glue and that's what we're trying to give back to them."

Very few issues can be more intimately sprung to the dynamics of New Labour than anti-social behaviour, for it captures the confusion of what it means to be progressive. Anti-social behaviour has manoeuvred socialists into positions they remember sounding rightwing 20 years ago, and induced the zealotry some need to steady their nerves. Fighting the behaviour with Asbos has given many on the left their first authentic sense of victory - of yielding power on behalf of the vulnerable - and the fight has the pleasing ring of populism. It communicates the party's transfer of faith from the delicacies of moral idealism to the dogma of what works.

It is probably because of this that Asbos tend to be discussed in black-and-white terms. Do they work or not? Are they right or wrong? Does Michael Talbot's Asbo help glue society back together, or betray socialism and civil liberties? Yes or no?

The political debate has such appealingly sharp edges that it is tempting to hope the same definition can be found in the actual lives of people who behave in an anti-social fashion. My experience of three families with Asbos was that all of these questions were simpler to answer the less time one spent with them. Proximity to their lives blurred the edges so quickly that any hope of answers vanished, and even the questions became almost meaningless, lost in the drama of domestic turmoil.

Just south of Hyde Road in Gorton, east Manchester, a lattice of Coronation Street back-to-backs limps into this century, scarred by boarded-up windows and broken-down doors. The Ward family lives on one of these streets - almost literally, in fact, for their house spills on to the pavement in a trail of broken toys, a one-wheeled bicycle and a dismembered shopping trolley. The windows of the house have been haphazardly patched with Perspex; the front door, re-hung back to front, hangs crooked and is slightly ajar. As I pushed it open, I thought I might have stumbled upon a burglary. Then a quilt on a sofa stirred and Eileen Ward sat up, rubbing her eyes.

Eileen, 17, and her sister Kathleen, 15, achieved local notoriety last August when they became the first sisters to receive Asbos. The pair were accused of threatening behaviour, of using foul, racist language and of stealing, and were banned from a large area of Gorton. Their family had to leave its three-bedroom council house because of the Asbos and had moved into this privately rented address, where exposed cables hung from the ceiling like vines, every single kitchen drawer and door dangled from its hinges, jumble piled up in heaps and the floor was a jigsaw of broken lino, bare boards and worn carpet.

By the time Eileen was fully awake, the room had filled with children. There are seven; after Eileen and Kathleen come Barbara, 13, Tommy, 11, Lizzie, nine, Jimmy, five, and Douggie, four. Kathleen was no longer living with the family, but the house still overflowed, for none of the children had been to school since they had moved. They appeared to be unravelling dangerously, the little ones tearing through the house, randomly violent, toothless, in tatters and filth.

With her wide, blue eyes, creamy cheekbones and full lips, Eileen is startlingly beautiful; in another life, she would look like Kate Moss. But in this one, worn down by a bad reputation, her youth has already begun to fade. "I'm a nice person," she protested, between scolding and soothing her baby brothers. "I'm not a proper thug, I don't think I'm hard. But having an Asbo, it's not nice, it's disgusting. People stare at you when you're on the bus. It's shameful." She sagged and shrugged. "People won't give me a second chance. It's hard to get a job. They say, 'We'll get back to you, Miss Ward.' Only they never do."

Why not come back later and meet her mum, she suggested. She had been dying to tell her side of the story, only nobody would listen. "Mind you," Eileen grinned, "you'd better bring a bigger notepad."

Zach Tutin is the infamous teenage boy whose Asbo bans him from saying "grass" until 2010. The order also outlaws the words "slag", "cripple" and "Paki", and bans Zach from using the main thoroughfare of Moston, east Manchester, where he lives with his mother. Outside the house, an aborted "Zac" had been sprayed in shaving foam on the pavement, beside a pool of vomit and a crumpled lager can. The door was answered by a small, olive-skinned boy.

Zach finds it difficult to talk about himself. A presumption of non-cooperation competes with an impulse to boast, and the challenge of chronological order only makes matters worse. The biggest challenge, though, is concentration. "I can't sit here for 20 minutes and just talk," he said, and it was true. "I've got a short attention span." A psychologist had told him this when he was 11 years old.

His parents had separated when he was eight. His father, who is Asian, stayed in touch, but his mother disappeared completely, so Zach and his younger sisters lived with their grandmother. By 11, Zach was in serious trouble. "I got done for battering someone. I had to go to court but then, before that, I battered him again. And then I got done for arson. And it just carried on from there. I've been hit for loads of things. Lost count, me."

His mother unexpectedly returned when he was 13. "It made me feel a bit better," Zach conceded, "her coming back. It felt good." He and his younger sisters moved back in with her. "But I was angry as well." He got expelled that year, for "slicing someone's legs. 'Cause he called me a - " Zach isn't allowed to say the word, but it was "Paki".

Did people often call him a Paki? "Sometimes."

Was it fair for the school to expel him? "I suppose so." His eyes gently closed, overwhelmed by a veil of boredom. Then, as if suddenly worried I might not think to ask, he volunteered: "I've been locked up before." Interest secured, he could retreat again, and the awkward dance of information resumed.

We met several times. Sometimes Zach would appear stoned, and the tattered terraced house was usually full of teenagers. His father collected him most mornings to go to a special school for excluded pupils, but the

days passed in shapeless boredom and distraction. Zach's mum, only 33 herself, would come and go, by turns cheerful and harried, yelling about the mess. Her moods were voluble and transparent, whereas Zach's were unreadable, hidden behind small black eyes.

Zach was the least indignant person I met in Manchester. He has travelled beyond defiance to a place so closed down that he can reflect on his circumstances with anaesthetised indifference, sounding almost philosophical. Lacking the hope that defensiveness would require, he has arrived at more or less absolute fatalism. "You always think it won't happen again," he mumbled. "But it always does."

The local press have called Zach a thug. His father said he's just a boy whose short life had been very, very hard. I asked how Zach would describe himself - and for the only time the anaesthetic lifted. "I can't describe myself!" Surprised, without a script, he looked lost. Pressed again, he shouted to his friends in the lounge for help.

"Pain in the arse!" one shouted.

"Funny!"

Zach relaxed. When I tried again, he made as if the question was stupid. "I don't know. Cheeky. That's it." What else? "Just ask the questions!" His face burned with anger. "Ask another question." Coaxed once more, he folded up with confusion. "I can't describe myself. 'Cause you don't know how you act sometimes, do you? I just do things. I don't know."

Friday 9 June 2006 <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/site/article/385/>

Stuart Waiton

A tyranny of 'respect'
The UK government's obsession with tackling antisocial behaviour is making society even more lonely and fragmented.

The rise and rise of 'respect'

Until the Nineties, the term 'antisocial behaviour' did not really exist. Yet over the past 15 years this social problem has apparently grown and grown; it is now understood to be one of the biggest problems - if not *the* biggest problem - facing society.

So seriously does the British government take the problem of 'antisocial behaviour' that immediately following New Labour's victory in the General Election in 2005, Prime Minister Tony Blair launched the 'Respect Agenda'. This will extend the 'politics of behaviour' further still, into the realms of politeness and manners. A *Respect Action Plan* was recently published by the government's Respect Task Force. It comes with a note written by each member of the Cabinet - from the health secretary to the secretary of state for

work and pensions to, of course, the minister of respect, Hazel Blears - explaining what contribution their departments will make to the battle against antisocial behaviour.

In 1997, when New Labour first came to power, 'petty crime' or antisocial behaviour tended to be discussed as a problem only in reference to 'serious crime'; for example, there were debates about how antisocial behaviour could easily become something more worrying, more seriously criminal. One broken window might soon lead to another and another, went the argument, until an environment of disorder has been created where serious crime can take hold.

Now, antisocial behaviour is not only seen as a serious social problem in itself - it also apparently has the power to drag society down, and is frequently described as a form of behaviour that undermines communities and makes life 'hell' for all of us. If antisocial behaviour goes unchecked, we are told, then neighbourhoods will be undermined by jobs; workplaces will become overrun by abusive clients; schools will be undermined by the constant disorder and threatening behaviour of children. Today the tables have been turned: crime itself is now seen as a serious issue because of its association with the apparently even bigger and more destabilising problem of antisocial behaviour.

Crime still hits the headlines, and there are still fevered debates about 'cultures' of crime - 'knife culture', 'gun culture', and so on. Yet as there has been a statistical fall in the level of crime, politicians and local authorities have tended to shift their focus to the more common and everyday problem of behaviour. So while the home secretary deals with crime as well as numerous other issues, we have a specific and dedicated minister for respect whose sole remit is to 'return public parks, streets and shopping centres' to individuals, so that they can 'go about their lives free from intimidation' (*Respect Action Plan*, 2006).

According to the *Respect Action Plan*, it is not easy to explain what lies behind the 'problem of behaviour'. It points out that some people believe that social trends - changes in the family, or the declining influence of churches and trade unions, for example - have influenced the change in behaviour. But these wider social factors are quickly forgotten about in the government's plan, and instead risk factors such as 'poor parenting', 'peer pressure', 'drug and alcohol misuse' and the rest become the focus of attention. If we accept, as the *Respect Action Plan* does, that these 'factors...are strongly associated with antisocial behaviour', then we have something of a tautology: the cause of bad behaviour is bad behaviour.

In New Labour circles, there is one other underlying belief about the cause of antisocial behaviour today, and that is the spawn of Essex Man - the greedy children of the selfish Thatcherite parents who refused to vote Labour in the Eighties have apparently come back to haunt society. These are disconnected 'underwolves', who have the capacity to 'ruin pretty much everyone's quality of life', as then Demos writers Helen Wilkinson and Geoff Mulgan put it in 1995 (Wilkinson and Mulgan, *Freedom's Children: Work, Relationships and Politics for 18-34 Year Olds In Britain Today*, 1995).

In this essay I will argue that the rise of antisocial behaviour as the defining issue of our age has less to do with any imagined emergence of expansive individualism, and is more the consequence of a sense of vulnerability amongst an individuated public. Today, we are more and more inclined to demand the 'right' to be protected from the actions of others. It is a 'quiet life', rather than the good life, that we crave today.

Talk to the hand

The problem of antisocial behaviour is sometimes portrayed as the work of a 'selfish minority', who, in the words of the government's *Respect Action Plan*, do not share 'the values of the majority'. But it is also understood to be part of a 'culture of greed', a far wider problem of a selfish society. According to Lynne Truss, in her 2005 book on manners and language *Talk to the Hand*, ours is a society imbued with a 'climate of unrestrained solipsistic and aggressive self-interest'.

Truss' book, which is subtitled *The Utter Bloody Rudeness of Everyday Life*, is a bestseller on both sides of

the Atlantic, suggesting that the British government is tapping into a genuine concern about a 'loss of respect'. Surprisingly, though, and despite Truss' obsessive focus on 'rudeness' in a book which she admits is a bit of a rant, there are more insights in *Talk to the Hand* than in any document the government has produced over the past 10 years.

Truss' key insight is to argue that we live in a 'hamster ball' society, a world made up of individuals living in their own private bubbles. Here, she gets very close to describing the real problem we face today: *not a problem of antisocial behaviour but rather the problem of living in an asocial society*. In other words, ours is a society that lacks the capacity to connect people with one another through a system of meaning.

Looking at the problem in this way can be helpful, as it shifts the debate away from a myopic focus on antisocial behaviour, and it shines some light on some of the genuine and new problems with behaviour between people today.

According to Truss, in our more fragmented world, where the purpose of society is unclear and our individual role within it even more so, there have emerged new forms of introspection and a trend for people to play by their own rules. 'Hey, my bubble, my rules', as Truss puts it. This is a world where we walk around in our own private bubble, and the 'public' becomes something of an obstacle in our way as we listen to our iPods or text our friends. When we live such bubbled existences, says Truss, then standards and manners look more and more like they are being enforced upon us from without, and thus we become more inclined to stick two fingers up at them. 'Authority', Truss notes, 'is largely perceived as a kind of personal insult'.

This sense of distance and separation between the individual and society rings true, where personal concerns override public interests, where our business is nobody else's, where the separation between public and private seems to have broken down. As Truss observes, 'It's as if we now believe, in some spooky virtual way, that wherever we are, it's home'.

Describing the way we have become disconnected from one another and increasingly inwardly focused, Truss argues that: 'The once prevalent idea that, as individuals, we have a relationship with something bigger than ourselves, or bigger than our immediate circle, has become virtually obsolete.'

The 'therapeutic me'

Despite Truss' focus on rudeness in *Talk to the Hand*, and her misguided argument - in my view - that the 'brute state of materialism' and 'selfish individualism' are to blame for the bloody rudeness of everyday life, her book also hints at an alternative explanation for changes in behaviour: the rise of a more 'therapeutic' society. She describes a society where the mantra 'talk to the hand' expresses an inward-looking and rather fragile sense of the self: a defensive retreat into the world of self-esteem.

Truss is able to see that the world of *asocial man* also helps to determine how we experience the behaviour of others. Isolated in our own bubble, we may find that other people are occasionally rude to us - but more significantly, I would argue, we are also inclined to have an exaggerated sense of their behaviour as problematic or threatening.

Throughout *Talk to the Hand*, Truss comes very close to exaggerating the problem of behaviour herself: every commuter, shop assistant and telephonist she encounters seems to be a caricatured example of today's talk-to-the-hand mentality. Unconvincingly, she also describes how car drivers constantly cut in front of each other these days - kind of, 'my road, my rules'.

However, Truss also notes that people in Britain still queue quietly, and she cites the work of Kate Fox, a researcher who walked around bumping into people and discovered that the vast majority of them said

‘sorry’. Fox concluded that manners had not declined in Britain.

Despite Truss’ concerns about the changing nature of relationships between people, she also - if only every now and then in the book - recognises that most of the people most of the time are pretty decent to one another. ‘And yet’, she notes, ‘if you ask people, they mostly report with vehemence that the world has become a ruder place. They are at breaking point. They feel like blokes in films who just. Can’t. Take. Any. More.’

Unlike the myriad government ministers who relentlessly take the preoccupation with antisocial behaviour at face value, Truss has the presence of mind to recognise a contradictory situation: people are often still civil to each other but seem to believe that everyone else is being rude. ‘So what on earth is going on?’ she asks.

What is going on is that the bubble we’re all living in has a pretty thin skin; it encircles a rather anxious and vulnerable *therapeutic me*. There has been a shift in recent years from the idea of public man - a strong-willed citizen who can make decisions and take actions by himself - to therapeutic man, where we are increasingly seen as fragile, potentially damaged, and in need of help from apparently benign authorities to manage not just our day-to-day lives but also our innermost emotions and feelings. Behind today’s therapeutic mindset there lurks the idea that humans are frail and weak; that we need constant protection from others and from the challenges thrown up by life itself.

In such circumstances, the ‘bad behaviour’ of other people, even young children, can take on a far greater significance than it would have in previous times. My experience of driving, for example, is the opposite of Lynne Truss’. Rather than drivers constantly being rude, they seem to spend more time than ever before waving thanks to each other or flashing their indicators in gratitude. In a world where one of the few positive day-to-day connections we have with other people is through polite exchanges, politeness has become more significant, not less. We may not all practice it, but, almost to a man, we are concerned about it - and when politeness is not forthcoming, we react in a more extreme way to this perceived snub. We ‘rage’, or more often we are simply internally outraged, without actually saying it out loud.

Our overreaction to ‘antisocial behaviour’ is often not directly determined by the behaviour of the ‘antisocial’ person; rather, it is when our fragile world of politeness breaks down that we seem to sense the more fundamental problem of our isolation and lack of connection with those around us. In this respect, experiencing or witnessing ‘antisocial behaviour’ seems to expose our sense of alienation within today’s asocial society. When politeness is all we have connecting us to others, incivility takes on an exaggerated significance.

In a humorous description of how she feels holding the door open for people who refuse to say thank you, Truss notes her own sense of wounded dignity. ‘You feel obliterated’, she writes. ‘Are you invisible, then? Have you disappeared?’ She continues:

‘Instead of feeling safe, you are frightened. You succumb to accelerated moral reasoning. This person has no consideration for others, therefore has no imagination, therefore is a sociopath representative of a world packed with sociopaths. When someone is rude to you, the following logic kicks in: “I have no point of connection with this person...A person who wouldn’t say thank you is also a person who would cut your throat...Oh my God, society is in meltdown and soon it won’t be safe to come out.” Finally you hate the person who did not say thank you.’

Disconnected

In a world where people had a strong sense of connection with society - with institutions, organisations and beliefs, and consequently with one another - the irritations of everyday life were not considered to be of such life-changing importance; they were not read as signs that society must be in ‘meltdown’.

Again this is something that Truss herself recognises when she looks at the issue of smoking. ‘Personally’, she explains, ‘I hate smoking [but]...I do remember a time when it just didn’t bother me’. So what has changed? It’s not just a health issue, she notes, but rather:

‘I used to accept something I truly don’t accept anymore: that being with other people involved a bit of compromise. When you were not alone, you suspended a portion of yourself. You became a member of a crowd. You didn’t judge people by your own standards. I believe we have simply become a lot more sensitive to other people’s behaviour in a climate of basic fearful alienation.’

What Truss is describing is the diminution of the ‘public’, and with it a growing intolerance of other people and their foibles. The world of ‘my bubble, my rules’ may have resulted in the emergence of a ‘me generation’, but it is a therapeutic me rather than a self-interested or ambitious me. Our society seems to be made up of introspective individuals who seem less aware of any social mores beyond their own selves, and, perhaps more significantly, appear prone to overreacting to those around them. Thus, we seek refuge in our own private world. It seems to me that today’s ‘offender’ and ‘offended’ are often two sides of the same asocial coin.

The strength of *Talk to the Hand* is not in the identification of ‘The Utter Bloody Rudeness of Everyday Life’, which, after all, in our world of ASBOs and *Respect Action Plans*, is hardly a novel outlook. Rather, it is the implicit recognition that ours is an asocial society that gives the book its punch. Unfortunately, in the end, and like another useful book that addresses the issue of behaviour, Alexander Deane’s *The Great Abdication*, Truss’ starting point and end point is a preoccupation with rudeness, or antisocial behaviour.

With Truss, this is forgivable, as she acknowledges that her book is a bit of a rant, and recognises the limitations of what she is proposing. What Truss ultimately aspires to, she says, is ‘to be a zero impact member of society’. ‘But’, she continues, ‘does this qualify me as the opposite of an antisocial person? Quite honestly I don’t think it does, because that would be *pro-social*, which would involve acting on society’s behalf, and I don’t do that.’

Ironically, Truss ends up retreating into that very ‘bubble world’ that she identifies is one of the biggest problems we face in dealing with others today. Only Truss would like ‘her bubble, her world’ to be a little bit more polite than it is at present.

Asocial politics

However, if the more profound problem we face is one of an asocial society, then we need to address how we ‘burst the bubble’ and create a ‘pro-social’ society. Unfortunately, the trend at present is not to challenge the asocial nature of society and of individuals’ behaviour, but to endorse it and attempt to make connections through it.

The world of ‘my bubble my rules’, when it takes the form of teenagers wearing hoodies or drinking on street corners, results in new laws and forms of policing to prevent this ‘bad’ form of behaviour. But when ‘my bubble, my rules’ results in individuals suing their local councils because they have tripped over a paving stone, or taking their local hospital to court for an accident during surgery, society endorses such asocial behaviour. Rather than people feeling that they are part of society, that accidents sometimes happen, and that it would be wrong for them to drain the resources of their local authorities, today the ‘my bubble, my rules’ outlook is institutionalised through law and we are encouraged to blame and claim.

In a local community group I work with, the problem of antisocial youth is often raised with the local councillor who attends our meetings. Recently, one member of the group did indeed trip over a pavement stone: he broke his ankle, and then he did what is the done thing these days - sued the council. While the ‘disconnected nature of youth’ is leading to attempts to install CCTV cameras in my local area, nothing is

said - even by the councillor - about the disconnected nature of adults reflected in this case.

Until relatively recently the idea that you would sue your council or health service for accidents that occurred in their areas - thus taking funds from usually hard-up local authorities - would have been unthinkable. Today, however, the use of the law to claim compensation for accidents and misfortunes is both shaped and encouraged by a cultural climate that separates the interests of people from society while also undermining a sense of personal responsibility.

In Scotland, where new antisocial behaviour laws and initiatives are forever being churned out by the Scottish Executive, and where concerns are constantly raised about the cost of having to deal with litter and graffiti, little is said about the more troubling issue of the £5 million worth of compensation that has been paid out to Scottish policemen and women over the past five years. Even for those people who are meant to be defending the 'law and order of society', today's sense of individual grievance appears to override any wider sense of duty and responsibility. When the police start claiming for bites they receive from their own police dogs, 'society' really is in trouble.

Worse still, in terms of the loss of any sense of loyalty among individuals to society, is the situation where soldiers can make claims against the Ministry of Defence for not providing them with a safe working environment....

Rather than challenging these asocial developments, the state and the law has institutionalised the compensation culture. Unable to project and promote a national or social sense of purpose and responsibility, today's elite has incorporated the outlook of 'my bubble, my world' into the framework of society.

The problem of the asocial society is that the relationship between the individual and society has broken down. However, politicians, who increasingly lack the capacity to unite people around a common set of beliefs and values, have attempted to engage with individuals within 'their world'. In the process, our individual bubbles are actually being fortified *against* society by officialdom itself.

The authorities' attempts to engage with the isolated and individual self can be seen in the way that key jobs for society, which once would have required a commitment to a wider purpose, are advertised these days. The ads for the Royal Navy on the Glasgow underground never fail both to amuse and depress me, with their promotion of a life full of sun and fun where you can make new friends. They can hardly be distinguished from ads for Club 18-30 holidays.

Similarly, the ads for teaching posts promote teaching as 'enjoyable and stimulating', where the kids are the most exciting people you'll ever meet. These also do not present teaching as an important and socially responsible job that involves transferring knowledge to the next generation, but rather flag up the 'fun' that *you* as a teacher will (allegedly) have in the classroom. When kids start misbehaving and undermining their teachers' sense of wellbeing, it is perhaps unsurprising that teachers too - given their belief that this job is apparently about making them feel special and happy - feel 'obliterated' and 'frightened'.

Within education itself, the trend is towards engaging with and reinforcing the more introspective outlook (or 'in' look) of children, as captured in the growing significance of self-esteem as the 'measure of man' and the institutionalisation of 'bullying awareness' schemes. Rather than educating youngsters to climb out of their caricatured adolescent self-absorption, we appear to be encouraging their preoccupation with 'how I feel'.

And in the criminal justice system, too, the authorities' engagement with the vulnerable individual has grown rapidly in recent years. Now, rather than law being enforced by the state against the criminal, on behalf of all of us and of society itself, we have victim-centred justice - a form of 'justice' that really endorses the idea of 'my bubble, my rules', or in this case, 'my feelings, my law'.

Respect for what?

Many arguments today, which appear to be coming from opposite sides of the fence, actually endorse the perspective of the asocial man. The reaction to the hoodie issue, for example, was not to raise a *public* debate about the use of CCTV cameras, but to cry ‘my hoodie, my rules’, as if *Guardian* readers’ lifestyle choice of wearing hoodies was under attack. Similarly, the reaction to proposals for more CCTV cameras and for the introduction of ID cards is often simply to question who is inspecting the inspectors: can we trust the people behind the cameras? So today’s distrustful asocial outlook can be seen both in those who favour CCTV cameras as a form of protection from the public *and* in those who oppose the cameras on the basis that they want to be protected from the protectors.

Ironically, even within the government’s Respect Agenda, the asocial outlook is encouraged rather than challenged; a kind of NIMBYism of the self is reinforced by New Labour’s version of Respect.

The government’s *Respect Action Plan* may sound like an old-fashioned attempt to instil good moral values in society. It also appears to be all about creating a more social society, with catchy subtitles such as ‘Everyone is part of everyone else’, and ‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts’. However, hidden within the very meaning of ‘respect’ promoted here, is the same asocial and equally amoral outlook that is coming to dominate politics and social policy more broadly.

Until recently, the idea of respect related to experience and achievement. Adults, for example, deserved respect from children due to the socially accepted notion that they, as mature, active subjects, the people who made society, should be looked up to by their less mature charges. Particular individuals were given respect for great things they had done: we looked up to our heroes as people who had achieved something important.

Respect was a socially ascribed category, something that was *earned*: it represented a judgement of certain individuals based on what they had done. There may have been battles over who should be seen as deserving of respect, with disagreements between conservatives and radicals, but all sides tended to celebrate the actions and attributes of certain individuals and institutions.

Today, by contrast, the idea of respect is devoid of content or of character. Everyone, we are told, should be respected - adults and children alike. Respect young people, the children’s commissioner tells us, and they will respect you (*Guardian*, 19 January 2006). In his book *Respect*, the sociologist Richard Sennett asks how the professional classes might *give* respect to the poor. Here, respect has become something handed down from above, often just for being who you are, rather than a set of values that we aspire towards that can take us beyond our selves.

‘Give respect get respect’ - that is the title of the opening chapter of the *Respect Action Plan*. It quotes young people defining respect in the following ways: ‘Being able to be the way I am without being bullied or skitted. And vice versa’; ‘Not offending or damaging someone else’s feelings or property’. This is a highly individualised, fragile and negative vision of respect. Rather than respect embodying values of achievement and character - something which, in the process of aspiring to, can help us change ourselves, to mature and gain self-respect - it has become something we demand simply for *who we are*.

In the framework of today’s preoccupation with antisocial behaviour, the demand for respect has become little more than a call to be nice to one another. To translate, ‘Give respect get respect’ really means ‘Be nice and others will be nice to you’. Rather than respect being a form of social judgement, we are told to be non-judgemental, to respect people for who they are. Indeed, we are actively encouraged to respect an individual’s self-esteem, which is seen as being easily damaged by any apparently hurtful social judgements. In essence, this is little different from the sentiment of ‘talk to the hand’, or the outlook of the child who challenges your right to question his behaviour by arguing, ‘I know my rights’.

Broken down to its basic elements, the idea of respect today is really: ‘Respect my bubble, my rules and I

will respect yours.’ Rather than the individual being drawn out of himself through values that relate to society, society is validating the inward-looking and insecure outlook of the ‘therapeutic me’.

The government’s Respect Agenda is based on the idea that the state must protect vulnerable individuals. ‘Respect’ has become little more than the protection of one individual from the ‘abuses’ of others. It is not about saying ‘respect me, because I have done something to deserve it’, nor is it about respecting adults because they know best; rather, it is a demand that we should respect everybody because if we don’t then we will undermine them and their self-esteem. In other words, respect is now defined by the need to curb ‘bad behaviour’ and defend the vulnerable, rather than by ideas of what it is to be a good and strong-willed character who has achieved a status that deserves recognition. By saying everyone should be respected - young and old alike - the government actually undermines the idea of respecting adults and infantilises the notion of respect itself.

At a time when respect for the institutions of society is in decline and, according to a recent MORI poll, politicians are the least trusted group of people in society, the government is attempting to engage with the bubble world of the individual. In the process, respecting others has become contentless. Any sense of the ‘social’ informed by moral or political norms has been diminished, and today’s political elite instead promotes a respect agenda in which there is no sense of society beyond the feeling of the ‘therapeutic me’. Through this process people are encouraged to have respect for the ‘self’ rather than actively achieving self-respect. And showing good manners become little more than an acquiescence to the vulnerable individual: ‘respect’ for the therapeutic self.

Encouraging impotence

Traditionally, respect was given to adults because of their capacity to *act*. Today, respect is about not acting - about not harassing, upsetting, abusing, alarming or offending the vulnerable individual. There is no sense of individual capacity or of social responsibility, except in ensuring that our actions do not harm others.

This preoccupation with harm to others has been latched on to by a government devoid of any social or political capacity of its own, and which can only develop social policy around the framework of social control. Protecting the diminished subject - the fragile individual - is the basis for myriad antisocial behaviour initiatives. Disastrously, this approach takes the asocial self as the starting point and consequently reinforces the problem of the asocial society.

Rarely, if ever, are people encouraged to take responsibility for the behaviour of others. Rather, a framework is being established that encourages us all to resolve the irritations of everyday life - of noisy neighbours, rude commuters, rowdy kids and aggressive customers - by contacting the authorities to deal with these problems on our behalf. This both discourages the establishment of social norms by the public itself, and also adds to the sense of individual impotence.

Until recently, antisocial behaviour was understood as a problem to be resolved by people themselves. When children swore and dropped litter or neighbours were noisy, people were expected to take a socially responsible approach and act themselves to discuss and resolve such behaviour. Today we are less inclined to act; indeed we are discouraged from doing so. The various antisocial behaviour laws and programmes being introduced tell us the authorities will do it for us. Now there is a whole range of community wardens, police initiatives and helplines that we can contact to ask for help in dealing with any problems we have with other people’s behaviour.

When we fail to take responsibility for these problems - which we know, in our hearts, that we should be doing something about - then we diminish our sense of ourselves. By not acting we both sense *and* reinforce our own diminished subjectivity.

Despite New Labour’s proclivity to replace a sense of purpose with an ever-growing list of statutes, laws

cannot resolve society's problems. Lynne Truss notes that when a policeman kindly asks you to get out of your car, regardless of how politely this is done, it is not a form of good manners but of force. Manners, she notes, cannot be enforced. Today, through the process of relating to others through third-party mediators, individuals are actually being de-socialised. One consequence is that we increasingly feel comfortable engaging with others only within a regulated environment - such as in the exchange between a customer and a shopkeeper - rather than through a free exchange with members of the *public*.

Ultimately, despite some real issues of behaviour in our hamster ball world, the preoccupation with antisocial behaviour has emerged because of the loss of connection we feel with society and with those around us. This is something that is being reinforced by an asocial elite which lacks a social sense and which is equally disengaged from 'public' life. By engaging with the asocial individual through his or her fears, not only is the 'my bubble, my rules' outlook not overcome but the fragmented nature of society is reinforced.

Rather than examining how we can stop people being antisocial, the real question today is how can we create a 'pro-social' society; how can we burst the bubbles many of us seem to be living in? With this starting point there is the capacity to move beyond the myopic focus on antisocial behaviour, to raise the expectations of individuals to act for themselves, and also to identify how today's elite is actually codifying rather than transforming the asocial nature of society.

Stuart Waiton is a director of the youth research group [Generation Youth Issues](#).

Anti-social behaviour 'inherited' BBC 24th May 2005

Anti-social behaviour in some children could be the result of their genetic make-up, a study says.

UK research on twins suggests children with early psychopathic tendencies, such as lack of remorse, are likely to have inherited it from their parents.

These young children may also display inherited anti-social behaviour, the Institute of Psychiatry team found.

But environmental factors are also important and, if favourable, could act as a buffer, they stressed.

And anti-social behaviour in children with no psychopathic tendencies is likely to be down to mainly environmental factors, they believe.

Previously, the same researchers had found boys who had a particular version of a gene were much more likely to display antisocial behaviour if they suffer maltreatment when young.

In the current study, published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Professor Terrie Moffitt and colleagues from King's College, London, followed 3,687 pairs of seven-year-old twins.

Twins are often used to investigate inherited traits because identical twins share the same genes, and therefore the same inherited influences, whereas non-identical twins do not.

The researchers used teacher ratings of anti-social behaviour and psychopathic tendencies - lack of empathy and remorse - to rank the twins into groups.

Those falling in the top 10% for anti-social behaviour were split into two groups - those with and without psychopathic tendencies.

Prevention

Analysis showed that anti-social behaviour was only strongly inherited in the psychopathic children.

Lead investigator Dr Essi Viding said: "The discovery that psychopathic tendencies are strongly heritable suggests that we need to get help for these youngsters early on.

"Any behaviour is influenced by multiple genes and an unlucky combination of genes may increase vulnerability to a disorder.

"However, strong heritability does not mean that nothing can be done. Children are open to protective environmental influences early in life and these influences can buffer the effect of genetic vulnerability."

Professor Marian Fitzgerald, visiting professor of criminology at the University of Kent, said this early-onset anti-social behaviour was different from that seen more commonly among teens aged 15-17.

"Most people who get involved in crime and anti-social behaviour are not genetically predisposed.

"A lot of kids get swept up in their teens and there are many social, economic and environmental factors involved. Most grow out of it.

"Obviously, individuals with genetic factors that predispose them to this behaviour will be more at risk. But tackling this small number of people will not make a big difference for society.

"What is important is to look at early interventions - family support, economics, improving neighbourhoods, pre-school education and so on. These are critically important."

Landlords on the front line Wednesday September 20, 2006 The Guardian

Today's social landlords already have a lot on their plate, so should the government now be putting more pressure on them to deal with antisocial behaviour? Saba Salman reports

Nuisance behaviour costs an estimated £3.4bn a year - a public problem that demands urgent action. But new government measures are placing more responsibility for tackling the issue onto social landlords, pushing them further into law enforcement as well as housing provision.

The government launched its latest anti-nuisance measure, the Respect standard for housing management, in August. The voluntary standard is a blueprint of how to deal with antisocial behaviour, part of a national campaign to encourage good behaviour and is part of the Respect Action Plan issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

Landlords are now responsible for a vital area of government policy without any additional funding, and there are fears that the drive stigmatises social tenants. With a major government-commissioned assessment of housing on the horizon - Professor John Hills report on the role of social housing is due out by the end of the year - there are concerns about the government's expectations of an already stretched sector.

The new measure urges landlords to offer "tailored services for residents and provision of support for victims and witnesses" and demands prevention, intervention and swift enforcement using tools such as antisocial behaviour orders (asbos). Although the standard is voluntary, the Audit Commission, which inspects housing, is to amend its criteria to reflect its contents. This has led to fears - disputed by the DCLG - that inspectors will penalise those who fail to sign up.

The DCLG says the aim is to "provide recognition for those delivering good services while providing a benchmark to aim towards for landlords who are striving to improve". While some landlords accept that the move formalises good practice, many believe it is yet another measure that unfairly thrusts housing to the forefront of the fight against nuisance.

Since 2002, when housing associations were given the right to apply for asbos, the onus for tackling antisocial behaviour has shifted onto housing. The Antisocial Behaviour Act 2003 obliged landlords to publish antisocial behaviour policies and the Housing Act 2004 gave councils the flexibility to extend introductory tenancies.

The National Housing Federation (NHF), which represents 1,400 housing associations, fears the public will develop unrealistic hopes about what landlords can do. "Community safety is paramount," says the federation's chief executive, David Orr. "However, in recent times it's seemed to many that landlords are being asked to do a job in respect of tenants that the police are being asked to do in respect of other people."

Merron Simpson, head of policy at the Chartered Institute of Housing, whose membership includes 19,000 housing professionals, agrees: "Housing providers are already doing a great deal to tackle antisocial behaviour - government now needs to focus its efforts on other agencies."

Furthermore, rooting such policies in social housing perpetuates negative perceptions of social housing. "Developing a standard for social landlords does nothing to address the significant issues around antisocial behaviour in the owner-occupied and private rented sectors," says Phil Morgan, chief executive of the Tenant Participation and Advisory Service. "Some of our resident members feel unfairly singled out."

The demands of tackling nuisance combined with the lack of resources also risk affecting landlords' work in other areas. The government estimates that adopting the standard will cost £300 per organisation, but associations say this underestimates the cost of staffing, consultation, publicity and preventative measures.

So what's the answer? Some believe standards must be launched in other public services: "It would be more appropriate to jointly site it in agencies such as crime and disorder partnerships," says Morgan. The federation thinks the solution could be more funding for neighbourhood wardens to deal with bad behaviour in partnership with landlords.

Non-housing experts also back calls for the spotlight to be moved off tenants. "We need a debate that has to be extended to what goes on in more prosperous areas," says Joe Sim, professor of criminology at Liverpool John Moores University. "Who gets to decide what antisocial behaviour is and what impact does a range of activities have on particular areas?"

In response, the department says the standard recognises landlords need to work in partnership and promises to issue good practice on the role that partners could play in tackling antisocial behaviour later this year. A spokesman adds: "The best landlords do this without additional funding schemes because it's what matters to their tenants and it makes good business sense."

At best, housing is at the heart of government policy in a welcome recognition of its potential. At worst, its forced role as chief protagonist in the war on nuisance risks diverting attention and resources from its function as a provider of affordable homes. The risk is that smaller social landlords suffer

