

There are several different practices of anti-social behaviour policy in Scotland (Shiel, Clark and Richards 2005). Using one of the theoretical frameworks, can you provide an exhaustive classification of these practices?

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An Evidence-Based Analysis of Scotland's Better Neighbourhood Services Fund

Introduction

Anti-social behaviour policies are at the forefront of aims to create safer communities in Scotland. This policy memo focuses on the Better Neighbourhood Services Fund (BNSF) announced in January 2001, which was a £90 million, 3-year programme, aimed at delivering substantial service improvements across twelve local authority areas (Pathfinders) in Scotland. Shiel, Clark and Richards (2005) discuss the various consultation, development, implementation and evaluation strategies used throughout the BNSF project, and the varying levels of success that they experienced in terms of policy outcomes. This policy memo recommends that future anti-social behaviour (ASB) policies in Scotland use the full range of evidence available to them, balancing traditional conceptions of scientific evidence with more local, experiential forms of knowledge, in order to create policies that both reflect and benefit communities. It firstly sets out the background of ASB policy in Scotland, before examining how policy tools fit (or do not) within the EBPM evidence hierarchy. Finally, this memo present policy recommendations, and concludes that using a reflexive, balanced range of evidence-gathering methods to develop policy will result in stronger, more relevant policy.

Evidence-Based Policymaking Framework

EBPM was created by governmental actors in order to take ideology and politics out of policy formulation, avoid 'old dogmas of the past' (Cabinet Office: 1999) and 'rescue the policy process from Politics' (Parsons: 2002). EBPM scholars drew on

research-based evidence in a bid to aid policymakers in better understanding ‘what works’ when creating policy. A core question within EBPM scholarship, therefore, is what constitutes ‘good’ evidence? The ‘hierarchies of evidence’ framework attempts to answer this by setting out processes through which research can be evaluated. Parkhurst and Abeysinghe (2013) offer a simplified evidence hierarchy as containing the following broad categories:

1. Systematic reviews and meta-analysis of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs)
2. RCTs with definitive results (large and well-conducted studies)
3. RCTs with non-definitive results (including smaller RCTs)
4. Cohort studies
5. Case control studies
6. Case studies
7. Expert opinion

Although these categories vary across EBPM scholarship, all hierarchy representations emphasise randomised controlled trials (RCTs) as the gold-standard of research, with more ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ forms of evidence inhabiting the ‘top’ level of the hierarchy (Parkhurst and Abeysinghe: 667). By categorising evidence in this way, it is argued that a better understanding of what constitutes ‘good’ evidence can be reached. However, this hypothesis has been criticised as only suiting certain policy areas, such as public health, and unable to provide a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to policy formulation (Parkhurst and Abeysinghe: 675), particularly within highly localised contexts. Furthermore, “complex or structural interventions are often not conducive to experimental methods, and as such, a focus on evidence derived from randomised trials may shift policy attention away from broader issues” (Parkhurst and Abeysinghe, 2013: 2). This is important to keep in mind when considering policies that target ASB, which is a phenomenon strongly linked to underlying, systemic issues of poverty and deprivation (SCSN, 2020).

Policy Issue Background

Several policies targeting ASB have been implemented by the Scottish Government since the end of the 20th century. ASB was initially implemented in policy with the Anti-social Behaviour Order (ASBO), a “preventative order to protect victims of antisocial behaviour and the wider community from further acts of antisocial behaviour” (Scottish Government 2004). The Guide to Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) 2004 Act replaced ASBOS and introduced unique local strategies to combat ASB, which required local authorities to collaborate with councils, police and social landlords to reduce ASB. The guidance for tackling ASB laid out in the 2004 Act continues to be used, and according to the Chartered Institute of Housing, “legislation in relation to ASB has remained largely unchanged since the 2004 Act” (2014: 1).

However, there have been substantial contributions to policy development and re-conceptualisation (2014: 1). Promoting Positive Outcomes: Working Together to Prevent Antisocial Behaviour in Scotland (Scottish Government 2009) aimed to find a new structural policy framework that would aid the Scottish Government “to create a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth” (Scottish Government 2009: 1). The wider goal was for communities not to experience ASB – as such, the prevention stage was constructed as the most pivotal (Scottish Government 2009: 8). This report recommended the need for long-term solutions, instead of the traditional short-term risk management policy strategies. While the 2009 report marked a policy shift in ASB by taking a person-centred approach rather than perpetuating scapegoat stereotypes, it is noted by The Chartered Institute of Housing that “dealing with anti-social behaviour can be very resource intensive and does not always achieve positive outcomes” (2014: 1). This policy framework was described as a “springboard for action”, however, while the sentiment remains, there has since been little progress towards renewed legislation (SCSN 2020c: 5).

Better Neighbourhood Services Fund

Through Shiel’ et al 2005’s policy report, in particular community consultation processes and input from the Scottish Executive, ASB was identified as a key priority across Pathfinder areas. As ASB in Scotland is up to local authorities to interpret and

address, consultation processes were characterised by a highly localised approach, which led to a variety of ASB initiatives across the twelve areas. This report discusses the overall effectiveness of direct and indirect interventions aimed at tackling ASB across the 12 local authorities, as well as examining specific case-studies. Measures include the instalment of lighting and CCTV, mediation services to improve resident relations, and creating more positive opinions of the neighbourhood through addressing local perceptions (Shiel et al, 2005: 6). There will first be a specific examination of the uses of evidence in selected local councils. Following this will be a more holistic exploration of the report to probe where it may place within EBPM hierarchies of evidence.

Consultation Processes

ASB policies were developed using evidence sourced directly from local communities including, but not limited to, community consultations, surveys, resident meetings, newsletters and questionnaires. Although evidence gathering processes were open to all community members, they were not a comprehensive nor cross-sectional representation of the community. Participants in community consultations themselves noted low turnout at resident meetings, which in some cases saw just 12 participants (Shiel et al, 2004). Therefore, the evidence-gathering processes here cannot claim to be scientifically rigorous.

Many policies aimed to reduce 'fear of crime' - a category which many ASBs fall under - indicating the lack of involvement in evidence gathering processes of people involved in ASB themselves. Perpetrators of ASB tend to be vulnerable and may be better described as 'navigating structural discrimination, deprivation and inequality' (SCSN, 2020). Therefore, the exclusion of their experience, or evidence, from policy development is a limitation to Pathfinders' ability to implement policies which truly reflect community needs. While policy invariably "emerges from competing interpretations of data and evidence... underpinned by the shared experience of the policymakers" (Fleming, J. and Rhodes, R., 2017:7), policymakers can at least control whose experience and 'evidence' is included in policymaking processes.

Resource and Time Constraints

Considerations of available resources, time and public perception were key in BNSF policy-making processes. Once resource limitations were considered, community representatives and stakeholders were able to easily identify and agree on priorities. As BNSF funding ran for just three years, addressing deep-rooted issues in a meaningful, visible way required strategic policy creation. Pathfinders balanced short-term community expectations with longer term initiatives by implementing a wide range of initiatives: direct and indirect; short and long term; capital and revenue, etc. The need to balance short time scales and high community expectations led to visible, focused approaches aimed at improving both service coordination and access. Abeysinghe and Parkhurst (2013:3) propose that “the best use of evidence in decision-making does not simply focus upon quality as judged by the hierarchy of evidence. Rather, it is more useful to judge the appropriateness of the evidence,” with respect to the decision-maker's considerations. In other words, policy evidence in this context had to work within time and resource constraints in order to be considered ‘good’ or useful.

Feedback and Evaluation Processes

In best practice instances, ongoing community consultation and involvement guided decisions throughout the BNSF project. Whilst projects that regularly used community feedback found the process time-consuming, it was worthwhile due to the resulting community acceptance. Kelly (2017) cited in (Fleming, and Rhodes, 2017) highlights the importance of experience in evidence for policy, in order to gain a more accurate picture of reality, as “without experience, evidence means absolutely nothing ... experience is the basis of *a priori* knowledge” (2017:20).

Most ASB measures targeted public instances of young people's ASB, aiming to both challenge ASB and provide appropriate diversions that would enable young people to participate in communities in a more ‘pro-social’ manner. Youth Strategies, which were implemented in various forms across several Pathfinders areas, were largely defined by community members and service providers in consultation

processes. Young people themselves were notably absent from these, as well as evaluation or feedback processes. While positive feedback was received from service providers, the lack of young people's representation was a considerable limitation in accurately understanding young people's needs. It follows that young people's perspectives, or 'evidence' was implicitly placed below that of community representatives, running the risk of policies based on biased perceptions, rather than reality (SCSN, 2020). Overall, when mapping the Pathfinders' evidence-gathering strategies against the EBPM 'hierarchy of evidence,' they do not strictly fall within any of the seven categories outlined by Parkhurst and Abeysinghe (2013), except perhaps expert opinion, if service providers may be classed as experts.

The prioritisation of community feedback indicates a clear preference for experiential-based knowledge, rather than 'evidence-based' policy making by BNSF. However, community-based knowledge is not immune to criticism. Fleming and Rhodes note that all sources of knowledge are "constructed in an organisational and political context that selects facts and their relevance" (2017: 4) and caution against exclusive reliance on any one form of knowledge, as "all knowledge – evidence-based and experiential – is political... it involves conflicting definitions of problems, the selection of data by stakeholders, and the use of that data in both an organisational and larger political game" (2017: 20). They go on to describe experience and local knowledge specifically as "complex... specific to a context and group of people acting together" and therefore inherently subjective. Despite the flexibility and opportunities that come with using experiential or 'participatory evidence' in policymaking, similarly to EBPM's over-reliance on RCTs, it should not be exclusively relied on.

The Synthesis of Evidence

While this memo addresses specific BNSF policies and their use of evidence, it is also important to examine what the paper says about the use of evidence in ASB policymaking holistically. The paper provides an "overview of the different projects... delivered through BNSF" (2005: 5) and at face value features the type of evidence that governments tend to value. Within a classical hierarchy of evidence, transposed

from the world of medicine, there has been a favouring towards “RCTS or meta-analyses”. These reports typically focus on “impact evidence”, or the “effects of an intervention” (Hansen, 2014: 11-12), which is what Shiel et al appear to do. Chapter 4 of the report synthesises evidence of ASB policy effectiveness, reporting the success of the introduction of White Lighting, as well as improvements in policing and surveillance across all 12 areas (Shiel et al, 2005: 18-19).

However, the evidence presented in the report would not meet EBPM evidence criteria. Evidence from the Pathfinders is described as largely “anecdotal”, and while there was greater involvement in *designing* BSNF policies from local communities, on assessing their effectiveness, there was “not a great deal of representative feedback from communities”. Instead, it relied largely on those who had delivered the services, rather than those who had used or received them (Shiel et al, 2005: i, 18). Shiel et al appear to suggest that the form of type of data they have gathered is not the issue; rather, they wish it would be *more representative* of local communities. That their evidence would not be considered ‘scientific’ does not appear a concern. Hansen (2014: 11-13) has suggested that evidence-producing organisations seek to provide a wider variety of evidence to policymakers – rather than just “impact evidence”, it should also include “implementation evidence” and “attitudinal evidence”. He fits this into his ‘case study’ evidence typology – suggesting more qualitative data collection methods are more suited to “complex” and “highly differentiated” and contextual policy settings. Rather than asking, “What Works?”, Hansen seeks to ask, “What Works for Whom in What Circumstances?”.

As part of their ‘knowledge sharing’ processes, the SCSN pride themselves in “measuring what matters” by examining policy practice through “case studies, thematic papers and research papers” (2020a; 2020b: 4). The 2009 Scottish Government report acknowledges the importance of properly engaging communities in ASB policy processes; called for “more balanced evidence”. However, there was still an emphasis on gathering data sets to help transfer ‘best practice’ – although this data would be more locally focussed – and policy still being made on an “evidence and intelligence-led basis” (2009: 5, 11). In 2020, the SCSN suggested a “new dialogue on ASB”, with several of its members suggesting the Scottish

Government redefine how ASB is discussed, as well as what kind of evidence shapes policy and enters the process (2020b: 3; 2020c: 5).

Recommendations

Feedback

As noted by Shiel et al (2005: 37) feedback is an important part of developing strategies which successfully progress towards targeted outcomes. Similarly, Fleming & Rhodes (2018: 8) point out that developing a localised knowledge-based grounded in experience is key to developing informed policy. Further policy approaches should emphasise the need for ongoing community feedback consultation in order to tailor practice to the needs of individual communities and authorities. This should actively involve young people within communities in order to foster an understanding of the needs of this key group, and particular care should be taken to ensure that feedback consultations are inclusive of community members, not just co-ordinators and project managers. Feedback consultations should be conducted regularly to monitor progress and provide an up-to-date impression of community expectations and potential risks or problems. It may also be useful to include the community in the analysis stage of the feedback process in order to develop a mutual understanding of key issues at hand.

Youth as Key Community Members

Existing community initiatives aimed at young people should be encouraged to work alongside local authorities in order to develop services which are tailored to young people's needs. In addition to this, further investment in initiatives and projects which aim to promote community cohesion should be encouraged and prioritised within local authority budgets, particularly in areas identified as being most affected by ASB. It is important, however, that the development of these services is guided by evidenced needs and desires of those who might utilise them – whilst the BNSF directed funding towards sport and leisure facilities as a means of disincentivising ASB, it was not made clear whether the development of these services was the result of consultation with young people or those either involved in or at risk of being involved in ASB.

Evidence Approach

Within BNSF an evidence-based approach should be prioritised, building on both community feedback and outcomes, in order to continue working towards a range of effective strategies best suited to the unique needs of each Pathfinder. Evidence should be evaluated from the perspective of those who are directly impacted by ASB, as opposed to following a top-down approach, arguably developing short-term resolutions and lacking in initiatives that will have a longer-term impact. The causes of ASB are complex, however, by inviting young people who may engage in ASB to provide their perspectives, policy might be better guided and not rely on a hierarchy of evidence that does not include the experiences of young people. Methods that evaluate the evidence of the efficacy of BNSF should go beyond reported crime rates and address the experiences of residents of the community through a variety of participatory methods (Smith & Haux 2017).

Conclusion

This policy memo has mapped out ASB policies and the evidence they are based on in Shiel et al's (2005) report against EBPM 'hierarchies of evidence'. The majority of ASB policies developed by Pathfinders fall under the lowest rung of the evidence ladder. Policy development processes varied significantly across Pathfinder areas, however all relied heavily on public consultation, or 'participatory evidence' in order to ascertain the most appropriate policies for the locality.

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