Daring to Damage:

an investigation of young people’s motivations to commit acts of criminal damage in the North West of England.

A report for
Lancashire’s Strategic Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership

ASSURE (Applied Social Science Unit for Research and Evaluation).

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Executive Summary

The report has one main objective:

To investigate the motivation of young people in (North West) committing acts of criminal damage.

The focus of the research is young people between the ages of 14 and 25 years.

Methodology Employed

One hundred and seven young people were interviewed across Lancashire in a variety of venues including: prisons, community youth facilities, Youth Offending Teams and a University.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals, small, medium and large groups.

We also contacted a number of people who worked either with young adults, provided services for young people or were involved in responding to acts of criminal damage to canvass their options as to why criminal damage took place.

Key Conclusions

The majority of young people can differentiate between different types of criminal damage and they create a range of justifications around their involvement. The continuum is shaped by the location of the damage and the underlying reason for taking the action.

Motivations can be placed along a continuum of activity:

Public Property -

At the most prevalent end of the spectrum many young people engage in damage to public property because they do not perceive it as being owned by an individual and therefore the action is not seen to malicious.
There was a degree of ambiguity around taking part in these actions which were known to be legally wrong but morally acceptable. This was taken further as activity of this sort was seen to be expected of adolescents by adults and young people alike.

This activity is associated with general socialising with a peer group which may include consuming alcohol and to lesser degree soft drugs.

*Private property -*

Fewer young people took part in criminal damage to private or personal property as this was understood to be clearly wrong in legal and moral terms.

However, participation was often prompted and justified by a sense of injustice at an individual or societal level.

This type of damage solicited discourses around jealousy, revenge, retribution, control.

This type of activity could be either a group or an individual activity (mainly the former) often involving alcohol/drugs.

**Recommendations**

- More open and accessible youth facilities/services/provision
- Consultation to identify and meet the needs and requirements of local young people
- Ensuring services are located in such a way as to be accessible to young people
- Consideration of the way services are designed and operated
  - Providing activities to increase emotional well-being, including self-esteem
• Graffiti walls are liked but as a piece of public art not an alternative to neighbourhood graffiti

• Consideration of the risks of short term funding and targeted services

• Review of the impact of short term funding and a lack of community engagement for young people

• More local and youth friendly policing

• More consultation, clarity and guidance on the use of Dispersal Orders

• Agencies working together to achieve their outputs and provide good quality to services to every child

• Consultation and engagement in the use of technology
1. Introduction

As a team of researchers in the Department of Applied Social Science at Lancaster University we were commissioned in February 2007 to conduct a short piece of research on young people and criminal damage by Lancashire Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (Strategic)\(^a\).

This evaluation will hopefully assist in understanding why criminal damage is committed by young people and thus help the CDRP to tackle criminal damage problems caused by young people between the ages of 14 – 25.

The main theme is centred on: The motivation of young people (in the North West) committing acts of criminal damage.

We hope this report assists in addressing the problem of criminal damage across Lancashire by adding to the discourse surrounding the nature, context, motivation and target type regarding the problem. We hope that our recommendations add to considerations of how this problem might be managed in the future.

1.1. What is criminal damage?

The Home Office states that:

*Criminal damage refers to crimes where any person without lawful excuse intentionally or recklessly destroys or damages any property belonging to another. Activities resulting in non-permanent damage (i.e. that can be rectified, cleaned off or removed at no cost) such as letting down of car tyres should not be classed as criminal damage, nor should accidental damage.

Any damage around a point of entry to a house or vehicle should be treated as attempted burglary/vehicle crime rather than criminal damage if, on the balance of probabilities, one of those crimes is the more likely offence than criminal damage.

Vandalism is the term used in the British Crime Survey. Whilst the definition has been kept as close as possible to that of criminal...*

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\(^a\) Working in conjunction with Government Office North West.
Criminal damage offences are covered under the Criminal Damage Act 1971.

In the 1970s criminal damage was commonly referred to as vandalism more recently aspects such as graffiti tend to come under the rubric of anti-social behaviour whilst still remaining criminal offences.

1.2. Recording criminal damage

Official statistics on criminal damage suggest that it accounts for just over a fifth of recorded crime (Crime Reduction, 2007a). It is, however, problematic to examine criminal statistics as real evidence of the extent of criminal damage as much damage is not reported either because it is seen as too trivial, the victim does not feel it is worth reporting as nothing can be done about it, they may fear retribution or it may not have been discovered or it may have been assumed to have happened accidentally. Victimization surveys, such as the British Crime Survey, are seen to give a more accurate picture of the problem but this survey does not cover damage done to commercial property and does not interview people in institutions, or aged under 16. The Crime reduction website, drawing largely on the British Crime Survey, provides us with the following figures:

- There were 2.7 million offences of vandalism against private property as measured by the BCS in 2005/06. This represents 25 per cent of all BCS offences (16% damage to vehicles and 9% to other private property).
- Recorded crime figures show a one per cent fall in total criminal damage between 2004-05 and 2005-06 to 1,184,683 offences. Of these 40 per cent were to vehicle and 25 per cent to dwellings.
- Reporting rates based on 2005/06 interviews estimate that just under a third 31% of incidents of vandalism are reported. BCS and recorded crime figures do not show the full extent of criminal damage, particularly damage to public and commercial property.
- The most recent Commercial Victimisation Survey (2002) showed that 23 per cent of retailers and 16 per cent of manufacturers are victims of criminal damage.
- Most police-recorded criminal damage is to either a vehicle (39%) or dwelling (25%) (2005/06).
The BCS data for 2004/05 shows that most damage to private vehicles involved scratched body work (38%) damaged body work (23%) and damage to wing mirrors (21%).
The main damage to residential properties involved broken walls, fences or other garden items (30%) and broken windows (15%), (BCS 2004/05).
Overall 7.6 per cent of households interviewed for BCS 2005/06 experienced vandalism once or more.
BCS interviews for 2005/06 indicated that victims of vandalism (30%) were most likely to suffer repeat victimisation and 12 per cent of those victims experienced vandalism three or more times in a year.
Of those interviewed for BCS 2005/06 29 per cent perceived vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage to property as a problem in the area.
According to the BCS, nationally the number of incidents of vandalism fell by 19 per cent between 1995 and 2005/06.
At the local level most Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) have shown a decrease in the recorded level of criminal damage between 2003/04 and 2005/06. The average change is a reduction of 3 per cent.

(All the above figures are taken from Crime Reduction, 2007b)

1.3. Costs of criminal damage

'It is estimated that the economic and social cost of criminal damage in England and Wales for 2003/04 was £2.2. billion. The estimated average cost to an individual who has been a victim of criminal damage is thought to be approximately £850. This included an estimated cost of emotional impact.

The 2004 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) found that offenders’ estimates of the cost of their action was frequently between £21 and £50 for vehicle damage and for other damage was most likely to be less than £5. The British Crime Survey found that the median cost of criminal damage was £100’ (Crime Reduction 2007b).

Criminal damage is seen both as a criminal activity and as an environmental issue that undermines community confidence and
perpetuates fear of crime (Lancashire Strategic Partnership, September 2006).

In summary, the extent of incidences of criminal damage are difficult to gauge. Incidents which are reported tend relate to insurance claims and therefore often centre on damage of vehicles and private property. By contrast those events which are perceived to involve property which is not owned by anyone or is jointly owned, for example by the local authority, in public and shared space, such as communal areas and facilities do not automatically appear in the data. Often the cost of repair is absorbed into the budget of the individual building for example schools do not report relatively minor damage to the local education authority and pay for repair from their individual budget (personal conversation with local authority representative January 2007). All of this results in a mixed picture of criminal damage, who is affected, who pays for it and how much actually occurs and in which locations.

The official Home Office figures do indicate that the level of police recorded criminal damage is continuing to grow generally, (Loybakks et al, April 2007) particularly in the North West where the rise is higher than the national average over recent years.

Increasing levels of criminal damage in the North West

Official figures demonstrate that in contrast to the overall figures for criminal damage across England and Wales, the North West is experiencing a high and increasing level of reported activity (Home Office Crime statistics for April 2005 to March 2006). This is true of each of the five locations that comprise the North West: Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside.

Within Lancashire itself (excluding the independent Unitary Authorities Blackburn and Blackpool), six of the 12 districts have experienced a rise in reported criminal damage. Of these, four areas already had figures above the national average but were seeing a further rise. The most notable increases were occurring in Burnley, Hyndburn and Preston. Burnley has seen the greatest increase and is subject to special interventions and was therefore not appropriate for study. Taking this into consideration it was decided to try and encompass the voices and views of young people from across the rest of the county as to why they thought criminal damage was being committed by their friends and peers.
1.4. Methodology

Young people were recruited for the research through a variety of sources including: Young Offender Institutions, Youth Offending Teams and their associate programmes, Youth Inclusion Programmes operated by NACRO, youth services and programmes offered by Lancashire Fire Brigade, Lancashire’s Youth and Community Services and undergraduate students within the University system.

People working with young people in the North-West and those engaged in the prevention of criminal damage were also engaged to solicit their perceptions of criminal damage and its impact.

All interviews were conducted in February and March 2007. All respondents were assured of confidentiality and their anonymity and were asked to sign consent forms. In the report all the quotes are coded in brackets and can be attributed to individuals.

1.5. Profile of interviewees:

One hundred and seven young people aged 12 to 25 years were interviewed for this report.

The profile of the young people breakdown into the following categories:

- Youth Offending Team, all with court orders relating to criminal damage, - 2 females and 1 male, aged 15 to 17 years
- Youth Inclusion Programme (NACRO) – 5 females and 3 males, aged 12 to 16 years
- FLARE – Lancashire Fire Brigade Programme for young offenders, all within the YOT system – 3 males, aged 13 to 16 years
- Prison inmates in three locations in the North-West, all with convictions for criminal damage, – 6 males, aged 21 to 25 years
- Youth and Community facilities in five locations including detached youth work – 47 males and females, aged 12 to 18 years
- University students - 40 males and females, mostly aged 18 to 19 years.

Participation in the research was voluntary.
The semi structured interviews were carried out at a number of locations across the county. The format of the interviews varied between one-to-one, small groups, medium sized group and large groups of up to ten young people. Conducting interviews across a range locations and sizes we were able to capture a diversity of respondent and opinion. In each location youth workers and other appropriate adults were on hand to address any personal issues that may arise during the interview process.

Apart from those young people who were within the criminal justice system we did not know at the outset if the young people had been involved in criminal damage. To prevent any ‘leading’ of respondents the question of ‘criminal damage’ was not central to the interview. However, from the comments made by many of the respondents it is clear that a number of interviewees had at some point either been the victim of or had taken part in acts of criminal damage.

Some of the young people who agreed to participate in the research were clearly distressed about both their impact on others and in some cases the impact criminal damage had had on them. In one case a young person wished to continue the interview even though, the researcher noted, she was wringing her hands and clenching her fists.

We also contacted over twenty service providers who worked with young people, provided services for young people or were involved in responding to acts of criminal damage to canvass their options as to why criminal damage took place.
2. Literature review

A review of the literature on criminal damage or vandalism, as it was known in the past, gives us a useful insight into its development over the past 30 years. Many of the issues raised here are also present in the voices of the young people interviewed for this report.

2.1. Criminal Damage and Vandalism – definitions

As Cohen (1973a) reminds us, the term ‘vandalism’ has a long history dating back to at least 455 when the East German tribe, the Vandals, sacked many cities and towns across Europe. However, views on what constitutes vandalism have changed and can still vary depending on where it is and who commits it. For example, Ward notes that writing, or carving, names into desks has been a youth activity for many years yet is not always frowned upon or considered criminal. The school desk carvings of carvings of Robert Clive or Winston Churchill are seen as ‘heritage’ rather than criminal damage (Ward, 1973, p.294). Similarly writing on the Berlin Wall were not legal, in that permission was not sought to mark public property, but nor were they considered as being ‘against the norms of the then society and therefore not a criminal offence against property’ unlike the average tag on the wall of a local housing estate (Bandaranaike 2001, p.3). Therefore, whilst it is assumed that we all share a definition of vandalism and know what constitutes it, from the start there is a degree of flexibility in the term. This is explored by Cohen (1973a), who queries consensus while conceding that there are commonalities in the definitions:

‘vandalism is a form of rule-breaking… a label attached to certain types of behaviours under certain conditions…Something like a continuum exists from – at one end – deliberate forms of property destruction to which society somehow accommodates itself or which it absorbs, without invariably regarding them as vandalism or processing them as criminal offences, to – at the other – behaviour invariably labelled as vandalism, processed as criminal offences and widely regarded as socially problematic. This continuum refers less to categories of behaviour than to conditions under which illegal property destruction becomes tolerated, acceptable, institutionalised or, as some sociologists have expressed it, normalised’ (Cohen, 1973a, p.23).
In effect he argues that in the same way that ‘one cannot assume a consensus about the definition of vandalism as a social problem, nor can one assume the problem will be seen in the same way by everybody. In addition, some forms of vandalism are very clearly dangerous or threatening, while others are not’ (Cohen, 1973b, p.215).

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the discussions around graffiti.

2.2. Graffiti

Graffiti is considered to be one of the important Signal Crimes which indicates dissatisfaction with a neighbourhood, creates an inconvenience and often engenders a fear of crime. As McDonald (1999) commented, ‘Traditional crime models relating to graffiti and vandalism, reiterate the notion that crime breeds crime.’ However, graffiti exist in many forms ranging ‘from scratching one’s name on a park bench or electricity pole to sophisticated murals’ (Bandaranaike, 2001, p.3). Graffiti can appear as ‘ (Ferrell, 1993: 83), as a more advanced drawing is referred to as a ‘piece’ where usually a series of words and drawings are jointly composed or as the most elaborate type of graffiti the ‘mural’. Much of the negative public opinion on graffiti is passed on undecipherable tags, while ‘legal graffiti is relatively well received and has approval of local city councils and some businesses’ (Bandaranaike, 2001, pp.3/4).

Graffiti can also be seen as:

- forms of self expression for those with no other outlet (Geason, 1989).
- ‘claim to fame’ (Geason, 1989).
- a powerful propaganda tool (Geason, 1989);
- ‘an art form or a quest for place and belonging in the context of an individual’s community’ (Spooner, 2003, p.2).

Thus graffiti is seen by some as an art form and by others as ‘ugly, anti-social daubs’ (Geason, 1989; Halsey and Young, 2006). This was recently shown when artwork by the “guerrilla artist” Bansky, whose works now sell for thousands of pounds, was painted over in error when workmen thought it was graffiti to be removed (BBC News 3.4.2007). It is a matter of intent and interpretation.

The intent of the young person involved in the activity contrasts starkly with the interpretation of graffiti as ‘mindless’ and ‘wanton destruction’.
Interviews carried out by academics Halsey and Young (2006) in Australia found that there are many reasons given for being involved in graffiti, for example ‘the sense of cultural belonging graffiti can generate’. Halsey and Young (2006) stress that the pleasure given by graffiti is not solely down to the trangressional aspects ‘…When one talks to writers about why they do what they do, the resulting narratives tend to hang together round themes of respect, expression, design and the quality of the image. Only rarely do writers mention the thrill accompanying the breaking of the law’ as their primary motivation’ (p.292). They conclude that ‘graffiti is, overwhelmingly, about pleasure and desire in the act of writing’ (Halsey and Young, 2006, p.276).

This contrasts with a second commonplace assumption about graffiti: that it is due to ‘the writer’s supposed boredom, or the writer’s desire to damage and deface, or the writer’s lack of respect for others’ property’ are used to develop policies to tackle graffiti culture (Halsey and Young, 2006, p.279). They found that boredom and rebellion were mentioned less frequently as motivating factors than the following:

- Aesthetic appeal
- It was a gregarious activity that allow them to make friends
- The pleasure it gave them, in both an emotional and a physical sense
- The pride it gave them because they see it as an art form
- The social aspect of doing it with friends
- The recognition it gave them from the writing community (some disputed this was a reason for them)
- ‘Something in the act of writing feels ‘right’ to the writer’ (p.283)

Bandaranaike (2001, p.4) takes a different view and argues that: ‘Youth subcultures in the postmodernist society establish their cultural autonomy and claim on public space by leaving marks on the landscape…The basic conflict between graffitists and society lies in the ownership of that space. In this dichotomous society claiming space by one group can be interpreted as aggressive behaviour by another.’ Her argument is that this is not aggressive behaviour but that ‘graffiti is a culture of winning space and assertive behaviour’ (p.2) The prompt for this action is seen by others to be because they have ‘the diminishing opportunities for specific groups to legitimately express themselves’ (Farinango, 1996) (Spooner, 2003, p.5). The use of apparently aggressive means to be heard when placed in a marginal position in society had been made earlier by Campbell (1993), who discusses the ‘riots’ in England and Wales in 1991-1992. She states that
‘the riots were the young men’s way of speaking to the world…They show us something about the country in which we live, what people do with their troubles and their anger, who gets hurt and who gets heard’ (Campbell, 1993, p.x).

Campbell asserts that the claiming of public space offers a mode for young men to assert their masculinity and claim territory but in doing so they may terrorise others. Some of the examples she gives are of criminal damage deliberately used to target and intimidate others in the community. For example, of the Meadowell estate in the North-East of England, ‘Graffiti was serious reading matter, it was a way of broadcasting injunctions, accusations, slogans and insults. Most importantly, it sustained a culture of fear by announcing the names of anyone suspected of being a ‘grass’’ (Campbell, 1993, p.54). Similarly on the local estate ‘before and after the riots, residents who might bear witness became suspects in their own space; their property was attacked, their persons were abused in the streets’ (Campbell, 1993, p.171). Jarman (2005) also notes a similar phenomenon in Northern Ireland where graffiti and destruction of property can be deliberate and malicious.

However, not all academics agree: ‘We would also want to resist the temptation to construct graffiti writing in terms of its masculine character or as a means for young men to lay claim to particular territories’ (Halsey and Young, 2006). Halsey and Young go on to note that graffiti writers consider their acts not to be ‘senseless or irrational acts’ and that ‘there is good reason to think that writing graffiti requires all those attributes typically associated with ‘rational’ behaviour – forethought, planning, design, practise, patience, alertness, attention to detail and so forth. Even the most hastily drawn tag has its own style that is itself derived from many hours of perfecting the image – even if this one image is less than perfect (ed.)’. (Halsey and Young, 2006, p.294). Thus they conclude that graffiti cannot be seen in purely ‘binary terms (good versus bad art, criminal versus legal activity, creative versus destructive images, etc)’ (Halsey and Young, 2006, p.279). However, the situation is to the lay person further complicated by the distinctions made by young interviewees between ‘pieces’ and ‘tagging’; the former being considered as needing skill, time and effort whereas the latter was dismissed as vandalism.
2.3. Who commits the damage?

‘The stereotype of the vandal…is that of a working-class male adolescent, and his act is the ‘wanton’, ‘senseless’, or ‘motiveless’ destruction of property, usually public property of some kind’ (Ward, 1973, p.13). This view has changed little over the years with ‘vandals’ often being describes as alienated, socially and economically disadvantaged (Jarman, 2005).

Official statistics are notoriously unreliable when assigned the extent of criminal damage, because as we have already shown, much of the damage is not reported. Whilst victimisation surveys may tell us more about the extent they tell us little about the offenders or their motivations. More recently self report studies have been used with young people is an attempt to determine how much damage is actually committed, by whom and why.

Since 2003 the Offending Crime and Justice Survey has been conducted annually in England and Wales. This survey interviews people under the age of 25 in the general population about their experiences as both offenders and victims. The Crime Reduction website reports the results of the surveys stating that:

- The peak age for committing criminal damage is mid-teens for males and for females, with males much more likely to offend (OCJS 2005).
- Of those who had committed criminal damage, 45 per cent did so more than once (OCJS 2004)
- In the majority of cases, offenders reported that they committed criminal damage with at least one other person (60%) (69% in the OCJS 2004). Co-offenders were most frequently a friend of the offender (85%) (OCJS 2005). (Crime Reduction, 2007b)

Wilson et al (2006) look at the findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey 2005. They found that in this survey:

75% had not offended in the last 12 months and, of those that had, many had done so only occasionally and had tended to commit relatively trivial offences. This has been a consistent finding in the three surveys undertaken. However, they do remind us that the survey does not cover people living in institutions and the homeless and consequently may omit some high offending groups. (Wilson et al., 2006, p.8).
• Males were more likely to have offended in the last 12 months than females (30% compared to 21% respectively). For males the prevalence of offending peaked among 16 to 19 year olds, whilst for females the prevalence peaked earlier at age 14 to 15’ (Wilson et al., 2006, p.8).

• ‘Seven per cent of all young people were classified as frequent offenders i.e. they had committed an offence six or more times in the last 12 months. This group was responsible for the vast majority (83%) of all offences measured in the survey’ (Wilson et al., 2006, p.8).

• ‘Over three quarters (77%) of young people had not committed at least one of the four anti-social behaviours in the last 12 months. Of the 23 per cent who had committed anti-social behaviour, most had done so only once or twice’ (Wilson et al., 2006, p.10). Males are more likely than females to commit offences and 10-17 year olds rather than 18-25 year olds.

• Criminal damage, listed as one of the core 20 offences asked about, was carried out by only 4% of the respondents in the survey as a proportion of all offenders over the last 12 months, 6% being male and 3% of females. Most offences were committed by those in the 10-17 category and the majority (55%) only admitted to doing it once, with 19% admitting to doing it twice, 8% three times, 7% four times, 3% five times and 8% six or more times (Wilson et al, 2006, p.29).

• Graffiti is listed as one of the 4 anti-social behaviour ‘offences’ and only 3% of those who admitted to committing anti-social behaviour engaged in graffiti
2.4. Gangs or delinquent youth groups?

Sharp et al (2006) in their examination of responses to questions put 10 10-19 year olds about groups in the 2004 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey warn against the use of the term gangs and prefer the term ‘delinquent youth groups’ (DYG). They found that ‘Sixty-three per cent of those belonging to delinquent groups have, themselves, committed at least one ‘core offence’ in the last year. This is significantly higher than for non-members (26%)’ (Sharp et al, 2006, p.vi). However, they do note that most were not serious offences and only a minority offended on a frequent basis. When asked about their group offending 36% admitted involvement in graffiti and 31% admitted breaking, damaging or destroying things. Twenty five per cent of young people in DYGs admitted committed criminal damage in the last year compared with 5% of young people not in DYGs; for graffiti the figures were 19% and 4% respectively (Sharp et al, 2006, p.8).

McQuoid et al’s study of vandalism and young people in Craigstown, Northern Ireland found that 70% of the vandal category were boys and 30% were female. Sixty per cent of the total sample admitted being involved in vandalism at some time but only 25% of the girls admitted it. Fifty eight per cent were in gangs at the time (McQuoid et al. 1989)

In Jarman’s (2005) study of young girls’ perceptions of violence in Northern Ireland, his definition of violence included minor criminal damage, hate crime, damage to property and graffiti. Of his respondents, 11% admitted doing graffiti and 5% admitted to vandalism and rioting. When asked about the acceptability of the crimes only 3% thought that doing graffiti was always okay, 20% sometimes okay and 78% never okay.

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*Their definition of a delinquent youth groups adheres to the following criteria: Young people who spend time in groups of three or more (including themselves; the group spend a lot of time in public places; the group has existed for three months or more; the group has engaged in delinquent or criminal behaviour together in the last 12 months; the group has at least one structural feature (either a name, an area, a leader, or rules)* (Sharp et al., 2006, p.v)

*These include ‘robbery (commercial and personal), assault (with and without injury), burglary (domestic and non-domestic), criminal damage (to vehicles s and other), thefts of and from vehicles, other miscellaneous thefts (from shop, person, school/college, work) and selling drugs (Class A and other).*
2.5. Motivations?

‘People do things for reasons. These reasons may not always be totally explicit, to individuals and others, but they are always there’ (Haines and Drakeford, 1998, p.xv).

‘How we respond to a social problem is a consequence of what we think causes that problem’ (Polk, 1985, p.50 cited in Bessant, 1993, p.3).

The main motivation for being involved in criminal damage, recorded by the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey 2005, was boredom, after which followed: ‘for the buzz’, ‘was drunk’, (OCJS 2005). Ferrell states that widespread boredom is not just restricted to young people and permeates society as a whole, due in part to ‘mediated entertainments and pre-arranged excitements’ (p.291). ‘Under the dehumanizing conditions of modernism, boredom has come to pervade the experience of everyday life. This collective boredom has spawned not only moments of illicit excitement – that is, ephemeral crimes committed against boredom itself – but larger efflorescences of political and cultural rebellion’ (Ferrell, 2004, p.287).

He states that work and consumption of mass-produced leisure activities does not satisfy people and thinks that humans need adventure, but not in pre-packaged form. This explains our need for a ‘buzz’ obtained through legitimate (e.g. alcohol, extreme sports) or illegitimate means (e.g. drugs, acts of vandalism). Ferrell goes on to ascertain that for some people, ‘the deployment of carefully honed skills in dangerous situations, the on-the-spot integration of practiced artistry and illicit adventure, the embracing of emotional rituals that pre-date modernist rationality – all suggest experiences that are not boring, and not boring precisely because they recapture, if momentarily, the lost immediacy of self-made human experience. They suggest a broader question as well: Are certain crimes committed not against people or property as such, but against boredom?’ (Ferrell, 2004, p.293).

Another approach has been adopted by other academics over the years who have attempted to look at the reasoning behind why young people become involved in criminal damage. Cohen (1973a) states that there is a plethora of reasons why vandalism is committed and therefore the question can only be expressed at the most abstract level and even this ‘cannot really do justice to the wide range of behaviour that the term vandalism covers’ (p.51). To add to the complexity, Cohen notes that not
all vandalism is criminalised. To demonstrate this he breaks it down into categories which may be combined:

- ritualism – fixed occasions when property destruction is expected, condoned or even encouraged (p.23) e.g. Bonfire night, New Year’s Eve, Halloween or sporting fixtures and stag nights.

- protection – ‘the behaviour by certain groups who are given something like a collective licence by the community to engage in vandalism’ (p.24) e.g. student rags, sporting events, end of term parties, and damage committed by the members of the armed forces when not on duty. ‘Such behaviour has been regarded as ‘fun’ or ‘letting off steam’ and the offenders have been either not punished at all or punished only by unofficial bodies like college disciplinary committees’ (ibid.). The perpetrators are protected on a social class basis and/or the offence is handled within the organisation;

- play – Cohen thinks that society sees breaking of windows by small children as play, part of local tradition or targets fair game e.g. derelict buildings – ‘the behaviour is seen as adventure, play or exuberance by both the actor and the audience’ (p.26);

- writing off – rule breaking, which although constituting vandalism is rarely formally reported and contributes ‘virtually nothing to the public image of vandalism or its reflection in the official statistics’ (p.27) e.g. minor property defacement: graffiti on lavatory walls, hoardings or posters; names scratched on walls of ancient monuments, buildings or statues; chewing gum stuck under cinema seats, etc. This is seen as damage or defacement that is ‘institutionalised in the sense that it is expected’ (ibid). Nevertheless Cohen also notes how this can ‘easily be converted to conventional vandalism’ depending on target e.g. if the target is a war memorial or if it gets too excessive or contains ‘ideological messages’(p.29);

- walling-in – trivial property destruction which occurs within the confines of a closed setting such as a factory or a school and is ‘sanctioned within the framework of the organisation’ (p.30) e.g. sabotage in factories, vandalism in schools (often rationalised as play activity), vandalism in prisons and mental hospitals ‘often motivated by impotent rage and hostility against authority. It might
also be a way to relieve boredom or a conscious tactic to draw attention to a particular grievance’ (p.31);

- licensing –overlaps with most of the other categories. These are situations in which vandalism is benevolently tolerated although it might be regarded as a nuisance and troublesome. This is rarely officially reported even though it may be in a highly public setting spectacular and may involve participants from a protected group (for example members of a rugby team/club), or on a ritual occasion or in the context of play or that the actors are under the influence of alcohol. Some informal arrangements are made whereby the rule-breakers can be ritualistically sanctioned and the damage covered by insurance and sanctions taking the form of financial reparation’ (pp.32/3) e.g. vandalism of hotels by sports teams, and damage to properties such as colleges or halls of residence.

Cohen (1973a) aims to dispel stereotypes of vandalism as ‘homogenous and as meaningless’ but recognises that there are certain types of vandalism that are generally accepted as such and ‘processed as delinquent or criminal offences’. (Cohen, 1973a, p.41). He categorises these under the headings shown in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of vandalism</th>
<th>Acquisitive</th>
<th>Tactical</th>
<th>Ideological</th>
<th>Vindictive</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Malicious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to acquire money or property, for example, breaking open telephone boxes</td>
<td>the damage is a conscious tactic, a means to achieve some other end, such as breaking a window to be arrested and get a bed in prison</td>
<td>similar to tactical vandalism, but carried out to further an explicit ideological cause or to deliver a message, for example, chalking slogans on walls</td>
<td>damage in order to obtain revenge, for example, breaking school windows to settle a grudge against the head teacher</td>
<td>damage in the context of a game; who can break the most windows of a house</td>
<td>an expression of rage or frustration and is often directed at symbolic middle class property. It is this type that has the vicious and apparently senseless facade which people find so difficult to understand</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Cohen, 1973

He reminds us that individuals can be motivated by any of the reasons listed or by a combination of them. The reasons may vary and may be dependent on when and where the act is committed.

Among these permutations, Cohen also explores the idea of some vandalism as manufactured malice and excitement, particularly for those frustrated with their situation in society. He describes the sense of disillusionment with school and work and the lack of ability to purchase consumer goods and services which leads to frustration which could end up in people committing acts of criminal damage. He states that their lack of commitments and ties to society means they have little to lose by committing criminal acts, a view reinforced by Stewart et al, (1994) and Campbell (1993). Taylor, too, warns of the dangers of ignoring these voices that have no other outlet for expression. (Taylor, 1973, p.63).

Thus, once again we return to the concept that criminal damage is a matter of intention and interpretation, as identical acts can have quite different meanings depending on the actors’ motivations.

Whilst academics and policy makers will probably discuss the motivations behind criminal damage for many years to come, the aim of this study is to examine the reasons given by young people in the North West of England for young people committing criminal damage and so in the next section we report on their views.
3. Young Peoples’ Responses

3.1. Defining criminal damage

As we stated earlier in the report, the young people interviewed were from a variety of backgrounds and covered a wide range of ages; nevertheless, they seemed to agree on what constituted criminal damage. In response to questioning about types of criminal damage, the young people in our study identified:

- damage to vehicles (e.g. police cars, private cars, public transport);
- broken windows;
- graffiti and tagging;

**other peoples’ objects being damaged or destroyed;**
- damage to public property or property located in the public domain e.g. bus shelters and phone boxes.

For some young people the location of the damage was seen as being widespread, with no specific detail and no ownership involved, whilst for others it was an attack on private property. Any perceptive lack of ownership caused confusion in defining certain types of activities as criminal, for example, they appeared to see criminal damage as including damaging to public property, yet didn’t think things like writing names on bus shelters were criminal damage.

Some of the interviewees, for example those young adults in prison at the time of the interviews, also named activities at a higher level of criminal damage, for example, fire setting – to hedges, bins, sheds, old settees; pinching wing mirrors off cars; vandalism in pubs e.g. throwing benches through windows on the way out of public houses; ‘smashing cars’ and doing ‘really stupid things on motorbikes’ (Interview 8.1). They defined these activities in terms of having a meaning beyond the actual damage per-se, as they were intended to ‘terrorise’ a location Interview 6.3). For these particular young people, the events were part of a wider range of illegal activities:

“Doing criminal damage was more about stealing cars and robbing houses in the day and driving them about. Growing up as a kid, it was get up in the morning, go and steal a car, drive it round all day, crash into things, burn it out at night time and do the same the next day. Did shop lifting and drinking in the day” (Interview 8.2).
Similarly perceptions of criminal damage on a university campus caused some debate around the split between public and private space. Students felt aggrieved that they had to pay for any damage committed in their building, especially when they had not been involved. Examples of the types of damage committed on the campus included: ironing boards thrown out of windows; broken windows; electricity sockets smashed; fire exit signs stolen; eggs thrown at windows; rotten poultry sellotaped to lifts. Although in this case the young people themselves would have to pay for the damage, they felt they were victims rather than perpetrators: ‘criminal damage inconveniences and it costs a lot of money as well!’ (Interview 9.1.1). This situation, of the young people feeling they were victims of criminal damage and its impact on communities, was a common theme running through the majority of the interviews.

A second, less overt theme was the level of frustration expressed by young people at the lack of care by adults in powerful positions which resulted in the degradation of their neighbourhood. This, it was felt, was the equivalent to vandalism due to the nature of locations being left in a run down and uncared for state. At times the lack of maintenance was felt to contribute to the overall image of an area suffering criminal damage and was seen on occasions to be an excuse to close down a youth facility because it had not been repaired to a useable standard.

3.1.1. When do incidents of criminal damage take place? Time of incidents

There was little dispute as to when incidents of criminal damage tended to take place. A number of young people felt they could identify the time of day when incidents were most likely to take place, namely during the hours of darkness:

‘I don’t think most people do it much during the day. It’s always at the night when most of the shit goes off. It’s most of the time it’s when people are drinking’ (Interview 6.1).

This perception was supported by a local transport provider who, without hesitation, pinpointed the week the hour changes in autumn as the moment for the most prolific activity: ‘It is dark enough not to be seen and warm enough to be out’ (Interview 10.1). He followed this up with a comment on the apparent correlation between the lack of local youth provision during the half term and winter holidays and the
increase in vandalism. Many young people made similar statements, adding that weekends, especially Friday and Saturday, tended to see a rise in the number and frequency of incidents. The need to occupy young people in school holidays is acknowledged by the use of, for example, ‘summer play’ schemes and other organised activities. These comments are supported by findings of the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) (2005) which indicates that peak times of day for committing criminal damage are in the evening, between 6pm and 10pm, and at night time, between 10pm and 6am. Although the OCJS has a small sample, this is supported by BCS findings (2004/05) which suggest that around two thirds of reported vandalism occurred in the evening or night, (Crime Reduction 2007b). Similarly, McQuoid et al’s. study of vandalism and young people in Craigstown, Northern Ireland found that of those who admitted vandalism, 64% did it in the evening (McQuoid et al. 1989).

However, this was not seen as the pattern by all of the respondents in our interviews. Older respondents recalled participating in more criminal damage during the summer months as they tended to start drinking alcohol earlier and continue later:

“I’d always do a little bit of criminal damage on the way to one pub or walking to another kicking wing mirrors off cars. It sounds mad doesn’t it, just sat here talking about it now.” (Interview 8.1).

3.1.2. Who becomes involved in criminal damage?

Whilst there was an acknowledgement that criminal damage was an activity that some adults engaged in, most interviewees in all locations felt that it was something perpetrated mainly by young males, aged 13 to 19, with a core of activity at 14 to 16. They also considered it to be something which young people ‘grew out of’, as if it were a normal and accepted right of passage into the adult world. This perception would seem to be confirmed by both the reported incidents and self reporting during the research.

It was noted that while reflecting on their activities at a young age, ie between 7 to 8 years old, young people tended not see their activities as being criminal. One of the university students commented when asked about climbing on his local school roof:
‘I didn’t really at the time see it as vandalism maybe it was. I was about 7 or 8 years old. The people who I’d hung out with round in my area had been doing it before me like. The older ones maybe like say “oh go and do that, it’s fun” and you’ve just got to try it out.’ (Interview 9.3.5).

Older interviewees, who had been involved in criminal damage a few years earlier, reflected on their experience and could frequently pinpoint the age they started offending at about 11-12 years, with little happening before that age:

‘I was alright me as a kid until I was like 10-11 [the second interviewee present agreed with this statement] and then I started getting in with the wrong people and that and that’s when things started to go wrong but up until that age I was like hanging around with decent kids like and that [a fellow interviewee agreed]’ (Interview 6.1).

Sometimes an individual incident could be recalled as the initial event which started them on their career in criminal damage, for example, a respondent who recalled smashing a teacher’s car with a friend whilst in year 5 in primary school (5.1).

When asked why they made the progression into deviant activities at a certain age, one respondent commented: ‘You start going out more, out of the house more and meeting new people and that’ (Interview 6.1). To which his colleague added ‘you’ve to prove yourself to them’ (Interview 6.2). This was an observation repeated in other interviews. When asked why they stopped committing criminal damage, it was stated that it was something one ‘…grew out of’ towards the end of teenage years (Interview 6.3). Nevertheless some of the prison inmates admitted that they continued to damage things when they were older but that often this was as a result of an acquisitive crime rather than vandalism per se. This statement was supported by other interviewees who are at present incarcerated, one of whom recalled how he started committing criminal damage at the age of 12 but after 16 he progressed to the heavy use of crack and heroin and wasn’t interested in vandalism unless it was acquisitive in nature.

Normalisation of criminal damage comes in a different form for those attending a university. The difference between committing criminal damage within an institution such as a university and ‘outside world’ was commented on by several respondents:
'You’ve got the excuse of being ‘a student’. You just know that the majority of people that are kind of going to be around if they see you do it... because they’re like quite similar to you and they’re like the same age or whatever and they’ll just think oh that’s a bit of a laugh. Whereas if you’re on a housing estate there’s going to be adults and like... you’d feel a bit embarrassed if they see you doing it and you’re not going to…' (Interview 9.3.2).

However, whilst some of the university group respondents felt that their behaviour was condoned as ‘student antics’, others frowned upon the behaviour and said the resulting response by the authorities was not serious enough for the individual/s involved and resented having to take collective blame. This situation was not unlike that expressed by a number of young people in communities where they felt they were taking the blame for the actions of others.

3.1.3. Not the usual suspects?

Youth workers and other respondents noted that criminal damage could be perpetrated by others who were not the “usual suspects”. These included young adults from ‘better off’ homes, those with money in their pockets and under only the “long arm” supervision of their parents. In one case, recalled by young males, ‘just having a laugh’ caused a quarter of a million pounds worth of damage to a caravan park and resulted in a nine month prison sentences for those involved (Interview 4.1p).

The labelling of all disaffected young males as potential proponents of criminal damage was commented upon by several young men in prison:

‘You stereotype people, you know, like young lads with hoods on they’re the stereotypical kinds but you get all kinds’ (Interview 6.1).

This was supported by another interviewee at the interview:

‘Some of the girls were worse [than the boys] They were wild, not arsed, going all out, …they was doing the same things but doing it to the extreme say like if we were to smash one window, then they’d smash the other 3... I think they were trying to impress us more’ (Interview 6.3).
It was acknowledged that actions could not be generalised, ‘Girls in our groups, they were exactly the same basically… some of the girls didn’t want to get involved but others were just mad like’ (Interview 6.1). Nevertheless, there was an impression among males that girls were less likely to be arrested or even noticed by the police ‘Girls get away with everything don’t they really’ (Interview 6.3).

The impact of adult perception and peer group pressure were seen to be forces which combined to put young males, aged 10 to 12, under a lot of pressure. Issues around impressing one’s peers arose several times during the interviews:

‘it’s how far can you get sometimes, just what your friends tell you to do and sort of peer pressure and stuff like that at that age’ . (Interview 9.3.5).

However, the desire to impress peers seems to be compounded by the unfair blame placed on the young males by adults who expected them to be involved in criminal damage. Young boys, aged 12 years and under, felt unfairly blamed, especially by the police, for the activities of older youths by their community: “People blame us… think we’ve done it. The way we act and walk, people think we’ve done it.”(Interview 2.1). This made them wary of any interactions with local people and the police.

The interviewees had divided opinions as to who was perpetrating damage in their neighbourhood but felt that, to a degree, it was caused by outsiders: “People who don’t live on the estate.” (Interview 2.2), “ people who are in gangs, really” (Interview 2.3). The presence of these gangs was seen as a threat to their personal safety and thus limited their access to their own neighbourhood. In summary the actions of adults, especially the police, in allocating blame and the threatening presence of unknown outsiders who were perceived by the boys as being the, created an uncomfortable tension and a considerable degree of frustration for the young males, as they were not gaining acceptance by either party in their home location.

3.1.4. Why do young people become involved in committing criminal damage?

Although the definitions of criminal damage appear to be clear to young people over the age of 10 years, their motivation for becoming involved was not easily expressed. In some cases the young person did not have the vocabulary to explain the motivation for their actions in which case
they tended to resort to blaming boredom. However, from the interviewer walking them through events and exploring the motivation at each stage, it became clear that there were a number of motivating factors involved, many of which support those in the literature review.

Older offenders with the benefit of hind-sight stated:

‘We didn’t notice it then but now we’re looking back at it all, we can see what we did. When you’re in it and you’re doing it, you don’t actually see why you’re doing it [criminal damage]’ (Interview 8.2).

“We didn’t care. We were bored; simply boredom.” (Interview 8.1)

Once again the normalisation of criminal damage was apparent. Many of the activities now acknowledged as criminal damage by the older respondents were seen as normal to the younger respondents: ‘It’s what we do and we don’t know why we always do it’ (Interview 7.3). This is not to say they did not know it was illegal but that consideration did not appear to influence their decision making process at the time of the damage. This normalisation was also seen by the young people as an adult expectation of them, especially if you lived a certain type of neighbourhood. Therefore, the rhetoric of boredom, a certain type of young person being involved in criminal damage and the desire to be seen to comply with one’s peers becomes a self fulfilling prophecy from both the adult and the child’s perspective.

3.2. Finding a place to be

The cause of the boredom cited by the majority of the respondents was the lack of youth provision. This, it was felt, causes people to find their own amusement which, in some cases, results in groups of young people antagonising local people:

‘Walking around, having a laugh. Sometimes looking for trouble... go around doing daft things, giving people grief and stuff like that’ (Interview 5.1).

Several of the respondents noted how their criminal damage had occurred on the spur of the moment in the evening, in response to not having
anything to do other than “walk around ‘and feeling ‘bored really” (Interview 1.2). Where youth facilities were not available, either because they did not exist or because they were not open, there was a tendency, as an offender stated, to:

‘hang around, it could be ‘til the early hours, until 2-3 in the morning.’ (Interview 5.1).

However, it is worth noting that the annoyance of local residents was not always an intended outcome of the activities of young people. Many were simply looking for a place socialise with their friends. The lack of a safe space was frequently cited as a problem and often the cause of being perceived as being ‘up to no good’:

“There’s not many activities – that’s why we get done.” (Interview 2.2).

Frequently young people stated they were merely trying to find a space which they could inhabit which was not the private home environment but yet was not too public. One young person commented that space needed to be public enough to feel safe, yet not that public that they felt constantly observed. The negotiation of such a space can be difficult, mainly because the actions of the young people are often interpreted as aggressive or dangerous by others using the same spaces, for example paved areas outside shops.

If facilities are not available there is a tendency for the young people to find a location for themselves:

“We get moved on for kicking about in kiddies Swing Park or sitting on the sofa” (Interview 7.1)

In this case a sofa had been dumped in the middle of a recreational site near the estate green and the teenagers sat on this each night and hung out there until the council removed it. This group of young people pointed out that if facilities were unavailable, they were at greater risk of inhabiting areas where they ran into conflict with local residents or of seeking out alternative places that could not be monitored. This was seen by youth workers as creating unsafe places for young people, particularly those who have been barred or removed from youth facilities; thus physically marginalising those who are already existing at the edges of society.
3.2.1. Youth people’s perception of youth services and facilities

The majority of the interviewees appeared to value, to varying degrees, the presence of youth services and facilities:

“There used to be people coming round and they had like a football area...place ... on a primary school and people used to come and they had football training and that used to be all right. We used to go there instead of hanging round and that, and there used to be someone who would come round in a van... a man and a woman came and talked to us and they had a van and you could talk in the back and they used to organise trips...we went on a trip to Blackburn Waves...we weren’t bored anymore.” (Interview 1.2)

Where there were no facilities there was a plea for:

“a place to go when there’s nothing to do. We could do with something that’s near by and something that’s going to stick around like a youth club.” (Interview 7.3).

This comment was made by a young woman engaging with detached youth workers. Although the detached team members are greatly valued, the young people identified the need for a place of their own as desirable and as being somewhere “just so we can sit down” (Interview 7.2). Although in this area there are plans for a community centre, it is known that this space will have to be shared. The young people interviewed do not mind this but are concerned that the facilities may not reflect the needs of themselves and their peers, especially if they are not consulted.

The need for services to consult and acknowledge that young people are not a homogenous group was expressed in several locations. Several people noted there was a tendency towards offering a ‘one size fits all’ approach to youth services rather than tailoring it to wants and needs.

3.2.2. One size does not fit all

Interviewees often felt that computer games and pool were no longer enough to entertain young. There were cries for a wider variety of activities. The type of facilities the young boys and girls requested included trips out to Camelot Pleasure Park and Blackpool Fair Ground, sporting and leisure facilities, discos and in one case a desire to work on motor cycles and car engines.
There appeared to be a gender dimension to the activities required and youth workers felt that young girls appear to have a more structured leisure time:

“more girls than lads have proper plans – going to the cinema, going to so and so’s house… …boys are the ones the parents feel more comfortable leaving unsupervised’ (Interview 4.1p).

However, given the fact that more young men than young women appear to be involved in criminal damage and given concerns about the unsupervised nature of young males in the community, there could be a tendency to target that potential audience at the expense of the young women. As one young women noted, “not everyone likes football” (Interview 2.2).

In essence, many young respondents wanted to be engaged in a rolling programme of consultation to ensure the youth service offered appropriate provision. Nevertheless, there are notable differences in perceptions of the current provision between the young people and the youth workers and YOT officers concerning the range of diversionary activities available, with the young people citing lack of appropriate activity as a reason for criminal damage and professionals arguing that there sufficient activities available. For example in the same location one young woman stated that there should be more for older youths who were seen to be causing the damage “There’s no clubs or owt – it’s crap.” (Interview 2.3) even after her friend listed a number of activities in the area.

There is a perception by many of the workers that a great deal of investment by a range of agencies, including the police, local authority, neighbourhood renewal, Groundwork and voluntary sector organisations has gone into improving estates in socially deprived neighbourhoods of some areas. However, provision is variable and there is a sense that agencies are sometimes working in competition rather than collaboration. There was also the perception that professionals from organisations involved in running clubs and activities in the past had arrived late, failed to turn up or withdrawn their activities (the nature of these activities was not specified). This led to a growing sense of young people feeling let down at the apparent withdrawal of services.
3.2.3. Competition and overlap in services

Concern was expressed by some youth professionals that multi-agency interventions were creating competition and overlap between the providers:

“Agencies tend to compete with each other, which is pathetic really because we’re all after the same outcome but on the whole I do think they work well, but I do think there’s a competitive edge to it, which shouldn’t be there really.” (Interview 2.2).

It was also commented that at times the allocation of funding seemed to be drive by politics.

Nevertheless other workers acknowledged that there had been a concerted effort by agencies to establish clubs and activities in the community, citing examples such as kick boxing, street dance, football, together with activities organised by Preston PAYP (Positive Activities for Young People), Dreams Come True and Groundwork. In some locations there was a feeling that apathy played its part in a lack of engagement by young people:

“A lot of the young people say there isn’t a lot for them on the estate, but there is actually. There’s things on most nights really, so they don’t really have an excuse to commit criminal damage.” (Interview 2.3).

3.2.4. Factors affecting access to youth facilities

However, there are a number of factors which appear to be limiting young people’s ability to access youth facilities.

Access to youth facilities is complicated by lines of demarcation which are not always immediately visible to an uninitiated eye. As noted in the section relating to graffiti, many young people feel it is important to mark out their neighbourhood and not all of these are members of gangs. Thus the identity and the means of identifying an area are clearly important to young people. For example, the young people attending the YIP gave the impression that they are defined by where they live and seek their identity through affiliation to peer groups formed on their estates. They appeared reluctant to access activities on neighbouring estates, even if, in some cases, this meant crossing the road. This sense of territoriality appears to inhibit young people, in terms of taking advantage of facilities on
neighbouring estates. This impression is supported by the worker at the YIP, who notes how young people are often reluctant to cross the borders onto neighbouring estates.

This geographic divide would seem to emphasise the apparent difference of opinion between the young people and the service providers in the area about the range of activities available locally. From the service providers’ perspective, there may be a number of services available, but the young people may not see these as being accessible.

Another practicality raised was the presence of facilities that could not be accessed: football pitches were locked all the time; youth clubs only opened at specific and very limited times. In some cases facilities had been closed because of misuse by a limited number of adolescents; for example, the closure of computer rooms where some young people had been downloading porn annoyed those young people who considered that the action taken made them victims of actions perpetrated by others and over whom they had no control.

Concern was expressed during an interview that many teenagers found attending a youth club to be intimidating and that more could be done to cater for young people - the “quieter ones” (Interview 1.1). Even when facilities were accessed the cost of the activities was sometimes seen as preventative.

3.2.5. Loss of youth services and facilities

One issue raised time and time again was the closure and withdrawal of established services. This was seen by the young adults as actively devaluing those who had attended and engaged. In a very few interviews young people themselves noted the impact of short term funding on service provision. An example of this was the re-allocation of a youth centre to another government programme that did not engage young people. Not only did this service not work with the age group or allow them to access the building, they were largely left out of the change process. A replacement youth service came in the form of a detached duty role for ‘outreach workers’.

Even when services are maintained, the required sustainable engagement which is seen to be very important by the young people and youth practitioners is frequently undercut by a quick turn over of staff due to restricted funding and an inability to recruit and retain volunteers to help run the facility. Short term funding was identified by some of the young
respondents as being problematic as it often led to short term, and from the practitioner perspective limited impact, interventions. Some of the respondents remember services which ended over a year ago. For example, one young man recalled some football training that had stopped. His response conveys a sense that young people may have felt let down by the seemingly inexplicable withdrawal of services and, lacking structured leisure time, turn to the streets to commit criminal damage (Interview 1.2). This was just one example among many of services being removed.

When the youth facilities are not open, boys reported engaging in a variety of activities including: playing darts and poker at friends’ houses; repairing cars; standing in the local shelter or against a wall. Older members of the club go to the local public house and are permitted entry (no age checks) The shopping centre is popular during the day time but access to this facility is virtually impossible out of business hours because security guards are on duty. Those young people barred from youth facilities tended to find an alternative peer group, who are often older and engaged in criminal activities, in the same way as those who are excluded from school.

3.3. Under the Influence - of peers

Reflecting on events that had lead to criminal damage, older respondents noted that they had started going around in groups, often with older peers and this had a profound impact on their activities:

‘That’s part of doing it, isn’t it? Your mates do it so you do it’ (Interview 6.1).

‘Yes that’s true. Actually and some of your mates are older than you as well so like you do it following suit or you do it to stand out a little bit’ (Interview 6.3).

Clearly there is a relationship between wishing to impress one’s peers, acceptance and criminal damage, especially for boys aged 13 to 15 years.

However, a number of younger males and some females noted that younger people aged five and six would also copy the gang tagging as a means of eventually gaining acceptance by the group:
“It makes them (children) think that they should do it when they’re older. Like when eight year olds walk past somebody and walking past the shops, they’re going to try and do it (tagging) as well … try and copy cos it’s their territory.” (Interview 2.3)

The desire by older males to fit in with their peer group was noted by females, young and older males:

‘You just get in with the wrong crowd and you start being like that I suppose’. He also said some of it was kids ‘showing off’ (Interview 5.1).

‘People want to show off… like if you do something that’s bad and there’s gangs near you, they’re going to think “Oh he’s not scared and he’ll get in the gang”’ (Interview 2.5).

Although the general perception was that criminal damage occurred whilst in groups, it was also recognised that if an individual wished to damage something alone then they would. However this was qualitatively different from incidents with peers present. From the young people’s perspective the presence of a group may result in being teased and goaded into committing criminal damage. From the youth worker’s perspective it was suggested the activity would be pointless without an audience. This situation, taken to the next level, shifts the discourse into a discussion about graffiti, gangs and gang activity.

3.3.1. Graffiti

Graffiti was seen by all of the respondents as relating to criminal damage but its merits, purpose and effect were debated by most of the groups and at individual interview. Generally it was found to be males aged around 14 to 16 years of age who were routinely engaged in creating graffiti and possibly also involved in gang culture.

3.3.1.1. Gangs and graffiti

Graffiti was identified by the young people and the workers as the main source of damage and as an issue of growing concern, because of its linkage to gang culture. Gang culture, it was felt, had led to a rise in graffiti-related damage, signified by “tagging” i.e. gangs marking their territory by spray painting their gang names and slogans on property. “Tagging” was seen as a way for individuals to gain acceptance into gang
culture and gangs to assert their status within a neighbourhood and define their geographic boundaries.

A youth professional operating in areas where the gang culture appeared to be growing commented:

‘Gang culture, that has had a lot of impact on graffiti, because it’s the type of music you listen to, all the rapping, and I think a lot comes from America and young people think it’s cool to be in gangs and put their mark on things and I think that has had a big influence on things’ (Interview 1.a).

This was not a perception explored by any of the young interviewees, possibly because they did not wish to discuss such issues in an open forum. The emphasis tended to be on tagging as signifying the presence of gangs in an area, especially the domination of an area by one particular gang. However, the very presence of the tags could be felt to be intimidating to young people who were aware of the gangs but who were not engaged in gang activity. The intimidation was felt to come from two sources, the gang members themselves and the police who perceived them to be involved. The point to be made is that the presence of the tags was not valued by all the young people in an area and was deeply resented when they were made by people from other locations.

Whilst for those young people who may be involved in tagging, it appeared to be a sign that they were accepted by their slightly older peers, older youths, in their early 20s who were in the past involved now consider it an infantile activity, ‘normal for school kids’ and something which they would grow out of.

3.3.1.2. An individual’s graffiti

It is important to note that not all graffiti is gang related and that motivations are varied. Some young people want their graffiti to signify their individual presence:

“It’s a way of saying it’s my territory, I’ve been here. It’s like a dog really when it wees and it wees its mark.” (Interview 1.1).

To others it is an art and they had no wish for it to be seen as damaging the environment – quite the opposite. However, it was accepted that the presence of graffiti of any type would encourage an increase in the
activity in that location. Once a cumulative presence was established, it became seen as a legitimate thing to do:

“everybody was doing it. You get a buzz” (Interview 1.1).

There was a perception that graffiti spreads because no steps are taken to remove it:

“…Cos if people start graffitying now and people see it, they’re just going to carry on and it’s going to go on” (Interview 2.3).

This was noted to be the case when out socialising with peers and consuming alcohol, “it’s having fun. It reminds you of when you were pissed and you sprayed on a wall” (Interview 11.1). In this type of example it would be quite likely that other types of damage would occur at the same time.

3.3.1.3. Where does it take place?

Young people themselves noted that criminal damage was particularly rife in concealed places, for example behind the community centre, because it is inaccessible to vehicles:

“No police or cars can get through because it is blocked off, so if they (perpetrators) see police there they can get out and walk away” (Interview 2.4).

This was supported by the comments of a local youth worker in another area who suggested that graffiti took place in areas of social housing where there are few people on the streets and where the police can’t get through by car.

3.3.1.4. Graffiti – loved and hated

Although many young people liked graffiti it was not seen as acceptable by everyone. For some young people it was seen to have a sinister side:

“cos they write stuff about other people as well… like “snake”… people that they’re writing it about … it’s not very nice” (Interview 2.4).
Others considered it anti-social:

“You look at it (the damage) and you think how can they do that to their own estate… like people would like to live on a nice, clean estate, but, like doing that isn’t really good” (Interview 2.4).

“It’s not their (the young people’s) property and they shouldn’t be damaging or graffiting it” (Interview 1.3).

These young women felt that graffiti had an impact on property owners and families and they felt a sense of injustice at the notion of crime being committed against others.

One group of interviewees also resented the damage gangs from other areas did in their community:

“[the name of the gang] come down from their estate. They’ve got nothing to do on their estate, so they just come and ruin our estate” (Interview 2.1).

In spite of all of these anxieties, this none of the respondents would be prepared to report any incidents to the police because of fear of recrimination.

3.3.1.5. What would help?

In several locations the young people discussed what would help reduce the amount of graffiti in their area. The idea of a graffiti wall was very popular and greeted with enthusiasm. One young woman commented “Vandalism is art” and told the interviewer about a graffiti wall she had used in Birmingham. She drew on it and her mum wrote a poem on it—“it looked good” (Interview 11.1). Only one young person stated that they thought it would look like a ‘big mess’ (Interview7.1).

Nevertheless, in one group there was also a grudging acknowledgement that, once the novelty of the wall had gone, there was a strong chance that people would revert back to what they had been doing previously. A distinction was also drawn between a graffiti wall and other types of graffiti. They saw a graffiti wall as public art, an artistic endeavour with intended graffiti decoration and not a mess.
Speedy clean up of graffiti was also seen as a possible solution to reduce the levels in a location. One of the youth workers said that graffiti and damage to bus shelters is now dealt with within 24 hours. At this location the damage to the youth centre itself was still in evidence many months later. However, this was something which the young people did not see as a problem, as it was a badge of ownership and belonging. This was certainly the case in other areas:

‘It’s to mark where you live. It’s territorial. Everyone puts their name on the roof here [youth club]’ (Interview 77.1).

### 3.3.2. Gangs

Gangs were also mentioned in relation to damage other than graffiti. All of the following issues were raised during discussions about gangs: their presence and impact upon neighbourhoods; showing off; impressing peers; gaining acceptance by older peers; distribution of blame; territory (ownership and belonging); social activity and pastime. Comments were made in relation to graffiti and general antisocial behaviour as a pastime. In some locations the respondents felt they were being seen as threatening simply by being present with groups of friends. This distinction between a group of friends and a ‘gang’ and all the associate connotations was lightly touched upon by a number of young people. In this case, the group agreed that they felt local people are intimidated by them and they felt this is unreasonable in light of the fact that they moved around in small groups of 3-5 maximum and posed no real threat.

When they were asked, if they felt guilty even though they’ve often done nothing other than being watched and judged by neighbours in the street, one respondent replied:

“I don’t feel guilty but I feel it’s a mess [reference to the level of local judgement and blame they experience when they’ve done nothing] and I feel bad because of what’s happening” (Interview 77.2).

It was felt by young males and females alike that the general perception is that, by simply gathering in a group, they were suspected by local adults as being “up to no good”. Young people feel discriminated against because they are judged according to what they are wearing or for simply hanging around. They feel local adults and police judge them on the
basis of stereotypes and there is a general mistrust of young people which they see as misguided:

“If anyone else does something, we get the blame” (Interview 77.3).

Indeed there does, in some areas, appear to be an interchangeable language of groups of young people being seen as ‘gangs,’ a term which has taken on a specific interpretation of intimidation in the minds of some adults. Hence, as we have already mentioned, Sharp et al’s use of the term delinquent youth groups.

As noted earlier in the report the requirement for a safe and acceptable space is an important issue for many young people. They feel that people generally complain about the noise that the young people make when gathered in a group:

“Those people who complain the most or swear at us tend to get verbal abuse back but if they're okay with us, we’ll just move on” (Interview 77.3).

Young people are concerned that they are easily perceived by adults to be a problem when they are not:

“[They think] we’re just causing trouble but I don’t think we are” (Interview 77.2).

Gangs are perceived by other young people as intimidating because their members are older, physically bigger and in many cases have moved onto the estate from neighbouring estates. A Youth Inclusion Programme (YIP) worker noted that this movement was often the impact of the application of Dispersal Orders which removed gangs from their own resident estates to other areas, resulting in rival gang activity focused on a particular estate. This situation was confirmed during interviews during which children commented that they had experienced being ‘jumped’ by gang members and had glass bottles thrown at them (Interview 2.1) and this limited the freedom of local younger boys and females to traverse their own neighbourhood, an observation supported by the comments of a local YIP worker.

A YOT worker felt it was important to make the distinction between criminal damage performed as a part of gang ritual and affiliation, marking territory (which may involve drugs, violence and guns) and that damage caused in attempts to feed a drug addiction. This observation
would seem to be borne out by the comments of the men currently serving prison sentences as they progressed from criminal damage per se to crime to sustain their use of illegal substances.

It was not always the atmosphere created by young adults which made other feels less secure in their own neighbourhoods. Other factors which impacted upon young people’s perceptions of their own community included the general noise and violence from fights among adults on the estate. There was general agreement that it felt safer during the summer, when the evenings were lighter, than in winter. The presence of police was not seen as reassuring but an addition to the noise and general level of tension.

Against these events it is worth considering the antisocial activities and criminal damage which occur within the university campus environment and as such remain within a private rather than a public space. Students in the interview groups spoke of incidents of damage perpetrated by people from other colleges, especially those involved in team sports. In every case the incidents were dealt with within the university system. Several students noted that if similar incidents had occurred outside the culprits would have found themselves engaging with the police rather than the Dean or similar officials.

3.3.3. Under the influence of - alcohol and/or drugs

‘Since I was 16 I’ve been in jail every year since then, at least once a year, and it’s always for doing stupid things as well, most of the time like robbing cars when I’ve had a drink and that. I do that… You just can’t say when you’re going to stop. It happens when you’re drunk’. (Interview 5.1).

During the interview this young adult, currently incarcerated, considered the relationship between his drinking habit, criminal behaviour and his present position, coming to the conclusion that for him there was a strong connection between all three and that they were all part of being young. However, for some of the other prison interviewees it was different:

“Even before I had the drink or took the drugs, that was what would usually start the night off, probably pinch a car or something first, then go and snatch a couple of crates of beers from a shop and this is when it would all start” (Interview 7.2).
‘Personally I’ve not really fuckin got pissed and gone out and smashed things up but I have smashed things up when I’ve been drunk’ (Interview 6.3).

3.3.3.1. Fun and recreation

Often the reason for consuming relatively large amounts of alcohol was couched in terms epitomised in the statement:

“There’s fuck all to do, right. So everybody just decides to get pissed, because it’s a laugh” (Interview 4.5).

A considerable number of young people acknowledged that alcohol was associated with socialising which often led to a lack of inhibition and this resulted in risky behaviour of all types including criminal damage. There was also recognition that there was a level of alcohol consumption at which one felt allowed to take part in damaging property whilst remaining conscious of one’s actions. For example, a young man currently with the YOT, described the relationship between his criminal damage activities, (graffiti, smashing house windows, being aggressive to a police officer), taking place when he was “not quite drunk,” and aware of what he was doing (Interview 1.2). In this case the motivation for committing the activity was perceived by him to be fun and mischief, rather than vindictive. Similar justifications and explanations were used in another location where young people devised ways of flaunting their alcohol misuse, before youth workers and playing a game of cat and mouse with the police.

The local youth worker commented that their numbers were very low on Friday, as it was not seen to be ‘cool’ to do anything but drink over the weekend. She went on to note the difficulties faced when trying to engage a wide age range whilst at the same time addressing the specific challenge of young people with alcohol misuse problems. It was felt that one possible solution was to employ an outreach worker in the community in order to establish a working relationship with the young people on their own territory, in addition to having a staff team within the Centre. This would be subject to funding and there was a concern that once the relationships were established the funding would be withdrawn and the situation would return to it previous position.
3.3.3.2. Alcohol and anger

Although for some young people drinking alcohol was a way of having fun, for others it resulted in anger and at times the line between the two states of fun and anger was seen as very thin:

‘One of our room-mates gets very drunk and he is a very violent person and stuff…It’s calmed down a bit now but he just gets so reckless,… he just gets so angry…sometimes it’s just stupidity. He finds it fun!’ (Interview 9.1.1).

Further along this continuum are the young people who know they become angry after a certain level of alcohol consumption:

‘It just makes me angry. It just makes me feel not afraid of the consequences either’ (Interview 5.1).

He continued to recall one occasion when he had drunk a considerable amount, had an argument with his sister and went on to smash up her car:

‘We had a big argument and I just took it out on the car at the time. She phoned the police and I was arrested. I’d done about £200 damaged and I had to get it repaired. I’d had a lot to drink I wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t had a drink’ (Interview 6.2).

Some young people participate in criminal damage when they are out of control whilst under the influence of alcohol, drugs or both. A young women recalled to the interviewer how she participated in an attack on a car with the driver inside:

“ I was with me mates… it’s showing them who’s boss, isn’t it? They (the gang) started kicking this door and everything and smashing its windows, so I just started booting it at the left side of the car and then I got the wing mirror …He (the car owner) wasn’t letting me in his car or anything – that just made me feel worse because he was just ignoring me… I got a rush and it felt right good, cos it was like excitement. I was stoned as well, so I didn’t know what was going on.” (Interview 1.1)

This state of awareness was more closely associated with young people who mixed alcohol and drugs. A youth justice officer commented on how alcohol and drugs contribute to criminal damage, with young people going out to deliberately get drunk or mixing alcohol with drugs with the
result that many young people who committed criminal damage were unable to recall the incident afterwards.

Although fewer young people mentioned drugs during the interview, those who did admitted to using cannabis, pills and magic mushrooms and in this state were likely to become involved in damage if they were capable of it in their drug induced state. It was also noticeable that some of the young adults in prison saw their move away from criminal damage as a result of becoming increasingly involved in other types of criminal activity in order to fund their growing habit and as a way of surviving day-to-day.

3.3.4. Under the influence of emotions - moods and mixed messages

3.4.1. The buzz, the excitement and the chase

Criminal damage was perceived by some respondents to be a way of achieving heightened fun and excitement, often referred to as ‘The buzz’ which was seen as an antidote to the vacuum seen to be created by the lack of alternatives:

‘There’s no where to go, you know, no where to hang out… and um you just sometimes get bored and just start smashing things up’

(Interview 5.1).

This perception applied as much to the University campus groups as those interviewed in the wider community. They recounted a game created in one block of throwing objects at a lamp post in an attempt to smash the light. However, whilst this was all seen as harmless fun by the respondent, some of the others in the group did not seem to think it was funny.

Similar perceptions were held by one young person in a prison setting of his activities:

“When we were younger, we used to set bins on fire and then stand there and phone the fire brigade ourselves – we set cars on fire then called the fire service to come and put it out and we’d stand there and watch…we were bored…I liked the chaos and I’ve done it for a buzz. …there have been times where I’ve done stuff off my cake [head], but a lot of the time I’ve either done it to show off to
people who I’m with or it’s been for the buzz – like being centre of attention or something” (Interview 8.2).

In this case, as with others, the excitement comes from two sources. The first is the creation of a local spectacle, as in the case of the fire setting. The second is the adrenaline rush described by those young people who had been chased by the police. To achieve either of these a certain level of risk had to be taken to create the buzz.

The risk levels young people were willing to engage with in order to ensure excitement varied and, whilst some took place in private, others seemed to enjoy an audience and performing.

The most extreme risks and performances were reported by those interviewees currently in prison. These involved setting fire to ‘rubbish’ around their estates. Second to this, a number of young people reported fire setting and uncoupling railway wagons on the nearby line. In these cases ‘the chase’ involving the police after the event was often seen as a desirable outcome, as it was ‘a laugh’ (Interview 4.6).

In contrast, ‘the buzz’ can be created in quieter moments, with a limited audience. For example one interviewer watched a young person ‘idly’ attempting to burn the cushion of the chair beside him whilst being interviewed. She commented, ‘He didn’t appear to be conscious of what he was doing’ (Interview 4.5).

Another factor which seemed to contribute to the buzz factor was waiting to see the look on the victims’ faces when they saw the damage done to their property, especially damage to cars.

3.4.2. Anger

Although young people tended to see boredom as the trigger to committing most criminal damage, anger, frustration and moods were also raised as motivational factors in all the interview settings. These feelings may be expressed in terms of the local and specific, for example relationships with family and friends, unaddressed bullying, a feeling of isolation or abandonment and that no one really cared. The latter in turn may be the source of a more generalised anger demonstrated in the comment:
“It just makes you angry. You just get angry all the time for no reason” (Comment made by young person in the youth justice system) (Interview 1.1).

In some cases the exact reason for the anger was not apparent and it would have been inappropriate to pursue the line of questioning in an open interview situation without expert support.

One interviewee, when initially asked about criminal damage, straight away said:

‘it’s usually triggered by anger. In most cases I think’ (Interview 5.1).

Difficulties with relationships in particular could also be seen to be the spark for aggression:

‘You’ve just had an argument with your missus or something and you’re peed off and you just smash something’ (Interview 6.2).

Revenge and retribution were other factors mentioned in relation to anger.

3.4.3. Jealousy, revenge and retribution

Vandalism was sometimes used to simply to ‘make a point’ and this is motivated by any number of variable factors e.g. anger, jealousy, feelings of rejection, lack of stability with family and friends, frustration of having nothing to do, and the availability of some object or place in the community that you can make your point. Occasionally this was generalised anger or around something the young person found very difficult to explain. In most cases the discussion focussed on one event when actions were aimed at an individual. In each example events took place after an argument or dispute with an adult and the ensuing damage was perceived in terms of ‘pay back’ or revenge. The results, in terms of criminal damage, included: a 14 year old male kicking and breaking a shop window after a dispute with someone in the shop; a 17 year old female badly damaging a car because of an undisclosed grudge against the owner; two cases of damage to cars and property by young males after there had been complaints made to parents about their child’s behaviour.
Less specific example retold by hearsay continued to include elements of revenge. A shop, through to be run by someone labelled locally as a paedophile, was said to be under constant attack resulting in the windows being bricked-up. In another unspecified incident school windows were broken after an exclusion.

Cars appear to be considered a valid target for attack especially if they are high performance vehicles. The following case is a good example:

“There have been loads of times when I’ve just seen something like when I was 14 years old, smoking and drinking in a park by a car park that has loads of nice cars on it, and this particular day there was a brand new Porsche there and we just laid into it, we couldn’t resist the temptation. I knew that I could never have it; I suppose there was a bit of jealousy in it, so we popped all the tyres, kicked the wing mirrors off, snapped the window wipers off, popped off the badges, then left it” (Interview 8.1).

He was too young to drive but stated that if he’d been able to drive then he would’ve stolen it for a joy ride. On this occasion, he didn’t wait to see the owner return but got a kick out of “imagining the look on the owner’s face when he got back”. The kids at the time were laughing saying “that car would look better smashed up – it was exciting” (Interview 8.1).

The statement ‘I knew that I could never have it; I suppose there was a bit of jealousy in it,’ (Interview 8.1) is very telling and to varying degrees was repeated by many disaffected young people’s perceptions of their position in a consumer society.

Several young people pointed out that physical damage of this kind was felt to be a way of addressing the inequalities and unfairness that they felt they were experiencing for as one youth worker commented:

“They’re very moral but because they are young people they go about it the wrong way” (Interview 4.7).

There may also be an argument to support the perception that many young people do not know how to constructively deal with their anger or do not have the public networks to redress any perceived imbalance of power with adults.
3.5. Who is the Victim?

3.5.1. Victim, victims or a victimless crime?

Victims were defined through lines of demarcation drawn by the young people between criminal damage that involved personal possessions and those that were seen to be in the public arena. In the former case there was understood to be a victim but in the latter there was more debate around ownership:

‘... you don’t really go around smashing people’s houses and that where you live, like just old buildings with windows in’ (Interview 6.1).

Along with street furniture, bus shelters and the usual targets for criminal damage, run down or derelict buildings were seen to be legitimate targets with no victim:

“There are a few mills near where we used to live and we’d go there in a group just to smash up all the windows. We spent the whole of our six weeks holiday’s one summer just going to the mill every day to smash it up until there was nothing left” (Interview 8.1).

Similar stories were recalled by others in both urban and rural locations including a factory, a chapel, a shop, a water tower and university campus blocks due for demolition or conversion in the near future.

Graffiti in particular was not seen to be a crime or in some cases damage. A young female, now aged 17, who felt she had now outgrown her graffiti activities, reflected on how she felt that she hadn’t done anything significantly wrong, claiming a distinction between public and personal property:

“Walls, they’re not really personal. I have more respect for personal things like stereos and cars and stuff like that” (Interview 1.1).

This was not the view taken by other young people at the same location:

“It’s not their property and they shouldn’t be damaging or graffitying it” (Interview 1.3).
3.5.2. Perceptions of what it must feel like to be a victim

Although damage in the public realm was seen as legitimate by some respondents there was also recognition of the impact of criminal damage on individual victims by the vast majority of the young people. Often this was discussed in terms in imagining what it would feel like if it happened to them:

“If I had a car and when I get my house and my drive and someone come (sic) ... kids and scratched it, I know what I’d do – I’d go mad” (Interview 6.1).

In considering her own case and the damage she had caused she added she felt a sense of remorse and regret:

“I feel right tight cos of what I’ve done to him” (Interview 1.1).

However, the expressed emotions were not always so straightforward as the incident recalled by a young person in prison illustrates:

‘Once I robbed a phone box on a train station and like ripped the whole thing apart and just left it in a mess and we went back the next day we were going somewhere passing it and it had all tape around it and I felt bad.. I robbed it for the money …and didn’t feel guilty but it was seeing it because it was in my area’ (Interview 6.1).

3.5.3. Young people as victims of criminal damage

Several youths interviewed in community settings have experienced criminal damage to their homes and family cars but they were not always happy to discuss the event in detail. Quite the opposite situation existed in the university campus groups where incidents of damage to kitchens and shared living areas was a topic considered ripe for discussion.

The reason for the student’s willingness to engage with the issue lay in the injustice members of all four groups felt at having to pay for damage which they felt had been perpetrated by others. This situation was contrasted with events outside the university where, if damage occurred in public areas and no one was arrested as being the culprit, it would be paid for out of the public purse.
Community based group members preferred to speak in general rather than specific terms. The most debated aspects of criminal damage and its effect on young people related to its impact upon facilities and amenities in their area. A number of examples were raised and discussed by the young people to illustrate the ways in which criminal damage made a direct impact on their quality of life. For example, in one area the only shop on the estate had closed, football nets had been ruined, play equipment broken, schools vandalised and activities such as dancing had been spoiled.

A youth worker commented that many of young people in their group were frustrated by criminal damage when it directly impacts upon them.

Two of the prison inmates had been victims of criminal damage, one had had his house burnt down and the other received damage to his vehicle. Another was upset that his girlfriend’s car had been damaged. In all cases there were expressions of frustration and anger. In the case of the interviewee who had his car damaged, it was never discovered who had done the damage and this left him feeling angry and upset. It had happened two years ago when he was 19. The interviewer asked if it made him feel differently about criminal damage:

‘It did a bit yeah… I understood what it felt like because of the damage done’ (Interview 5.1).

He felt angry because he had to pay for the damage. It also made him start thinking about what he had done:

‘I started to understand like what other people felt like after what I’d done to them’ (Interview 5.1).

Another way in which young people become the victims of criminal damage, as noted in the section on gangs, was the double impact of other young people coming into the area. In one rural location it was suggested that youths from adjacent villages regularly cause problems for young locals by causing criminal damage in public spaces. Not only did this reduce the number of public facilities for the young people themselves, they were also blamed by other members of the community who assumed the local village lads had perpetrated the damage.
3.6. *Young People’s perceptions of vandalism within their community*

The young respondents did hold a number of perceptions about what criminal damage meant for their neighbourhood. From a youth worker’s perspective many of the areas are:

“not a very nice place for them to live… there’s not a lot of amenities for them, the only things they’ve got on this estate is the school turfs and there’s all derelict buildings…” (Interview 1.3).

This was acknowledged by some of the young people but they stated they liked the areas they lived in, even though some experienced a moderate to high level of vandalism:

‘there are nice areas but some rough, it’s like that everywhere… I like it, yeah but it’s rough as fuck… lot of criminal damage, boarded up houses burnt out cars’ (Interview 6.1).

‘It varies doesn’t it. People get used to it though, cos everyone’s known it to be like that from day one really – well I have anyway, you get like used to it…It’s alright, obviously you can get areas all over like that, that are like shit’ (Interview 6.3).

In one interview the point was made that in some locations criminal damage was less apparent because of the concealed nature of the crime but in others it appeared worse because the damage was more visible. When asked how she felt about the criminal damage in her home community, one girl was particularly animated in her response:

“You look at it (the damage) and you think how can they do that to their own estate… like people would like to live on a nice, clean estate, but, like doing that isn’t really good” (Interview 2.5)

When asked about how this made her feel personally, she replied: “Horrible” (Interview 2.5.)

The boys in the same location also discussed how criminal damage, and crime in general, was having a detrimental effect on the whole community:

“My nana… she’s terrified of people… of coming up to her… smashing windows and all that” (Interview 2.1)
The young respondents across all the locations were of the opinion that it is pointless to vandalise their own communities. There were, however, inherent contradictions with this: as a number of interviews progressed, one or two interviewees admitted they were responsible for some local graffiti and other acts of infrequent vandalism. The roots of the apparent contradictions may lie in the definitions and understanding of the terms ‘community’ and ‘neighbourhood’. Many young people saw their neighbourhood in terms of street immediately adjacent to their homes, no further.

Interestingly, once again a number of comments were made about the disruption caused by adult behaviour on young people’s lives; for example, the noise and unpredictable behaviour created by adults when leaving the local public house was a source of concern. In one specific estate, comments were made by several young people that they found it difficult to get to sleep because of the general level of rowdiness:

“People are always arguing and then we can’t sleep and we’re late for school because we can’t sleep and then we get done for being late” (Interview 1.1).

3.7. The Impact of school exclusion

Several young males who admitted to being involved in criminal damage have either been, or currently are, excluded from school. The following story is a good illustration of the type of situation in which a number of the young males found themselves:

“My behaviour got worse once I was excluded from school at around 12 years – everything started really early for me and everything progressed from there. Things did get worse after I was excluded from school because I had a lot more time on my hands and both my mum and my dad worked full time. I was permanently excluded from [the best local] school, which made it impossible to apply successfully to other surrounding [lower banded] schools. I had about a year off then went on this programme to do with ‘Progress to Work’ at the Job Centre for two days per week at age 14 – you were paid to go on this scheme but it didn’t really have any impact on my behaviour” (Interview 8.2).

Exclusions may well have occurred for a number of reasons and it was not always appropriate to enquire in depth during an open interview.
However, eight of the nine young people currently within the YOT or prison system had all experienced exclusion at some point in their school careers, often the initial one being around about the same time as their engagement with or increase in criminal damage. Often the exclusions started around the age of 11 or 12, just at the point of change from small primary schools to larger secondary schools.

When asked what they did during their time out of school, the responses were: drinking; using drugs; stealing; taking cars without the owners’ consent and criminal damage. Indeed some young people could pinpoint the moment in their lives when they became involved in criminal damage:

‘It all started then when I got expelled. That was the first time I got expelled from school and that’s when all the trouble escalated from probably cos I went to another school which was a lot rougher’ (Interview 5.1).

However, the interviewee’s recollections appear to be slightly blurred as he also reported that his exclusion was actually because he and a friend had smashed a teacher’s car up in primary school.

Other older respondents commented that they too had been excluded/expelled several times for smoking, fighting and ‘petty things’. Expulsion resulted in spending time with friends in the town centre, many of whom were also excluded or truanting. Although some of the respondents regretted it now, it was felt to be okay at the time. These were not an isolated example of school exclusion enabling young people to increase their criminal damage activities. Short term exclusion appeared to have the effect of leaving the young person unsupervised in the home, without educational support. In one case the young person aggravated his neighbour which eventually resulted in him committing a revenge attack on the neighbour’s car in retaliation for a complaint to his parents.

Dyslexia was also mentioned by a couple of the interviewees and this had failed to be detected until they had already been excluded from the school environment. One interviewee also commented that his problems had begun when he had been sent to a psychiatrist whilst as primary school because of ADHD. He said it made him feel like an idiot (Interview 5.1).

In the next section of the report we draw conclusions from the research, and reflect on the young people’s comments in the light of the literature.
4. Conclusions

4.1. Flexibility and justifications

Cohen (1973a) has argued that society has afforded a degree of flexibility encompassing change over time and locations to the applications of the term vandalism. Thus, it is not a static term but a social construction and whether or not it is considered as criminal depends on the act, the locality and the actor. Whilst some acts of vandalism are considered illegal some sorts of criminal damage can seem more acceptable than others. Therefore, what initially appeared concrete in legal definition becomes fluid. This fluidity is also apparent in the interviews with young people in the North-West of England. The people we interviewed often created a range of justifications, a continuum of ‘allowable damage’ in ‘certain circumstances’ to the inexcusable, and how far along this continuum they were prepared to go seemed to correspond with their involvement, as offenders, with the criminal justice system.

4.2. Public property and private possessions

Cohen’s flexible boundaries seem to be stretched considerably when the issue of property in public space or publicly owned property is raised. He notes that many acts of vandalism are directed to specific targets, not usually private property but public property or in semi-public places; ‘public not just in the sense that it is owned, but that it is prominently accessible and visible to the public’ e.g. ‘public’ transport (Cohen, 1973b, p.220). Halsey and Young (2006) also note that their interviewees generally tended to operate within their own ethical guidelines e.g. they did not write on walls of private property. McQuoid et al.’s study of vandalism in Northern Ireland also found that vandals tended to distinguished between buildings that belonging to people and those which did not (McQuoid et al. 1989)

4.2.1. Public property

Cohen believes that the conscious decision to target public property is in part because of greater opportunity but also due ‘to its anonymous nature and symbolic value. The target is de-personalised and not easily identified with; it belongs to ‘them’ (Cohen, 1973a, p.50). He also adds that the targets tend to be derelict, in the process of being built or run down. ‘Again such property might be seen as fair game and not really belonging to anybody’ (ibid.).
Once again damaging public property or property that was in public space was seen as criminal damage by the young people we interviewed but the degree of justification for attacking these locations was extensive. Property owned by the local authority or unknown (or unseen) others and especially property seen to be in a state of disrepair also became a legitimate target for criminal damage. Associated with this was a certain degree of frustration among those young people who reported they had not been involved in vandalism that occurred in their area but had been unfairly blamed for it. They considered themselves to be victims of vandalism by others from outside the neighbourhood.

The young people interviewed also appeared to resent the fact that property had not been kept in reasonable condition by people in positions of responsibility and that when property was damage, either accidentally or deliberately it was either not repaired or not repaired swiftly enough. These perceptions find echoes in the evaluation of the National Reassurance Policing Programme (Tuffin, R. et al 2006) and more recently the Home Office Guidance notes on preventing criminal
damage

As in the research mentioned above there appeared to be an ethical code amongst young people we interviewed about the type of property it is acceptable to damage and the extent of damage caused. However, apart from youth facilities and bus stops other property, such as schools and other local authority buildings were not specifically mentioned by the young people. In several cases graffiti on the youth facility was seen as justified and possibly necessary to mark it out as being occupied by young people from a specific area. In these terms the graffiti was not criminal damage just a signal of occupation or ownership.

4.2.3. Private possessions

There were certainly issues around ownership of property that seemed to inform the degree to which they were seen as a legitimate target for specific reasons. Attacks on private possessions, especially when the young person knew the owner, tended to be prompted by feelings associated with anger, revenge and retribution. Similar findings were recorded in the Offending Crime and Justice Survey of 2005 (OCJS 2005).

\[d\] A series of pamphlets have been produced by the Home Office giving advice and guidance on the prevention of criminal damage. These can be found at (http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk/criminaldamage/criminaldamage001.htm).
These were not random acts of damage, quite the opposite, but that is not to say any formal planning was attached to the event. In most of the examples reported to us the young people felt they had a valid grievance against an individual which had not been addressed or addressed to their satisfaction and this had left them angry. The damage had then tended to occur sometime after the initial incident when the young person was with peers/friends often when they had felt uninhibited after the consumption of either alcohol, drugs or a mixture of both. It was frequently acknowledged that this combination enabled or allowed the damage to take place. McQuoid et al’s survey looking at 847 young people’s (aged 9-14) attitudes and feelings towards vandalism as well as motivational factors in Northern Ireland found that 94% thought that people did it to appear big in front of friends, 88% thought people did it for a laugh with friends (McQuoid, et al. 1989)

Along with the presence of an audience of peers alcohol is noted in previous studies to have played a considerable part in activities leading to criminal damage. Nearly a third (32%) of criminal damage offenders reported that they were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the offence, higher than the proportion of offenders who reported alcohol use at the time of committing offences of violence (OCJS 2005). Our findings would confirm the relationship between alcohol and criminal damage noting that the consumption of alcohol also appears to have been normalised by young people.

In recalling events leading to the damaging of a specific person’s property young people often mediated their responses in a language of justification. These motivations differed from those employed to damage to property belonging to an individual who was not specifically known to the group. In these cases it was all about performance and observation – to observe or imagine the ‘look on their face’ when people see the damage that had taken place. Cohen sees these type of event as malicious vandalism as being done for amusement but with an underpinning of malice, aggression and anger. He notes that this may be done out of feelings of ‘boredom, despair, exasperation, resentment, failure and frustration’ (Cohen,1973a, pp.48/9); ‘the combination of hostility and fun is present in many cases’ (p.48). He even suggests it can serve a purpose, for example, he cites Prewer (1959):

“…to break a man’s window is a much safer way of paying him out than to punch him on the nose, for example. The victim is left with a cold draught, to be followed later by the glazier’s bill; and he may remain in complete ignorance as to who has done the deed. The
smash itself may be pleasurable, so that this form of revenge is often safe, usually certain and always sweet”. (Cohen, 1973a, pp.44/45).

Certainly in the interviews with our respondents all of Cohen’s observations held true. On the rare occasions when a young person did volunteer more information and reflection on their actions they appeared to reflect on either a jealousy of ownership, revenge for a perceived injustice or a desire to ‘terrorise’ an area. In the case of the former there was a desire to own items and an awareness of the pressure to consume commodities which they felt they would be unable to afford, a point noted by Asquith (1996). The focus of these incidents tended to be vehicles. Those young people who themselves in later life became victims of this type of crime noted the initial annoyance but then the more sinister side to the attack in that they did not know who had done it or why. This relates to another explanation which is associated with the theme of the unknown assailant.

The unknown assailant may commit damage offences which may result in limited physical and/or financial damage which is easily repaired or removed but the discomfort and reaction they caused could be considerable. Often for the young people the explanation was in terms of ‘the buzz’, the excitement and in the nature of fun rather than malicious intent however, the actions could be interpreted by the victims as a malicious act. In some cases this added to the frisson of excitement; the thought that they may be engendering fear in the area by such a simple act. Bessant (1993) noted similar findings in her study of young people in Australia:

‘activities such as shoplifting, fights or vandalism were related to a number of factors, some of which were simply the rush of excitement, the enjoyable feeling of defiance and potency in just ‘getting away with it’ [they] demonstrate personal competence, especially in the case of shop lifting and vandalism, if it is accomplished before adults’ eyes. Such ‘triumphs’ become a powerful, ‘exciting and seductive attraction’ (Bessant 1993, p.4/5).

It is also worth noting that 80% of respondents in the OCJS (2005) who had committed criminal damage felt they were unlikely to be caught, this could further add to the excitement (Crime Reduction, 2007b).
4.3. A continuum of crime, justification and motivation

Thus there is the creation of a continuum, as Cohen points out, that can tolerate conditions under which the illegal destruction of property destruction becomes ‘tolerated, acceptable, institutionalised or, as some sociologists have expressed it, normalised’ (Cohen, 1973a, p.23). The evidence in this report notes the normalisation that has taken place among the young people with reference to activities leading to criminal damage and their perception of what is expected of them by adults. There are examples of each of these conditions within the report especially in the comparison of the experience of university students existing in a protected and private world in comparison to the other young people operating on a very public stage.

In summary the justification continuum created by the young respondents runs something like this:

Public property – does not belong to anyone and therefore they are not acting maliciously by damaging it. This makes it an acceptable target for damage. The damage is a group activity that has a social element that may, but does not necessarily, involve alcohol and/or drugs (mainly the former). Graffiti on public property is not always intended specifically as damage but can be carried out to either improve the area (as a piece of public art) or as marking the territory and demonstrating belonging. This is seen by the ones carrying out the activity as acceptable so long as the tagging is undertaken by local young people and not those coming into the area – this is seen as threatening. An area that is already poorly maintained is more likely to become a target and this creates a downward spiral, which even the young people themselves feel is a concern.

Property in public space – This property may be owned by someone or an organisation, for example a transport provider but it is still perceived as public property and is treated as such. Derelict property especially is not seen to be owned by anyone and thus is a target for damage often because it is damaged anyway. Again this is most likely to be a group activity involving alcohol and/or drugs. Damage to this type of property is rarely seen as anything but fun. The ultimate objective is the buzz, created either by for example, the noise of breaking windows, or the consequent chase which may ensue by police or other officials, or if the fire and rescue service have to attend. Again these attacks are part of a group activity as above. The location itself is often felt to be the domain of the young people and may provide a place for them to consume alcohol and/or drugs.
Both of the above can be perceived as legitimate social activities, by some young people, that have become normalised over time in terms of their own perceptions and their interpretation of what adults expect of them. Therefore these are the activities which some of our interviewees [don’t forget the self report studies state that it is a minority activity] become drawn into. Frequently this type of criminal damage is justified as taking place because there are no alternative activities.

Private property – At this point the damage becomes increasingly personalised but there remains an element of anonymity as the young people observe the impact of their actions. There is an increased awareness across the board that this type of activity is illegal and has negative connotations. Damage to cars on the street can be motivated by jealousy and frustration at the inability to engage in a consumer society to the levels they desire. To the young people this continues to be labelled as a fun activity, with all the associate thrills, but on closer questioning there often lays a malicious undertone to their motivation including an attempt to have an impact on a specific location by engendering fear in the residents. Fewer young people appear to become involved in this type of activity and when they do they regularly reported having engaged in the consumption of alcohol and/or drugs.

Personal property – there appears to be a greater level of personal motivation to carry out specific attacks on a persons’ private property. In the few cases encountered during the research it was clear that anger, jealousy, frustration, revenge and retribution played their part in creating the initial motivation even though the final attack was likely to be spurred on by alcohol/drug and peers. Even at this level justifications were made mainly around the lack of a right to respond in any other way to something which the young person felt had been done to them by the person whose property they had attacked.

Far fewer young people engaged in these last two categories and for many young people this type of activity did cross an uncomfortable line in their moral reasoning. This type of criminal damage was seen as extreme and therefore not normalised in the same way as the former categories.

4.4. Individual emotions and attempts to control neighbourhoods

Underlying many of these justifications and motivations are a number of individual emotions which, according to Hayward (2002 p 81) include
humiliation, arrogance, ridicule, cynicism, pleasure and excitement. However, Hayward goes on to argue that there is even more to it than this as it is also provides a means for ‘youth expression and exerting control in neighbourhoods where, more often than not, traditional avenues of youthful stimulation and endeavour have long since evaporated...’ (Hayward, 2002, pp.82-3). It is argued that individuals are ‘seduced by the existential possibilities offered by criminal acts – by the pleasure of transgression and hence...why it is that youth criminality is not solely the preserve of those groups who are economically and socially disadvantaged.’ (Hayward, 2002, pp.82-3). If this is the case then it explains the activities of those who are usually in a different position within society, for example at University as the excitement of transgression is not bounded by social circumstance.

However, comments relating to the youthful attempts to control neighbourhoods have to be seen in the context of the demonisation of young people which, according to Haines and Drakford (1998) and Muncie (1999) among others, leads to the alienation of young people within their own communities. Research over the years demonstrates this demonisation of young people and perception of young people as delinquents is not a new phenomenon (Pearson 1983). It has also been argued that young adults are under closer supervision now than they have been since the end of the Second World War particularly relating to greater supervision and control in communities and target hardening associated with crime prevention (Asquith, 1996 p8). From the evidence in this report this approach appears to be increasing in intensity with the arrival of, for example, mobile CCTV which absorb non proven offenders in the realm of the panoptican⁶ and potentially lead to net-widening of the criminal justice agencies.

Therefore, it would appear that assumptions are made about the intentions of young people to exert control over neighbourhoods when in actuality they are looking a place to spend time with their friends. Young people ‘hanging around’ on the streets can appear to be a problem even if they are not doing anything illegal. Armstrong and Wilson, (1973, p.76) describe this as a ‘visible and extensive practice’. For some this is a social activity without problems but for others it can turn into criminal behaviour. Even if the former is true some elements of ‘anti-social’ activity may be in place. Often this is because of the need not to exert

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⁶ The panoptican was concept and a practice commented upon by Foucault in his work ‘Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison, translation 1977 (Penguin). The panoptican is an intense surveillance of a community with the intention of controlling and changing behaviour. It is also a term used in association with the design of prisons in the nineteenth century.
control over the neighbourhood but to find a place within the peer group by impressing them. As Armstrong and Wilson argue:

‘vandalism in the context of the gang can only be understood from an appreciation of the gang boy’s social world. The motives for smashing the windows in a school may not be identical with those for spraying gang slogans in enemy territory, for example, but as with other behaviour appropriate to the situation of the gang, a delicate balance is sought between the element of risk and pay-off in terms of prestige’ (1973, p.82).

Thus often the intentions of ‘the group’ (the term we would prefer to use rather than the gang as this now has a specific definition and connotation), may be misinterpreted. What is intended to be fun can be seen as malicious. The lack of a location for socialising and satisfying their sense of adventure in legitimate ways is likely to lead to anti-social or criminal behaviour. If the young people have poor financial resources and there are not free activities nearby to engage in then it seems obvious they will carry out their socialising on the streets. Even the Home Office recognise the importance of diversionary activities:

‘Diversionary activities can engage young people before they become involved in criminal activity. Sports based activities can be an enjoyable means of increasing self-confidence and interpersonal skills, in a manner that is widely accessible. Importantly, these activities should not be regarded as rewarding those who behave badly, but rather as a means of initially engaging young people, and then developing a relationship of trust that allows them to explore the underlying reasons of nuisance behaviour, such as poor educational attainment or drug and alcohol abuse.

There is also a need for recreational facilities for teenagers that are free and available to use at all times, because venues for organised activities are not open all day or may request a charge for use’ (Home Office, 2006a)

As can be seen from the evidence there is no one single explanation for young people engaging in criminal damage and consequently there is no one solution. The challenge seems to be in managing the transition of young people from childhood to adulthood without allowing criminal damage to be seen as a normal part of that process.
The recommendations below are drawn up in light of young people’s comments and as such start a process of consultation which could be the basis for further engagement in the future.

5. Recommendations

These recommendations take into account the comments and concerns of the young people who were interviewed.

5.1. Youth facilities – access and accessibility

- More open and accessible facilities

The lack of engaging activities was seen as one of the core reasons why young people become engaged in criminal damage. The Home Office document ‘Tackling Youth Vandalism’ (2006a) document raises a number of very important and relevant issues around accessing youth facilities in particular the need for the events and services to be free and open as frequently as possible. At the present time there may be facilities but these are not easily or frequently accessed by young people.

Offering alternative venues and means for young people to socialise would certainly appear to be the way forward. Time and time again young people expressed a desire for a place to be, to call their own that had protection from the weather, unwanted ‘others’, and was available at all times. This latter point is an important one for as the young respondents themselves noted, if a facility is closed then the distraction is gone.

5.2. Relevance of services

- Consultation to identify and meet the needs and requirements of local young people

On-going consultation is needed to find out exactly what young people want or need. There are at present some unrealistic expectations among young people as to what can be provided in the way of large and exciting events. However, at the same time a considerable number of young people are simply looking for a safe space to be in with their friends and activities which they are happy to take part in.

Services need to monitor and evaluate their provision on a regular basis to ensure they are engaging and meeting the needs of the young people.
This process should also enable service providers to better understand the requirements of the young people rather than making assumptions about their needs.

5.3. Type and location of facilities

- Ensuring services are located in such a way as to be accessible to young people

Consideration needs to be made of the type and location of services and facilities. To an adult eye a community centre at the heart of a housing estate, for example, is accessible to all. Clearly this is not the case. Young people do not find it easy to share space or cross from their localised neighbourhood of one or two streets around their home, into areas dominated by others. This could be addressed through detached youth working which may eventually enable the connections to be made between young people from a number of streets and thus remove concerns around moving freely across invisible but very real boundaries.

Young people acknowledge their need for safe places and spaces in which to socialise otherwise they realise they are placing themselves in a vulnerable position and may be creating vulnerability in others e.g. other members of the community who are also using the shared public spaces.

5.4. The design of youth services

- Consideration of the way services are designed and operated

It may also be necessary to be inventive in the way that services are offered. Clearly in some areas the present provision is taken into the ownership of a specific cohort of young people and thus is inaccessible to others. To engage the broad spectrum of user, from the quite and retiring to the more active and energetic, there is a need to ensure the service is accessible to the widest range is users. This should include young people who are deemed ‘hardest to reach’ who may have been deterred from accessing formal youth provision due to school exclusion. Routes into the service may have to be considered rather than depending on self referrals. This may necessitate closer contacts with schools, especially extended schools, and other child orientated provision.

Good quality monitoring and evaluation of services would enable the identification of good practice and the possibility of replication in other locations.
5.5. Graffiti walls

- Graffiti walls were viewed positively are liked but as a piece of public art, not an alternative to neighbourhood graffiti.

The presence of a graffiti wall was not seen as a way of preventing graffiti in an area as it serves many purposes: group or gang tagging; copy tagging; individual tagging; self expression. However, there was a great deal of enthusiasm for such a facility in several locations as a piece of public art.

5.6. Targeting and marginalising

- Consideration of the risks of short term funding and targeted services

Several times concerns were expressed that youth services would be short term funded to reduce criminal damage in an area. This was seen as potentially focussing on the needs of young men between the ages of 13 and 17 years whilst the requirements of young women were marginalised as they were not perceived to be involved in criminal damage and are seen to have a stronger friends and family network. Similarly young males, under the age of 13 years, may also become marginalised as they would find it difficult to attend a youth facility dominated by older youths which they would perceive as hostile. It could be argued that they are exactly the type of group who need to be engaged at this early stage when they are looking to others as male role models to prevent future criminal damage.

Therefore, at the present time there are examples of youth facilities being dominated, to the exclusion of others, by a specific age range or peer group. This created a cycle which engages a number of young people of a specific age for a period of time but at the same time ensured the non-engagement of others a year or so younger. Youth Workers stated that the only way to address this would be to have detached workers gradually supporting and recruiting new members of the group or to run a second set of events.

Once again it would be necessary to monitor and evaluate services to evidence the impact and the contribution they have made towards the achievement of targets.
5.7. Lack of sustained engagement

- Review of the impact of short term funding and a lack of community engagement for young people

Short term funding has resulted in a degree of cynicism among young adults as to how long the facility will be open and what it can offer. Youth workers note the need for sustained engagement. This may enable workers to facilitate a greater level of emotional literacy among young people, especially young males, who have been seen to resort to criminal damage as a means of expressing their anger and feeling of injustice.

Long and sustained engagement may also facilitate engagement with the community as a whole enabling and promoting greater understanding between the various members of the community. Engagement which encourages more local people to become volunteers at youth facilities, or for young people to become involved in other community activities, must be considered a positive step. However, the cost and implications to engaging members of the community in operating the provision must be acknowledged in any cost benefit analysis for example, the cost of recruitment; CRB checks; the establishment of rigorous training and support systems. It must also be taken into account that there may be a relatively quick turn over of volunteers all requiring the above services and support.

It is worth noting that very few young people became involved in the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, the Single Regeneration Budget or the National Reassurance Policing Project (now Police and Communities Together -PACT). Each of these programmes enabled adults to have a forum at which they could comment on the behaviour of young people but rarely did it enable young people to enter into a meaningful dialogue with adults. The effect on those who were involved in such programmes would, by this time, have been lost as they are likely to be in their late teens or early twenties and it is rare to find young people cascading engagement of this type to their younger peer groups.

5.8. Promoting emotional health and well-being

- Providing activities to increase emotional well-being, including self-esteem

Many of the young people would appear to be driven to criminal damage by underlying social and emotional or behavioural difficulties which
could be addressed through a range of imaginative activities aimed at promoting emotional literacy and self-esteem, for example through art, music, dance, photography or drama. Such activities could have the impact, for example, of channeling feelings of anger and aggression into creativity and self-expression and provide an alternative outlet for the sense of powerlessness and hostility that was evident in so many of the young people.

5.9. Community Safety Officers and Police and Communities Together (PACT)

- More local and youth friendly policing

Although Youth Workers in one location discussed the excellent work carried out by the local community police person, the overwhelming discourse relating to the police service was negative. This negativity arose from young people’s general suspicion of the police and the feeling they were being targeted for unnecessary suspicion to actual incidents of youth workers being mistaken for ‘young people’ and experiencing the force of ‘assertive’ policing.

None of the respondents mentioned community police or wardens in their interviews although they were known to be present in some of the areas where the interviews took place. The general impression given was that the police were either a source of a challenge and risk taking (‘The Chase’) or as another potential threat to those who were not involved in criminal damage.

Therefore a less aggressive approach based on local policing and contact with the CSO may undermine the thrill of the chase whilst engaging those who currently feel needlessly under suspicion.

The police and fire-brigade attending schools was not seen as useful by those in prison but this was clearly not the case with all young people as other mentioned the impact that school sessions on “thinking about the consequences of crime” had on them (2.2).
5.10 Dispersals Orders

- More consultation, clarity and guidance on the use of Dispersal Orders

A number of young people interviewed deeply resented Dispersal Orders. This was partially because they felt they were inappropriate applied to themselves and they also felt they had no redress against this perceived unfairness.

More frequently the feeling of injustice came from Dispersal Orders applied in other local areas, pushing youths into each other’s territories. Youth Inclusion Workers noted that in areas where Dispersal Orders have been in place, elements from different gangs are being pushed into new locations where previously there may not have been a gang related problem.

In another location concern was expressed about the issues around the enforcement of a Dispersal Order and the fact that whilst local youth workers agreed to work with the Order, they felt they were not told the truth about its two mile exclusion area. Clearly there needs to be improve communications and consultation between services to avoid any misunderstanding or perceptions.

5.11 Partnership working

- Agencies working together to achieve their outputs and provide good quality to services to every child

In these days of partnership working it may be appropriate to look for other partners to fund and support new and established youth facilities. The arrival of joint commissioning through ‘Every Child Matter’ and the subsequent development of Children’s Trusts and Local Area Agreements there are new mechanism for funding of services under the framework of the Five Outcomes for Children and Young People. For example, Primary Care Trusts will have targets relating to young people and their health that could be facilitated through the youth services. Other sources of potential funding and support may be found with local schools and voluntary service providers all of whom will be looking to meet the outputs of their local Children’s and Young Person’s Plan. It may be possible to engage with social housing and transport providers.
both of whom are likely to financially benefit from any reduction in criminal damage in their areas.

5.12 Close Circuit Television

- Consultation and engagement in the use of technology

In one area in particular increased numbers of CCTV cameras were seen to be a potential answer to the problem of criminal damage by the young people interviewed. This was, in part, because they believed that it would deter criminal damage type activities especially in concealed areas. This popularity of CCTV, however, was not universal, as some respondents in an area where a mobile CCTV has been introduced felt that the camera was yet another intrusion upon their public space and an invasion of their rights to privacy. Comments were made about how it felt to have every move watched and their social activities recorded even though they had not committed any crime. The atmosphere of distrust was compounded by the fact that they had not been consulted on the use of the camera. This lack of engagement had, in effect, resulted in the confirmation to the young respondents that there is an automatic presumption that they are ‘bad’. Secondly, the surveillance is seen as ‘faceless’ and intrusive. In this case the presence of the CCTV does not make young people feel safer rather it leave them feeling powerless and angry; exactly the type of emotions they had previously described as being at the root of some criminal damage.

To some young people the presence of CCTV was not a deterrent, quite the opposite it was an extra challenge, an extra risk and therefore an addition to ‘the buzz’ factor.

5.13 Other technologies

A range of other technical solutions had been encountered by interviewees, for example, plastic instead of glass in bus shelters, vandal grease and black box alarms in empty houses. Some of these were considered more effective than others.

Plastic windows in bus shelters often resulted in taking on a new challenge and devising ways of breaking the material. Paper was put across vandal grease although it was acknowledged that when it was the dark and the paint not visible it did get on their clothes and was difficult for their mother’s to wash off. However, black alarm boxes put in unoccupied houses by the council were seen as effective.
A recent discussion on criminal damage held by the Home Office demonstrated the current emphasis on resolving the problem through technical means. However, within the discussion itself and from the evidence of this report is it clear, that although some technologies, sometimes address some of the issues they are not a panacea. For some young people the presence of the technology is an added challenge to what is already an exciting situation and thus fulfilling several of the major requirements of being involved in criminal damage in the first place. There is a risk that if the balance is tipped in the direction of technology because it is easier to manage and monitor then money will be lost on addressing the underlying issues which will stay with some of the young people currently involved.
6. Afterword

Interviewers asked all those the young people who had been involved in criminal damage when and why did they think they would desist. Most interviewees agreed that criminal damage is something that is generally ‘out grown’.

For the older respondents the opportunity to commit damage is reduced when people enter employment:

‘I’ve just grown out of it…Getting a job and then you’re occupied all the time and that would stop you from getting into trouble all the time’ (6.1).

For others they stopped ‘hanging around’ on the streets:

‘At our age you wouldn’t be hanging around on the streets, would we, you know what I mean’. (6.2)

Nevertheless, a shift into higher tariff crimes and the use of illegal drugs also reduced involvement in criminal damage as one interviewee stated that he had largely finished with criminal damage at around 12 to 13 years of age when he “got a habit [heroin use]” then he stopped working in groups.

As for the future a certain degree of concern was expressed by a number of respondents with respect to apparent addition of gun and knife crime to criminal damage:

‘kids are getting wilder now… it’s not vandalising no more is it, it’s killing people…it wasn’t like that when we were young’ (6.3)

“I don’t know what kids are going to be like in a couple of years’ time, cos if I think “Oh my God, that’s what I was like when I was about 13” and I think that was bad…”(1.1)

From our interviews it is clear that criminal damage has, to some extent, and at the lower end of the scale, become normalised by young people and adults alike. To turn this perception around is going to take considerable skills and resources. Not all young people will be diverted by the presence of youth services, facilities and provision but it likely that the majority will at least engage if the attraction is strong enough. This is
important not only for those who are currently involved in criminal
damage but also to those who are currently on the margins for example
younger children looking to their older peers as role models on which to
shape their teenage or young people excluded from school and becoming
drawn into the world of slightly older offenders. This is a challenging
proposition but not to engage with that process could result in even
greater problems in the future.
References


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