



Media Portrayal of Young People – impact and influences

Summary Report

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Introduction

While other research projects have looked at how young people are portrayed in the media, very little has involved the views of the young people themselves, or of the journalists who write or present stories about young people. A recent article in the 'Time' magazine ('Unhappy, Unloved and Out of Control' 26/04/08) commented on the representation of young people in Britain, claiming them to be "boys and girls who casually pick fights, have sex and keep the emergency services fully occupied." If this is the common view in the British media, how does this affect young people? This is what we wanted to find out, as we think this is an important issue, and also a chance for us to influence how young people are presented in the media.

Research Aims

The broad aim of the research project was to explore how young people aged 13-18 are portrayed in the media, and find out what impact this has on them. Through gathering information from young people and journalists, we wanted to answer the following research questions:

- How are young people portrayed in national and London local papers and BBC/ITV news broadcasts?
- What do young people identify as positive, negative and neutral images? How do young people feel about these images?
- What do journalists' think about young people's views?

Literature Review

The research team asked Amanda, a member of NCB's Research, Evidence and Evaluation Department, to look in their library at what research had been done in this area.

The existing research that has explored how young people are portrayed in the media has found that the majority of stories about young people are negative. Research shows that when the media cover stories featuring young people, the stories are most commonly about knife crime; education; gangs; social exclusion or violent crime. Young offenders in particular are likely to be the subject of negative reporting. Existing research suggests that people are very worried about youth crime, even when the official statistics show that the amount of crime committed by young people has decreased. Some of the literature that was gathered pointed out that the media often reports stories in a sensational way, using extreme headlines

and statistics that can frighten the public. Thus, the media does not always represent reality, and other evidence points out that journalists and editors select stories that are 'newsworthy'. Well behaved young people are not worthy of coverage; while young people behaving in negative ways makes a good story. Some previous research has explored how young people feel about the media, and the ways in which they are represented. A survey of young people found that the vast majority of them felt that the media does represent them as anti-social, and as a group that should be feared. For these respondents this was a concern, as it may not only cause older people to be afraid of them, but it may alienate young people and contribute to causing more anti-social behaviour.

Methods

To collect our data we used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative methods, which included interviews and focus groups, allowed us to look in more depth at people's views, and find out what they thought and felt about this topic. To gather the quantitative data an online survey was used.

At the beginning of the research, the team spent two weeks collecting stories on young people aged 13-18 that appeared in a selection of national and local newspapers, and on two TV news channels. With the help of a group of Young NCB members, a selection of these stories were classified into positive, negative and neutral categories, based on how they represented young people. This group also helped us to develop our questions that we would ask young people and journalists.

Two focus groups were conducted: one in Suffolk, and the other in London. In total, 14 young people took part, who were all aged between 13 – 18 years. Seven journalists were interviewed over the telephone. Four of these wrote articles about children and young people in magazines; one wrote articles for both national newspapers and magazines; and two of them worked for a TV channel. The NCB's Media Department helped recruit the journalists.

We used an online survey to get the views of young people from across the country, which remained 'live' for two weeks, and received 62 responses in total.

After analysing our findings (see below for more detail), we received help from a group of Young NCB members who supported us with our dissemination strategy. They helped us to identify our potential audiences, developed the key messages from the research and its findings, and contributed to the design process for the research poster and flyer.

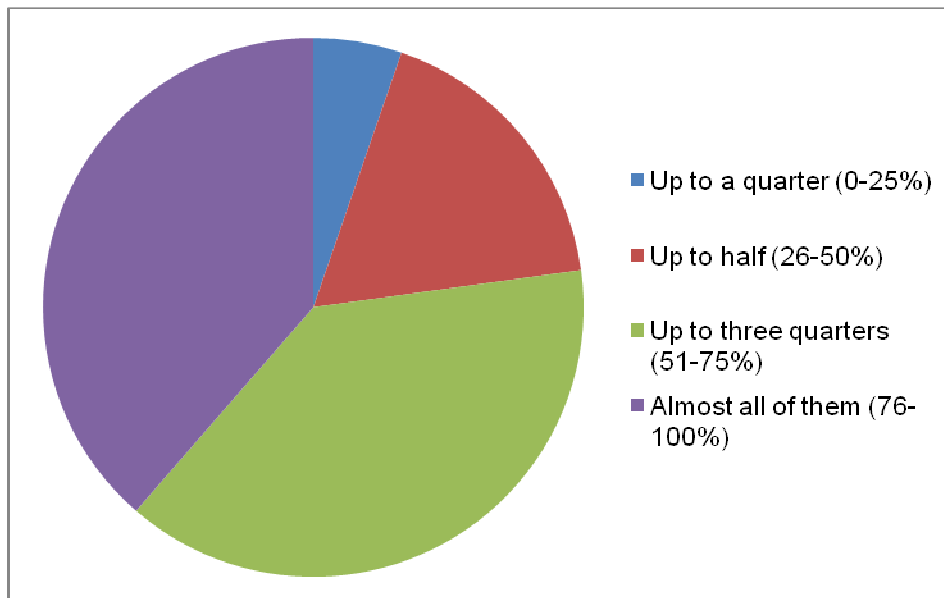
Analysis and Findings

To analyse the information that we had gathered, we developed codes and used these to extract themes from the data. These are the key themes that we identified.

Media content

The evidence gathered from the research indicates that the media produces both positive and negative stories about young people. There was a difference between local/regional and national media, in that the local/regional media tended to cover more positive stories about young people. Overall though, the media as a whole tends to report more negative stories. The data displayed in Table 1 below is taken from the young people's survey and shows what percentage of stories they felt were negative.

Table 1: Out of all the stories on young people that the media covers, what percentage of these are negative?



Our data also showed that young people feel that media stories are not representative, as they tend to focus on minorities of the youth population: either violent young people engaged in criminal activity, or extremely gifted and talented young people, i.e. young athletes or high academic achievers.

Barriers experienced by journalists

Our research found that journalists do not feel that all young people are bad. They felt that frequent negative reporting by the media is likely to make young people feel negative about themselves, alienated and angry. However, the journalists we interviewed talked about the pressures that they face to cover negative stories, that

often portray young people in a bad light. The media needs to sell itself to the public, and it feels that this is the type of news that the public wants to hear about. As some of the journalists who were interviewed explained:

“If it’s bad news its news worthy”

“Bad news sells”

Young people’s perceptions of ‘self’

The young people who took part in the research felt that the way in which the media portrays them and their peers, can have an impact on the way they see themselves.

Some of the young people felt that negative images and stories can cause stereotyping, as older people feel that all young people are part of gangs and are badly behaved. Some felt that these negative stereotypes were impacting on their daily lives: affecting how they dressed or where they could go with their friends. They often felt that older people were intimidated by them, and would cross over the street to avoid walking past them. Many of these young people felt that the media and the general public were ‘tarring them with the same brush’.

Evidence from the research also indicated that some young people feel that negative reporting in the media can impact on their self-welfare. After reading or seeing negative coverage, they often felt intimidated and scared of young people they didn’t know. Some respondents described how they had been harassed by the police despite doing nothing wrong, and felt that negative media coverage had led the police to suspect them.

Other young people we spoke to were angry about the media’s obsession with young people who misbehaved. They felt that behaving badly was often the only way to get any attention.

The young people who took part in the research recognised the important role the media has in informing people of what is going on, and that the public should be informed when bad things happen. However, they were critical of sensational reporting and felt that there should be some more positive news stories about young people to create a balance.

Key points to consider

- There should be a balance of negative and positive stories
- Young people should be given a voice to put across their views on this issue

- Negative, sensational reporting can have a negative affect on young people's lives
- Negative stories have the potential to be used for education