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Asbo kids get the massage

By Robin Brant
BBC News politics reporter

On the eastern edge of Manchester, in a windowless room at the back of a community housing office, a group of teenagers is learning how to give arm and hand massage.

This is how the town of Gorton is tackling a problem that has propelled the city it is part of to the top of the Asbo league.

The latest figures from the Home Office show Anti Social Behaviour Orders (Asbo) are being dished out in record numbers across the UK, and Manchester has the most.



The classes are popular with local teenagers

The hotspot for trouble in Gorton is Mount Road, where the police and locals say groups of teenagers gather round the shops late at night.

The Post Office is sandwiched in between an off licence, a café and a newsagents.

'Nuisance'

It is a soulless parade, with boarded up houses among the terrace row just a minutes walk away.

Irene Thorpe, who is in her 80s, told us about problems she had had.

"I couldn't get any sleep at night, during the day the hooded yobs used to sit on the iron railing and all I could see through my window was the back of the hooded boys.

“ We wouldn't be doing that now if it weren't here, we'd be on the streets sitting around ”

Nathan, 15

"They climbed the lamppost, swung on the lamppost and made a general nuisance of themselves."

It is a hard core which causes the most trouble, although especially during the summer months there are a lot more children and teenagers hanging around.

The swimming pool was closed down recently, and replaced with a Gymnastics Centre.

Dispersal order

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Despite the new investment most of the people we spoke to said the children preferred swimming.

They have tried a curfew in the Mount Road area, banning under 16s when it gets dark. Now they have got a dispersal order.

But it is not the only way Gorton is dealing with the problem.

Massage is part of the solution. Pat Stewart leads a team at the "On The Streets" project which lays on activities for young people from eight to 16, teaching them to give arm and hand massage.



Gorton is a tough area to grow up in

They target teenagers who already have Asbos or who they consider at risk of getting one.

Others come along as well, but the focus is on the ones who are in danger of going off the rails.

"The aim is very clear, it's not about coming in and just chilling out," she says.

"It's about learning things, learning how communities are put together, what makes them effective and reducing the anti-social behaviour that takes place."

'Diversion'

The class will practise their arm and hand massage for a few weeks then visit a home nearby to help treat pensioners.

They get to learn something new, but more importantly they get contact with people they wouldn't normally meet.

"Basically it's about targeting young people that could become involved in anti social behaviour and providing diversion away from those sort of activities," says Inspector Mark Kenny.

He is in charge of the Gorton area for Greater Manchester Police.

"It's vital to give them positive inputs in their lives. It's a win-win situation."

'Swearing'

But this is part of a two-pronged approach: activities on one hand, and enforcement on the other.

Manchester City Council see its high number of Asbos as a positive thing, proof it is dealing with a problem that 99.5% of the people in the city are not responsible for.

Massage, football, pool and PlayStation are combined with Asbo Awareness at 'On The Streets', and you see the evidence of that covering the walls of the back office.

Posters explain what an Asbo is and what happens to you if you get one.

There are Post-It notes stuck to the posters with handwritten notes explaining what could get you an Asbo. "Smoking skunk" one says, "swearing", another says.



Football is also popular

'Silliness'

Nathan, 15, was doing the massage class for a second time. He has an Asbo, restricting his movements around certain streets near his home.

The terms were imposed, after a court visit with his father, because he had been in trouble with a group of friends. He is one year into a four-year order.

Talking about the massage and other activities on offer at the project he says, "You have a laugh about with your mates, go and have a game of pool and you've got a Playstation.

"They don't moan and you can just do what you want, but not silliness."

Vital

I asked him about the fact he is learning new things as well.

"We wouldn't be doing that now if it weren't here, we'd be on the streets sitting around," was his answer.

Arm massage and Asbos is not a combination that comes to mind straight away but it is a vital way of tackling anti-social behaviour, according to the police and the people behind "On The Streets".

But the reality is that only a handful of teenagers come through the door of the small, windowless office where the cream and tissue paper is laid out for the massage lesson. Even then they only stay for a few hours.

For most of the time they are free to do what they want.

The following comments reflect the balance of views received:

Massage? They need a good birching!

James Holland, London, UK

Whilst I'm sure there is some benefit to the troublemakers, and a lot of benefit to the pensioners who eventually receive the massages, what about the rest of the community they are affecting outside the few hours a week of this project? This is not a real solution to the day to day problem of anti-social behaviour. We need a 24/7 solution. Military boarding school or hanging are the best two I can come up with! Alas, I can think of few politicians who'd be brave enough to implement that....

Dean Brown, Stoke-on-Trent, UK

It is all very well talking about these crackpot schemes, but the reality is that there is a serious problem that is here to stay; that of the repeat offender and serial anti-social individual. Until we get politicians with some moral fibre who

will really tackle this problem we will be faced with increasingly large numbers of individuals who are lawless and know that any punishment is almost irrelevant in the scheme of things, when your greatest ambition in life is to own a games machine.

Mark Stringer, Tunbridge Wells UK

I have been a massage therapist for 20+ years. If this project helps one child to go on to help others, then the program is a success. Even if it does not seem that these teens are changing because of it now - it is planting a seed of humanity that will sprout at some important time.

Georgia Gillia, CA, USA

For the past 3 months, I've been subjected to harrassment and intimidation by young kids hanging out at one of the supermarkets I frequent. I report what I perceive to be crimes, such as the kids letting the air out of my tyres. But the police tell me they cannot do anything about it, because these children cannot be prosecuted unless they do something seriously criminal. Which also means, these kids are free to roam the streets, causing havoc and trouble, until they eventually commit a major crime.

Ruggiero, Cambridge

This may be the only non-threatening human touch a troubled youngster recieves all day. To be able to give and receive a comforting touch should certainly boost their self image as a valued member of society, not just a troublemaker.

Kathy, Beaufort, NC USA

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