

CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS  
JOY-RIDING CHILDREN IN WEST BELFAST

1. INTRODUCTION

At the request of Mr Alison the Co-ordinating Committee on Social Problems (CCOSP) examined the non-security aspects of the problem of joy-riding in West Belfast. This Paper presents the result. It takes account of a background study by the Central Economic Service (Appendix I), a survey by the Department of Education (Appendix II) and discussions held with community and youth workers, school principals, probation officers, priests, the RUC voluntary workers and mothers from the area, most of whom had experience of the problem at local level.

2. THE PROBLEMS OF WEST BELFAST

Joy-riding cannot be examined in isolation from the deep-seated, structural social, economic and environmental problems of West Belfast in general and Divis in particular. The ASSN Report and other studies have highlighted the massive scale of social need and disadvantage in the area. Joy-riding is but one further indication of that social need. The almost intractable problem of unemployment in West Belfast, in particular the high rate of unemployment among young people and the slow rate of absorption of school leavers into employment, underlies most of the other social problems and has been cited as a factor predisposing to joy-riding.

3. INCIDENCE

3.1 Joy-riding is not a new problem, nor is it confined to Northern Ireland. Overall, the problem of joy-riding and unauthorised taking of vehicles is on a larger scale in Great Britain where it has escalated steadily over the past 10 years. In Northern Ireland, however, there is a greater likelihood of juvenile involvement in vehicle theft and the added dimension of the stolen car being used to crash or evade a VCP, with the further danger to the occupants of being shot or severely wounded. This compounds the problem for the security forces manning a VCP, who must take a rapid decision on whether the event is a terrorist incident - and their reaction is likely to be influenced by their level of expectancy - or a more innocuous but yet potentially dangerous escapade by children.

3.2 Army sources feel that the problem of joy-riding has increased sharply over the past five years. It is possible on the one hand that as terrorist activity declines, car-stealing may act as a suitable substitute for some adolescent boys whose life is largely dull; on the other that as the level

of military activity on the ground has decreased, young people have more opportunity to engage in criminal behaviour generally, of which joy-riding is but an aspect. They estimate that crashing or evading VCPs in West Belfast is relatively frequent, occurring perhaps 10-12 times per week.

- 3.3 Incidence appears to be higher in Winter and to follow a cyclical pattern, with joy-riding gaining popularity only to be superseded by another, more fashionable juvenile offence. An inverse relationship between joy-riding and breaking and entering has been suggested. While the problem was particularly acute in 1979, there are some indications that the present trend is past the peak.

#### 4. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCALISATION

Joy-riding tends to be localised, found mainly in Police Division B which consists mostly of Andersonstown and the Lower Falls. It tends to intensify as one approaches the inner city, being concentrated in Divis and relatively slight in Turf Lodge.

#### 5. CHARACTERISTICS OF JOY-RIDERS

##### 5.1 Numbers and Age

Joy-riding appears to be limited to a relatively small proportion of the population of young people in West Belfast. The DENI survey estimated that approximately 70 pupils in secondary schools in the area were involved. It seems to be most prevalent among boys in the 14-17 year age group, although children of as young as 7 and 8 are known to have been involved, perhaps learning by example. We note with concern the widening age groups and the growing tendency to find joy-riders among pupils in primary schools. It is commonly done in small groups, usually with one, older ring-leader, and with girls often involved as passengers.

##### 5.2 Educational disadvantage

Joy-riding children tend to be typified by such factors as a high incidence of absenteeism, low attainment, low or average intelligence and difficulties in relationships in school. They tend to be found in 3rd and 4th year non-examination classes in secondary schools and to be alienated from and disenchanted with school-organised extra-curricular activities or youth clubs. Our attention has been drawn to the fact that the problem of persistent non-attendance is being exacerbated by the

tendency of some schools in West Belfast to suspend indeterminately or expel pupils often without any explanation, and to the inability of the Education Welfare Service to pick up children with school attendance problems at an early stage.

### 5.3 Behavioural aspects

Why do children joy-ride? There is no easily discernible, single answer. Boredom, "for kicks" and the disinhibitory effects of underage drinking have been advanced as reasons. Some children are clearly attracted to joy-riding as a form of exhibitionism, and media publicity which highlights the 'problem' adds to its appeal. The bravado of attempting to drive through or evade a VCP, or to provoke a chase by the Security Forces can add to the thrill and increase the status of the joy-riders, who tend to hold themselves in low esteem and not to be popular members of their particular peer groups. There is some evidence, however, that in Divis they are accorded a degree of admiration and emulated by younger children. This emphasis on seeking stimulus and demanding attention seems important. It is not perhaps insignificant that several joy-riders, when interviewed, cited "Starsky and Hutch" and "The Dukes of Hazzard" as their favourite TV programmes, in both of which dramatic car chases seem to be integral and recurrent events.

## 6. LACK OF FACILITIES

In terms of youth facilities West Belfast is not under-provided. Not all the existing provision is necessarily appropriate to the needs of the different age groups. Specific reference has been made to the lack of facilities catering for the 14-17 age group in which most joy-riders are found, and to the almost total absence of play facilities for young children in the Lower Falls area, particularly after school hours. We have also been told that the high entrance charges prevent many young people from using the facilities in Leisure Centres. There is some indication too that less sophisticated facilities would serve the needs of these children better, simple drop-in centres with pool tables, table-tennis and coffee-bars, kick-about areas, lighted where necessary and inexpensive neighbourhood social facilities. A further problem is that many of the church-based youth clubs eject or disbar disruptive members so that the children most in need of help are denied the use of the facilities.

## 7. ACTION BEING TAKEN AT PRESENT

7.1 There is already a wide range of activity on the ground aimed at reaching small groups of young people and to which we attach importance as means of grappling with the joy-riding problem. These include the Youthways scheme,

Neighbourhood Workshops, Drop-in Centres for the 5-10 year olds, the Centre in St Peter's School, Raglan Street, which provides a valuable play resource for 5-10 year olds, and the appointment of Detached Youth Workers who are making an important and significant contribution in tackling the problem at ground level.

- 7.2 Various initiatives are being taken by schools and by DENI to deal with the problems of absenteeism and alienation. These include -
- emphasis on improving relationships with pupils, particularly in 4th and 5th year non-examination classes, by appointing one teacher as a 'class teacher' for 25-30 periods per week. Contact with pupils can be more easily maintained and support established, and evidence suggests that attendance improves significantly where a class teacher is employed.
  - attempts to develop a curriculum which is relevant to the needs of pupils, for example by including modules in work experience, community service, residential courses and physical and practical activities.
  - placing a "Youth Tutor" on the staff of a school and incorporating the philosophy of the Youthways scheme into the thinking of schools.
- 7.3 Individual workers have taken a number of initiatives with joy-riders, ranging from the involvement of the leaders of joy-riding groups in IVS and other community projects, to the establishment of 'ad hoc' centres geared specifically for young people who do not easily identify with youth clubs or Youth Service provision, and meetings with parents of children involved in joy-riding to talk about the problem and the parents' difficulties..
- 7.4 Of particular interest is a pilot, local motor project being planned on a non-agency basis by a group in West Belfast and modelled on the Ilderton Project in Lewisham Borough Council, which is described in Appendix I, Section III. The group are particularly anxious that their plans be given as little publicity as possible and that the scheme should not give rise to expectations that it will provide a solution. If successful, however, it might be replicated elsewhere. Because they are seeking to attract some highly alienated boys, they need to proceed quietly and without patronage or overt association with established agencies. They face formidable problems of insurance and organisation, and may in the end operate under the aegis of a national voluntary body. DHSS should contribute to the cost of a project leader to ensure continuity and early completion of the pilot study.

## 8. THE SCOPE FOR INTERVENTION

Those involved, or most at risk of becoming involved in joy-riding, are those who are alienated from or rejected by the school system. The school, therefore appears to be the key agency for any intervention. We see scope also for developing the Youthways scheme and Neighbourhood Workshops, as well as the input of Detached Youth Workers in an attempt to attract the "Unclubable" difficult young person who might not benefit from any school-based initiatives. We would emphasise the importance of providing physical activities into which young people can channel their energies, which might thus be diverted from joy-riding and we would underline the importance of the role of mothers in the area in dealing with joy-riders in their own families or wider community. Gaining access to a motor vehicle is a straightforward process for the joy-riders and some models, such as Fords, are known to be more at risk of being taken than others. We note with concern the apparent ease with which the children can obtain car keys from car showrooms and cars from open car parks. There would appear therefore, to be scope for action in the crime prevention field. The problem with Ford cars seems to be widespread and might be better tackled on a national level. In the longer term the progressive extension of neighbourhood police and police liaison schemes will have a significant effect.

## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 We do not recommend any major new programme to deal with joy-riding. Rather we feel that the range of activities under way or planned, some of which have already proved to be reasonably successful in tackling the problem, should be allowed to continue, perhaps with a sharpening of focus or some stepping up of existing programmes.

9.2 In a situation where some children are attracted to joy-riding as a form of exhibitionism, media publicity can only be detrimental and high profile involvement in an already sensitive area by political or agency establishment could well be counter-productive. We recommend, therefore, that any intervention should be at as low profile level as possible, and that further consideration be given to the following areas.

- (i) Key schools in West Belfast which have not already done so should be encouraged to place initiatives such as curricular development, Class Teachers and Youth Tutors high on their lists of priorities.  
(DENI)

- (ii) Consideration should be given to the problem of indeterminate suspensions by some schools in West Belfast, to the scope which might exist for strengthening the Home/School Links scheme, and to whether the Education Welfare Service could pick up persistent non-attenders at an earlier stage. We understand that these issues will be actively pursued by the DENI Inspectorate (DENI).
- (iii) The concept of the school-based team proposed in the Black Report should be introduced experimentally in at least one large secondary school in the area. (DENI/DHSS)
- (iv) Attempts should be made to ensure that youth clubs in the area meet as effectively as possible the needs of older age groups, whether by separate clubs or by providing "senior member" facilities in existing clubs. (DENI)
- (v) The possibility should be considered of developing for recreational purposes the additional use of already available resources, for example schools with declining populations, and of strengthening the Youth Service input in the area. (DENI)
- (vi) A few simple drop-in centres on the lines of an existing model in Trinity Street should be established as a matter of urgency. (DENI)
- (vii) Children at risk should be ensured readier access to Leisure Centres and should not be disbarred by high charges. The City Council should be asked to devise a scheme whereby high-risk children through membership of a youth club could use the facilities at reduced rates. (DENI)
- (viii) DHSS should grant-aid the appointment of a project leader for the Auto-project as a pilot scheme. (DHSS)
- (ix) Some of the resources at Whitefield House should be deployed in a concerted programme to help at least some of the children at risk. An interdepartmental review of the operation of Whitefield is under consideration. (NIO/DHSS/DENI)