

Do Skateparks Reduce Anti-Social Behaviour?

**A research project for 3rd year of BA studies
in
Human Geography**

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Paul Dugard, Exeter City Council
Tony Bodgin, Exeter City Council
Rob Dentworth, Exeter City Council
Bernard Will, Exeter City Council

1. Introduction

The project's purpose was to identify whether skateparks reduce anti-social behaviour (ASB) in young people. Secondary research and literature was combined with the data collected from a primary research study in Exeter and Sheffield, to develop an understanding of the issues surrounding skateparks, including youth culture and not in my back yard (NIMBY) attitudes, before exploring the impact the facility has had on the area.

Data was drawn from a research undertaken of Flowerpot skatepark, Exeter's most recent large-scale skatepark, built in 2001. Participant observation was conducted in a skatepark in the centre of Sheffield to explore its use and examine the effects of floodlighting on ASB - a feature which distinguishes the Sheffield facility from the one in Exeter.

Since there is a consensus among academic sources that 'extreme sports' such as skateboarding and stunt riding are rising in popularity amongst young people, in contrast with a decline in 'traditional' team sports, a study of the effects of youth participation in these sports, and its link to any impact on ASB offered itself as a worthwhile topic.

The study adopted the Crime and Disorder Act's (1998) definition of ASB as "acting in a manner that causes or is likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons".

Research objectives:

1. Investigate whether skateparks reduce ASB in young people
2. Identify the extent of NIMBY attitudes among residents who live in vicinity of a skatepark
3. Suggest methods of reducing public misconceptions towards skateparks
4. Explore the effects of floodlighting on ASB in skateparks after dark.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Interviews

Interviews were conducted between June and September (2008) on participants with key insider knowledge. Tim Ruck, the owner of the Boarding House bike shop was the main driver behind the Flowerpot skatepark project and has a vast experience of skateparks and is in daily contact with its users. Paul Dugard, leisure support officer for Exeter City Council provided a council's viewpoint, even if he was not yet in post during the construction and first few years of the skatepark. Finally the senior community patrollers, Rob Dentworth and Bernard Will, contributed their extensive experience with ASB in young people in Exeter.

2.2. Questionnaires

In September, 2008, 50 questionnaires were posted in Hayes Barton, Flowerpot Lane and Western Road to uncover their attitudes towards the facility. These were the areas identified with help from Tony Bodgin, Special Projects & Tenant Liaison Manager in Housing Services for Exeter City Council, as the closest to Flowerpot Skatepark. The residences are council and privately owned, a large proportion consists of elderly residents. Each posted envelope included a cover letter briefly introducing and explaining the aims of my study, the questionnaire and a freepost envelope to return to the Civic Centre (see appendix). Sixteen questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 32%, higher than the average rate of 20% as identified by Denscombe (1998).

2.3. Participant observation

This aimed to explore how a skatepark is used by different groups. This was conducted in autumn during weekends, school half term and over weekdays at different times of the day. The observation occurred in Sheffield as it was not until later on in the project, away from the initial research area, that this method was adopted. The effects of floodlighting on group presence was also studied. Groups were categorised as:

A - Skatepark users

B – People watching

C – People socialising on the skatepark borders

D – People using the park anti-socially e.g. consuming alcohol and drugs, shouting and showing aggressive behaviour.

The number of people from each group was periodically recorded into a phone and notes were made of any unusual or significant events.

2.4. Limitations

The limited scope of the research affects the representativeness of the data, although case studies have been argued by some academics to produce results which may be applicable to different settings.

Due to a limited number of residents close to the facility the sample was small which hinders its reliability.

Finally, ethical issue prevented interviewing of under 18's and was replaced by observation and third party experiences.

The researcher identity as a skatepark user meant that bias could have affected the results and conclusions. Subjectivity was minimised by referring to a range of sources and through triangulation.

3. Key findings

3.1. Has Flowerpot skatepark reduced ASB in the area?

Initiatives which have encouraged sport participation in problem neighbourhoods have revealed positive outcomes. Adolescent behavioural characteristics have been acknowledged by Bunton et al (2004) and Parsons 1942 (cited by Bale, 1999) to focus around risk taking and thrill seeking inherent in notions of masculinity. Importantly, it is Bunton et al (2004) recognition of the need for spaces to be allocated for risk taking and socialisation that suggest the significance of skateparks.

Academics who have studied youth culture and statistics documenting the rapid rise in popularity among skatepark sports suggest indirectly that skateparks would reduce ASB

This topic question was put to the interviewees and residents. Paul Dugard could not directly address the question since he had not been present during the Flowerpot skatepark project construction and inauguration. Although he stated that:

'We (the council) have monitored it quite extensively and if there were any problems then we would have gone back to rectify them if possible'.

Tim Ruck acknowledged that when the skatepark had opened there were problems of user conflict, vandalism committed by drug dealers and a trespassing issue which has since been eradicated with the construction of a fence around the nearby residences. However he believed that these problems are no longer present. In Tim's view, the skatepark has had a 'massive' and positive impact on the area:

'As far as the residents are concerned they are all ok with it... Local community patrol officers told us that their calls for various problems had dropped overnight... it definitely has [had] a massive impact on social problems such as people skating around estates'.

The senior patrollers confirmed this statement. Bob Dentworth stated that the impact of the facility to the area had been 'brilliant'. Bernard Will added:

'It's worked really well to lure skate boarders off the road which was what quite a few of our complaints were about [...] it was a very good idea and it has worked really well.'

Incidents of anti-social use of the area have however caused some opposition towards it from residents. The resident survey revealed that opinions over whether the skatepark had been beneficial or detrimental with reference to ASB were divided, although as only half the correspondents responded to this question, the other residents may not have viewed the skatepark as conducive to ASB.

The interviewees and a few of the residents agreed that ASB was not caused by the skatepark users as they would go home at the end of the day, which poses the question

whether usability of the skatepark after dark would disperse the 'trouble makers' from the area. Since an observation analysis was conducted in a skatepark with floodlighting this will be explored.

The popularity of the facility highlights its significance to its users. This is likely to explain the affirmation from the senior patrollers that the skatepark has reduced complaints regarding ASB in the area.

3.2. How extensive are NIMBY attitudes?

NIMBY literature has unveiled that residents have tended to oppose plans to new facilities in their area when there has been a concern that they may, as a result, be negatively effected (Wolsink, 1994). Blake (1994) views people with NIMBY attitudes as immature, selfish to the needs of society and ignoring how new facilities would benefit their area. These opinions reflect those shown in reports focusing on skatepark proposals, where residents have been quoted to voice concerns over an increase in ASB, especially noise, in their neighbourhood.

Academic literature on NIMBYism towards skateparks is restricted to a study conducted by Fiore et al in Australia (2005). This study argued that, following a range of tests, skateparks did not increase noise levels beyond '200 feet' or increase crime. Since NIMBYist lobbying has been powerful enough to restrict or abort skatepark proposals, it is important to address this issue.

Interestingly, only two residents stated that they found the skatepark difficult to live near. (see figure A2 for overall results) Positive remarks included:

'I live opposite the skatepark and it hasn't had any negative effects on me. [...] In fact I like to watch the skaters'.

'Where I am living there is no problem- I hardly notice what goes on in the skate park'.

'I support areas such as this for young people and have not had any negative experience from its use'.

At present, the senior patrollers only receive *'the occasional complaints'*, such as,

'about people [...] skateboarding up the road at 11 a clock at night on the pavement'.

Only two respondents portrayed a strong sense of NIMBYism. One retired resident was explicit about experiencing most of the 'negative effect':

'Have one beside you and see if you like it'.

Another respondent was unhappy that the skatepark had been built 'so near [to] houses'. They viewed the facility as:

'An eyesore [which] spoils the area [due to] rubbish [being] chucked down by skateboarders [which] blows all over the area'.

This respondent also noted that the skatepark had become

'a gathering place for teenagers at night drinking and shouting'.

To tackle this issue the senior patrollers stated that there had been an increase in patrol presence during these times.

Only two residents noted that they had experienced threatening behaviour, trespassing or insecurity when travelling around the skatepark, which shows the importance of night surveillance.

The residents portrayed a positive overall outlook of the skatepark. It is however evident that experiences and attitudes among certain residents differed substantially. This coincides with Blake's (2004) observation that NIMBY attitudes do not reflect and therefore cannot be used to generalise the view of an entire community. According to Denscombe (1998), it is unlikely that residents who hold a strong NIMBY attitude would ignore the opportunity to express their feelings, and it was made explicit in the cover letter that the questionnaire's objection was to collate views and concerns about the skatepark for these to be addressed by the City Council (see figure A.1).

Out of the fifty questionnaires posted only four were returned holding NIMBY attitudes. The interviews revealed that NIMBYism towards Flowerpot skatepark had strongly declined over time, inevitably due to initial problems being subsequently tackled. This suggests that the actual experience of living near the skatepark had not been as problematic as perceived before and during its construction. This supports the view shared by Wolsink (1994), Fiore et al (2005) and Blake (2004) that NIMBYism is often caused by presumptions and prejudice, rather than based on facts and experiences.

This survey has shown that a skatepark does not have a detrimental impact on a community when managed and policed effectively.

3.3. How can NIMBY attitudes be addressed?

Holding events at skateparks improve their perception in the eyes of the public. As Tim Ruck witnessed, the public have shown great interest in the annual competition. He recognised that these people

'probably don't normally see what happens in the skatepark [...] whereas if they come to the contest they [...] are a lot more aware of the sort of time and dedication [the skatepark users] put into it'

The senior patrollers stated that the competition had been 'excellent' and was 'well attended by the public'. In their view,

'more competitions and advertising of skate parks would attract more youths and families to compete and give them something to do all year round.'

If events such as this were held in all cities, than NIMBY attitudes could diminish as people acknowledge the importance of this facility to a growing number of users. Young

spectators could be motivated and become involved in these sports, which could deter them from becoming involved in ASB later on. This can be supported by Tim Ruck's opinion that the skatepark users were not responsible for the binge drinking and rowdy behaviour occurring after dark, since 'they want to use the park, they don't want to fall around smashing bottles in it'.

An increased frequency of competitions could attract more youths to participate and increase the demand for skateparks.

3.4. Should more skateparks be built?

In Tim Ruck's opinion, skateparks are not being built because councils and schools often fail to realise that

'what kids want to do is changing and the traditional sports don't necessarily hold so much of an attraction'.

The leisure officer recognised that the problem was that they are 'still perhaps viewed slightly negatively in some people's eyes'. Tim Ruck argued that

'most kids, at some point in their childhood will own a pair of roller blades, a skateboard or a BMX bike.'

This observation of a shift from team to individual, 'character building' sports coincides with the sport participation statistics noted earlier. The leisure officer concurred that,

'[extreme sports] definitely have risen in popularity quite massively [...] in recent years'.

Tim Ruck thinks that schools should invest in skateparks, as they are

'great for recreation in the breaks [and] you could teach PE on them and hold events there'.

He recognised that

'skateboarding and BMX are both going to be in the 2012 Olympics, that's where it's moving towards so if the schools had the facilities that would be perfect'.

Tim Ruck emphasised that effective planning and consultation are important to reduce poor design, which inhibits the facility's popularity. In the Flowerpot skateparks project 'everyone's voice was heard', which Blake (2004) argued was essential for successful community development. Everyone interviewed viewed the Flowerpot skatepark project as a definite success. Exeter City Council recognised that there had been

'few complaints and opposition to the project [...] but] now it's a well established [...] and a] well used facility'.

The leisure officer credited skateparks for providing young people with a

'place that they can call their own [...and] hang out', acknowledging that young people are 'going to be hanging out somewhere', so it is better that this is 'a safe, fun place for them to be'.

The senior patrollers recommended

'more skateparks and events in the city [...they] 'take problems away from residential areas and [...] bring all age groups together'.

The majority of the residents supported the statement that more skateparks should be built, which is significant since this group has been portrayed by reports to express the greatest opposition. These opinions signify the importance of a well-managed skatepark such as Flowerpot. The consensus implies that on a larger scale local authorities should be provided with an increase in funding and the public should be educated about the positive effects of skateparks. This would result in more skateparks being built, and drawing from the research of this project, would reduce youth ASB.

3.5. Skatepark use and the effects of floodlighting

Early evenings (note: observation took place during the winter months) drew the largest number of users to the facility in Sheffield, usually a large group of BMX riders in their late teens and early twenties (see figure B1 for data on skatepark use).

The '*unspoken etiquette*' at skateparks which Tim Ruck identified was evident during the observation, as there was no conflict between the users and there was a positive atmosphere among them.

A large number of users often deterred 'deviant' behaviour (e.g. shouting and confrontation). This control shifted on occasional evenings when the number of users gradually decreased while binge drinking groups became dominant on Friday evenings.

The interviewees on the whole supported the suggestion of floodlighting in Exeter's skateparks. According to Tim Ruck, this would have a positive impact on residents as the users deter ASB. An insight from the council revealed that the reason for not having floodlighting was a lack of funds. Tim Ruck recognised that the lack of lighting presented a

'major fault with Exeter's skateparks', since they cannot be used during the winter by the time 'anyone gets home'.

Burney (2005), Collingwood et al (1992) and Parsons (1942, cited by Bale, 1999) stated that youths are likely to seek often anti-social activities when they suffer from boredom due to limited provision of facilities. This perspective applied to the users who would have been likely to venture out onto the city centre and residential areas where they would have caused problems if the skatepark was not usable during evenings.

While the skatepark users appeared to be from different social backgrounds, the anti-social groups were composed of working class young males, reinforcing Parson's noted 'dysfunctional nature of having a good time' among this group.

It is important to note that there was no police presence of the skatepark in Sheffield over the observation period, which explains why at times there were large anti-social groups in the facility. Despite the lack of policing, the users did manage to sustain order in the skatepark until anti-social groups became dominant. This shows that floodlighting at Flowerpot skatepark would deter anti-social youths and in effect reduce problems experienced by residents. Lighting coupled with the policing already present in the area would ensure that problem youths would be unlikely to congregate in the skatepark.

The fundamental impact of floodlighting in skateparks is the attraction among its users who would otherwise practice their sport on the street. Support for this comes from the senior patrollers who noted that Flowerpot skatepark has 'lured skateboarders away from residential areas'. Whether ASB occurs in skateparks depends predominantly on policing rather than on the presence of users.

4. Policy recommendations

- 1. Acknowledging the growing importance of skatepark sports among adolescents.**
- 2. The continuation of youth involvement in projects targeted at them.**
- 3. Considering skateparks as an essential part of community development programmes to address a growing number of adolescent needs and to help tackle ASB.**
- 4. Educating the public about the actual effects of skateparks and holding more events at them to reduce misconceptions and NIMBY attitudes, which could stifle new skateparks developments.**

5. Conclusion

The data drawn from the case study established that skateparks reduce ASB due to a number of reasons. First, the facility draws skateboarders and stunt riders away from the streets where they would otherwise cause problems. Second, due to the positive social atmosphere which was documented by the interviewees and observation in this study, participation in skatepark orientated sports improves youth behaviour. This coincides with findings by Bailey (2003), Makkai et al (2005), Jones and Oxford (1989) and Goulding and Lindsey (2006), who studied the behavioural effects of sport participation.

Third, unlike initiatives, in which noted the behavioural benefits had rebounded when the programmes had ended (www.idea.gov.uk, Jones and Oxford, 1989), skateparks do not require youth worker presence so these benefits are long term. Finally, as Farrington (2006) and Blake (2004) have argued, to tackle ASB, investment in neighbourhood facilities is required. The senior patrollers stated that they have received fewer complaints since the skatepark has been present, which supports this suggestion. As Blake (2004) added, youths should be included in these projects for them to be successful. Youth involvement in the Flowerpot skatepark project supports Blake's (2004) claim due to the facility's enduring popularity. Floodlighting of skateparks coupled with policing has been

established to reduce ASB among skateboarders and stunt riders, especially over autumn and winter.

In an effort to tackle ASB, a greater emphasis should be placed on the value of, and investment in, skateparks. While evidently skatepark sports do not appeal to every adolescent nor address every cause of ASB, their popularity is mounting and a range of benefits have been identified. Furthermore, this activity transcends social classes and therefore is able to bring people from different backgrounds together and create a 'community of interest' which has 'bridging' qualities in social terms. The results from this study support the argument that youth ASB reduction initiatives should consider the positive effects achieved by skateparks.

Milan Recknagel, February 2009

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Appendices:

A.1

Milan Recknagel
27 Oakfield Road
St Thomas
Exeter
EX4 1BA
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E: milanboez@hotmail.com

28 August 2008

Dear Resident

Flowerpot skatepark study

I am a human geography student in my final year at University, researching the social effects of skateparks. The aim of my study is to find out whether skateparks can reduce anti-social behaviour in young people, by providing them with a space and opportunity to engage in a challenging and fun sport activity. I am using the Flowerpot skatepark as a case study and am undertaking this project in partnership with Exeter City Council.

Your views and experiences as local residents living in proximity to the skatepark are very valuable for my research, by throwing a light on the wider social impact of skateparks. I have prepared a short questionnaire and would be very grateful if you could spare five minutes to complete it.

All questionnaires are anonymous and will be dealt with in confidence. The results of this questionnaire will help Exeter City Council identify and act on any issues.

If you have any queries or would like to be informed about the results of this study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

I would appreciate it if you could post questionnaires before **18th September** using the FREEPOST envelope provided.

I look forward to your views and thank you again for taking the time to respond.

Yours sincerely

Milan Recknagel

A.2

Questionnaire results

Section 1:

1. Your experience of the skatepark so far:
 - Passive: as a local resident only (no involvement). **9**
 - As a spectator: I have watched events/ competitions or the action, whilst walking past. **3**
 - Active: I have used/ taken family or friends to the skatepark. **4**
2. Would you say that you have been affected by the nearby skatepark?
 - Yes **9**
 - No **7**
3. Are you aware that a fence has been built facing the skatepark?
 - No **4**
 - Yes: **12** If 'Yes', has the fence eradicated previous problems?
 - Yes **4**
 - No **6**

Section 2: About yourself

4. .Where do you live?
 - Flowerpot Lane **11**
 - Hayes Barton **5**
 - Western Road **0**
 - Retired **6 (7)**
5. How long have you lived there?
 - Less than 2 years **2**
 - 2 – 6 years **3**
 - 7 years or more **11**
6. Your age:
 - 18 – 24 **0**
 - 25 – 55 **5**
 - 56 + **11**
7. Occupation:
 - In paid work **7**
 - Not working **1**
 - Parent or Carer **1**
8. Do you have children/ grand children?
 - No **5**
 - Yes **11**
9. If yes, do they use or do you take them to the skatepark?
 - No **8**
 - Yes **3**
10. Use of the skatepark by yourself/ children/ grandchildren/ family:
 - Frequent: Most days
 - Regular: Few times a week **1**
 - Sometimes: Once a week **1**
 - Rarely: Few times a month **1**
 - Never: Maybe in the future
 - Never: No intention to **12**

Section 3: Only respond if you have answered YES to question 1

11. Have you experienced any of the following **negative effects** (please tick appropriate box)

	Day	Evening	Night
Noise	3	5	6
Feeling insecure	1	2	2
Litter	4	5	4
Graffiti	2	1	2
Threatening behaviour	1	2	2
Trespassing	2	2	1
Other (please specify)	Litter/ damage		

12. Have you ever made any complaints in relation to the skatepark?

- To the council 2
- To Police 2
- To the Community patrol officer 2

Section 4: Your overall opinion about the skatepark (tick relevant box)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The skatepark provides an important sports facility for young people	3	8	2	0
The skatepark provides an important social facility for young people	2	8	1	1
The skatepark is a valuable asset to the area	2	3	1	4
I find it difficult to live nearby	0	0	7	3
The Skatepark has reduced anti-social behaviour in young people	0	4	3	1
The Skatepark has caused anti-social behaviour in young people	1	3	2	2
There should be more skateparks for young people	2	6	1	1
The positive aspects outweigh any related problems	2	8	2	1

B.1

Observation data and graphs

A: skatepark users

B: observers

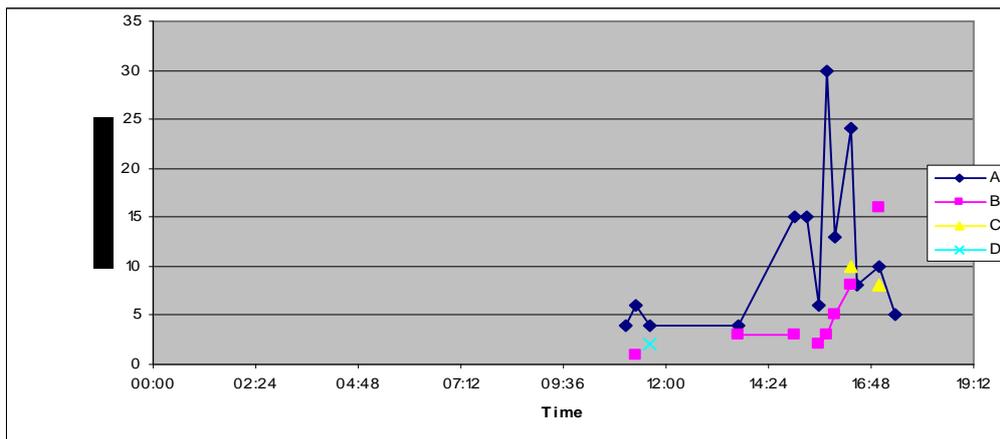
C: social use of parameters of skatepark

D: ASB

The tables represent the data recorded over the study period into one a single table for each category (weekend, half term and weekdays) to show the overall use over the course of a day.

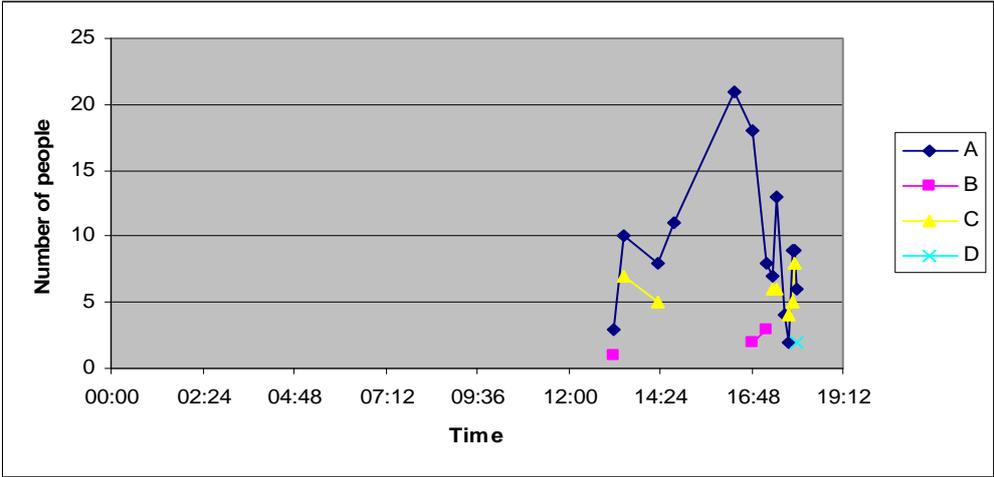
Weekends

	A	B	C	D
11:04	4			
11:19	6		1	
11:38	4			2
13:42	4	3		
15:00	15	3		
15:19	15			
15:35	6	2		
15:45	30	3		
15:57	13	5		
16:20	24	8		10
16:27	8			
16:58	10	16		8
17:22	5			



half term

	A	B	C	D
13:12	3		1	
13:28	10			7
14:20	8			5
14:45	11			
16:20	21			
16:50	18		2	
17:11	8		3	
17:22	7			6
17:26	13			6
17:41	4			
17:48	2			4
17:52	9			5
17:55	9			8
18:00	6			2



weekdays	A	B	C	D	
14:45	7				
15:09	6				
15:11	4				
15:23	7			3	
15:31	7				
15:32	9		3		
15:33	8				
15:49	10			5	
15:51	9				
16:00	2				
16:13	5		2	3	
17:52	18			4	
18:49	23		2		
19:14	4			9	7
20:00	2				
21:21	8		1		
22:35	1				

