Adolescent antisocial behavior: Changes over time and across the life course

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Outline of the presentation

1. Background and context
2. Data and measures
3. Research findings
4. Conclusions and policy implications

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Background and context

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Background

Antisocial behaviour (ASB) among children and young people is a term used to cover a range of behaviours from graffiti to physical fighting

- Often assumes a bell-curve trend, increasing into adolescence before declining into the early twenties (Farrington et al., 2008; Moffitt, 1993)
- But there is some evidence of longer-term effects of engagement in adolescent antisocial behaviour into adulthood (Baker et al., 2026; Parsons et al., 2021; Popli et al., 2025)

- Use Cohort '98 of the Growing Up in Ireland study to look at the trajectories of ASB and their consequences for a range of outcomes
- Broader study also looks at changes over time in ASB among 13-year-olds



Conceptual framework



Parallel literatures on youth transitions and on antisocial behaviour or crime but there are good reasons for integrating insights from both sets of literature



Developmental perspective: adolescence as a period of risk-taking; ASB can be an expression of testing boundaries and gaining independence (Czech and Kemp, 2010; Romer et al., 2017); but potential impact on relationships with others (e.g. fighting) and on key developmental trajectories (e.g. school engagement) (Thornberry et al., 2003)



Labelling perspective: even less serious actions may result in contact with the police and the wider justice system (Medina Ariza, 2014); vicious cycle re further contact; negative signals for employers (Parsons et al., 2024)

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Data and measures

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Data and measures



Cohort ‘98 was initially sampled at 9 years and followed up at 13, 17, 20 and 25 years of age



Face-to-face interviews with sensitive questions (e.g. on ASB) administered on a self-completion basis in the home – child/young person, mother, (resident) father

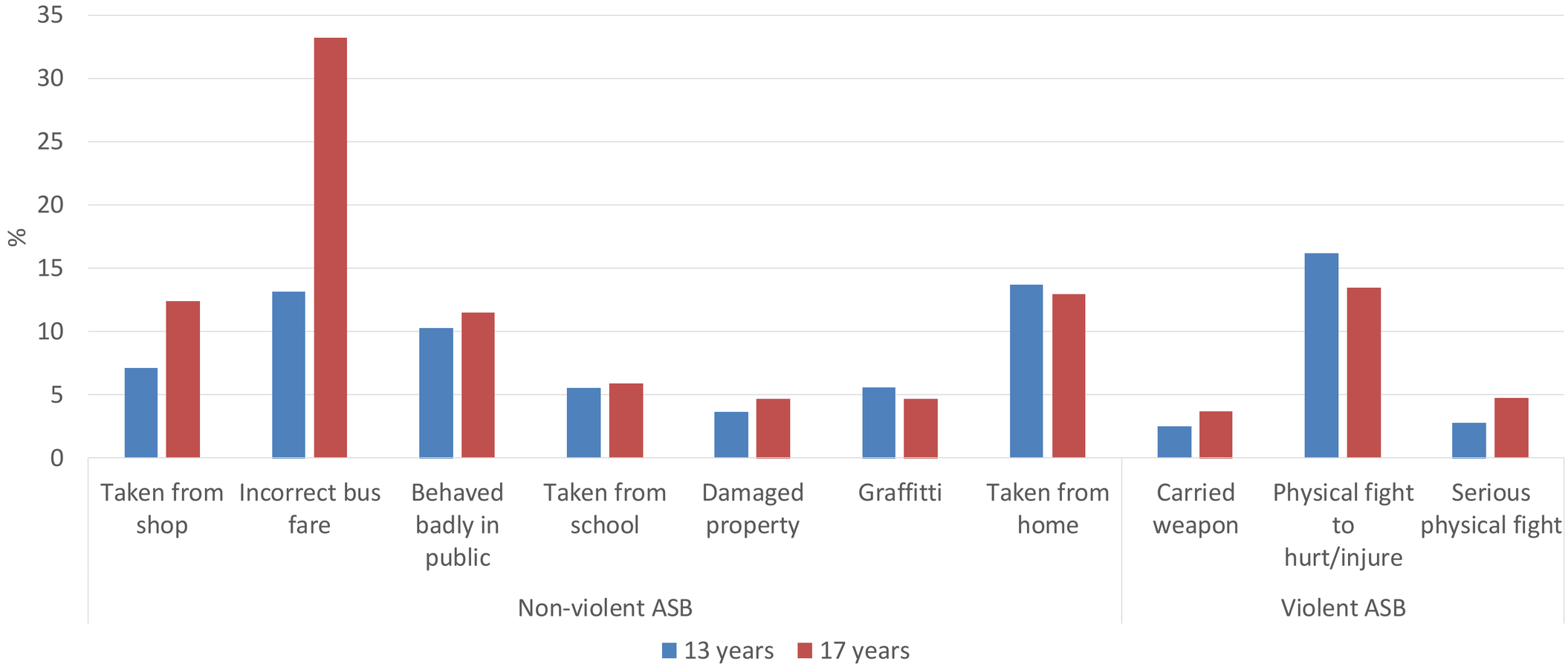


Questions on antisocial behavior were asked at 13 and 17 years of age; not continued into adulthood because of risk of self-disclosure



Questions on contact with the justice system were asked at 17, 20 and 25 years

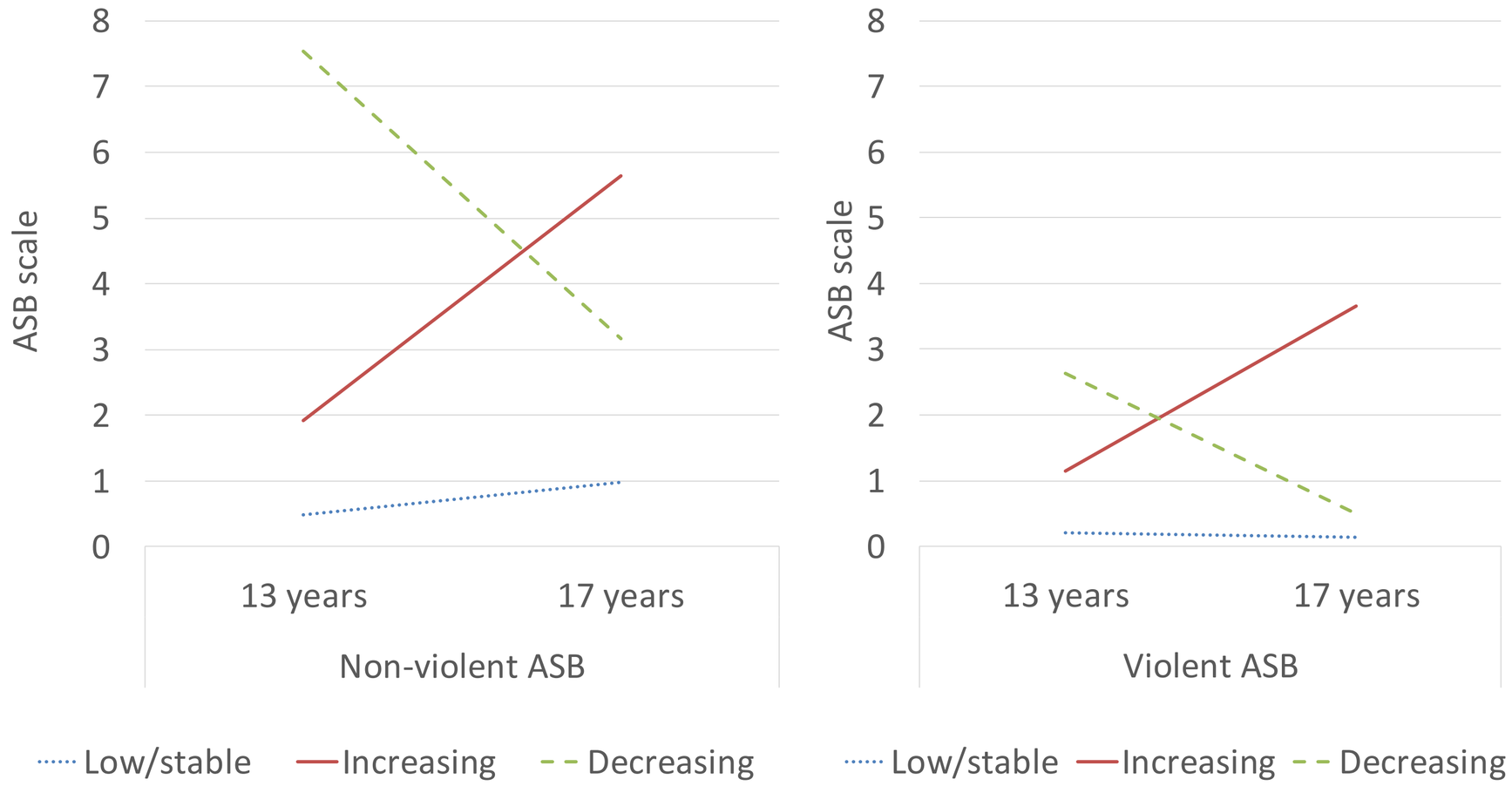
Antisocial behavior at 13 and 17 years



More serious actions (breaking into house or car, stealing car, arson) – less than or around 1%

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Latent class analysis of ASB trajectories



Three groups:

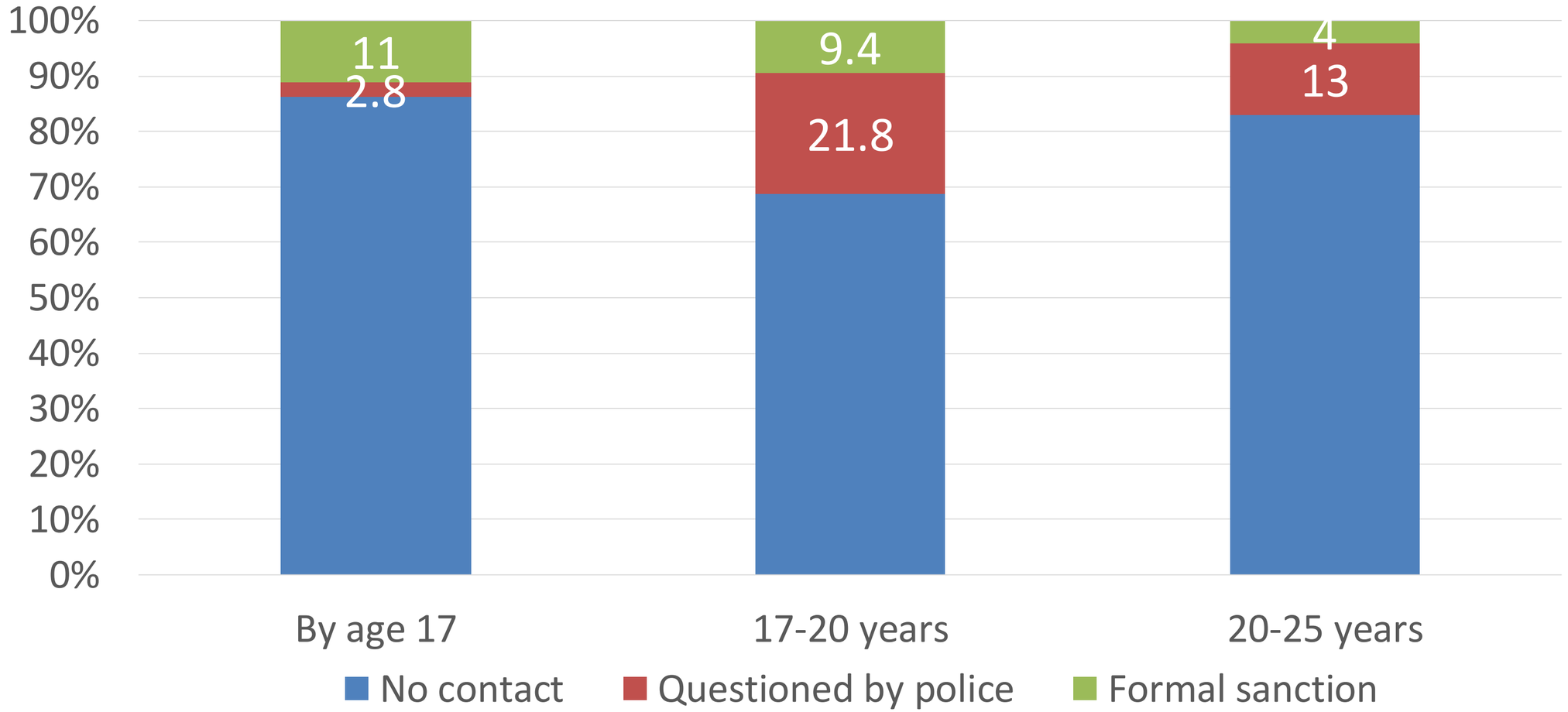
No/low ASB (91%)

Increasing (5%)

Decreasing (4%)

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Contact with the justice system



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Outcomes

Education

- Upper secondary (Leaving Certificate) grades
- Achieving a degree by age 25

Wellbeing at 20 and 25

- Depression (Center for Epidemiological Studies scale)
- Life satisfaction
- Satisfaction with social life
- Trust in other people

Labour market at 25

- Employment status
- Receipt of social welfare payments in previous two years
- Income decile

Analytical approach

Models of relationships between ASB trajectory and outcomes

Controls:

- Gender
- Social class
- Migrant background
- Disability
- Urban/rural
- Reading scores at age 9 (for educational outcomes)
- Socio-emotional difficulties (SDQ) at age 9 (for wellbeing)

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Factors associated with ASB and justice system contact

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Factors associated with ASB (I)

Family background	Social class, parental education and financial strain are not significant
	Only being from a lone-parent family is significant
School	Fee-paying schools have higher rates of non-violent ASB
	Schools with a concentration of socio-economic disadvantage have somewhat higher rates of violent ASB
Neighbourhood	High rates in urban neighbourhoods characterised by more disorderly environments

Factors associated with ASB (II)

Family relationships	Mother-child conflict
	Older siblings
	Socialising with older peers
Mental health and socio-emotional difficulties	Externalising difficulties at age 9
	Higher depression scores and hearing voices at age 13
Adverse life events	Increases in ASB between 13 and 17 years are strongly related to experience of adverse life events (bereavement, parental mental health, addiction etc.)

Factors associated with justice system contact by age 17

Controlling for levels of non-violent and violent ASB at age 13

Lower contact for females

Clear social class gradient – highest rates for those from working-class and non-employed families

No variation by urban/rural, migrant background or disability

ASB trajectories, justice system contact and outcomes in early adulthood

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Impact in early adulthood

- The increasing ASB group and those with early justice system contact have lower Leaving Certificate grades and lower qualifications by age 25
- The increasing ASB group have higher depression scores and lower life satisfaction at age 20; these effects diminish by age 25
- Early justice system contact is linked to lower levels of trust in others
- There are no differences in employment status but income is lower and welfare receipt higher for those with early justice system contact

Conclusions

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Conclusions

- Both ASB trajectory and contact with the justice system make a difference to outcomes in early adulthood
- Marked educational penalty for the increasing ASB group and for the decreasing group who had early justice contact
- Poorer wellbeing and less social integration among the increasing ASB group, with early justice contact also linked to reduced trust in others; effects diminish by age 25 (but not for lower trust)
- Fewer differences in LM outcomes, perhaps because of favourable conditions but some evidence of higher welfare receipt and lower income with justice system contact
- Important to consider involvement of ASB and contact with the justice system in youth transitions research more generally

Thank you

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