

BMOE 7013

Rhein Mikaelson: 2109766

Assessment 2: Essay

Critically evaluate the impact of outdoor adventure on the health and well-being of a specific demographic group in your local area and make recommendations for removing barriers to participation.

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This essay critically evaluates the extent to which outdoor adventure can influence antisocial behaviour among young people aged 16–25 in the West Midlands, with particular attention to associated health and wellbeing outcomes. It also proposes practical and evidence-informed strategies for reducing barriers to participation, recognising that the benefits of outdoor adventure are not equally accessible to all young people.

For the purposes of this essay, outdoor adventure is understood as structured, purposeful activity undertaken in outdoor environments, such as hiking, kayaking, bushcraft and facilitated team challenges. These activities typically combine physical exertion with social interaction and managed challenge. They are commonly used within outdoor education and youth development contexts to promote personal and social growth (Priest and Gass, 2018). Outdoor adventure is therefore positioned not simply as recreation, but as a potential intervention that supports psychological, social and emotional wellbeing.

Antisocial behaviour (ASB) is defined as behaviour that causes harassment, nuisance or distress to others within public or community spaces, including acts such as vandalism, intimidation and disruptive group behaviour (Home Office, 2015; Citizens Advice). Among young people, ASB is frequently associated with unstructured leisure time, limited access to positive activities, and wider social and environmental inequalities.

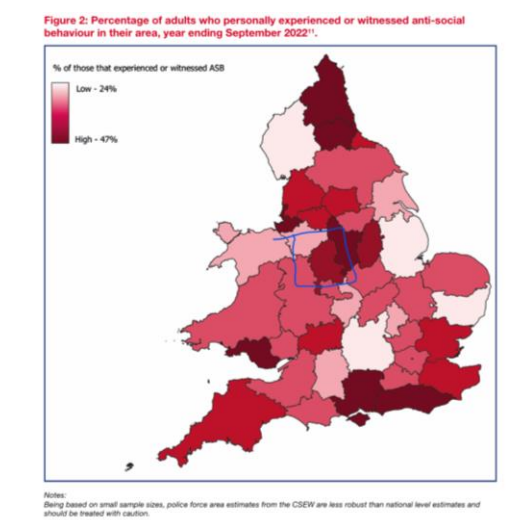
Within the West Midlands, persistently high levels of youth-related antisocial behaviour have resulted in increased investment in preventative and early-intervention approaches. Notably, the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner has committed over £1 million to initiatives aimed at reducing ASB and supporting safer communities, particularly in urban areas (West Midlands PCC, 2023). National policy further emphasises the role of youth services, early intervention and diversionary activity in preventing young people from entering the youth justice system (Home Office, 2023). This policy context highlights a growing recognition of the need for approaches that move beyond enforcement and towards engagement.

Evidence suggests that participation in structured physical activity programmes — including sports and outdoor adventure-type interventions — can contribute to reductions in antisocial behaviour by improving mental wellbeing, strengthening peer relationships and enhancing self-regulation. For example, a mixed-methods systematic review of sports and physical activity interventions for at-risk youth aged 25 and under found positive effects on offending, aggression, externalising and internalising behaviours, as well as self-esteem, indicating pathways through which structured group activities support behavioural outcomes relevant to antisocial behaviour. <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp->

However, these potential benefits are contingent upon participation. Evidence suggests that a range of practical and psychological barriers continue to limit young people's engagement with structured activities, particularly those who may benefit most. National research identifies barriers relating to cost and affordability, transport and access, time constraints, physical accessibility and the availability of appropriate provision, alongside attitudinal and psychological factors such as confidence, perceived relevance, and whether environments feel inclusive, welcoming and safe (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025).

As such, this essay argues that outdoor adventure can contribute to reductions in antisocial behaviour among young people in the West Midlands, but only when embedded within inclusive, community-led and structurally supported strategies.

As Figure 2 illustrates, the proportion of adults who have personally experienced or witnessed antisocial behaviour is highest across Police Force Areas in the North East, Midlands and South East, further reinforcing the regional relevance of this study.



Rather than producing wellbeing benefits in isolation, outdoor adventure appears to influence young people's mental health through the interaction of physical challenge, social context and environment. Adventure activities require participants to engage with uncertainty, effort and managed risk, often within small groups, which creates opportunities to practise emotional regulation and coping in real time. Evidence suggests that physical activity supports subjective wellbeing partly through social mechanisms, with peer relationships and social connection mediating reductions in stress and improvements in mood (BMC Public Health, 2025). In outdoor adventure settings, these social mechanisms are heightened, as cooperation, mutual reliance

and shared challenge are embedded within the activity design rather than added as secondary outcomes.

This combination of challenge and collective experience can be particularly significant for young people who experience stress, exclusion or disengagement in other areas of life. Research on outdoor adventure education indicates that navigating challenge alongside supportive peers can foster social-emotional learning, including communication, problem-solving and trust, which contributes to a sense of belonging and positive identity (Orson, McGovern and Larson, 2020). These processes help shift how young people relate to both themselves and others, providing alternative ways of achieving status and recognition that do not rely on risk-taking or antisocial behaviour. In this way, outdoor adventure supports mental wellbeing not simply by reducing stress or anxiety, but by reshaping social experiences and identities in ways that may reduce longer-term vulnerability to antisocial behaviour (Pretty, J., et al. (2005).

Systematic evidence on adventure education further supports the potential of structured outdoor group activity to enhance social competence and interpersonal connectedness. A meta-analysis of adventure education interventions found significant between-group improvements in resilience, self-esteem and social belonging compared to no intervention, highlighting social cohesion as a key outcome of outdoor activity programmes (Down et al., 2024). These findings align with research on experiential outdoor activities showing that groupwork skills such as cooperation and effective interaction can increase participation in outdoor adventure education, even among older adolescents and young adults (Cooley, Burns & Cumming, 2016). Such social skill gains are especially relevant for populations at risk of antisocial behaviour, as stronger peer relationships and group cohesion are linked with reduced externalising behaviours in other structured activity contexts (Malhotra et al., 2022; BMC Public Health, 2025).

However, the quality of social outcomes in outdoor adventure is not guaranteed simply by being outdoors in groups. Peer influence can operate in both positive and negative directions, and outdoor adventure research highlights that group composition and leadership matter: programmes that intentionally cultivate supportive group cultures and ensure skilled facilitation are more likely to foster inclusive, pro-social norms (Priest, S. & Gass, M. 2018). Without this, dominant individuals or poorly structured group dynamics may reinforce negative behaviour patterns rather than ameliorate them (Allison, P. & Pomeroy, E. 2000). This underscores that outdoor adventure's social impact depends on programme design and delivery, not just the natural setting alone.

Building on its influence on emotional regulation and wellbeing, outdoor adventure may affect antisocial behaviour indirectly through changes in social behaviour and peer relationships. Adventure-based activities are typically structured around small-group participation, where cooperation, shared problem-solving and collective responsibility are necessary for progress. This design means that social interaction is not incidental but integral to the activity, requiring participants to negotiate roles, communicate effectively and work towards common goals. Research on outdoor learning suggests that such interdependent tasks can foster trust, cooperation and more positive peer interactions, particularly when activities are facilitated with clear expectations around behaviour and respect (Rickinson et al., 2004).

For young people who experience exclusion or marginalisation in other social contexts, outdoor adventure can provide alternative spaces for belonging and identity formation. Rather than status being determined by dominance, risk-taking or antisocial behaviour, recognition within adventure settings is often linked to contribution, reliability and mutual support (Hattie, J., Marsh, H. W., Neill, J. T., & Richards, G. E. 1997). This shift in social value can be significant, as it offers young people opportunities to construct pro-social identities and experience group membership in ways that do not reinforce harmful peer norms. As such, outdoor adventure may reduce reliance on antisocial behaviour as a means of gaining recognition or belonging.

Evidence from youth physical activity and sport-based interventions supports this interpretation, identifying peer relationships and social bonding as key mechanisms through which structured group activities influence behavioural outcomes. A mixed-methods systematic review of interventions for at-risk youth found that improvements in peer relationships were associated with reductions in aggression and other externalising behaviours, suggesting that social processes play a central role in behavioural change (Malhotra et al., 2022). Similar mechanisms have been identified across structured, challenge-based group activities beyond sport, including outdoor and experiential education, where shared challenge and collective achievement strengthen group cohesion and support the emergence of pro-social norms (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Neill & Dias, 2001). This suggests that the social mechanisms identified within sport-based interventions are transferable to outdoor adventure contexts when programmes are intentionally designed and facilitated.

However, the social impact of outdoor adventure is not uniformly positive and must be interpreted critically. Peer influence operates in both constructive and detrimental directions, and without careful attention to group composition, facilitation and behavioural boundaries, group-based activities may reinforce negative norms or enable antisocial behaviour to be normalised within peer networks. This risk is particularly relevant when strong personalities dominate group dynamics or when

facilitation lacks consistency and clarity. Consequently, the extent to which outdoor adventure supports positive social development depends heavily on leadership quality, intentional programme design and reflective practice. Outdoor adventure is therefore not inherently pro-social, but can contribute to healthier peer relationships and reduced antisocial behaviour when delivered within well-structured, inclusive and professionally facilitated programmes. Dishion, T. J., McCord, J., & Poulin, F. (1999) Neill, J. T. & Dias, K. L. (2001)

Outdoor adventure may contribute to reductions in antisocial behaviour primarily through its function as a structured and purposeful alternative to unstructured leisure time, particularly for young people living in urban contexts where opportunities for safe, engaging activity may be limited. Rather than simply occupying time, outdoor adventure offers structured environments in which expectations around behaviour, responsibility and participation are made explicit. By providing supervised, goal-oriented experiences, such programmes reduce exposure to situational risk factors associated with unsupervised socialising, including peer pressure, boredom and the normalisation of nuisance or disorderly behaviour. In this sense, outdoor adventure operates as a diversionary intervention, redirecting young people away from contexts in which antisocial behaviour is more likely to occur. Within the West Midlands, where youth-related antisocial behaviour has prompted increased emphasis on preventative approaches, this diversionary role is particularly useful and needed. (Malhotra et al., 2022)

Beyond the displacement of unstructured time, outdoor adventure may influence antisocial behaviour through the development of self-regulation and behavioural control. Adventure activities often require participants to manage uncertainty and risk, adhere to agreed rules and take responsibility for both personal and group safety. These demands create opportunities for young people to practise emotional regulation, decision-making and impulse control within supportive but bounded environments. Evidence from structured physical activity and group-based interventions suggests that such experiences can reduce externalising behaviours, including aggression and rule-breaking, through mechanisms such as improved emotional regulation, enhanced self-efficacy and stronger alignment with pro-social norms (Malhotra et al., 2022). Repeated exposure to these expectations may support the internalisation of behavioural skills that extend beyond the activity setting into wider social contexts.

However, the relationship between outdoor adventure and reductions in antisocial behaviour should be interpreted with caution. Much of the existing evidence does not measure antisocial behaviour directly, instead identifying changes in mediating factors such as wellbeing, peer relationships and self-control that are associated with behavioural outcomes. Consequently, claims regarding reductions in antisocial

behaviour remain largely indirect. Moreover, the evidence base indicates that activity-based interventions are most effective as preventative measures for young people exhibiting low-level or emerging behavioural difficulties, rather than as responses to entrenched or persistent offending (Petrosino et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2018). This reinforces the importance of positioning outdoor adventure within early intervention and diversionary frameworks, integrated alongside broader youth support and justice strategies, rather than as a standalone solution for complex behavioural needs.

benefits remain unevenly distributed due to a combination of practical, attitudinal and structural barriers that disproportionately affect those most at risk of exclusion. National research identifies a range of practical barriers to participation, including cost and affordability, transport and geographic access, time constraints linked to education, employment or caring responsibilities, physical accessibility, parental permission for younger participants and limited awareness or understanding of available provision (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025). For many young people in urban areas of the West Midlands, particularly those from lower-income households, the financial costs associated with outdoor adventure including participation fees, specialist equipment and travel to rural or peripheral locations present a significant obstacle. These barriers often reflect demand-side constraints, such as limited household disposable income, but are equally shaped by supply-side factors, including the high operating costs of adventure provision and the uneven availability of subsidised or local programmes. (Natural England 2023)

Alongside these practical constraints, attitudinal, psychological and relational barriers play a significant role in shaping participation. Research highlights that lack of interest, competing priorities and a preference for other activities are among the most frequently cited reasons for non-participation (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025). However, these preferences do not emerge in isolation and are often shaped by prior experiences of exclusion, low confidence, negative perceptions of outdoor or adventure environments and concerns around safety or belonging. For young people who have limited exposure to outdoor spaces or who associate adventure activities with elite, white or middle-class cultures, outdoor provision may feel inaccessible or irrelevant, regardless of its potential benefits (Natural England 2023)

Confidence and apprehension also represent substantial barriers, particularly for individuals who have experienced failure or marginalisation within formal education, sport or authority-led settings. If outdoor adventure environments are not perceived as inclusive, welcoming and psychologically safe, participation is unlikely to be sustained. This highlights that barriers are not solely logistical but are deeply, rooted in how young people perceive themselves in relation to the activity, the facilitators and the peer group. These participation barriers are particularly significant when

considered in relation to contemporary youth justice and diversionary policy. Mendel (2024) argues that the growing shift towards diverting young people away from formal justice system involvement reflects increasing recognition of the harms associated with early system contact. Formal processing can increase the likelihood of future offending by reinforcing antisocial identities through labelling, surveillance and stigma, while simultaneously disrupting protective factors such as education, family relationships and psychological wellbeing. This argument is strongly supported by empirical evidence. Systematic reviews by Petrosino et al. (2017) and Wilson et al. (2018) demonstrate that formal justice processing — even for minor or first-time offences — is associated with higher rates of recidivism when compared to diversion or no formal intervention, particularly among low-risk young people. This evidence reframes antisocial behaviour not as behaviour that necessarily requires punitive response, but as behaviour that may be exacerbated by inappropriate or overly formal intervention, underscoring the importance of preventative and strengths-based alternatives.

In England, Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) are central to operationalising diversion by assessing risk and need, determining whether young people enter the justice system and referring diverted individuals to community-based interventions. When YOTs direct young people towards structured activities such as sport, physical activity or outdoor and adventure-based programmes, they implicitly recognise the role of structured engagement in shaping behaviour, identity and social integration. These referrals acknowledge that antisocial behaviour is often situational and relational, influenced by peer dynamics, boredom and limited access to positive activities, rather than fixed individual deficits. While diversionary provision has traditionally focused on sport-based interventions, the underlying mechanisms identified within this literature including structured use of time, consistent adult mentoring, reinforcement of pro-social peer norms, opportunities for skill development and the formation of positive, non-deviant identities are equally applicable to outdoor adventure contexts (Petrosino et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2018). However, the effectiveness of such referrals is contingent upon the accessibility and suitability of provision. If cost, transport, cultural relevance or psychological safety barriers prevent engagement, diversion risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive, offering referral without meaningful participation.

Taken together, this evidence highlights that barriers to participation are not just considerations but central determinants of whether outdoor adventure can contribute to reduced antisocial behaviour. Without deliberate strategies to address both practical and attitudinal barriers including subsidised access, local delivery, inclusive programme design and trusted community partnerships outdoor adventure risks reinforcing existing inequalities in access to preventative support. Consequently, for outdoor adventure to function effectively within diversionary and early-intervention frameworks in the West Midlands, barrier reduction must be treated as an integral component of programme design rather than an afterthought.

To mitigate these barriers and enable outdoor adventure to function as an effective early-intervention and diversionary strategy, provision must be intentionally designed around accessibility, inclusion and sustained engagement rather than assumed participation. At a practical level, evidence indicates that reducing financial and logistical barriers is critical. This includes subsidised or fully funded provision, equipment loan schemes, and delivery in or near local urban green spaces rather than remote rural locations, which can significantly reduce cost and transport constraints (Natural England, 2023). Local delivery models, such as partnerships with schools, youth centres and community organisations, can also address time constraints and awareness gaps by embedding outdoor adventure within settings that young people already access, increasing familiarity and reducing the psychological threshold to participation (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025). Such approaches align with Sport England's emphasis on "meeting people where they are", recognising that participation is more likely when activities fit within young people's existing routines and social contexts rather than requiring significant additional commitment (Sport England, 2022).

However, addressing practical barriers alone is insufficient. Strategies must also target attitudinal, psychological and relational obstacles that shape young people's perceptions of outdoor adventure. Research consistently highlights that environments perceived as inclusive, welcoming and psychologically safe are more likely to sustain engagement, particularly among young people who have previously experienced exclusion or marginalisation (Natural England, 2023). This requires facilitators who are skilled not only in technical outdoor competencies but also in relational youth work, trauma-informed practice and inclusive leadership. Priest and Gass (2018) emphasise that the quality of facilitation is central to outcomes in adventure-based programmes, with effective leaders creating supportive group cultures, setting clear behavioural expectations and enabling participants to experience challenge without fear of judgement or failure. Representation also matters: involving facilitators and mentors who reflect the cultural and social backgrounds of participants can help counter perceptions of outdoor adventure as elite or culturally exclusive, strengthening feelings of belonging and relevance (Sport England, 2022).

Within diversionary and youth justice contexts, these strategies are particularly important. As diversion is most effective when it offers meaningful alternatives rather than symbolic referrals, Youth Offending Teams and partner agencies must ensure that outdoor adventure opportunities are genuinely accessible and appropriate for the young people they serve. Mendel (2024) argues that diversion works best when interventions support identity development, strengthen protective factors and avoid replicating the exclusionary dynamics of formal systems. Embedding outdoor adventure within trusted community partnerships, with clear progression routes and

opportunities for sustained engagement, can enhance its legitimacy and impact as a diversionary option. This approach aligns with evidence that early, strengths-based interventions are more effective than punitive responses for low-risk and first-time offenders, particularly when they foster pro-social identities and stable adult relationships (Petrosino et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2018).

The evidence reviewed suggests that outdoor adventure can contribute positively to mental wellbeing, peer relationships and self-regulation factors that are consistently associated with reduced risk of antisocial behaviour. Through structured challenge, social interaction and facilitated reflection, outdoor adventure offers opportunities for stress reduction, identity development and pro-social engagement, positioning it as a potentially valuable component within early-intervention and diversionary approaches.

However, this evaluation has also highlighted important limitations. The relationship between outdoor adventure and reductions in antisocial behaviour is often indirect, mediated through improvements in wellbeing and social functioning rather than measured behavioural change itself. Furthermore, the evidence base indicates that activity-based interventions are most effective as preventative strategies for young people experiencing low-level or emerging behavioural difficulties, rather than as responses to entrenched or persistent offending. This reinforces the need to situate outdoor adventure within broader youth support and justice frameworks, rather than treating it as a standalone solution.

Crucially, the benefits of outdoor adventure remain unevenly distributed. Practical, attitudinal and structural barriers including cost, transport, cultural perceptions, confidence and psychological safety — disproportionately limit access for those young people who may benefit most. Without deliberate strategies to address these barriers, outdoor adventure risks reinforcing existing inequalities in access to preventative support. The analysis demonstrates that effective provision requires subsidised access, local delivery, inclusive programme design and skilled facilitation grounded in community partnerships.

In conclusion, outdoor adventure has the potential to play a meaningful role in reducing antisocial behaviour among young people in the West Midlands, but only when embedded within inclusive, sustained and well-facilitated early-intervention and diversionary strategies. Addressing barriers to participation is not peripheral to this aim but central to its success, determining whether outdoor adventure functions as an equitable preventative tool or an opportunity accessible only to a privileged minority.

(3400 words)

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