

The Impact of Church-based Social Action Projects on Deprived Areas

By Peter Wyatt, independent researcher

Abstract

This research paper investigates the impact of church-based social action projects on crime and antisocial behaviour in deprived council estates, focusing on the Monks Hill estate in Croydon, UK. It compares Monks Hill, where active church social projects have been running, with three similar estates lacking such initiatives, over the period 2010-2023. The study combines quantitative crime data analysis with qualitative insights from community stakeholders and reviews relevant literature to understand the mechanisms behind any observed effects. The research shows that the presence of church-based social action projects can lead to a reduction of 20% in crime and antisocial behaviour, in deprived areas.

Introduction

“Twenty-five years ago the Monks Hill council estate was the worst in Croydon and now it is one of the best. I believe the reason for this change is the local church”. That is what Councillor Andy Stranack said in 2024 about the place where I work as the Church of England vicar in the Monks Hill estate in South Croydon. Indeed, when I arrived 14 years ago it had a bad reputation as a place where youths were out of control, antisocial behaviour was rife and the community was unhappy. There were stories of victimisation of any residents who spoke out: fences set alight, bricks through windows, and verbal abuse. In spite of this various churches embarked on many social action projects in the last twenty-five years, culminating in a new community hub opening in 2021. However, the councillor’s statement was a bold one, and I wondered if there might be any evidence to back it up. He suggested I look at reports of antisocial behaviour (ASB). This is what this paper sets out to do as well as looking at the broader literature on the subject.

Context

The Monks Hill estate is a small council estate of around 3,000 people and part of which is in the 14% most deprived areas in the UK, as of 2019, based on ONS figures. Since 1999, two churches (Croydon Jubilee Church and St Francis) have been running social action projects in this area, in particular youth work and since 2019 a food pantry and community lunch. Since 2024 a Men’s Shed, vegetable growing and cooking classes have also been added.

Methodology

In order to create an objective measure of the impact of church-based social action, I decided to use crime and antisocial behaviour (ASB) data, as these are readily available and are good indicators of how people feel about living in an area. Experiences of, or even reports of, antisocial behaviour and criminal behaviour create a sense of dissatisfaction and stress among residents and greatly impact the perception of their area. In fact, the literature also states that being a victim of ASB has a serious impact on people’s physical and mental health (Coker et al., 2002). Furthermore, Parsons and Bergin (2010) also found that victims of violence suffer

persistent emotional and mental health problems. Therefore, I decided to use reported crime and antisocial behaviour data as a way to measure the impact of church-based social action.

The methodology of this paper comprises several elements:

1. As well as Monks Hill, three other similar council estates in Croydon, which have had no or limited church-based social action projects, were selected to provide a comparison over the period 2011-2023.
2. Analysing reported crime and antisocial behaviour figures for these four areas over the period 2011-2023.
3. Qualitative research comprising conversations with community workers, residents, council workers with experience in these areas.

Selecting comparison areas

Each area comprised approximately 3000 people and was made up of two “Lower Layer Super Output Areas” (LSOAs) of around 1500 people each. Each area chosen was required to be a small, self-contained housing estate, originally constructed as social housing, although some properties are now owner occupied. I decided to exclude larger council estates, say of 10,000 people or more. Waddon has significant housing development in recent years and so its population has increased by a 1000 between 2011 and 2021.

Therefore, the following were chosen:

Area	LSOA	Deprivation in 2019 %	Population 2021 census
Shrublands, Shirley South Ward	025B	18%	3,366
	025C	16%	
Waddon, South Croydon Ward	028B	21%	4,033
	028D	11%	
Monks Hill, Selsdon and Addington Village Ward	034D	35%	3,074
	034F	14%	
Ashburton, Shirley North Ward	045A	13%	3,226
	045E	9%	

Recorded Crime and Antisocial Behaviour

All the data came from **data.police.uk** website for the years 2010-2023.

This is a record of all crime and anti-social behaviour reported to the police in the UK by Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOA) as mentioned above. It is aggregated on a monthly basis. Linear regression will be applied to the data – in other words attempting to fit a straight line to the data. For each regression the R-squared value will be used which tells you how well the straight line fits with the data. If the R-squared value is greater than 0.5, then the regression model will be accepted as showing a genuine pattern in the data, rather than just as a result of random variations.

Qualitative research

To provide deeper insights into the nature of these communities and the impact, if any of churches in these communities, I had conversations with several community workers, residents and church ministers.

Literature Review

In this section I will look at two questions, what impact, if any do churches and their social action projects have on crime and antisocial behaviour in communities, and secondly, what possible mechanisms are there for such impacts.

Does church-based social action have an impact on crime?

The first question being asked was whether churches, and in particular church-based social action projects, have an impact on reported crime and antisocial behaviour data. Several papers in academic literature do explore this, although most are from the USA.

A very extensive and rigorous study was conducted by Seto and Ju, published in 2025. In this paper they looked at crime data from every single county in the USA, and also the per capita size of religious congregations for each county. They found strong negative correlation between property crime and per-capita size of religious congregation – in other words, the more people go to church in an area, the lower the crime rate tends to be. They found that the more deprived an area the stronger this relationship was – in other words, the effect of church congregations was much greater in poorer areas. In most deprived areas, with the highest per capita size of religious congregation, violent crime was down 18% and property crime down 22% compared to areas with the smallest per capita religious congregations. Furthermore, the authors categorised churches into “worldly” (uniquely focused on community outreach and support) or “other-worldly” (focussing on personal piety with less interaction with the world). Interestingly, the more worldly churches (in the USA called mainline protestant denominations), had a much greater crime reducing effect than “other-worldly” churches (mostly Evangelical Protestant churches). This paper clearly shows that in the USA, there is a measurable impact on crime levels by churches which focus on community outreach and support, particularly in deprived areas. On the other hand, churches who do not interact with their neighbourhood in this way do not have the same impact (Seto & Ju, 2025).

In the UK, traditionally “other-worldly” evangelical churches have become much more interested in social action projects in the last 40 years (Wier, 2014), and so the categories described in Seto and Ju’s paper of Mainline Protestant versus Evangelical Protestant may not be applicable. Evangelical churches in the UK have become much more “worldly” and now many engage in social action projects. Indeed, social action projects are now common across all denominational traditions in the UK: a survey of Church of England churches in 2015, by the Church Urban Fund, 53% of churches were addressing five or more social issues in their area, with two-thirds involved in running a food bank (Eckley, Sefton 2015).

A meta-analysis of 40 studies in the USA by Larson and Johnson concluded that “studies ... consistently found that religiosity was negatively related to delinquency”, in other words that antisocial and criminal behaviour by young people decreased the more religious they were (Larson & Johnson, 2003). Furthermore, Johnson looked at specific church-based interventions such as *Teen Challenge* and *Prison Fellowship* and found that “found that offenders who participated in the faith-based drug treatment program were more likely to remain sober and maintain employment than those who did not” (Johnson & Schroeder, 2014).

Back in the UK, Whitehead has reviewed the practice of “community chaplaincy” which offers faith-based, supportive relationships to people leaving prison, and also “draws attention to the unpropitious economic environment into which they will be released”. He argues that the faith-based community chaplaincy creates more authentic and caring relationships, motivated by the moral obligations of faith, rather than the instrumental relationships created by market-driven criminal justice operators (Whitehead, 2014). This hints at a reason why church-based action may be more effective than secular operators.

In conclusion, two things are clear from the extensive literature on the subject: firstly, the very fact of being religious is a protective factor against being drawn into crime, particularly for young people, and secondly, that the social action projects undertaken by churches also lower crime in an area, and especially in areas of high deprivation, by as much as 20% compared to other areas.

How might church-based social action have an impact on crime?

Various mechanisms have been proposed as to why religious people as *individuals* may commit less crime. These include social control theory (religious teaching providing a strong moral framework), the strengthening of social bonds associated with being involved in a religious community. Further proposals include social learning theory (positive role models) and strain theory in which religious teaching provides a buffer against stresses and strains of life, especially in disadvantaged areas.

However, all of these proposals attempt to explain individual behaviours. In this paper I am more interested in whether there is any mechanism as to why churches as *organizations*, rather than as collections of individuals, can influence the level of crime and antisocial behaviour in a particular area.

While the role of individuals is important, more recent research has shown that the presence of outward focussed religious organizations has a greater impact on crime levels than any measure of religious adherence. There is evidence for several mechanisms. Firstly, there is community resource mobilization, and secondly church-based social action increases social capital.

Community Resource Mobilization

Church-based social action projects mobilize resources for that community. Grants are obtained, staff employed, volunteers are recruited, and new buildings are constructed. This is exactly what has happened in my church, St Francis Selsdon. The residents perceive that positive things are happening in the community, even if they do not access them themselves. The provision of food, healthcare and other basic needs mitigate against crimogenic strain (the temptation to commit crime) for those who are direct recipients of these services (Agnew 1992, 1999). Furthermore, “deaths of despair” (suicide and substance abuse) are moderated by the presence of church-based projects for mental health (Case and Deaton 2017). In my own context we have been able to gather resources to fund a youth worker and we have seen over 12 years the change in the behaviour of young people attending our youth club. For example, we have observed a much greater degree of engagement and co-operation and much less antisocial behaviour.

Social Capital

Church-based social action projects also increase social capital – the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular area. Hance, in a survey of South London Anglican churches, suggests that what he calls “community ministry” results in an increase in social cohesion (Hance, 2011). Beyond the Sunday congregational gathering, social action projects provide opportunities for people to talk to each other and form trusting relationships, for example in food banks, community lunches and youth work. This applies to both service users and volunteers. Stronger relationships foster greater trust and connection.

In a study of rural churches in the USA, Lee suggests that they support social organization and informal control by building relationships, promoting norms, and fostering social capital. These community benefits extend even to nonbelievers (Lee, 2006). In our own interaction with local residents in Monks Hill we have found two things: firstly, that nine out of ten of residents were aware of St Francis church and its work in the community, and secondly, they were appreciative of this work even if they did not make use of it themselves. This creates a “ripple effect” which means that even though only a minority of residents ever access the service offering of a local church, the goodwill and enhanced reputation of the area multiply this impact many times (Rayhan, 2023). In our own context, we have seen this happen many times – residents who have received support from our social action projects then go on to provide support to other members of the community. And in our youth work we have found that former members want to give back to the community and become volunteer helpers, as social capital has increased, also demonstrating the same ripple effect.

Seto and Ju also look at the possible impact of non-church based “non-profits” on crime in an area. They did not find any extra impact from the presence of a non-profit in an area, as compared to that expected from church-based projects, although these effects were hard to disentangle (Seto & Ju, 2025).

Results from Conversations with community workers

As a resident of Monks Hill myself, I am well aware of the context of this research paper. I moved into the estate in 2011, and we took over running youth work from Croydon Jubilee Church in 2012. At the time there was a lot of antisocial behaviour. I remember a resident’s fence being set fire to by unruly youths, the young people at the youth club being disrespectful, disengaged, prone to destructive behaviours and attacking the building where the youth club was held.

Zoe Gaffney, a Council-employed neighbourhood warden said, “kids used to steal cars from Forestdale strip them in the garages on Monks Hill and race them. They would intimidate anyone who approached, by throwing stones at them” but now they are well behaved.

Andrew Stranack, former youth worker on Monks Hill described the vandalism, aggression and victimisation that occurred on the estate in the early 2000s. Church members described the church building being broken into and the cross damaged, windows broken and items stolen. There was a gang-related knife murder on the estate in 2016, and this led to the Monks Hill Community Association being founded which then worked very closely with St Francis church in terms of youth work and community projects. This seemed to be a turning point where the estate became a much more peaceful place, and we noticed that the next generation of young people were much more inclined to engage and be respectful of others. In 2019 St Francis set up its Food Stop food pantry which has grown to engage around 40 families a week, and we have

noticed that this has led to many new relationships forming and people connecting with each other. And not least, this has led to new members of the church. In summary, Andrew Stranack, now cabinet member for Community and Culture in Croydon Council, stated that the estate has gone from being the worst to the best in Croydon, and he believed it was the presence of the church that made the difference. He believes that church-based social action projects offer several extra ingredients which impact on an area, namely that they offer a spiritual as well as a practical solution; that they have highly motivated staff and volunteers willing to go the extra mile; and that atmosphere of a place is affected by the prayers and compassion of community minded churches.

Results from Crime and ASB data

As mentioned earlier, reports to the police of crime and antisocial behaviour, were analysed for Monks Hill and for three other similar housing estates in Croydon which to my knowledge did not have any church-based social action projects in the years 2011-2023. In particular, total crime and violent crime will be considered, as well as ASB. For all of these, linear regression will be performed, and the R-squared value considered. The R-squared value will be graded as follows:

R-squared value	Correlation
Less than 0.25	None
Between 0.25 and 0.5	Low
Between 0.5 and 0.75	Moderate
Between 0.75 and 1	High

Then changes in the crime levels will be compared between Monks Hill and the other three areas.

Summary of Data

Table 1 Total reported crime 2010 to 2022

Area	Change	Correlation	% change 2010-22
Monks Hill	no change	none	2%
Shrublands	rising	moderate	36%
Ashburton	rising	none	18%
Waddon	rising	moderate	25%

As you can see from the table above, in the period 2010 to 2022 the total crime reported in Monks Hill changed to such a small degree such that it is accounted for by random variation, whereas in the other three areas, in the same period, total crime increased by between 18% and 36%. This is against a background of total reported crime in the UK rising by 50% in the same period (UK Gov, 2023).

Table 22 Total violent crime 2010 to 2022

Area	Change	Correlation	% change 2010-22
Monks Hill	no change	low	25 %
Shrublands	rising	strong	104%
Ashburton	rising	moderate	68%
Waddon	rising	strong	133%

Violent crime sadly has increased in all these areas, but significantly less in Monks Hill (25%), compared to other areas of between 68% and 132%.

Table 3 Antisocial behaviour 2011-2023

Area	Change	Correlation	% change 2011-23
Monks Hill	falling	moderate	-72%
Shrublands	falling	low	-41%
Ashburton	falling	low	-51%
Waddon	falling	low	-69%
London	falling	low	-51%

Antisocial behaviour has fallen across London in the years 2011-23, with a big drop in the years 2012-13. It is unclear whether this is to do with different ways of reporting, or whether it represents a real drop in reports of antisocial behaviour. This represents a background drop of over 50%. If this represents a real change, it must represent a real policy success. However, with moderate correlation, the reports of ASB in Monks Hill have dropped a further 20% to 71.6% down since 2011, with moderate correlation. This compares to smaller drops in the three other areas being examined, of between 41% to 68% with low correlation. On this measure, Monks Hill can claim to have gone from the worst estate to the best in Croydon!

Full graphs of these data sets are to be found in the appendix.

Discussion

In Monks Hill, reported crime has not increased since 2010. This compares with a national increase of 50%, and an average increase for my three control areas in Croydon of 26%. This is statistically significant.

Furthermore, in Monks Hill violent crime has increased by 25% compared the average of with my three control areas of 101%, again a huge difference in the years 2010-22.

ASB has decreased in London by over 50%, but in Monks Hill by 71% since 2011, and an average decrease of 53% in my three control areas.

Looking at these figures, the change in reported crime and antisocial behaviour figures are around 18% to 25% more favourable in Monks Hill. The only increasing figure is violent crime, against a much worse figure in other areas.

What possible explanations are there?

I decided to look at three other alternative explanation (other than church-based social action). Firstly, levels of deprivation, secondly demographic change, thirdly changes in social class.

Deprivation

It is well known that crime increases with levels of deprivation. It is possible, that Monks Hill has become less deprived and therefore has less crime. This is not the case. In fact, the Index of Multiple Deprivation has got worse in Monks Hill (up nearly 7%) compared to an improvement or staying the same in the three control areas. We therefore can eliminate this explanation.

Demographic Change

There has indeed been demographic change in terms of ethnic make-up in the four areas under study. I have tracked this by highlighting the percentage of the largest ethnic group, i.e. the white British population of the areas in question. Perhaps reducing crime and ASB in Monks Hill could be explained by a significant demographic shift, as compared to other areas?

From census data it is clear that this is not the case at all. In all areas the white British population has declined by between 6% to 11%, not enough to explain the data.

Change in Social Grade

Finally, I looked at social grade as an explanation. In UK statistics, people are categorised in social grades A-E. The number of people in each area in social grades A-C was obtained from the 2011 and 2021 censuses. Perhaps the difference in crime figures in the areas is because there has been increase in higher social graded people in Monks Hill as compared to the three control areas?

Again, this is not the case. The percentage of people in social grades A-C has not changed by more than a few percentage points, certainly not enough to explain the differences in crime data.

Church-based social action projects

There may be other hidden forces at work which I have not accounted for to explain the difference in crime and ASB data. However, having eliminated other possible causes what remains is the fact that in Monks Hill there were active church-based social action projects running in the years 2010 to 2023 and beyond. It appears that the effect of these projects is a 25% reduction in reported crime compared to control areas (and more so in violent crime), and an 18% reduction in antisocial behaviour as compared to my three other control areas of Shrublands, Waddon and Ashburton. Interestingly, Seto and Ju report at least a 22% reduction in the most deprived areas where there are churches uniquely focused on community outreach and support (Seto and Ju, 2025). This is a remarkably similar finding and tends to suggest that there is real effect occurring here, in other words that the presence of church-base social action projects can have a noticeable effect on reported crime and antisocial behaviour. This in turn makes people's perception of an area a much more positive one.

Effect on Church Attendance in Monks Hill

Although this is not the main focus of this paper, it is interesting to note that church attendance has increased strongly since low point of the COVID pandemic in 2020 to the current day at St Francis Church in Monks Hill. Median Sunday attendance prior to the pandemic (2019) was 57 (adults and children) and dropped further to 47 in 2020. By 2024 this had climbed to 76 adults

and children. This I believe is also an effect of the church-based social actions project which originate from St Francis Monks Hill, in two ways, direct and indirect:

Firstly, people from these projects have started coming to church – around 15 people. These people have come without any proselytising but rather people asking to come. Secondly, other people looking for churches, who are new to the area or those who were “de-churched” see a vibrant church engaging strongly with the community and are therefore attracted to join St Francis as a part of our worshipping and missional community. Stephen Hance’s PhD thesis suggests that “the evidence seems clear that a relationship exists between community ministry and church health”, (Hance, 2011).

Conclusion

From the research undertaken that the presence of church-based social action projects creates a noticeable improvement in deprived areas. It can result in around a 20% reduction in reported crime and antisocial behaviour.

This is described in research in the USA and UK, and in particular, the locality studied – the Monks Hill estate in Croydon, as compared with other similar estates.

It also leads to increased church attendance.

I urge policy makers, in funders, government and local authorities to consider this finding carefully. These projects cost money, and in Monks Hill we are very grateful for the support of the National Lottery and other funders. But they also save money, because every drop in crime and antisocial behaviour reduces call outs to police and other authorities, enables residents young and old to live more peaceful lives and have better mental health.

I urge all church leaders to consider embarking on social action projects, to increase the quality of life in an area and to increase attendance in their own churches. This echoes Hance’s conclusion: “every church should engage in community ministry I would urge all churches to begin to develop these kinds of ministries and, if they exist, to consider how they might be developed”, (Hance, 2011).

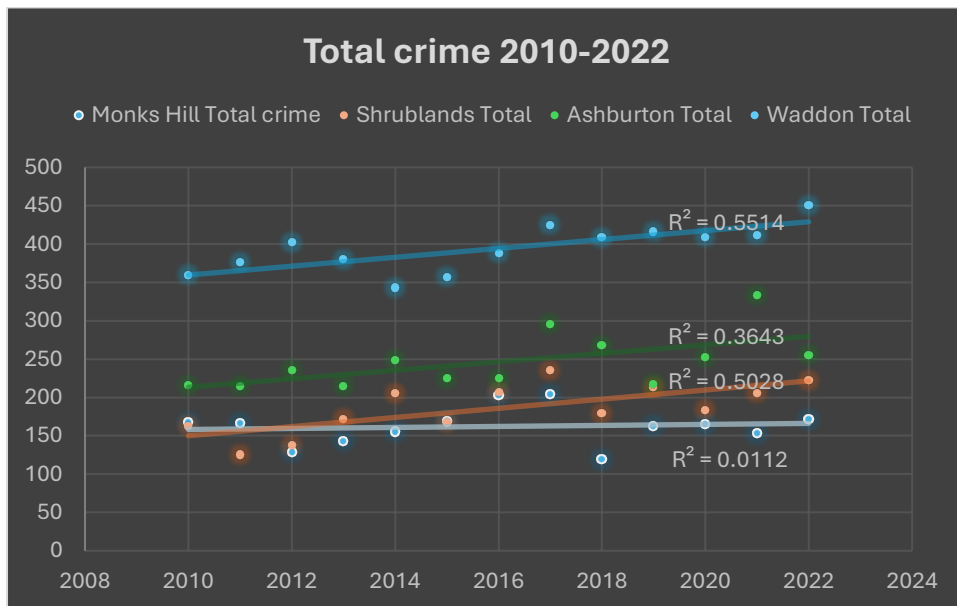
Overall, I believe it is worth churches considering initiating these kinds of projects and for funders to support these kinds of projects as they can have a significant impact, particularly in deprived areas.

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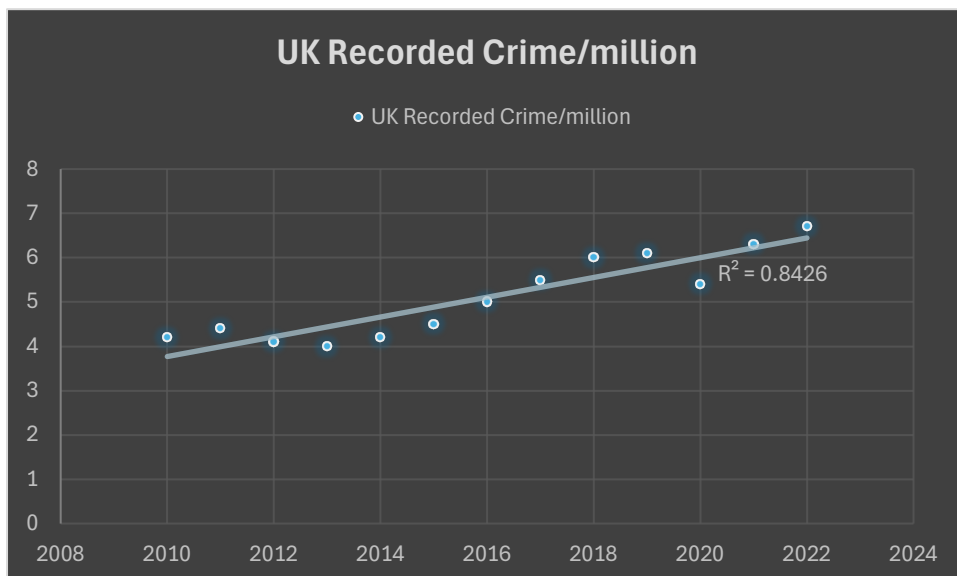
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Appendix – Detailed Graphs and Figures

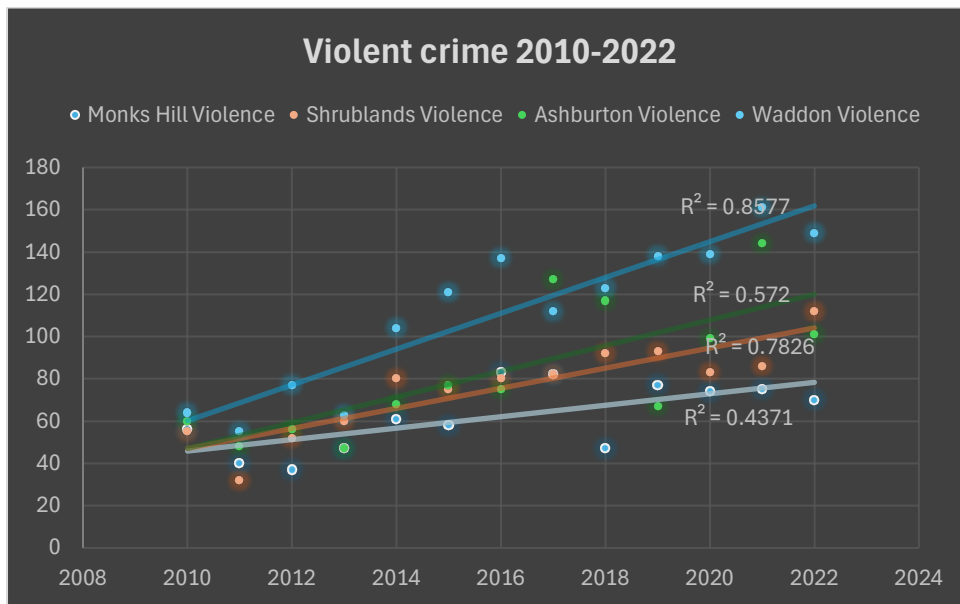
Total Reported Crime in Four Areas Studied 2010-2022



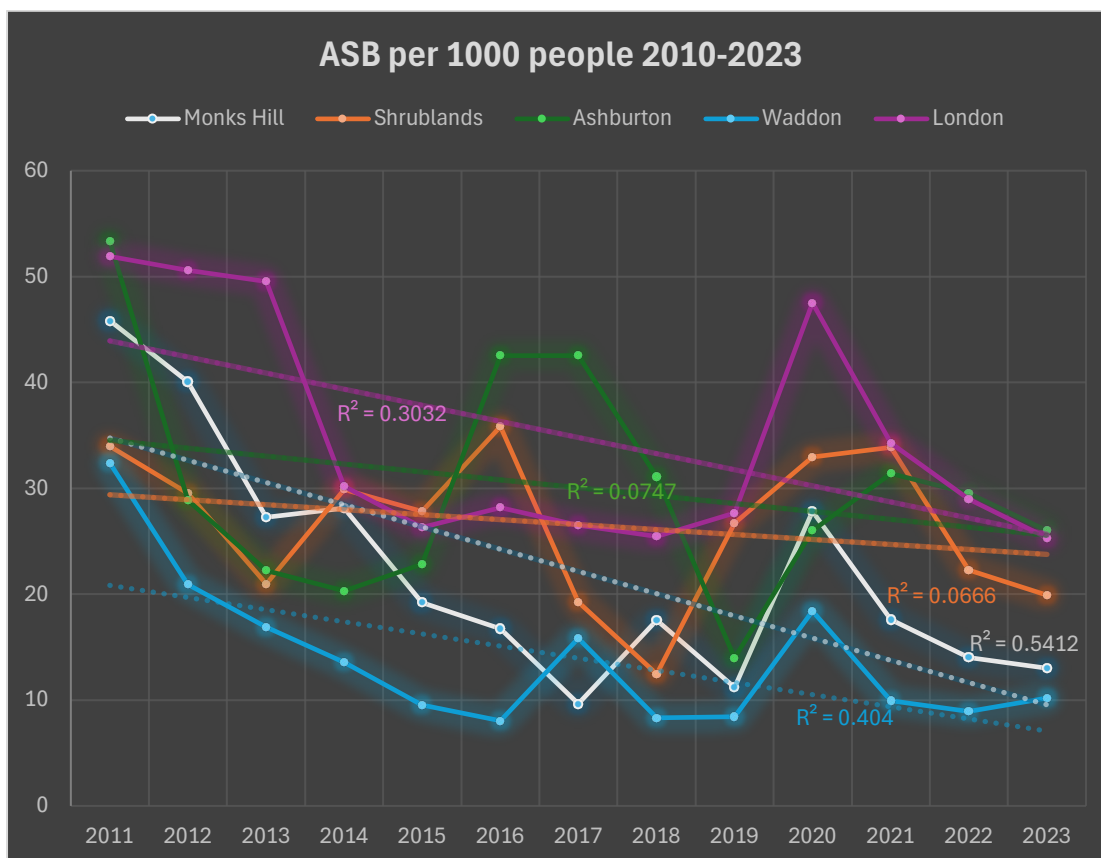
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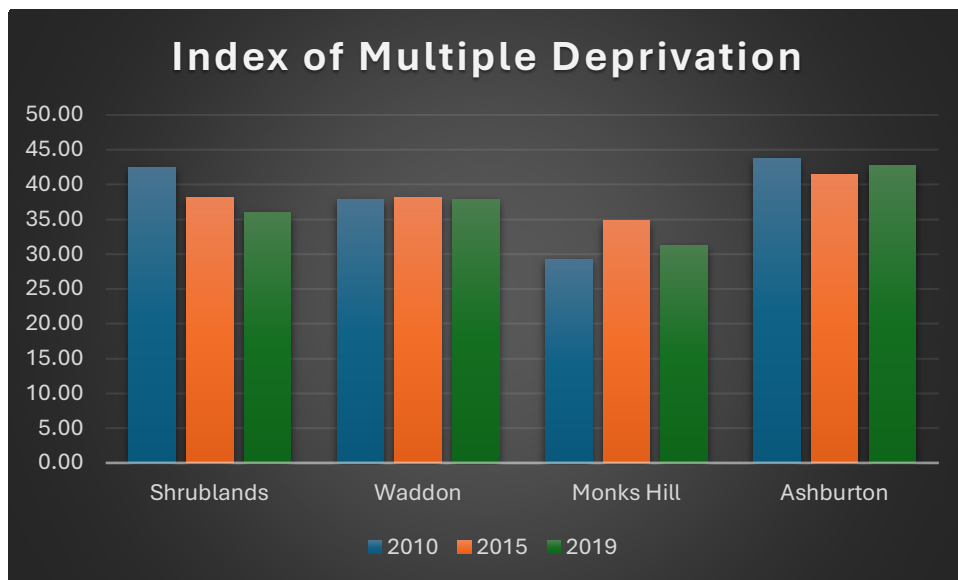
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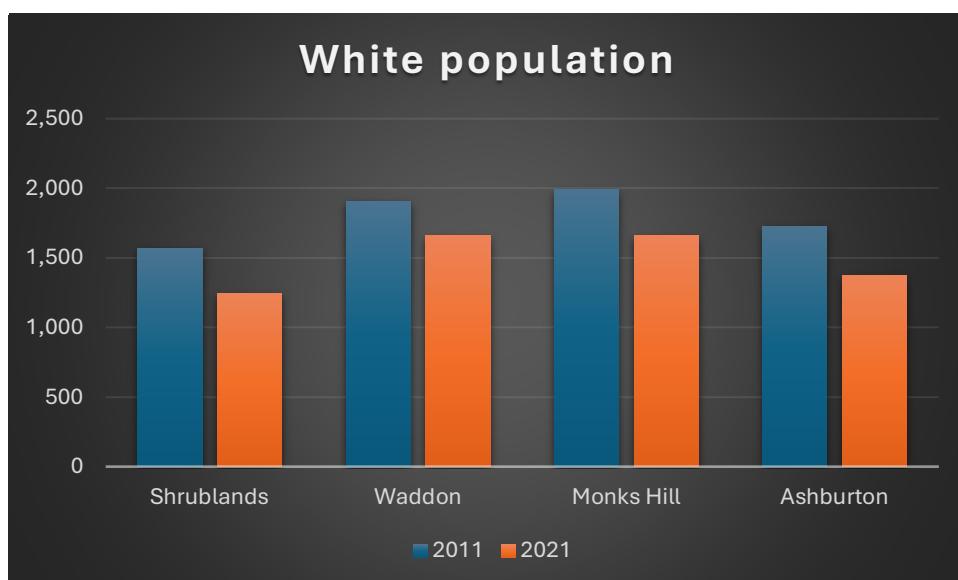
Reported Antisocial Behaviour per 1000 population 2011-2023



IMD scores for the four areas – 2010, 2015 and 2019



White population in 2011 and 2021



Social grade A-C population in 2011 and 2021

