

City Centre anti-social behaviour place audit

Background

The Place Experience and Marketing (PEM) team in the City Renewal Authority works to

- Promote the City Centre as a destination through marketing and communications activity.
- Actively contribute to the liveability and vitality of the City Centre through place management, implementing projects that improve beautification.
- Identify opportunities for large-scale festivals, seasonal events, installations or activations to enliven the City Centre and support the development of the ACT's event sector.

During the program's delivery in 2024 a large increase in incidents of antisocial behaviour at public events and during installation of place activations was observed. These incidents posed an increased risk to the safety of the community, contractors, and staff. As a result, several events were closed early (a measure not previously actioned), increased security was required at all activities, and costs related to theft and vandalism increased.

Anecdotal findings from the 2024 PEM program were as follows:

- Place interventions that have historically contributed to the mitigation of anti-social behaviour—such as maintenance, beautification, events and activations— were proving less effective.
- In some cases, these interventions appeared to invite and exacerbate anti-social behaviour.

Anti-social behaviour place audit methodology

An anti-social behaviour place audit was designed to collect place data for internal use by the City Renewal, to provide insights about the current place experience and inform the PEM program. This audit is both a pilot—with the criteria for assessing anti-social behaviour trialled and iteratively adjusted during the auditing period - and an observational study of place. Data from this study should not be used for other purposes (for example, crime statistics).

For the purpose of this audit, anti-social behaviour is “conduct that disturbs or annoys others, interferes with lawful activities, or causes harassment, alarm, or distress”.ⁱ

The place audit was designed to elicit the following data:

- The number of anti-social behaviour incidents
- The types of anti-social behaviour observed

- The locations where incidents occurred
- The perceived impact of behaviour on people

Categories of anti-social behaviour were developed using the UK’s Research, Development, and Statistics Directorate’s typology frameworkⁱⁱ and adapted to the local context based on preliminary observations by City Renewal’s place management partner (Dionysus).

The auditing team was selected from City Renewal’s place management partner’s (Dionysus) preferred security services provider, ensuring that the auditors were both familiar with the local environment and had the requisite training needed to navigate challenging situations.

The auditing footprint included those locations in the City Centre where anti-social behaviour was most commonly noted through the delivery of the PEM program (see Table 1).

Locations
City Walk (between Garema Place and Petrie Plaza)
Intersection of Petrie Plaza and City Walk (near merry-go-round)
Garema Place
Petrie Plaza behind merry-go-round
Other (if other explain in notes)
Petrie Plaza (north end)
Bus interchange
Bunda Street (Scott's Crossing)
Ainslie Place
City Walk grass (between Petrie Plaza and Ainslie Place)
Canberra Times fountain
Canberra Centre entrance

Table 1: Locations for ASB Place Audit

Audit data collection was limited by the following constraints:

- **Indicative data due to limited personnel:** A single auditor was deployed to log incidents of anti-social behaviour over a 12-hour period (8am – 8pm), roving between the audit locations and following anti-social behaviour where possible. The audit therefore does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the whole audit footprint, but rather an indicative overview of the number, types and locations of anti-social behaviour found within that footprint.
- **Overview instead of month to month comparison:** although efforts were made to maintain consistency in data collection (e.g. equivalent times and days), the length and timing of auditing periods conducted in January and February were ultimately determined by auditor availability.

Note: One of the members of the auditing team was removed from the project for their own safety after receiving direct threats from individuals engaged in anti-social behaviour during his auditing period in December.

Place audit findings

Anti-social behaviour is an embedded element of the daily place experience in key public spaces in this audit

The data collected during the audit substantiates anecdotal findings from the 2024 PEM program, confirming that anti-social behaviour is an embedded aspect of the daily place experience in City Centre public spaces. Over a 22-day period between December 2024 and February 2025, the auditing team logged 267 hours between 8am and 8pm, during which 369 timestamped entries were recorded—each documenting one or more incidents of anti-social behaviour. In total, 612 incidents were identified across eleven categories (see Table 2). The audit highlights frequent and recurring instances of alcohol use and shouting or offensive language, alongside less frequent but still regular incidents involving drug use, vandalism, threats of violence or abuse directed at the public, and physical altercations.

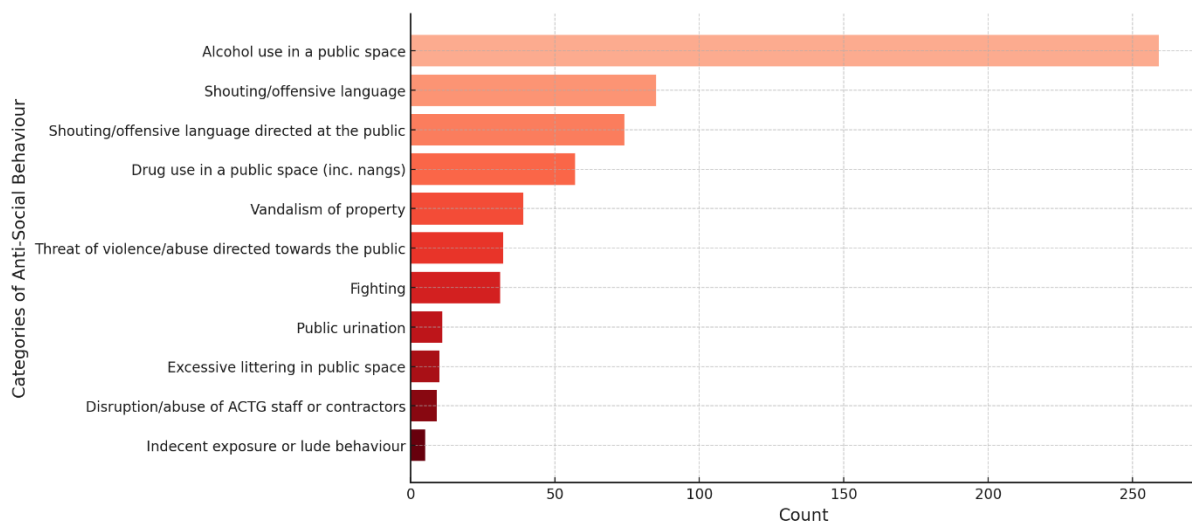


Table 2: incidents of anti-social behaviour by category

Alcohol use is by far the most common type of anti-social behaviour in the assessed public spaces

Despite the City Centre’s designation as an alcohol-free zone, consumption of alcohol emerged as the most prevalent, visible, and persistent form of anti-social behaviour observed during the audit. A total of 259 alcohol-related incidents were recorded, accounting for approximately 42% of all documented incidents of anti-social behaviour (see Table 2). Alcohol use was observed daily, often multiple times per day, across the

whole audit footprint. Concentrations of this behaviour were highest in Petrie Plaza and City Walk near the merry-go-round, City Walk between Petrie Plaza and Garema Place, and Garema Place. Both individuals and groups—typically ranging from two to four people but reaching up to nineteen—were observed consuming alcohol in both static and transient patterns.

Alcohol (and drug) use fuels other anti-social behaviours that disrupt and diminish the place experience

Alcohol use, along with drug use (approx. 57 incidents or 9%)—which together constitute 52% of all incidents of anti-social behaviour—are key drivers of broader anti-social behaviour that diminish the place experience.

Behaviour consistent with intoxication or substance abuse was correlated with other forms of visible and disruptive behaviour, including shouting and offensive language, threats of violence and abuse directed at the public, vandalism of public property and fighting.

Studies show that alcohol is associated with a decrease in perceived safety.ⁱⁱⁱ Individuals report feeling uncomfortable or threatened in areas where intoxicated persons congregate, especially if disruptive behaviours (e.g., shouting, aggression, public urination) are present.

Mitigating the current levels of alcohol and drug use and the associated anti-social behaviours in public spaces in this audit is beyond the scope of the PEM program.

Nearly one-fifth of all incidents of anti-social behaviour were directed at members of the public

One concerning finding from the audit is that 19% of all recorded incidents of anti-social behaviour were directed at members of the public (see Table 2). This includes 74 cases of shouting and offensive language and 32 instances involving threats or verbal abuse—many of which were triggered solely by the proximity of individuals to heightened or intoxicated persons and groups.

In addition, nine incidents involved direct targeting of ACT Government staff and contractors, with the intent to intimidate or disrupt programming. These incidents involved verbal abuse, threats of violence, spitting, and attempted vandalism.

Incidents directed at the public and staff undermines both perceived and actual public safety and as such poses a significant challenge for the delivery of the PEM program.

Anti-social behaviour is situated in those locations with the greatest public amenity

An additional challenge for the PEM program is that those locations offering the highest levels of public amenity—such as seating, tables and shade—also attract a greater

proportion of anti-social behaviour. A clear example is the recently upgraded area of City Walk between Petrie Plaza and Garema Place, which accounted for 28% of all recorded anti-social behaviour incidents in this audit (see Table 4 below), with a further 17% at the intersection of City Walk and Petrie Plaza near the merry-go-round.

The audit shows that entrenched pockets of anti-social behaviour are concentrated around the merry-go-round, which undermines the capacity of this iconic public infrastructure to attract families into the city.

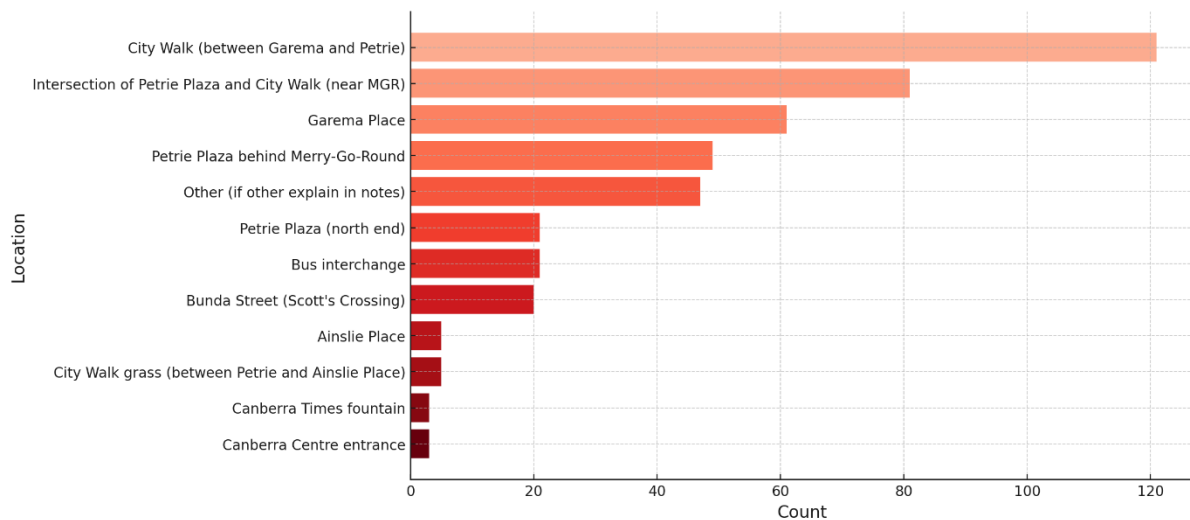


Table 4: Frequency of location of anti-social behaviour

Anti-social behaviour acts as a strong deterrent to the use and enjoyment of some of these key public spaces

A key finding from this audit is that anti-social behaviour has a demonstrable negative impact on how people use and engage with key public spaces. In 43% of observed cases, individuals were seen leaving or actively avoiding areas in response to such behaviour (see Table 3). This impact is further compounded by physical barriers created by anti-social activity—for example, groups obstructing entry points or occupying key infrastructure—hindering access and reducing the overall functionality and usability of these spaces.

Anti-social behaviour in the City Centre engenders visible emotional discomfort and fear

The audit also shows that anti-social behaviour negatively impacts the emotions of public space users. A total of 151 incidents were recorded in which individuals displayed visible signs of emotional discomfort in response to anti-social behaviour, with an additional 50 cases involving more acute reactions such as intimidation and fear (see Table 3). These findings indicate that anti-social behaviour not only deters people from engagement with public space—it actively undermines perceived safety and contributes to a diminished sense of comfort and inclusion in these spaces.

The PEM team could consider small-scale, agile interventions designed to counter negative sentiment, such as person-to-person ‘simple acts of kindness’. However, again these temporary measures provide a salve not a solution and could contribute to a broader coordinated strategy.

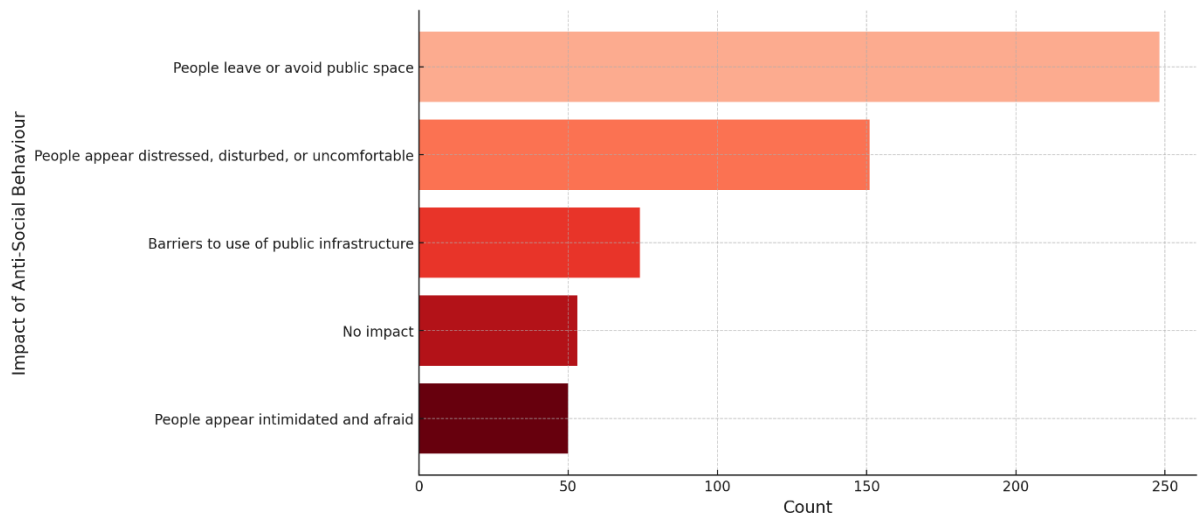


Table 3: impact of anti-social behaviour on people

Additional auditor observations

The following are two observations from the lead auditor that provide further insights into the audit data.

Excessive use of alcohol is a key driver of escalating anti-social behaviour

The auditor identified and tracked patterns of escalating anti-social behaviour among individuals and groups engaged in excessive and/or ongoing alcohol consumption in public spaces. Alcohol use earlier in the day was found to contribute to escalated incidents of anti-social behaviour among those groups who remain in the city, with this escalation occurring from early to mid-afternoon.

The city is attracting more anti-social behaviour

The lead auditor identified an estimated 40 distinct clusters (individuals, pairs and groups) of people engaging in anti-social behaviour over the duration of the auditing period in January and early February, with an increase in incidents of anti-social behaviour from unknown persons. This trend may suggest that the sustained visibility and frequency of anti-social behaviour in the City Centre contributes to an enabling environment, potentially encouraging further occurrences.

Recommendations

- 1. Targeted PEM programs are integrated into a broader government and community sector response to more effectively address the complex issue impacting the City Centre's public realm.**

The current complexities affecting the City Centre require more than place-based interventions to deliver longer-term solutions and are beyond the scope of the PEM program. While targeted place interventions can play a role, their effectiveness will be diminished unless they are part of a broader, coordinated response involving government and community stakeholders working in partnership to address the underlying issues affecting the city.

- 2. ACT Government directorates partner with relevant stakeholders including Police and Territory based community services to develop a coordinated response that includes a strategy to reduce alcohol and drug use in the City Centre.**

Alcohol (and drug) use has been identified by this audit as both the predominant type of anti-social behaviour, and the driver of other types of anti-social behaviour negatively affecting the place experience. However, the mitigation of alcohol and drug use is not within the scope of the PEM program and requires support from relevant areas of government, police and community sector expertise and resourcing.

- 3. Consideration of increased activity delivery costs and return-on-investment measures are incorporated into PEM program planning to ensure program success.**

Future programming must account for the increasing costs associated with current activity delivery, including the need for additional security, potential psychosocial impacts on staff, risks to community safety, and negative effects on attendance and public perception of the city.

The PEM team should also implement an iterative review process to assess program performance and ensure return on investment across a range of financial, visitation and perception metrics.

- 4. Further research is undertaken to identify and evaluate effective place-based solutions that respond to the incidents, patterns and impacts of anti-social behaviour identified in this place audit.**

A desktop study should be conducted to identify place-based intervention exemplars from other jurisdictions that have effectively addressed the identified issues and enhanced the place experience.

ⁱ McAtamney, A., & Morgan, A. (2009). *Key issues in antisocial behaviour*. Australian Institute of Criminology.

ⁱⁱ Harradine, S., Kodz, J., Lemetti, F., & Jones, B. (2004). *Defining and measuring anti-social behaviour*. Home Office, Research, Development and Statistics Directorate

ⁱⁱⁱ Randerson, S., Casswell, S., Rychert, M. (2019). *Diminished inclusivity in public space: How alcohol reduces people's use and enjoyment of public places literature review*. Wellington: Health Promotion Agency