

Merchants in Britain Give Young Loiterers an Earful - washingtonpost.com

ABINGDON, England -- Jordan Webb can predict the exact time of day his head will start aching. If the 10-year-old lingers outside the Reynolds grocery store past 5 p.m., a small black device latched onto the storefront and operated on a timer will emit a high-pitched sound that makes the boy's skull feel like it's popping.

"It sounds like 'Eeeeeeeek' and gives me a big headache," said Jordan, who then covered his ears and made a face reminiscent of Macaulay Culkin's famous pose in the "Home Alone" movies.

Jordan is referring to the Mosquito, a \$975 transmitter designed to disperse young loiterers by making a loud humming noise that most people older than 25, such as his 41-year-old mother, can't hear. The Mosquito has sparked a new sort of buzz in [Britain](#), this time among political and civil rights groups that say the device is discriminatory and treats young people as second-class citizens.

Others have worried that the Mosquito is the next step in Britain's Big Brother society. Britons are among the most photographed, filmed, speed-checked and monitored people in the world, thanks to an interlocking system of computerized government devices.

Many Britons are deeply ambivalent about having a closed-circuit television camera in practically every public space; they appreciate the help in solving crime but worry that the government sometimes comes too close. A new high-tech device to shoo away teenagers like so many pesky squirrels strikes many the same way: a good idea with an unattractive flip side.

On a recent sunny afternoon in this historic town near Oxford, Jordan was kicking a soccer ball outside Reynolds with four other boys his age, all wearing red Manchester United jerseys. At 5 p.m., right on schedule, the grocery store's Mosquito began squealing. Jordan said he felt a painful "scratch" in his ear, and he hustled across the road to get out of the machine's 50-foot range.

The device has sold about 3,500 units in Britain since its introduction in 2006, according to inventor Howard Stapleton. Outside Britain, about 1,500 more have sold, including about 200 in the United States, by distributor Moving Sound Technology Inc., which says its U.S. clients are mainly schools and convenience stores. Schools use them to ward off kids at night, and the stores use them to discourage young loiterers, the distributor said.

The gadget exploits a peculiarity of aging. At a certain age, hair cells in the inner ear start to deteriorate and so does the ability to hear high pitches.

"I have spoken to young children across the country, and they are angry," said Al Aynsley-Green, the children's commissioner for England, who recently joined several civil rights groups to launch a campaign against the devices called Buzz Off. He has persuaded five stores to remove the units and plans to continue his quest for a total ban.

Aynsley-Green's counterpart in Scotland, Kathleen Marshall, started her campaign five months ago. "This is a war on young people," she said, noting that some of the slogans for the device -- such as "teen tormentor" -- did not go far in winning the hearts or minds of the teenagers who have told her through her Web site that they feel demonized.

Some young people have gotten back by using similar technology -- cellphone ring tones in those same high frequencies. Kids can hear them, parents and teachers often can't, thwarting many an effort to limit the phones' use.

If the Mosquito devices are shelved, it would be a dramatic reversal for a country that makes a lot of fuss over petty crime and antisocial behavior. A few of the British tabloids are running campaigns ("Broken Britain" in the Sun; "Can It! Stop Kids Boozing" in the Mirror) with reams of copy on loutish behavior.