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Half the Battle:
Understanding the impact of the Troubles on
children and young people in Northern Ireland.
Marie Smyth

First Published 1998
by INCORE the Initiative on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity
Aberfoyle House, Northland Road. Deify Londonderry, Northern Ireland
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Cover design by Belfast Litho Printers Limited
Cover photograph by young women of North Belfast
Printed by Belfast Litho Printers Limited

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ISBN 0 9533305 2 4

Cover price £5.00 stg

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Centre for Childcare Research at The Queen's University of Belfast in documenting services to children, and Dr R Scullion of the Central Statistics Unit who provided statistics on road traffic accidents. Arlene Healey from The Young People's Centre also offered assistance, as did John Park from the Social Services Inspectorate of the Department of Health and Social Services. Joy Dyer, an intern with The Cost of the Troubles Study, from Vanderbilt University collected some of the data, ran focus groups and documented the young people's views. Dr Mike Morrissey conducted the original analysis of all Troubles-related deaths in Northern Ireland, Marie-Therese Fay directed the compilation of the database of deaths, a subset of which are analysed here. Owen Keenan, Director of Barnardos (Ireland) commissioned an early paper on this subject and started the process which culminated in this paper being produced. Barnardos (Northern Ireland), Save the Children, the Community Relations Council and their Cultural Diversity Programme funded some of the work with young people. Survivors of Trauma, Sunningdale Youth Group, Woodvale Youth Group and the Alexander Park Project made the work with young people possible. The young people from various communities in North and West Belfast, Deify and elsewhere contributed enormously to our understanding of their position, and we wish to thank them for their time and patience with our questions. Their voices and photographs are published in a separate volume; Do you see what I see? which can be seen as a companion volume to this paper. Over sixty adult interviewees participated in our enquiries, and many gave us much by way of understanding of parental roles, and their own childhood experience. Lyn Moffett provided technical, proof-reading and desktop publishing assistance, Mike McCool and Catherine Sharkey also provided technical assistance, and Gillian Robinson, director of Research at INCORE provided feedback on a draft of the paper, and supported the publication process within INCORE. My colleagues, Marie Therese Fay, Sarah Oakes and Mark Mulligan at the Cost of the Troubles Study, and my fellow directors, particularly David Clements, Brendan Bradley,

John Millar and Mike Morrissey have provided much needed guidance and feedback. Others who offered feedback on the development of the model were Paul Morrissey, Mary Enright, Belle McGuinness, Marguerite Egin, Tony McQuillen and Dr Yarnell. Finally, I would also like to thank Dr John Pinkerton from The Centre for Childcare Research at The Queen's University of Belfast and Dr Elma Hedderman from the Department of Child Psychiatry at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children who acted as referees for the paper.

For Emmet and P.J.
and all the other children who have lost parents

Half the Battle: Understanding the effects of the "Troubles"
on children and young people in Northern Ireland.

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacence with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.
Siegfried Sassoon
July 1917

Foreword

The lines from Sassoon refer to the civilian ignorance of the suffering of soldiers, far from home in the trenches of the First World War. The Troubles in Northern Ireland have not affected us all equally, and the worst effects of the losses have not been directly apparent to many of us. Even within the communities and groups who saw at close quarters the death and destruction of the last decades, we must now ask if we, as adults, have had "sufficient imagination to realise" the impact on children and young people within those communities that have been worst affected.

Finally, after almost thirty years of armed conflict, Northern Ireland has given some attention to those who have been bereaved and injured over the last three decades of the Troubles. Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's report to the government, "We Will Remember Them? was published in April, 1998. This was the first official acknowledgement of the extent of the injury and loss caused by the Troubles. As a society, we have lived for many years in silence about the extent and depth of that loss. Silence seemed to be the best that most of us could do in the circumstances - the continuing violence. Now, hopefully, the violence is ending, it becomes necessary to look afresh at the damage that has been done, and how it can best be repaired. As in armed conflicts in other parts of the world, here too, it has often been those who are the most vulnerable that have suffered most. Children and young people are the focus of this paper, particularly those who have been closest to the violence of the Troubles, and they must be a priority in such a period of reassessment and reconstruction. This paper aims to make a practical contribution to this work, by providing a survey of a wide range of material, some of which will hopefully be of assistance in the work of rebuilding the social fabric of our communities.

This paper is a first step, and as such, its limitations should be stated from the outset. A number of areas and questions are set out and addressed in turn and the paper attempts to provide a wide survey of sources and findings on each issue. It is multi-disciplinary in approach, examining demographic, psychological, neuro-developmental and sociological

sources. However, synthesis of such a variety of material and approaches has not been achieved or even attempted here, and so the paper is a smorgasbord rather than a stew, a survey rather than a integrated analysis. The reader is presented with a range of findings some of which are compatible with one another, and some less so. The paper uses both local and international material. The findings of others are presented alongside some of The Cost of the Troubles Study findings, which are based on both statistical and qualitative research conducted over the last year (1997-1998), and on contact with communities throughout Northern Ireland stretching over a twenty year period. The paper also contains some of my own preliminary attempts at creating a model of how armed conflict impacts on communities and on the society.

Second, this is not an attempt to "average out" the experiences of the Troubles children and young people have had. The paper is most concerned with that minority of children and young people who have the most difficult experiences, since it is they who are likely to require the most urgent attention, and for whom the need for policy development is most keenly felt.

The paper raises as many questions as it solves. Much remains to be understood and distilled from what is already known, by those researching the area and from the experts in the field - those children and young people who continue to live with the impact of armed conflict on their lives.

Marie Smyth
June 2, 1998.

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1. Introduction

1. This paper provides a background to the Northern Ireland conflict, and examines the situation of children and young people in the context of almost three decades of conflict, It does so in a number of ways.

2. The social context in which children and young people experience the Troubles is summarised, including:

2.1 the societal context;
2.2 the family context.

3. Using a newly compiled database on deaths in the conflict since 1969, **deaths of children** and **young people** are analysed and overall trends extrapolated.

4. **Children and young people's relationship to violence** is explored.

5. **Negative strategies employed to cope with violence are delineated.**

6. **A review of services available to children and young people affected by the Troubles is** provided.

7. **The effects of the Troubles on children in Northern Ireland** is discussed, in terms of the following questions:

7.1 Can research on the impact of other wars and conflicts on children be validly used to inform us about the impact of the Troubles on children in Northern Ireland?

7.2 Can research on the impact of domestic and criminal violence (that is not politically motivated) be used for this purpose?

7.3 What is the role and value of research that adopts a singularly psychological perspective, and uses frameworks designed to examine and deal with individual psychological functioning?

7.4 How can we distinguish between the impact of war and low intensity conflict on children and the impact of other factors such as deprivation and domestic or criminal violence that happens in all societies?

7.5 What conclusions can we reach about the effect on children and young people in Northern Ireland?

7.6 How can this inform the priorities of programmes of intervention and reconstruction with children worst affected by armed conflict?

7.7 Specific points for local action

This paper is based on data collected:

(a) on deaths due to the Northern Ireland conflict from 1969 until 1997. Data on deaths of those under the age of 25 and those under the age of 18 years have been extrapolated and analysed and are presented in the first part of the paper;

(b) a series of individual and group interviews with young people in some of areas with high Troubles-related death rates in Belfast, conducted between January and May, 1998. These interviews have been transcribed and are cited throughout the paper, particularly when the social context of children and young people's lives is discussed.

The term "child" here is used to refer to the United Nations definition, namely those under the age of 18. The term young person is used more loosely, to refer to adolescents and young adults. Occasionally data is presented on those over the age of 18 for comparative purposes, and where this occurs, ages are specified.

1.1 Background

Since its formation in 1921, when 26 counties of Ireland formed the Irish Free State and the remaining six remained under British rule exercised through a devolved parliament in Belfast, the state of Northern Ireland has had a troubled history. At the centre of these Troubles lies the contest over the legitimacy of the state, with the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist majority defending it, and the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican minority challenging it. The most recent phase of this contest has taken the form of armed conflict involving paramilitaries on both the Loyalist and Republican sides, the local police force who are heavily militarised, the local regiment of the British Army and the British Army itself.

The current conflict in Northern Ireland has lasted from 1969 until the present, decreasing significantly after the cease-fires of 1994. The longevity of the conflict means that only citizens in their fifties and older have any memory of living as adults in Northern Ireland in

relative peace. For those of us who grew up here, and who are in their forties and younger, the Troubles has provided the societal context, - and often traumatic punctuation and turning points - to our lives as children and as adults.

Since 1969, 3,601 people have been killed (at 24 March 1998), and well over 40,000 people injured. The equivalent death rate applied to the population of Scotland would mean that 11,244 people would have died: applied to the United Kingdom as a whole, the equivalent number of deaths would be 106,432. New statistical evidence (The Cost of the Troubles Study, Fay Morrissey and Smyth, 1997) reveals that young people have been at the highest risk of being killed, with almost 26 percent of all victims aged 21 or less and the 19-20 age group have the highest death rate for any age group in Northern Ireland.

Yet within Northern Ireland, all sections of the population and all regions have not been equally affected by the Troubles. According to The Cost of the Troubles Study, 91% of those killed were male and 9% were female. Sixty per cent of all deaths being due to the activities of Republican paramilitaries, (28% are due to Loyalist paramilitaries, 2% are due to the police and 10% are due to the British Army). However, it is estimated that approximately 42% of those killed came from the Catholic/Nationalist community. Twenty nine per cent of those killed came from the Protestant/Unionist community, 17% from outside Northern Ireland and the religious affiliation of 12% of those killed is unknown.

Children in Northern Ireland live in one of the most deprived regions of the United Kingdom, with levels of unemployment that have been consistently among the highest in the United Kingdom over the past number of decades. Family poverty is a well-known enemy of child welfare (Trew, 1995) and children in Northern Ireland suffer at the hands of this enemy. General child-care provision is not plentiful either. Northern Ireland has the lowest level of nursery provision in the United Kingdom, and schooling consistently fails the most deprived and marginalised children (Wilson,1989). Children of ethnic minority groups such as travelling children, or Northern Ireland's Chinese community face marginalisation within the education system, and this can result in low educational attainment, illiteracy, and reduction in life chances . (Irwin & Dunn, 1997). Infant mortality and perinatal morbidity in the travelling community in particular is at levels unprecedented in the wider community (Fitzpatrick, Molloy & Johnson, 1997). Provision for all children with special needs is also poor, with very limited or no choice in education provision for such children, resulting in children failing to reach their potential, and children being marginalised in unsuitable facilities. It seems that education as a means of improving life chances is not accessible to many of those who most need to achieve such improvements.

All of these issues, whilst particularly problematic for children in Northern Ireland because of the degree of the problem, are also faced by children elsewhere in the United Kingdom. However, this paper will focus on the additional hazard experienced by children and young people in Northern Ireland - that posed by the armed conflict, which is life threatening, and which damages their physical and mental health and social well being.