

Section 1: Introduction

Background

My first memory of the Troubles was when I got a petrol bomb put through my window ... It was into my mummy's room, and there was all my wee brothers and that. And we were all in the house, and our house was on fire. And we all had to get out of the house ... See, we live at the back of a 'peace line'. And it was sectarian ... And now we have guards up on the windows. (Young Woman in North Belfast).

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 who grew up in the Province who are in their forties and younger, the Troubles has provided the societal context to their lives as children and as adults. Since 1969, 3,601 people have been killed (March, 1998), and well over 40,000 people injured. Statistical evidence that emerged from 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% 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.

Additionally, 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 UK 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 UK, 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 educational system, and this can result in low educational attainment, illiteracy, and reduction in life chances (Irwin and Dunn, 1997). Infant mortality and perinatal morbidity in the travelling community in particular is at levels unprecedented in the wider community (Fitzpatrick et al, 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 education as a means to improving life chances is not accessible to many of those who most need to achieve such improvements.

Youthquest 2000: Aims and Objectives

Youthquest 2000 was a survey of young people undertaken by the *Joint Society for a Common Cause* (JSCC) in association with *Community Conflict Impact on Children* (formerly Cost of the Troubles Study). The JSCC is a cross-community youth group comprised of young people from the Greater Belfast and Newtownabbey area. The group has been involved in organising cross-community residencies and events for several years before embarking on this research project. The project has evolved from an application to Youthnet for funding which had been a response to the adult-focus

of television and newspaper polls in relation to the peace process. A key theme has been to involve young people in the design and implementation of the questionnaire and survey with the JSCC providing the team for undertaking the fieldwork and providing an important input into constructing the questionnaire. The role of the Community Conflict Impact on Children (CCIC) has been to provide a steer and direction to the research, while assisting in implementing the study in accordance with participative action research principles. The CCIC's pragmatic advice has also been invaluable in relation to fieldwork administration, consistency in questions and so on. In general terms, the study has been a *learning process* for the young people involved, developing skills in research, communication, presentation and organisational capacities.

The overall aim of the project is to give a political voice to young people between the ages of 14-17 (inclusive) – a group without a voice in elections and opinion polls. The project was designed to give young people the chance to explore and express their views and opinions on issues surrounding the peace process and the Troubles as a whole. Through disseminating the results of the survey in this report, it is hoped that public understanding of the views, wishes and experiences of young people will increase and improve, and therefore act as a tool for policy makers and decision takers. Accordingly, the objectives of this report can be stated as:

- To give young people a chance to express their beliefs and opinions on the peace process and to gauge the effects of the troubles on their lives;
- To improve understanding of all young people's values, beliefs and opinions in the wider community;
- To provide funding organisations information that will help them target spending on young people's expressed needs;
- To provide baseline information for future surveys of young people to build on;
- To build on previous work of the Community Conflict Impact on Children in understanding the impact of the Troubles on children and young people¹.

The structure of this report is as follows: the remainder of section 1 will outline the survey's research methods and will provide a brief literature review as a context for the study; this will be followed by data description based on key themes that have been identified from the questionnaire; then a synthesis will be outlined in which cross-cutting themes will be developed; and conclusions will then be drawn in the final section.

Research Approach and Methods

Research approach

Central to the research approach has been the principle of partnership, and for both JSCC and CCIC the advantages of this have been clear. For JSCC, the association with CCIC has provided a technical research expertise and experience from an organisation grounded in research practice in relation to people's experiences of the Troubles. With this previous research experience, CCIC has acted as a 'sounding board' for ideas and methodology. For CCIC, the inclusion of JSCC has provided a

¹ See <http://www.jscclife.com/CCIC%20Final%20Report%202003.pdf>

democratising of the research process, by involving individuals from the researched population (i.e. young people). In this project, young people were involved in: initiating; managing; designing; and implementing the research. This has enabled the research to be conducted in accordance with participatory action research principles, in an attempt to prevent disempowering those whose lives and experiences are documented in this report.

Therefore, from the outset a number of research principles were adhered to, namely:

- That any work, research or exploration had to be conducted in partnership with children and young people;
- That the work of the project addresses the issues of the effects of the Troubles using an inclusive and humanitarian approach;
- That the project would also be conducted in partnership with local grass-roots community organisations and individuals within communities who wish to work on these issues with this approach;
- That any work should have practical and concrete outcomes and outputs that are of benefit to those children and young people participating in the project and their communities;
- That the project should also meet the requirement of compiling good information and reliable data on the level of need and the variety of situations and views of children and young people affected by the Troubles;
- That the project would generate and develop policy.

As stated, an important theme of the research approach has been to emphasise the learning process for those involved, in particular for members of the JSCC.

Research stages

The overall aim of the study is to give young people the chance to explore and express their views and opinions on issues surrounding the peace process and the Troubles as a whole. Although this report has drawn on previous qualitative research undertaken by CCIC, the thrust of this project has been mainly quantitative.

To this end, a tripartite research strategy was employed:

- Phase One of the project involved the identification of the key issues to be addressed in the survey. This entailed drawing together the initial ideas of the JSCC with the wider research agenda of the CCIC. Clarifying the roles of the two organisations was also discussed;
- Phase Two of the research included designing and administering a questionnaire to elicit the views and opinions of young people in Northern Ireland. No existing questionnaire was adequate to this task, and it was necessary to develop an instrument for this purpose. In this way the survey may act as a benchmark for future research;
- Phase Three consisted of the analysis of this survey. Research Evaluation Services were commissioned to 'handle' and input the data that was then made available to CCIC for analysis. Phase three also involved the dissemination of results with the aim of targeting a variety of audiences: young people; NGOs; policy makers; and in particular the EC.

Constructing the questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed in five parts.

1. Cover sheet and introduction

The first section contained the date of the interview, questionnaire serial number, interviewer code and information relating the location of the interview. This information was to be used for response rate monitoring and quality control purposes. A written introduction to the survey was also provided, setting out the purpose of the survey, conditions of confidentiality, and information relating to the dissemination of the survey.

2. The Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement

This section of the questionnaire aimed to collect data in relation to the political views of young people in Northern Ireland. Questions began generally, probing the institutions and personalities that have been viewed as helpful to the peace process and the political party usually supported by the respondent. Questions then became more specific in relation to the Good Friday Agreement in terms of interest, understanding and support. More detailed questions aimed at probing specific elements of the agreement and issues subsequently drawn into the peace process were also included, for example: decommissioning; RUC restructuring; and the place of paramilitaries in the local community. The section also consisted of questions relating to cross-community attitudes in terms of: marriages; social opportunities to mix with people from different religious backgrounds; and cross-community work and projects.

3. Human Rights and Young People

This section was framed in the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular the expression that young people should have the right to practice their own religion and culture. The aim of this section is to probe the extent and variety of ways that young people have had this right infringed. This was considered in terms of:

- Masking religious beliefs in case other people held it against the respondent;
 - Verbal abuse due to religion;
 - Exclusion from place for fear of verbal abuse;
 - School bullying (including to and from school) due to religion;
 - Special educational classes to discuss problems of bullying and sectarianism.
- Other issues raised in this section include questions relating to parades, and whether young people intend to remain in the Province after leaving school and possible reasons why.

4. Experiences of the Troubles

This section aimed to examine the nature, extent and effects of young people's experiences of the Troubles. Drawing on previous research by the Cost of the Troubles Study, questions were ordered in the questionnaire, so that they began with relatively common and less distressing experiences of the Troubles and escalated gradually to the more severe and distressing experiences, thus:

- Common experiences;
- More direct experiences;
- Severe experiences;

- Injury or death in the Troubles.

To this section was added questions on two other issues:

- Responsibility for the Troubles;
- Impact of events on respondent and their families.

These issues were identified in the Cost of the Troubles Study report 'True Cost of the Troubles' (1999) based on qualitative and quantitative data.

5. Demographics

This section aimed at collecting data on religion and ethnic origin, age type of school and religious mix of school, and tenure and type of house.

Following refinements and consultations, a final draft of the questionnaire was agreed and piloted in Bridge Youth Club. The final version of the questionnaire is contained in appendix one of this report.

Sampling and administering the questionnaire

In total, 1000 young people aged 14-17 were interviewed for the survey. It had been originally intended to survey 14-25 year olds for the study, however, this proved to be impractical for the field-team due to the difficulty in accessing 18-25 year olds in a relatively short timeframe for the survey. In any case 18-25 year olds already had the opportunity to express their political opinions through voting at elections. To provide access to 14-17 year olds, the interviews were undertaken through schools in the Province. Fifteen schools were selected through a quota sample based on the following characteristics:

- State schools (predominantly Protestant);
- Maintained / controlled schools (predominantly Catholic);
- Integrated schools;
- Single sex schools;
- Mixed sex schools;
- Rural schools;
- Urban schools;
- Secondary schools;
- Grammar schools.

Schools were involved throughout the Province and a list of participating schools is contained in appendix two.

For each school, the Principal was contacted to gain permission to undertake the survey and to outline the objectives of the study. Each survey was administered in the presence of a teacher and a member of the field-team, either in a normal classroom environment or in groups of different classes congregated in the assembly hall. The field-team was comprised of members of the JSCC and is outlined in appendix three of this report.

Contextual Analysis

Her wee brother and sister can't sleep in the back room. They're too afraid, 'cause their back windows been done [petrol bombed, bricked ...] that many times. They're

too afraid to sleep in their own room. Her wee sister sleeps between her mummy and her daddy, and her wee brother sleep's upstairs' (Young Woman in North Belfast).

Children and young people do not experience conflict and violence in a vacuum, nor is it the only problem they are faced with. Conflict and violence is experienced by children and young people in the context of assets, resources, impediments and handicaps *in* the child or young person's wider social context. In Northern Ireland, this wider social context is characterised by a number of features that help construct and mediate the experience of violence and the following will be considered:

1. The societal context;
2. The family context;
3. Young people's relationship to violence.

Societal Context

Segregation

Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society, in which the two communities are segregated from one another in educational, residential and in some cases, occupational terms. One mechanism, which has historically been employed by communities in order to manage these divisions in Northern Ireland, is that of residential segregation. Paradoxically, residential segregation can make people feel safer whilst they are among members of their own community; segregation can also mean that certain communities, such as enclaves, are sitting targets.

It has been estimated that following the 1991 Census, 50% of the population in Northern Ireland lives in areas that are more than 90% Catholic or Protestant. Segregation is most marked in the larger urban areas, but is also a feature of smaller towns and some rural areas. Residential segregation is more closely associated with public housing areas. Smith and Chambers (1991) estimate that 37% of manual Catholic households living in public housing were in wards where 90% or more of the population were of the same religion. The corresponding figure for privately owned households headed by a manual worker was 19%. The trend towards segregation has been steadily increasing (see McKitterick, 1994; Doherty and Poole, 1995).

Segregation is a feature of almost every aspect of life in Northern Ireland. Residential segregation is the most visible and discussed form of segregation, marked by so-called 'peace-lines' – high security fences that separate communities – kerbstone painting, graffiti, flags and other emblems. Areas segregated in this manner are often public housing areas, where unemployment and other forms of deprivation are prevalent. Residential segregation also occurs in middle class owner occupied housing areas, but is less visible. Of particular concern are the experiences of residents and their children in enclave areas. These areas, surrounded by the 'other' community, also experience deprivation levels that are the highest in Northern Ireland. It is often residents in enclaves that have experienced the most intense effects of the Troubles. Sectarian attacks are commonplace on the boundary of such areas, and it is young people, particularly males, who are most often involved, both as victims and aggressors.

Education

Children are educated in separate systems in Northern Ireland, according to their community of origin, with a small integrated school movement providing the exception rather than proves the rule of segregation. The Northern Ireland educational system is not only religiously segregated between the state and maintained schools, but is also streamed according to ability into grammar and secondary schools. Furthermore, gender segregation is also widespread. The educational system also serves children differently depending on their orientation towards education, and their location within the system.

Children who do not do well within the education system tend to come from the more deprived areas, which are often affected by violence. Those living in segregated areas face a whole range of additional challenges. For example, a survey by McKeown (1973) of all post primary schools in Northern Ireland found that over half of those surveyed reported harassment on the way to school. This is an issue that will be further probed in this study with insights into the extent that children experience harassment and bullying within school and on their journey to and from school, placed in the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Deprivation and the Troubles

Even a casual observation of the distribution of troubles-related violence suggests that a correspondence exists between deprivation, on the one hand, and concentration of Troubles-related violence, on the other. A correlation between Robson's (1994) ward index of deprivation and civilian death rates at ward level has been found (Fay et al, 1997). Northern Ireland experiences high levels of deprivation in comparison to other regions of the UK and Europe. Unemployment is high, dependence on social security benefits is heavy, rates of congenital abnormalities and incidence of long term handicap conditions are high, suicide rates among the young are rising, health is poor and income is relatively low (James and McCoy, 1989; Brown, 1996; Robson et al, 1994).

Trew (1995), writing about children in Northern Ireland's experience of the Troubles, states:

Poverty is a war against children ...The most economically deprived areas are frequently characterised as regions of high levels of political conflict and violence. The level of violence has varied across the region [of Northern Ireland] and across time...

In Northern Ireland, the effects of Troubles-related violence augment the effects of deprivation, creating what Smyth (1998) has termed a 'double penalty'. Programmes aimed at targeting social needs have, for the most part, ignored this double penalty. Intervention programmes and their social policies have operated as if they were dealing with 'simple' socio-economic deprivation, rather than deprivation which is interlocked with and compounded by the attritional effect of the violence of the Troubles.

Community identity and grievance

Segregation, continuing violence and other factors has served to tighten the networks and the bonds within communities, particularly in enclave communities. This is understandable, even predictable, given that many of these communities perceived

themselves to be – and indeed are – under attack. The other side of the coin of cohesion is that outsiders are often regarded with suspicion – particularly outsiders from the ‘other community’.

The Troubles has created the fear and suspicion with which the ‘other side’ – and to some extent all outsiders – are regarded. Furthermore, a sense of grievance and victimhood is felt almost universally. The sense of grievance is often based on real wrongs and injustices, many of which have gone unacknowledged and unaddressed for many years. In some cases it has appeared as if the political to address grievances is absent. This has been referred to as a ‘grievance culture’ and children growing up in such a climate inherit these grievances. They often learn at a very early age, either implicitly or explicitly, of the wrongs that have been done to their ‘kith and kin’.

Family Context

Inter-generational effects

Communication between parents and children living with armed conflict may be shaped – and limited – by a suite of protective intentions. Parents raising children in violent and unstable political and social environments deal with a formidable challenge. Faced as they are by impossible choices, few are in a position to realise the full impact of their actions on children, and on subsequent generations. Whether intentionally or not, the effects of the violent experiences of this generation of adults can be passed on to subsequent generations. In addition, individuals within families may live in close proximity to one another, but are frequently unable to discuss openly what has happened to them, using denial and silence as a defence against the horror of their loss (Deane, 1997).

In times of violence and war, the ability of adult caretakers to continue to carry out their care-taking role for the children in their care may be compromised. Adults who have been severely traumatised can be so shocked that they can be rendered virtually incapable of recognising the needs of other people, including the needs of their children. Previous research by the Cost of the Troubles Study (Smyth, 1998) outlines how a number of women who have been violently bereaved in the Troubles have described in interview how they, in the total absence of other forms of support, used alcohol and prescribed and unprescribed medication to self-medicate for long periods after their traumatic bereavement.

Parenting

War and low intensity conflict appears to create huge obstacles to the discharge of the adult responsibility for protecting children. In situations of armed conflict, physical danger may require the setting aside of normal standards of parenting. Perhaps it is that adult instincts of self-preservation may be so strong – or adults may be so preoccupied with crisis management – that children’s needs are sometimes overlooked. Children and young people may live in families that have been multiply bereaved or traumatised, in which consistent care attention may not always be available, albeit for understandable reasons. Another obstacle to the discharge of the parental responsibility is the fact that, due to the nature of violent conflict, parents may be powerless to ensure their children’s safety. Clearly, parents exercise little control over the level of violence in an area, and are therefore relatively powerless over the level of danger that their children are exposed to.

Children of prisoners

Amongst the most distressing experiences that can befall a child is separation from a parent in times of war and civil conflict (Machel, 1996; Macksound and Aber, 1996). Children who suffer such separations from parents can be among those most severely affected by their experiences. Children who are bereaved suffer a permanent separation, but those whose parents are imprisoned are also affected. Children in families where a parent has been imprisoned suffer the effects of separation from the imprisoned parent, and the added financial and emotional burden that this can place on families. Where the parent is imprisoned outside Northern Ireland, it may be virtually impossible for the child to maintain meaningful contact, due to the financial and emotional strain imposed by long journeys for visits, and disruption caused by the frequent and unpredictable moves which such prisoners can be subjected to.

Children of security forces

Another group of children about which little is known is the children of the Northern Ireland security forces. The local security forces have been targeted since the early Troubles, and many have been killed or injured. Quite often officers are attacked whilst at home and off duty, which means that constant vigilance is called for, and not only the officer but also his or her family is vulnerable to attack, at any time. Car bombs have been placed under officers' cars, officers have been attacked while travelling to and from work, and whilst off duty socialising or at home with their families. In some cases, children have witnessed these attacks.

Officers and their families have lived with the necessity of secrecy, and high levels of personal security over long periods of time. This has had a number of effects. Identity has to be managed in order to protect life. For young children, this means that from an early age they learn that they cannot talk at school about certain issues, and they discover early that ‘outsiders’ can be dangerous, and are not to be trusted. This undoubtedly has implications for their relationship with other children, and for their development and attitude formation.

Young People's Attitudes to Violence

Statistics on deaths of children and young people²

An examination of those killed in the conflict since 1969 illustrates the particularly vulnerable situation of children and young people. An age breakdown of deaths in the Troubles by Smyth (1998) revealed that of all the age groupings examined, the 18-23 age group contains the highest number of deaths – 898. This age group alone accounts for 25% of all deaths in the Troubles. People of 29 years and under account for over half the deaths in the Troubles to date. The risk, therefore, for those in their late teens and early twenties is unmatched by any other age group. If death is viewed as a surrogate for the effect of the Troubles as a whole, we can surmise that similar patterns will occur amongst the population of those injured in the Troubles. High levels of participation by young people in rioting and other street activities ensures that in relation to injury, young people are also the highest risk group.

From previous research by Fay et al (1997) and Smyth (1998) it was apparent that deaths in Northern Ireland from the Troubles are concentrated in a relatively small area of in the Province, with the highest risk areas being in urban areas – North and West Belfast and Derry Londonderry. Generally, these areas also correspond with areas that experience the highest levels of deprivation and family poverty. What emerges from this is that certain sub groups of children and young people are identified as being particularly at risk of becoming victims (or perpetrators) of violent acts, particularly young males, resident in these areas where the overall death rates are especially high.

The implications for Northern Ireland's children are that some children in the worst affected areas are likely to have a great deal of experience of the violence of the Troubles, whilst others have very little experience. This, argues Smyth (1998), has had major ramifications for our understanding of the situation of children in Northern Ireland. Because of the localisation of conflict, research that takes a representative sample of young people in Northern Ireland, such as this survey and study, will tend to over-estimate the experience of children in low violence areas like Bangor, whilst under-estimating the experience of children in high violence areas such as North and West Belfast. To speak of the 'average Northern Ireland child's' experience is somewhat misleading, since children's experience is widely diverse, with a substantial number of children having very intense and concentrated and prolonged experience of life-threatening Troubles-related events.

The culture of violence

McVeigh (1994) suggests that over a quarter of young people in Northern Ireland between seventeen and nineteen feel that they have been harassed in some way by the security forces, few registered complaints and few had confidence in the mechanisms for dealing with complaints. In 1991 there were 8,455 joyriding incidents, many of which involve shootings and assaults on joyriders. Some young people report that pressure is put on them by the police to become informers, in order to avoid prosecution as joyriders (Smyth, 1988).

Children who live in a surveillance culture grow up learning to be secretive and to distrust authority (Machel, 1996). Children who have grown with routine and repeated stopping and questioning in the street under emergency legislation and with house searches which were conducted because the police had 'reasonable suspicion' learn to hate the police and security forces. Authority, including the security forces, is often seen to be unfair, not even handed, and acting against the best interests of the community and of young people. In order to survive the violence and brutality of the Troubles, many people, including many children and young people, have become habituated to violence. Violence is minimised, and in the past this has enabled people to survive psychologically.

Set alongside a popular culture that often celebrates and promotes the use of violence, it is difficult to quantify the scale of the damage and brutalisation that has occurred to young people and to children. Everywhere, in the news media, in fiction, violence is presented as thrilling, entertaining, sexy, powerful, and exciting. It is not surprising that young adolescents, young men especially, often attach positive values to being tough, aggressive, and negative values to kindness, gentleness and compassion. Children and young people require help to reshape behaviours that were arguably

appropriate to the violence, in a context where violence is to be consigned firmly to the past.

Young people's attitudes, and the reproduction of sectarian division

Perhaps partly due to the limited and/or violent contact with members of the other community due to residential and educational segregation, young people often have strong views about the 'other side'. Whilst young people undoubtedly show signs of awareness and openness to the 'other side', there is also evidence of suspicion, anger, and at times hatred, directed at the other community (Smyth, 1998). This is in spite of cross-community schemes and positive parental influence. Children and young people's attitudes are formed in the context of the other things that happen to them, and maintenance of open-minded attitudes in the context of violently divided communities is clearly impossible for many young people.

However, it is not only children and young people from highly segregated areas that suffer as a result of the divided nature of this society. All children suffer in terms of the warping and restriction of their education and socialisation. The lack of preparation children receive and the lack of adult models for dealing in healthy, open and mutually respectful ways with different views, aspirations and traditions, means that children can grow up without positive models of inclusiveness outside their families. This increases the chances that they will grow into adults who are ill-equipped to deal successfully with the differences contained within the wider political community. Their full capacity for citizenship is not developed (Smyth, 1995a, 1995b). This has far reaching implications not only for children, but also for the society at large and for long term prospects of peace.

Negative coping strategies

Substance abuse – prescription drugs: Medication, either prescribed or non-prescribed, has been used by people to dull the emotional effects of the Troubles ever since the first events of 1969. For both adults and children, this has led to dependence on medication, and contributed to an informal community traffic in prescribed drugs within communities worst affected by the Troubles.

Drugs and young people: In spite of all the political and social ills that have befallen it, Northern Ireland has not had the same level of illegal drug problems as other European regions. Part of the reason for this has been the longstanding opposition of certain paramilitary groups to trafficking in illegal drugs, and the use of punishment beatings and shootings as a method of sanctioning those involved.

Alcohol: However, alcohol use – legal, relatively cheap and easily accessible – is arguably the most extensive substance abuse problem. Alcohol can be seen as a legal form of 'self medication', the use of which achieves (as do other illegal substances) an altered state of consciousness, and this provides for many the only form of respite from the stress of the environment. Most enclave areas have their own drinking clubs, off-licenses, and heavy drinking including extreme drunkenness is socially tolerated. However, adults are not the only consumers of alcohol. Clearly alcohol consumption by children and young people is hazardous, not only in terms of the health risks involved, but also the risks of setting up long-term dependence on alcohol. Furthermore, alcohol consumption has a dangerous effect on children's behaviour in the volatile atmospheres along peace lines or with police and army presence. In

situations where street violence and joyriding are common place, alcohol not only leaves children and young people's inhibitions of their behaviour, but also compromises their ability to assess and avoid danger.

Silence: In Northern Ireland, as in other situations of war and violent conflict, a culture of silence has developed around the most dangerous and fearful aspects of the Troubles. Even when people do break the silence, the taboo is still felt. As Feldman (1991) notes – “The line between informants and informers was clearly drawn: it marked a division of life and death”. The taboo of speaking offers an alternative explanation to the findings of some earlier research, which concluded that children had taken the violence for granted – it had become normalised. Instead this could be due to a behavioural (reluctance to break the silence) rather than a perceptual factor (failure to perceive the violence as noteworthy). This silence has served to conceal among other things, the experiences of the children and young people who have suffered most directly as a result of the Troubles.

Conclusion: Young People and a Political Voice

This research undertaken will hopefully act as a counterbalance to the silence that surrounds young people and the Troubles in Northern Ireland and its political context. The research has given an opportunity to 1000 young people in the Province to express their experiences in Northern Ireland ranging from daily experiences of harassment and bullying to the most serious consequences of the Troubles, such as bereavement and injury. The survey also provided a timely opportunity for young people to express their views in relation to the current political situation in Northern Ireland, faced with a stalled peace process and political tension concerning decommissioning of paramilitary arms, RUC restructuring, and the parades issue. Therefore the aim is to give a political voice to young people currently excluded from expressing views through elections and opinion polls. In this way, young people are viewed as important stakeholders in the peace process.