



Young people and armed violence in Northern Ireland

This report is part of an international research project on children and youth in organised armed violence (COAV) coordinated by Viva Rio, ISER (Instituto de Estudos da Religião) and IANSA (International Action Network on Small Arms). The study presents contextual comparisons of organised armed groups, and the involvement of children and youth within them, in ten countries across four continents. The history, structure and functioning of the groups themselves are discussed, as are the motivations, desires and day-to-day realities of their child and youth members, as well as the common threads in public policy used to deal with the problem. In so doing, the study is a starting point for the much needed discussion of a situation that is too often addressed by state force and repression.

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This report focuses on the role of young people in the conflict in Northern Ireland, concentrating on the changing nature of their involvement in street violence before and during the ongoing peace process. A full-length version of the report summarised in this chapter can be found at www.coav.org.br.

Introduction

While young people have played a significant part in the violent conflict in Northern Ireland, there has been relatively little analysis of their role within it. This article attempts to address the differing roles of children and young people in the 'Troubles'¹ since the 1970s.

Researchers carried out 15 individual interviews with adults who had been involved as children and young people in paramilitary groups on both sides of the conflict over the last thirty years. Further interviews were also held with young people aged between 15 and 24 years who were not members of paramilitary organisations, but lived in areas severely affected by the conflict and/or 'interface'² communities and were involved in 'anti-social' violence or 'recreational rioting'. Most of the interviewees came from Belfast or Derry/Londonderry, although some lived in large towns in County Antrim.

The changing patterns of violence

The first significant developments in the peace process in Northern Ireland were the ceasefires of 1994 since when there has been a steady reduction in violence. However, violence, albeit at a lower level, continues, particularly along interfaces in North Belfast and during Protestant Orange marches in the summer. A series of political crises led to the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly in October 2002. Elections in November 2003 saw the middle ground parties on both sides losing ground to the more radical parties. The British and Irish governments have made intermittent attempts at reviving talks – all unsuccessful to date – to resurrect a government in Northern Ireland.

In Belfast alone, there are twenty-seven interfaces where sporadic violence punctuates the lives of residents. The tensions along these interfaces separating communities are partly driven by contests about territory. Whilst some of this violence may be organised by paramilitary groups, at least some is perpetrated by groups of young people engaged, often casually, in what has come to be called 'recreational rioting.' This pursuit presents a thrilling pastime for bored, underemployed youths in the absence of effective policing of their communities, and the lack of more legitimate occupations. Examination of police statistics shows.

That violence emanates from both sides of the conflict. Since the ceasefires, and with the corresponding influx of foreign workers, there has been a rapid increase in racist and homophobic violence.

¹ The political conflict between Nationalists, mainly Catholic, who tend to see themselves as 'Irish', and Unionists or Loyalists, mainly Protestant, who tend to see themselves as 'British' and support union with Great Britain.

² Catholic communities that border Protestant communities, or Protestant communities that border Catholic communities, which are usually separated by a wall.

While violence has decreased post-1994, the nature of violence amongst young people and the motivation for engagement in that violence has changed dramatically – a change that has also been visible in South Africa as it emerged from apartheid.³ There too, the transition to peace saw a marked increase in levels of criminal violence in the poorest areas that had been worst affected by the violence of apartheid. This same pattern is emerging in Northern Ireland, with an increase in drug availability and usage, drug-related crime, racketeering criminal activity and racist and homophobic attacks.

Prior to the ceasefires and the peace process, the recruitment of young people into paramilitary groups was perceived as politically motivated and the violence they engaged in as motivated by Nationalist or Loyalist sentiment. Adults in the worst affected communities tended in the pre-ceasefire era to perceive street violence in the form of rioting as defence of the community in the face of outside threat, and therefore politically understandable, if not legitimate.

With the advent of the ceasefires, opinion has shifted. On the republican side particularly, the political strategy of mainstream republicanism no longer includes armed struggle, and this de-legitimises rioting and other violent activity. On the loyalist side, a violent and bloody feud between the two main paramilitary groups⁴ has polarised some loyalist working class communities and created a rather different context for young people living in loyalist areas. However, the two main loyalist groups, although active militarily, are officially also on ceasefire, so the opportunities for participation in paramilitary violence there too are limited, although competitive recruitment of young people has been reported recently.

Young people from both communities who currently participate in violence tend not to have access to guns, which are tightly controlled by the paramilitary groups. Currently, the violence is typically between rival groups of young people who are loosely organised groups from the same community, rather than formally organised gangs. Since the ceasefires of 1994 and 1996, confrontations along interfaces have continued, often involving the use of petrol bombs/Molotov cocktails, blast bombs, bolts and other heavy metal missiles fired from heavy-duty catapults, and occasionally firearms. Young people from both sides of the conflict participate in this rioting, although the majority have no direct links to paramilitary groups, but instead are acting under their own initiative. One group interviewed for this study described themselves as ‘wannabes’ rather than members of a paramilitary group. However, wannabes also know how to make blast bombs with readily available household and garden substances, carry knives and other weapons, and attack and defend their ‘territory’. Loyalist leaders have espoused the view that young people who are ‘beyond control’ are more easily controlled if recruited into a paramilitary group.

It is commonly alleged that paramilitary groups – or Sinn Féin – can ‘turn on and off’ street violence as a way of manipulating the political situation. However, there are several examples of how this may not be entirely true. For example, Sinn Féin’s MP Gerry Kelly had his arm broken in North Belfast when remonstrating with young people engaged in street violence. Other examples, such as the relative peace on certain interfaces during certain key periods, however, would suggest that elsewhere in Belfast the UDA in particular, have a role in orchestrating interface violence. At the outset of the peace process, wider society and particularly communities badly affected by the Troubles began to report increased levels of disorder and lawlessness. Local residents in these communities complained of increasing levels of vandalism, joy riding, drug abuse, petty crime and other forms of anti-social behaviour; usually carried out by disaffected young people who were increasingly perceived as problems within their own communities.

³ See for example Pierre du Toit ‘South Africa: In Search of Post-Settlement Peace’ in John Darby and Roger McGinty. *The Management of Peace Processes*. Macmillan (2000).

⁴ The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) is in competition with the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and a sub-group within the UDA, the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF).

Prior to the ceasefires, paramilitary groups in both Loyalist and Republican areas in Northern Ireland had adopted a practice of punishing petty crime and anti-social behaviour, using a tariff system of threats, exclusions and physical punishment. In some cases these physical punishments involve firearms, in so-called 'punishment shootings,' and in the most extreme cases death or exile.

Interviewed young people talked about their 'anti-social' behaviour. 'Gerard' said, "They [young people] steal cars. I'd say the good majority of West Belfast kids growing up are shoplifting and stuff from a young age. Nowadays they're breaking into people's sheds and stealing cars, probably even planning robberies and stuff."

'Seamus', speaking about the IRA, said "They think we're hoods. They'll shoot us if we don't stop. They pulled a gun on us. You'd be scared for ages but then you'd drink again and it would make you not care." 'Emer', a 16 year old from Derry said, "I hate the Provos.⁵ They go round beating people up. I don't think that's right. See if the Provos ever came to us, to our wee boys [young men], I couldn't stand it."

For one youth, his punishment for car crime was to be attacked and beaten by paramilitaries. He suffered severe injuries, including a broken jaw. Another said, "I was into cars, selling drugs, not giving a fuck...selling Es and that, making a few quid for buying a car. At the weekend you've got something to spend, you can buy yourself clothes, you've got a few quid." This 'entrepreneurial' activity was to have extreme consequences. "I've actually been shot four times by the Provos. If I hadn't been shot four times, I don't think anything would have stopped me."

Young people interviewed spoke in detail of the types of violence in which they engage and the weapons used. Interviewees from Ballymena reported sectarian fighting between Catholics and Protestants using "Weapons, batons and that, knuckledusters, steel toecaps, baseball bats, machetes and hammers, golf clubs, bus hammers, hurley sticks,⁶ forks you eat your dinner with." They also described making soda bombs. "Soda and vinegar, you get a bottle, yep and you throw it, it blows up. It explodes glass all over the place. It's like a type of acid thing where it burns all of your skin." Others in this group said that they had made petrol bombs, which they learned to do by observing others around them.

'Francis' commented: "If I was fighting someone my own age or younger, I'd use these [his fists], but if I'm fighting someone older or bigger, then I'm going to use something else...We use sticks and bats, we have knives." 'Danny' said: "I wouldn't use a knife. Loads of people have knives. Most of the people running around with knives, the Ra⁷ are looking for them, the cops are looking for them."

Young interviewees spoke of wide-scale drug and alcohol use. As 'Francis' from Derry/Londonderry said: "There's nothing to do in this place; nowhere to go..." "Cannabis, Es, speed, you take anything you can get your hands on. It makes you relax."

'Eamon' in Belfast stated, "I sniffed glue before I drunk, at 13. Everybody else was doing it. Why would I not do it like everybody?" 'Seamus', a 16 year-old from Derry told us that he had had his stomach pumped out twice as a result of alcohol poisoning. He expected to carry on drinking to excess. "Why not? Once you start you don't stop. You can't stop. Only if you've got no money."

⁵ The Provisional IRA

⁶ Stick used to play hurley, a traditional Irish sport.

⁷ Slang for the IRA.

Although there was some ambiguity as to whether they would use guns if they were available, young people said that access to firearms was very tightly controlled in their communities, and denied to them. One young Catholic said that, "It's too hard to get guns. If someone did something on me and you had a few beers on you.... You could do anything with a gun, rob a bank, kill people, kill pensioners." He pointed out that any young person who was known to have a gun would soon find themselves in trouble with the IRA. "If word got out, the Ra would take the gun. The Ra would come after you."

Recruitment of children by paramilitaries

The IRA maintains its cease-fire and, to the best of current knowledge, is not currently recruiting under 18 year-olds. Although there have reportedly been some attempts at recruiting amongst dissident Republican groupings, these have been limited. The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association/ Ulster Freedom Fighters (UDA/UFF) have recently entered into competition as a result of the feuding among them. Loyalist groupings believe that, unless they recruit, they become vulnerable to being overwhelmed by their rivals. Young people are seen in terms of their potential to augment the ranks of one side or the other. Young people themselves report feeling 'safer' if they belong to one group or another.

One man described his entry into the UDA in the 1990s: "I joined the UDA when I was 16. I admired the UDA because they were hitting back and Sinn Fein/IRA were being killed. The other reason I joined was out of sheer boredom, there was nothing else to do."

A male who joined the Fianna (IRA youth wing) before the current ceasefire described the influence of his family as a key factor: "Two of my older brothers were members of the IRA but that obviously had a major influence on my line of thinking. Likes of the IRA were never out of the house. They were in the house for tea and stuff like that."

A Catholic man described recruitment into the Fianna during the Troubles in 1980s: "We would have been members of the Fianna when we were sort of thirteen and fourteen but that was just that was like a boy scouts thing. You weren't allowed to use weapons or anything like that...There was older ones in the Fianna about fifteen or sixteen who were taking part in blast bomb and nail bombs attacks."

As to what age groups the various paramilitary groups recruited from, the Ulster Young Militants (UYM) produced a written statement in 2002 claiming that they did not recruit young people under the age of 16 years (recruitment into the UDA and the UFF has traditionally been based on recruiting from the UYM). The researchers were told by one informant that the age for recruitment into the IRA was 16, but one senior Republican stated that 'recruitment was not an issue' thus implying that recruitment was not currently taking place. Therefore this point is academic. It is not clear whether there is an age limit for recruitment into the UVF.

It is notable that none of the youths interviewed had any comments to make about their own politicisation either within the home or their wider community. These young people appear to have a very different relationship to politics than those who were previously involved in the political conflict. Whilst some of them called their loose grouping X Republican Youth, or Y Loyalist Youth, they did not appear to have formal links with mainstream political groupings. Rather, these informal groups tend to focus on self-defence and defence of their territory in the highly segregated environment they live in.

While politics was not an issue for those youths interviewed, many young Catholics interviewed felt that the police discriminated against them and in favour of young Protestants. Police violence was referred to by 'Danny' who told researchers: "Cops have beat us up a few times as well. We were being cheeky to them. Cops are worse. I hate the cops more than the Ra.I think they're bitter. They hate me because I'm Catholic."

Future perspectives

When asked what they expected of the future, the answers were almost uniformly bleak. Seventeen year-old 'Francis' replied with one word: "Parties." Asked to elaborate, he expanded, "I like being young just. It's better than being old. I don't want to be old and wrinkled. I don't want a wife. I've not got the patience for a wife. I don't want kids. They'll only end up like me and I wouldn't be able to keep them under control."

The only ambition that 'Seamus' expressed for the future was the hope that he would be able to carry on drinking. Like the other young people to whom he spoke, he was unemployed and had been so since he left school. When pressed, the only positive comment he could find to offer about the future was, "I'm getting really good at snooker."

'Gerard' had thought about the future he wanted for his own children. "Move away from this place, that's what it needs. I don't want my kid getting involved in this place. Down South's great. Everyone's friendly and all. It's quiet and all. How good would your kid be and all. It would grow up properly. Instead of like me. I don't want those problems with my kid. No chance."

Good Practice Case Studies

The case studies presented here are drawn from the NGO sector; it is in this sector that up until now innovative work has taken place. These case studies are of projects that offer diversionary activities to young people, in order to take them away from involvement in violence. The following presentations are based on external evaluation reports.⁸

Case study 1: Community Restorative Justice Ireland⁹ and Northern Ireland Alternatives

As noted above, since the peace process began both Loyalist and Republican working class areas have been troubled with problems of petty crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour by youth. Due to gaps in policing, local people turned to paramilitary groups to 'police' the community. As noted earlier, this often took a violent and brutal form: punishment beatings, kneecappings, exclusion from the community or the country and on occasion, death. Two community restorative justice schemes, one in Catholic areas, Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI), and one in Loyalist areas, Northern Ireland Alternatives, were formed in order to provide an alternative method of approaching breakdowns in relationships in the community as a result of crime and anti-social behaviour. These two schemes operate separately, and have taken different approaches. The Alternatives Scheme offers a pre-designed programme to young people who are referred by a wide range of agencies in the community. Alternatives work closely with the existing criminal justice agencies, including the police.

The CRJI have 15 local projects throughout Northern Ireland with further groups developing. They have trained over 1000 people in methods of restorative justice, and have dealt with 1700 cases involving 6000 individuals in the last four years. Independent evaluation recorded a satisfactory outcome in 92% of these cases. CRJI schemes respond to complaints from members of the community, and mediate a local resolution with the consent of the victim. An agreement is reached between the parties, part of which is a restorative requirement and the perpetrator is supervised in carrying out the terms of the agreement. The CRJI schemes, since they operate in Catholic/Republican areas where the police have not been acceptable in the past, do not work openly with the police. They consider to do so would bring severe criticism from many in the community who are not satisfied with the extent of police reform, and who will not, therefore, participate in the structures of the criminal justice system, or work with the police.

⁹ <http://www.restorativejusticeireland.org/>

CRJI scheme members have also been involved in mediating city centre violence, which is particularly prevalent in Derry/Londonderry. There, volunteers walk the streets at high-risk times, and attempt to de-escalate confrontations. Both CRJI and Alternatives schemes see themselves as involved in preventative work as well as responding to referrals. Both would take a non-punitive line, and would argue that an education and awareness training alongside diversionary schemes is the most effective method.

Both schemes report impressive success rates, and relatively low rates of re-offending for most offenders. However, a cohort of persistent 'deep end' offenders present them with substantial challenges and such schemes cannot deal with a range of issues such as domestic violence or sexual abuse.

Northern Ireland Alternatives has four programmes and has operated since 1998 in Shankill, handling 129 referrals related to punishment threats; 62 young people became involved in the intensive programme as a result. 42% of referrals came from paramilitary organisations, 27% came from the community, 18% from social services and 13% from either BASE2 or self-referral. Most of those they work with are males and between the ages of 10-22. As a result of their work, punishment beatings in Shankill have been reduced. 86% of young people, once referred, formulated a contract in one month or less. 64% of cases were on the Programme for a maximum of 7 months, and the range of length of participation was from one month to 17 months. 76% of cases involved meetings with victims and over 58% of cases had previous or current involvement of one of the statutory agencies. 87% of closed cases were successfully completed. The most frequent activities in the contracts drawn up were volunteer work, victim restitution, alternative schooling, prevention programmes, individual and group counselling, drug and alcohol awareness programmes and family support.

Case Study 2: Ógra Shinn Féin¹⁰

Ógra Shinn Féin is the youth section of Sinn Féin, now the largest party representing the Northern Ireland Catholic community. It is also the party with close associations to the IRA, the largest and most effective of the paramilitary groupings in Northern Ireland. Ógra Shinn Féin provides an effective alternative for young people to membership of the IRA and direct involvement in armed conflict and violence by providing young people with a channel for political expression and participation.

In recent years Sinn Féin has invested time and energy in developing their youth wing, which has been active within the party, and in coalition with other political groupings, for example, campaigning against the war in Iraq. Their manifesto states:

'Young people are interested in political issues, but many feel that politicians don't represent their interests. This does not mean that our young people are apolitical. The willingness of so many young people to participate in political action was illustrated by the huge numbers who protested against the war in Iraq.' (Ógra Shinn Féin Election Manifesto, 2004).

The manifesto goes on to discuss educational access for young people, children's rights, corporal punishment, immigration, homelessness, employment rights, human rights, cross-border voting on the island of Ireland, the arms trade and nuclear disarmament amongst others. Ógra Shinn Féin has appointed youth liaison officers in both Northern Ireland and in the Irish Republic, together with five regional youth officers and a national executive. They raise issues about the lack of participation of, or consultation with, young people in decisions taken by government that affect young people. The manifesto also addresses the issue of justice for young people:

¹⁰ <http://ograsf.freespaces.com/english/>

At a time when other political parties struggle to maintain their membership, Ógra Shinn Féin is flourishing and vibrant. Their members stand in elections for Sinn Féin, and are amongst the youngest candidates in recent electoral contests. For those young people who were drawn into armed violence and paramilitary membership in the past for reasons of political motivation, there now exists on the Republican side a vehicle for political expression and activity.

On the other hand, Sinn Féin is now suffering the consequences of success in its own constituency. Whereas previously, joining Sinn Féin was seen as an act of a rebel, nowadays, the party is seen as the mainstream, the authority. Its ability to attract the more marginalised young people is limited because of this, in spite of its other successes. Ógra Shinn Féin members nowadays tend to be smart, focused, articulate, accomplished, rather than angry, disaffected and marginalised. A second concern is related to suspicions about the robustness of the IRA ceasefire, and the role of Ógra Shinn Féin should the IRA return to war. However, a separate military youth wing of the IRA, (Na Fianna Éireann) means that Ógra Shinn Féin will remain in the same role as that of Sinn Féin to the IRA, namely as a political wing, with an armed associate organisation. In spite of the suspicion about these links, it is incontestable that OSF provides the most effective political opportunity for young people of any of the range of political parties operating in Northern Ireland.

Recommendations for Possible State Interventions

These recommendations address the situation of both the young people involved in politically-motivated armed violence and those involved more recently in 'anti-social' violence.

1. Establishment of a justice system that has the confidence of all. The lack of consensus on policing, and the resultant gap in policing has meant that paramilitary groups have operated a rough justice system, largely targeted at younger people in those communities. The building of trust in the formal justice system and in the police is an issue raised in the Good Friday Agreement, and various agencies are charged with responsibility for advancing this. The establishment of a justice and policing system that has the support of the entire population is essential if young people's involvement in armed violence is to be addressed comprehensively and justice for young people is to be achieved. The ending of paramilitary policing is in everyone's interest, and the paramilitaries themselves claim that they have no appetite for such a role.

2. Change the balance in existing interventions. Young people who have been through the criminal justice system multiple times appear to have the best developed intervention and support services available to them. Other young people that are at an earlier stage on the same trajectory have less access to such services. Priority should be given to preventative work with young people at risk of perpetrating acts of armed violence, rather than focussing so heavily on those already apprehended and convicted.

3. Address alcohol abuse. An urgent, comprehensive and hard-hitting initiative on alcohol abuse aimed at young people from the age of 10 upwards must be devised involving both a preventative and a remedial strategy. Since almost all of the anti-social violence encountered during this study was fuelled by alcohol, achieving a drastic reduction in alcohol consumption amongst young people can effectively reduce levels of violence. Penalties for providing alcohol to young people should also be enforced.

4. Prevent educational exclusion. Almost all the anti-social violence committed by young people encountered during this study followed on from early educational failure. In some cases these failures were clearly due to undiagnosed psychological or learning difficulties, often dismissed by schools as bad behaviour. The proper assessment of disruptive and under-performing pupils by educational psychologists and early intervention, as well as improving the availability of schools psychological services particularly to schools in deprived and militarised communities, will go a long way towards addressing these problems.

Where possible children should be kept at school, and school exclusions should not be used, as these merely compound the problems for the young person concerned. Provision of remedial education by appropriate educators for those that are too old to return to the public school system is also an important step towards addressing the marginalisation of those involved in anti-social armed violence.

5. Provide a nutrition and diet service for deprived communities. Research has shown that nutritional deficiency and insufficient vitamin intake in school age children has severe adverse effects on their levels of concentration and educational performance. This, coupled with the increase in obesity and the high levels of consumption of fast food has compounded the marginalisation of young people in deprived areas. A state-sponsored nutrition and vitamin programme, together with a healthy eating programme for schools and for marginalised communities should be established to address this.

6. Provide violence education in schools. South Africa has instituted excellent multimedia violence education in schools. Such a programme in the mainstream curriculum should be devised for, and provided in, Northern Ireland, so that children can learn from an early age to understand the causes and effects of violence, alternatives to it and how to stay safe.

7. Resist punitive policies. The evidence is clear that punitive policies, whilst being politically popular and appealing to the desire for revenge on the part of some in the community, do not reduce the levels of violence. Government should therefore resist implementing such policies, including the soon-to-be-introduced Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, which merely replicate in the mainstream the kind of physical exclusion enforced in the past by paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland.

8. Involvement of the Children's Commissioner. The Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner should take up the range of issues relating to the involvement of children and young people in armed violence, and advocate on behalf of those young people.

9. Implement the Good Friday Agreement. The Northern Ireland Assembly was congratulated by the UN Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict for having included young people in the text and provisions of the Agreement. However, this inclusion has yet to lead to concrete action. Community-based schemes to support young people referred to in the document have not been implemented, and provisions that have been made have been inadequate. Provision for young people who have an involvement in armed violence, either as part of an armed group or as a consequence of the continuing social problems in militarised communities, must be established and mainstreamed. Such provision must be long term and located in both the NGO and statutory sector. This work cannot be done in a piecemeal fashion with short-term funding commitments.

10. Acts of completion by armed groups. Whilst the Agreement calls on the armed groups to end violence and to put their weapons verifiably beyond use, this process has not been brought to completion by any of the armed groups, and indeed some have not even begun. A comprehensive commitment to ending violence and the destruction of weapons and dumps would create a more secure future for young people, and would effectively demobilise those already recruited into the armed groups concerned.

11. A DDR strategy for Northern Ireland. Simple decommissioning in itself is not sufficient. In other conflict zones, a Demobilisation, Demilitarisation and Reintegration (DDR) approach has been adopted, and specific measures put in place to ensure that those, including young people, involved in armed groupings do not continue to pose a threat to peace and stability, and are enabled to make the transition back into civilian life and useful citizenship.

- As part of the DDR strategy, a criminal records review process should be established in order to facilitate the integration of former politically-motivated prisoners with criminal convictions acquired during the conflict. Such records debar people from certain occupations and professions and thus compromise their employability and reintegration.
- Similarly, as part of the DDR process, screening of former combatants for psychological problems and the treatment of PTSD and other disorders found is important, not only for the individuals suffering these disorders, but also for the safety and quality of life of those encountering them.
- Finally, DDR should include educational assessment of former combatants, and the provision of education to make good any deficits in their education will increase their ability to reintegrate.