

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The effect of paramilitaries on society in Northern Ireland](#), HC 24

Wednesday 9 November 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 9 November 2022.

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Stephen Farry; Sir Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Carla Lockhart; Ian Paisley; Mr Robin Walker.

Questions 105 - 140

Witnesses

I: Koulla Yiasouma, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People; Mairéad McCafferty, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People \(NICCY\)](#)



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Koulla Yiasouma and Mairéad McCafferty.

Q105 **Chair:** Good morning, colleagues. Welcome to this session of the inquiry on the effects of paramilitaries on society in Northern Ireland, and a particularly warm welcome to Carla Lockhart, who joins the Committee for the first time this morning. Carla, you are very welcome and thank you for joining the Committee.

We are very pleased to be joined by the Commissioner for Children and Young People and the chief executive of the office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People this morning to give evidence. Ladies, thank you for joining us. You are both very welcome.

I am going to kick off the questioning. Commissioner, this may well be a question for you, but I will leave that to the two of you to divvy up, as it were. Are you able to tell us, in your experience, in which community you find the greatest challenge of paramilitary activity taking place as it affects the young people for whom you are a commissioner?

Koulla Yiasouma: The first thing that I would say that it is not a community but communities where we see the biggest challenge, and it is what predominantly we would call working-class communities. I do not know whether your question is particularly related to whether this is more predominant in republican or loyalist communities.

Q106 **Chair:** Yes, I suppose so, but as it is affecting young people, or are you finding it at parity?

Koulla Yiasouma: We are more likely to be talking about working-class communities that are identified as socially deprived young people who may be vulnerable, particularly because of their personal or family circumstances. I know that you will have heard about adverse childhood experiences in their background. They are the young people we would find most vulnerable to these sorts of gangs and groups. It is communities where vulnerable young people are likely to be, so it is working-class, socioeconomically deprived communities, and that is what young people themselves are telling us. They are telling us that they have learned how to survive living in those communities.

Chair: So that is irrespective of whether they would identify as Protestant or Catholic.

Koulla Yiasouma: Yes.

Q107 **Chair:** With that in mind, is there a broad similarity in how paramilitaries intimidate young people, or is there any noticeable differential between the two?

Koulla Yiasouma: In the work that we have done with young people and their representatives, particularly in the voluntary and community sector, the characteristics are broadly the same, in that we are talking about



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coercion, threats and drug debt. In some cases, we have heard instances of sexual exploitation as well. How that coercion and influence characterises and impacts on the lives of children and young people is broadly similar.

There are peaks and troughs. In April 2021, when we had the so-called protocol riots, you would have heard more in loyalist communities that young people were being messaged and that social media was being used to get them to turn up to civil disturbances. You will get that, but, in how they experience it in their lives, it has not been reported to my office that it is characterised in a different way.

Q108 Chair: Still on the communities theme, this Committee relatively recently undertook an inquiry with regard to the experience of migrant and ethnic minorities coming into Northern Ireland, and we have seen the census figures quite recently, which show a small but growing number. What is your engagement as a commission with that cohort of young people? Are you picking up any trends or thoughts about how they may be being dragged into the sphere of influence of paramilitaries?

Koulla Yiasouma: Put succinctly, no, we are not picking up any trends that these young people are being coerced. It could be because they are still relatively new to Northern Ireland, and that vulnerability has not manifested itself or come to the attention of the armed groups and the gangs. We have some engagement with our newcomer community, and our legal and casework service is open to them. We are also doing a lot of work with families—and their advocates—whose asylum status is still unclear and subject to asylum controls, but we are not picking up any involvement of these young people with paramilitary organisations or criminal gangs.

Mairéad McCafferty: Just to support what Koulla is saying, we have not had any of this brought to our attention at this stage. That is not to say that it is not happening. Certainly at the minute we would say that most of the impact of paramilitaries or criminal gangs—however you want to term them—in terms of what they are doing in communities is very much the legacy of the conflict in the communities that have been historically affected, as Koulla has been saying, by underinvestment, and that are suffering economic and social deprivation.

The transgenerational trauma, therefore, in families is a big factor in these communities as well, because we know that it is very often the case that children and families are suffering the trauma across generations, and that can manifest in a lot of different ways.

Q109 Chair: We often have manifested over here what is called cuckooing, where vulnerable, sometimes disabled people with learning difficulties and so on will be targeted, and their properties, their homes, their flats or their sheltered accommodation used as a base for criminal activity, with their vulnerability of disability used as a smokescreen. Is that manifesting itself at all in Northern Ireland among young people?



Koulla Yiasouma: I am not sure about cuckooing in the way that you describe it. It is vulnerable young people, as Mairéad has said. When we have talked to young people or to the groups who are supporting them, you will find characterised, as I said at the beginning, adverse childhood experiences of families—often single parent—who have experienced mental health issues, have been victims of domestic violence, and are impacted by the trauma of the conflict and have their own trauma issue. You will find children and young people who may have a disability, particularly a learning disability, and who do not do well at school. You will find children and young people, and their families, who should be receiving additional services from the state.

The way in which cuckooing manifests itself with young people is that they are the ones who are prey. They are the ones these groups target and pick on, similarly to what is happening with county lines on your side of the water.

Q110 **Chair:** Would you typify it as being, in broad terms, people who feel lost and disconnected finding the succour and comfort of connection as part of a gang and a group providing a stability network in a very unstable living environment?

Koulla Yiasouma: There is that. We absolutely all need to feel that we belong. If we are being told by certain elements of our communities that we do not belong because we are from this family or because our behaviour is this or is that, and there is no place for us, we feel that we do not belong.

The other thing, though, that is really important to point out is that these young people will sometimes do this for survival. If you feel lost in your community, you may feel you do not belong, but also what is your alternative to saying yes to these groups? There is none that they can reasonably perceive. I, as a middle-class woman, may think that there is an alternative, but they do not see themselves as having an alternative, and I question whether they are wrong. They are probably right from their perspective. It is about finding somewhere to belong to, but also they do it because they need to in order to survive in their community. That is a really important point to make.

Q111 **Chair:** There is a threat or a fear of significant repercussion if they do not acquiesce, I presume.

Koulla Yiasouma: Yes, absolutely. If you do not see the police as a legitimate force—and I believe the PSNI is the only law enforcement agency that we have and should have in Northern Ireland—and if you live in a community that is not necessarily comfortable or does not trust that the police will keep it safe, what is your alternative? You have no alternative, so you have to do what you have to in order to keep yourself safe.

Q112 **Chair:** Let us turn to the pounds, shillings and pence question. I am



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going to guess that the answer is no, and that the answer to the second question is “more”. Is there sufficient funding for bespoke schemes targeted towards young people?

Koulla Yiasouma: Looking at the tackling paramilitary activity taskforce and the funding that has gone out, quite a lot of funding has gone into awareness raising and some prevention. We are not seeing enough going into these sorts of schemes to protect these young people, particularly going to the community and voluntary sector organisations that support them.

The other important point that I would really welcome teasing out is that, instead of having one system for working with vulnerable young people, we have piecemeal funding all over the place, so organisations are picking bits and pieces. Government themselves, including this programme, are not working together around what are ultimately the same group of young people who are working with social services, who are having additional education programmes and who are in our criminal justice system.

While I would agree that there is not enough, I am not convinced that Government funding to vulnerable young people is being spent as wisely and as efficiently as it should be.

Q113 **Chair:** Does that run the risk of duplication and triplication but not having the maximum impact, or just neglect?

Koulla Yiasouma: Both.

Q114 **Carla Lockhart:** In relation to the funding, there was a significant pot of money set aside for tackling paramilitarism, and it went to four areas, one of which is in my constituency, which takes in Kilwilkie, Drumbeg and Drumgask. In recent days, some money has been made available to some of the loyalist estates, after a lot of lobbying, as areas of influence. Has that money made a difference? Did enough of it go to the young people’s aspect, trying to ensure that young people do not get involved?

My final question would be around women. There was a significant pot of money for women in those areas. Women have a big influence on their kids—what their kids do and where their kids go. Do you see a need for more money invested in the women in those areas that would then have a knock-on effect on young people?

Koulla Yiasouma: On your first question, are you talking about the communities in transition programme?

Carla Lockhart: Yes.

Koulla Yiasouma: You have to be impressed that I knew that. The communities in transition programme was very late off the starting blocks, so it is early days from when the money went into those communities and those organisations. That is a programme run by TEO. It is early days to see what impact it has had on young people. My worry is that, as recently as 2019, when this was surveyed, young people were



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still telling us that they were being deeply impacted by paramilitary groups or armed gangs. For me, it is too early to say whether those programmes are having benefits, but I have seen quite a lot of projects for young people within those areas.

On the women's point, Mairéad and I were talking about this earlier. What is remarkable about that programme as part of the fresh start agreement is what a little bit of money did when targeted at those women. You are absolutely right that we are often talking about children who live in families with their mother, and how their mother struggles so enormously to do all the things that they need to do—particularly with boys—so, yes, we need more funding for women's projects and for family projects.

Children live in families. There is no child who does not live in a family. Whether it is their birth family or an extended family, or if they are living in children's homes, that is their family. We need to see not just the young person but the system around them—their family, their communities and their schools. We need to work with our children and young people within those ecosystems. Where the communities in transition programme is helpful is that it is seeing the whole community, not just the individual, because we cannot be blaming individual young people. We need to look at the circumstances they come from.

Q115 Sir Robert Goodwill: Good morning. We use the terms "paramilitarism" and "paramilitary groups" in a way that maybe is not helpful in almost legitimising them. Some may have a misplaced glorification of terrorism, not having directly experienced the troubles and understood the desperate time that it was. Do you feel that using these terms risks legitimising some of these groups in their communities?

Koulla Yiasouma: Yes, it is romanticising. Young people, particularly in some communities, have this romantic notion of paramilitary groups. We need to move away from that language. These are armed groups. These are gangs. There is nothing about the ones that young people are involved with that suggests to me that they are doing anything other than criminal activity, so we need to use language that describes it properly. That is not to say that you can compare an armed criminal gang in Northern Ireland in the same way that you can anywhere else. It has to be seen within the context of our situation, and that they have emerged from our conflict.

I was also very struck by something that Siobhán McAlister said to you back in May, which was that people involved in these groups sometimes oscillate between being a criminal gang member and being a political voice. Those of us who are not involved in them do not always know the difference. It is not straightforward, but we absolutely need to use the language of gangs to remove the romanticisation for young people.

Mairéad McCafferty: The piece of work that NICCY did back in 2017, following the shooting of two young people, when we brought all the



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statutory agencies as well as the community and voluntary sector agencies around the table, was about seeing this as a child protection/child abuse issue for communities and for statutory bodies.

A piece of work has been done on that by Government, but we also did a piece of work on that, because we need to get away from this notion, as Koulla said, that there is legitimacy, in a sense, by calling them paramilitaries or ex-paramilitaries. What has now emerged, or what we have at the minute, is the exploitation and abuse of children and young people in the communities, whether that is through fear, intimidation or recruitment and so on, which has been flagged up in a number of reports, including our own. It is fundamental that we put the language on this that is more accurate in the current context as well.

Q116 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** So “criminal gangs” or “unlawfully armed groups”?

Koulla Yiasouma: Criminal gangs.

Mairéad McCafferty: Yes, criminal gangs.

Q117 **Chair:** “Gangs” has a romantic thing. What about “groomers”? These people are grooming people, are they not?

Mairéad McCafferty: Yes.

Koulla Yiasouma: It is the point that Mairéad just made about looking at where they exploit and groom. You are absolutely right. If we use the language of safeguarding and child protection, it will flow that these children are victims of exploitative adults, of which grooming is an element. That will come naturally. We need to move to that language. We need to use the language of child abuse, safeguarding and child protection.

Chair: This is an incredibly powerful theme that is coming out in this inquiry, even in just the few sessions that we have had, so thank you for that.

Q118 **Mr Walker:** I fully agree with what you just said and we had an interesting exchange with Minister Long around using this language of “child abuse”. Are there any downsides to that, in that it raises the bar? Clearly, there are parallels: violence and coercion of children; grooming and careful preparation of people in a certain way. Are there any risks in that approach or should it be more universally adopted?

Koulla Yiasouma: I cannot see a risk, except one thing around perception, and I do think that it should be universally adopted. The risk around perception may be this idea that these young people get involved in criminal activities and then they get let off with it. The other risk is that these gangs may then think that if they use these young people to do their dirty work—drug dealing and civil disturbances—they are going to get off with it, so they have more of a lever with them. There are absolutely those risks, which is why this has to be a twin-track approach.



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There has to be criminal justice to bring these groomers, these exploiters and these armed groups to book, to pursue them, to prosecute them and to disrupt them—all those things. You cannot do one without the other, but we absolutely need to change the lens through which we see these children. We need to see them as vulnerable; we need to see them as victims.

That does not mean that we give them carte blanche for certain behaviours or do not help them appreciate the impact of their behaviours, but we can do that within the lens of child protection/safeguarding processes and systems, while disrupting and arresting the adults who manipulate and groom young people.

Q119 Mr Walker: The people behind it—yes, that makes sense. This is something that the Chair has come across through a lot of the evidence that we have heard. Is it yet sufficiently embedded among the organisations that are involved with this? Is there more that could be done to broaden that approach and get people signed up to it?

Koulla Yiasouma: That is absolutely right. As Mairéad said, in July last year we published a paper on child criminal exploitation. We issued that to the then Ministers, and were very clear that the child protection and social services system needs to get more involved in this discussion and these debates.

In terms of the senior child protection officials group—whatever it is called—you will have heard about a task and finish group around this. That was in direct response to the NICCY advice that we issued. We are expecting to hear from Government in the next few weeks as to how they are going to address this, but I do not think that either the police or social services are where they need to be yet on this issue. There is a way to go. That is why we issued formal advice around this.

Q120 Mr Walker: Mairéad mentioned the issue of a trauma-informed approach and recognising adverse childhood experiences. There is presumably further work to do in making sure that all organisations have awareness of the best way to engage with traumatised children and that side of things. Do you have good partners to work with in that respect?

Mairéad McCafferty: Absolutely. As Koulla has already said, we engage quite extensively with Government and statutory partners, but also with the NGO community and voluntary sector here, working directly with these children and young people on the ground. We are mindful that, as awareness grows around ACEs—adverse childhood experiences—and the impact of those, this is an area that should be included as an ACE as well. NICCY has said that in the past.

Coming back to the point about support services and seeing these children and young people as victims who have been groomed into criminal activity, back in 2016 we had the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child calling for more extensive work by the state in addressing these areas that children are facing. We also had the UN Committee against



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Torture calling on the state and Governments in the devolved jurisdictions, including Northern Ireland, to do more to stop the recruitment of these children into these organisations, because this is where the abuse is happening, whatever face that takes.

Sometimes, it can be child sexual exploitation, which we are, unfortunately, familiar with already and suspect is probably the tip of the iceberg in terms of what has been brought to our attention, but it can also be dealing drugs and then making young people dependent on drugs. They then get into debt around the drugs, so have to deal the drugs to pay off the drug debts. We have had stories, as Koulla mentioned earlier, about vulnerable families who are in real difficulties trying to deal with the issues around this as well.

Q121 Mr Walker: One of the risk factors, clearly, for children being at risk of that kind of exploitation is being disengaged from or severely absent from school. I know that the Children's Commissioner over here has been very involved in the push to try to get children back into school. Do you feel that joining up with the Education Department, schools and other organisations allows you to have an active role in supporting that and making sure that children are, wherever possible, in a safe place?

Koulla Yiasouma: Schools need to be places that children can go to. We absolutely agree that education is a protective factor. It is also that aspiration; schools need to be places where children feel welcome and, particularly for this group of children, where they will be cherished. That is not always the case. Our education system—hence the independent review of education—needs to do a little more work to make sure that schools are supported to do what they want and need to do for all the young people in the community they serve. Schools and education are key in this process, but there is still a lot of work to do to get us to where our children need our education system to be.

Q122 Mr Walker: As commissioner, do you have visibility on the day-to-day figures in terms of what numbers of children are absent from school and what numbers are there?

Koulla Yiasouma: That is a great question, and I am sorry you asked it. I do have visibility, but the problem is that we have not drilled down on the numbers as well as we should have. We do not believe that the absentee level or the level of returners coming out of covid are as extreme as you have experienced in England. There are a group of young people—in the couple of hundreds—where the system does not understand where they are and how they are getting on. We need to drill down, and we are working with the education authority and the Department of Education to do that.

We also know that a number of parents have deregistered their children to home educate them, and that whole system needs to be properly addressed, particularly to ensure that those parents are receiving the support they need to be able to educate their children. The figures we



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have in Northern Ireland are not as robust as those that you have over there, but we have been working with the Department of Education on that.

Q123 **Chair:** Just following the point that Mr Walker was talking about with regard to children and families in education, is any of the intimidation to offer up recruits to the parents—"We need 14 to 16-year-olds this week and, if you do not, you might have some trouble"—or do they go directly to the young people themselves?

Koulla Yiasouma: I am just looking at Mairéad here. That is not something that we have heard—that they go via the parents. Generally, we are hearing that it is a direct engagement, often through social media and often through word of mouth.

Mairéad McCafferty: Just on that, we are hearing that parents sometimes get involved to try to extricate the children from the influence of these gangs and to pay off debts. We have heard anecdotally as well from parents who have paid off debts or were coerced into paying money to protect their children.

Q124 **Chair:** But it does not happen the other way—that a parent gets into debt.

Koulla Yiasouma: Not that we have heard.

Mairéad McCafferty: Not that we are aware of at this point.

Chair: Has anybody looked at that?

Mairéad McCafferty: We would need to check that.

Chair: If you could and come back to us, that would be helpful.

Koulla Yiasouma: We can do that.

Q125 **Claire Hanna:** How does socioeconomic deprivation combine with intergenerational trauma to create the conditions where children and young people are vulnerable to paramilitary activity?

Koulla Yiasouma: It is hard for me with my English accent to talk about the troubles, but what you know is that the day-to-day trauma of the conflict was often in working-class communities. When you look at those areas described as most economically deprived and you overlay that with a map of the communities that were most impacted by the conflict, while it is not 100%, there is quite a lot of synergy there. Those families are much more likely to have experienced a trauma, to have lost a loved one, to have been hurt themselves or to have witnessed something.

Today's young people, all of whom were born after the Good Friday agreement, are telling us, "We know that our granny, our auntie or our mummy is upset. We know that they are hurting, but we hear about them only when there are family gatherings and there is a wee bit of a drink taken. We do not understand why our granny is so hurt, or why our



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grandad is so angry. We do not understand that, because they want to protect us from it, so they are not talking to us about it”.

The communities that are most likely to have been and to continue to be impacted by the conflict are those socioeconomically deprived communities. Children are living in those communities and, therefore, they will pick up on the conflict from their families.

“It Didn’t End in 1998”, which was done by Queen’s on behalf of the Commission for Victims and Survivors, said that families do not talk to their children about it because they want to protect their children. When a parent is worried or anxious, or when a community is worried or anxious, that infects the children and young people; they become anxious. We know that as parents. If you live that every day, you pick that up. That is why our children and young people are, evidentially, 25% more likely to have mental health issues than children and young people in England and Wales, when there has been a direct comparison. That came out in the youth wellbeing survey. We know that, and most of that is attributed to the conflict.

Mairéad McCafferty: When we are looking at the conditions that combine—as you say, Claire—transgenerational trauma and the mental ill health suffered by people, which is transferred through families and generations, that is a big factor. When you also take into account, as you said, the economic and social deprivation, you have areas where there has been historic underinvestment, and they are still suffering economic and social deprivation. This is now compounded by the cost of living crisis and lack of opportunity for families and young people.

That creates the conditions for young people to be recruited into these organisations and for criminality to thrive, because people see no other route and do not see that they have a vested interest in their own success when they are being exploited like this. Unfortunately, we do have those conditions that occur.

Q126 **Claire Hanna:** What can we do to try to change the outlook and raise the aspirations of communities and young people in those communities? Are we doing enough, for example, in education to try to break some of those cycles?

Koulla Yiasouma: This is probably the first time that I have ever said to you, “Sorry, I do not agree with you, Claire”. I am going to challenge this notion that these communities and young people do not have aspirations. I think that they really do.

Claire Hanna: How can we raise them further?

Koulla Yiasouma: I am going to get a bit emotional, because I just do not think that those aspirations have anywhere to go. My children are dreamers, but they have somewhere to channel that, because they are middle-class. These children have the most amazing hopes and dreams. You have met them as much as I have. These are the funniest, most



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resilient communities. As Mairéad said, it is about the underinvestment, so it is about how we match that.

I am going to go there. We have an education system that rewards the haves and, to a certain extent, leaves the have-nots to their own devices. I am talking about schools as much as I am the children they serve. Until we have an education system that sees every single individual child, including those with special educational needs and those from our newcomer communities—including our boys, particularly our working-class boys—and until it finds a home for their aspiration and for their potential to be developed, we are going to get nowhere.

We absolutely need that investment. I will say one more thing. At the root of all this is poverty. If we do not properly address poverty—and we can properly address poverty—we will continue just to tinker around the edges of all this. Poverty is something that a Government can address, whether that Government are in Belfast or in Westminster, but particularly if that Government are in Belfast.

We need an education system that does not discriminate in the way it currently does. I do not use that word lightly, but I use that word advisedly. We need proper measures that will address poverty. Child poverty is a result of poverty in our communities and in our families.

Q127 Claire Hanna: It absolutely is. Our most recent report on the economy talked about underinvestment, but over the decades we have had various programmes that have not worked, Koulla. I am not saying that we have thrown enough money at the problem, but there are clearly changes in direction and reforms that need to underpin those programmes. What are the topline in that regard?

Koulla Yiasouma: The topline is addressing poverty—putting more money into families' purses, wallets and money boxes. It is absolutely the one thing that we have to do. It will cost a lot now, but it will save a lot in the future, particularly in the lives of children and young people.

The other topline for me is a radical reform of our education system.

Claire Hanna: Is transfer locking people into—

Koulla Yiasouma: I am well on record saying that academic selection simply perpetuates the status quo. It is not that all the programmes we have had in the past have not worked, but that they have not been sustainable. We have done bitty, piecemeal programmes. We have done short-term programmes. We need long-term investment. There is a very strong argument, which I endorse, that these programmes have ensured that it has not become worse, but has it ensured that the change has been sustainable? Probably not, because the funding has not been sustainable. The strategies have not been sustainable. We have not had a programme for government in Northern Ireland since 2012. We need one programme that everybody is working towards, and we have not had that since 2012.



Q128 **Carla Lockhart:** Are safeguarding policies and procedures sufficiently robust to protect children and young people from paramilitary violence?

Koulla Yiasouma: No. This is where we get to this area of contextual safeguarding. We need to move away from thinking that children are harmed only in their homes and from our traditional view of child abuse. We need to begin to see these children as victims of child abuse and, therefore, to regard safeguarding policies. The work needs to be done to review and revise safeguarding policies and procedures to ensure that these children and young people are seen and responded to by the systems that are expert in this, which are our child protection agencies.

What we also know, though, coming out of the review of children's social care, is that that system is on its knees currently, and that the big reform that is currently led by Professor Ray Jones needs to be properly implemented.

In answer to your question: no, they are not, and we know what needs to be done so that these children are seen. Secondly, we know that the system we want to review to include these children and young people is already suffering. Does that answer your question, Carla?

Q129 **Carla Lockhart:** It answers a few questions, actually. You talked about the system that is currently there. Do you find that it is catching any of these children who are being pulled into that paramilitarism sphere?

Koulla Yiasouma: It would not be fair to say that it is not catching any of them. It is, particularly those who are and whose families are already known to social services. It is catching some of them.

It is also probably catching some of the young people who are sexually exploited, because we have already done some of that work in Northern Ireland. It is able to see those children and catch them, but the system really struggles hard to respond to older teenagers, particularly this idea that they go running to their abusers. Sometimes we see older teenagers as culpable and complicit in their abuse, and we need to shift that mindset.

It does catch some of them. I do think it does. It would be wrong to say that it does not, but I do not think that it catches enough—or the system is not robust enough to see and catch them all.

Mairéad McCafferty: We are mindful that there are things like joint protocols between the PSNI and social services in terms of children who are subject to what is referred to as paramilitary threat. That could be supported better, because we know that there have been instances where children or young people have been notified that they are under threat and then maybe taken out of that community, but their siblings and families are left, who then become the targets as well. There is something in there about doing a bit more to promote the safeguarding of the family, rather than just trying to isolate the young person, because we know that that is happening as well.



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When we had the wellbeing prevalence study in 2020, we had as many as two in five young people reporting the fear of paramilitaries and the intimidation in their communities, which contribute to crime. There is that fear, so the safeguarding and the child protection side of things has a lot more work to do, but, as Koulla has already said, we are mindful that resources are very much stretched, and we do need to put more resource in there to be able to do this much more effectively.

Q130 **Carla Lockhart:** So updating, overhauling and making the system more about families is key.

Mairéad McCafferty: Yes.

Q131 **Carla Lockhart:** What is your view on categorising this as child criminal exploitation? Can you just give us a wee bit of a thought on that?

Koulla Yiasouma: Absolutely, that is how it should be viewed. It is about having additional categories of child abuse that will include criminal exploitation of children. Our view is that that is where we want to see the revision of our child protection policies and procedures go, and that this is a group of young people who are named and, therefore, seen in the same way that children subject to child sexual exploitation are.

Q132 **Carla Lockhart:** How do organisations identify and tackle it when it looks like it is consensual?

Koulla Yiasouma: We learn more from what has been happening across the water with the county lines stuff and the use of the modern slavery provisions. If we raised the age of criminal responsibility, we would not be getting into this consensual/non-consensual thing. We learn the lessons from child sexual exploitation. "How did you get involved in this? What was offered to you? How did it make you feel?" When somebody really expert and child-centred teases that out with a young person, you very quickly understand that most, if not all, of these young people have been exploited.

It goes back to what I said earlier. Young people do not always see that they have an option. They say, "Yes, I did. Nobody made me go to this house", but then you have the conversation: "When they sent you the text, what did you think?" "Well, when they sent me the text, I thought, 'If I do not go, what is going to happen to me or to my family?', so I had to go", as Mairéad has already said. There you go. We may have perceptions of consent, including from the young person themselves, but good, expert work with young people will tease out and identify that. It is always better to err on the side of caution anyway.

Q133 **Stephen Farry:** Good morning. Just to follow up on the issue of safeguarding, I wanted to highlight the disjoint. On the one hand, when young people are in more formal state settings or with recognised community groups, there are AccessNI checks in terms of trusted adults, and health and safety measures.

I am thinking in particular about what happens around bonfires in



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Northern Ireland, be they loyalist or dissident republican bonfires. I am very conscious that we have situations where young people are building bonfires, whereas an adult on a building site would have to have their health and safety card. There will be scaffolding, hard hats and jackets, and so on. In terms of the adults they are interacting with, there are no AccessNI checks, so there is a clear vulnerability there. Is that something that you are conscious of and have flagged up?

Koulla Yiasouma: Yes, absolutely. I will go to the last question first. We cannot AccessNI every adult a young person meets in their community. We just cannot do that. It is about how we are supporting young people to be resilient and how we, as a whole community, are keeping an eye on our young people. If we see somebody we would have concerns about approaching them, what are we doing? It is a tall ask.

Moving on to the question of bonfires, I have for some time been concerned about the involvement of young people in the erection of bonfires; we have all seen the pictures. Most bonfires are done very safely and are community events, and I am never going to say that we should not have these bonfires. I agree that this is a cultural thing, but I do think that some of them have gone out of control and that it has placed some young people in vulnerability. I am going to say that there needs to be some level of regulation, not to deny people's right to celebrate the eleventh night or the August stuff, but to make sure that these are done safely.

As you said, in any other scenario, that is what we would do. In a fireworks display or at Halloween, you would have goodness knows how many permits to run a community fireworks display. I am not sure that I understand why that does not happen with bonfires, particularly these huge ones. It is not as a way of stopping them, but as a way of making sure that they are safe, and that there is a responsible person who is named and known to the authorities. You cannot always stop young people climbing up these things—they are there to be climbed—but we need to make sure that all reasonable efforts have been made to stop that happening and to keep our children safe.

Q134 **Chair:** You mentioned in passing the Executive and the Government in Belfast. Is this other interregnum, with the collapse of Stormont and the absence of local political leadership, helpful to criminal gangs and groomers?

Koulla Yiasouma: It is not helpful for our children, young people and families. We are in a political void, and we know from the past that any collapse of our Government, particularly based on our green and orange divide, is not helpful because it polarises opinions. I am on record as saying that the absence of a Government in Northern Ireland is detrimental to the children and young people of Northern Ireland.

Q135 **Claire Hanna:** With regard to paramilitarism, is the state meeting its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child? To what



extent have the Government responded effectively to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and its advice in 2016 to take immediate and effective measures to protect children from violence by non-state actors?

Koulla Yiasouma: As Mairéad has already said, the UK Government and the rest of us will all be part of the next examination, which has started, but we are in Geneva at the beginning and middle of next year. When it looks at monitoring this particular recommendation, I think the analysis will be, "Could do better". The fact that the police are not arresting and the PPS is not prosecuting these adults who are grooming our young people absolutely means that effective measures have not been taken.

It is complicated, because they are not getting the evidence to do that, so there is a confidence issue here among children and young people in their police service, and that has to be addressed. We have faffed and tinkered around that for decades, and we need to sort that out properly, so that the police service is the only place where our young people go to make sure that they are protected and have confidence that they will be protected. At the moment, in these communities, with these groups of adult perpetrators, that confidence is not there. That is why young people are getting involved.

I am not going to say that the space is clear, because it is not. The police are aware of the issue, but I do not think that the measures they are taking are sufficient.

Q136 **Claire Hanna:** Are there specific measures that you would recommend? As you will be aware, we had a wide-ranging conversation with the PSNI last week. They share some of our frustrations, but are there specific actions or initiatives?

Koulla Yiasouma: Specifically on young people, the way that PSNI engages with young people on the ground is very hit and miss. We have had pockets of really good practice and we have pockets of poor practice. Particularly this group of young people would say, "I have a bad name. I would never go to them if I was at risk, because they see me as that person. They see the label and they do not see me as somebody who needs their protection".

This is a conversation that Mairéad and I, and NICCY and a range of organisations, have been having with PSNI, saying, "You need to be much better at supporting your local officers on the ground in how they engage with young people", so that young people understand why the police are behaving how they are, where they are more circumspect in using certain powers, particularly stop and search; where there is a level of trust and respect between the two; where young people feel respected by the police and feel that the police want to protect them; and where the police feel that they have the trust of the young people, which is not currently the case.

We can talk about all the big stuff, but the engagement piece and young people in these communities seeing the PSNI as the agency there to



protect them needs to be built on, because, at the moment, they do not. When they are being approached and coerced by these groups, they look up and there is no one there who could stop that happening for them. That is the problem. We think that there is a choice, because I am happy to ring the police. They do not, because they have nothing that leads them to believe that the police will take them seriously.

Q137 Chair: Of course, it is not only the police who can help, is it? What are church and faith leaders doing? What is their role?

Koulla Yiasouma: Some of the best youth work that we are seeing is from faith-based groups and from youth clubs attached to local churches. There can be no doubt that, on the ground, churches and faith organisations are seen as places of sanctuary. As for whether I have seen enough of the leaders of the churches speaking out on this issue, I would say I have not, but I may have missed it.

I do not think that the Church is absent, because faith is so big in Northern Ireland—not just Protestant and Catholic but across all our faith communities. On the ground, there is some really good work going on by the churches. I am not seeing that elevated outside of some really good priests and clergy saying the right thing. We can name them, but I am not seeing the leaders of the church stepping up as much as I would like in this, I think it is fair to say.

Q138 Chair: Can I take you back to your compelling thesis with regard to poverty? If it takes people out of poverty, you foster the spark of aspiration, you provide a good education and so on; that is the route out, for want of a better phrase.

These groomers and criminals are the sort of people who sit behind the electronic gates with their personalised number plate and have never paid tax in their lives. They will not tolerate that vacuum, will they, so what happens in that instance? If the cohort from which they recruit is so diminished as to make it not sufficiently large for them to undertake their criminal activity, they do not just give up, and go and get a nine-to-five job, PAYE and all the rest of it, do they? They go and find other people to fill that vacuum.

There is always going to be a residual group of people who are vulnerable. Their vulnerability may come from poverty or from other sources. Is there a risk that it just leads on to people trafficking in order for them to continue to lead their high-quality but entirely illegal lifestyles? Could you say just a word or two about any concerns you have now about people trafficking?

Koulla Yiasouma: You posit an interesting thesis. You talked about illegal activity. If someone is doing illegal activity, we have a criminal justice system that should be better at responding to that. That is why, as I said earlier, working with young people can only go alongside if we get the perpetrators and their groomers off the street. I am hoping that they are not behind their gated locked doors. I am hoping that they are



behind the locked doors of the prison. We need a criminal justice system that is, like I said, able to disrupt and prosecute these people. You cannot do one without the other, because, as you say, if you create a vacuum, they will find other victims.

Q139 Chair: We are all familiar with the phrase “nature abhors a vacuum”. We could take all current practitioners off the streets and put them behind bars. As sure as night follows day, somebody is going to come along to fill the gap.

Koulla Yiasouma: There is only so much. Let us try to take them off the streets, shall we? That sounded a little bit aggressive, but I did not mean it to.

Chair: You can sound as aggressive as you like. I like it.

Koulla Yiasouma: I am being assertive, not aggressive.

Chair: Go on—assert away.

Koulla Yiasouma: The issue for me is that we have not done this as well as we could. Let us see how much of a vacuum is created. If we have a society that has fewer vulnerable people in it, they are less likely to want the drugs. We will also be cutting off the demand. If we work to reduce vulnerability, we are cutting off the demand. If we work to have a more effective criminal justice system that is able to identify these perpetrators and bring them to book, we are cutting off the supply. If we can do both together, let us see what we come out with at the other end.

Yes, it may be like a whac-a-mole, where you are just hitting. We can see where the weaknesses are at the moment. If we can be better at it, we should give it a go. Let us be confident that we are doing everything we can. Let us see what happens with that vacuum, because it may be smaller than we think it would be and, therefore, more manageable.

Mairéad McCafferty: I wanted to come in on the modern slavery and human trafficking angle. We have referred to this, going back to the earlier discussion around grooming. Of course, this is an element of the exploitation that we can see is probably the tip of the iceberg at the minute. We are alive to that.

How you stop it, as Koulla said, is a lot more complex, because you have to get away from the conditions that create the context for these people to function and to get that support to function as well. It is about looking at how we, as a state and a society—the state has an obligation as the duty bearer here—prevent the harm caused to children and young people who are victims of this kind of exploitation, and prosecute and pursue them, as Koulla has already said. That in itself sends a message to a wider society that this behaviour will not be tolerated and can be disrupted. I do not think that we are there yet, and that is a growing concern.



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Q140 **Chair:** I am conscious of time. We are going to draw this session to a close. Can I thank you, on behalf of the Committee, so very much indeed? Just to let you know, so powerful has your testimony been that one of my colleagues has passed me a note to say, "I just wonder whether we should rename this inquiry to move away from the effect of paramilitarism and talk about the effect of organised crime and groomers". If you have achieved nothing else between the two of you, thank you for that.

Koulla Yiasouma: That is good. That is a job well done, as far as I am concerned.

Chair: You have provided real insight and we are very grateful. You are very welcome to stay and listen to the second panel, if you so wish. I would just ask you to turn your cameras and microphones off, but we will perfectly understand if you want to go off and do something else. Thank you very much indeed.