

Written evidence submitted by the Ulster University and the Irish Football Association (IFA), related to the effect of paramilitaries on society in Northern Ireland (PNI0021)

Introduction

This submission has been made by Dr Conor Murray, Dr Brendan Coyle, Professor Brandon Hamber, and Dr Gavin Breslin from Ulster University, and Mark Dennison and John Marshall from the Irish Football Association (IFA). We have been researching and working on issues directly relating to paramilitarism in communities and prisons for the last decade, we will draw upon these experiences throughout this submission¹. Most recently, we have been exploring the use of sport-based interventions as a means of diverting 'at-risk' young people from becoming involved in paramilitarism and/or organised crime. We have responded to two areas of interest outlined by the Committee: the socio-economic effects are of paramilitaries on communities in Northern Ireland; and how effective measures under the Fresh Start Agreement have been in combining police and justice measures and tackling socio-economic issues to eradicate paramilitarism in Northern Ireland.

What the socio-economic effects are of paramilitaries on communities in Northern Ireland

The main area of our focus has been on the impact the presence of paramilitary organisations has on young people within our communities, particularly young men. Throughout the Troubles and the period of tentative peace since the GFA (1998), boys and young men from areas of multiple deprivation have been disproportionately at risk of conflict-related injury and death; common perpetrators of conflict-related violence and crime; and most likely to be arrested and imprisoned. Currently, young men from areas of multiple deprivation in NI are not optimistic about the future, feel excluded from local decision-making processes, and express disconnection from adults in their communities. During the conflict, young men from areas of multiple deprivation were often considered to be 'defenders' or 'protectors' of their communities. Despite the many successes of the peace process, such attitudes linger. Many young men still have a strong sense of ethno-nationalist identity, and some continue to be recruited to paramilitaries. At the same time, this also creates a range of mental health, fear and other challenges that do not lead to violence but rather social-exclusion and withdrawal, which are explored below.

Continued presence of paramilitaries, paramilitary-style attacks, and perceptions of justice

In spite of the unfolding peace process in NI, paramilitary activity has continued to have an influence on the lives of some young people in NI, most frequently young men from working class areas in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, but also in smaller towns. For some, this manifests in an acute awareness and often first-hand experience of paramilitary activity and

¹ See Byrne et al. (2016); Coyle (2019); Coyle et al. (2015; 2022); Gallagher and Hamber (2015); Hamber and Murray (2022); Murray (2019; 2020; forthcoming); Murray et al. (2019); Napier et al. (2017); Woods et al. (2017ab; 2020).

sectarian violence. For instance, one of the most enduring features of the NI conflict, which has specific relevance for young men and for this submission, is the phenomenon of 'paramilitary punishment attacks' or 'paramilitary-style attacks' (hereafter PSAs). Victims of PSAs, generally young men from the same community as their attackers, are 'disciplined' for perceived criminal and/or antisocial behaviour, such as drug-dealing, burglary, car theft, paedophilia, child abuse, or infidelity. Such attacks continue to be employed by republican and loyalist paramilitaries, and the victims are almost always young men (aged 18-24). PSAs have not decreased dramatically since the peace agreement was signed in 1998.²

These brutal informal systems of social control receive a certain amount of support from the communities in which they occur. Some parents continue to bring their own children to receive PSAs by 'appointment'. Terms such as 'punishment beatings' legitimise the physical abuse of children and young people. In Murray's research with young men in prison, more than 60% of the interviewees had experienced PSAs, and many had received punishment by 'appointment'. Communal support, legitimisation of violence, and use of appointments sanitise the full extent of the injuries inflicted on young men. The threat of paramilitary violence weighed heavily on their minds, contributed to mental-ill health, fear, and influenced their aspirations for the future.

These forms of so-called community justice, and the complicity of adults in reporting, allowing and administering such acts, shape how young people within NI understand law and order, distort their perception of violence, and displace other methods that might be used to deal with disputes or anti-social behaviour; ultimately leaving young men "perplexed about youth justice" (Harland and McCready, 2014, p. 270). The local dynamics of paramilitary leadership, which varies from area to area, reinforce mistrust of statutory, security and governmental organizations and provision. Even in the absence of direct experiences of paramilitary activity, the embedded and pervasive legacy of the conflict, perpetuated by paramilitary organisations, can result in, feelings of exclusion and marginalisation, coupled with a mistrust of those in positions of authority.

Paramilitarism, and community attitudes to PSA, therefore, show that conceptions of justice have been profoundly distorted by NI's conflict. Those on the social and economic margins are also more likely to end up in conflict with the state and in contact with the criminal justice system, exacerbating historical distrust of the police services. To this end, PSAs are not merely about those who facilitate and inflict them, but is a major social problem and a challenge to the peace process as a whole that sought to build trust in the police service

² Police figures (which are likely to underestimate) reported 1,856 PSAs (excluding shootings, of which there were an additional 1,368), nearly all of which have involved young men. 12 Females account for about 2% of all victims. Most male and female victims are in their 20s, but assaults on children as young as 12 and on adults up to 75 have been reported (Napier et al., 2017).

(this suspicion of police exists in both republican/nationalist and loyalist/unionist communities).

When violence cross-cuts different dimensions of young people's lives, the number of "safe havens" – places in communities offering protection or refuge to young people – decreases, making it challenging for young people to sustain positive coping mechanisms. As a result, young people who are exposed to violence across multiple life domains develop harmful coping mechanisms, resulting in internalising problems (anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder) or externalising them (aggressive behaviour or social withdrawal). Far from becoming a new generation of outwardly violent men as is often the perception, Gallagher and Hamber empirically found that many young men have retreated from society and suffer from a range of social and mental health issues. They report depression, stress, anxiety, addiction, feelings of worthlessness, risk-taking behaviour, low self-esteem, pessimism about their future, feelings of neglect, hopelessness, despair, and fear of paramilitary attacks.

For both young men and young women in NI, illegal and prescription drug use, alcohol abuse, and addiction have been identified as a problem. Of course, problematic drug and alcohol use is common globally; in NI, however, substance abuse specifically increases the links between young people and paramilitaries that are involved in the drugs trade. As a result, some young people become targets because they have drug debts; others consume more drugs due to the stress and fear created by paramilitaries that control the trade; and a number become victims of paramilitary groups that try to 'police' drug use using PSAs.

Young men who associate with paramilitary groups

Young men continue to join paramilitary groups, and are susceptible to joining these groups as a result of transgenerational effects. The stories that a lot of young men have heard coming from older familial relations filter down to them. They want to be part of the story or narrative, they want to keep doing the things that the generations before them did. Community politics, murals, and norms continue to be steeped in historical violence and hostility and continue to play a role in young people's socialisation – even though political support for violence has ended. New, and unresolved, cultural and political issues, create public order challenges for policing, and are also used as a conduit for paramilitary recruitment (discussed in more detail below). As a result, joining paramilitary organisations provides a degree of intergenerational affirmation.

As with previous generations, joining paramilitary organisations provides young men with a sense of identity, and many young men continue to find paramilitary groups a hyper-masculine vehicle for maintaining their status and control, as well as personal protection. Other young men decide to become involved in paramilitary organizations because they feel marginalised socially and economically. Joining paramilitaries can be

attractive to the extent that it provides protection and generates income and status. Set against the backdrop of segregation, multiple deprivation and sectarian conflict, Coyle found that young men are expected to navigate a successful transition to “full” adult status in a unique and frequently challenging environment. Structurally disbarred from some traditional developmental milestones associated with increased economic stability and social status, becoming involved with the activities of paramilitary organisations can, for some, represent an appealing alternative pathway to status and significance.

Unsurprisingly, young men who associate with paramilitary groups are more likely to become involved in paramilitary and criminal violence, and to experience intimidation and bullying by paramilitary groups. Both contribute to mental health issues and suicidal ideations. Young men who become involved with paramilitaries are also more likely to engage in illegal activities, to be imprisoned, and to suffer other harms. On one hand, paramilitary groups provide a hypermasculine environment that allows some young men to assert dominance, violence, and social control. On the other, many young men who join paramilitary organizations inwardly feel anxious, have low self-esteem and are deeply fearful and find it difficult to ‘speak-up’ or escape these organisations.

Girls, women and paramilitarism

The hypermasculinity associated with paramilitarism has direct effects on the construction of femininity, an area that has received very little attention in NI. What we do know is that the actions associated with violent masculinities thrive on, and link to, the silenced voices of young women, who are expected to uphold gendered roles as partners and domestic supporters of men (stereotyped as caring wives, mothers, sisters) or face sanction. This pattern maintains the status quo, reinforcing the idea of young men as defenders (and controllers) of the community, while harming young women and reifying inequalities. The social and economic disadvantages women face include, “stereotyping in careers, unequal pay, lack of access to opportunities for advancement in the workplace, sex stereotyping in domestic roles and double standards relating to sexual practices”, as well as high levels of domestic violence and sexual abuse (Morgan and McArdle, 2018, p. 300). Many of the issues facing young men, such as lack of voice, economic marginalisation, and violence, also affect young women, and may do so more profoundly in different ways. The role of young women in NI since 1998 is under-researched.

For example, very little is known about PSAs against young women. There certainly have been cases. As noted above about 2% of PSAs are directed toward women. A ten-month retrospective chart analysis (2012-2013) of all assaulted patients admitted to the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) in Belfast (approximately 2,500 charts) identified 30 PSAs against males and two against females (McGarry et al., 2017). It is possible that other types of PSA or other forms of sanction are inflicted on young women. Several studies have examined domestic, political and other forms of violence against women during the conflict³.

However, very little research has studied the day-to-day lived realities of young women and the influence of paramilitaries on their lives in the post-1998 period.

There is a rich literature on the role of women in the political conflict, and many gendered analyses of the conflict more broadly, but virtually no work exists on young women and their role as agents and victims of paramilitarism and sectarianism, though it is badly needed.

Supporting young people

A great deal of creative and positive work is being done to support the development of young people in NI, but such work is often fragmented, short term and under-funded. Work in this area can be broadly divided into the following: socio-economic interventions that seek to increase the life chances or education of specific groups without changing the broader social context; programmes to increase the agency of young men (self-awareness programmes, buddy schemes); medical and psychological interventions (for example, to address drug-dependency); and interventions that address the legacy of the conflict. However, the issues addressed across discrete interventions and programmes are intermeshed for many young men.

By way of example, paramilitary assaults against young men indicate the presence of a severe social problem in which violence has permeated everyday life, and is moreover legitimised by some members of the community. At the same time, many of the young men in question are involved in crime or have experience of the formal (as well as informal) justice system. For many young men in areas of multiple deprivation, living under the intermittent threat of violence, experiencing poverty, and with the limited availability of developmental opportunity, immense psychological stress is inevitable. The stress increases drug and alcohol use, which in turn increases interactions with paramilitarism, thereby creating new and continuous personal security concerns. Further, when paramilitaries target young men, it is not merely an individual problem; whole families are implicated, and in a gendered manner. Such attacks destroy families; mothers generally bear the stress, supporting their sons emotionally while they are under threat and trying to 'mediate' with paramilitary groups to prevent further harm. To say that what is needed to address paramilitary assaults is a mental health intervention, or a criminal intervention, or a security intervention, overlooks the interrelated nature of the problem. Paramilitary assaults are the result of a wide range of political, social and community problems that are embedded in long-established justifications and practices. The criminal activity that some young men become involved in, whether directly paramilitary or "ordinary" in nature, cannot be divorced from paramilitary influence, poverty, community fragmentation, under-achievement, schooling, family life, or the politics of the past.

³ See, for example, Doyle and McWilliams (2018); Green (undated); Swaine (2018).

How effective measures under the Fresh Start Agreement have been in combining police and justice measures and tackling socio-economic issues to eradicate paramilitarism in Northern Ireland

Although a number of policy documents acknowledge the challenges that young people face, they often reduce them to a matter of service delivery (drug awareness, buddy schemes, mental health services, domestic violence), or signpost them across a range of agencies. Interventions frequently target areas with the most problems and fail to adopt a holistic population-wide approach. Most peacebuilding work takes a similarly narrow view. It focuses on the needs of young victims who have lost a parent, or individuals who have been traumatised, or who live in specific conflict interfaces. When conflict is mentioned (rarely), policies typically highlight education to promote tolerance and proposals for preventing paramilitary violence that have no clear plan for achieving that goal. In general, youth policies in NI do not address peace and security and do not adopt specific and holistic approaches to deal with the complex legacy of conflict – this is a shortcoming shared by youth policies globally.

Using sport as a means of engaging young people

The 2015 ‘Fresh Start’ agreement sets out the Executive’s commitment to ‘dealing with the impact of continued paramilitary activity’ and associated criminality under four key areas of delivery: long term prevention; building capacity to support transition; strategies and powers to tackle criminality; and building confidence in the justice system. Section A of the agreement relates to the promotion of lawfulness, with a range of subordinate actions that encourage the development and maintenance of cross-sector, community-oriented partnerships that both promote lawfulness and the generation of a culture of lawfulness.

Recently we have been exploring the use and effectiveness of sport-based interventions, delivered via funding for Fresh Start initiatives, as a means of engaging with young people who are at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism and/or organised crime. The premise of these interventions is that sport has a universal appeal, can be used as a hook to motivate young people to get involved, and can provide physical activity, sports-based learning and support for individuals.

In October 2020, four of the largest sporting organisations in NI, the Irish Football Association, Gaelic Athletic Association, Ulster Rugby and the Belfast Giants partnered to deliver a sport-based intervention: Fresh Start Through Sport (FSTS). Supported by the Department for Communities, Department of Justice, and Police Service of Northern Ireland, participants to FSTS include young people, aged 16-24, from areas of multiple deprivation. The four key sporting partners deliver a series of sport-based modules, focusing on areas such as disability, racism and mental health in sport. The purpose of these modules is to guide and support participants in identifying and making positive life choices, with the eventual goal of providing a pathway into coaching and/or volunteering through their chosen sport.

Now in its third phase of delivery, the evidence base concerning the effectiveness of the programme is becoming apparent. We have seen some positive examples of the impact that FSTS can have on the lives of young people in marginalised settings, even in spite of the social, physical and practical limitations wrought upon the programme by government-imposed public health restrictions put in place to reduce the spread of COVID19.

Through our ongoing evaluations of each phase of delivery, we have found that bringing young people from different communities together through the conduit of sport has a positive impact on young people's aspirations, and can serve as a vehicle for developing positive peer influence and building cross-community rapport. The programme has played a role in helping young people to break down a range of barriers, be they related to personal circumstance, physical and mental health, or cross-community tensions. It provides young people from different community backgrounds with the opportunity to realise that they are from very similar backgrounds, facing similar challenges. The programme also offers participants viable pathways to learning opportunities, the development of new practical and social skills, and developmental opportunities where those may be otherwise limited by context. The programme also supports community embeddedness by integrating and promoting local volunteering opportunities for participants. An exemplar of cross-sectoral partnered delivery, FSTS represents a creative, and potentially highly impactful, means of engaging with and supporting at-risk young people, at least partially mitigating against some of the factors that may render them vulnerable to the influence of paramilitary organisations in their local communities.

There are lessons to be learned from the delivery of sport-based interventions in communities. Identifying the right partners and developing strong governance is essential in promoting and developing programmes. Within the IFA based programmes (Fresh Start Through Sport, Stay Onside, and Gamechangers), the partnership with PSNI is crucial in examining current data relating to paramilitary incidents and activity throughout NI. This evidence is used to select areas for programme delivery and identify community partners who are working with the young people most at risk. Engagement with those groups has provided an understating of the threats of paramilitarism within communities. Without sports intervention programmes the risk for young people is higher as they do not have a focus and can be encouraged to take part in paramilitary activity on different levels. By providing pathways it upskills young people and also improves mental health and well-being. Sports based interventions work best when delivered in the right locations, to the right young people at the right time.

May 2022

References

Byrne, J., Hamber, B., Morrow, D., Dougherty, B., Gallagher, E. (2016). *Political Violence and Young People: Exploring levels of risk, motivations and targeted preventative work*. Belfast: Ulster University, Transitional Justice Institute, INCORE and the School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy.

Coyle, B. (2019). 'What the f**k is maturity?': Young adulthood, subjective maturity and desistance from crime. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 59(5), 1178-1198.

Coyle, B., Maruna, S. and Marsh, B. (2015). 'Desistance from Crime in the Transition to Adulthood'. In *Youth Crime and Justice* (2nd Edn.) Sage: London.

Coyle, B., Murray, C., Breslin, G. & Walsh, C. (2022). *Supporting Positive Youth Development During a Global Pandemic: An Evaluation of the Fresh Start Through Sport Pilot Programme*. Belfast: IFA.

Doyle, J. and McWilliams, M. (2018). *Intimate Partner Violence in Conflict and Post-conflict Societies: Insights and Lessons from Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Transitional Justice Institute.

Gallagher, E. and Hamber, B. (2015). *Addressing the psychosocial needs of young men: The case of Northern Ireland*. In: *Psychosocial Perspectives on Peacebuilding*. Springer: New York.

Green, R. (undated). *The Impact of Conflict on Violence Against Women in Belfast*. Working Paper Series. At: www.qub.ac.uk/Research/GRI/mitchell-institute/FileStore/Filetoupload,841091_en.pdf.

Hamber, Brandon; Murray, C. (2022). *Voices from the Margins: Young men and post-conflict masculinities in Northern Ireland*. Interpeace: Geneva.

Harland, K., McCready, S. (2014). 'Rough Justice: Considerations on the Role of Violence, Masculinity, and the Alienation of Young Men in Communities and Peacebuilding Processes in Northern Ireland'. *Youth Justice*, 14(3), 269-283.

McGarry, K., Redmill, D., Edwards, M., Byrne, A., Brady, A., Taylor, M. (2017). Punishment Attacks in PostCeasefire Northern Ireland: An Emergency Department Perspective. *The Ulster Medical Journal*, 86(2), 90-93.

Morgan, S. and McArdle, E. (2018). 'The Alchemy of Work with Young Women'. In *The SAGE Handbook of Youth Work Practice: Professional Work with young people*. London: Sage.

Murray, C. (2019). "Do your whack": Investigating the needs and experiences of young men imprisoned in Northern Ireland. Belfast: ARK.

Murray, C. (2020). 'Can't hack the whack': Exploring young men's gendered discourses on time in prison. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 21(5), 705-724.

Murray, C. (forthcoming). *Young men, Masculinities and Imprisonment*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Murray, C., Payne, B., Byrne, J., and Morrow, D. (2019). Evaluation of the NI Policing Board's Local Policing Consultation. Belfast: Ulster University.

Napier, R. J., Gallagher, B. J., Wilson, D. S. (2017). An Imperfect Peace: Trends In Paramilitary Related Violence 20 Years After The Northern Ireland Ceasefires. *The Ulster Medical Journal*, 86(2), 99 -102.

Swaine, A. (2018). *Conflict-related violence against women: Transforming transition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Woods, D., Breslin, G., & Hassan, D. (2017a). A systematic review of the impact of sport-based interventions on the psychological well-being of people in prison. *Mental Health and Physical Activity*, 12, 50-61.

Woods, D., Hassan, D., & Breslin, G. (2017b). Positive collateral damage or purposeful design: How sport-based interventions impact the psychological well-being of people in prison. *Mental Health and Physical Activity*, 13, 152-162.

Woods, D., Leavey, G., Meek, R., & Breslin, G. (2020). Developing mental health awareness and help seeking in prison: A feasibility study of the State of Mind Sport programme. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*.