Experiencing Paramilitarism: Understanding the Impact of Paramilitaries on Young People in Northern Ireland


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This paper sets out findings of research examining young people’s experiences of safety, informal control and policing in their communities.

The research was funded by British Academy/Leverhulme and data collection was completed in 2016. The fieldwork was carried out across three research sites in Northern Ireland. These were geographically spread and reflected different ethno-identities. One site was predominantly Protestant/Unionist, another predominantly Catholic/Nationalist and the third site was based in an interface area and data was collected from both Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist communities. The sites were deliberately selected in order to reflect the experiences of those growing up in communities with a continued paramilitary presence. The aim was to give voice to children and young people, particularly those victimised, in order that these add to the public and political discourse. The participants included 38 young women and men aged between 16 and 25 years, and 29 adult service providers including representatives from: local youth and community projects, mediation and restorative justice projects, the Youth Justice Agency and the PSNI.

The paper comprises an overview of some of the themes to emerge from the research with young people, with reference to paramilitaries. It demonstrates the multiple impacts of growing up in communities with a paramilitary presence. The aim was to give voice to children and young people, particularly those victimised, in order that these add to the public and political discourse. The paper comprises an overview of some of the themes to emerge from the research with young people, with reference to paramilitaries. It demonstrates the multiple impacts of growing up in communities with a paramilitary presence. The aim was to give voice to children and young people, particularly those victimised, in order that these add to the public and political discourse. The paper comprises an overview of some of the themes to emerge from the research with young people, with reference to paramilitaries. It demonstrates the multiple impacts of growing up in communities with a paramilitary presence. The aim was to give voice to children and young people, particularly those victimised, in order that these add to the public and political discourse.
The profound effect of what we have
defined as ‘indirect experiences’
should not be under-estimated. Some
young people spoke of feeling fearful
and unsafe in their communities,
hearing regular stories of people in the
area being attacked, or witnessing the
aftermath of such attacks themselves.

Speaking of an incident just the week
prior to involvement in the research
Eric (aged 18) told us that someone he
knew had ‘got beat to bits … got badly
beaten head to toe’ to the extent that
Eric ‘was physically sick looking at him’.

Twenty young people (54% of the
sample) also had direct experiences of
paramilitaries. This included witnessing
or personally experiencing: shootings,
fines, exile, beatings, bans and
curfews, intimidation (e.g. personal
threats, threats of which they were
informed of through the police, threats
and naming via social media and being
‘moved on’). Importantly, and from a
child rights perspective, much of the
intimidation and abuse started and took
place when these participants were
still children. It should, therefore be
understood as a violation of children’s
rights, constituting not only an abuse
of ‘power’ but also child abuse. It was,
and is, also taking place in a post-
conflict, post-ceasefire context.

A significant number of young people
had experienced a range of types
of abuse, and on multiple occasions.
Eamonn, for example, was 18 at the
time of interview and was under an
exclusion order. He was first assaulted
at the age of 15 and received a further
two beatings before receiving an
official warning to leave the town.
Eamonn now walked with a limp as a
result of his injuries. John, now aged 19,
spoke of how he had been ‘kidnapped
… for 72 hours’, ‘held against my will’,
tortured and ‘scared for [my] life’ at the
age of 14/15 after continual warnings
about selling drugs.

Aidan spoke of witnessing his father
being shot when he was 13 or 14 years old:

‘[They] kicked in my dad’s door while
I was standing there … and shot my
dad five times, and I was made to
watch it. I tried to run out the door,
one of the c**ts stood up at the door,
scruffed me, banged my head off two
doors and threw me into the top of a
staircase that had no carpet in it so
it was just nails. And I was left there’
(Aidan, aged 16)

Laura described an incident that she
witnessed as a child (aged 6), when her
uncle had been beaten by paramilitaries
and came to her house for refuge:

‘My uncle … came home with blood
pouring all over the place and he’s
had to walk from, just by himself, he
had to pick himself up off the road
and drag himself home, you know like
that, you know…’ (Laura, aged 17)

David, like some others, accepted that
his actions might have brought him to
the attention of paramilitaries, but he
felt the response was excessive:

‘I actually got beat up by a
paramilitary member two years ago,
but that was, there was just drink
involved … But that there was just
over the top so it was … I got my
hand broke and beat with a chair, a
metal chair, so I did’ (David, aged 22)

Some spoke of the psychological as well
as physical abuse experienced at the
hands of paramilitaries. This included
low-level but constant surveillance
(defined by the young people as being
watched), threats and goading. Shay
explained that in addition to a physical
beating, he was taunted emotionally
causing him to respond angrily,
providing further justification for more
violence against him. Shay’s friend had
hanged himself three years prior to
interview, and Shay had found him:

‘The boys who hit me a couple of
times, they know what gets to me ...

I found my best friend like and they
just, they slagged me, they slag over
it all the time. They just start saying
things because they know I’ll f**king
shout back’
(Shay, aged 22)

The range of experiences of the young
people in this research demonstrate the
power that those defining themselves
as paramilitaries hold over children
and young people in some communities.
Local knowledge combined with
reputation, power and often weapons,
results in a heightened level of informal
as well as formal control over the
community, and inevitably impacts
young people’s sense of safety, their
levels of vigilance and how they
experience their community.

IMPACT OF PARAMILITARY
PRESENCE, THREATS AND
ATTACKS

Lost childhood: Because their everyday
activities would come to the attention
of paramilitaries, some young people
spoke of a lost childhood. This was
because many activities associated with
being young (hanging about, being loud,
drinking etc.) were defined as ‘anti-social’
by paramilitaries. Explaining why he was threatened by
paramilitaries when younger, Aaron said:

‘Mucking about, you know, just, you
know, being a wean [a child], being
young. Maybe just making muck
bombs or whatever, just carrying on.
But you couldn’t do any of that, you
couldn’t have a childhood really, you
know? (chokes up) Or they would
dictate it’ (Aaron, aged 19)

Drug and alcohol use: Many reported
that those young people who were
attacked by paramilitaries were either
drug users or (low-level) drug dealers.
There was a general sense, however,
that if threats and attacks aimed to
make communities safer and rid them
of drugs, that it was actually doing the
opposite. Many of those who had been attacked, or knew others who had been attacked, noted that drug and/or alcohol use had become worse as a result (e.g. to help them cope). Aoife spoke of her friend, a heavy drug user, who had been shot through both knees:

‘He turned to drugs, he turned to them even worse. Do you know what I mean? So it’s a nightmare for everyone. They [paramilitaries] get involved far too much. They put the fear of god in them, if anything they put the fear of god in people and when they go around throwing threats the way they do is it any wonder people are turning to drugs?’ (Aoife, aged 19)

Furthermore, in many instances young people noted an inherent hypocrisy regarding paramilitaries and their approaches to regulation of drug use. In some cases, young people perceived this as paramilitaries’ attempts to control the market for drugs in a local area. In the words of Laura:

‘I don’t understand also because ... the paramilitaries make the young people sell the drugs, and then the young people maybe get into debt, and what happens if young people don’t pay them the money they are owed, and then the paramilitaries would beat the s**t out of them … the boy who they gave the drugs to sell in the first place’

(Laura, aged 17)

Mental health: Others spoke of the impact on their mental well-being - anger, fear of leaving the house, feeling suicidal and having to seek psychiatric help. For instance, Aoife spoke of the immediate impact of a threat she received when she was seventeen:

‘... I was the one that was locked in the house and put on six months watch, suicide watch ...’

(Aoife, aged 19)

Joe spoke of the long-term impact resulting from his kidnapping and assault when he was aged 17:

‘For up to a year and a half, two years after like. See the uneasy feeling, the fear it’s surprising that it does put into you like. You can act as hard as you want but you see when there’s boys coming after you with guns telling you they’re going to shoot you and your brother, they’re going do you with a shotgun, as big as you are hey, the fear’s there, know what what I mean?’ (Joe, aged 22)

Paul spoke of the fear he was currently living under. He had been subject to threats and an assault and had briefly been involved with a paramilitary group. He had left the country for six months to ‘clear my head’ when he realised that he was being recruited and his family were subsequently forced to move from the area due to constant threats. Before returning to Northern Ireland, Paul had been informed by a family member ‘there’s a death threat going about for you ... you’re not allowed back in Northern Ireland ... ’. As these ‘informal’ threats are never formally lifted, he now lived in continual fear:

‘I am living with fear, I’m living with paranoia and one day I’ll be fine, one day I’ll be walking round the house edgy, as you can probably imagine. Yesterday if you would’ve seen me I was, I couldn’t take the smile off my face, but then today I’m sort of, do you know what I mean? Just, it’s really mixed emotions, it’s really, it’s hard to ex-, it’s, it’s like one minute you could be fine and then one minute, not having like a panic attack but it’d be right under a panic attack, like thinking something’s going to happen. Like do you know when you get them feelings, your body senses stuff?’

(Paul, aged 22)

A number of young people in one area also suggested a link between a young person taking his own life and having been beaten and shot by paramilitaries in the past. This theme arose in a second community. Speaking of his knowledge of paramilitary attacks, David noted:

‘... a few friends actually. One of them was selling drugs a few, it must’ve been four or five years ago, and ah he got in debt. He was getting threatened and all, and I think the pressure... he ended up hanging himself so he did’

(David, aged 22)

Indeed, the perceived relationship between attacks on young people and poor mental health was a consistent theme:
Further exclusion: Some of the most marginalised young people – those with drug and alcohol problems, precarious housing, difficult family circumstances - experienced further exclusion and marginalisation as a result of coming to the attention of paramilitaries. Eamonn, for example, who had been excluded from his community spoke of the impact on his family life and support networks, his training and employment; he could not attend either as they were in the town from which he was exiled, therefore he lost both:

‘I actually got sacked and everything off my job because of it. Threw out of the Tech. They said I can’t be in the Tech because I’m putting other people’s lives at threat. It’s shocking like’ (Eamonn, aged 18)

Aidan who had watched his father being shot, and who had himself been assaulted in the process, spoke of how his life had spiralled out of control as a result:

‘Actually you’ve got, you’ve got a name, paramilitaries give you a name and it sticks, like mud. Mud sticks, it doesn’t matter how much you’ve changed’ (John, aged 19)

Aidan’s anger manifested in violence and other negative behaviours, which brought him to the attention of paramilitaries again, resulting in a further physical attack.

John and others also explained that in receiving a ‘community punishment’, you became labelled within the community. In this respect, such ‘punishments’ can have exclusionary effects similar to criminal sanctions:

‘Actually you’ve got, you’ve got a name, paramilitaries give you a name and it sticks, like mud. Mud sticks, it doesn’t matter how much you’ve changed’ (John, aged 19)

The cycle of exclusion demonstrates that those who are already excluded, those who have complex and chaotic lives may be those most vulnerable to punishment. Punishment then, not only exacerbates the very behaviours some are punished for in the first place (drug and alcohol use, violence), but further erodes these young people’s access to justice (for fear of reprisals).
Behavioural change?: Paradoxically, some of those who sustained the worst physical injuries explained how their experiences with paramilitaries had, eventually, led to a cessation of the behaviour which had brought them to the attention of paramilitaries in the first place. However, given that many were given warnings or graded beatings (i.e. they became more severe), it is unsurprising that there was an eventual cessation. Rory (aged 25) who had been involved in low-level drug dealing and had been bundled into a car, taken away and beaten, reported “I’ll never do it again, because I learnt my lesson”. Rory attributed his cessation in dealing, which primarily funded his own drug taking, directly to this experience. He spoke of feeling suicidal and of the fear he felt for himself and his family as a result of his experiences. He was aware of others who had been shot by paramilitaries, and in his words his family had ‘lost enough people’.

In these cases, therefore, we see that changes or ‘transformations’ in young people’s behaviour came at a heavy cost and often after repeated threats and/or experiences of abuse. For the most part, however, and as demonstrated above, young people reported that intimidation and beatings did not change behaviour. This was primarily because the behaviour they were being ‘punished’ for was not deemed by them to be harmful in the first place; they were not guilty of what they had been accused of; the ‘punishment’ led to an intensification of the behaviour as a result of trauma or resistance.

**Young People’s Attitudes Towards Paramilitaries**

Young people often had mixed feelings about paramilitaries. On the one hand they felt their actions were excessive/brutal, unfair and hypocritical especially given the illegal behaviour paramilitaries themselves may be involved in. Within each of the areas some argued that paramilitarism was now closely related to the drugs trade, and that community protection was less of a priority than it had been in the past:

‘But nothing is about like protecting communities or anything like that anymore, it’s all about their money and the drugs, which completely goes against what they are supposed to be there for anyway’ (Maria, aged 22)

Yet the same young people, and others, also spoke of how these groups/individuals acted as community protectors, from supposed drug dealers, those who ‘wreck’ communities and sex offenders (referencing paedophiles and rapists). Fraser commented:

‘Like how am I meant to feel safe if there’s a rapist up round the corner or a murderer around the back, you know? … So the paramilitaries are good for that like, because they get those type of people out’ (Fraser, aged 20)

There was also a sense that they and/or their communities perceived the criminal justice system to be ineffective or inefficient. This they felt, could explain the continued presence and support of paramilitaries. Brian explained:

‘The police, I feel like the police only do things right ten per cent of the time, maybe not even. Like police, I just rarely think police do things right, so they’re, I really, I, I would be much happier knowing if my community was police-free and only controlled by a paramilitary organisation in terms of justice and crime. I’d be much happier to know that if something goes wrong I’m dealing with them and not the police’ (Brian, aged 20)

The swiftness of ‘community justice’ and the value of a local system of control was reiterated by others:

‘… it’s different with the police, you know, someone could smash a window, if you ring the police they’ll be like “oh we don’t know who it was”, because people are in, tight-knit in the community, including the paramilitaries, they’re more than likely able to find out who it was, when it happened, and can give them a slap on the wrist or whatever they need done for it’ (Natalie, aged 20)

**Why Attacks are Not Reported to the Police**

‘Nobody has the balls to stand up to them to be able to stop them, like the police can’t do it so what’s the chance of anybody else being able to do it? … nobody really has a way of stopping them because no matter how many Agreements they sign there is always going to be one that all they have to do is break away, start their own [group/organisation], and there’s another one that started up anyway’ (Debbie, aged 22)

Across all of the communities it was noted that threats or attacks were generally not reported to the police. This suggests that official police records/statistics on ‘paramilitary style incidents’ are a serious under-estimate. In fact, only one of the young people who had been personally intimidated, kidnapped, beaten, shot or exiled told us that this had been reported to the police. In this case it was because the exclusion order was communicated to them by the police.

There were a number of reasons why young people did not report to the police. These included:

- a perception that the police could not or would not do anything
- a strong belief that in many cases the police already know who these people are, and do nothing about it;
- fear of reprisals/ do not want to be viewed as a tout;

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2 In our interviews with professionals there was no discussion of a paramilitary focus on alleged sex offenders.
poor relationship with or lack of trust in the police (including previous negative encounters); and

- a feeling among some young people that they ‘deserved it’ because of their behaviour.

This latter issue is of particular concern, as some young people referred to the fact that in retrospect they felt that the ‘punishment’ they had received had ‘taught them a lesson’. While, they had suffered injury themselves some said that if an issue arose for them (e.g. their house was broken into), they would consider bringing it to the attention of paramilitaries rather than the police.

JOINING UP?

Only two young people with whom we spoke claimed to be/ have been a member of a paramilitary group themselves. Others did, however, claim to know of young people who were members, and many felt that young people were still being recruited. Most had an opinion as to why young people might be attracted to such groups. What is important to reiterate, however, is that overall there was much less knowledge or experience of young people as ‘perpetrators’ of this form of violence, than there was of young people as victims.

The young people identified a range of reasons why young men in particular might join these groups. Such factors demonstrate a relationship between social exclusion, marginality and paramilitarism similar to the relationship we found with victimisation. They felt that those most vulnerable to recruitment are: family members (e.g. the sons of those currently involved); those searching for a sense of identity (power, masculinity, culture); and those who are in debt to paramilitaries.

Family and community pathways: With regards to family connections, Jess, who had such a connection herself felt:

‘See it’s families as well like. If you’re born into [name of paramilitary organisation] family then like there’s a good chance the boys in the family are going to be in the [organisation] as well’

(Jess, aged 18)

These intergenerational pathways were recognised across the communities and linked with community and cultural factors – what children learn from a young age about history, their culture and their community, and indeed what they are often exposed to. As Tam said:

‘… they’re brainwashed. It’s what they know, it’s what they grow up, it’s what they heard round them, “up the [name of paramilitary organisation], up this, up”, you know? That’s all they know’

(Tam, aged 22)

Many also spoke of a search for a personal identity, rather than a cultural identity as such. They knew that those in their community who had an identity, a reputation, power and money were paramilitaries. Aoife, for example, suggested that some aspired to this to the extent that they were mimicking the behaviours of paramilitaries:

‘[They are] all boys, sixteen and seventeen, and maybe eighteen, do you know what I mean? And they, that’s the sort of example the paramilitaries are leading because now the younger ones think that they can sell it [drugs], take it and act like they’re in a paramilitary when they aren’t…”

(Aoife, aged 19)

Such actions, of course, would bring these young people to the attention of paramilitaries.

Exploitation: There was also a view that children and young people are exploited by paramilitaries, to do their ‘dirty work’, sell drugs and issue threats. It was felt that some agreed because they are in debt:

‘… there would be a few people that I have known that have been given the choice to either pay their debts they have to paramilitaries, or join up. And they can’t afford to pay the money, then they join up because it is either that or they are the ones getting a beating or whatever’

(Maria, aged 22)

‘I think there’s certain members, I don’t know that get the young people to sell drugs … So, and then they get in debt and they sign up and it’s just … stuff like that there’

(David, aged 22).

Debbie on the other hand, felt that her friend who had joined a paramilitary group had done so as he was searching for a sense of belonging he did not otherwise have in his life:

‘I actually grew up with them in the care system, so they didn’t really have much family anyway so maybe he thought this was going to be like, a way of being like, like in a group with someone … ’

(Debbie, aged 22)

Callum (aged 25) who had been involved with paramilitaries for three years also said that he had joined ‘to have a family’. Paul who had, for a short time, also been involved in a paramilitary group again linked this involvement to a lack of family support. His account clearly demonstrates how powerful adults took advantage of him at a vulnerable time in his life:

‘… like my family were a good family but it was lack of family being there. I had that much going on in my head with other things ah that I felt like I needed a bit of, like they act, like they act like your friends more, sort of reeled you in on like a fishing rod. Like “oh you’ve got a wee problem there, a wee problem here, we’ll help’
The various motivations for ‘joining up’ illustrate the complexity of wider issues around structural concerns such as a lack of opportunity, social marginalisation and a sense of hopelessness. Added to this, young people’s ties and attachment to groups through family and community provides an ‘only option’ for some young people. These structural, political and cultural factors illuminate a broader issue of identity and purpose for many young people, with some linking group membership to not only an ethnocultural identity, but also establishing masculinity and reputation, which brings with it a sense of protection.

SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

The level and nature of supports varied across the communities. In two of the areas, young people were very positive about a mediation/restorative justice project, in the third most (but not all) were sceptical of the local mediation/restorative justice project. While knowledge or experience of support services other than such projects seemed to be limited, some young people drew on pre-existing supportive relations with key workers (e.g. through the Youth Justice Agency, homelessness support) or youth workers.

For others, however, speaking out was simply deemed too risky. To do so could bring retaliation because as Aaron noted, you don’t know ‘who talking to who’. Or it might bring more punishment or stigma as it could draw attention to the negative behaviour some young people were involved in. As such, you ‘take it on the chin’, ‘just get on with it’ or ‘get used to it’.

Yet the profound impact of the combination of difficulties some of these young people faced often reached crisis point. As noted, a number of the young people in two of the areas we visited experienced problematic alcohol and/or drug use and/or poor mental health. Sometimes it was this that brought them to the attention of paramilitaries, and this contact exacerbated these difficulties for some, and was a catalyst for others. Talking of the pressure caused by not speaking out and seeking help, along with the worry that he may still be under threat, David told us:

‘So see even for me like to tell people that I can trust, like the right people, it still feels like I’m doing wrong in my head, because it still feels like something’s, something’s going to come back of it. Like that’s the last thing I want, because it’s not the fact that like it would just be me that could end up, like people could go for family or threats could get made on other people and then it just causes a big, and then I know it’s all to do with me. And then that’s why I’ve got like depression and stuff, because you’re constantly depressed thinking like, well what if this happens or what if this happens like?’ (David, aged 20)

Thus, when asked about services and supports young people often spoke of the lack of youth specific services for addressing drug, alcohol and mental health issues. In one area a significant number of young people spoke of the need for a Detox Centre, and relayed personal stories of seeking drug and alcohol support, and support for their mental health. Long waiting lists and prescription medication were the responses most often experienced.

The complexity of these young people’s lives demonstrates the need for holistic responses to young people experiencing continued marginalisation and the legacies of the Conflict. It was apparent in all areas that there was a lack of sustained support and services beyond the community based youth and restorative justice projects.

CONCLUSION

The high levels of both direct and indirect experiences of paramilitary violence in this research raise serious concerns. Most had an experiential knowledge of paramilitaries from a young age, understanding the roles they play in their communities and the particular risks for children and young people. This impacted on many of their rights, including their freedom of movement, their right to play and leisure.
and their feelings and rights to safety and security. A significant number of the sample had been victims of severe, and sometimes multiple instances of physical and psychological abuse as children, the impacts of which had continued into young adulthood. There is also evidence to suggest that some of the most marginalised young people, those with complex lives and unaddressed needs, are at most risk of paramilitary violence and exploitation.

None of the young people reported their experiences to the police, nor would they countenance doing so. Their concerns regarding repercussions and confidence in police (and wider questions of legitimacy) were factors in under-reporting. There is evidence of a compounding effect - if paramilitary activity is not addressed young people perceive this as paramilitaries being treated with impunity and therefore they have lower confidence in policing and other institutions of justice. There is also evidence relating to how patterns of power and control are sustained. This was apparent in that some young people, who themselves had experienced paramilitary attacks, also considered paramilitaries as ‘protectors’ and a first port of call for dealing with criminality or external threat. Moreover, the complex motivating factors for young people’s involvement with paramilitaries only shines a brighter light on the vulnerabilities and needs of many of these young people. The recruitment of children and young people should to understood in a similar way as the ‘punishment’ of children and young people. This is a violation of children’s rights, constituting exploitation and child abuse.

The findings of this research point to a need to engage meaningfully with children, young people and their communities to understand and address the impact of trauma, and the dynamics which sustain violence. They also demonstrate the need to address both structural and legacy issues including poverty, lack of investment in core services and lack of investment and sustainability of youth and community services and supports. This is important, not least because of the recent Executive commitments to tacking paramilitarism® and specifically its wider impact on young people.4

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3 In response to the Fresh Start Agreement (2015), a Tackling Paramilitarism Programme (# Ending the Harm) was established which sets out a series of 38 commitments from the Northern Ireland Executive aimed at tackling Paramilitarism, including a commitment to prevent young people becoming involved in paramilitary activity (3.9 - Cross-departmental programme to prevent vulnerable young people being drawn into paramilitary activity).

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The Centre for Children’s Rights is an interdisciplinary research centre which operates as a focus for research intended to better understand and improve children’s lives. The Centre’s research activity focuses on substantive children’s rights issues, children’s participation in decision making and children’s rights-based research methods.