

BELFAST'S YOUNG OFFENDERS

Juvenile Delinquency: A Self-report study

With the recent decline in the juvenile population in Northern Ireland over the last 10 years, it has not been surprising to note a decline in juvenile court convictions. In 1992 for instance 588 juveniles (10-17 years), of whom only 42 were female, were found guilty in the magistrates and Crown courts, most commonly for theft and handling (42%), burglary (27.9%), criminal damage (13.9%) and offences against the person (7.8%). The existence of police cautioning and some diversion from court schemes, together with the low reporting of certain offences may, however, be concealing the true picture.

It is well known that much juvenile offending does not reach the notice of the authorities, and studies of self-reported delinquency and teachers' ratings reveal a very different scenario to official statistics. While self-reporting is known to be affected by concealment and forgetting, and sometimes puts the prevalence of delinquency spuriously high because of the trivial infractions admitted, it nevertheless provides a valuable alternative insight into the nature of undetected and unreported youth deviance.

Theorists such as Becker (1962) suggest that much secondary deviance occurs because minor delinquencies are unnecessarily processed judicially, resulting in the young person committing further misdemeanours because he has been labelled a delinquent by the police and courts. It has been argued therefore that minor infringements of the law are in fact very widespread among normal adolescents and that they will grow out of these tendencies given time.

In order to estimate the true nature and extent of adolescent offending therefore, representatives from several European countries, the United States of America and Canada met under the auspices of the Ministry of Justice, Holland, in 1988 as a first step to construct a standard instrument for measuring self-reported delinquency. Each country validated the pilot questionnaire in a standardised fashion during 1990, and in Northern Ireland the study was carried



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out jointly by the Centre for Independent Research and Analysis of Crime (CIRAC) and the Northern Ireland Office. This article describes the result of this survey.

A sample of 310 young people aged 14-21 years were selected from the city of Belfast using a modified random walk method and interviewed face-to-face in confidence about a range of behaviours from status offences and criminal damage to stealing, drugs and violence. There were 161 males and 149 females in the sample distributed fairly evenly over the age range, 60% of whom were still in full-time education (including further education college and university).

It was found that the vast majority (95%) reported having committed at least one "offence" at some time in their lives, although this figure includes status offences, underage drinking and breaking copyright.

Despite the criminal justice system's dealing with a much greater proportion of males, almost half of the some time offenders were female. Certain offences however were more predominant among males, such as driving without a licence or insurance, public disorder and carrying weapons. Three quarters of the sample had drunk alcohol underage and two thirds had broken copyright. Other mi-

nor offences, such as truancy, criminal damage and bus fare evasion were also fairly widespread, but twenty two different offence types were committed by fewer than one tenth of the group (see Table).

Only a very few young people reported a wide variety of deviant behaviours, girls and those in full-time education averaging fewer than boys and those who had left school. The type of schooling was not significantly associated with the number of different offences however.

Certain offences tended to occur together, thus if one had stolen from school it was most likely one had also stolen from a shop, and then progressively less likely from home, work, telephone kiosks and a car. Underage drinking was associated with those involved in public disorder and also more than

twelve different delinquencies, but half of those reporting the use of hard drugs had never used soft drugs. The more serious the offence reported the more likely it was that an individual admitted a wide range of other offences.

The earliest age reported for the onset of offending behaviour ranged from 4 years for truancy, spraying graffiti and shoplifting to 13 or 14 years for stealing from work and using drugs. However, in general very little offending began before the age of criminal responsibility (10 years), but even at this early age it did include theft and break-ins. Cars were reported stolen or driven for the first time by juveniles as young as 10 or 11 years, but the average age overall for first time offenders was 14 years.

The frequency and recency of the delinquency presented a different picture to the overall prevalence rates, as only 47% of the sample had offended during the previous year, although averaging approximately nine times. The less serious offences were also the most frequent, such as breaking copyright, underage drinking, spraying graffiti, truancy and bus fare evasion.

Over half of all the most recent of-

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fences had occurred either at home or within a ten minute's walk, while two thirds happened in the company of two other people, roughly a quarter with one other and only 4% were solo efforts. In general 80% of all the different kinds of offence were committed with at least one other person.

The frequency of offending decreased significantly in those who had left full-time education behind and also as the young person grew older. A greater proportion of boys than girls were recent offenders, thus while participation in

offending was very similar, frequency differentiated the sexes. However, no significant relation was found between frequency and employment status, living with parents, educational level or hours spent playing sport, although the latter was statistically significant for those still in full-time education.

Approximately 8 out of 10 of the most recent offences went undetected, and those young people whose offences were discovered were found out mainly by their parents, followed by the police. Police were mostly involved in the detection of public disorder, graffiti, running away and driving offences. If

truancy and running away were excluded, the police had detected only 5% of the last offences committed, illustrating how much youth crime does not appear in the official statistics.

It was difficult to discover what makes one young person commit deviant behaviours and not another. Regression analyses were carried out on participation in offending, entering over 12 possible explanatory variables into the analysis. However the predictors of participation in nine different offence categories were quite limited and consisted variously of age, sex, weekly income, living with parents and the age the offence was first committed.

If you were younger, female and had a smaller weekly income you were less likely to truant or commit theft, whereas being young and female meant you were less likely to be involved in vandalism. Being young, female and living with parents meant less underage drinking and living with parents less drug use. The model for copyright breaking predicted well using the age at which the young people first started this offence, while females were less likely to drive without a licence or insurance or evade transport fares. Finally age and weekly income differentiated between those who had or had not committed some kind of violence against the person, but because the numbers involved were small this effect is probably of dubious validity.

Because these were the particular explanatory variables entered into the analysis this might as such suggest that there is little which those involved in crime prevention can actually change in order to reduce the chance of a young person committing an offence. Obviously this is only true for variables measured and there are a whole range of educational, psychological and sociological measures that are widely and successfully used to help reduce adolescent offending. However the widespread nature of minor offending at some time during adolescence suggests that deviant behaviour is actually 'normal' at this stage for both sexes, and that if it is not given undue emphasis the majority will start to outgrow it as they leave school and take on adult responsibilities.

PER CENT ADMITTING 'EVER' COMMITTED AN OFFENCE

| Offence | Frequency | Per cent of sample | Per cent of males | Per cent of females |
|---------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Underage drinking | 235 | 75.8 | 48.5 | 51.5 |
| Breaking copyright | 210 | 67.7 | 46.6 | 53.4 |
| Criminal damage | 149 | 48.1 | 58.4 | 41.6 |
| Truancy | 135 | 43.5 | 51.8 | 48.2 |
| Bus fare evasion | 135 | 43.5 | 55.5 | 44.5 |
| Spray graffiti | 105 | 33.9 | 58.1 | 41.9 |
| Steal school | 72 | 23.2 | 52.8 | 47.2 |
| Steal shop | 68 | 21.9 | 47.1 | 52.9 |
| Drive without licence | 53 | 17.1 | 69.8 | 30.2* |
| Public disorder | 47 | 5.2 | 68.1 | 31.9* |
| Run away home | 34 | 11.0 | 64.7 | 35.3 |
| Soft drugs | 31 | 10.0 | 61.3 | 38.7 |
| Carry weapon | 26 | 8.4 | 76.9 | 23.1* |
| Break in house/building | 25 | 8.1 | 52.0 | 48.0 |
| Obscene/threatening phone calls | 25 | 8.1 | 56.0 | 44.0 |
| Train fare evasion | 24 | 7.7 | 45.8 | 54.2 |
| Steal home | 22 | 7.1 | 50 | 50 |
| Steal work | 20 | 6.4 | 50 | 50 |
| Buy stolen goods | 20 | 6.4 | 50 | 50 |
| Injure outside family | 15 | 4.8 | 66 | 33* |
| Hard drugs | 14 | 4.5 | 50 | 50 |
| Steal telephone/vending machine | 13 | 4.2 | 69.2 | 30.8 |
| Sell stolen goods | 12 | 3.9 | 58.3 | 41.7 |
| Take away car | 8 | 2.6 | 87.5 | 12.5* |
| Take bike/motorbike | 7 | 2.3 | 57.1 | 42.9 |
| Steal something else | 7 | 2.3 | 57.1 | 42.9 |
| Steal from car | 4 | 1.3 | 25 | 75* |
| Injure with weapon | 4 | 1.3 | 50 | 50 |
| Threaten with weapon/force | 3 | 1.0 | 66 | 33 |
| Injure family | 2 | 0.3 | 50 | 50 |
| Pickpocket | 2 | 0.3 | 100 | 0 |
| Snatch purse | 2 | 0.3 | 100 | 0 |

* gender differences

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Crime in Northern Ireland from a literary perspective

It is difficult to obtain an overview of the incidence and pattern of crime in Northern Ireland. As elsewhere, there are various perceptions from different sources, each of which produce a series of snapshots rather than one coherent image. It is particularly difficult to find meaningful measures of crime in Northern Ireland because of the range, and often stark diversity, of the perceptions that do exist. The image of terrorism which is so vividly displayed on television screens across the world dominates, but this hides a more complex and conflicting reality.

In official discourse the fears that were expressed in the 1970s of a society about to teeter over the edge to widespread disorder have been replaced in the 1990s with the view that Northern Ireland is basically decent and peaceful under the veneer of terrorism provided by the "men of violence". Indeed, it is now argued widely in some circles that Northern Ireland has a particularly low level of what the security forces term "ordinary decent crime". The most recent official expression of this view can be found in the Northern Ireland Office's (NIO) discussion document *Crime and the Community*¹ published in March 1993 where the context for discussion of wider issues is set by the assertion that "Terrorism apart, Northern Ireland

appears significantly less affected by crime than other parts of Europe" (p11).

Research findings

The official statistics, contained in the Chief Constable's Annual Reports seem to bear this out. There it is claimed that ordinary crime is significantly lower than in Britain and that the clear up rate is higher. While there may be some doubt about the levels of reporting, international victimisation studies seem

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to bear out this view of a low crime rate.

A report² based on the 1987 international crime survey found Northern Ireland had the lowest crime rate out of 14 regions in Europe and the USA. A very recent report³, based on the 1989 and 1992 international crime surveys, claimed that Northern Ireland was second only to Japan in having the lowest overall victimisation rate for crime amongst the twenty industrialised countries that took part in the surveys. The 1991/92 survey of 'Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland'⁴ also found that respondents in Northern Ireland expressed less anxiety about crime than those in Britain and considered that there was a higher incidence of ordinary crime

in Britain than in Northern Ireland.

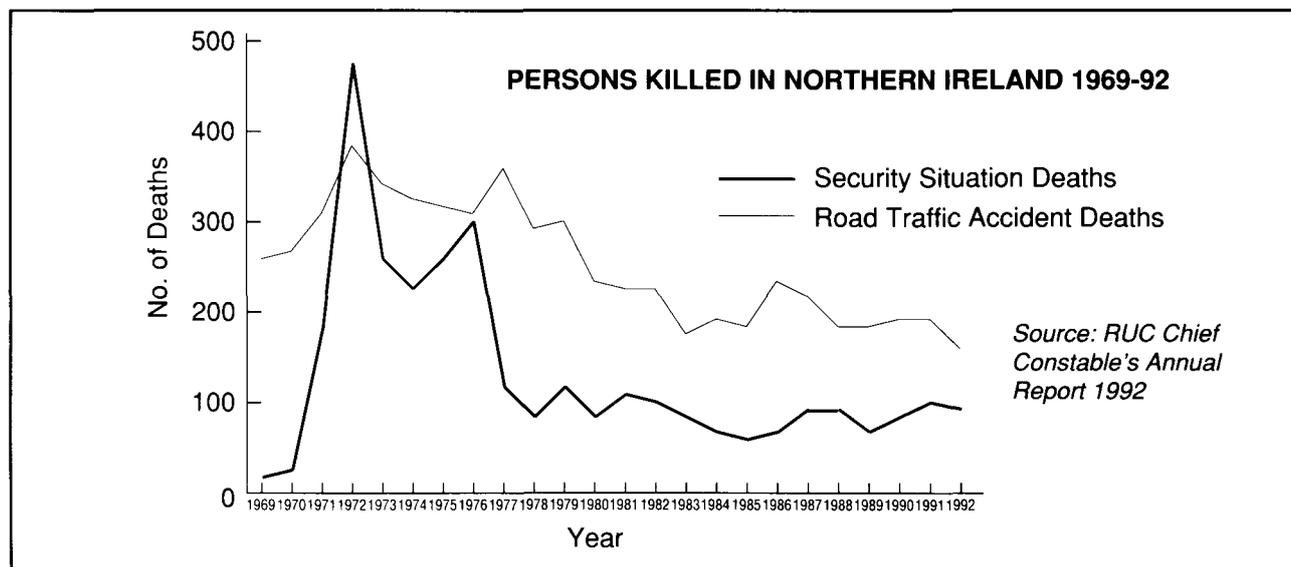
The emphasis on the low incidence of ordinary crime has been unconditionally accepted. It has been repeated as a constant litany, whilst the very questions and contradictions which this raises are ignored. The NIO discussion document refers to 'areas of multiple deprivation' (p 11), but does not consider why, given the prevalence of such areas in Northern Ireland, this does not result in more ordinary crime similar to that experienced by corresponding areas in Britain and Ireland. Equally the discussion document treats terrorist and ordinary crime as being discrete entities, without discussion whether they might overlap or subsume one another.

Official discourse may be unable to explore these issues but the issues should be amenable to literary discourse and those approaches which analyse it. It may be that literature can use different techniques to explore these questions. Metaphors, allegory and symbolism do perhaps reveal "truths" that escape the notice of the harder forms of the social sciences with their interview data and graphs. It has been suggested that, 'Literary texts are ... able to escape or smooth over strongly felt contradictions in belief or practice that other kinds of texts have difficulty dealing with'.⁵

Fictional depictions

Unfortunately this does not seem to

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FANTASIES, FIGURES & FICTIONS

have been the case with fictional depictions of crime in Northern Ireland. Virtually all such depictions, whether in novels, films or television, involve terrorist crime without any specific reference to ordinary crime. They may even repeat the litany of a low ordinary crime rate as in, for example, Frank Kippax's novel, 'Other People's Blood'⁶, which is to be televised soon. This may be understandable in the context of Northern Ireland and the seriousness of terrorist offences, but the NIO discussion document points out that 'most offences have nothing to do with terrorism' (p 5). Many people's perceptions of crime in Northern Ireland, however, may be formulated by this fictional discourse allied to the images which they receive from television and newspaper reportage, which is again predominantly concerned with terrorist offences. 'Fiction' and 'fact' consequently appear to confirm the 'reality' of the low incidence of ordinary crime and the separateness of ordinary and terrorist crime. Rather than producing a coherent image, however, this may produce a disjuncture: people outside of Northern Ireland simply see the imagery of terrorism, and those in Northern Ireland, if they are not directly confronted by the terrorism, emphasise the low incidence of ordinary crime. This may in turn influence the views expressed in victimisation studies and the reporting of offences to the police.

In confirming this consensus, writers depicting crime in Northern Ireland may be contained by their genres and by the expectations of their readers. The complexities of the problem do not lend themselves to an easy formulation and it

is more convenient, as with official discourse, to present them in discrete genres. Thus, for example, the novels of Gerald Seymour⁷ can be generally classified as thrillers emphasising the confrontation between the security forces and the Provisional IRA. Brian Moore's 'Lies of Silence'⁸ appears as the novel of the moral dilemma and the books of M.S. Power⁹ focus on conspiracy and multiple collusion. These may, of course, succeed in their own terms. And it might also be too much to ask them to address the issues of the inter-relationship of ordinary and terrorist crime, or in fact to portray ordinary crime. In failing to do so, however, they miss the opportunity to provide clarification and simply serve to repeat the litany of a low ordinary crime rate overlaid with terrorist violence. In contrast, in Britain there has been a distinctive move in the depiction of crime from the international terrorism confronted by 'The Professionals' in the 1970s to the more mundane issues facing 'The Bill' in the 1990s. Similar developments can be observed in the crime or detective novel. In Northern Ireland, though, the fictional representation of crime has not witnessed any similar developments.

Thus the inconsistencies and contradictions of the official discourse have not been addressed and the fictional representation of crime in Northern Ireland too has simply served to obfuscate further the dilemmas of ordinary crime. "Ordinary Decent Criminals" have so far been inadequately represented in both fact and fiction. Indeed, as Lionel Shriver points out in her novel, entitled *Ordinary Decent Criminals*, this is a term that is

'used to distinguish offenders with political motives from nice lads who murder, rape and pillage for no particular reason'¹⁰.

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Footnotes

1. NIO, *Crime and the Community* (Belfast: HMSO, 1993)
2. Jan van Dijk et al., *Experiences of Crime across the World* (Deventer: Kluwer, 1991)
3. Jan van Dijk and Pat Mayhew, *Criminal Victimisation in the Industrialised World* (Netherlands: Ministry of Justice, 1992)
4. Peter Stringer and Gillian Robinson, *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland: The Second Report* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992)
5. Lincoln Faller, *Crime and Defoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p.XV.
6. Frank Kippax, *Other People's Blood* (London: Fontana, 1993).
7. See, for example, Gerald Seymour's, *Harry's Game* (London: Fontana 1977); *Field of Blood* (London: Fontana, 1986) and *The Journeyman Tailor* (London: Fontana, 1992).
8. Brian Moore, *Lies of Silence* (London: Arrow, 1991).
9. See, for example, M.S. Power's *Children of the North* (London: Abacus, 1991) and *Come the Executioner* (London: Penguin, 1992).
10. Lionel Shriver, *Ordinary Decent Criminals* (London: Harper Collins, 1992) p.422.

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One of the problems of this pilot study was the small sample involved and the preliminary nature of the questionnaire. National and city based samples of a minimum of 1000 young people have been therefore interviewed in approximately fifteen countries during 1992 as part of an International Study of Self

Reported Delinquency. This will reduce the methodological problems of the earlier studies, facilitate cross-cultural comparisons and provide the basis for further investigation of the nature of, and reasons for delinquent behaviour among young people.

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- McQuoid, J. (1992) *Self-Reported Delinquency: A Pilot Study CIRAC Paper No.3*. Extern: Belfast.