Children, violence and transition

Based on the most extensive independent research into children's rights carried out within a European jurisdiction, **Phil Scraton** considers the impact of violence on the lives of children and young people in the North of Ireland.

While the impact of political conflict in the North of Ireland (the six counties that comprise the jurisdiction of Northern Ireland) on children and young people is yet to be fully acknowledged, several generations have endured pervasive sectarianism, hardline policing, military operations and paramilitary punishments. A combination of ceasefires, arms decommissioning and the *1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement*, reflected in the commonly-used phrase 'peace process', suggests 'the conflict' has ended and a 'post-conflict' phase has emerged. Whatever the advances, transition is slow and complex. However sporadic and opportunist, violence persists between and within communities. An entrenched loyalist feud, triggering the displacement of numerous families and their children, is one manifestation.

Interface confrontation between neighbouring communities occasionally flares. The legacy of war has taken its toll on children, themselves now parents. Much is broadcast about 'leaving the past behind' and 'moving on', but 'truth' and acknowledgement are essential to recovery and reconstruction. There is an obvious and marked reluctance within the State to disclose the role played by the police, the military and the security services, particularly regarding collusion and prosecuting a 'dirty war' (Royston and Scraton 2005).

Recent research on children's experiences of political violence notes: subjection to paramilitary punishment attacks; witnessing killings, shootings or punishments; rioting; being exiled; suffering school-related sectarian bullying. Less dramatic and often unaddressed are: "chronic anger, lack of trust in adults, isolation and feelings of marginalisation, bitterness at other community or at the police; distrust of all authority; feelings of marginalisation; lack of contact with or knowledge of 'other' community" (Smyth *et al*, 2004). Our research identified inter-generational consequences: arrests involving the army; forced house entry during the night by the police; parents imprisoned, 'on the run' or killed; exposure to violence and death in communities. Community workers were concerned that while house raids had stopped, 'emotional harm' went unrecognised.

They also identified a 'dire need' for appropriate mental health services to support children and reconsideration of how children in conflict with the law are defined and criminalised. A children's caseworker graphically stated: "For this generation, post-conflict, we're dealing with a huge age range of people who've been bereaved, injured, been the children who were killed – and another generation who are the children of the children. Trans-generational trauma affect[s] children's education, their mental health and their ability to participate in society". State agencies "have no idea what the effects of trauma are, they don't put it into the equation when children are displaying different symptoms, whether they are in education, the criminal justice system or whatever...the issue of the conflict doesn't even raise itself".

Deeply affected children have "difficulties in concentration and the aggressive behaviour that followed their traumatisation was misinterpreted ... being seen as deliberately disruptive behaviour" (Smyth *et al* 2004). We found a serious deficit in child and adolescent mental health services alongside investment in anti-social behaviour orders (Scraton, 2005). Yet there is no systematic case research into self-harm or the high number of suicides of children and young people living under the shadow of paramilitary threats, forced exiling, economic marginalisation and social exclusion. It is a context where hopelessness, helplessness and despair accumulate. A young woman explained self-harm as her "only way of coping and I release the pain as well".

In interface areas there is bleak resignation that differences have solidified. Children report less armed conflict but 'more hatred'. There is a pervasive "sense of inevitability and permanence" with many "pessimistic about the possibility for conflict resolution" and permanent peace "a distant vision" (Leonard, 2005). Notions of 'post-conflict' or 'transition' are distant possibilities as sectarianism entrenches hatred for the 'other', physically, psychologically and culturally.

Aggressive policing

Our research found children accepted the 'need' for policing, but the police were routinely aggressive:

"The Peelers just push you around. If you come back at them they give you a quick beating. It's not right but it goes on all the time."

"If you're on the street then you're up to no good, like. They just come and tell you to go and when you say 'Where?' they tell you to 'Fuck off, that's where'."

"They know you, your families an' all. They tell you 'You're next' and that you're up to no good an' they're watchin' for you. I got that paranoid that I was scared to go out."

"One of the blokes [police officer] grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and threw me against the wall and had me up against the wall like this. I just said 'Nine one one, I've got your number'."

A youth worker witnessed an incident: "... a car pulled over and a guy came out, about four or five inches taller than me, and grabbed a wee young fella up by the throat and threw him into the car. The wee fella was only about 14". Recent research notes, the "lack of accountability of the police and the sense that young people had of police impunity was a significant source of anger and frustration, particularly amongst young Catholics". It amounted to "a strong sense of injustice" accompanied by "powerlessness to challenge unfair treatment" (Smyth *et al*, 2004).

'Victims of violence'

Young people in conflict with the law gave painful accounts of endurance and resilience. A young mother stated "When you're desperate nowhere will take you because you'll get put out for fighting or smoking blow. When I was in [hostel] I ran away and they didn't even phone my mammy and let her know. I ended up on the streets, drinking heavily, doing drugs and sleeping in a subway. I felt worthless. Maybe this was what I was supposed to be. I was suicidal, so low. Soon after, I started to self-harm...I had all this anger inside me so I did it to release it. I was getting used to the pain so I was getting deeper cuts. You don't think in the long run where you'll end up. You feel like you'll be like that for ever."

A young man voiced the continuum of violence: "I used to wait for my Da, like, and he'd take off on us for nothing ...belt, fists, anything he could use. I was bullied all through my childhood. There were always fights in the house, like. And then I got it at school. You were going through enough at home, you didn't expect it in school, like. Then it was on the street with the peelers. *You've* got the attitude problem. You feel like a hurt animal, just waiting to be released."

Much of the violence negotiated by young people occurred within the family and at school, supposedly safe havens. They constantly feared assault when outside their community: "'You shouldn't be here, you Fenian bastard'...then they started spitting on her [girl-friend] on the street. Then Social Services turn round and blamed her". A young father stated: "You've got to forget about your past, when you've got kids you don't want them to live what you've lived."

Street violence is most common and most severe in interface areas with histories of "mass movement of people, open street rioting, clashes with security forces, shootings and intimidation" (Leonard, 2005). One complex area has "around 24 interfaces" and "eight of the official Belfast peace lines". Asked about the positive aspects of community life, children specified "strong ties, family, friends and neighbours". These were overshadowed by the negative: the area's appearance; lack of amenities; availability of alcohol and drugs; joy-riding; paramilitaries; rioting.

"Fear of verbal and physical intimidation and violence" impacted on all children with places "outside the children's immediate locality...labelled as spaces of risk and fear" (Leonard, 2005). The level of violence in and around schools was extreme, including attacks on buses and vandalising or torching teachers' cars. Children attended school behind locked gates monitored by security guards, unable to use playgrounds for fear of being stoned. Verbal abuse and spitting were everyday occurrences as they made their way home.

A prolonged, internal feud between Loyalist paramilitaries has forced out families with devastating consequences for children. In the "largest forced movement of households since the 1970s", 263 families were exiled. Many more families were "dispersed throughout the area because of death threats made on their lives". Approximately 1,000 people were affected (Inter-agency Working Group on Displaced Families). Children's experiences of exiling included violence and assaults, houses ransacked or burnt and furniture damaged, destroyed or stolen. Statutory agencies' responses were short-term.

There has been a recent increase in racist attacks including intimidation, assault and arson extending to European migrant workers. Children reported racist abuse, stone throwing and house attacks. While the police proclaim a "zero tolerance policy towards hate crime", Portuguese and Traveller communities under-report racist attacks because of "fear and suspicion of authorities". Based on past experiences, Travellers felt vulnerable to investigation if they called the police.

Conclusion

The North of Ireland is divided by sectarianism but also by class and poverty. The intersection of these determining contexts is crucial in the lives of children and young people. In urban areas people live in close geographical proximity occupying entirely contrasting worlds. This brief article has focused on communities where violence has been part of children's negotiation of daily life. They are communities that are rarely policed sensitively or effectively, where community-based workers accuse statutory agencies of institutional neglect. Our research demonstrates the necessity of reviewing service provision to identify the needs and implement the rights of children. Given the conflict's enduring legacy, the children's right to life, survival and development is paramount.

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