



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

## **Young men's experiences of violence and crime in a society emerging from conflict**

Walsh, C., & Schubotz, D. (Accepted/In press). Young men's experiences of violence and crime in a society emerging from conflict. *Journal of Youth Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1636012>

**Published in:**  
Journal of Youth Studies

**Document Version:**  
Peer reviewed version

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**  
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

**Publisher rights**  
Copyright 2019 Taylor and Francis This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

**General rights**  
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**  
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [openaccess@qub.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@qub.ac.uk).

# ***Young men's experiences of violence and crime in a society emerging from conflict***

## ***Abstract***

Previous studies have consistently established young men's over representation in the criminal justice system particularly in relation to interpersonal violence. Despite this, the voice of young men are seldom heard, reducing our understanding of young men's experience of crime and violence. As Northern Ireland emerged from the longest conflict in contemporary European history following the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, a new generation of young men have grown up in a society with a reconstituted police force, sustained paramilitary ceasefires and increased community cohesion. In 2018, 32 young men aged between 16 and 20 from across Northern Ireland engaged in focus groups exploring their perceptions of crime and violence growing up since 1998. The study found that paramilitaries are still present but the extent to which they are active differs greatly between communities; young men's literacy around crime in general is limited; issues of personal safety are critical but they do not always develop the necessary skills to avoid violence until later in adolescence; and contact with the police is generally perceived as negative. It is recommended that young men have spaces to reflect on their attitudes and beliefs, develop skills to avoid violence and professionals are trained to engage young men more effectively.

## ***Introduction***

The aims of this article are to (a) explore how crime and violence are perceived by young men living and growing up in Northern Ireland, a country emerging from violent and sectarian conflict; (b) to identify young men's own experiences of violence and

crime; and (c) to contribute to an understanding of how they navigate their own personal safety where and when they perceive risks.

The study results reported here are mainly based on group discussions held with young men from across Northern Ireland (Belfast, Derry<sup>1</sup>, Armagh) during which we explored their perceptions and experiences of violence and crime. The group discussion schedule was informed by the results of the 2017 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey (ARK, 2018). YLT is an annual survey of 16-year olds undertaken since 2003 in Northern Ireland. The 2017 YLT survey included questions on community safety, attitudes to paramilitaries, as well as perceptions of, and contact with, the police. In this article, we will also draw on the results from the YLT survey where they connect with views of the young men who took part in the group discussions. We argue that in addition to the well-rehearsed arguments of hegemonic, non-hegemonic and new masculinities (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Messerschmidt, Martin and Messner, 2018), Galtung's notions of structural violence (1969) and cultural violence (1990) provide a useful conceptual framework to explain why the lives of young men, especially those from disadvantaged social backgrounds continue to be impacted by experiences and fear of violence and crime.

### ***The Legacy of the Northern Ireland Conflict***

Since the emergence of the violent sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland (NI) during the 1960's - commonly referred to as the '*Troubles*' and generally regarded as Europe's longest running violent conflict (Lynch and Joyce, 2018), approximately 3,700 people lost their lives, about 40,000 people sustained physical injuries

---

<sup>1</sup> Although the names 'Derry' and 'Londonderry' are often used interchangeably to refer to the same place, the young men interviewed referred to the city in which the focus groups took place as Derry.

(McAlinden and Dwyer, 2015) and countless others suffered psychological trauma. The NI Study of Health and Stress, based on a nationally representative, face-to-face household survey involving 4,340 individuals, reported a lifetime prevalence of 39% of mental health problems (Bunting, Murphy, O'Neill, & Ferry, 2012). This data confirms earlier findings from reviews such as the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (2005) which highlighted the impact of political violence on the mental health of the NI population. NI has found to have proportionally higher levels of poor mental health than anywhere else in the United Kingdom (UK) (Leavey, Galway, Rondon, & Logan, 2009) with higher rates of male suicide compared with other European counterparts (McLafferty et al., 2016). Some estimates suggest that 80 percent of the population know someone who had been killed or injured during the *Troubles* (Breen-Smith, 2012). Crimes against person and property permeated all aspects of life. Routine tasks such as shopping, travelling and socialising were often affected by conflict-related incidents such as police check-points, bomb scares, car hijacking, protests, parades and mass rioting (WRDA, 2010). Whilst the conflict touched a large proportion of the population, the impact was not consistently felt across class, regional and gender barriers. (McAlister, Scraton and Haydon, 2014). Young men from areas of high deprivation were at greater risk of conflict-related injury and death (Fay, Morrissey and Smith, 1998), and those who were more likely to be perpetrators of conflict-related crime were men. Years of living within a conflict situation forced communities to adopt mechanisms and strategies to cope with the intensity and fear (Muldoon, Trew and Kilpatrick, 2000). Men in particular were expected to protect both family and community. The symbolic power of defence and justice as motivating concepts (Gilligan, 1997) fuelled expectations intrinsically linked with masculinity.

Findings from a pilot study carried out by the Centre for Men's Studies at Ulster University (Harland, 2011) showed that attitudes towards the roles of men have not significantly changed. Among 11 and 12-year-old boys who took part in this study, 96 percent believed it to be an important quality of a man to defend his family and 89 percent thought it to be vital to defend themselves. Confirming the findings of classic studies of working-class boyhood in Northern Ireland (Jenkins, 1983), Beattie, Harland and McGready (2006) found that boys living within a paradigm of conflict often feel that they must prove themselves, and violence was a vehicle to do so. In the preferred and dominant narrative about the peace process, violence and sectarianism is no longer condoned. However, as Shirlow and Murtagh (2006: 174) point out, *'identity formation remains influenced by a real and imagined presence of an ontological "other" that is "threatening"'*. In our study we were interested in how this played out in the lived experiences of young men in relation to crime and violence.

### ***Gendered Perceptions of Crime***

Experience of youth victimisation is primarily considered in the context of violent interactions, so much so that violence is described as an 'everyday reality of many young people around the world' (Kumsa et al., 2013: 848). Fear of crime is important to understand because it is our perceptions of safety in public and private spaces that shape how we interact with those environments (Williams-Reid and Konrad, 2004). The differences between fear of crime and perceived risk of crime vacillate between an emotional and a cognitive response (Mesch, 2000; Amato, 2012). In many places childhood and in particular, adolescence is strongly associated with 'violence' (Kumsa et al., 2013: 849). Recent studies on the role of media (see for example, Gordon, 2018), its portrayal of young people and the degree to which they influence fear of

crime in NI have suggested that media representation continue to demonise young people as aggressors and highly threatening youth sub-cultures, akin to the notion of folk devils and moral panics described by Cohen (2011). However, these representations do not fully capture demographic variations and the criminogenic effects of subjective experiences. Despite being almost universally available, media portrayals of young people, the heterogeneity of outcomes is evident. The 2014 Status Report on Violence Prevention demonstrated that 'the patterns and consequences of violence are not evenly distributed among countries, regions, or by sex and age' (World Health Organization, 2014: 8). In fact, the same report indicated that it was young men aged 15-29 who were at greatest risk. Gender has been a stable but under-evaluated predictor of exposure to and fear of crime. One of the paradoxes of victim ontology is that women, despite being less likely to be at risk of being a victim of violent crime are more likely to report fear of crime than men (Smith, Torstensson and Johansson, 2001; May, Rader and Goodrum, 2010; Snedker, 2015; Schafer, Huebner and Bynum, 2006). Men, on the other hand, often misperceive or discount the levels of risk, and this can conceal the extent to which they are anxious about crime (Smith and Torstensson, 1997). Russo, Roccato and Vieno (2013) argue that crime risk can be defined as a recognition that certain situations or places are dangerous and therefore infer a sense of vulnerability, and in that sense, fear of crime can serve as an adaptive function.

Interpersonal violence appears to be particularly relevant to gender (Mahalik et al., 2003). Whilst traditionally explanations of men's violence have centred around biological factors, theories around the social constructions of behaviour such as Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Social Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provide a more promising approach (Mehta and Beer, 2010). Applying a gender

lens to a systemic framework can aid a fuller understanding of young men's perceptions of crime and so far, relatively few studies have explored adolescents' perceptions of crime from a gender perspective (Dodge, Bosick and Van Antwerp, 2013; Yuan and An, 2017).

Over recent years systemic and ecological perspectives on crime have suggested that the neutrality hypothesis helps to explain why, despite understanding the prevalence of risk and their cognitive appraisals, men neutralise their anxieties and take decisions to engage in risky behaviours (Smith, Torstensson and Johansson, 2001). Some studies have demonstrated that young men understand the risks of crime but are influenced by, and develop certain scripts about, expected behaviour, as they grow up (Mac na Ghail, 1994). These expectations are explicit but unspoken and exaggerated according to the degree to which each young man conforms to masculine ideals. Connell and Messerschmidt (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Messerschmidt, Martin and Messner, 2018) have been instrumental in providing a theoretical framework for our understanding of masculine identity and conflict. According to their theory of hegemonic masculinity, it is argued that there exists a hierarchy of masculine norms and behaviours. In practice this means that men who support more traditional forms of masculinity are more aggressive in their social responses (Amato, 2012; Reardon and Govender, 2013). In striving to achieve normative masculinity, young men can refute any thoughts, feelings or behaviours perceived to be feminine and actively police other young men's behaviours (Harland and McCready, 2014). Young men from deprived areas appear particularly trapped in a social context which encourages them to attain traditional masculine traits and punish those who do not (McAlister, Scraton and Haydon, 2014). Here, Galtung's notions of structural violence (1969) and cultural violence (1990) provide a useful

additional conceptual framework, as they can help to explain how scripts of expected behaviour which may condone physical violence and crime as a means of attaining status may be a consequence of ongoing structural disadvantage. According to Galtung (1990), cultural violence are those expressions of everyday life, bound so intimately with our identity that create paradigms conducive to increased aggression and interpersonal violence. Within these paradigms, violence is not only acceptable, but necessary, and through both gendered scripts and masculine ideals, these cultural norms become behavioural rights.

### ***Risks of Crime***

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2007) being male is the greatest risk factor for experiencing violent crime, with 15-29 year old men accounting for three quarters of all victims of homicide globally. Being male not only increases the likelihood of being the victim of violence but also increases their likelihood of becoming the perpetrator of violent acts. Almost 96 percent of the prison population across 164 countries is male (Muncie, 2005).

Regular exposure to multiple and varied forms of violence, such as verbal and physical conflicts with friends, family or siblings results in violence being perceived as a 'normal' part of life and therefore being 'unseen, unrecognised and unrecorded' (Fraser et al., 2010).

Despite being a global problem and almost exclusively a male issue, research exploring the causes of men's violence and challenges as a result of exposure to violent crime largely focusses on men's perpetration of violence against women (Dagirmanjian et al., 2016). Systematic reviews and meta-analyses have to date



tended to focus intervention effectiveness and systemic risk factors for engagement in violence and crime (Johnson, 2009; Derzon, 2010; Tfofi, Farrington and Losel, 2012; Malvaso, Delfabro and Day, 2016). The dual role of young men as both victims and perpetrators (Harland and McCready, 2015) has largely been disregarded and we know little about the therapeutic needs of young people exposed to various forms of crime (Finkelhor et al., 2009) and the transition between gender constructions and exaggerated masculinities (Goody, 1997). In order to understand exposure to crime and perceptions of crime it is therefore important to identify those who need additional supports and prevent further victimisation.

#### *Young men's exposure to violence in the Northern Ireland context*

McAlister, Scraton and Haydon (2014) suggest that in Northern Ireland it is in those communities most affected by the conflict where conflict legacy issues still remain and deprivation continues to foster crime. A report by Harland (2011) showed that despite a reduction in sectarian crimes, police have consistently recorded a rise in race crime, knife crime and vandalism. More recently, statistics from the PSNI (Police Service in Northern Ireland) revealed a two-fold increase in so called 'punishment attacks' between 2016 and 2017 (Irish News, 20<sup>th</sup> November, 2017). In a study which followed 1,000 young men in Northern Ireland over a period of five years, Harland and McCready (2015) found that young men were very aware of the risk of crime, particularly violent crime, and the majority had direct experience of violence and aggression. Violent crime, it appears, continues to affect communities in Northern Ireland.

## **Methods**

This study adopted a mainly qualitative research approach to explore young men's perceptions and experiences of crime. Opportunistic sampling was used to recruit young men from across Northern Ireland to engage in group discussions about these perceptions, experiences and responsiveness to perceived risk. The group discussion schedule was informed by current research on gender, masculinity, crime and violence, but also by the results of some questions asked in the 2017 YLT survey (ARK, 2018), namely questions on community safety, attitudes to paramilitaries and attitudes to, and experiences of contact with, the PSNI. YLT is an annual randomised postal survey of 16-year olds undertaken in Northern Ireland by ARK, a joint initiative by Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University. In 2017 around 1,400 respondents took part in YLT, and some of the survey results complement the findings from the focus groups. In total, six focus groups with between three and eight young men took place in the period from April to May 2018. Thirty-two young men aged between 16 and 20 years from both rural and urban areas from across Northern Ireland engaged in the focus groups. The young men were recruited through existing youth work structures, and therefore the participants generally knew each other well. In only one focus group (Derry) were the participants from a range of distinct youth work projects. Generally, the high level of trust between the participants favourably impacted on the climate in which the group discussions were held. In Derry, a series of ice-breaker activities were undertaken prior to the focus group in order to facilitate greater engagement. The young men engaged well in the activities and this appeared to be conducive to greater dialogue during the focus group conversations. Contrary to

assumptions often made of engaging young men, across each of the focus groups, the participants approached the discussion with an openness which facilitated the sharing of personal experiences of and strategies to avoid violence. The young men clearly enjoyed the experience of being asked to reflect on what they would regard as a 'masculine' topic. The discussions were voice-recorded and additional notes were taken by the researchers. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted to inductively identify themes emerging from the data. These themes are now discussed.

## ***Findings***

### ***Theme 1: What young men regard as a crime?***

There was a general consensus among young men that crimes included actions or activities that were against the law and which existed on a scale from acceptable low-level illegal behaviour that '*just affects yourself*' to high level crime that '*hurts other people*'. Young men felt that '*there's a difference between something being illegal and something being a crime*'. As one young man in put it:

*'Some things are against the law and wrong but other things that are against the law but you do them all the time. Like jaywalking - who's going to feel guilty about that?'*

There was a perception amongst some young men that the responses of statutory authorities and criminal justice services sometimes served to copper-fasten the idea

of acceptable crime. Whilst illegal, some crimes would be tolerated if there was a minimal chance of prosecution, such as underage drinking:

*'Underage drinking is a crime but you still do it.'*

*'Legally it's a crime but socially underage drinking isn't. It's not the same as breaking into a car.'*

One young man explained further:

*'Police officers who are enforcers of the law are part of society, so they know young people drink. If they see them they just ask young people to put it away- If there's no one there to enforce the law, then has there been a crime?'*

This issue of potential conviction seemed to be central to many young men's conceptualisation of crime. One young man explained:

*'If you can get jailed for something then it's a proper crime, but if you wouldn't, then it's not really a crime.'*

However, even when significant violence was reported, some young men did not believe that the police were the most appropriate organisation to deal with it:

*'I was in school and punched someone and there was a big fight and I left the school. I was battered, it was pretty bad... Eight on one like. It was in school so no-one got arrested, the police weren't called. I don't think the police should have been called anyway. I left the school. The one who beat me the most got expelled and others got suspended. Because it happened in school, the school need to deal with it. I'm glad the police weren't involved.'*

Whilst young men generally regarded violence as wrong, they felt also that *'depending on the context, violence can be justified.'* For example: *'If you see someone being attacked, you need to step in', as one young man put it.* Violence was therefore judged differently depending on the circumstances in which it occurred. A perceived social acceptability or pressure to engage in violent behaviour could on the one hand provide a justification for violence whilst the same behaviour would not be deemed tolerable under a different set of circumstances. One young man illustrated this logic using an example:

*'You could take a homeless man who steals because he needs to feed himself and someone else who steals just because. Obviously the one who has the house doesn't need to be at that so you can take a different approach depending on the reason for doing it.'*

All participants reported that they had been involved in fights, but they only saw their role as that of a victim and not a perpetrator. Being personally at the receiving end of verbal abuse or bullying was regarded as a legitimate reason for a fight:

*'Some things are more acceptable than others; like you can't hit people but sometimes there's reasons. If someone is bullying you and you're standing up for yourself then it's ok. Everyone has experienced this.'*

*'I've hit someone because they said something about my family. You know they're looking [for] a fight but you can't let it go. You have to defend yourself and that's ok.'*

The use of weapons was regarded as a tipping point at which violence could no longer be justified:

*'If someone goes in with a weapon to seriously hurt someone then that's not OK. You can't try to kill someone.'*

Thus, fighting was not generally considered as a crime, and whether or not it was seen as acceptable depended on the inherent moral dimension of the respective encounter. In practice, young men involved in this study had all had experience of violent physical encounters with other male peers. In fact, as one young man put it, *'fighting happens so much, it's just normalised'*. Another young man confirmed:

*'Fighting is everywhere when you grow up. Our year was mad. There was fighting all the time, lighting fires in school, scraps in classrooms. It was good craic like.'*

As bystanders to other fights, young men indicated that there were certain rules - almost like a social contract - by which violence became a legitimate way of resolving disputes. As one young man put it, *'if two people between them want to sort it out with a fight, then let them go for it. It's an easy way to end it.'*

In summary, violence was regarded as partly functional or instrumental in that it serves a purpose, but it was also partly seen as recreational. As a consequence, experiences of violence and aggression were not *per se* perceived as crimes but were described as a part of everyday life. This social acceptability and sense of social justice had the potential to normalise some crimes.

## ***Theme 2: Experience and exposure to crime***

Among study participants, there was a general consensus that they had a limited understanding of crime, violence or issues of safety outside of the home when they were younger. The community was a place to see friends, to be with family and to play. There was a perception that parents or carers were watching, and play always took place in proximity to the family home. As one young man put it: *'At 10 you don't really know what's going on. We were out playing and when the street lights come on, you're in.'*

Around the time when young men start to attend post-primary schools, this changes:

*'Once you become older you become more aware of crime. Mostly drinking and fighting and drugs. When you're ten or eleven and in your own street you don't really know. But when you get a bit older and are out around the area more, you see more and you start to become aware of crime.'*

Some young men affiliated this *'new freedom'* with a new nature of activities, as you *'do things you didn't do when you're a young lad.'* Only a minority of young men reported that they were aware of danger from an early age. They described activities that took place inside the home, alluded to behaviours undertaken by family members and reported frequent visits or *'raids'* by the police. One young man recollected that he lived in *'houses that were getting raided'* from when he was about seven or eight. Another young man reported that he *'grew up in an estate where it all happened'* and he *'saw loads'* from when he was about ten.

There was a consensus that awareness changes during early adolescence, and at the age of around 13 or 14 young men's social space transitions. It *'becomes larger'* and they have access to a greater area of the community. They see more things and hear

more about things. And these things shape how they perceive risk in their communities in what was once safe.

This sentiment connects well with the results of the 2017 YLT survey. One in five (21%) males overall, but one in three (33%) from not well-off family backgrounds who responded to the YLT survey agreed that there was a lot of crime, drugs and antisocial behaviour among young people in their area.

### **Theme 3: Staying safe**

92 percent among male YLT respondents - and three quarters (75%) of those from not well-off backgrounds felt very safe or fairly safe living in their neighbourhood. Safety is related to the ability to negotiate social spaces in different ways, and as teenagers, young men start to learn just that:

*'There are some places I wouldn't go to, like the forest or the docks, or I wouldn't go near [name of street]; people are drinking and just hiding there.'*

Despite indicating that generally they felt safe, young men made conscious efforts to sustain their personal safety suggesting there was at least a tacit acknowledgment of risk. When explored more specifically, young men suggested that various factors influenced their sense of safety.

Depending on the time of day, even the time of the year, their location, the activities they engage in, the people they associate with - the behaviours young men exhibit are in many ways functional - they serve a purpose:

*'It depends where you are or who you're with. Like, if you're on your own you stay away from some places at night but during the day they're fine. If you're*



*with your mates, you might go a bit further but then again, there's some places you don't go, no matter what! Like we went over to [a different County] a while back to go to a club and were chased out.'*

Another young man stated:

*'You stay away from places that you don't know that well or that you know are a different community.'*

It was interesting to note that despite referencing things such as burglary, theft and rape when illustrating their perceptions of crime, when asked about their specific experiences young men overwhelmingly described behaviours that were aggressive and violent.

Young men believed that they were more vulnerable to crime than young women were:

*'Like, if a young woman is walking down the street listening to music they can just walk on past. Like they might get a wee whistle or something. But if you're walking past doing the same thing, they'll think you're a threat and start on you.'*

Being a young man was perceived to be *'more risky because, you can get into a fight very quickly.'* Young men also felt that they were more likely to be targeted by the police than young women:

*'Girls never get blamed for anything. Police would never stop a girl but they always come up to us.'*

*'We stand in groups. You don't really see girls in groups so people automatically think we're up to something.'*

And sometimes physical attributes, such as being tall increased the risk to be targeted even further.

*'See the many times I've got started on because they think I'm a threat. How's me being tall and a wee bit big for my age being a threat? Because I'm built...like a wee bit built [laughs]. That's the way with me because I'm a bit bigger, they try and test themselves and take on a bigger one. You get sucked into it.'*

Young men reported that they became more aware of risks as their social circles grew, their independence increased and the space where they socialised expanded beyond the street they grew up in. Some young men reported that as their awareness increased so too did their strategies to avoid danger. However, even the minority who described using such strategies felt that these strategies were under-developed and, in some ways, were counter-productive. For instance, a common strategy was to stay in larger groups. Friends and acquaintances in these groups were perceived as a deterrent to others who may intend to inflict harm. However, in retrospect, young men felt that these strategies often backfired as larger groups frequently drew unnecessary attention from residents:

*'They all just think we're up to no good. Because we stand there they think we're doing something. Where are we meant to go?'*

*'I think fellas, because they might be a bit loud with their mates outside, get a bad press. They think we're all doing drugs or raping people but you're just standing with your mates.'*

As young men got older, they described being more conscious not just about the risks that were present but the steps that they could take to avoid them. For instance, rather than walking down a street which was perceived as dangerous, they took the longer route that *'would take the extra 20 minutes'*. Others would avoid certain areas completely:

*'There's places in the [part of city] I wouldn't go to at night time. I haven't experienced it but I've seen things happen. Things get heated and all sorts happen.'*

In relation to the attempt to keeping safe, it was interesting to review the relationship young men had with the police. Historically, in Northern Ireland the police force was closely affiliated with the Protestant community, but as part of the peace process significant attempts have been made to reform the police and its image generally and in Catholic communities particularly. Interestingly, in the focus groups young men made no references to historical perceptions and they did not describe the PSNI as sectarian. Nonetheless, Protestant young men appeared to be more supportive of the police presence in their areas than young men from predominantly Catholic areas who remained unconvinced of the role that police had in maintaining social order and bringing offenders to justice, as the following two quotes from Catholic participants show:

*'You wouldn't go to the police if you're in trouble. You go to family or friends or just sort things out yourself.'*

*'If you phone the police it makes it worse. They don't do anything and you're a rat. My house had got broke into twice and they never even called back.'*

Again, this aligns well with the YLT survey results. Sixty percent of Protestant males, but only 44 percent of Catholic males disagreed with the statement that people in their area did *not* feel confident reporting crime and anti-social behaviour to the PSNI. In the group discussions, perspectives around policing were primarily related to direct experience of, and exposure to, community policing. Like the young men in Ilan's (2018) ethnographic study in inner-city Dublin, the majority of young men in our study had an apprehensive relationship with the police, which they described as difficult, antagonistic and aggressive in their engagement with young men, as the following quotes exemplify:

*'When I was about five or six they used to stop us and ask us questions and that's probably where I got my hatred for the PSNI because I was so young and they scared you. We used to run home crying. They used to come in their land rovers and stop us and ask us questions about people.'*

*'I nearly got arrested because they didn't believe what my name was. I told them what my name was and they didn't believe me so we had to wait for an hour for someone else to come and then they let us go. I nearly got arrested for saying my name which is ridiculous.'*

*'They search people in a really paranoid way. They keep going on about community policing but community policing isn't about stopping people and wanting to know everything about them. They should be building up a relationship but they walk around as if they are in the military or something.'*

Particularly in the border areas with the Republic of Ireland, which during the Northern Ireland conflict experienced a high level of paramilitary activity, young men reported being routinely stopped and searched, but never being charged with an offence.

*'I got blamed for smashing windows. But it was my auntie's house, so I was able to say it would hardly be me, but that's the thing - they just stop you and blame you.'*

One young man described a recent experience of walking to work and being harassed by police officers who he indicated were from the local area, knew him, and routinely stopped him.

*'I got detained one morning down in the square, searched and all for going to work basically. This was in November there before Christmas. I was on my way to work at 5 o'clock in the morning walking down the road in my work gear and they thought I was doing a robbery. I was going to work. They didn't believe me I was going to work. I get stopped all the time. I got stopped three times over Christmas.'*

The issue legitimacy of the police actions was raised across all group discussions. One young man suggested that the police was not following their own rules. These perceptions by young men in the focus groups mirrored those of the 13 percent of young men who completed the 2017 YLT survey who had been stopped and searched by the PSNI. When asked why they thought they had been stopped and searched, some respondents reported that they thought this happened because they were *'hanging around a local area where the police have been called to before'*, because they *'are young and they [the police] assume we are up to no good'*, because they

*'looked suspicious'* or simply because they *'were standing outside a shop waiting on our friends'* (Topping and Schubotz, 2018).

#### **Theme 4: Sectarian violence or its 'absence'**

The 2017 YLT survey found that almost one in five (19%) males who lived in mainly Loyalist neighbourhoods agreed with the statement that paramilitaries had a controlling influence in their area, compared with 12 percent of males who lived in mainly Republican areas. In addition, over one quarter (27%) of males living in Loyalist areas agreed that paramilitary groups created fear and intimidation, but only 17 percent of males from mainly Republican areas agreed.

In group discussions, paramilitaries were also referred to, although the perceptions of their role and the level of their activity differed depending on the community young men were coming from. Whilst the group discussions confirmed that Protestant young men from Loyalist housing estates perceived the paramilitary influence to be strongest, overall few young men described perpetrating violence against those from another community or being the victim of a violent attack from members of another community.

For many in predominantly Catholic communities, paramilitaries were on the periphery. Young men were aware they were there but reported that they were not very active. However, young men in Derry, the second largest city in Northern Ireland, which has been heavily affected by sectarian violence in the past but also during the peace process, disclosed that active recruitment by paramilitaries was still ongoing.

Asked about the paramilitaries' recruitment strategies, participants reported that young men from *'around the age of 16'* were targeted - *'but not really young ones'*. Recruitment could take place in a number of ways, but was often done in an informal way by someone known to be a paramilitary, which participants said was difficult to refuse:

*'It could be something as simple as someone buying you a pint, and then being asked to do a job for them, like setting a car on fire, stealing something or breaking into a house. You have to be careful who you take a drink from.'*

Young men from urban Protestant areas also reported that paramilitaries remained active and still engaged in forms of *'community policing'*. To a lesser extent this was the case in rural nationalist areas. However, the vast majority of our study participants believed that the primary focus for paramilitaries was now to make money, primarily through drugs.

Study participants reported that they *'don't really get the Protestant/Catholic stuff going on'* and that their experiences of violence and crime was *'more about issues with people in [their] own community, to be honest.'* Especially for young men who lived in religiously homogenous rural areas, sectarian violence did not present itself as an immediate issue:

*'We don't really have interface areas down here. It's different up in Belfast but down here it's mostly rural, you don't really come across sectarian issues unless you go looking for them.'*

The term *'interface areas'* refers to geographic areas where predominantly Catholic/Republican housing estates border with predominantly Protestant/Loyalist housing

estates. During the Northern Ireland conflict, sectarian violence had been a particular feature in in these areas, especially those with a high level of socio-economic deprivation. Group discussion participants who had experienced sectarian violence or the threat of this lived indeed often on or close to such an interface area, as this quote from a young Catholic man shows:

*'I, well, we all live close to an interface... You're definitely more at risk in Protestant areas. I would feel more at risk walking up [another community] than I would walking up [my own area] with people carrying knives.'*

In order to avoid sectarian violence, the majority of young men who lived near interface areas followed strict strategies, such as self-imposed restrictions of movement. One young Catholic man reported:

*'You feel safer in your own area and don't travel too far socially. When we do, we usually go as a group, but you wouldn't go into Protestant areas.'*

These quotes suggest that many young have adopted conflict avoidance strategies when negotiating contested geographic spaces.

Overall, the way young men in the YLT survey and the group discussions portrayed paramilitary activity was contradictory and ambiguous. Young men from all backgrounds believed that rather than a sectarian or political cause, the continued presence of paramilitaries in their areas were a result of poverty, social injustice and the presence of drugs which funded the groups and helped to maintain their control over certain areas.



*'They treat drug dealers in this area. They just want a share of the profit. If you're not making money in this place and can't get a good job then £30,000 a year is good money!'*

Among some group discussion participants there was nevertheless a sense that paramilitaries did *'police the area'* or *'protect the community'* and ensured that some criminals were dealt with (primarily by beatings and removing them from the area).

*'They're still there and still active. They protect the community but the community are afraid of them as well. There was a [suspected] paedophile in the area and they threw him out.'*

The results of the YLT survey showed similarly that among male respondents, eleven percent of those who lived in mainly Loyalist areas and eight percent from mainly Republican areas agreed that the paramilitaries helped to keep their area safe. A majority of study participants however perceived paramilitaries as being involved in or supporting criminal activity, therefore posing a threat to the community and having no legitimacy whatsoever:

*'I don't know what they're meant to be doing. They're still there and trying to let on that they protect us – but from what? They're just about money and drugs. They're gangs now more than paramilitaries.'*

Among YLT survey respondents, 30 percent of males from predominantly Loyalist areas and 20 percent of those from predominantly Republican areas agreed that paramilitaries contributed to crime, drug-dealing and anti-social behaviour.

## ***Discussion and Conclusions***

In this article we set out to explore how crime and violence were perceived, experienced and reflected by young men living and growing up in Northern Ireland, thirty years into the Northern Ireland peace process. Our data provides evidence that despite the fact that the level of informal sectarian and organised (paramilitary) violence has significantly decreased since the Northern Ireland peace process began, the lives of young men remain acutely shaped by the threats of and fear from both inter- and intra-community violence. Our study found that risk to personal safety remains a primary concern for young men, and in areas where this risk was perceived as higher, such as interface areas, greater efforts were taken to mitigate the risk of violent crime. Our survey and group discussion data shows clearly that paramilitaries are not only an ongoing feature of many communities, they also remain a viable force in the communities in which young men live and socialise. However, not all young men report the same level of influence nor risk. In some communities, particularly around the border areas (Derry and Armagh), young men reported that risks were highest.

During the group discussions we found that crime and violence was often legitimised as being socially or morally acceptable or as being acceptable due to the relatively small chance of prosecution or punitive response. This was the case even though there was a broad consensus that the activities were illegal and few young men actually disclosed that they were perpetrators of crime or violence. This is indicative of young men's social reality where harmful violent behaviours are often sustained and normalised, and are still part of scripted behaviour patterns, as has been shown by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005). Indeed, some of the examples provided by young

men in our study indicated that violence may not only be morally justifiable but a necessary response.

It was evident across all focus groups that risk to personal safety was a primary concern for young men and in areas where this risk was perceived as higher, greater efforts were taken to mitigate the risk of violent crime. During late adolescence, young men became more vulnerable towards violence, but also started to adapt strategies to avoid crime, using a variety of skills to stay safe.

Group discussion participants showed an awareness of ongoing paramilitary activity, even though this was now mostly related to internal feuds between paramilitary factions, often related to conflicts over control over illegal businesses or money laundering, for example in relation to illegal drug dealing. Shirlow and Murtagh (2006) had argued that control of place is a feature both inter- *and* intra-community discord, and the evidence from our study suggests that whilst inter-community violence has indeed diminished as a result of the Northern Ireland peace process, intra-community fighting and control continues to affect young men's lives strongly. Shirlow and Murtagh (*ibid*) contend that the fact that paramilitary groups continue to control communities in particular in urban working class areas means that they are crucial to any process of conflict resolution. By extension of this argument, one may ask to what extent they will, and indeed have the capacity to, play a role in the development of communities in which violence plays a lesser part in the lives of young men than it did in the past. Galtung's notions of non-physical 'structural violence' (1969) and 'cultural violence' (1990), which refers to cultural aspects that legitimise structural violence can be very useful analytical tools here.

There is clear evidence that the Northern Ireland peace process has not managed to address the institutionalised social inequality that inhibits people from disadvantaged working class communities to develop their full potential. This, in Galtung's terms represents structural violence. The way ideological, political, religious and language cards are being played by political elites to reinforce and instrumentalise existing divisions in Northern Ireland has also all the traits of what Galtung has called 'cultural violence'. The narratives of young men, particularly those from disadvantaged communities continue to be dominated by the language of violence, victimisation and threat. They remain at the receiving end of this structural and cultural violence, and, if anything, the ongoing loss of traditional employment opportunities for young men from working class backgrounds that has coincided with the Northern Ireland peace process has increased this problem. As Shirlow and Murtagh (2006) eloquently comment, lifestyle changes brought about by the peace process have first and foremost benefitted the upwards mobile middle classes for whom the 'Troubles' may indeed be mainly of historical interest. For segregated working class communities, the reality is that of ongoing deprivation, precarious and zero-hour job contracts, increasing educational under-achievement, illegal and prescription drug misuse, poor mental health, and higher rates of suicides among young men (Tomlinson, 2007).

As notably Messerschmidt has shown, violence by men against women and other men can be linked to the need to attain social power, personal honour and status, especially among those who are otherwise powerless, disadvantaged and disempowered (Messerschmidt and Tomson, 2018). We content that whilst the peace process in Northern Ireland promised and has largely delivered an end to the sectarian and paramilitary tit-for-tat cycle of violence, what remains is the challenge to provide young men, who were in the centre of sectarian violence and crimes and the accompanied

social status of 'defenders' of their own communities and cultures, with alternative positive role models and masculinities. As long as young men remain at the receiving end of structural and cultural violence, there is little hope that the current and next generations of young men will lead less violent lives.

In our study, the experiences of young men from North Belfast and Derry, two of the areas worst affected by sectarian violence during the Northern Ireland conflict, varied notably from those of young men in more rural and more affluent urban areas. This is clear evidence for continuing spatial inequality which overlaps with socio-religious segregation, inequality and social exclusion fitting with previous studies (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006; McAlister, Haydon and Scraton, 2013). It is in these areas where young men's lives remain most affected by violence and crime.

In conclusion of our study we therefore propose that efforts to advance crime reduction policy and in particular violence prevention strategies, need to engage young men around their social realities and their experiences of violence. It is clear that young men need safe spaces to reflect on and consider their broader experiences and attitudes towards crime.

## **References**

- Amato, F. (2012) The relationship of violence to gender role conflict and conformity to masculine norms in a forensic sample. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 20(3): 187-208
- ARK. *Young Life and Times Survey, 2017* [computer file]. ARK [www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt) [distributor], May 2018.

Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability. (2005). A strategic framework for adult mental health services. Belfast, UK: DHSSPS. <https://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/bamford/published-reports.htm>

Bandura, A. (1977) *Social Learning Theory*. Oxford, UK: Prentice-Hall.

Beattie, K, Harland, K. and McCready, S. (2006) *Mental Health and Young Men: Suicide and Self Harm*. Centre for Young Men's Studies, Research update number 2, August 2006, INCORE.

Braun, V & Clarke, V. (2006) *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 2, pp. 77-101

Breen-Smyth M (2012) *Injured in the Troubles: The Needs of Individuals and their Families*. Belfast: WAVE Trauma Centre. Available at: [www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/uploads/pdf/1397214916--WAVE-Executive-Summary.pdf](http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/uploads/pdf/1397214916--WAVE-Executive-Summary.pdf) [accessed 12 April 2017]

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bunting, B. P., Ferry, F. R., Murphy, S. D., O'Neill, S. M., & Bolton, D. (2013). Trauma associated with civil conflict and posttraumatic stress disorder: Evidence from the Northern Ireland study of health and stress. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 26:134–141.

Cohen, S (2011) *Folk devils and moral panics*. Routledge: London.

Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Cambridge, UK: Policy Press.

Connell, R.W. and Messerschmidt J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society* 19(6): 829-859.

Dagirmanjian, B. F., Mahalik, J.R., Boland, J., Colbow, C., Dunn, J., Pomarico, A and Rappaport, D. (2016). How do men construct men's violence? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 32(15): 2275-2297.

Derzon, J. (2010). The correspondence of family features with problem, aggressive, criminal, and violent behavior: a meta-analysis. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 6(3): 263-292.

Dodge, M. Bosick, S. and Van Antwerp, V. (2013). Do men and women perceive white-collar and street crime differently? Exploring gender differences in the perception, seriousness, motives, and punishment. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 29(3): 399-415.

Fay, M., Morrissey, M., and Smyth, M.-T. (1998). Mapping Troubles-Related Deaths in Northern Ireland 1969–1998. 2nd ed. Derry/Londonderry: INCORE.

Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Ormrod, R. and Hamby, S.L. (2009). Violence, abuse and crime exposure in a national sample of children and youth. *Pediatrics*, 124(5): 1411-1423.

Fraser, A., Burman, M., Bachelor, S. and McVie, S. (2010). *Youth Violence in Scotland: A Literature Review*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice.

Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 27 (3), 291-305.

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace and Peace Research, *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3): 167-191. Gilligan, J. (1997). *Violence: a reflection on the national epidemic*. New York: Vintage Books.

Goody, J. (1997). Boys don't cry. Masculinities, fear of crime and fearlessness. *British Journal of Criminology*, 37(3): 401.

Gordon, F. (2018) *Children, young people and the press in a transitioning society: Representations, reactions and criminalisation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Harland, K. (2011). Violent Youth Culture in Northern Ireland, Young Men, Violence and the Challenges of Peacebuilding. *Youth & Society*, 43(2), 414-432.

Harland, K. and McCready, S. (2014). Rough Justice: Considerations on the role of violence, masculinity and the alienation of young men in communities and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. *Youth Justice*, 14(3): 269-283.

Harland, K. and McCready, S. (2015). *Boys, young men and violence: Masculinities, education and practice*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ilan, J. (2018). Scumbags! An ethnography of the interactions between street-based youth and police officers, *Policing and Society*, 28(6): 684-696.

Jenkins, R. (1983). *Lads, Citizens and Ordinary Kids: Working-Class Youth Lifestyles in Belfast*. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul.

Johnson, S. L (2009). Improving the school environment to reduce school violence: A review of the literature. *Journal of School Health*, 79(10): 451-465.



Kumsa, MK, Ng, K, Chambon, A. (2013) Rethinking youth violence and healing. *Journal of Youth Studies* 16: 847–863. Leavey, G., Galway, K., Rondon, J., & Logan, G. (2009). *A Flourishing Society: Aspirations for emotional health and wellbeing in Northern Ireland*. Belfast, Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health.

Lynch, O. and Joyce, C. (2018). Functions of collective victimhood Political violence and the case of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. *International Review of Victimology*, 24(2): 183-197.

McAlinden, A. M., Dwyer, C. (eds.) (2015). *Criminal Justice in Transition: The Northern Ireland Context*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.

McAlister, S., Scraton, P. and Haydon, D. (2014). Childhood in transition: growing up in 'post conflict Northern Ireland. *Children's Geographies*, 12(3). 297-311.

McLafferty, M., Armour, C., O'Neill, S., Murphy, S., Ferry, F., Bunting, B. (2016) Suicidality and profiles of childhood adversities, conflict related trauma and psychopathology in the Northern Ireland population. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 200, DOI <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2016.04.031>

Mac na Ghail, M. (1994). *The making of men*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Mahalik, J. R., Locke, B. D., Ludlow, L. H., Diemer, M. A., Scott, R. J., Gottfried, M. and Freitas, G. (2003). Development of the conformity to masculine norms inventory. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 4(1): 3-25.

Malvaso, C., Delfabro, P. and Day, A. (2016). Risk factors that influence the maltreatment-offending association: A systematic review of prospective and longitudinal studies. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 31: 1-15.

May, D., Rader, N. and Goodrum, S. (2010). A gendered assessment of the threat of victimisation: Examining gender differences in fear of crime, perceived risk, avoidance, and defensive behaviours. *Criminal Justice Review*, 35 (2): 159-182.

Mehta, P. H., and Beer, J. (2010). Neural mechanisms of the testosterone-aggression relation: The role of the orbit-frontal cortex. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 22, 2357-2368.

Mesch, G. (2000). Perceptions of risk, lifestyle activities and fear of crime. *Deviant Behavior*, 21 (1): 47-62.

Messerschmidt, J. W., and Tomsen, S. (2018). Masculinities and crime. In DeKeseredy, W. S. and Dragiewicz, M. *Routledge Handbook of Critical Criminology* (pp. 83-95). Oxon: Routledge.

Messerschmidt, J. W., Martin, P. Y. and Messner, M. A. (2018). *Gender Reckonings : New Social Theory and Research*. New York: NYU Press.

Mulachy, A. (2018). Criminal Justice in Transition: The Northern Ireland Context. *British Journal of Criminology*, 58 (2): 498-501.

Muldoon, O, Trew, K. and Kilpatrick. R. (2000). The Legacy of the Troubles on the young people's psychological and social development and their school life. *Youth and Society*, 32 (1): 6-28.

Reardon, C. and Govender, K. (2013). Masculinities, cultural worldviews and risk perceptions among South African adolescent learners. *Journal of Risk Research*, 16 (6): 753-770.

Russo, S., Roccato, M. and Vieno, A. (2013) Criminal victimisation and crime risk perception: A multi-level longitudinal study. *Social Indicators Research*, 112 (3): 535-548.

Shirlow, P. and Murtagh, B. (2006). *Segregation, Violence and the City*. London: Pluto Press.

Schafer, J., Huebner, B. and Bynum, T. (2006). Fear of Crime and Criminal Victimisations: Gender-based contrasts. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 34 (3): 285-301.

Smith, W. R. and Torstensson, M. (1997). Gender differences in risk perception and neutralizing fear of crime: Toward resolving the paradoxes. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 37 (4), 608-634.

Smith, W. R., Torstensson, M. and Johansson, K. (2001). Perceived risk and fear of crime: Gender differences in contextual sensitivity. *International Review of Victimology*, 8 (2), 159-181.

Snedker, K. (2015). Neighbourhood conditions and fear of crime: A reconsideration of sex differences. *Crime and Delinquency*, 6 (1): 45-70.

Tfofi, M., Farrington, D. and Losel, F. (2012). School bullying as a predictor of violence in later life: A systematic review and meta-analysis of prospective longitudinal studies. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 17 (5): 405-418.

Tomlinson, M. W. (2007). *The Trouble with Suicide. Mental Health, Suicide and the Northern Ireland Conflict: A Review of the Evidence*. Belfast: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Northern Ireland).

Topping, J. and Schubotz, D. (2018). *The 'usual suspects'? Young people's experiences of police stop and search powers in Northern Ireland*. ARK Research Update 120. Belfast: ARK. Available at: [www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2018-07/update120\\_0.pdf](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2018-07/update120_0.pdf) [Accessed 22nd Feb 2019]

World Health Organization (2014) *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention*. Luxembourg: WHO.

Williams-Reid, L. and Konrad, M. (2004). The gender gap in fear: Assessing the interactive effects of gender and perceived risk on fear of crime. *Sociological Spectrum*, 24 (4): 399-425.

WRDA (2010). *Talking about the Troubles and Planning for the Future*. Belfast: Women's Resource and Development Agency. Available at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/women/docs/mclaughlin08womenconflict.pdf> [Accessed 18 June 2018]

Yuan, Y. and An, W. (2017). Context, Network and Adolescent Perceived Risk. *Social Science Research*, 62, 378-393.