



Outside the Box:

Amplifying youth voices and views on YPS policy and practice

Voices from the margins: Young men and post-conflict masculinities in Northern Ireland

Brandon Hamber and Conor Murray

The views are those of the author and don't necessarily reflect the view of Interpeace or of the Government of Ireland.

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Introduction

In 2018, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (Graeme Simpson, hereafter *The Missing Peace*) was published at the request of the UN Secretary-General. It built on UN Security Council Resolution 2250, which recognised that youth² make an important and positive contribution to efforts to maintain and promote peace and security. The resolution focused on five pillars of intervention: participation; protection; prevention; disengagement and reintegration; and partnerships. *The Missing Peace* took this framework further, providing a deep contextual and case study-driven analysis of young people's role in relation to peace and security. One of its key recommendations is to address the 'violence of exclusion' of young people, the "structural and psychological violence that is indivisible from their political, social, cultural and economic disempowerment" (p. 63). Other recommendations called for: activism to uncover less visible dimensions of gender and masculinities; and supporting the disengagement of young people from violent groups, and their reintegration to society after conflict.

The Missing Peace observed that, while the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda recognised the importance of gender, its main emphases were on reducing violence against women, improving maternal and reproductive health, and promoting gender equality. Resolution 2250 consolidated connections to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda by repeatedly emphasising commitments to the distinct experiences and roles of young women (Simpson and Altiok, 2020). These are rightly accentuated in Resolution 2250 and two subsequent youth-focused resolutions, 2419 and 2535. At the same time, these resolutions are silent about the specific and gendered challenges faced by young men, as both perpetrators and victims of violence. Although Resolutions 2250, 2419 and 2535 mention recruitment to extremist groups and the reintegration of former combatants (which have obvious gendered dimensions), they ignore masculinities and their role in violent conflict and peacebuilding.

1 Professor Brandon Hamber is John Hume and Thomas P. O'Neill Chair in Peace based at the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE) and the Transitional Justice Institute (TJI), Ulster University. Correspondence to b.hamber@ulster.ac.uk. Dr Conor Murray is a Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice at Ulster University. We thank Ali Altiok, Fidelma Ashe, Elizabeth McArdle, Eilish Rooney and Graeme Simpson for their constructive comments on earlier versions of this Brief.

2 In Resolution 2250, the UN defines 'youth' as persons aged between 18 and 29, although it also notes that various definitions of the term exist nationally and internationally.



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By contrast, when *The Missing Peace* discusses gender-based exclusion, it recognises the importance of addressing issues of masculinity and calls for research to “systematically apply a gender and age lens to all conflict assessments and peacebuilding programming” and, in particular, inquire more deeply into “positive, non-violent and gender-equitable masculine identities that challenge restrictive social norms” (p. 125). This Brief explores what addressing young, violent masculinities means in the Northern Ireland (hereafter NI) context.

NI is a suitable case for studying the issue of masculinities and conflict for three principal reasons:

First, *The Missing Peace* points out that peace is “not the exclusive preserve of post-conflict contexts or of developing countries” (p. 4); however, notwithstanding case studies from the US and Sweden, the case studies in *The Missing Peace* report primarily focus on poor and low-income countries.³ NI provides a lens for observing challenges the study highlights from a context where significantly more resources are available than in other countries. We will show that the problems identi-

fied in *The Missing Peace* report are present in NI, suggesting that addressing violent masculinities is not merely a resource question but also a social, cultural and political one.

Second, *The Missing Peace* notes the “interrelationship and porous dividing lines between different types of violence” (p. 49), particularly criminal and political violence, and the influence of socio-economic factors on both. NI is a context that allows us to explore these complex intersections. Further, *The Missing Peace* report observes that, for many young people, education and the criminal justice system are two of the primary points of interaction with their governments. Young people are the central focus of these institutions; however, they have little input into their nature or operations. *The Missing Peace* notes that, in the view of young people, the prison system in the United States of America (US) is “not helping anyone become better people. It is just there to punish, break families ... a second wave of slavery” (United States of America CFR, cited in *The Missing Peace*, p. 28). At the same time, the study recognised that “additional work must be done to capture the experiences of youth who are directly involved” (p. 106)

³ This focus was not a choice or omission by the author; funding for the study was restricted to low and middle-income countries.

and that it had little access to inputs from youths convicted of criminal offences or imprisoned.⁴ We have therefore chosen to focus on young men in NI who are in prison or who have experienced prison in recent years. This not only adds to the analysis of *The Missing Peace* but enables us to understand better the complex relationship and porous dividing lines between criminal and political violence for some young men.

Finally, there is a scholarship on masculinities in NI, and a robust youth and community sector. The case study presented here provides useful resources for comparison and lesson learning.

To deepen the conversation on masculinities started in *The Missing Peace*, this Brief will take the issues outlined above as its principal focus. Primarily, it will explore the experiences of young men from NI, tease out the overlaps between crime and politics in countries steeped in conflict, and map the relations between past and present. This is a complicated subject in most societies, and is especially complex in societies in which some view all violence as criminal whereas others, for political reasons, see violence as a legitimate tool of resistance. Globally, the subject is also challenging because most policies on youth and political violence tend to criminalise and delegitimise almost all forms of youth engagement, including peaceful protest as motivated by politics. We will not resolve these questions in this Brief but will return to them when we consider what the genuine participation of youth, an enduring theme of *The Missing Peace* report, entails.

We draw on primary data collected from two separate research projects. The first project consisted of four focus groups and a series of semi-structured interviews that collected the experiences of

young men receiving psychosocial support in NI (Gallagher and Hamber, 2015; Hamber and Gallagher, 2015). The second study was conducted in a young men's prison. It involved a nine-month period of ethnographic fieldwork, using methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews (Murray, 2019; 2020; forthcoming). In this Brief, we address objectives outlined in *The Missing Peace*, but shift the focus of discussion from global to national policy and implementation and consider a mechanism for amplifying the voices of young people. The Brief begins by outlining the legacies of NI's political conflict that remain. It then describes five specific challenges that young men face in NI. The Brief concludes by reflecting on how the five challenges relate to *The Missing Peace* report and policy implications.



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4 "It must be acknowledged that the research for the study had limited (yet important) exposure to former combatants, gang members and prison inmates" (p. 106).

The remnants of the ‘Troubles’

Since the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (1998), NI has been slowly transitioning away from the longest-running violent conflict in contemporary European history, commonly and euphemistically known as the Troubles. There were over 3,700 conflict-related deaths and 8,383 to 100,000 physical injuries (Breen-Smyth, 2012),⁵ which is significant in a small population of 1.8 million people. Throughout the Troubles and the period of tentative peace that began after 1998, boys and young men from socially deprived areas were most at risk of conflict-related injury and death (McAlister, Haydon, and Scraton, 2013). Young men and boys were also the most common perpetrators of conflict-related violence and crime and were most likely to be arrested and imprisoned (McAlister, Scraton, and Haydon, 2014; Walsh and Harland, 2021). The progression towards peace has been marked by paramilitary⁶ ceasefires, steps toward inter-community cohesion, the reformation of criminal justice, and a dramatic decrease in direct political violence. At the same time, various political crises, lack of political commitment, and contrasting narratives of victimhood have meant that a comprehensive transitional justice process has not occurred in NI (Hamber, 2020; Jankowitz, 2018).

The peace process has also not created any significant shifts in a deeply divided political system or removed residential, social and educational segregation.⁷ Polarised political parties continue to disagree on responsibility for deaths and how to commemorate victims (Gray et al., 2018,

p. 177). So-called culture wars permeate political debate, including disagreements over parades, flag-flying and an Irish language act (Blake, 2019). These disagreements augment ideological divisions between the already spatially-divided Catholic and Protestant populations (Mesev, Shirlow, and Downs, 2009). These political, cultural, and social divisions and remnants of the conflict continue to affect young people in meaningful and distinctive ways. As we will show, the legacy of victimisation by paramilitaries and state violence still lingers at community level; coupled with high levels of poverty and social exclusion (Hamber and Gallagher, 2015), this has generated a specific and gendered dynamic.

Many Catholics and Nationalists continue to question the long-term constitutional status of NI as part of the UK and campaign for NI to join the Republic of Ireland to create a united Ireland. More recently, tensions between political parties have increased over Brexit. The majority of NI voters voted to remain in the EU (56% to 44%). However, research conducted during negotiation of the withdrawal agreement found that most Unionist voters preferred a ‘hard Brexit’; few were in favour of NI having a special status within the EU. By contrast, Nationalist voters strongly opposed a hard Brexit and strongly supported a special status (Daniels and Kuo, 2021). Indicators also suggest that voting throughout the UK was divided on intergenerational lines: an older, more socially conservative generation voted to leave the EU, while a younger, more

5 According to Breen-Smyth, this variation in figures is due to the “definition of what constitutes ‘injury’ and also to changing practices in record-keeping over the period of the Troubles, including the destruction of some records” (Breen-Smyth, 2012, p. 7).

6 International audiences should note that in NI the term ‘paramilitary’ does not denote “a militarised police force or a local auxiliary militia; instead, they are illegal, armed militant groups that employed politically motivated violence or terrorism, either in an attempt to force a British withdrawal from NI (Irish republican groups) or to maintain NI’s position within the United Kingdom (Ulster loyalist groups)” (Ferguson and McAuley, 2020, p. 218).

7 Only 7% of children go to integrated schools (for both Catholic and Protestant children). As the Peace Monitoring Report (2018) notes, “the levels of segregation have proven very slow to change over the past two decades, there has been a decline in the proportion of ‘single-identity’ wards (above a threshold of 80 per cent of one religion) from 55 per cent to 37 per cent, though this decline has affected Protestant areas more than Catholic. The 2011 census indicated that 61 (of 582) wards were at least 90 per cent Catholic, while only two were over 90 per cent Protestant, reflecting changes in the social mobility of the growing Catholic population and the arrival of ‘new communities’ into traditionally Protestant areas” (Gray et al., 2018, p. 177).

progressive and liberal demographic voted to remain (Dalzell, 2017; Wildman, Goulding, Moffatt, Scharf, and Stenning, 2021).

The aftermath of the conflict, along with Brexit and Covid-19, has stunted economic growth. NI continuously outranks other parts of the UK in terms of unemployment and state-entitled dependency (Coulter, 2014).⁸ Recent figures on NI show that 350,000 (19%) of people in NI lived in relative income poverty, and 16% (approximately 303,000) in absolute poverty, including 17% of children (approximately 75,000 children).⁹ Poverty and deprivation have had a profound impact on mental health in the region, alongside a range of other effects. Areas of high deprivation, in turn, overlap with those most impacted by the political conflict (Mesev et al., 2009).¹⁰ Youth are also disproportionately affected. In the period October to December 2020, 13.9% of all young people aged 16-24 years were not in education, employment or training (called NEETs in NI), compared to 11.3% in the UK as a whole (Department of the Economy, 2021).

Direct political violence has fallen to low levels since the 1998 peace agreement. According to official police statistics, from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, one security-related death occurred, compared to two in each of the previous two years. However, political violence is by no means non-existent. Paramilitary groups, especially those still opposed to the peace process, continue to orga-

nize and recruit (Byrne, Hamber, Morrow, Dougherty, and Gallagher, 2016). In the period between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020, 21 bombing incidents, 40 shooting incidents and 13 casualties of paramilitary-style shootings were attributed to the 'security situation', and 123 persons were arrested under Section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000. At present, MI5 considers the threat from NI-related terrorism to be 'severe', meaning that an attack is "highly likely".¹¹

One of the most enduring features of the NI conflict, which has specific relevance for young men and for this Brief, is the phenomenon of 'paramilitary punishment attacks' or 'paramilitary-style attacks' (hereafter PSAs), in which victims, generally young men from the same community as their attackers, are 'disciplined' for perceived antisocial behaviour, such as drug-dealing, burglary, car theft, paedophilia, child abuse, or infidelity (Napier, Gallagher, and Wilson, 2017). Such attacks continue to be employed by republican and loyalist paramilitaries. PSAs have not decreased dramatically since the peace agreement was signed in 1998. Police figures (which are likely to underestimate) reported 1,856 PSAs (excluding shootings, of which there were an additional 1,368), nearly all of which have involved young men.¹² Females account for about 2% of all victims. Most male and female victims are in their 20s, but assaults on children as young as 12 and on adults up to 75 have been reported (Napier et al., 2017).

8 The difference between Catholic and Protestant unemployment (and deprivation) was at one stage deeply entrenched in NI. In 1971, 17.3% of Catholics were unemployed compared to 6.6% of Protestants (Rowland, McVicar, and Shuttleworth, 2018). Recent figures suggest that the gap has narrowed in the last 50 years. In 2017, 8.6% of Catholics and 4.2% of Protestants were unemployed (Wright et al., 2017).

9 According to the Department for Communities (2021), in the year April 2019 to March 2020, 17% of the population of NI were in relative poverty (approximately 313,000 individuals), including 22% of children (about 100,000 children). People are considered to live in relative income poverty if their household income is less than 60% of UK median household income. Approximately 13% of the population was living in absolute poverty (approximately 241,000 individuals). A person is defined as in absolute poverty if the income of their household is below 60% of the (inflation-adjusted) UK median income in 2010/11, allowing comparison over time (Department for Communities, 2021).

10 Research has shown that more impoverished, more segregated neighbourhoods in western, northern, and central Belfast suffered more fatalities and were disproportionately affected by the conflict, compared to more affluent neighbourhoods in southern and eastern parts of the city (Mesev et al., 2009).

11 See <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/threat-levels> (accessed 5 March 2021).

12 Very little is known about PSAs against young women. There certainly have been cases. A ten-month retrospective chart analysis (2012-2013) of all assaulted patients admitted to the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) in Belfast (approximately 2,500 charts) identified 30 PSAs against males and two against females (McGarry et al., 2017). It is possible that other types of PSA or other forms of sanction are inflicted on young women. Several studies have examined domestic, political and other forms of violence against women during the conflict (see, for example, Doyle and McWilliams, 2018; Green, undated; Swaine, 2018). However, very little research has studied the day-to-day lived realities of young women and the influence of paramilitaries on their lives in the post-1998 period.

In post-agreement NI, violence is most often experienced at local level and within communities rather than between them. Focusing on the macro-security threats monitored by the UK security services (MI5) draws attention from the subtler realities of life in environments where the past still dominates the present and obfuscates generational manifestations of violence, of which PSAs are but one localised expression. Many NI communities, chiefly in areas of high social deprivation, display public symbols and markers of the past that demarcate space and territory. Murals portray community political allegiances, reify past acts of violence, and

celebrate gunmen in balaclavas. Flags mark territory. One-sided conflict narratives dominate community life. The local dynamics of paramilitary leadership reinforce mistrust of statutory, security and governmental organizations and provision (Ashe and Harland, 2014; Byrne et al., 2016; Lucas, Brendan, and Jarman, 2019; Young, 2018). As a police respondent noted in a recent study (Byrne et al., 2016, p. 9.):

History is taught by murals and families not by schools.



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Young men, masculinities and marginalisation

Below, we outline five issues that have a particular resonance for young men in NI today. These issues are present more frequently in areas of high social deprivation, confirming an observation in *The Missing Peace* that experiences of conflict, and violence more generally, are influenced by age, gender, and socio-economic status.

We should note at the start that, in focusing on young men, it is not our intention to create a hierarchy of importance. We want to explore certain specific issues to tease out the challenges that young men face. But many of these, such as lack of voice, economic marginalisation, and violence, also affect young women, and may do so more profoundly in different ways (Doyle and McWilliams, 2018; Morgan and McArdle, 2018; Swaine, 2018). The role of young women in NI since 1998 is under-researched. Relatively little is known of their experience as victims and supporters of violence, or their role in the contexts we describe below, at the margins of society. By contrast, there is a rich literature on the role of women in the political con-

flict, and many gendered analyses of the conflict more broadly (see, for example, Ashe, 2015, 2019; Doyle and McWilliams, 2018; Green, undated; Morgan and McArdle, 2018; Swaine, 2018). But virtually no work exists on young women and their role as agents and victims of paramilitarism and sectarianism, though it is badly needed.

Our aim is not to subtract, or distract, from the experiences of women, but to add another dimension to gender analysis by examining the dangers of specific types of masculinities. We recognise that youth work and resources in NI have often been skewed toward responding to and managing civil disorder by young men (Morgan and McArdle, 2018). We believe it is important to address this dimension; however, we also challenge the assumption that masculinities are primarily a 'security' issue (that only involve young males), rather than a broader social problem that is embedded in a complex set of gendered and power relations.

Underachievement, marginalisation and participation

The current generation of boys and young men is the first to grow up in NI since the 1998 peace agreement and experience a post-conflict society undergoing a process of social, economic, and political transition. Although this has given new opportunities to many young people, in terms of mobility and political stability, a large number (and not only young men) are not in education, training or employment and do not have a well-defined social status, which reinforces feelings of marginalisation, lack of value and vulnerability. Notwithstanding its status as a 'developed' economy, the situation of youth in NI is very similar to the global profile described in *The Missing Peace*: young people suffer unemployment, underemployment and precarious employment and have decreasing faith that government will deliver the benefits of economic growth equitably (p. 77).

In late 2020, it was estimated that 13.2% of those aged 16–24 years in NI were not in education, employment or training (NEET).¹³ Although this figure covers both young men and young women, their academic achievement differs. Areas of highest multiple deprivation (Harland and McCready, 2014) are associated with poor education performance.¹⁴ However, in general, girl school leavers significantly out-perform boys across all socio-economic demographics. Boys from high-deprivation areas (commonly measured in terms of free school meals) perform least well (Borooah and Knox, 2017). Protestant boys from deprived neighbourhoods in NI perform worst of all.

“Pupils who receive free school meals in Catholic secondary schools are twice as likely to go to university than pupils who receive free school meals in Protestant secondary schools. That is a significant problem and a big gap, and we need to understand why that happens. Even in the deprived and marginalised communities there is a 2:1 capacity gap between those who go to university, and that has serious repercussions.” (Pete Shirlow, cited in Hansard, 2011, p. 5).

While there is a disparity concerning religion and educational attainment, the main barrier to participation and progression in education, training and employment remains economic for both young men and women and regardless of community background (Lucas et al., 2019). This also matches the findings of *The Missing Peace* and UN Resolution 2250. These emphasise that education is not merely a tool to improve learning but a vehicle to increase participation in society more generally, which can contribute to peace (Simpson and Altiock, 2020). Limited academic achievement is one of many factors that contribute to feelings of social marginalisation, again for both young men and young women. In terms of young men specifically, research suggests that young men from NI communities that are socio-economically deprived are not optimistic about the future and feel excluded from local decision-making processes and disconnected from adults in their communities (Walsh and Harland, 2021). In a longitudinal study of youth masculinities in NI, not one of the young men in-

13 It is estimated that 26,000 young people aged 16–24 years in NI were not in education, employment or training (NEET) in July–September 2020. This number is slightly higher than the 12.4% of young people who were NEET in the UK (Department for the Economy, 2020). Interestingly the figure is close to the young unemployment rate of 13% globally quoted in *The Missing Peace* (p. 76). That report also describes the profile of youth employment. Globally, 3 of 4 young people aged 15–29 are employed in the informal economy; in developing economies, the proportion is up to 19 of 20 (ILO, 2017b, cited in *The Missing Peace*, p. 76).

14 This is not to say that the link between poor educational performance and deprivation is straightforward. Many other factors and dynamics may contribute to differences of educational achievement (see Leitch, 2015). We also lack information on how differentials have an influence over longer periods of time, for example, how they affect the place of women in the workforce, despite academic success earlier in life.

interviewed believed that his marginal status would change in the future or that he had played a role in the peace process (Harland and McCready, 2014). Worsening this situation, research indicates that

many young men decided to become involved in paramilitary organizations partly because they felt marginalised socially and economically (Lucas et al., 2019).

Paramilitarism: a home for hypermasculinity and protection

During the conflict, young men from areas of high deprivation were often considered to be ‘defenders’ or ‘protectors’ of their communities (McAlister et al., 2014; Walsh and Harland, 2021). Despite the many successes of the peace process, such attitudes linger, and many young men still have a strong sense of ethnic-nationalist identity, and some continue to be recruited to paramilitaries.

Young men are more susceptible to joining these groups and getting involved in the conflict as a result of trans-generational effects. I mean the stories that a lot of young men have heard coming from their grandfathers and fathers and filtering down to them. This type of trans-generational effect makes a lot of young men want to get involved, they want to be part of the story, they want to keep doing the things that the generations before them done. (Staff member working with a victim/survivor group: cited in Gallagher and Hamber, 2015, p. 92.)

In addition to providing young men with a sense of identity, joining paramilitary organizations provides a degree of intergenerational affirmation from men in their community. Many young men continue to find paramilitary groups a hyper-masculine vehicle

for maintaining their status and control, as well as personal protection.

I tried to commit suicide. It started off when my Aunty died. It was the way that she died that really got to me. I grew up hearing all about the conflict, it was the norm. I didn't do my exams in school, didn't really care about a job, just took drugs and got into trouble. I got drawn into a paramilitary group and thought it was great because nobody could touch me as I had backing. (Young male member of a support group: Gallagher and Hamber, 2015, p. 91.)

However, involvement in paramilitarism and organized crime impacts young people's lives in a range of ways. Young men who associate with paramilitary groups are more likely to become involved in paramilitary and criminal violence, and to experience intimidation and bullying by paramilitary groups. Both contribute to mental health issues and suicidal ideations (Rondón, Campbell, Galway, and Leavey, 2014). Young men who become involved with paramilitaries are also more likely to engage in illegal activities, to be imprisoned, and to suffer other harms, as discussed below.¹⁵

15 This is not to say that young women are not affected by paramilitarism. Some have argued that young women are a hidden voice in the conflict, because they are “not considered or recognised as direct or indirect victims or perpetrators of violence” (Morgan and McArdle, 2018, p. 300). Others suggest that young women are impacted differently, in a less visible but gendered way (Lucas et al., 2019, p. 19). Young women are often silenced by paramilitaries, become passive, or avoid conflict due to fear of threats, thereby narrowing their aspirations and opportunities (Morgan, 2012). Paramilitarism has specifically been implicated in controlling young women sexually. More research is required to explore this issue further; however, existing literature has identified “unhealthy domestic relationships and child sexual exploitation” in which paramilitary-linked individuals are allegedly involved (Lucas et al., 2019, p. 19).

The hypermasculinity associated with paramilitarism has direct effects on the construction of femininity, an area that has received very little attention in NI. The actions associated with violent masculinities thrive on and link to the silenced voices of young women, who are expected to uphold gendered roles as partners and domestic supporters of men (stereotyped as caring wives and mothers) or face sanction (Ashe, 2015). This pattern maintains the status quo and reinforces the idea of young

men as defenders (and controllers) of the community; it also harms young women and reaffirms and maintains their inequality. The social and economic disadvantages women face include “stereotyping in careers, unequal pay, lack of access to opportunities for advancement in the workplace, sex stereotyping in domestic roles and double standards relating to sexual practices”, as well as high levels of domestic violence and sexual abuse (Morgan and McArdle, 2018, p. 300).

Ongoing paramilitary-style attacks (PSAs)

Since 1998, PSAs have continued in some NI communities. These brutal informal systems of social control receive a certain amount of support from the community (McEvoy and Mika, 2001, 2002). Recent reports suggest that 35% of the people who live in communities most affected by paramilitary activity support PSAs in certain circumstances (Department of Justice, 2019). Some parents even bring their own children to receive PSAs by ‘appointment’. However, terms such as ‘punishment beatings’ tend to legitimise the physical abuse of children and young people.¹⁶ In Murray’s research with young men in prison (Murray, 2019; 2020; forthcoming), more than 60% of the interviewees had experienced PSAs, and many had received punishment by ‘appointment’.

They ask you to meet them somewhere, like in an alley, and they shoot you twice, three times; or if they have to come and get you, they shoot you five, six times.

.....
Dermie, prisoner, interview.

Communal support, legitimisation of violence, and use of appointments sanitise the full extent of the injuries inflicted on young men. Low-velocity handguns or shotguns or weapons such as hammers, baseball bats or metal rods are typically used to break joints such as elbows, knees or ankles. Jack, a young prisoner, described his experience of being shot:

I was lying in bed when I felt a pain in my knee. I thought it was my brother coming home blocked [drunk], so I jumped up and pushed him. Then I got cracked in the face with the bottom of the gun and realised it was the Provos [Provisional IRA]. I moved back against the wall, and they shot at me again and missed fuck sake. They fired two more times and both fucking hit me in the same knee ... the blood was shooting out like a super-soaker.

.....
Jack, prisoner, informal discussion.

¹⁶ The term ‘paramilitary-style attacks’ is currently used by the NI Department of Justice. Communities also call such attacks ‘paramilitary punishment attacks’ or ‘paramilitary punishment beatings’. Because ‘punishment’ is understood to imply deserved retribution for a fault, the authors consider that using the word in this context tends to legitimise what are brutal criminal assaults, often of minors. While mindful that ‘punishment’ is used popularly at community level, we have therefore adopted the more generic ‘paramilitary-style attacks’ to avoid any appearance of legitimisation.

Other young prisoners spoke of being beaten by sewer rods, having breeze blocks dropped on them to break bones, and being violently attacked by groups of men. The threat of paramilitary violence weighed heavily on their minds and influenced their aspirations for the future.

[Interviewer: Do you have any worries about getting out?] Aye, I have a death threat. So, if I get out, I will probably be shot, know what I mean, so that's the only worry ... They [paramilitaries] say to you to get out of the country and if you don't get out, they come and shoot you...

.....
Dermie, prisoner, interview.

The historical support that communities have given to paramilitaries and PSAs increases the marginalisation and social isolation of young men who fall victim to these assaults. Members of the com-

munity frequently report antisocial behaviour and other crimes to local paramilitaries. This practice occurs in the communities in which the young men who are its victims have grown up and where their families and partners live, widening their dislocation from community life. Communities also continue to give approval to paramilitaries when they exile young men from their communities, making them homeless or forcing them to move to another part of the city, the country or abroad. These forms of so-called community justice, and the complicity of adults in reporting, allowing and administering such acts, shape how young people within NI understand law and order, distort their perception of violence, and displace other methods that might be used to deal with disputes or anti-social behaviour (McAlister, Scraton, and Haydon, 2009). This ultimately leaves young men “perplexed about youth justice” (Harland and McCready, 2014, p. 270).



Ongoing mental health challenges

Empirical research has found that, on one hand, paramilitary groups provide a hypermasculine environment that allows some young men to assert dominance, violence, and social control; and, on the other, that many young men who join paramilitary organizations inwardly feel anxious, have low self-esteem and are deeply fearful (Gallagher and Hamber, 2015; Hamber and Gallagher, 2015). The status of such violent masculine behaviours is also changing. As protector or defender, young men felt they enjoyed power, respect and purpose vis à vis their community, but these roles have become increasingly redundant in a post-conflict environment. Indeed, some community residents who valued this form of aggressive and violent behaviour during the conflict (because it offered some protection from the perceived other) now consider it to be burdensome and socially problematic (Gallagher & Hamber, 2015). Although it is positive that the violent behaviour associated with paramilitaries no longer receives the same degree of social (and to a degree political) support, the result is that some young men are now 'stuck' somewhere between a ceasefire mentality and ambiguous messages of peacebuilding (Harland, 2011). Young men often fill this psychological void or middle space by new forms of violence. Some continue to engage in risk-taking behaviour (drinking, drugtaking, reckless driving) and paramilitary activity; others have increasingly turned violence inwards, leading to a rise in the incidence of self-harm and suicide (Gallagher and Hamber, 2015).

Far from becoming a new generation of outwardly violent men, in the post-conflict period many young men have retreated from society and suffer from a range of social and mental health issues. They report depression, stress, anxiety, addiction, feelings of worthlessness, low self-esteem, pessimism about their future, feelings of neglect, hopelessness, despair, and fear of paramilitary attacks (Gallagher and Hamber, 2015).¹⁷ This finding is

echoed by *The Missing Peace* report from a global perspective:

When violence cross-cuts these different dimensions of young people's lives, the number of "safe havens" decreases, making it challenging for young people to sustain positive coping mechanisms. As a result, young people who are exposed to violence across multiple life domains develop harmful coping mechanisms, resulting in internalising problems (anxiety or depression) or externalising them (aggressive behaviour or social withdrawal). (*The Missing Peace*, p. 102.)

Young men seem particularly vulnerable to life events that cause stress, despair, depression, or low mood (McGrellis, 2011). For both young men and young women in NI, illegal and prescription drug use, alcohol abuse, and addiction have been identified as a problem (Lucas et al., 2019). Of course, drug and alcohol abuse is common globally; in NI, however, substance abuse specifically increases the links between young people and paramilitaries that are involved in the drugs trade (Lucas et al., 2019). As a result, some young people become targets because they have drug debts (Lucas et al., 2019, p. 3); others consume more drugs due to the stress and fear created by paramilitaries that control the trade (McAlister, Dwyer, and Carr, 2018); and a number become victims of paramilitary groups that try to 'police' drug use using PSAs. Young people themselves describe the contradictions of these complex relationships:

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

¹⁷ This raises other important questions. If some young men 'retreat' from society with a range of social and mental health problems, who will take care of them and manage the impact on their families and home life? No doubt women, and specifically mothers, take responsibility. This additional gendered stress and burden on families, particularly women, is another under-researched subject in conflict and peace studies.

would beat the shit out of them ... The boy who they gave the drugs to sell in the first place. (Laura, aged 17: cited in McAlister et al., 2018, p. 2.)

Where support is available this often focuses on tackling anti-social behaviour, rather than addressing the ongoing issues of control by paramilitaries at community level.

Yes, the government sees the young people as a nuisance and a drain on their resources, out drinking and getting into trouble with the police, so I think they would see places like this [referring to community-based support service] as a good way of tackling young people's antisocial behaviour. (Staff member of a support group: cited in Gallagher & Hamber, 2015, p. 86, authors' addition in italics).

Seeing current problems as being a result of the conflict, or continuity of it in a different form, is not a mainstream view. Professionals tend to explain and treat acts of self-harm, alcohol or drug problems as generic youth issues or linked to antisocial behaviour rather than as lingering effects of the conflict.

People patronise you, and they think because I'm only 20 years old that I couldn't have suffered, but I am still traumatised and

have been affected. (Young male member of a support group: cited in Gallagher and Hamber, 2015, p. 86.)

Furthermore, as reports worldwide have shown, masculine identities tend to deter help-seeking behaviour among men, young men and boys (Gough, 2016; Leshem, Haj-Yahia, and Guterman, 2015). In NI, barriers to help-seeking still include stigma, and beliefs that it is inappropriate to seek psychological help from professionals (Hamber and Gallagher, 2015; Robertson et al., 2015). A young man receiving support in a group noted:

Men have to deal with the stereotype of being big and strong and able to deal with their problems, and this isn't the case, and they end up harming themselves or others. (Young male member of a support group: cited in Gallagher and Hamber, 2015, p. 85.)

A longitudinal study in NI noted that masculine identities tend to prevent distressed young men from seeking help.

Although young women in the study experienced and talked about stress, feeling down and depression, the number of young men who did so was particularly striking. Their coping strategies and lack of knowledge about support and resources were also of interest. (McGrellis, 2011, p. 6.)

Young men in the criminal justice system

Finally, the situation of young men in prison has received almost no attention in discussions of masculinities in the YPS agenda. NI has 96 prisoners per 100,000 of population (Sturge, 2020).¹⁸ In 2018/19, 96.4% of all prisoners were male (Gray et al., 2018). 31% of prisoners were aged 21-29, whereas this age group accounts for 15% of the whole population (Sturge, 2020). Conflict literature in NI has focused almost exclusively on political imprisonment, and young men in prison for 'ordinary' crimes have been described as a 'forgotten group' (Prison Review Team, 2011, p. 70). However, the same communities that experienced the highest levels of political imprisonment during the Troubles now experience the highest levels of general imprisonment.

Imprisonment exacerbates experiences of marginalisation, particularly for young people transitioning into adulthood. It can lead individuals to seek alternative forms of belonging and cohesion that can be socially and individually destructive – to adopt negative forms of resilience. It affects employment prospects, living arrangements, and the ability to form and sustain meaningful relationships. Research conducted with young male prisoners in NI has identified high rates of mental illness, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and histories of alcohol and drug abuse (Linden, O'Rourke, and Lohan, 2020). Most of the prisoners Murray spoke to recognised that young men are socially marginalised and lack opportunities.

[What are the main issues facing young men in prison?] They're threw out with nothing really set up for them, go out there with no money and no jobs, and they just get straight back into trying to steal what they can ... They're just threw out and come back in, and there's never any interaction with any of them ... No job for them, no money in their pocket, so they go put money in their pocket the wrong way ... There is just no opportunities there ...

.....
Brendy, interview.

For many young men, life in the community means unemployment, financial distress, homelessness, threats from paramilitary organizations, and substance abuse. So severe were these feelings of exclusion and social marginalisation that some participants felt prison was the best and safest place for them to be:

Some people prefer it in here because it's stability, it's a stable environment, know what I mean? You get up, you go to work, get your lunch, you get your dinner, everything is done for you, you have something to do.

.....
Zack, interview.

Although deeply troubling, prison provided stability, food and a place to sleep at night. Other young men spoke of the escape that prison offered.

For me personally, it [imprisonment] was an escape ... Outside I wasn't happy and stuff anyway. It was strange being locked up, but it never really processed in my mind that I was in jail.

.....
Craig, interview.

18 At the most recent count, there were 173 prisoners per 100,000 of the population in England and Wales in 2019; 162 per 100,000 in Scotland (2018/19); and 96 per 100,000 in NI (2018/19).

Learning from the Northern Ireland case

The experience of NI bears out many of the global findings of *The Missing Peace* report. As that study notes, young men are often negatively stereotyped as problems or threats, rather than viewed as resources and assets that can help formulate solutions – despite the fact that only a small number of young men participate in violence. For these young men, violent masculine identities have provided a vehicle to regain agency and control and overcome a sense of disempowerment and marginalisation that is compounded by their socio-economic background, race, ethnicity, age, rural/urban setting, or other factors. This Brief has shown that violence experienced and committed by young men in NI has a distinct socio-economic and political character. In all the five areas described above, there are clear overlaps between the experience and perpetuation of violence and economic deprivation and social marginalisation.

Since the 1998 peace agreement, this dynamic has evolved. For some, the transition has created new economic prospects; for others, their marginalisation has increased. The transition has also challenged previous ways of surviving. For example, joining paramilitaries is no longer a ‘functional’ solution for some young men, though it may still be attractive to the extent that it provides protection and generates income and status. The line that separates a past in which paramilitaries fought with other political groups for ideological reasons from a present in which paramilitaries are involved in drug trafficking, ‘policing’ antisocial behaviour and community control has become blurred.

There is evidence that a high proportion of young men in NI have mental health problems, which in many cases are linked to the past and continue to be linked to deprivation and paramilitarism in the present. The Brief has identified several vicious circles, of marginalisation and poverty linked to drug dependency, that increase the likelihood that young men will associate with or become a victim of paramilitaries. These generate additional psy-

chological stresses and physical risks to the young men and others, and in some cases increase substance abuse. NI’s profile is not very different from many of the cases described in *The Missing Peace*, which found that “patterns of violent conflict transmute and evolve over time” in a constant process of “continuity and change” (p. 47).

The Missing Peace notes that, in many countries, young people on the margins are often subject to the vagaries of dysfunctional criminal justice systems. In NI, informal community policing by paramilitaries remains a grave threat to the physical and mental well-being of some young men. Paramilitarism, and community attitudes to PSA, show that in some respects conceptions of justice have been profoundly distorted by NI’s conflict. Those on the social and economic margins are also more likely to end up in conflict with the state and in contact with the criminal justice system, exacerbating historical distrust of the police services. This intersects again with NI’s political history. So-called ‘ordinary’ prisoners in NI, many of whom are young men, are a forgotten group – that share a pattern of mental illness, alcohol and drug abuse, a low education level, and lack of opportunity. Once again, whenever young men start to commit crimes, they are more likely to associate with or become victims of paramilitaries.

Taken together, these experiences lead many young men to feel that they have no stake or influence in society. As *The Missing Peace* noted, a similar response has been found in many societies with a history of political conflict, in which young people are politically voiceless (also see McEvoy-Levy, 2001). Negative stereotyping of young people exacerbates their marginalisation. As a result, young men often feel disconnected from local initiatives and are “regularly perceived as ‘problems’ as opposed to resources, by adults in their communities” (Harland and McCready, 2014, p. 12). As *The Missing Peace* notes:

The overarching consequence of these negative stereotypes is that they contribute to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of youth by framing young people as a problem to be solved, or an actual threat, rather than recognising the assets and resources they offer, or the hopes and aspirations they articulate (p. 18).

A great deal of creative and positive work is being done in NI. (See, for instance, Morgan and McArdle, 2018; Walsh and Harland, 2021; YouthAction Northern Ireland and the Centre for Young Men's Studies, 2002). But, as *The Missing Peace* report points out, such work is often fragmented and under-funded. As a recent study of NI noted:

Throughout the fieldwork, participants raised the limitations of short-term funding cycles. There was thought to be an institutional preference for 'new' or 'pilot' schemes rather than building upon or sustaining initiatives with proven results. The Social Inclusion Framework should allow for multi-year funding cycles to create conditions for real and sustained change. Longer-term funding should be applied alongside a system of collaboration and signposting within and between organizations and services to meet the changing needs of an individual young person over time. It was repeatedly emphasised that young people may leave and return from training or employment numerous times, and funding needs to reflect this non-linear progression. (Lucas et al., 2019, p. 42.)

In general, NI work in this area still seems to try to distinguish between: socio-economic interventions that seek to increase the life chances or education of specific groups without changing the broader social context; programmes to increase the agency of young men (self-awareness programmes, buddy schemes); medical and psychological interventions (for example, to address drug-dependency); and interventions that address the legacy of the conflict. But such issues are inter-meshed for many young men.

By way of example, paramilitary assaults against young men indicate the presence of a severe social problem in which violence has permeated everyday life, and is moreover legitimised by some members of the community. At the same time, many of the young men in question are involved in crime or have experience of the formal (as well as informal) justice system. For many young men, living in such communities, under threat, suffering from poverty, offered few opportunities, generates immense psychological stress. The stress increases drug and alcohol use, which in turn increases interactions with paramilitarism, thereby creating new and continuous personal security concerns. Further, when paramilitaries target young men, it is not merely an individual problem; whole families are implicated, and in a gendered manner. Such attacks destroy families; mothers generally bear the stress, supporting their sons emotionally while they are under threat and trying to 'mediate' with paramilitary groups to prevent further harm (Ashe, 2015).

To say that what is needed to address paramilitary assaults is a mental health intervention, or a criminal intervention, or a security intervention, overlooks the interrelated nature of the problem. Paramilitary assaults are the result of a wide range of political, social and community problems that are embedded in long-established justifications and practices. The crimes that some young men commit, as paramilitaries or so-called 'ordinary' criminals, cannot be divorced from paramilitary activity, poverty, community fragmentation, under-achievement, schooling, family life, or the politics of the past.

Although a number of policy documents acknowledge the challenges that young people face (Department of Education, 2013; Northern Ireland Executive, 2020; Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), undated), they often reduce them to a matter of service delivery (drug awareness, buddy schemes, mental health services, domestic violence), or signpost them across a range of agencies. Interventions frequently target areas with the most problems and fail to adopt a holistic population-wide approach. Most peacebuilding work takes a similarly narrow view. It focuses on the needs of young victims who have lost a parent, or individuals who have been traumatised, or who

live in specific conflict interfaces. When conflict is mentioned (rarely), policies typically highlight education to promote tolerance (Department of Education, 2013) and proposals for preventing paramilitary violence that have no clear plan for achieving that goal (Northern Ireland Executive, 2020). In general, youth policies in NI do not address peace and security and do not adopt specific and holistic approaches to deal with the complex legacy of conflict. As *The Missing Peace* report notes, this is a shortcoming shared by youth policies globally.

Elsewhere, the issue of young men is reduced to a relatively linear economic model, that focuses on job creation or prisoner reintegration to prevent future violence. The assumption is that, if young people are employed, peace will follow, and sectarianism will reduce. Of course, more jobs would be welcomed, and the young people we interviewed made this clear. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that employment will remove the obstacles young people face or reduce conflict is untested. Drawing on a range of sources, *The Missing Peace* found little evidence of a simple causal connection between youth unemployment and violence. In many contexts, improved economic standing has not been associated with a measurable decrease in support for armed groups (p. 76).

That said, *The Missing Peace* report does find some evidence that violence is more likely to occur where economic frustration coincides with the social and political exclusion of young people (p. 76). Based on our own research in NI, we would add that masculinities are an additional factor here. Masculinities are a prism through which young men interpret their frustrations, anger and sense of exclusion; these masculine identities fuel violence. The complex social, psychological and economic contexts in which young men operate, including notably the pervasive presence of paramilitaries and their associations with violent masculinity (as evidenced in PSAs), suggest that interventions to build the capacity of young men need to extend well beyond access to education, training and qualifications, crucial though these are (Hamber and Gallagher, 2015).

To grapple with the past, it will be necessary to focus very deliberately on the social, political, and psychological experience of 'being a man' in NI.

Youth programmes that work with young men will need to develop an 'appreciation of masculinities' alongside an understanding of the ways in which society perpetuates certain harmful forms of masculinity (Walsh and Harland, 2021, p. 115). At present, nevertheless, youth policies include no serious treatments of masculinities. The same can be said more broadly of peace processes, which are seldom explored through the lens of dominant masculine identities (Hamber, 2015). These still saturate the political system in NI at the highest level, even if direct political violence has decreased (Ashe, 2009; Ashe, 2015, 2019).

The Missing Peace calls for a more holistic approach to thinking about young men and violence, one that recognises the importance of socio-economic context, the dynamics of violent masculinities, the mental health impact of living in violent societies, and the need to engage with young men in ways that do not define them only as a security problem but encourage their participation and reinforce their resilience. This is a stark reminder, to avoid the trap of seeing problematic masculinities as a threat that needs to be contained or resolved by hard security responses, and instead invest "in meaningful inclusion and resilience for peace which address underlying causes of violence, youth marginalisation and exclusion" (Simpson and Altiok, 2020, p. 3). As the NI case shows, work should take place not only in the policy arena but at the level of the 'everyday' where violence is experienced and manifests. It is important to engage with the daily experience of others and the wider community, in the spaces where young people deal with, respond to, participate in and resist conflict, violence, and exclusion (Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 2015).

The issues explored in this Brief highlight that the lines between criminal and political violence are porous. This brings into question terms such as 'post-conflict' or 'post-agreement'. Recognising this, we have chosen to consider many of the problems that young men in NI face as legacy issues where crime and politics blur. In this society, violently divided, demarcated by flags and emblems, marked by forms of violence that are both social (bullying, street fighting) and criminal (drug dealing, associated harms), violence is part of everyday life, particularly in socially and economi-

cally deprived communities. These issues are so ordinary that they are often subsumed into or hidden in plain sight in youth policies that seek to address a plethora of issues that relate directly to the past conflict but often label them euphemistically as initiatives to promote community relations, or build tolerance or social cohesion. Such language obscures the complexity of the environment and does not adequately consider how crime, politics, poverty and social exclusion intersect and reinforce one another. This point highlights the limits of defining the problem of young men in NI solely as a 'peacebuilding' issue, or as a 'youth' concern to be addressed by community development work, when in fact the challenge is both larger and more intricate. The issue of gender also requires rounded attention.

Despite its relative wealth compared to many of the societies discussed in *The Missing Peace* re-

port, the example of NI shows that the challenges young men face, and the stubborn problem of violent masculinities, are global and shared. It will be necessary to move away from a narrow set of assumptions about what masculinities are and how they impact young men. Masculinities can be drivers of violence, but also reflect aspirations which, if frustrated, can generate mental health problems. To understand and address violent masculinities, it is important to recognise vulnerabilities and their close relationship to social exclusion and poverty. It is not enough to be concerned merely with threats to peace. We need to frame a more inclusive and deliberative agenda and to listen to the voices of *all* young men (not just those engaged in violence), as well as the voices of young women (Morgan & McArdle, 2018). This will lead us to better understand the gendered meanings of violence and to promote forms of peacebuilding that enable social change. ●



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Interpeace

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION
FOR PEACEBUILDING

Interpeace Headquarters

Maison de la Paix
2E Chemin Eugène-Rigot
Petal 5 (Building 5)
CH-1202 Geneva
Switzerland