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Examining the 3 P's: Personal Safety, Paramilitaries and Policing

Colm Walsh

One of the most enduring socio-political issues affecting the population of Northern Ireland is the legacy of conflict. The 'Fresh Start' agreement¹, published by the UK and Irish governments in 2015 set out strategic proposals for addressing some of these most challenging, and often intractable issues. This vision became enshrined in the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government 2016-2021. As part of the Executive's commitment, the three-person Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) was convened. In order to operationalise this cross-departmental government programme, a Tackling Paramilitarism project team and board was established. The recommendations from IRC proposed four key thematic areas and this directly informed the 2016 Executive Action Plan²:

1. Promoting lawfulness
2. Support for transition
3. Tackling criminality
4. Addressing systemic issues

In their second report³, the IRC (2019) reaffirmed a commitment to a twin track approach, that is, combining policing and justice efforts alongside activities that will better understand socio-economic issues facing communities where paramilitaries are most active and measurably address these in an evidence--informed way.

To complement the range of

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/a-fresh-start-for-northern-ireland>

² <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/tackling-paramilitary-activity-action-plan.pdf>

³ <https://www.ircommission.org/publications/irc-second-report>

administrative and organisational data that is available to the Tackling Paramilitarism team, questions on community safety and perceptions of paramilitary activity have been asked in the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) and Young Life and Times (YLT) surveys since 2017. Topics included respondents' perceptions of the community that they live in with regard to personal safety, attitudes towards law, justice and policing, perceptions of crime, drugs and antisocial behaviour and attitudes towards paramilitaries.

This Research Update explores data from the NILT and YLT surveys, with a focus on three strategic priority areas referred to as the '3 P's': Personal Safety, Policing and Paramilitaries.

Personal safety

Between 2017 and 2019, 7,089 participants responded to NILT and YLT: 3,606 to NILT and 3,483 to YLT. Each year, respondents were asked about how they would describe

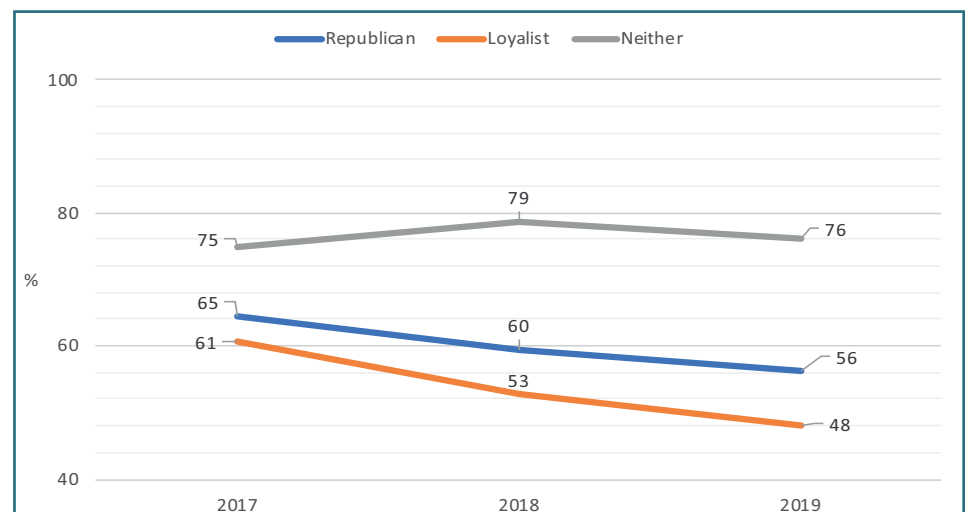
their area. Overall, 43 per cent of respondents reported living in neither Republican nor Loyalist areas. This is similar to the proportion living in either mainly Loyalist areas (25%) or mainly Republican areas (20%)

Personal Safety

Across all years and surveys, the majority of respondents (68%) indicated that they felt 'very safe' in their communities. There appeared to be differences between adults and young people, with NILT respondents being more likely than YLT respondents to report feeling 'very safe' (72% vs 51%). Whilst proportionally small, a number of respondents indicated that they felt 'very unsafe' in their communities (2%). The remainder of respondents indicated that they could not choose an option.

There was no statistically significant change in the proportion of adults or young people reporting feelings of safety in NILT between 2017 and 2019. Whilst overall, the majority of both men and women reported feeling 'very safe', there was a marked decrease for women between 2017 and 2019 (from 75% to 69%). There was no statistically significant change for male respondents.

Figure 1: Respondents feeling 'very safe' by community identity (NILT and YLT)



Within NILT, feelings of safety were higher among those who had lived in their area longer. Within Republican areas in particular, those who had lived in their area for longer were more likely to report feeling safer (i.e. ‘very safe’ and either ‘fairly safe’ or ‘neither safe nor unsafe’). Across both NILT and YLT, there was a statistically significant reduction in the proportion of respondents who self-reported feeling ‘very safe’ in the communities between 2017 and 2019 with an increase in those reporting feeling ‘fairly safe’. In fact, it was only respondents who identified as living in neither Loyalist nor Republican areas whose sense of safety appeared stable across the three years (see Figure 1).

Feelings of personal safety appear to increase with age, and those within the younger age group of NILT (18-24) were significantly less likely to report feeling safe in their communities than other age groups.

Policing

A minority of respondents (19%) each year agreed or agreed strongly that people in their community were not confident in reporting crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) to PSNI. For NILT respondents in particular, there was a statistically significant increase in respondents saying that community members were confident that they could report crime and ASB to PSNI, from 49 per cent in 2017 to 58 per cent in 2019. For YLT respondents too, there appeared to be a statistically significant increase over time. However, among 16 year olds there was no statistically significant change in their perceptions of the extent to which PSNI keep their community safe. Unsurprisingly, those who reported most confidence in reporting crime and ASB to PSNI were also most likely to report feeling protected by the law and justice system. 62% of all YLT and NILT respondents who indicated that they did not feel that people were protected by the law and justice system, also agreed that people did not feel confident reporting crime and ASB.

Interestingly, those who felt most safe in their communities were least likely to report community confidence in reporting crime and ASB to the police.

In fact, it was those who felt most unsafe that were most likely to feel that

their community was not confident in reporting crime (see Table 1).

Table 1: YLT and NILT respondents agreeing or disagreeing that people do not feel confident in reporting crime to the police in their area. By feelings of safety in their local area

	%			
	Very safe	Fairly safe	Fairly unsafe	Very unsafe
Strongly agree	6	6	27	15
Agree	12	20	34	8
Disagree	36	34	18	31
Strongly disagree	24	9	8	15

Further nuances were discovered when data was disaggregated by community identity (see Table 2). Respondents living in Loyalist areas were more likely to believe that their community was willing to report crime and ASB than those from perceived Republican communities. There was no statistically significant change amongst those from other areas across the three years. This distinction was observed across year for both NILT and for YLT.

Among NILT respondents who self-reported living in Republican areas there was a 20 per cent increase in

those who strongly agreed with the statement between 2017 and 2019.

Respondents living in mainly Loyalist areas were significantly more likely than those living in Republican areas to strongly disagree with the statement. Moreover, there was an increase in the proportion of people living in Loyalist areas to strongly disagree that local people do not feel confident reporting crime: from 16 per cent in 2017 to 30 per cent in 2019. This suggests that both Loyalist and Republican adults’ perceptions of confidence in reporting crime changed in the period.

Table 2: Proportion of YLT and KLT respondents agreeing or disagreeing that people in their area feel confident reporting crime and ASB. By type of area (%)

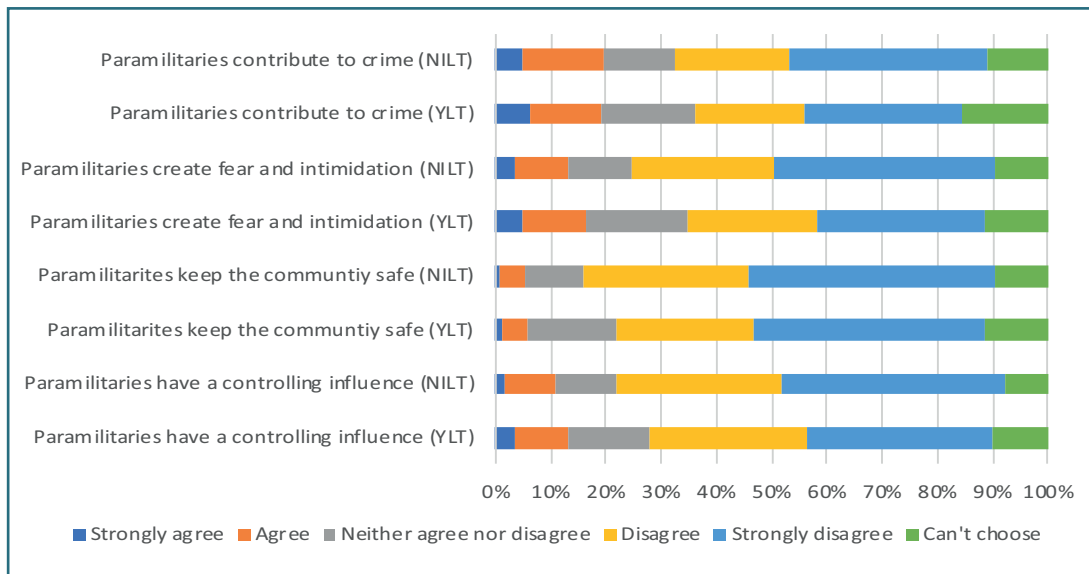
	Year	%		
		Republican	Loyalist	Neither
Strongly agree	2017	8	11	5
	2019	15	7	4
Agree	2017	15	21	14
	2019	29	21	10
Disagree	2017	34	27	17
	2019	22	28	14
Strongly disagree	2017	19	15	21
	2019	9	19	26

Paramilitaries

Observations across the three years appear to show convergence between NILT respondents and YLT respondents regarding perceptions of paramilitary activity. Taking four key questions in particular, similarities can be illustrated (see Figure 2). For example, a minority of both NILT and YLT respondents believed that paramilitaries

contributed towards crime in their communities and a majority reported that paramilitaries did not keep their communities safe. Taken as a whole, there is little distinction within or between the two surveys. However, when findings were examined across year and communities, statistically significant differences between responses were observed.

Figure 2: Attitudes towards paramilitaries 2017-2019



When disaggregated by perceived community area, a number of interesting observations emerge from the YLT data. At a broad level, it appears that those who live in areas perceived by respondents to be Loyalist, are more likely than those from perceived Republican areas, as well as those who identified to live in neither area, to agree (strongly agree and agree) that paramilitaries cause fear and intimidation (see Table 3). Conversely, those who live in areas not defined as either Loyalist or Republican were most likely to strongly disagree with

YLT respondents were more likely to agree that paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation in their areas in 2019 than they were in 2017. Whilst this may not necessarily reflect increased paramilitary activity, it could be a reflection of high-profile awareness raising campaigns, increased targeted youth provision and increased investment in developmental programmes aimed at engaging young people in critical reflections around the theme of lawfulness.

This was not the case for respondents in the NILT. There was strong evidence that adults in 2019 were statistically more likely to disagree that paramilitaries had a controlling influence in their areas than in 2017.

Figure 3: Agreement that paramilitaries contribute to crime, drug dealing and ASB in this area (YLT and NILT)

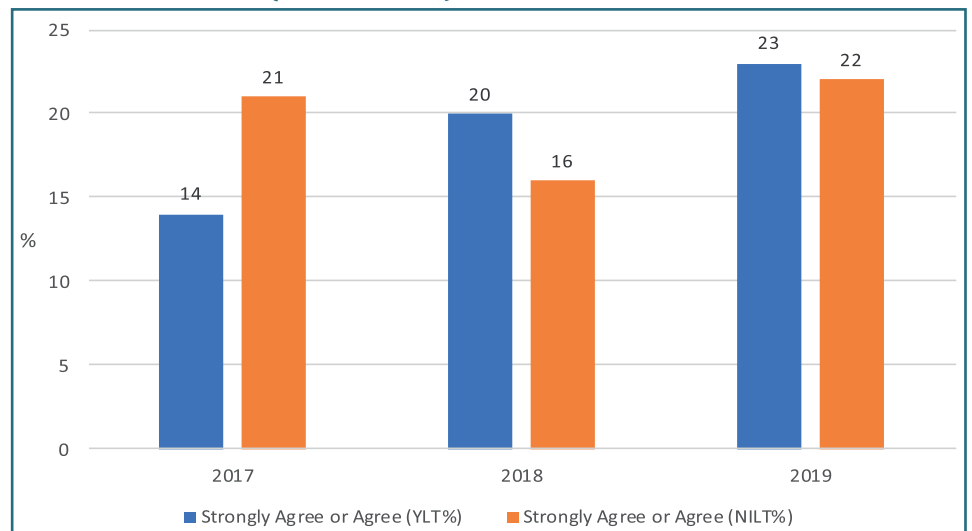


Table 3: YLT respondents agreeing or disagreeing that paramilitaries cause fear and intimidation in their area. By area characteristic and survey year (%)

	%			
	Year	Republican	Loyalist	Neither
Strongly agree	Combined	8	5	4
	2017	4	3	2
	2019	11	5	4
Agree	Combined	18	13	7
	2017	18	10	2
	2019	19	12	9
Disagree	Combined	24	26	22
	2017	21	25	25
	2019	24	24	20
Strongly disagree	Combined	23	23	44
	2017	32	33	54
	2019	20	29	44

the statement. When examined further by disaggregating by year of response, it appears that across all communities, respondents were increasingly more likely to agree with the statement and less likely to disagree to some extent. The reason for this is unclear and could be unpacked further with qualitative study.

In particular, young people's responses appeared to diverge marginally from those of adults across a range of items. For example, YLT respondents were more likely to agree that paramilitaries contribute towards crime and drug dealing in 2019 than they were in either 2018 or 2017 (Figure 3).

There was no statistically significant change between 2017 and 2019 in the responses in either the YLT or the NILT surveys in regard to perceived paramilitary influence over young people.

Mean differences in how respondents ranked responses on the degree of influence paramilitaries have on communities were examined. In general, both YLT and NILT respondents were less likely over time to agree that paramilitaries continue to exert influence on their community. This finding is interesting as it points towards a key tackling paramilitarism indicator and it will be useful to examine this in subsequent years to determine if this trend continues. It would also be useful in later analyses to isolate those areas known to have higher levels of paramilitary activity and track this over time.

Conclusion

ARK surveys have provided an important lens through which to capture and understand attitudes and beliefs of young people and adults towards community and personal safety, crime and paramilitary activities. This analysis of the multi-year data has provided some evidence around the issues that are important to people living in Northern Ireland, some evidence of attitudinal change as well as opportunities to target policy and practice in more focussed ways.

Aligned with other comparable surveys (e.g. Crime Survey or Safe Community Survey), the majority of respondents across both NILT and YLT as well as across years reported feeling safe in their communities.

However, this finding was nuanced. For example, it appears that there are significant differences for those living in Republican and Loyalist areas compared with those reporting to live in neither of these areas.

Although those from Loyalist areas are more likely than those from Republican areas to report community confidence in reporting crime and ASB, there was evidence of a general trend upwards with the overall sample increasingly confident between 2017 and 2019. This would be useful to monitor in subsequent years to establish if and why this trend continues.

Overall, a minority of respondents report favourable attitudes towards paramilitaries. Nevertheless, young people appear to be increasingly aware of the negative impact of paramilitary activity in their community across years and also appear to diverge from the perceptions of adults in regard to the role paramilitaries play in local communities. This could suggest greater sensitivity amongst young people but may also reflect the reality of life for young people who could be more at risk of being exposed to paramilitary activity as well as those purporting to representing criminal organisations. When examining those from different community backgrounds, adults from Loyalist areas were generally more likely to report elevated concern regarding paramilitaries. It would be useful in subsequent years to identify and isolate respondents from higher risk communities, such as those living within communities specifically targeted for intervention through the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme.

The three big P's remain important

social, political and economic challenges in Northern Ireland. Interdependent issues of personal safety, the role, influence and impact of paramilitaries as well as the legitimacy of policing are critical to understand as Northern Ireland continues to emerge from the past. Whilst the legacy of conflict continues to affect communities in different ways, the results of these surveys provide some reason for optimism and point to new directions for policy and practice. They also raise new questions about the experiences of people living within communities across Northern Ireland.

Key points:

- Over six in ten respondents reported feeling safe in their community. Adults responding to NILT expressed a greater sense of safety than 16-year olds responding to YLT.
- Around one in five respondents (19) agreed that people in their areas felt not confident reporting crime or anti-social behaviour to the police.
- Around one in ten respondents agreed or strongly agreed that paramilitaries created fear and intimidation in their neighbourhoods. This figure was larger among YLT respondents than NILT respondents and much larger among respondents in Loyalist and Republican areas than neutral area.

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