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## **Beyond the Spark: Young people's perspectives on the 2021 Northern Ireland Riots**

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# Beyond The Spark

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE 2021 NORTHERN  
IRELAND RIOTS

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QUB



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## Introduction

### The Spring 2021 riots

Violence is complex both in its origins and in its solutions (Gilligan, 1999). It takes many forms (Lee, 2019) and can be directed towards oneself, towards others, or perpetrated collectively by a group of individuals towards others (Dahlberg and Krug, 2002). As Spring 2021 came to Northern Ireland, the streets of some communities were marred by collective violence. Unusually for riots, these appeared to be structured and coherently organised (De la Roche, 1996). Scenes of young people throwing bricks and petrol bombs at police were circulated online, as well as through international media. The story of escalating community tensions was reported in the Guardian, Euronews and Al Jazeera. Time Magazine posed the question, *'Is Northern Ireland experiencing the worst violence in years?'* In terms of mobilisation, it certainly was the most destructive in recent times. After seven nights of rioting, eighty-eight police officers were injured and several communities were left with significant damage to property (Cross and Rutherford, 2021).

As tends to be the case in any conflict, youth are often at disproportional risk of being the perpetrators of violence in addition to being more likely to be the victim of violence (Walsh and Schubotz, 2020). During these Spring riots, it was reported that children as young as eight were actively involved in some of the most violent disturbances. In response, the Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland publicly claimed that organised criminals, operating through paramilitary structures were coercing and criminally exploiting young people to engage in the violence (McLafferty, 2021). A few months later, the office of the Commissioner published a government advice paper on the issue of criminal exploitation calling for a whole government approach (NICCY, 2021).

The riots took place in largely "loyalist areas" and where communities interfaced. In one of the most well documented interfaces known as the *'brick fields'*, the predominantly loyalist Shankill Road erupted and the concrete *'peace wall'* that separates it from the nationalist Springfield Road was shut. The aesthetics were powerful. Images of the interface showed groups of what appeared to be mostly young people masked and armed with projectiles. Maybe the most striking as well as memorable image, was the public bus that was hijacked and set alight. Against the darkness of the night, the fire illuminated the concrete barrier separating the two communities.

## Potential Explanations for the NI violence

Commentators during the Northern Ireland riots suggested several potential 'sparks'.

One of the most dominant reasons cited was the impact of Brexit-specifically the 'divorce deal'- a formulation of the future relationship between the UK and the EU. Many cited a contentious element of the deal- the '*Northern Ireland Protocol*', which included a mechanism to facilitate checks on good leaving Britain and arriving into Northern Ireland. Loyalists claimed a constitutional crisis, and in some loyalist communities, graffiti and '*vaguely menacing posters*' (Guardian, 18<sup>th</sup> Feb 2021) portrayed the intention to resist these changes. An umbrella group representing loyalists, the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC), claimed that in agreeing to the Northern Ireland protocol, the UK government had '*sold out*' the unionist community. The following month, the *Irish News* newspaper exclusively reported that the Council informed the UK prime minister of their withdrawal of support for the Good Friday Agreement (Morris, 2021).

In pre-covid times, remembrance, ceremony and ritual had persisted with little significant social or political impact. However, with the onset of Covid, these were not normal times. Following the death of prominent Republican, Bobby Storey, loyalists (as well as other nationalists) pointed to potential Covid-19 breaches and the perceived failure of police to enforce the legislation. The attendance of leading Sinn Fein politicians at the funeral, including Michelle O'Neill, the joint First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive, elevated tensions. Despite the claims, a review by the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland at the end of March 2021 recommended that no legal action be taken (PPS, 2021). This appeared to only enflame pre-existing tensions (Mitchell, 2021).

There is clearly a local context and yet, the riots that took place in Northern Ireland during early April were not isolated. As early as the Summer of 2020, violence experts had begun to moot the potential for surges in violent protest (The Guardian, 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2020). Evidence since has provided some support. Throughout 2020 and into 2021, there has been an escalation in riots across continents (Campedelli and D'Orsogna, 2021). Indeed, the Global Peace Index reported that during 2020, civil unrest was at its highest level since the index began (IEP, 2021).

Why now? Behaviour often reflects the social context, and 2020/21 has been largely dominated by the global pandemic as well as widespread public health regulations. In sum, it was a period of significant of stress and strain for many and strains have been implicated in increased aggression and violence (Agnew, 1992). Understanding the effect of these strains

could be critical for policy planning. Put simply, *how do people behave during hard times* (Reicher and Stott, 2020)? Ellis, Briggs, Lloyd and Telford (2021) suggest that the Covid context is potentially '*violence inducing*', and whilst each space and place may have its own unique '*spark*', there are more distal mechanisms that appear to underpin the many and varied presentations of collective violence (Eisner and Nivette, 2020)

From a general and more global perspective, it is during hard times that social issues become much more glaring. Societal cracks begin to show as it becomes more obvious that the burden of crisis tends to fall on those least able to take the weight (Schwab and Malleret, 2020). In May 2020, the murder of George Floyd by an armed policeman was the spark that ignited pre-existing racial tensions, leading to weeks of civil unrest in the United States (Aitken, 2021). In Asia, protests became violent in Hong Kong as many mobilised against an amendment to an extradition law that would provide the Chinese central government greater powers. The grievances of Hong Kongese were compounded with the onset of Covid (Hou et al, 2021) and what began as opposition to legislation, became a much wider reflection of the populations frustrations (Ismangil, 2021). In Europe, the French lockdown came in the aftermath of the '*yellow vest*' movement-symbolically representing the disconnect between the state and the '*suffering citizens*' (Reicher and Stott, 2020). On 19<sup>th</sup> April 2021, a young man of Arab descent was injured when his motorcycle collided with a French police car. The days that followed this '*spark*' were marred by riots across Paris (Willsher, 2020).

From Poland to Pretoria, 2020/21 has, and continues to appear excessively violent.

All of these cases also illustrate an important reality- where there are riots, it is often the police that come face to face with the rioters (Lewis et al., 2011). Understanding the potentially moderating role of the police on riotous behaviour are important reflections. Police responses have been implicated in escalating or indeed helping to de-escalate tensions. For example, during the disorder in Bristol in 1980, Brixton 1981 and Birmingham in 1985, the crowds were observed to provoke the police, but at the same time, the police were observed to provoke the crowd (Waddington et al., 1989). These observations have lasting effects. There has been evidence that in the aftermath of riots, public perceptions of the police can be framed through the lens of how people believe the police '*police*' riotous behaviour (Hohl, Stank and Newburn, 2013). Where there had already been low confidence, this can be exacerbated, at least in the short term. Importantly levels of confidence in policing may predict, or even drive unrest (Stanko and Bradford, 2009).

These examples raise interesting questions. Whilst they are generally sparked by local context, there also appear to be more generalisable mechanisms that underpin the violence in Northern Ireland, as much as in other areas. Understanding these could help to predict, and even prevent the scale of harm that was witnessed during April 2021.

### Explaining Youth Engagement in Rioting

Riots can appear illogical (Le Bon, 1960)- the destructive manifestation of mass hysteria (Foster, 1991). This type of violence is rarely attributed with a coherence that can help to illuminate its origins, its purpose and provide opportunities for prevention. Just as with other behaviours, violence can be thought of as a behaviour learned (Sutherland, 1947, Gilligan, 1999; Milaniak and Widom, 2015). But the nature of violence is as much expressive and symbolic as it is instrumental (Lee, 2019). That is, even when there does not appear to be any material gain from engaging in violence, understanding what the behaviour represents could be of greater importance. When under significant strain (Agnew, 1992), violence can alleviate feelings of fear and frustration, and particularly for young men, violence is often one of the few expressions of emotion available to them (Stott and Reicher, 1998). In communities characterised as being highly violent, young men can become hyper aroused to the potential of threat (Horowitz et al., 1995) and ready to respond to those threats (Errante, 1997; Widom, 1989). Violence, individually and collectively can be regarded as a form of self-help (De la Roche, 1996). This may help to explain that even with the prospect of harm or arrest, individuals combine into collectives and continue to engage in violence (Cobbina, LaCourse, Brooke and Chaudhuri, 2021).

The mechanisms that connect fear and frustration to perpetration are hypothesised to be partially connected via masculine ideals (Walsh, 2020). These ideas about what it means to be male within a specific context, serve to foster and regulate descriptive norms as well as injunctive norms. Descriptive norms are behaviours that individuals see others engaging in (Zou and Savni, 2019). These contribute towards learned and performative '*know-how*'. Injunctive norms on the other hand are the standards of behaviour that people believe others expect of them-the type of behaviour or response that they believe others would approve of or disapprove of within a given context (Cialdin and Trost, 1998). These norms regulate both cognitive and behavioural male performance (Messerschmitt, 1993) and can, in certain situations help people to justify the violence that they perpetrate (Matza, 1964). Masculinity is intimately connected with violence. Masculine identities define the parameters of behaviour that are considered to be acceptable and conversely, unacceptable (Brown and Burton, 2010). Masculinity is not only about feeling but doing (Messerschmitt, 1993; Maguire, 2020). In some contexts, violence is normalised (Terr, 1991) and in context where violence

is normalised, they are more likely to be repeated (Sutherland, 1947). In these situations, violence is not only expected, but required. Those who fail to comply with the expectations, face the prospect of humiliation-something potentially more destructive than the implicated injury (Katz, 1988; Gilligan, 1999). This speaks to the criminogenic effects of shame and may at least partially explain the '*peer policing*' that takes place among young men, all of whom fear being '*unmasked*' as cowards (Kimmel, 1994) who fail to protect themselves, their family or their community.

Whilst the 'sparks' may be self-evident, it is the wider, more systemic and often more complex issues that are harder to capture, and yet, it are these, that when coherently described that provide the basis for prevention. There is an imperative to understand the meaning of engagement and non-engagement in riots from the perspectives of those most proximal to the events. This attention to the personal accounts of those living in the communities that are most directly affected counter attempts to dismiss rioting as mere mass hysteria (De la Roche, 1996) or outbursts of lawlessness that are intended to score political points (Waddington, 1994). The analyses reported below is an attempt to capture the perspective and motivations of those most intimately connected to the riots and in their own words, illustrate the factors that contributed to the escalation during April 2021.

## Methodology

This study sought to understand the riots from the perspective of those who were physically closest to them, and present the findings in a way that could enhance understanding and contribute towards prevention. The purpose was to capture the accounts of the violence and its meaning. In this sense the author sought to capture both the micro level stories and the meta narratives that connected individual accounts to each other. Whilst words are important, we were concerned with the ideas that can embody violent behaviour and sustain its presence (Metzler, Jackson and Trudeau, 2021). Something that is particularly relevant to the post-conflict context of Northern Ireland.

## Participants

A purposive sample (Patton, 2015) of young men and young women aged 14-18 were recruited through existing partnerships that the researchers had with community youth workers working in the areas that were affected by the 2021 riots. In addition to age, the only inclusionary criteria was that the young people had to either i. live in the areas in which the riots took place or ii. Have been present in those areas during the nights of rioting. This



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helped to ensure that information rich cases were selected for the in-depth study and could help to facilitate significant learning (Gentles et al., 2015). During their routine engagement with young people, youth workers explained the purpose of the study and provided all young people with an information sheet. The participants self-selected into the study and those who expressed an interest were provided consent via the youth worker.

To protect the identity of participants and to encourage greater engagement, personal details were not provided to the study team. Instead, the participants signed consents using a pseudonym. Audio recorded calls were scheduled between a member of the research team and local youth workers. Participants were either provided with a number to call the researcher or the researcher called a phone/laptop owned by the youth work organisation. Where the call included video, only the video of the researcher was streamed and this was at the request of the participant.

In total, twelve in-depth interviews were facilitated. All were first-hand witnesses to the rioting, although only 67% (n=8) admitted during the interviews that they took actively part directly. There is the real possibility that given the ongoing tensions at the time of interview, and the very real potential to be arrested, some young people were reluctant to disclose the nature of their involvement.

75% of the sample were male (n=9) and 25% (n=3) were female. Ages ranged between 15 and 18. The mean age was 17 (see table 1).

*Table 1: Sample characteristics*

<b>ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Involved</b>
16005	<b>Male</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>Yes</b>
15002	<b>Male</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>Yes (arrested)</b>
16006	<b>Male</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>Yes</b>
18003	<b>Male</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>No</b>
18007	<b>Male</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>Yes</b>
18016	<b>Female</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>No</b>
18017	<b>Female</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>Yes (arrested)</b>
19009	<b>Male</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>No</b>
20001	<b>Male</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>Yes</b>
15013	<b>Female</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>No</b>

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11015	<b>Male</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>Yes</b>
12012	<b>Male</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>Yes (arrested)</b>

Interviews lasted for between thirty minutes and one hour. The average interview duration was forty minutes. The interview schedule consisted of three broad areas: about you; about your community and; about the riots. At the end of the third section, participants were also asked about post-hoc reflections, including if and how the riots could have been prevented and how optimistic they were that these events would not be repeated. If during the interviews, participants were unwilling or uncomfortable with answering particular questions, the researcher moved on. The purpose of the interviews was to understand how young people perceived the riots and unpack convergent and divergent themes that helped to explain their proximity to them.

### Ethics

The study was funded through the cross Executive Tackling Paramilitarism Programme. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Queen's University Belfast School Research Ethics Committee (SREC).

### Data analysis

The authors undertook reflective thematic analysis, using an iterative coding process and analyses that immersed them in the narrative data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Eleven meta themes and forty-one operational themes were identified. These are summarised across five sections below.

The methodological approach has strengths and limitations. First, the data was heavily biased on gender. Despite actively encouraging both young men and young women to take part, in the end, the majority (75%) of participants were male. This may reflect the elevated risk of young men taking part in riots. Alternatively, it may be a function of the youth worker contact. That is, they may be more likely to engage young men. Secondly, the study is limited to in depth interviews with twelve people. However, the purpose of a qualitative study was not to make claims about causality or generalisability but to uncover the social processes at play. The strengths therefore are that the study uncovers a rich narrative that illuminates the complexity of youth involvement in collective violence and specifically, in riots.

## Findings

### People-how young people described their social and educational experiences

Young people consistently described feeling isolated from mainstream community structures. The most common was their relationships within school and with teachers. In general, educational experiences were not positive and interactions with teachers were dominated by references to conflict.

***“it’s like, I would get on with them un’s like just having a laugh and carrying on, but the teachers in school like they didn’t see it that way. They just seen it as messing about and then they just kept shouting”***

This captured young people’s desire to make their own decisions and simply do their own thing. Whilst noble, these attitudes can often become problematic in contexts that require standards of behaviour and set clear expectations such as in school, in work or indeed in many social settings.

***I: “What way do you feel, or what way do you respond if people are trying to make you do something that you don’t want to do?”***

***P: “They can’t tell me what to do”***

As relational learners who appeared to engage in educational content most when they could relate to the staff and the content, most appeared to struggle. These struggles were not just with the academic content, but also in those relationships with teachers. As a result, they often lost out on structured teaching time.

***“Aye, because I didn’t really get an education...I was always suspended or else on a reduced timetable” 12012***

These conflictual relationships appeared to be a precursor to reduced academic attainment rather than the other way around. Relatedly, those who reported having a poor school experience also appeared to be those who lacked a general optimism for their own futures.

***P: “There’s nothing in particular, nothing I’m interested in, like proper interested in”***

***I: “Right and what about-where do you see yourself...where do you see yourself in a couple of years’ time? What would you like to do?”***

***P: “Anything”***

***I: Anything that you’d like to be doing or see yourself doing?”***

***P: “No” 16006***

Some however were more hopeful than others. These young people appeared to be determined to achieve despite the obstacles that had prevented them from achieving their potential within formal education settings.

***"Well I had left school with not many qualifications so I was like just determined to do something" 18016***

One of the most striking differences between those who took part in the violence and those that did not, appeared to be the variation in the ways that young people identified positive social supports and were able to describe how accessible they were. Those who admitted to taking part in the violence were significantly more likely to suggest that there were few positive and reliable supports that they could engage compared to those who indicated that they were not part of the violence.

***"Who do I look up to? I don't know...there's not really much people that I look up to...I hadn't really thought about looking up to anybody" 18007***

***"There's nobody really around this area that you can talk to" 11015***

#### Places-how young people describe their local areas

For the most part, young people described their areas affectionately- as places where family were close by and where people knew each other.

***"...all my family live close around the area, because all my family live close around the area..."***

***"...Everyone knows everyone so you can walk up and down X and you'd talk to about ten or fifteen people" 18007***

***"I think it's a good wee community...the people live close by, and like everybody's so like supportive in my community" 18016***

Despite the affectionate ways that many described their communities, there was consensus that those looking in may have a very different perspective.

***"well anyone like. I know people, my boyfriend's from Glengormley so, and obviously his mum's, his mum, when I first met him was always like 'oh the antisocial behaviour that goes on in X', and that's just the sort of name that the town has then"***

***"I think it is was people from outside of [the area], they'll probably look at it and think it's a rough area" 18016***

One of the reasons that participants believed that this divergence of opinion existed was due to the aesthetics. For several young people, the aggressively symbolism of the community obscure some of the good work that takes place in those areas

***"You'll see Union Jacks. You'll see bands...I mean, it's very religious, like it's very, in terms of religion and in terms of culture. But like, I don't know-it's a hard one. Like that there's if you just search up [the area], it's always going to***

***come up with all the religion stuff, like with paramilitaries or, do you know what I mean? It's always going to come up with something to do with that. It doesn't really come up with 'oh that they've raised such and such for mental health, or they've done something for the community.'*** 18007

But as the interviews progressed, most young people generally began to focus on the more challenging aspects of living in their communities.

***"There's good and bad things"*** 18007

***I: "And what's it like you grow up in?"  
P: Not the best of places to be honest"*** 15013

***"Oh its fucking shite mate. I don't like it"*** 20011

Several young people talk about their communities changing over recent years. They described significant, and observable transitions taking place which included demographic changes as more ethnically diverse people were thought to have moved into the community.

***"Well there is some kind of people, like now it's coming to the point where there's like, you walk through [the area], and there's actually like so much people that you don't even know their faces, don't know who they are...we were saying like it's actually scary to walk through. Like see [the area], we're actually like, when it's dark, we're scared sometimes to actually walk through it"*** 18017

Few of the young people believed that these transitions enhanced the community. In fact, most believed that these demographic changes threatened their sense of cohesiveness and as it became less clear what community meant within a given context, young people felt increasingly isolated and disconnected. Whilst only a minority of young people referred to their national identity and cultural heritage without a prompt, those who did, indicated that traditions such as the 12<sup>th</sup> July and the parades that accompany it are a source of pride—something that can be enjoyed by the whole protestant community.

***"well like our culture's good and our parades and all that there and all the things like the twelfth and the eleventh and all that there—it's good like"*** 19009

Others indicated that whilst they valued these traditions, their function was less about celebrating culture and heritage than it was about providing some structure and purpose. During specific periods of the year, these events were seen as opportunities to become involved, to serve a purpose, and to feel like through being engaged and taking part, young people's connection to the communities that they often feel disconnected from is enhanced.

***"...there's the bands and the bonfires [but] the rest of the time, you feel like there's not much to do...you just tootle about and talk"*** 20011

Across all of the areas, young people described significant and complex social issues that affect them in their everyday lives. In particular, they have a demonstrable effect on young people's sense of safety.

***"it's just like there's a lot of drugs and stuff mate in the estates like. That there's, there's a lot of, lot of drugs in the estates and then it's flipping-it's even sad to see like where I'm seeing younger ones now... but I've always said this mate-see whenever I was thirteen, it was easier to get drugs that it was to get a carry-out out of the offies."***

***P: "it isn't drugs"***

***I: "What is it?"***

***P: "Like crackheads"***

***I: "Right OK and has anything every happened that makes you feel unsafe?"***

***P: "No, it's just a feeling that I have, like me and my friends. You just don't feel safe in your own area anymore" 18017***

Young people's reflections on their own personal safety were highly contradictory. Most reported feeling safe in their own areas and not so safe in other areas. This related to their degree of familiarity with the geography, as well as with the people. In other areas, unfamiliarity was associated with risk.

***"well not in my own area like, but if I was to walk into like a Catholic area or anything, you know, I would feel unsafe like because I'm in a whole new area...if there's people about like, you would feel a bit nervous and all like-you wouldn't really want to-you'd cross the road and all and hopefully not like cause too much attention to yourself. But if you get through like you're sweet when you get to the other, like your own area again" 19009***

However, the overwhelming evidence was that these young people were actually less safe in their own areas than they were in other areas. Most provided illustrative examples of having been either directly and/or indirectly affected by physical violence in their own communities. For some, these experiences were not isolated events, but enduring experiences.

***"You can't walk about like drinking or anything without getting your c\*\*t kicked in" 20011***

Despite indicating how safe they felt in their own areas, most if not all of their exposure to incidences of violence were within the spaces that they were most familiar with.

***I: "So have you ever been attacked?"***

***P: "Aye a couple of times like. Not really in other areas. Twice in my own area like"***

***I: "So mostly actually in your own area?"***

***P: "Yeah" 19009***

Young people appear to become aware of the potential risks in the area as they transition into adolescence-potentially as their social worlds expand. As younger children, they are

generally unaware of the wider risks in the community but as they grow, there is increasing recognition that risks are pervasive. There is increasing recognition that they are at personal risk. Further, this is accepted as a normal part of life.

***"I don't really remember much in childhood. Like, I just remember it always being quiet but whenever I got to like eight or nine, that when like trouble would have started..." 18016***

***"Just sometimes it can be a bit like...violent" 12012***

This violence permeated across many aspects of young people's lives and took place in a number of ways. These young people were directly exposed to violence among peers, indirectly exposed to and aware of higher-harm violence across the wider area and conscious of the areas that they move in and out of. Much of this violence was described as being perpetrated by adults. Adults who are largely known by young people, from the areas that they live in and associated with paramilitary groups.

***"Oh aye, yeah there would be plenty of that as well like. There'd be plenty of fighting and kids fighting as well yeah" 18003***

Interestingly, none of the young people referred to violence in the home or within intimate relationships.

***"...it's all kicking off and you see like people getting kicking or something when you hear about all the kicking's and it's like round the corner from your house" 15002***

Unsurprisingly, the biggest threat to young people was linked with paramilitarism. Paramilitaries were not considered to be distinct from the community, but rather, woven into the fabric of their communities. They were people that the young people knew. They were neighbours. They were present in the community and although none of these young people disclosed it, members of paramilitary groups were also likely to be family members.

***"You know when they're building the bonfire and all, like I live around the corner. A couple of us would go round and help out, you know, and build it with them...they always laugh and joke with us like" 15002***

Young people indicated that they were aware of paramilitary activity in the area and were concerned.

***"There's just, well there's stuff still happening like shootings et cetera and you could turn a corner and that there could end up you-do you know what I mean? So you're not safe, but you wouldn't be at the same time because you don't know who's standing around the corner with a bat, or you know, walk into the wrong place at the wrong time. So it's not safe like. 18007***

Despite the apparent pervasiveness, most were unwilling to talk about their direct experiences of paramilitarism in any detail. This culture of coercive control was evident throughout the interviews and appeared to have the routine effect of silencing of the community. Even those who had been direct victims appeared unwilling (or unable) to discuss their experiences.

***I: "and have you ever been threatened by someone that you believed to be in a paramilitary groups before?"***

***P: "yeah"***

***I: "Would you be able to tell me a little about the experience?"***

***P: "No" 12012***

Even those who were more indirectly affected were also wary of disclosing anything that could potentially put them at risk within their own community.

***I: "Have any of your friends been threatened?"***

***P: "Aye"***

***I: "Would you be comfortable, now not to mention any names or anything, but if you could just describe what happened?"***

***P: "Aye, I don't really want to say what happened" 16005***

Despite the wariness, it was evident that most young people had stories, and these stories when they were told, illustrated the many and varied contacts with violent adults that young people believed to be linked with paramilitary groups. They also illustrated that perceptions of paramilitary activity in the local area tended to predict their sense of safety. As one young man described, older men, whom he believed to be linked to paramilitaries, would routinely follow young people about the area.

***"I just can't believe that I can't walk about my own area without getting followed by someone" 12012***

In most cases, it was young men in particular who were directly threatened with physical violence.

***"Well I've been threatened with baseball bats" 12012***

***"It was scary...we were all standing having a drink, just as you do because you're young ones, and there was a group of masked me had come up and grabbed a hold of whoever they could the hold of and everyone just sort of run. They had bats and stuff as well" 15013***

Many saw this type of activity as a routine part of life. Something that was not avoided, but accepted.

***P: "Aye and I was walking up and, me and my mates, they jumped out of a care with baseball bats and masks"***



**I: "And did any of your friends, did any of you get hurt?"**

**P: "No because we had literally no clue what they were on about"**

**I: "...how were you feeling after that?"**

**P: "The same like. It's just, it happens to everyone. It's fucking normal and like that would be-you would just have to get used to it" 16006**

Despite the range of ways that young people described coming into contact with paramilitaries, most young people did not generally believe that there was any meaningful support available. More, several indicated that if they were willing to access support, it was not clear what form this support would take.

**I: "can [you] get support? Say your two friends who were threatened, where did they get support from...?"**

**P: "fuck, you couldn't really do anything about it to be honest with you mate...you wouldn't go to anyone, it would just make it worse...you'd get known as a tout and no one would want to be called a tout up here"**

**I: "would that put you more at risk?"**

**P: "Aye"**

These comments were not uncommon, and appear to reflect the wider community norms that give life to, and sustain paramilitary activity. These norms prevent victims from seeking the support that they deserve. Indeed, by seeking external support, victims fear the prospect of further victimisation, as well as how they would be viewed by the community.

**I: "...if you were under threat was there anybody that could help you, you know, so that you didn't get harmed?"**

**P: "I wouldn't go to the police or nothing because you'd just get a bad name"**

**I: "A bad name by who?"**

**P: "Anyone. Everyone on the streets. You just-no one-everyone knows just not to ring the cops unless it's, like if it's for somebody like housebreaking or like all there yeah, but like not something like stupid"**

**I: "So why, if you thought you were at risk, you wouldn't phone the police?"**

**P: "Well it depends like, if my life or like if I was literally about to die, aye"**

**I: "And is most of the reason for that because of the way the community would see you..."**

**P: "Yeah because you'd just, you could end up with your name wrote on the walls saying that you're a tout and all that there..."**

**I: "Right OK. That would actually be worse that the beating that you might get?"**

**P: "It actually could, you could end up getting several beatings for that..."**

19009

Whilst no young person indicated that they fully supported the activity of paramilitaries, in general, there was acceptance of their enduring presence and several young people even described the 'policing' function that they believed paramilitary groups performed.

**P: "Oh aye, they used to get bricks and all off their face sometimes. One of my mates got threw bricks off his facing walking down one of the wee alleys near his house"**

***I: "By someone in a paramilitary group?"***

***P: "Yeah, IVF...for messing about at the train station and he was a couple of years older than me. He was getting like all of us drink and stuff and then we were all messing about..." 15002***

***"So they're everywhere like...they give punishment beatings. So if you do something wrong, you would get beat for it" 19009***

***"So is there sometimes when you might think, or you understanding why they're been threatened and that's fair enough?"***

***P: "Yeah...like all the kids, a couple of weeks ago...all the kids were throwing bricks and all of them and they were just like intimidating people, like all the wee tourists and all" 11015***

***"bad people go and beat people for the craic and the good people like would go after the people that sell the drugs and all" 12012***

These comments reflect the ways that young people make sense of the enduring presence of paramilitaries and the complex ways that violence can be justified. Participants referred to the perceived motivations of the violent adults as the basis for justification. Therefore, the rhetoric that surrounds violence is important to understand as these 'explanatory styles' justify violence, give purpose to the perpetrators and neutralise the harmful and traumatic effects on victims. Captured in four common words- *"they must have deserved it"*.

***"the majority of the times they bring it on themselves...it's some kinds of punishment [and] they're definitely getting this for some reason" 15002***

But beyond the bravado, a number of young people began to describe the long arm of the paramilitary presence in their local areas. Several described (but did not name) psychological trauma. This trauma manifested itself in particular ways that we know to include hyperarousal and avoidance. Hyper aroused to the ever present threat of danger and avoidance of people and places that could exacerbate risk further.

***"It affected who I went out with and stuff, because I didn't want to go out in large crowds" 15013***

***"Like I know friends that after it didn't come back out at all and didn't socialise with anybody really"***

***"you just know that they're up to stuff because you see, you can actually see them walking about just trying to watch you" 12012***

***"you are shitting yourself like because you don't know if or when they're going to show up...I would still walk about because it's my area [but] well you'd be a lot more on edge...like even if it wasn't the one that's looking you you would, as soon as you hear 'oh he's in the UDA, you're straight away freaking out..." 19009***

Despite the often ubiquitous threat, young people appeared to find safety where they could. For some, safety was found through well-established families, often with reputations for defending each other; for others, it was through the shielding effects of friends and acquaintances.

***"...because he's got that big family background as well like, people would know not to touch him... I'm not going to let my wee cousin be hit..." 18003***

Others find safety in the resources that are available in the community-places where young people feel that they can go to, socialise and avoid conflict with others. Youth services were particularly prized-not only because they were considered youth oriented spaces, but were places that young people have the opportunity to connect to adults who care about them, provide opportunities and where they can access support if they needed to.

***"yeah well I'd say that youth club really...[we] have a meeting on Friday just stuff to do with work and stuff they just really understand you so they do. It's not like school or nothing, like it's nothing like that. Like, youth work and school's two completely different things"***

***"In what way? What do you feel that the difference is?"***

***"Yeah, it's just the way they approach you and like they're more comfortable-they listen to you more really" 15002***

Despite the benefit of such spaces, several young people indicated that these were often limited, either because the physical resources had been damaged or alternatively, the provision did not meet their needs

***"...there's nothing really to do, like there's no really youth clubs or, like the parks are always burnt or destroyed and that there...so you just walk about and sit somewhere and you end up getting into trouble" 19009***

Violence and aggression become legitimate responses that serve to maintain reputation, heal damaged egos and also sometimes (but not often) achieve material reward.

During one conversation, a young person talked about their experiences in school and couldn't understand why it was that the school had expelled them because they had assaulted a teacher.

***"No, it was just one of the teachers just didn't like me and like he went to hit me so I hit him....they just threw me out because I hit a teacher" 11015***

Violence appears to be so pervasive that it is normalised in many situations, particularly when individuals feel aggrieved.

In sum, there appear to be a number of significant risks that young people struggle to navigate safely. These risks could place some young people at greater risk of exploitation and violence. That said, there are also opportunities that have been highlighted through these interviews that could mitigate these risks, reduce vulnerability and increase young people's sense of safety. But without these efforts, they can help to increase our understanding of the factors that contributed to an escalation in community violence on a scale not seen for some time.

### Purpose – how young people described the nature of the riots and participation in them

The vast majority of young people became aware of the riots via social media. Often the night before. Participants recalled that they began to see messages on their timeline referring to some sort of collective action. Interestingly, few of these social media posts appeared to directly incite violence. Despite this, most young people advised that the underlying assumption was the violence would be at least part of the response.

***"...there was a post, there was a Facebook page made up and they put up a post saying '[area]-peaceful protect' or something. It was something to do with a peaceful protest...[but] they weren't there for a peaceful protect, they were there for a riot. That's why they went" 18007***

As the posts gained momentum, the anticipated trouble became the talk of the areas. Among friends and work colleagues, many were discussing the looming events as well as the expectation for everyone to attend.

***"Because you would see it on like Facebook and stuff and you would hear it through mates at work. They were all talking about it in work and all-saying it's going to happen at a certain time" 15002***

In terms of engagement, there was a general consensus that although there were many adults watching on, it was primarily younger people that were actively involved in the rioting.

***"yeah there was adults standing watching it but all the ones it was like, they were all like ten, eleven and all so they were" 11015***

Several young people suggested however that the role of adults was more than that of passive observer. Young people suggested that they saw adults verbally encouraging young people to take part and even supplying them with petrol bombs and glass bottles.

***“and within seconds there was actually older ones dropping off jerry cans out of their cars full of petrol to help light the bins...”***

Some of these adults were known to the young people as paramilitaries.

***“...like whenever all that there kicked off-it was actually the first night it happened. It was the kids that done it and that would've been my friends about and the paramilitaries were actually supporting them that night. Like the paramilitaries were actually leading it on...the paramilitaries were actually leading the kids on. But any other, like because the kids are doing the paramilitaries dirty work in that situation because the paras, like they're the ones who's actually frightened by this here, the Irish Sea border stuff. So they're letting the kids go out and do their dirty work...” 18003***

So if that's the case, why did young people take part? When asked about motivations for participating in the disorder, the most common explanation was the familiar one of looking for “kicks” or something to relieve the boredom of the everyday (Ferrell, 2004; Matza, 1964):

***“Aye, it was a bit of a buzz, so it was ... because there was nothing else to be doing” (16005).***

All of the participants lived in areas that not only experienced the most significant violence in Spring 2021, but were characterised as being some of the areas most affected by violent conflict. When directly asked about the role of paramilitaries, most were aware of the presence of paramilitaries during the events and a small number of young people suggested that paramilitaries were actively involved in encouraging and equipping young people to engage in the violence. However, for some, even the anonymity provided during the interviews was insufficient to encourage them to discuss the role of paramilitaries openly and honestly. Several preferred to avoid this topic altogether.

***I: “So was it organised do you think...”***

***P: “Do I have to answer that??”***

***I: “No, not all at all. You don't have to answer anything that you don't want to”***

***P: “Aye, that's alright. Can I just skip that”***

Most said they got involved because others they knew, family members or friends, were getting involved, and that they required no further ‘cause’ beyond that social allegiance:

***“Yeah. So I was like having a drink in the house and then I got called to say, because I knew there was a protest but I didn't go, and I got a phone call saying ‘Your wee cousin's round here, he's rioting’. I was like ‘Right, I'll be round in five minutes’. Me and my other cousins ran round and were looking***

***for him, and then, I only had one glass of my drink so I was like not really that drunk but I was, I don't really know. But when I see stuff like that my adrenaline goes" 18017***

The young people in this sample indeed lived in areas characterised by multiple levels of deprivation as well as high levels of violence. This is known to create an effect with some young people hyper-aroused to perceived threats and dangers. This was evident throughout the interviews. Both fear for oneself and for one's community are equally motivating and increase the potential for violence to be perceived as legitimate.

The rioting was also framed by some as a sort of rite of passage for boys and young men, a chance for them to show that they can protect themselves, as well as their family and friends.

***"No, there would be a difference like. Wee girls wouldn't want to get involved in it like...Because wee girls don't really care about all that stuff, like religion and all" 16005***

***"I'd be protective of my family no matter what like" 16003***

Indeed, several explained their participation by pointing to the performative pressures of masculinity (Maguire, 2020):

***I: Why do you think the fellas were getting caught up in it more than girls were?***

***P: Because it's not really, I wouldn't say, if you're a man you have to like 'man up' and probably like 'grow a set' and it means you have to do it. Like girls are just, I'm not being sexist but girls wouldn't really go and be like 'come on and we'll throw stones' or 'come on and we'll throw petrol bombs'. It's just more of a men thing like. ... Like you can't, like in this community you would probably get mocked for not, like not doing something, do you know what I mean? You would get like, I wouldn't say like bullied, but you would like get laughed at or it'd be like 'oh remember you didn't throw that stone at the peelers' and all, and then you'd get the whole crowd laughing (18007)***

Another participant likewise described this peer pressure in explicitly heteronormative terms with the fear of being designated as un-masculine more powerful than the fear of violence or consequences from the police

***P: "Just, it's like if everyone else is doing it, like because I was with all my mates and I felt if I didn't do it... they would've thought I'd be scared to do it or something, so I had to do it to just show them that I'm not".***

***I: "Right okay. Were you scared?"***

***P: "Aye a wee bit like. I didn't want to get thing. Because the cops, they were in a team with the riot shields and all. I knew if they got me they would've probably beat the life out of me".***

***I: "And so was it more important that, what your friends thought than maybe getting beat up by the police, as you're saying, or getting arrested?"***

***P: "Yeah. Or else I was, they would've called me a wee -- they would've called me gay or something if I hadn't come down" (12012).***

Whilst we know that in most contexts young men would prefer to avoid violence, there appeared to be few opportunities during these riots to disengage and at the same time maintain status. The costs of not engaging in violence appeared to be considered more costly than abstaining—at least for some. In this study, failure to participate in the rioting, they said, risked having one's manliness called into question. That said, young men did look for opportunities to avoid the violence. The most common (and legitimate) ways were to assign responsibility to a girlfriend.

***"Like I went up with my girlfriend so like all I had to say is that I'm with her and that I'm not up to riot or anything like...so you don't feel as much as you have to be involved then" 1800***

This is an important insight for several reasons. It illustrates the very different expectations placed on young men and young women. As one participant put it, '*...girls wouldn't really go and be like, 'come on we throw stones' or 'come on we throw petrol bombs'. It's more of a man thing*'. It demonstrates that when given the opportunity, young men can choose non-violent responses, but they also need a greater number of reasonable alternatives than they perceive to be available.

***P: "Do you think that some of them, or even quite a lot of them wouldn't have got involved in they could have got out of it?"***

***I: "Yeah"***

In the absence of tools and strategies to take individual decisions, it seems that the role of families may be important. Living in a family with at least one adult who demonstrates warmth as well as control may mitigate the wider community risks. In this instance, young people described parental monitoring as an important deterrent.

***"Well flip, not even that I'm able to say no. See if my mum seen me throw a rock or anything, my mum would beat the c\*\*t out of me is the polite way to say it...[my friend's parents] probably don't care like that much and don't check...we've a big family as well, like a big family...so if I let any of them done it would cause all sorts of a shitshow in that sense" 18003***

Where they lived with familial difficulty, or where the adults were unable to effectively implement this supervisory function, community risks were compounded by these family

risks, and young people were at increased risk of engaging in the riots. For several young people, the expectation to be visibly present in the area on the nights of the riots extended to adults as well as young people. Seeing known adults, even parents could have helped to legitimise the violence further.

***“Well as I said, the whole community was out so you were actually probably looking at your parents and like whenever I went walking past with the dog, there was wee grannies and all just standing there watching them”. 19009***

Importantly, most of the interviewees were largely adamant that there was no direct, coherent political motivation for the rioting:

***“Like see if you were to ask any of the actual kids, like what is it they're doing any of this here for, they wouldn't have a fucking [clue]. Like, they would just tell you themselves that it's just to brick the peelers [police]. ... But if you asked any of them there kids running about there throwing the bricks, 'what's the cause of this?' not one of them would be able to fucking string a sentence together for you and tell you what the actual cause of it is. ... It came about because, I don't know, but it's something to do, see to be honest, and I couldn't really tell you much about the Irish Sea border because I'm not, like, I wouldn't be into it, it's not something that I'd be interested in. It was more like paramilitaries telling all these kids to go and do it. ... It's not them uns [paramilitaries] that's getting their hands dirty, it's the kids, and it's just ruining their future” (18003).***

At the same time, some interviewees bristled at negative media portrayals that portrayed participants in the rioting as apolitical, uninformed or purely hedonistic:

***I: “Right. And then do you think the kids in the area are concerned about the Sea Border and all that's going on?”***

***P: “They do know about it. Like, I don't know, people make us out to be stupid and that we don't know what it's about. They do” (18017).***

However, later in the interview, the same interviewee admitted it was only after the riot that he fully understood what he was rioting about:

***P: “No, I don't, like I genuinely do not care about anything that's going on. Like, I went into that riot not knowing that it was for the Irish Sea border until the next day, like do you know what I mean?” (18017)***

This was a fairly common response among the young people involved:

***I: “Why do you think there was young people involved in this?”***

***P: “I don't even know. I mean half of them didn't even know what the fuck it was over”.***

***I: “Did they not?”***



**P: "Nah. See to be honest I didn't even know what the fuck it was over until after" (20011).**

Unquestionably, the motivation for violence had some roots in the "two tribes" rhetoric of "them" and "us" that has long characterised or caricatured the constitutional conflict in Northern Ireland:

**"And because, I don't really know an awful lot like. I just know that like nothing's happened to them 'uns [the other side]. They didn't get arrested or like get cautioned or anything. Like it was all fine for them to be out at a funeral<sup>1</sup> with like hundreds of people and barely any of them was wearing masks and stuff" (18016)**

This captured the sentiment that for at least some of the young people, they felt that the state, as well as the police as enforcers of the law treated one community differently to their community. Where whole communities perceive themselves to be victims, isolated and unheard, fear and frustration become powerful violence inducing mechanisms. As one young person suggested, the community level factors were exacerbated by media reports and social media that enabled rapid and widespread sharing of information-sometimes misinformation.

**P: "Well obviously I should've stayed away, like but it's not something that I'm going to feel ashamed of. Like I did it and I'm admitting to it and I'm paying the price for it. Like there's, I don't know, there's just no need for the way people were judging me".**

**I: "Why, who was judging you?"**

**P: "I don't know, just everyone and anyone. ... It was all over Facebook. [A Belfast news outlet] put a photo up of me where you can see up my dress and all. It's disgusting. ... Everyone was sharing it" (02134).**

Several participants specifically reflected on the legacy of conflict which was eloquently described by one respondent as a "generational trauma" that afflicts many in the region as a result of decades of conflict:

**P: "I don't know. But in my eyes it's generational trauma so it is".**

**I: "Right. What do you mean by that?"**

**P: "So it's, like it's coming down through the family, and like their dad's dad's dad's dad's, and just keeps going and going and going. Like they were brung up through the Troubles and they were saying about it, and then like their kids are getting it into their heads that they have to do it."**

Of course, cross-community resentments are a constant in certain pockets of Northern Irish society, so cannot themselves explain violent outbursts such as the ones in the spring of

2021. Additionally, the interviews suggested that the riot participants were not themselves uniquely or even particularly motivated by sectarian passions:

**I: "But why was it that particular night do you think, that they all came together? Was there anything in particular that they were there for or any reason that they all decided at the same time to do that?"**

**P: "No, I think they were all there that one night because someone said on social media that it was a protest for like the DUP and get them all out and they don't want an Irish Sea border and all that."**

**I: "Yeah. And do you understand all of that and what's going on?"**

**P: "I understand it all, but I just let it all blow over because at the end of the day it's only a religion and half of my mates and family are Catholic, so there's no point fighting about that. And then on the other hand it's just everyone else doesn't see it that way. They're seeing it 'ah he's a Catholic, he shouldn't be in a Prod area' or 'he's a Prod, he shouldn't be in a Catholic area'. But no one sees it the way that I would see it" (11015).**

Interestingly, several of the interviewees pointed out that the anger and violence fuelling the riots were not directed so much at the other community as much as toward the police. By its very nature, civil unrest and riotous behaviour involves conflict with the police.

**"It wasn't the two communities that were looking to get at each other. I think it was mainly the police they were after" (19009)**

Violence appeared to be in part instrumental- a means of achieving control where there was a perception that control had been lost. Seeing oneself as 'effect', something that is having something 'done to', can create a sense of being pushed around, unable to exercise any lawful control over these circumstances and in these circumstances, unlawful responses can be legitimised.

According to interviewees, the police showed considerable restraint at first, then, once provoked by the young people they reacted. This police reaction in turn further accelerated the violence by encouraging others who had only been bystanders to join in:

**"The peelers [police] didn't even engage, so they didn't. But the [young people] just kept trying and trying and trying, and then the peelers just like, they got really pissed off about it and then that's when they engaged. And then it was making all the young people worse because the peelers were engaging with them and giving them the reaction that they want" (11015)**

**"So they were obviously waiting on the paddy wagons, and then the paddy wagons came and for fuck's sake, you know, the police got out of the paddy wagons and ran at the kids. The kids run like fuck" (18003)**

This mirrors several previous examples including the disorder in Bristol in 1980, Brixton 1981 and Birmingham in 1985 (Waddington et al., 1989). One interviewee explained that the primary purpose of the disorder was an attempt to provoke the "attention" of the police in

precisely this way:

***I: "Yeah? And why do you think [this happened]?"***

***P: "Just to try and get attention off like the police and stuff"***

***I: "Right. What sort of attention would they have been looking for?"***

***P: "Just any sort of attention -- to fight back" (18016)***

These antagonistic attitudes toward policing authorities are, of course, common throughout many communities and in previous example of civil unrest, but might be somewhat unexpected among a group associated with 'loyalism' or 'pro-state' politics. Whilst there are similarities in the English riots of 2011, and the widespread unrest following the death of George Floyd in 2020 that appear to point to hostility towards the police (Lewis et al., 2011), it may also be the case that the police are the most simple and visible manifestation of the state and can often be an 'easy target' for the pent up frustration and anger within communities. In these riots however, there was a context specific to the local context and whilst most young people were unaware of the nuances, there was a sense that they could not trust the police

***"like there's a two-tier policing system" 18003***

That said, several young people believed that the police response during the riots were as much to blame for the escalation as the pre-riot frustration.

***"...I've heard like other people that I know saying that people have come onto the streets for a peaceful protest and then felt intimidated by the police, because there was so many of them showed up expecting something like that to kick off" 15013***

Further, the wider criminal justice reaction against those involved in the disorder is likely to magnify these anti-authority views as well as helping to frame the perpetrators of violence as victims who are able to justify or neutralise their behaviour through the denial of responsibility, and denial of the victim.

In the aftermath of the riots, the damage to roads, vehicles, bins as well as other infrastructure became apparent. In the end, few young people believed that the riots served any material purpose. Few believed that there was any particular gain. At an individual level, several young people had been arrested. One described this experience as deeply distressing.

***"They kept me in the cells overnight and there was people getting beat and there was people trying to hang themselves. It's like the most traumatising thing ever" 18017***

Even for those who weren't arrested during the riots, there were increased anxieties at the prospect of police evidence catching up with them. For others, the destruction could be compared to self-harm on a community level. So what could have been done to prevent it?

Prospects- what young people believed about their futures and the futures of their communities

In general, young people lacked optimism for their communities. The multi-faceted challenges appeared to them to be too complex to feasibly address in the short term.

***"...there is potential that comes from [the area], but a lot of stuff that hold you back in the [area]. There's drugs, there's drink, there's everything in the [area]. There's paramilitaries, there's just people that you don't want to be around and they're always going to be there. So that's what it comes down to." 18007***

***"you just have to live with the fucking, you have to live with the fact of what the community is" 16003***

Despite the clear desire for change, there were few ideas on how this change could be achieved. As a result, most were pessimistic.

***P: "yeah, I think every young person whose grown up, well, they're accepting it now like-they're going to have to"***

***I: "and are you hopeful that it might change?"***

***P: "Well I hope it does change"***

***I: "how realistic is that?"***

***P: "Well I don't know. Probably not, but I hope it really does"***

***"...everyone has their view on paramilitaries. I think they're, I don't know. They're not good people but I suppose it's just something in this country that's always been here and it's always going to be here anyway" 18007***

Part of the reason for higher rates of pessimism appeared to be related to the confidence that young people had in elected leaders. In their own words, young people believed that the constant focus on sectarian issues and references to the past prevent progress from being made

***"because it's all politics-all they think about is orange and green...so it all comes down to Catholic and Protestant doesn't it?...This probably will never change. Well it will change in some time but it'll not change in my lifetime..." 18007***

***"No definitely not-it's going to get worse" 18017***

This perceived leadership vacuum combined with a lack of meaningful and pro-social opportunities reduced participants confidence in the extent to which peace would endure in their own areas. Instead, many believed that violence could be sparked again with little warning.

***"I can see a couple of estates going so I can, just because its going to be summer as well and all the kids are off...like all the ones that's just finished school and all-they'll probably do it just to get a reaction out of the police, but sure that happens everywhere...and now they've nothing else to do. They don't have nothing to do really..."***

In addition to the pessimism directed at a community level, few of those who were engaged in the riots described their own futures in optimistic terms.

***I: "So where do you see yourself then in the next couple of years? Any big plans or where would you hope to be?"***

***P: "I don't even know, I honestly don't. Just doing what I'm doing" 16005***

The minority who referred to their own futures in a more optimistic way often described their desire to leave the area. For these young people there was a belief that only by leaving the area could they achieve their potential.

***"Aye, I can't wait to get out of this dump anyway...there's nothing here..." 18003***

***"some people would say it's absolutely, as soon as they can get out of the place, they leave" 15002***

***"I can see myself getting out of the area and just going somewhere different and starting new" 11015***

In terms of preventing further outbreaks of collective violence, young people talked about this in two distinct ways. The first related to what could have been done during the

escalation. The second related to what could be achieved in a planned, purposeful and before an escalation.

In terms of the former, there was general pessimism. Young people believed that there was little that the police, youth workers or they themselves could do.

***“Well not really, because there is an amount of people like that there’s nothing really the police can do” 19009***

Most agreed that at the point violence erupted, there was little that could be done to quickly de-escalate the situation.

***“No there was no way that you could stop that like with the amount of violence that was on and the burnt buses and all” 12012***

The young people also identified responses that whilst pro-active, might have had little material impact on young people's engagement in the rioting. For example, youth workers were tasked with being physically present during the escalation. However, evidence from the young people suggests that at this stage, their role was significantly limited.

***“Well youth workers were already on the streets...but they weren't really listening to anybody” 19009***

This raises several important questions. Firstly, what is the role in the build-up, outburst and de-escalation stages of collective violence? In partnership with other key agencies, youth work organisation's could collectively consider their role at various stages of the cycle, how they best perform those functions and how to reduce the risk to themselves. That said, there appear to have been opportunities in the build-up for multiple agencies to have an impact. This is useful as it provides insights into the types of activities that are more generalisable and can be applied in a consistent way, leveraging existing resources and operating through coherent structures.

Worryingly, several young people believed that the only people that could have prevented the violence erupting were the paramilitaries. This reflects the influence young people believe could be attributed to the escalation but also the influence they have over activity in some communities. The fact that the violence ensued for several nights, reflects the desire of paramilitaries for it to continue.

***“It's just, I don't know, it all comes down to like the paramilitaries can stop it...No I don't think that it could've been prevented. Well I'd say it could've, but again the paramilitaries could've stopped all the kids rioting but they just didn't***

***want to because they knew if they kept rioting then the government, well aye, I think it's the government, would've offered them money and that there's why they're there-to get money. Nothing else" 18007***

One practical way that young people suggested could help some young people avoid being actively engaged in violence was through increased parental supervision. This is supported by the wider evidence and one of the main targets of intervention for several evidence based models such as Multisystemic Therapy (MST) and Functional Family Therapy (FFT). One young person compared his experience of being supervised by parents with those of his friends who were largely unsupervised. He suggested that this parental monitoring provided an 'out' from taking part in the riots without losing status.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Interpersonal violence is complex (Gilligan, 1999)- collective violence even more so. The riots that took place during April 2021 came as a surprise to many both in terms of onset and destruction. However, the events were not isolated to Northern Ireland (Campedelli and D'orsogna, 2020). International evidence appears to illustrate that as strains increase (Agnew, 1992) and as societal cracks begin to show (Schwab and Malleret, 2020) violence is increasingly likely to take place, not least as a symbol (Lee, 2019) of a community's control over matters they feel that they have little control over (Brezina, 2000). We joined a long list of communities across continents that experienced elevated rates of collective violence (IEP, 2021). This study aimed to capture the voices of those closest to the riots within the NI context and unpack the global, as well as local factors that influenced them. In doing so, this study sought to extend our understandings of the causes of the violence *'beyond the spark'* and identify the root causes and implications for policy and practice. During this study, we undertook in-depth interviews with young people who were physically closest to the riots, and captured their accounts of the violence and how they made meaning from them. In this report we present the micro level stories as well as the meta narratives that connect individual accounts to each other, as well as the riots in NI to elsewhere.

### ***The local 'Sparks'***

It was widely cited at the time of the riots that the violence was being driven by anger at the Brexit *'divorce deal'* and frustration with the ways that agencies dealt with the Bobby Storey funeral. Local and international media captured those most actively engaged in the violence (Morris, 2021). They were young, with some reports that children as young as eight years

old were involved as adults watched on. How much did these young people know about the politics of the UK's withdrawal from the EU or indeed the Public Prosecution Service's decision and to what extent did this drive their active engagement in the riots? This study suggests that most young people were aware of either. Whilst many of these young people were able to refer to concepts such as *'the Irish Sea border'* or indeed events such as the Bobby Storey funeral, most were unable to discuss in any detail what they meant by either. In truth, their involvement in the riots were not politically motivated. However, that is not the same as saying that ideas such as the sea border were not highly emotive and had the potency to provide the local *'spark'*. Without understanding the nuances, young people were acutely aware of the central messages. They were being told that their community was at existential risk, that the State could not be trusted to support them, and that if they did not defend their identities, they would lose it. This misinformation was being openly circulated on traditional, as well as on social media. Whilst it is not clear what the motivations of elected representatives were, it is evident through these accounts that more sinister elements, operating through organised criminal networks were intent on inciting violence. They actively encouraged some young people to engage fully expecting a *'snowball'* effect and even provided the material that would increase the level of destruction.

In this sense, Brexit and the Bobby Storey funeral were indeed the spark, but they were not the cause of the Spring riots. There were other much more fundamental factors at play. These are what connects the local to the global-the spark to its material, and also provide the basis for prevention.

### ***Connectivity to community***

Many young people think of their communities as being cohesive and generally refer to them in affectionate ways. They have family members living in those areas, and appear to feel intimately connected to others that live in close proximity. Others however do not feel connected. They feel disconnected to the community and report having few opportunities to engage with pro-social adults in constructive ways. This has a related effect on reducing the perceived availability of social supports. In the absence of stable social connections, some of young people are unable (and unwilling) to access supports when they need them most. The net impact is that vulnerability rises, the risk of harm increases, and as the riots demonstrate, some are at elevated risk of criminal exploitation.



### ***Normalisation of Violence***

This study documented young people's exposure to violence. For most of this sample, violence appears highly normalised, corroborating the findings of several previous studies (YouthAction 2001; Harland and McCready 2014; Walsh and Schubotz, 2020; Walsh, Doherty and Best, 2021). Violence is almost ubiquitous and so interwoven across many social settings that it is tolerated as simply a part of everyday life. Exposure to violence takes many different forms, but it appears that those who were actively involved in the riots had been victims of serious violence (Widom, 1989) among peers, and often at the hands of paramilitaries-although many were reluctant to tell their stories. Further, those who have been most affected by violence do not appear to have access to supports that can help mitigate its traumatic effects (Horowitz et al, 1998) This is likely to increase risks further, exacerbate vulnerability and elevate the chances of perpetrating violence against others.

### ***Social and gender norms***

The normalisation of violence appears to be driven in part by how young men expect that they should behave in certain circumstances (Terr, 1991; Cialdin and Trust, 1998). Put simply, if they believe that they or those closest to them are at risk, it is their responsibility to do something that will either reduce those risks or achieve retribution (Brown and Burton, 2010). Young men who do not respond, are perceived to be weak and in that weakness are at greater risk (Kimmel, 1994). So, whilst most young men would preferably avoid violence (Harland and McCready, 2014), it is one of the few behavioural responses available to them that enable them to ward off threat and also enhance their status (Stott and Reicher, 1998). Where these gender norms are pervasive, they can become part of the community norms that set the standards of behaviour. There is significant evidence that these norms facilitated young people's engagement in the riot. Coupled with the widespread campaign of misinformation, young men were under particular pressure to perform (Messerschmidt, 1993). Therefore challenging misinformation, whilst important, also requires community champions that can begin to challenge these dominant gender, as well as wider social norms.

### ***Enduring presence of paramilitaries***

Connected to young people's accounts of violence, were the reports of the enduring presence of paramilitaries. Like violence itself, these networks appear to be embedded into the fabric, impacting upon young people's sense of safety, as well as informing community

norms. There were several accounts of young people who believed that they were at imminent risk from paramilitaries and yet felt unable to identify or access the supports that could mitigate those risks. The fear of physical harm was often of less concern than the fear of community responses (Errante, 1997). It is evident that in some communities, paramilitaries continue to have a significant grip on individual's lives, and at the same time, the community norms (Cialdin and Trust, 1998) appear to perpetuate the attitudes that drive and sustain at least some paramilitary activity (Sykes and Matza, 1964). This activity that is often violent in nature is then justified on the grounds that victims get what they deserve (Sykes and Matza, 1964; Maruna and Copes, 2004). In April 2021, it was evident that many in loyalist communities believed that there was a constitutional, as well as existential risk. It was also clear that this was the message that was conveyed to young people. In this climate of fear, driven by this perceived threat, violence was justified, despite the harm to others (Stott and Reicher, 1998).

### ***Lack of hope for themselves and their communities***

What distinguished young people who engaged in the riots from those that did not, appeared to be the extent to which they were optimistic for their own futures and the future of their communities (Matza, 1964). Those most actively involved in the violence were significantly less likely to be able to articulate ambition, to discuss what motivated them, to indicate that they were hopeful for their futures and were also more likely to advise that they did not believe that the challenges that their communities experienced would be, or could be addressed. These young people generally lacked any sense of optimism for themselves or others. Conversely, those who were not directly engaged in the violence were generally more optimistic about their own futures. They believed that they could achieve in education and/or employment and that they could enjoy success. These young people were able to project into the future and generally had a plan of what they needed to do to get to where they wanted to. They were action oriented and appeared much more motivated. Interestingly, they were also the group of young people that appeared to have access to informal social supports, particularly through family. Those engaged in violence however were more likely to report fractured relationships with family members, tensions that were only exacerbated by Covid and lockdown restrictions and few adults that they could feasibly access for support.

### ***Roles and responsibilities of services***

It seems that whilst a joined up effort was observed in some areas, there was little understanding of how this joined up effort could be implemented. For example, youth workers were present during the escalation and yet there seems to have been little material gain. In fact, their presence could have placed them at greater risk of being harmed. The role of youth services is critical in the area of violence prevention but it is not clear what their added value could be during an escalation. It is more likely that their function is best served both before and after the events when young people are willing to engage and able to access those informal supports.

### ***Recommendations:***

Understanding and responding to need:

1. There is a need to identify those most vulnerable to violence and exploitation and provide therapeutic, practical and emotional support, particularly for victims of violence, whilst also recognising the barriers that prevent them from accessing supports
2. There is a need to ensure that vulnerable families are supported in ways that reduce vulnerability of young people

Challenging dominant and destructive norms:

3. There is a need to create safe spaces for young people to critically reflect on the norms that justify violent behaviour
4. There is a need to introduce non-violent skills that are considered feasible to young people

Building community capacity:

5. There is a need to challenge misinformation in much more proactive ways
6. There is a need for community champions and role models to challenge the community norms that drive, sustain and justify all forms of violence in communities

Connecting service provision:

7. There is a need to ensure that youth services routinely offer safe spaces for vulnerable at the times that they are needed
8. There is a need for greater clarity on the functions, roles and responsibilities of services during the escalation of violence

9. There is a need to understand the public/police relationships that exist at a local level and contribute to activities that increase the legitimacy of police

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