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Risk and refuge: Factors that facilitate and impede community supervision in post-conflict Northern Ireland

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**ABSTRACT**
Community sanctions often require the coordination of support between probation staff and a range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Despite these burgeoning partnerships, few studies have explored the experiences of such support in settings where community spaces and structures remain contested, where violence remains endemic; and where paramilitary influence endures. This explorative study captured the voices of justice involved young men to understand the barriers and facilitators of accessing support intended to reduce the latent criminogenic effects of living in a post-conflict society. This study found that young men experienced ecological stressors known to increase criminal coping. Exposure to paramilitary-related harms and a lack of trust in police as well as local NGOs had a tangible effect on support seeking. Further, adherence to traditional masculine norms exacerbated these issues. Practical implications are discussed.

**Introduction**
Community sanctions such as probation are core to the modern criminal justice process (Robinson, 2018). Probation supervision has increased exponentially since the 1980s (Byrne, 1989; Byrne et al., 2019) and is routinely facilitated within offenders’ own communities (Capdevila et al., 2016). The prevalence of community embedded supervision is illustrated by the fact that as of 2020, the 70% of those under correctional supervision in the United States were supervised in the community (Kluckov & Zeng, 2022). Community embedded approaches often have a rehabilitative focus that aims to reintegrate those who have experienced prison back into communities, and to simultaneously reduce criminal recidivism (Duan et al., 2023; Welsh & Rocque, 2014; Yang, 2018). They have the objective of responding to contextually specific criminogenic risks and needs (Van der Put et al., 2010), and are largely informed by the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) principles that have become widely embedded into community supervision (Schmucker & Lösel, 2015). The Risk principle leverages insights gained from empirically validated tools. Criminogenic needs include for example, the biological, social, psychological and structural factors that are hypothesised to contribute towards an individual’s propensity to offend, and often coalesce in multiples to elevate risk (Azeredo et al., 2019; Fenimore & Jennings, 2018; King, 2013; McCartan, 2007). These processes are located within nested relationships that facilitate or impede criminal behaviour (Johns et al., 2017) and may...
include individual-level factors (such as substance use, low empathy (O’Neill et al., 2017) and early on-set offending (Moffitt et al., 2002)), family-level factors (maltreatment and abuse (Farrington et al., 2009; Widom, 1989), and community level factors such as violent victimisation (Fowler et al., 2009), psychological trauma (Walsh et al., 2021), and persistent exposure to criminal networks. Gender-specific risk factors have also been found, with violent offending characterised as a particularly male challenge (Tomsen & Gadd, 2019), associated with gender-specific socialisation processes (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lourenco et al., 2019) that not only predispose males to violence-related behaviour (Brush & Miller, 2019; Hong, 2000), but can also prevent males from accessing supports that have the potential to reduce psychological strains (Agnew, 1992; Baughner & Gazmarranian, 2015). The Responsivity principle requires that supervisors recognise the risks and needs in the development of interventions (Viglione, 2019).

The hypothesis that has driven RNR is that by understanding and addressing the most salient criminogenic needs that exist within the ecology of probationers (Johns et al., 2017), risks (and therefore recidivism) may be reduced (Koetzle & Matthews, 2020). This is supported by figures from the USA (Kosson et al., 2019), Germany (Engel et al., 2022), and from Australia (Schaefer & Little, 2020). However, findings have been more mixed in other areas such as England and Wales (Palmer et al., 2015). Despite some evidence that community situated supervision that applied these RNR principles has generally had more favourable outcomes compared with incarceration (Andrews and Bonta, 2010), more recent reviews (see, for example, Duan et al., 2023) have found that there is significant heterogeneity. This makes sense. These approaches are implemented in the community, and the ecology of communities differ greatly. While responses are often “subtracted” to external agencies (King, 2013), this belies the reality that resources within communities are highly variable, and how individuals perceive such support similarly differs.

Despite this heterogeneity, partnerships between probationary supervision and community resources have grown exponentially and have been formalised since 2009 in England and Wales through the “integrated offender management” (IOM) structures that seek to enhance community safety and reduce criminal recidivism by responding to complexity through locality-based prevention partnerships between statutory agencies and NGOs (Abrams et al., 2019; Hadfield et al., 2021), etc. In their review of the ecology of probation services in Ireland, Healy and Griffin (2023) identified the importance of the penal voluntary sector and suggested that “In the Irish context (and elsewhere), probation officers do not operate in isolation but are instead embedded within a network of agencies, blurring the lines between different micro-system settings and highlighting the overlap between micro-systems (concerned with a single setting) and meso-systems (concerned with the relationship between micro-system settings)” (p. 84). Combined, these meso-system partnerships aim to provide a range of psycho-social and practical supports that hold the potential of reducing criminogenic risks such as addiction, poor mental health, unemployment, and poor or unstable housing (Dyer & Biddle, 2016; Healy & Griffin, 2023; Tomczak, 2016). Such approaches may, under the right conditions, contribute towards increasing community-level social capital (Koetzle & Matthews, 2020) through the mechanism of broadening social networks and thus increasing access to positive social supports that provide individuals with resources to attain personal goals that reduce risks associated with further offending (Williams & Ariel, 2012; Chilenski & Summers 2016). The presence of local NGOs in such partnerships appears to add significant value (Wong et al., 2012).

Despite their utility, such coordinated responses are not without their challenges (Hadfield et al., 2021) and few studies have sought to synthesise the challenges of NGO delivery from the perspective of those on probation. In their review of evidence, both Jiang et al. (2022) and Canton’s (2022) reflections on resettlement and the role of probation found that mutual trust was an important element of successful community supervision, but they also noted the paucity of research in this space, particularly with regard to the perceptions of those being supervised. Of the limited research available, few have explored the role of trust in NGOs, with greater attention paid to probation officer-probationer relationships.
Historically, confidence in the justice system has been contested in Northern Ireland (McEvoy & Newburn, 2003; Topping, 2008; Walsh, 2020). Following the peace agreement in 1998, societal structures, including the governance and application of criminal justice was reviewed and amended. Since then, Northern Ireland and its structures have been on a period of post-conflict transition. Despite this, the implementation of probation services remains challenging (Carr & Maruna, 2012), with some communities remaining materially and psychologically affected by the legacy of conflict and the enduring presence of paramilitaries (Duffy et al., 2022; Walsh & Schubotz, 2019; Walsh et al., 2021, 2021). One model of probation that has been designed in the post-conflict era, specifically formulated to understand and respond to the criminogenic needs of young men in contemporary Northern Ireland is the ASPIRE programme.

The “Fresh Start” Agreement, published by the UK and Irish governments in 2015 (NIO, 2015) set out strategic proposals for addressing some of these most challenging, and hitherto intractable issues. Following this agreement, a three-person panel was established by the Northern Ireland Executive (The Executive) to report with recommendations for a strategy leading to the disbandment of paramilitary groups and their influence on criminality in Northern Ireland. The resulting “Executive Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime” led to the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNi) being commissioned to implement the “ASPIRE” project, which was specifically designed for justice involving young men aged 16–30 at risk of paramilitary-related harms (Ritchie & McGreevy, 2019). Established in 2017, the PBNi ASPIRE team included a dedicated team of PBNi staff who coordinate with NGOs to provide a range of psycho-social supports via peer mentoring and targeted support (Ritchie & McGreevy, 2019), both of which are promising modalities for increasing social capital and increasing socially diverse networks (Koetzle & Matthews, 2020). Despite a commissioned evaluation of the service, few details were captured on probationer’s perceptions and experiences of the supports that they received from local NGOs so integral to delivery (NISRA, 2019). Given that community sanctions that combine supervision with access to such local supports or treatments (Focquaert & Raine, 2012) can conceivably contribute towards reduced offending (Durnescu, 2016), this absence is striking (Andrade et al., 2021). The way that those on probation experience such sanctions could predict the level of their engagement, the degree to which they benefit from well-tailored support, and influence their future behaviour, including the probability of re-offending (Weaver & Armstrong, 2011). It is therefore prudent to examine, understand, reflect upon, and respond to offenders’ perceptions about the support and supervision that they receive, and the contexts that facilitate or impede effective rehabilitation (Andrews & Bonta, 2017; Johns et al., 2017; Koetzle & Matthews, 2020). Despite some studies having already explored the barriers and facilitators of NGO engagement in the justice system (Abrams et al., 2019), few have examined this in post-conflict environments such as Northern Ireland where spaces and structures remain contested (Carr & Maruna, 2012).

Empirical inquiries have examined the role of probation officers in regard to the implementation of community sanctions (e.g., Gleicher, 2020). Studies have also examined the perceptions of probation involved individuals on their experiences of probation. However, only a small number of studies have explored the community factors that facilitate or inhibit individual’s access to community resources and social supports within the context of community supervision (see for example Koetzle & Matthews, 2020). However, these studies were undertaken in non-conflict affected areas, and the analyses therefore largely ignores the nuances of building social capital during probationary supervision in communities that are contested and where paramilitary-related violence and harms persist.

Our examination of these issues provides insights into how community services are perceived by young men in communities most affected by the legacy of conflict and violence, and thus identifies
the specific salience of trust in services for effective delivery of community supervision and rehabilitation (Sturm et al., 2021).

Methods

Qualitative approach

Given the importance of the socio-cultural influences and context in regard to support seeking behaviours and the reduction of criminogenic community risks, a critical realist framework was applied (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The study sought to understand the nature of community-focussed probationary support in the context of latent community criminogenic risk in post-conflict NI. An important objective was to give a voice to those being studied (Copes et al., 2016). In this sense, the authors sought to capture both the micro stories and the meta-narratives that connected individual accounts to each other. While words are important, we were concerned with the ideas that embody support seeking behaviour, and the factors that facilitate or inhibit criminogenic risks (Metzler, Jackson and Trudeau, 2021), both of which are particularly relevant in the post-conflict context of Northern Ireland. To achieve this, a reflexive thematic analysis approach was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As Braun and Clarke (2019) point out, this approach is not superior to other qualitative methods available, but is chosen when the approach is better aligned to the nature and purpose of the research. In this case, the focus is neither on the minutiae of conversations, or the biographies of the participants. The purpose here was to code and unite themes that have implicit or latent meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Rather than providing a codified, rigid framework, reflexive thematic analysis provides the researcher with a flexible starting point (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It provides a process for interpreting the qualitatively rich interview data, while simultaneously acknowledging the subjectivity of the researchers’ perspective (Braun et al., 2019). An important aspect of conducting this reflexive qualitative research was to acknowledge the backgrounds of the researchers and to ensure that these backgrounds added insights rather than obscuring insights from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Participants were made aware that participation was voluntary and not connected in any way to their statutory supervision.

Participants

In total, twenty-eight young men consented to engage in interview, with 66% (n = 18) of those who expressed an interest were interviewed. Others who had consented did not engage in the interview process. Reasons included: sickness (7.1%, n = 2); further arrest (3.6%, n = 1); crisis (3.6%, n = 1); working (3.6%, n = 1) and; loss of contact (17.9%, n = 5). Given the theme of the study, data was collected on exposure to paramilitary harms, the timing of exposure and trust in local services. As the study was being undertaken in the context of NI, an additional variable on perceived community background was captured. 33.3% (N = 6) of the sample self-reported to be from a Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) area while 66.7% of the sample identified as being from an area characterised as being Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL).

Procedure

The researchers engaged in semi-structured, individual interviews with the participants using video call software. This enabled the participants to self-select whether or not they wanted to be seen and indeed to see the interviewer. The interview protocol consisted of an introduction, a series of open-ended questions, followed by a closing statement. At the outset of each interview, the interviewer confirmed that each participant understood the nature of the study and asked the participant to confirm that they consented to particulate. The interviewer also reminded the participants of their right to withdraw. The interview schedule consisted of
three broad themes within which there were a range of illustrative questions and prompts: “about you” (e.g., tell me a bit about yourself—what do you like to do?); “about living in your community” (e.g., how active are paramilitaries in your community?) and; “about your supports” (e.g., have you ever engaged with community supports as part of your probation supervision?)

**Data analysis**

Both author one and author two undertook reflexive thematic analysis (TA), using an iterative coding process and analyses that immersed them in the narrative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Data analysis followed a six-phase process (Braun & Clarke, 2021): data familiarisation; systematic data coding; the generation of initial themes; developing and reviewing the themes; refining, defining and naming those themes; and writing up the findings. During the first phase, the researchers engaged with the interview data as it became available. This happened in a number of ways. The researchers individually reflected on the interview responses, reviewed transcripts, and also had periodic conversations together to discuss observations and emerging ideas. During the second phase, the transcribed data was moved onto NVivo where it was stored and coded. This allowed for a more rigorous and systematic analysis. The third phase allowed for the inductive coding of the full data corpus of interviews. The two researchers independently coded a selection of three transcripts, and through a verification process, agreed on codes (Guest et al., 2012), to enhance inter-rater reliability. Several themes were then selected and considered through the lens of this framework. While the data was analysed inductively, this was done in the sense of allowing the analysis to be grounded in the data rather than being purely inductive given that TA cannot be undertaken in the context of a theoretical vacuum (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Phases four and five overlapped and involved refining the themes, identifying similarities between them and revising them accordingly. For example, two initial micro themes (early trauma and lack of support) later became one theme (missed opportunities for support) (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Three themes emerged: experiences and impact of paramilitary-related harm; trust in services and; the influence of restrictive masculine norms on support seeking.

**Ethics**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Queen’s University Belfast School Research Ethics Committee (SREC) and from the PBNI ethics committee.

The purpose of this qualitative study was not to make claims about causality or generalisability, but to uncover the social processes at play (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and give a voice to those engaged in the study (Copes et al., 2016). The strengths therefore are that the study uncovered a rich narrative that illuminates some of the criminogenic strains associated with living in a post-conflict society, the fulcrum of which are the barriers that prevent those most vulnerable to such strains from accessing the supports that could reduce their criminogenic effects.

**Results**

**Experiences of paramilitary related harms**

The enduring presence of paramilitaries in some areas (Walsh & Schubotz, 2019; Walsh, 2022), and perpetration of a range of ecological harms (Johns et al., 2017) characterised violent communities, and was highly normalised across the sample (Fowler et al., 2009). Indeed 94.4% of the sample described having had direct experiences of paramilitary threat and intimidation and violence.
Despite the trauma of living in such violent contexts (O’Neill et al., 2017; Walsh et al., 2021) and the direct exposure to paramilitary related violence - it was often caveated with sentiments akin to the question, “what can you do?.” The inference being very little.

These comments illustrated the most common form of exposure-physical violence (Bunting et al., 2020). In this case however, the frequency and severity were much more concentrated than in the general population (Walsh, 2022), a factor known to elevate the risk of offending (Fowler et al., 2009; Walsh et al., 2021). Young men not only described in graphic detail the nature of the assaults, but also alluded to the feelings of fear that accompanied these incidents.

Most worryingly, many of the respondents reported that their initial experiences began during early adolescence, but also persisted. On average, participants were fourteen years old when they were first threatened or attacked by those they believed members of a paramilitary group – a factor that has been attributed to earlier onset and more persistent offending (Moffitt et al., 2002; Van Hazenbroek, Blokland & Van Domburg, 2019).

Previous studies have demonstrated how living in violent communities and being exposed to serious violence directly (Amato, 2012; Fowler et al., 2009) can contribute aggressive pathways through hyperarousal, hyper-vigilance and hostile social reactions, where young men become at elevated risk of engaging in violence themselves (Walsh, 2019b).

Exacerbating both the traumatic effects of exposure and further undermining confidence in community services was the interconnectedness of paramilitaries and communities. Members were described as being from within, and of the same communities. The two extracts from Michael and Tommy, who were from two different communities, illustrate the intimate connections with those who cause harm and those are expected to protect from harm.

PARTICIPANT: I think the first time there was three and then after that there was always five of them.

INTERVIEWER: Right. And I take it you knew some of them anyway?
PARTICIPANT: Yeah. And two of my best mates, their brothers, one of the first attack, one of the people that organised and done the whole thing was their uncle.

INTERVIEWER: Right. So it’s kind of people, friends, families and people that live in the area and people you know?

PARTICIPANT: Aye. My da would’ve drank with them as well all the time.

INTERVIEWER: Right. And did he continue drinking with them after you got attacked?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Did your dad know that it was him that attacked you?

PARTICIPANT: Aye my dad knew and all. I was just warned not to tout, but I was never going to tout anyway. (Michael)

PARTICIPANT: Well I got told on the way up what was happening, do you know, like there was people who wanted to talk to me. But my da said to me, “listen you’ll be alright,” do you know what I mean? “They’re not going to touch you or nothing.” But I knew what was happening, because obviously like a few of my mates were took to that same bar and stuff like that there, and then, do you know what I mean? And I knew what was happening, do you know what I mean? And then just had to go, do you know what I mean? If I didn’t it would’ve ended up being worse (Tommy)

For Tommy and Michael, compliance, tacit approval, and resignation to the dark and violent realities of community life were core to their descriptions of paramilitary related harm. However, exposure extended beyond physical violence. The complex relationship with and exposure to paramilitarism in communities was both a function of the past as well as contemporary reality. As this exchange with Paddy illustrates, the perceptions of paramilitary influence within NGOs can serve to undermine efforts to engage with them. In this case, a meeting facilitated by a local NGO with individuals known to be actively engaged in paramilitaries was not only in attendance, but was perceived by the young men to be directing proceedings.

PARTICIPANT: I went to [an organisation] myself, because I needed help. I couldn’t deal with this myself. I mean when I contacted [the organisation] I got a phone call. Someone from the paramilitaries came straight to my door and says “why did you go to them uns?” So obviously [the organisation] contacted the paramilitaries and then the paramilitaries came to my door and says “why did you go to [the organisation]?” So you’re sort of stuck. You can’t go to anyone. [the organisation] wanted me to pay money [to the paramilitaries] as well. So I disagreed with that. They wanted me to pay some money to them, but then why should I pay money for something I didn’t do? Do you know what I mean? They said pay money to make it easier for you, but then the way I look at it if you pay money you’re not guaranteed reassurance. You can’t trust these people.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. So whenever you were in [the organisation’s office] and they were saying this to you, was there somebody from [the paramilitaries] there as well?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And how did you feel whenever you were sitting in front of [them]?

PARTICIPANT: Intimidated. You’re scared too, obviously if you can’t relax- you’re just, you feel like you have to say stuff that you don’t want to say, do you know what I mean? . . . they says about a payment plan and I just had to agree to it, you know, obviously to get time to, if I had’ve said no I was scared of getting a beating, so I agreed to it. And then they says “right, well you’ve got a week,” and I agreed to pay them it, and then once a week, well I had to sort out where I was going to move to. I had to jump to my auntie’s house, you know, just to get out of their road. (Paddy)

This example was not isolated, but it does serve to illustrate several key points. Firstly, the increasing practice of integrated partnerships that leverages the skills, expertise and flexibility of the voluntary sector NGOs (Dyer & Biddle, 2016, Wong et al., 2012; Hadfield et al., 2021) is more challenging in
post-conflict society such as Northern Ireland. Secondly, communication between constituted NGOs and paramilitaries appears to be ongoing. The risk of cases such as this is that where the perception exists that some NGOs appear to negotiate a resolution that favours the paramilitary group, this can undermine confidence in those NGOs to facilitate aspects of community supervision and provide specialist support in an objective manner that contributes to a reduction in criminogenic needs. Indeed, this example suggests that risk actually increased.

**Trust in public services and NGOs**

Experiences of and exposure to paramilitary-related harms appeared to have informed the sample’s understanding of risk and refuge. Of harm and help-seeking. A central aim of the ASPIRE project is to engage and support young men from communities where paramilitaries are most active, and who are at elevated risk of further paramilitary-related harms (Ritchie & McGreevy, 2019). Core to delivery is the application of a probation led, but integrated approach (Hadfield et al., 2021) to supervision and rehabilitation, connecting those with multiple vulnerabilities to enhanced (Dyer & Biddle, 2016) and tailored supports (Williams & Ariel, 2012). During the interviews, however, young men provided insights into their experiences of engaging with, and perceptions of the range of services that they would be routinely signposted onto. Many of this sample appeared to be reluctant to seek or to access support from within their own communities, in part because trust in those supports was absent (Jiang et al., 2022). Even those who were injured were sometimes unlikely to access medical treatment.

PARTICIPANT: Well there was two of us that were got, and then we just sort of sat there afterwards, and the police and ambulance and all came, and then I just refused to go with the ambulance, refused to say anything to the police, and then got a taxi. I was living at my da’s at the time. I had to get a taxi out to his and then they just asked who it was and I said ["name"], and then they already knew and then they just told me not to go touting. (Michael)

Available and accessible core services can help those in need to secure instrumental supports – an important source of social capital—a factor known to buffer against other criminogenic risks. Statements such as these illustrate that many of this sample lack adequate social capital and while the targeting of community-based services, located in these young men’s communities could reasonably be thought to increase social capital (Koetzle & Matthews, 2020), these comments suggest that in some cases the dynamics impede this. Indeed, it is in these same areas that policing is contested (McEvoy & Newburn, 2003; Walsh, 2021). Despite being at risk of paramilitary-related harm, none of the sample believed that the police could protect them from such harm.

Participant: No! You can’t tell anyone—how can you? If you tell the cops then you’re a tout. What are they going to do? If you go to them, it wouldn’t be just [the paramilitaries] that you need to run from. You’d probably need to hide from your own family for touting [laughs]. They can’t protect you from all that.

During one young man’s recollection, his family were intimidated out of their home when his parents had engaged with the police— a memory that symbolised the long-arm of influence and the coercive strategies that aimed to sever the strings of support.

PARTICIPANT: Well ... my house and car got petrol bombed when I was a child in my mum and dad’s house ... probably about two or three ... I can remember I was in my bedroom and that there. Flipping three cars out on the driveway being on fire ... it was [the paramilitary group] (Aodhan)

Aodhan’s memory illustrates the reality for many young men that paramilitaries are embedded within their communities and the police are not. Further, young men’s engagement with the police was seldom positive, and despite their acute needs, reluctance to seek support from the police also
appeared to have been borne from young men’s belief that the police, in their capacity to protect, fully appreciated the seriousness of threats, robustly investigated attacks, pursued paramilitaries responsible for causing harm, and protected those who disclosed information (Ellison et al., 2012). As illustrated by Phil’s testimony, the police were perceived to merely pass on a message from a paramilitary group without providing any reassurance or feasible alternative.

PARTICIPANT: The police came to the house with the death threat, aye. Said it was paramilitaries, but they didn’t know which, do you know? An organisation it was from just . . . And I had forty-eight hours to leave. (Phil)

This example was not isolated, and for many, their first “warnings” from police came during adolescence. For Steve, his memory of events was described as traumatic.

PARTICIPANT: . . . it was a proper death threat . . . I opened the door and it was two police officers, and they were like, “we need to come in and talk to you,” and gave me all this information about checking under your car and all. I was only sixteen . . . you’re panicking like . . . You’re thinking, “what?” Is somebody just going to step out and shoot me (Steve)

Comments such as these, while specific to the Northern Ireland context also speak to the work of Tyler and Boekmann (1997) around attitudes towards police. In their pioneering study of public attitudes towards crime, they found that subjective assessments of risk are associated with variation in confidence around policing. In other words, in areas that experience higher crime, the public are likely to have less confidence in the police to keep them safe (Walsh, 2020). This could be exacerbated in the context of Northern Ireland where violence and exploitation are endemic and reflect what Ellison et al. (2012) found in one Northern Ireland community, that confidence in police was in many ways expressive of a complex set of interpretive processes underpinned by perceptions of violence and disorder. While a lack of confidence in police disadvantages the victims themselves, it can benefit others. Indeed, for as long as those most vulnerable to paramilitary harm lack confidence in the police, paramilitaries can coerce and exploit relatively unfettered, thus reducing the social supports that appear to be available to vulnerable young men (Koetzle & Matthews, 2020) thus increasing criminogenic needs.

Confidence in services was by no means limited to public services. Like other areas, Northern Ireland has a rich history of community development (Tomczak, 2016). Some of these organisations have developed on a regional basis, operating across diverse communities and others have developed organically, remaining largely located within communities of a specific identity (i.e., PUL or CNR). There are many organisations that are operational at a local level and that provide a range of supports, and in theory, connecting those vulnerable to paramilitary harms to experienced NGOs could reduce risk (Koetzle & Matthews). Indeed, there were several examples of positive experiences. For many, a positive future orientation was a powerful motivating factor. From a service-user perspective, relationships appear to have been powerfully aligned to engagement (Canton, 2022; Johns et al., 2017). Rather than describing mechanistic programme components, the young men often referred to accessible and trusting relationships with professionals that demonstrated through their actions how far they were prepared to go to support them (Sturm et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2022)

Participant: I’m talking to [worker] from [NGO], [worker and worker], them girls told me that I can ring them at any stage-day or night. I don’t but it’s good to know someone is there when you don’t have anyone else really (Walter)

Despite the work they do, and the positive experiences of many service users, there was significant mistrust among this sample towards some NGOs. Indeed, only 33.3% (n = 6) of this sample reported that they trusted local NGOs.
PARTICIPANT: And I don’t want to be going into [local organisation] up here and then uns knowing my business, do you know what I mean? ... I’ll be honest with you, I wouldn’t trust the [organisation], do you know what I mean? ... Because like I, when I first started working with [the organisation], I had to go up to the office to meet a member of the [paramilitary group] in their office, do you know, with my da. (Tommy)

PARTICIPANT: And half of them that’d be working in the place are [the paramilitaries] do you know what I mean? (Casper)

This poses a significant issue for the administering of criminal justice, but also for protecting those at risk of paramilitary harms. Understanding where these barriers emerge, and ensuring that those most at risk are connected to the most appropriate support, is vital (Ritchie & McGreevy, 2019). The perceptions of these young men appeared to be related to what many believed to be direct, and often inappropriate links between some NGOs and paramilitary groups that prevented young men from seeking out support when they were desperate. In many cases, these perceptions had endured from earlier experiences. For example, one young man described the coincidence of coming into contact with a known paramilitary following a conversation with an NGO.

PARTICIPANT: Well once, the [organisation] or something, they tried to help me once, and then, that was years ago when I was young like, but it was the same time I got pulled into that bar funny enough. And then, after that there, do you know, like I wouldn’t have asked anyone for help ... (Tommy)

Trust in local agencies was also balanced with the need to travel into new areas to avail of regional agencies. Both presented risks. While local services appeared to be more accessible, they were generally less trusted. Regional NGOs were less accessible, but generally presented greater risk as young men navigated their way through various areas and modes of transport.

PARTICIPANT: But it was a wee bit overwhelming, do you know, like the thought about going somewhere, do you know, not knowing where you’re going. You know, especially if they’re going into parts of Belfast where, some parts I’d be well-known, do you know, and obviously someone could see me ... (Tommy)

This has practical implications for how and where services are delivered. While there are expectations for service users to access those services independently, this ignores the potential harm that could be caused to those individuals. Whether or not threats are real, ignoring the safety concerns of service users could increase attrition as well as increase risk.

**Influence of restrictive masculine norms**

Central to the conversations were concepts of manhood, honour, safety and respect-attributes intimately connected to hegemonic ideals of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lourenco et al., 2019). These were not merely abstract ideas, but fundamental to how these young men made sense of risk, and subsequently, how their behaviours became the performative manifestations of those ideas that increased their risk of offending (Messerschmidt, 1993; Harland & McCready, 2015).

Participant: p***y’s let people walk all over them. If you live here, you need to have a set of b’lls on you or you’ll get walked all over. Being a man is getting respect and protecting yourself—protecting your family and your area

The inference of this comment being that through the paradigm of hegemonic masculinity, victims of harm would be more likely respond with further violence (Tomsen & Gadd, 2019; Widom, 1989), and those living in violent contexts would be more likely to adopt attitudes that endorsed the use of violence, thus increasing their risk of criminalisation (Agnew, 1992; Messerschmidt, 2000; Taliep,
Lazarus & Naidoo, 2021). This adherence to traditional, hegemonic notions of masculinity placed the young men at greater risk of harm, and at the same time, reduced opportunities to access support that could alleviate the criminogenic effects of those harms (Baugher & Gazmararian, 2015).

PARTICIPANT: It doesn’t matter how much like counselling you do, there’s still some things you won’t talk about … That you’ll still always keep it to yourself … You just feel weak or embarrassed or scared … so you don’t talk and you end up cracking up at everyone. I came the best fighter like (Michael)

Predisposed to a limited “code” of behaviour, these young men, who self-reported to be under significant psychological strain, were also likely to hold attitudes that could contribute towards criminal recidivism – particularly violent behaviours (Brush & Miller, 2019). As noted by Eoin, victimisation was characterised as weakness - the antithesis of what many considered “manly”. These masculine “codes” (Casey et al., 2018) appeared to moderate the relationship between harm and maladaptive coping, and even precipitate potentially criminal behaviours (Agnew, 1992).

PARTICIPANT: Seeing my mum get hit and all and I couldn’t do nothing because I was a child … I tried to chuck myself in that canal … I just let the stuff build up instead of talking about it, do you know? I think [we’re] scared to talk. You look weak. When you’re older you find ways to show you’re not weak (Eoin)

Conclusions

Despite the almost ubiquitous involvement of NGOs in the criminal justice system (Abrams et al., 2019; McNeill, 2013; Tomczak, 2016), to the best of our knowledge this is the first study examining probationer’s perceptions of community supports while on supervision within the context of a post-conflict society. This study adds to our understanding of the needs of those on probation, the nuanced ways in which community supervision is understood, and the factors that facilitate or impede addressing overt and latent criminogenic needs.

From the perspective of those involved in community supervision, this study illustrates the many opportunities that were missed to support those who had experienced potentially traumatic events and to interrupt offending trajectories. While this sample were young adults, their needs appeared to have emerged during adolescence (Moffitt et al., 2002). Despite this, services appeared to have been unable to fully understand their systemic needs (Azeredo et al., 2019; King, 2013; McCartan, 2007), and therefore respond in ways that could have interrupted pathways into more serious and persistent offending (Fenimore & Jennings, 2018). In particular, educational, mental health, and addictions services could reflect on their roles in contributing to system wide, collaborative responses at an earlier stage (Johns, Williams and Haines, 2017).

Data from the current study illustrate that paramilitary-related harm was particularly salient and that those who were most vulnerable to paramilitary-related harm could have benefitted from additional supports (Walsh et al., 2021; Walsh, 2022). It also appears that few benefited from adequate screening and support (Duffy et al., 2022; Koetzle & Matthews, 2020). In its absence, young men in this sample attempted to cope in alternative, and often riskier ways.

While connecting probationers to their communities can provide the promise of enhancing social capital (Koetzle & Matthews, 2020), in contested societies such as Northern Ireland, there remain issues of legitimacy of public services (McEvoy & Newburn, 2003; Robinson et al., 2015; Walsh, 2020), as well as a lack of trust in some community services (McEvoy & Shirlow, 2009). In the absence of trust, this study emphasises the need for all agencies to acknowledge, to understand, and to challenge the perceptions that prevent vulnerable individuals from accessing their services. This is particularly important given that a lack of trust could impede support seeking and
engagement, thus having an effect on the effectiveness of community supervision and support (Robinson et al., 2012).

Despite evidence that access to high-quality services in local communities can accelerate risk reduction (Ward, Fox & Garber, 2014), data from this study illustrates that there remain ambiguities around the role of some NGOs in contact with paramilitary groups. Although there appears to be some utility (e.g., for the purposes of mediating difficulties), this study also suggests that young men could be deterred from accessing specialist supports aimed at reducing risks if NGOs are perceived to be linked to paramilitary groups. While the complexity of community realities cannot be ignored, it does appear that to increase the legitimacy of support services, and to ensure that those most in need feel confident in accessing them, there is a need for greater transparency around the contact that local NGOs have with paramilitaries and work towards protocols that set out clear justifications for such contact and be more explicit about the extent and purpose of communication between legitimate NGOs and non-state actors such as paramilitary groups. While mediation in post-conflict settings where transitions towards legitimate criminal justice processes is iterative, at a minimum, organisations involved in mediating between victims and paramilitary groups should have the clear objective of reducing rather than legitimising illicit authority and criminal harms.

Finally, adherence to traditional and restrictive masculine norms (Amato, 2012) could simultaneously foster the endorsement of pro-aggressive attitudes (Harland & McCready, 2015; Tomsen & Gadd, 2019), impede support seeking (Baugher & Gazmararian, 2015) and elevate psychological strains (Agnew, 1992). Recognising, pro-actively challenging, and designing supports that take account of these norms through gender transformative approaches (Casey et al., 2018) could increase opportunities for support seeking and the reduction of criminogenic risks (Hong, 2000).

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