'Young people's voices need heard': Exploring the Panel recommendations on the disbandment of paramilitaries

1. Introduction

In January 2017 the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) with the support of a researcher team undertook a project to explore the needs and views of young people from communities that experienced high levels of paramilitarism.

1.1 Aim

The research project intended to explore the physical, emotional and psychological impacts of paramilitarism, organised crime and criminality on young people. More specifically the project:

- Explored the nature and type of interaction between paramilitaries, organised crime and young people, focusing on issues such as control and mobility;
- Considered young people's understanding of what constitutes paramilitary and organised crime activity and behaviour;
- Examined community and formal support mechanisms aimed at young people in the community;
- Provided young people with an opportunity to consider their contributions to government policies to build safer communities.

1.2 Approach

The NIYF with support from a research team conducted six focus groups (Carrick, New Lodge, Inner East Belfast, Ardoyne, Shankill and Lenadoon) and three interviews with staff that had experience of working in communities dominated by paramilitarism. The discussions focused on:

- Levels and types of paramilitary behaviours/activities, organised crime experienced and witnessed by young people;
- An understanding of what is meant by a culture of lawfulness from a young persons perspective;
- An exploration of how young people perceive the role of paramilitaries and organised crime gangs in their community
- The formal/informal support (or lack of support) within communities for young people facing and experiencing these specific (challenging) issues.

The remainder of this report presents the main themes to emerge from the discussions with young people and NIYF staff.

2. Youth worker perspectives

Interviews with NIYF staff allowed for a more extensive focus on the areas from which the young people lived on the themes of policing and paramilitarism. It is important to acknowledge that the NIYF staff faced two overriding challenges during the programme:

- The team experienced significant barriers in the recruitment of young people at the outreach stage of the project because of the association of the PSNI. Those that were not supportive talked about 'legacy issues' and a refusal to work with the police because of perceptions of discrimination;

- Within certain communities (in both Loyalist and Republican areas) there was suspicion and reluctance to engage because of the nature of the discussions around paramilitarism;

The degree of embedded suspicion in the community around programme work resourced by the police among some youth workers came as a surprise to some within the NIYF and highlighted the continuing complexity of building and sustaining relationships between elements within these parts of the 'community' and the PSNI.

2.1 Lenadoon

Commenting on the implications of law enforcement for some young people, one youth worker recounted the experience of a young person in Lenadoon:

> "Currently in Lenadoon, the community I live in, there has been a number of accounts of police coming and searching young people who are gathering in large numbers. This presents a massive barrier to relationship building. Young people in the area have inherited negative views due to this and now have an awareness of known polices officers, and I feel the young people are now taking a reactive approach at every engagement."

According to the local youth worker:

> "In my practice I have always got the initial response from young people viewing the PSNI negatively, due to the lack of awareness what the PSNI actually do. Although when having that knowledge and awareness, I have seen young people changing their views about the PSNI very quickly when roles and responsibilities are explained".

> "Street-based youth workers from the area have been working with targeted groups known to police and other youth providers. These young people have made positive references to the youth workers about working with the PSNI to break down such barriers, learn about each other and engage in more positive community activity in the area. "

Internal community politics and intergenerational experiences have a direct effect on relationships between the PSNI and community and influence how young people engage with policing structures. The interview revealed that building basic relationships through positive interactions still has the potential to transform negative stereotypes and views. From the perspectives of youth workers, there was evidence of an improvement in relationships and a need for a more collaborative approach to local community safety problem-solving.

2.2 Clonard

The absence of consistent relationships between police and community is a crucial concern. According to a youth worker:

> "There is long-term mistrust in the community towards the PSNI and wider criminal justice system. I think the police should fund more programmes with the added attachment of them being involved to build trust and show the community they don't have an agenda. Fund community officers instead of programmes. In my experience community officers do more for building trust and breaking barriers than any programme, as they are not a flash in the pan but a constant source of support."

A growing concern in the community was the use of 'stop and search' and a view that the PSNI were discriminating against particular individuals and adopting it as a tactic without any underpinning rationale:

> "There is no accountability for police tactics e.g. stop and search. Implement officer cameras to ensure there is an incorruptible log of every interaction. Young people see police as heavy handed, bossy, uncompromising, violent and uncaring. Young people believe they are prejudges against them and don't understand them. They feel they are all tarred with the same 'bad' brush. They see the police as a 'force' not a 'service'."

Many young people experienced policing within a negative context, and there were elements in the community that were keen to use these exchanges as opportunities to promote their agenda and provide a non-mainstream Republican narrative of the current situation.

2.3 Ballymurphy / Springhill

According to the local youth worker:

> "I feel that there is a long way to go before there is full engagement within the Upper Springfield area. There are a number of reasons: firstly young people have little or no respect for the police, this is a generational issue that no one challenges. Secondly there is very little trust that when the police are called that they will handle a situation in the right way i.e. being aggressive or obnoxious with young people. And I suppose police officers attitudes towards young people are a barrier, there is no differentiation is an approach to a drunk man outside a bar or a young person walking home with their friends".

> "There are some in the Upper Springfield community who are reluctant to engage with police because of issues that have yet to be resolved - the Ballymurphy Massacre Campaign being the main example. Some community/ youth workers can be a barrier to young people engaging with the police and there are still organisations that will not take PCSP funding based on their own personal values and fail to see how it can better their community and the people living in it. Young people who I have worked with have never known who paid for their programme and if they knew it was from the police I doubt they would care as long as they didn't have to meet/ talk/ engage/ get photos with them, they wouldn't be based on their own values but what the community/ family would think of them".

> "The PSNI are still viewed as a predominantly 'protestant' police force and young people from the Upper Springfield would be weary of ever joining based on fear that they/ their family would be ostracised from community or even worse under threat of violence. The PSNI are still viewed as the RUC and in the opinion of many are not a neutral force. Mixed messages from politicians would also be barriers for community engagement, some would advise to trust PSNI and others would view them as part of 'the British war machine'."

The historical legacy of policing remains a potent barrier to building positive and meaningful relationships in the community. Furthermore, family influences have a direct impact on how young people view the PSNI within their community.

2.4 Falls Road

The following account was given to a youth worker from a young person:

> "When young people interact with police they feel like they are being intimidated, followed and targeted for being in a group and socialising together. They feel that the police don't respect their rights and are always 'out to get them'. They're are no local police that they could talk too or who would take the time to talk to and respect them e.g. if the PSNI were funding programmes how likely are young people to be willing or able to engage.

> Young people in this area view the police as the enemy and people who they can't trust. When they are being followed young people have the impression that the police are taking an easy way out when they could be tackling 'real crime' instead of harassing them."

According to the youth worker, there was an assumption from young people that police assume that young people have engaged in negative behaviours, and are therefore 'guilty' of something/anything. It was also suggested that the young people never see beyond the uniform because there is a constant turnover of PSNI officers in the local area. This makes it incredibly difficult to form any type of relationship with an officer.

2.5 North Belfast

Speaking about the pressures on young people, one youth worker observed:

> "This is very much about peer pressure. Some young people have poor experiences with police and may place some pressure on their peers to not engage or have strong opinions about their peers engaging with police, so this could be a barrier to building relationships.

> There is also community pressure. Some of the communities' young people come from have poor experiences of police (legacy from the troubles, handling of sensitive cases, non-handling of matters community feels strongly about) therefore placing a barrier for young people to engage

openly…and there is also this notion of police reaching out to young people and then recruiting them as informants.

There is also family pressure. Some families are anti-establishment/police – my own experience in a republican community was due to a dad's imprisonment for alleged dissident republican involvement, his parents would not consent for their son to be involved in anything that involved PSNI.

There are other factors that affect the relationship. There are no Neutral spaces for young people to be able to engage with police – where do they meet that is non-confrontational?

Who police assign to work with young people from their organisation; what training have they had with young people; what experiences have they had with young people, and is the work something they have been 'assigned' to do or is it something they are genuinely interested in? All questions that say how much the organisation places on building relationships with young people.

I think generally the young people I have experience of working with viewed the police negatively. Some of these young people were involved in the criminal justice system and saw police as the 'enemy' and 'enforcers'. Generally, they were suspicious and untrusting of police. Of course this is probably most likely influenced by personal experiences."

The over-riding sense was that 'bad policing' had the potential to influence other agendas within the community. In general, the PSNI were not aware of how their behaviours and attitudes were making it easier for paramilitaries to increaser their influence at the local level.

2.6 West Belfast (Unionist areas)

Many people draw no distinctions between elements within the criminal justice system and the PSNI - subsuming everything into a single concept of 'policing'. According to one youth worker:

"The legacy of armed conflict, the subsequent peace process, and the negative historical memory related to the former, plays a role in how young people, particularly those from a traditionally nationalist/republican background view the police.

There are still high levels of distrust between working class communities in general, and the police, which I believe works both ways.

The manner in which certain groups of young people report the police services engagement with them – highlighting authoritarianism, discrimination and general harassment - paints a bleak picture for the prospect of young people from working class communities engaging with services funded by the police.

Based on my own experience of working with youth from a traditionally Loyalist/Unionist background, in particular those from the lower Shankill area, and the Carrickfergus estates of Sunnylands and its surrounding neighbourhoods, I found that animosity exists between sections of youths and the police…However I will stress that in particular sections of communities that are controlled by paramilitary groups, the animosity in wider terms, is obvious.

Specifically, young people from certain Loyalist/Unionist estates, who spoke about barriers between themselves and the police, appear to make their judgements based solely on their practical experience of policing - as opposed to a combination of negative historical memory and practical experience, as seen in Nationalist/Republican communities. This points towards similar experiences of authoritarianism, discrimination and general harassment that are found to exist in most working class estates across the UK and Ireland."

Funding from a PCSP is included within this broader criticism of the justice system highlighting the widespread suspicion of anything associated with 'the system', and underpinning the reluctance to publically engage with the institutions:

"Who supplies the resources is still key…I had a personal experience of this while on detached work recently when several youths from different areas questioned my motives, as I was wearing a NIYF coat that had a PCSP logo embroidered on it. I found myself having to justify that I wasn't a police officer, and felt that if this approach to engagement had continued I would have been placing myself, and young people at risk simply by publically displaying my connection to the Police Service of Northern Ireland."

2.7 West Belfast (Nationalist areas)

According to this Youth Worker, armed elements encourage non-engagement approach from the community to the PSNI by using threats and intimidation. They did not want people reporting crime or asking for support and assistance from the PSNI:

> "Many young people I work with in the community, which I come from, have very strongly held opinions regarding the Police. The majority of them are negative, mostly because of their experiences, like heavy-handed tactics used in dealing with them, the random use of stop and search or approaching young people to use them as Touts (informants). There is a widespread perception that the PSNI are not making arrests for community crime (house breaking etc) or are looking to engage with communities without addressing issues in the past with communities. It is still true that young people are unlikely to engage with PSNI because of the stigma and threat from other members of their community."

2.8 Summary

Interviews with youth workers repeatedly highlighted strains between young people in economically marginal communities and policing and lawfulness. More specifically:

- The contemporary view of policing in the areas of this study is still influenced by 'legacy related' issues and is transmitted specifically to young people. There are significant numbers of people (adults) in these communities that continue to refuse any engagement with the PSNI, which has a direct influence on young people;
- Many young people believe that police treat them as 'guilty until proved innocent', and therefore approach all police officers with suspicion. This interacts with legacy suspicion to prevent new relationships emerging;
- There is a strong cultural pressure against 'touting'. Police are treated as outsiders who are always trying to use young people against their community. The result is a culture of distance that also applies to other justice-related agencies;
- In the absence of strong bonds between young people and the PSNI through formal mechanisms, illegal groups can replace the more established figures of law and order. Negative experiences of policing from a young persons

perspective can contribute directly to support for 'armed groups' in the community.

3. Young people's views and experiences

In the course of five focus groups with young people the researchers explored a number of topics around policing, violence and paramilitarism, exposing a series of common emerging themes in both loyalist and republican communities:

3.1 Youth culture

The areas of this study are all considered to be Areas of Multiple Deprivation using NISRA statistical measures. In describing their areas, young people showed a variety of different feelings summarised as a mixture of pride in their own areas, alongside concern about violence and other social issues. All of the focus groups were held in youth clubs and there was a clear bias in the study in favour of those clubs, which where generally seen as opportunities to interact in a less hierarchical way and as a haven from the worst of community violence. As one young person remarked:

> "Some of us are in the gym and that's good. It keeps you off the streets and you are in charge, you don't have people telling you what you can and can't do."

> "The youth club is now open on a Saturday night. It's good because it somewhere to go."

Young people in these focus groups all had a strong sense of local identity. However, they were also well aware of the challenges of their areas. Some complained about the physical environment. Persistently, the most important issue relating to policing and criminality was drugs:

> "There are plenty of drugs, but after that there is no much to do…so you find yourself constantly being moved around the estate with by the 'boys' or the cops."

> "There are lots of drugs dealers linked to paramilitaries in the community…they get young people to sell their stuff, next thing you know they have become members of a group."

3.2 Culture of violence

In interviews with young people, there was a persistent sense that violence was treated as a *normal* part of life in the focus group communities. The impact of culture of violence went beyond direct beatings or assaults, verging on an acceptance that violence was used to respond to particular incidents. More often than not, violence was not connected to the police or formal structures but was part of the informal rules of everyday culture:

> "I wouldn't walk in the street after dark. Too many people out for you."

> "I don't feel safe in the town. Ever. I would only go into it if I had to buy clothes. We would rather go the [shopping centre outside the area]"

> "Last year we had loads of riots and people were scared to go out."

> "It makes you think. There was a shooting around the corner and it could have been anyone. They were shooting in broad daylight."

A specific development of this culture is the use of social media. Young people in several areas referred to street fights arranged through 'WhatsApp' or secret facebook pages where individuals were targeted and controlled. This also extended to forms of vigilante justice, especially in relation to drug dealing and so called 'paedo hunting':

> "There are loads of arranged fights. There is drinking at the Waterworks and there are sometimes fights at Yorkgate or in the town. It's mostly ones' who are 12 or 14. Every weekend they meet to drink. Then they get blocked and there are big massive fights. They use metal bolts, hammers or poles."

> "Gangs of Protestants and Catholics arrange fights all the time. They have their own 'WhatsApp' groups."

> "There is always loads about the Paedo hunters on the facebook."

Many young people recognised both overt violence and covert types of control, talking about assaults and shootings along with threats of violence. There was often an acceptance that violence was connected to punishment or in response to specific negative behaviours, and was therefore, in some sense, 'justified'. Support for these actions was not universal, but a significant number suggested that the victims 'deserved them', and assumed that a person had done something wrong:

"If someone is getting a beating the chances are they deserved it…like that fella that took the babies ashes, he got done, and that was right."

"Why do they happen? Anti-social behaviour like vandalism or joy-riding. Mostly they come from outside this area."

"All punishment shootings are done for a reason…they don't shoot you for the sake of it."

"When you hear about a punishment shooting or beating you usually know who it was and you know they have done something wrong. It's usually over drug money or they did something bad to the wrong person."

3.3 Policing and criminal justice

The focus groups revealed varied levels of negativity towards the police from young people, depending on geography.   However, there was a consistent complaint that police were not an integral part of the community and that they were in effective in protecting young people or in responding to crime.

"Policing is crap…what do they do? They don't deal with the issues like drugs and car crime; they leave it to the community to sort out."

"People do ring the police. But nothing happens. Useless B*****ds."

"Police don't do anything. Paramilitaries do more."

"The Police are always in our school. But on the street they don't know what to do. They just sit there and watch."

'The police don't know what to do. They sit in their cars and watch. They sit there for a while and if it gets too rough, they lift the first person they can catch."

"All I see them doing is switching on the lights of their cars to get through traffic lights."

Those young people with regular contact with policing highlighted the fact that they usually met the police in a negative context, and had limited experiences of meeting them on a positive issue:

> "If you are in the wrong place and they think you look suspicious, then they lift you – like when you are in a big group or in a track suit or something."

> "I just think young people get the blame of everything."

> "We don't meet the police…we don't have opportunities to talk and get to know them so beyond what we hear from family and see on the news, we know nothing about them."

> "They are alright sometimes but they could be doing a better job. They take the Catholic side whenever there are riots and stop us."

It was suggested on many occasions that specific people in communities were responsible for the majority of anti-social and criminal behaviour (usually breaking into houses, selling drugs, or stealing cars), and that everyone, including the PSNI 'knew' who these individuals were – with the implication that police were failing to act for a reason:

> "In our area there are the same group of young people and they steal all the cars and break into the houses. Every-time something goes wrong then you know who did it…and nothing happens to them, they get off with it all the time."

> "Car crime and drugs are the two biggest things in our area, and it's the same young people involved all the time…eventually something happens and it's not the police doing it."

The discussions also explored young people's views on reporting things to the police, namely information about crimes, or as a result being a victim of a crime. There were mixed responses with a smaller number of young people suggesting that they would have no difficulty in engaging with the police, while a larger number indicated a reluctance to formally report anything to the PSNI. The issue of 'touting' was a recurrent theme, with young people believing that there where elements within their communities that would target people for providing the police with information:

> "Touting is a big issue…you see it all the time. People are arrested on a Saturday and let out on Monday morning. Everyone in the community knows they are touts."

> "PSNI stands for Please Do Not Inform."

> "Our families tell us what it was like; how the police could not be trusted in this community…so of course you are going to be suspicious."

> "I wouldn't report anything. I don't want to get involved. I might do if I got burgled but not if anything happened to someone else."

> "If you tout you would get into trouble with the paramilitaries. I don't trust the police or the trouble you would get into for touting."

Some respondents suggested that they 'had no problem' with the PSNI, but preferred not to see them in their community.   In these cases, young people expressed a lack of interest in the organisation and did not really attach any historical or political meaning to the PSNI, seeing them as authority and/or establishment figures and not necessarily associated with the conflict:

> "You don't see the police in my community (Ardoyne) but that's not necessarily a bad thing…I mean, I don't want to see them all the time and think they are watching me. I don't have a problem with the police; they just don't interest me that much."

3.4 Armed groups

On a number of occasions the young people were asked about their knowledge and understanding of paramilitaries and their role in the conflict. According to young people in all of our focus groups there are a number of armed groups within and around their communities. Generally, they did not refer to them as terrorists, or even paramilitaries, but instead associated the violence of these groups with self-interest around drugs and criminality. Many simply referred to armed groups as criminals, and as a risk to young people:

> "The people shooting people…they are just scum bags. They are all drug dealers, nothing else. And the people that are shooting other drug dealers are just doing it for the money."

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"They are just a group that formed themselves. They terrorise young people. They wrote up a whole list of people on the walls complaining about their vandalism."

"Nobody likes the paramilitaries. Because they ruin people's lives, doing stupid stuff. They take things too far."

"Drug dealing is really bad in our area, and the kids are dealing for the big bosses and they are as young as twelve and thirteen."

"Action Against Drugs is a joke. They are actually taking the drugs and they are annoyed when somebody else supplies. They are only concerned about money."

"No such thing as paramilitary in our areas (Republican), it's just armed gangs."

The young people were extremely negative about these groups, referring to them as scum and bullies that only exercised power because they had weapons:

"They lend money to kids and then when they cannot pay it back they make them do things for them…there are kids as young as twelve and thirteen dealing drugs for paramilitaries."

"The paramilitaries wrote a list of who they were going to shoot and in what order and then stuck the list on all the shop fronts and doors. But the list was the wrong ones."

"They are not fighting for Ulster – they are doing drugs. We weren't around during the troubles, but now they are just on murals and they make people's lives hell."

"They just go about using threats. It's a joke, a disgrace. Young people don't know its coming and they do it anyway."

"The word Republican to me means IRA, and United Ireland. But you don't hear it much anymore, just what you see on the murals."

But when asked who was in charge the young people responded that it was either the paramilitaries or police, partly dependent on perceived effectiveness.

> "If you were attacked you would go to the paramilitaries. Mostly the adults go, but you would be taken."

4. Observations

Following an analysis of the emerging themes it became apparent that there were a number of core issues that were relevant to both the relationship and environment between young people and the police. More specifically:

a. The interaction of violence and criminal justice remains a reality to be negotiated by young people in all of the areas of this study. There was a persistent sense that violence was regarded as *normal* within the communities in this project, and that the rule of law was very much open to interpretation;

b. For many young people 'policing was not an issue of interest', it was not something that they talked about, and preferred not to come into contact with them. Although this was more about their position of authority as opposed to historical issues;

c. Armed groups are a continuing reality in all of the areas of our study. According to Youth Workers, armed elements encourage non-engagement approach from the community to the PSNI by using threats and intimidation;

d. Young people in this study no longer use the language of 'terrorism'. In some areas the term paramilitary continues, but seldom in republican districts. Many young people referred to armed groups as criminals, and as a risk to young people. At the same time, the groups appeared to be embedded in the patterns of community life: young people reported going to armed groups to report attacks, there was evidence of understanding and even support for some vigilante justice and an acceptance among some that intimidation was part of the everyday experience. In responding to anti-social behaviour and direct attacks on the person, paramilitaries were often portrayed as more effective than police;

e. Policing and the PSNI remain a contentious issue in all of the communities studied. Many people draw no distinctions between elements within the criminal justice system and the PSNI - subsuming everything into a single concept of 'policing'. This was reflected in continuing suspicion in the community around programme work resourced by the police;

f. It was common cause that 'bad policing' had direct influence on support for other agendas within the community. PSNI officers did not seem to be aware of how their behaviours and attitudes made it easier for paramilitaries to

increase their influence. In a context of suspicion, there were elements in the community that were keen to use negative experiences as opportunities to promote their own agenda and provide a non-mainstream narrative;

g. Some young people had interaction with police in formal settings, such as schools. However, there was widespread anxiety, ambivalence and concern about reporting, especially as a witness. This led to a somewhat paradoxical outcome whereby young people were keen not to be seen as 'touting' (seen as both socially taboo and potentially dangerous) while the police were blamed for 'knowing'; who the criminal are but not acting;

h. Other young people have no direct experience of police officers except in an enforcement context. The use of 'stop and search' was regarded as especially negative. Many young people complained of feeling intimidated in their interactions with police or targeted for being in a group and socialising together. As one youth worker commented: "They feel that the police don't respect their rights and are always 'out to get them'."

i. Social media plays an important role in community control among young people. This is often contained within the boundaries of local communities and youth culture. Learning how to understand and engage with social media is a huge challenge for both youth work and policing;

j. In part, at least, hostility to the PSNI has to do with the historic legacy of policing and conflict. We found evidence of an implicit culture of suspicion, a hostility to open co-operation and continuing concerns around legacy issues. Specific local memories of events in previous generations continue to be used as symbolic evidence of the 'true nature' of the police. In every case, however, young people assumed bias against their communities;

k. Internal community politics and intergenerational experiences have a direct effect on relationships between the PSNI and community and influence how young people engage with policing structures. This combination of peer pressure, community pressure and family pressure means that successful efforts to improve police-community relationships will require persistence and a flexible approach to problem-solving and community engagement;

l. There does not appear to be a consistent approach to engagement with policing in youth and community work. Some of our respondents suggested that attitudes of hostility were encouraged by some (small number) youth and community workers;

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m. Many youth workers believe that building basic relationships through positive interactions still has the potential to transform negative stereotypes and views.   This has implications for investment and planning. As one youth worker noted: "In my experience community officers do more for building trust and breaking barriers than any programme, as they are not a flash in the pan but a constant source of support."

n. Police training in relation to young people does not appear to equip them to engage creatively in youth work situations. Some youth workers called for the development of youth officers, and for work to be assigned to those with a genuine interest in working with young people. As one respondent commented: "there is very little trust that when the police are called that they will handle a situation in the right way i.e. being aggressive or obnoxious with young people...there is no differentiation is an approach to a drunk man outside a bar or a young person walking home with their friends. "