Countering Paramilitary & Organised Criminal Influence on Youth
A Review

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In June 2019 a team of academics based in Ulster University were commissioned by the Corrymeela Community on behalf of the Education Authority to conduct research on the theme of young people, youth work and tackling paramilitarism in Northern Ireland.

The specific tasks were:

» To research/map the effective and innovative theory/practice of 10-12 international INGOs or NGOs working with youth and actively countering factors that create risk vulnerability, and/or susceptibility related to paramilitarism, organised gangs or criminality;

» To enhance the CPD model by integrating and testing the relevance of international frameworks and associated tools to support the technical skills, capacity and wellbeing of front-line workers.

The goal was to produce research that could shape debate on the future of youth work intervention to support the Tackling Paramilitarism programme. The chosen method was to review literature on best practice across a number of international models of intervention with young people affected by violence by armed groups of various sorts and to conduct field research in Northern Ireland.

1
Introduction

1.2 Project Rationale

According to the United Nations in 2018:

"In 2016, an estimated 408 million youth (aged 15-29) resided in settings affected by armed conflict or organised violence. This means that at least one in four young people is affected by violence or armed conflict in some way. Estimates of direct conflict deaths in 2015 suggest that more than 90 per cent of all casualties involved young males. However, conflict, crime and other forms of violence impact young people's lives in more ways than mortality. While it often goes unrecorded, young people suffer from a wide range of short-, medium- and long term effects ranging from repeated victimization to psychological trauma, identity-based discrimination and social and economic exclusion."
(UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY SECURITY COUNCIL, 2018: 5)

The UN acknowledged that, while young people account for the majority of those engaged in extremist violence, only a 'minute proportion' of the youth population is involved in violence. Too often, young people are labelled as 'criminals' or 'terrorists' to the detriment of youth participation in political and social life. Resources are misallocated from services that are necessary to address the drivers of violence towards an overly punitive approach, which may be less effective and more costly than preventative measures:

"The political urgency for Governments to respond to the threat of global terrorism has contributed to a discourse in which sweeping characterisations of youth as fundamentally at risk of 'violent extremism' have produced un-nuanced, counter-productive policy responses. The 'policy panic' is further alienating young people. Instead of offering proactive prevention approaches to violent conflict, it risks cementing young people in these roles, giving them a sense that there are no alternative pathways available to them."
(UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY SECURITY COUNCIL, 2018: 7)

The UN therefore drew attention to the necessity of ensuring not only that violent extremism was 'tackled' but that alternative pathways were developed with an emphasis on participation, economic potential, education and dealing with injustice and human rights. This entails a shift from security responses to a violence prevention approach that builds up resilience and is based on partnership with young people and youth led organisations. This requires an investment in and inclusion of young people, as well as addressing security concerns.

Youth work necessarily starts from this perspective in its engagement with violent extremism. The contribution of youth work in peacebuilding is determined by its focus on the wellbeing and rights of young people rather than on politics, security or policing. Youth work in relation to paramilitary behaviour is distinct from 'stopping' a security problem - defined as young people's involvement with paramilitarism - but rather engages by reframing

its contribution within a commitment to the wellbeing of young people. In other words, this is not a question of co-opting youth work to security, but of achieving security for all through youth work methods.

Policy to tackle paramilitary violence that does not engage young people as both participants and victims is unlikely to be successful. It is notable that the language of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 is not mainstreamed in Northern Ireland, and it was not used in any of the interviews or focus groups. However, it was important for many respondents to make clear, that youth work was not a vehicle to 'police' young people, or an extension of law and order, but a vehicle to support young people in making better choices. Therefore, one of the central professional issues for youth work is: how can youth workers and youth work as a profession prevent and reduce the impact of violence on young people, and reduce marginalisation and exclusion as a consequence?

1.3 'Tackling Paramilitarism' in Northern Ireland & Youth Work

Violent extremism has been part of the political landscape of Northern Ireland for decades, drawing on deeply rooted traditions of resistance and community defence which predate the language of 'violent extremism' by decades and even centuries.

For almost thirty years after 1969, violence by organised and armed groups became 'normalised' in the sense that they were part of the everyday reality of life in Northern Ireland, with distinct and persistent relationships with social and economic marginalisation, age and gender. Overwhelmingly, direct participation in violent conflict has been dominated by males from districts with evidence of persistent multiple deprivation in the age group the United Nations identifies as 'young people' (15-29).

By 1998, the governments of the UK and Ireland had concluded that violence would not be eliminated by counter-security measures alone. The governments sponsored a comprehensive political approach, which bore fruit in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement of 1998. The Agreement directly addressed the question of violence and organisational continuity, removing further formal or informal political legitimacy for violence and committing signatories to 'explicitly peaceful and democratic means' for the resolution of disputes. In addition, the Agreement established an international process for the disarmament and disbandment of all paramilitary groups including the early release of prisoners eschewing political violence.

In practice, this has turned out to be a contentious and difficult task. Despite the new political consensus, violence by armed groups has continued to be a reality at community level in some areas. On the Republican side, groups opposed to the peace process (Dissident Republicans) continued to claim legitimacy to attack police officers and security personnel. Among Loyalists, there was ongoing evidence of recruitment, local participation in intimidation as well as rioting and other public order activities.

The 'Tackling Paramilitarism' programme emerged from the inter-party 'Fresh Start' Agreement in 2015. The programme received the full endorsement of political parties across the Executive prior to the 3-year collapse of the Northern Ireland political system in January 2017. The risks of involvement in paramilitarism for and by young people were included as one of forty-two measures of the programme. Under 'Measure A4', the Education Authority placed an Outreach Worker in each of the 8 most vulnerable 'Communities in Transition' across Northern Ireland with a view to preventing young people joining paramilitary organisations. According to the Executive Action Plan which accompanied the programme, "The Outreach Workers aim to build relationships with young people who do not currently engage with the youth services and who could be considered as being at higher risk of involvement in paramilitary activity; they deliver programmes and support that develop the young people's resilience and awareness of risk factors."

1.4 Methodology

The research was conducted between June 2019 and January 2020 and involved a mixed-methods approach.

Initially the team completed a literature review that documented thirteen international examples of youth work designed to reduce the impact of violence on young people involved with armed groups, impacted by armed groups or potentially attracted to armed groups. The second phased involved the completion of seventeen semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with practitioners and young people. Interviewees were identified for their expertise in working with young people at risk from involvement in paramilitarism in Northern Ireland.

For reasons of confidentiality it is not possible to identify the participants, however the interviewees included youth workers directly employed under the Fresh Start programme; youth workers managing the programme; community activists with a personal knowledge of communities and paramilitarism; members of youth organisations; and others with long standing experience of youth work policy and practice.

Confidentiality was critical to the viability of this project, and the research team have taken care to ensure that no material is attributed to a particular individual or organisation. The remainder of this summary report documents the key themes to emerge from the review of international practice, followed by the analysis of the data (interviews and focus groups) and concludes with a series of recommendations.

The research team critically analysed the approaches and methods underpinning thirteen programmes of interventions with young people (STREET in South London; CHANNEL as part of the PREVENT programme (UK); Aasha Gang Mediation Project in London; EXIT in Sweden; Mechelen Model in Belgium; CIRV in Glasgow; Fighting for Peace in Rio de Janeiro; St Giles Trust in London; J-ARC in Dublin; ROCA in Boston; GREAT in Arizona; BUILD in Chicago; Homeboy in Los Angeles).

A summary of the methods employed by the projects shows that no single or consistent approach to intervention has yet emerged in relation to young people and involvement in group-based violence. However, it is possible to identify a number of underlying themes:

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An International Review of Practice

» The majority of programmes were delivered by voluntary agencies. Several of these were in conjunction with broader state strategies, while others as independent projects. Five of the projects were directly led by the state or government agencies. In the case of CHANNEL, the policy had a high profile and was supported by all agencies of the state, from the police, to schools to local government. Others, such as CIRV were police co-ordinated and led;

» Projects with young people were directed at both preventing young people joining violent groups and at helping people leave;

» The projects engaging young people and group violence are divided between those with a clear ideological purpose (Islamist or far right), those directed at territorial gangs and those directed at people coming out of prison and becoming involved in gangs. Some of the projects were designed to address attitudes, whereas others were entirely directed at preventing or stopping violent behaviour;

» The majority of the projects engaged personal mentors;

» Formal teaching was one element in all the projects, and the full focus of the BUILD and GREAT projects;

» Connection to employment was central to the majority of projects;

» Sport was a vehicle for engagement in two of the projects;

» Counselling and support for wellbeing and personal health was a theme in the majority of projects;

» Changing the social environment was a conscious goal of a number of programmes;

» Six of the thirteen projects worked directly on matters of faith and ideology;

» Removing symbols such as tattoos was an explicit goal in two projects;

» One project was aimed at addressing primary aged children and worked within schools;

» One project (CIRV) worked on the basis of an amnesty, where young people were presented with choices in relation to the style of policing to be adopted;

» Other themes included direct personal development planning, inter-agency co-ordination and co-operation, mediation with gangs and groups, communities of support for young people, developing a new narrative at local level for inclusion, programmes for the training of trainers, drug treatment, legal services and support in cases of domestic violence;

» The slogan 'relentless outreach' was used directly by one project (ROCA). However, it underpinned the work within a number of other projects.

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In Northern Ireland, widely embedded ethnic and political narratives of hostility have generated an environment where organised violence has been tolerated as a fact of life within community.

Although there are clear common threads running through the international models of practice, it is also apparent that the definition of the problem that each project is designed to address varies significantly. No single project directly meets all the challenges associated with paramilitarism and there is no meaningful approach to 'roll out' existing programmes into Northern Ireland.

The political context of Islamism and violent far right militancy differs from the context of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. Islamism represents a threat to the West as a whole but not to the internal politics of any single western state. Far right violence can be treated as a threat to the state and marginalised with community support. The success of policy depends on preventing the spread of these ideologies beyond the narrow core of activists by isolating violence. Gang violence, on the other hand, is treated by the system as 'criminal' without fear of creating wider political sympathy and often without examining any underlying causes. This limits the applicability of anti-gang work to tackling paramilitarism in Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, widely embedded ethnic and political narratives of hostility have generated an environment where organised violence has been tolerated as a fact of life within community. As a result of the longevity of conflict in Northern Ireland, armed and paramilitary groups are integrated into the fabric of life in many localities; and are often neither distinct nor separate from many other aspects of community life. Rather, they are part of the internal structure and organisation of community life, embedded in families, cultural traditions, social control, the local economy and community development.

Although the political conditions have altered substantially since 1998, paramilitary and armed groups claim symbolic continuity with a legacy of community-political legitimacy. Tackling paramilitarism means change for communities beyond the activity of young people and violence, also involving a difficult process of reconfiguring vested elements of community life where paramilitarism is formally or informally present.

What is still uncertain is the extent to which action against paramilitary and armed groups by the state in 2020 is regarded as a necessary and positive action in protection of the law or a heavy-handed attack on communities. In the event of confrontation, who will be considered 'us' and who is 'them'? The absence of confidence in political, administrative or community support in 'tackling paramilitarism' continues to mean that in many cases it presents as an unacceptable personal or organisational risk.

2.1   Lessons for Northern Ireland?

A key aspect of the research was to consider the application of the international practice to the Northern Ireland context.

The following points emerged:

I.   International Insights & Northern Ireland Circumstances

Despite many common goals, all practice must be relevant to context. That context includes location, the social status of the individuals, the people engaged both as practitioners and young people, and the political environment. The origins of armed groups in Northern Ireland are clearly distinct from the religious and ideological extremism that has emerged in recent years in Western Europe. While armed groups in Northern Ireland are increasingly associated with criminal rather than political activity, they are not yet routinely or consistently treated as 'gangs' by either the community or statutory agencies and the status of numerous groups on the continuum between organised crime and political movement remains contested. This creates a gap between the formal unacceptability of paramilitary activity and the uncertainty which workers experience in practice about their authority to 'tackle' paramilitaries in the community. The fact that it has not yet been possible to presume that workers act with what Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) calls the 'moral voice of the community' inevitably shapes the attitudes and behaviour of young people, communities, youth workers and the political-administrative system and the nature of work, which is possible.

II. Youth Work, Relationships & Trust

A common theme is that the value or effectiveness of youth work to address group-based violence depends almost entirely on the extent to which youth workers can establish a relationship of trust with the young people they work among. Youth work is a person-centred profession. Although aimed at those most at risk of 'gang' involvement or 'radicalisation', the projects in this study mostly emphasised that addressing violence was a means to support personal and community wellbeing as their ultimate purpose. Addressing violence or enhancing security was a means to that end, rather than the goal of the work. Enabling change through positive relations means youth work cannot be 'forced'. However, as young people in the context of positive social activities and social networks choose to change, it is potentially more sustainable.

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Change becomes possible when a previous world-view no longer makes sense under changed life conditions.

The evidence of this analysis is that youth workers can only make change if they are allowed to build trust by the sponsor (often the state) and the local community in which they operate. Organisations involved in preventing (or countering) the 'radicalisation' of young people, such as the *Aasha Gang Mediation Project* and *Exit Sweden*, emphasised the importance of establishing relationships with the young people <u>before</u> a space is created for ideologies to be challenged. Youth workers are not 'agents of the state' but committed professionals building relationships with young people as an alternative to criminalisation or becoming a victim. Seeking to externally direct or micro-manage these engagements to meet wider political ends potentially prevents youth workers from doing their job with young people. This is clearly a complex, and occasionally dangerous balancing act requiring a professional code of ethics and systems of support.

III. Regardless of whether a programme is designed to prevent engagement or harm or to help people exit from participation (desist), the value of youth work approaches is dependent on the ability of youth workers to connect young people into social support.

In projects as diverse as the *STREET* community-led 'counter-radicalisation' programme in Brixton, South London and *Homeboy Industries* in Los Angeles, successful work is predicated on establishing connectivity, coordination and cooperation within the lives of marginalised, and often isolated, young people.

This includes building or rebuilding supportive relationships:

» In *Homeboy Industries* this is achieved by reunifying families and improving social connectedness;

» The *BUILD* and *ROCA* projects (and also the *St. Giles SOS* project) engage community members to establish mentoring and support relationships between the community and the young person;

» The *Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV)* in Glasgow encourages partnership working and greater coordination between statutory agencies and the local community to provide 'wrap-around' support services for 'vulnerable' young 'gang' members;

» The Project Oracle Synthesis Study concluded that such targeted, comprehensive multi-agency programmes gave *"the strongest indication of an effect on young people's participation in gang activity and violence in London."*

Good youth work often also involves pointing young people towards professional support services. Most of the projects (including the two statutory examples of *Channel* and *J-ARC*) deliberately established opportunities to address underlying needs which may have encouraged criminal behaviour, such as drug and alcohol misuse, mental health issues or social isolation, in a process of coordinated engagement.

IV. Change through youth work is largely dependent on widening opportunities for critical self-reflection by young people.

Change becomes possible when a previous world-view no longer makes sense under changed life conditions. Many of the projects maintain that only targeted support and continuous and sustained engagement offers the prospect of success. This requires a flexible and person-centre approach. Young people will not necessarily be ready to engage at the speed that the community or the projects intends.

Even where a young person disengages or falls away, they should not be abandoned:

» The *CIRV* project in Glasgow, itself borne from the 'focused deterrence strategy' of the Boston Ceasefire project, exemplifies the intense nature of approaches that balance harsh punishments with support for individuals seeking to move beyond 'gang' involvement.

» *ROCA* balances intense and 'relentless' direct engagement with young people with follow-up supportive elements designed to be transformational in building the capacity for the young person to transition from violence and criminal behaviour.

V. Almost all of the projects engage 'at risk', 'marginalised' and 'vulnerable' young people in 'at risk', 'marginalised' and 'deprived' communities.

Many of the case studies draw directly on theories that suggest that change can only occur if it disrupts cycles of poverty, hopelessness, crime and incarceration. Education and employment are regarded as crucial in sustaining the transition of a young person away from negative influences. Not only does this approach form the 'backbone' of a number of projects such as *Fight for Peace*, but also it is used as an incentive to participate. Young 'gang' members participating in *CIRV* in Glasgow suggested that the main reason they chose to participate was the hope of securing employment.

VI. The value of community members alongside professionals in supporting, guiding and mentoring young people was another common theme of most of the case studies.

By being able to speak with first-hand knowledge of having gone through similar situations with regards to 'gang' culture and expectations placed upon them, community partners are able, not only to relate to young people, but also to offer hope and inspiration that moving beyond 'gang' life is possible.

It also opened up a pathway towards re-connection with the wider community:

» The *STREET*, *Aasha* & *BUILD* programmes highlighted that the role of former 'gang' members was critical in building relationships with young people.

» Many *EXIT Sweden* staff were themselves former members of far-right groups.

In summary, the international projects suggest that youth work to address violence must be:

» locally relevant;

» built on trust with all key parties;

» relationship-based;

» addressing individual needs; supportive in reconnecting young people to services, the community and healthy networks; sustained and relentless where appropriate;addressing real educational and employment deficits; and, working with community support and participation.

The following key themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups:

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3.1 The language and place of armed groups in Northern Ireland

The terminology that has emerged in Northern Ireland around paramilitarism has become imprecise and even confusing. While 'paramilitarism' and paramilitaries are still referred to on a daily basis in politics, community and the media, closer scrutiny shows that similar terms reflect very different meanings. The word 'paramilitary' is used interchangeably to mean local gangs, organised crime operations, para-state paramilitaries, terrorists, dissidents and armed groups. Given that policy responses to each of these phenomena are necessarily different, 'paramilitarism' may have become an unhelpful and even inaccurate term in defining policy.

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3.2 Making sense of 'paramilitarism' in Northern Ireland

Despite the caveat of inconsistent terminology, respondents in this research were unanimous in identifying a 'normalised' and pervasive tolerance of 'armed group activity' in the geographical areas targeted under the Tackling Paramilitarism programme, describing the influence or potential influence of armed groups operating over many years within community. However, the specific nature, purpose and geographical scope of organisation and the activities of groups in each area varied over time. In some cases, they were dependent on personality. The uncertain nature of the activity made it

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The Northern Ireland Experience

difficult to measure, but always included 'known' 'extra-curricular' activities of named individuals; an informal but pervasive and sinister influence on community life that was experienced as real or anticipated intimidation; and decisive 'political' control and sway shaping power relations and free speech along with movement in community.

3.3 Living with 'paramilitarism' within local communities

Community attitudes to paramilitarism are complex and often ambivalent. These are reflected in attitudes that appear at times to be contradictory and affected by a variety of factors, including:

» Personal relationships with individuals who are also known and valued for their contribution to family and community life outside paramilitarism, including for their general leadership and organisational skills;

» Disdain and disapproval of illegal paramilitary/armed group activity related to drugs and other criminal activity;

» Admiration for an identification with the political 'causes' for which 'paramilitary/armed organisations stood in the past;

» Fear of paramilitary/armed group attention or reprisal which acts to suppress open debate or criticism;

» Tolerance for paramilitary/armed action against alleged anti-social behaviour;

» Resentment at alleged 'control' of community development and community resources, and the perception that state agencies collude with this development;

» Tolerance of public displays of paramilitary-related or erected emblems, symbols and flags.

3.4 The pressures on young people experiencing coercive control

There was consensus among all interviewees that young people were at the frontline of the experience of paramilitarism in communities as both participants and victims of activity, ideology and culture. Interviewees identified both *'push'* factors, which encouraged or drove young people to either become or remain involved in paramilitarism and *'pull'* factors, which attracted young people. These included:

» family ties which encouraged a sense of identity and belonging in extended networks;

» personal security in a hostile environment through membership of a group;

» pathways to identity and power at local level;

» excitement and perceived glamour;

» opportunities for financial gain;

» debt and dependency issues, including drugs; and,

» bad experiences of policing or wider authority.

3.5 Is tackling paramilitarism a role for youth work?

Despite the continuing existence of armed activity and organisations in communities in Northern Ireland since 1969, this research did not identify any current project or community-based youth work programme with the explicit or primary aim of preventing young people from joining local armed groups or paramilitary organisations or with an explicit mission to support young people if they seek to leave. There is no formal body of practice with this aim, no structured support and only occasional community-led debate over this issue.

3.6 Youth work where paramilitarism is a continuing reality in communities

Aside from providing protected space away from traumatic social influences, direct personal development intervention and personal emotional support, youth work activity to prevent damage to young people in relation to paramilitarism often fell into three broad categories: mediation, diversion and advocacy. As mediators, youth workers described finding themselves as one of the few people of trust capable of finding solutions at the centre of negotiations with young people (both individually and in groups), armed organisations, political parties, local residents, statutory agencies including the police and local Councils and the media.

3.7 Challenges for youth work in addressing issues arising from paramilitarism

In the course of the research, interviewees identified ten specific challenges to the successful delivery of a systematic programme to tackling paramilitarism:

» Tackling paramilitary activity and the culture of paramilitarism in communities is currently not systematic but relies on individual workers and their relationships in communities and with other agencies;

» Dealing with difficult young people at risk from involvement as either perpetrator and victim is complex work requiring attention to both recruitment and constant attention and reflection on the part of the worker;

» There are real fears about the intimidation and safety of workers in communities, especially if workers are seen to be in co-operation with the police. The expectations on workers need to be appropriately managed;

» Work to address the consequences of paramilitarism for young people in communities needs to be imaginative and flexible, requiring active and intelligent workers, and will require that resources can be made available in a timely way. This will require new approaches to accountability that focus on outcomes as well as procedures;

» Training in this area of youth work remains limited and cannot fully be relied upon in the field. Respondents felt that mentoring and reflective practice for workers were more appropriate for a developing field with huge risks and the potential for worker isolation;

» Re-orientating youth work provision to tackling paramilitarism means prioritising those most at risk. This is a culture change for youth work;

» Tackling paramilitarism successfully through youth work will require persistence and consistency from funders as well as specific, tailored projects;

» Accountability must be directly linked to outcomes. Outcomes need to be assessed honestly and pragmatically, with the opportunity to evolve and adjust practice if unsuccessful on the first attempt. Reflective learning should be co-ordinated a central level;

- » There is no simple cause and effect which youth work can deliver in tackling paramilitarism. Success for youth work may not look like statistical transformation, but rather small alterations, which enable larger social changes. Government agencies need to support workers as they engage with this topic and reflect on their own expectations of success. Additionally, they should be willing to adapt changes learned through the programme into their mainstream activities;

- » Honesty about difficulties and challenges is problematic in an environment that is driven by corporate success and a media culture that money spent on tackling difficult issues is money misdirected.

3.8 Evolving youth work practice to address paramilitarism in communities

Every youth worker agreed that change in behaviour only happens in and through relationships. As several people said independently: "Relationships are the heart of the work." This is entirely consistent with the successful international models of violence reduction reviewed as part of the research. A number of issues emerged as consistent priorities in any changed approach to improve youth work practice:

A revision of the understanding of 'risk' or 'with promse' in youth work to ensure that the concept of 'at risk' is focussed away from generic socio-economic indicators to enable youth workers to identify and focus effort on those young people identified as 'at risk' from serious involvement with criminality and violence;

- » A formal professional recognition of the damage that violence does to young people, both through trauma as victims and as perpetrators of harm. This in turn would enable significant commitment to difficult young people who have suffered in and through violence, requiring a willingness by professionals to be honest about unacceptable behaviours with young people, while working more closely with them;

- » A more focussed approach may reduce the total number of young people being worked with at any one time but would involve a commitment to end exclusions for difficult young people, the encouragement for a culture of reflective practice for workers, and increased attention to action-research. This shift in thinking would align closely with the concept of 'relentless outreach' adopted in *ROCA*;

- » One of the most striking themes to emerge from the research was the initially paradoxical suggestion that any success would depend on BOTH local credibility AND the engagement of trusted outsiders. In the first instance, local credibility was

a constant theme from interviewees in relation to the ability of any professional, including youth workers, to engage with paramilitarism and armed group violence in local communities. Indeed, all respondents were of the view that unless there was sufficient trust with the local community, no work could be successful.

3.9 Measuring success

For youth workers, paramilitarism is the context not the problem; the professional challenge is finding effective ways to support culture change against violence for young people in communities where group-based violence and self-protective organisation have remained ingrained. Many respondents believe that the Tackling Paramilitarism programme should develop a clearer understanding of change and the pace at which it can be delivered, alongside what that looks like in the short-, medium- and long-term. This should include an understanding of the role that youth work can play in supporting young people in relation to these specific issues and challenges.

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The formal commitment to tackling paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is qualified by the experience that society is much more ambivalent about taking action in practice.

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Paramilitarism remains a contested concept in Northern Ireland, with both Loyalist and Republican communities shaped by embedded narratives of armed struggle and/or defence of the community by these groups for several generations.

Both the presence of armed groups and young people joining them has a degree of 'historic tradition', even 'normality', in families and communities. This gives groups outside the law an unusual depth and continuity as well as a tradition, however tenuously, of claiming political purpose.

Tackling armed violence in Northern Ireland therefore means tackling something that is treated as integrated, traditional and 'normal', and part of the community fabric and infrastructure, not something that is distinct, separate and exceptional. While other parts of the UK and Ireland have known aspects of this, and many have had youth gangs or local 'ethnic' groups, none of them lived through this phenomenon for so long, and nowhere else has it impacted on everyday community life and politics for over a century. Anyone working with paramilitarism is therefore working in an unusual political context, in which personal history and local 'tradition' has combined to create a degree of 'normality' - even acceptability - around the presence and use of violence for political ends.

In 1998, all of the main political parties, including those associated with armed groups, accepted that violence has no place in solving political disputes, that the rule of law should apply everywhere and that paramilitary groups should disband. In theory, this represents a watershed political consensus that any armed activity is no longer 'political' but is instead 'violence' and therefore criminal. Twenty years later, however, armed activity in communities continues - albeit at a reduced level - usually associating itself with the political traditions of the past.

Young people in deprived and marginalised communities are in the frontline of this activity, both as perpetrators and victims. Models of practice to address violence developed elsewhere cannot therefore simply be 'lifted' and applied without reference to this historical and social context.

B

This study confirms that there are numerous examples of efforts to prevent armed-group violence in democratic societies across the world or that are dedicated to preventing gang violence and/or enabling members to leave and integrate into mainstream society. Youth work approaches have been an essential element in these efforts, specifically of relationship building, providing alternative services, counselling, support for employment and education, mediation and persistent targeting of those most at risk. The most successful are those, which offer a genuine alternative path and support to reach it.

Consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2250, the contribution of youth work is a commitment to young people and their participation. While resisting the narrative of 'moral panic', most youth workers recognise that violence and conflict shapes and distorts young lives disproportionately to the lives of the wider community. The evidence from this study shows a surprising degree of consensus about the locus of youth work in addressing violence by armed groups in communities:

» De-glamorisation of violence with restorative principles;

» There is no single formula: work has to be street by street and person- centred;

» Mentor- and peer-approaches to change are critical. Relationships are the core of the work;

» Success requires persistence and commitment to the young person, especially those most at risk because of trauma and marginalisation;

4
Summary Observations

» Local people are critical (both in support and in change);

» Authentic and honest engagement with dilemmas (reflective practice);

» Youth work exists to support young people and their well-being not simply manage problems;

» Good youth work requires an ability to focus resources on those most in difficulties;

» The systems supporting youth work with young people at risk have to be agile and flexible and not pre-determined or bureaucratic;

» Where people change, this has to be acknowledged and permitted not resented.

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The formal commitment to tackling paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is qualified by the experience that society is much more ambivalent about taking action in practice.

The ability of youth work, or any single profession, to deliver change in isolation in relation to armed groups in Northern Ireland is limited by:

» Perceived continuing ambivalence in political leadership and communities about tackling paramilitarism that creates uncertainty and risk for those working with young people;

» Organisations such as councils, police, housing or community development groups seem unwilling or unable to name tackling paramilitarism as a corporate goal, and much of the work appears to depend on individuals willing to take risks;

» At a professional level the specific contribution and responsibility of youth work towards young people and their relationship to armed groups has not been clarified formally. There are currently inadequate systems of professional support, insufficient training, and inflexible sources of protection and finance. Anyone charged professionally with tackling paramilitarism at local level without unambiguous support is perceived to be immediately at risk. This has not substantially changed since 1998;

» There is inconsistency in the wider community about the role of law and order (retributive) and personal and community (restorative) approaches in dealing with violence leading to a lack of consistent narrative;

» Funders appear to treat tackling paramilitarism as a short-term delivery target rather than a major culture-change project requiring the development of cultures of trust, collaboration, co-design and co-delivery. There is a need to move away from short-term 'delivery' models, to one which measures long-term and sustainable changes in culture, reflected in the lives of young people;

» There are few opportunities for honest dialogue about challenges, opportunities and risks on these themes between young people, local communities, youth workers and political leaders or public agencies with responsibilities. A working culture that penalises mistakes rather than learns from mistakes is counter-productive in a context of risk. There is a requirement for opportunities for reflective learning and support for a transformative practice for youth workers.

D

Change will depend on addressing the identified challenges and embedding the values and practice of supporting young people to escape violence in the practice of youth workers.

This requires a transformation in training, community expectations and attitudes and professional support.

1.

The experience of the Tackling Paramilitarism programme should lead to a wider social and political conversation seeking greater clarity about terminology around paramilitarism, highlighting the complexity of tackling the variety of different phenomena which are currently encapsulated in a single term and require specific responses. This would inform the development of more precise interventions and outcomes, as well as setting more realistic expectations and measurements of change.

2.

The value of youth work intervention in relation to armed groups can only be fully realised if there are clear pathways for collaborative working with other agencies. The Youth Service should consider hosting a quarterly meeting of other stakeholders and policyholders focussing on 'Tackling Paramilitarism for Youth' as a vehicle for enhancing learning across sectors, sharing resources and identifying common priorities. At a minimum these forums should include councils, education, police and community health agencies.

3.

As part of a Policing with the Community approach to Tackling Paramilitarism, the PSNI and youth service should develop clear protocols for youth workers and police officers on formal collaboration, to enable clear pathways to support safeguarding. This could also explore opportunities for a triage system, perhaps including community mental health services, to enable appropriate response to issues of young people and violence in the community. The central importance of pastoral care and mental health support was a consistent theme of this research. The Fresh Start programme should be directly connected to mental health services, to enable fast access to mental health acute services at the point of vulnerability.

4.

Addressing paramilitarism and its impact on young people remains an undeveloped area of youth work practice. The Youth Service could establish clear opportunities for reflective learning and critical reflective practice to underpin the development of professional standards. Such a process might consider whether tackling paramilitarism and related issues of armed group violence requires specialist skills or becomes part of generic youth work in Northern Ireland.

5.

Formal youth work practice, professional standards and training should be developed to ensure that tackling paramilitarism and all other programmes are governed by international standards of working with young people (as articulated in 'The Missing Piece' (2018)); this includes a formal commitment to:

» Mentoring and positive relationships, including one-to-one mentoring for those most at risk. This could include the establishment of formal training for Mediation, Diversion and Advocacy;

» Recreating and maintaining 'social bridges' between young people and their communities, working alongside others;

» Designing and making available a variety of tools for youth workers engaging those most at risk, including the potential of group work, diversionary activities and the role of sport, entertainment and the arts;

» A clear role for youth workers in identifying issues of personal wellbeing and pathways for signposting young people to appropriate wellbeing and mental health support;

» Exploration of gender and the appropriate interventions relating to this particular issue;

» Education or employment as crucial elements in sustaining the transition of a young person away from harmful behaviour and influences.

Addressing prevention and desistence in relation to young people and violent groups in these terms should be seen as legitimate youth work activity and integrated with broader youth work approaches.

5 Recommendations

6.

Youth work programmes are committed to working towards reducing exposure to trauma and risk of any further harm to participants within fractured communities. Youth work agencies should continue to explore the potential of restorative practices and/ or trauma-informed approaches to practice as well as exploring the potential for public health approaches to violence reduction to enhance youth work through a co-workers model. The lessons should then be integrated into professional training and development and professional support systems.

7.

One of the most important concepts emerging from this research was 'relentless outreach' to young people at risk. There was widespread support among workers for diverting resources to those most at risk. While this concept was seen as vital in establishing commitment to some of the most marginalised, it was also recognised that successful outreach was emotionally and physically challenging for workers. To enable this, the Youth Service should establish clear mechanisms to support workers in this difficult and pioneering area, where workers may feel isolated or under stress. Youth workers should have clear support within their line-management structure within which sometimes difficult judgements can be considered and supported and have the capacity to draw on external support and planned respite if required.

8.

Like all statutory and community services, youth work depends on the rule of law. The role of youth work in addressing paramilitarism arises from a particular application of the duty to safeguard young people from risks, which have a more universal application including violence, serious criminality and coercive control. While the nature of the risk in armed groups is specific, it is ultimately a development of an existing role. Consideration should be given to the articulation of a Professional Duty, which applies to all youth work and is not simply the domain of workers in the Fresh Start programme.

9.

A meaningful youth work contribution to tackling paramilitarism in communities will not be achieved unless youth work is resourced to sustain the work over a meaningful period of time. Relationship-based work

requires sustained engagement. Long-term success will require resource planning for a minimum 5-10 year programme.

10.

Within the Tackling Paramilitarism programme, the issue of ongoing paramilitarism is to be addressed through both community initiatives and law enforcement. Youth work can address the participation of young people and armed group violence through voluntary engagement, providing alternative pathways for affected young people and supporting transition and is distinct from enforcement-based approaches. It appears at times, however, that the approaches are not integrated but sometimes run at cross purposes. It would be helpful if more work could be done by the Programme Board to clarify:

» the ways in which these two approaches interact in communities;

» the relationships expected between youth workers and police around young people; and,

» the expectations of 'success' used to measure each approach.

11.

Unless there is clear understanding of purpose and measurement along with strong professional support and guidance for workers, the dedicated focus on supporting young people 'at risk' or involved in armed and paramilitary groups in this programme can easily be blurred and subsumed into 'general principles of good youth work'. Youth work managers should develop new methods to gather information on change and development. This includes qualitative measures, which indicate how apparent micro-developments are sometimes major achievements for young people. Clarifying expectations at programme and professional level and developing a clearer understanding of the range of possible interventions and measures of success would be a critical contribution to professional development in this area. These should be presented in such a way as to contribute to outcomes-based accountability.

Countering Paramilitary & Organised Criminal Influence on Youth: *A Review*

This is a summary of the wider research, which can be found at corrymeela.org and eani.org

Access the full report at
corrymeela.org
eani.org.uk