



Communities in Transition

Area Research Reports 2023 Summary

Dr Brendan Sturgeon
and Prof Dominic Bryan



Northern Ireland
Executive



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The Executive
Programme on
Paramilitarism &
Organised Crime

BACKGROUND

The Communities in Transition Project aims to support areas where there has been a history of paramilitary activity and coercive control. The primary objective is to support the transition of these sites to a point where paramilitary groups no longer exercise influence, and their activity is no longer as prevalent. To achieve this ambition, Communities in Transition funds a range of over 30 innovative and community focused projects. These projects are designed to increase the capacity of each area and are categorised under the following headings: Area Regeneration; Capacity Building; Community Safety and Policing; Environment and Culture; Health and Wellbeing; Personal Transition; Restorative Practice; and Young People.

Between April and July 2022, the authors of this report led a team of researchers in the design and development of 10 Area Reports, which would facilitate an overview of the sites within which the Communities in Transition (CIT) project is active.

The purpose of these reports was to assess the current conditions of the 10 sites, including relevant political, social and economic issues. Given that the respective sites were selected for participation in Communities in Transition due to the

prevalence of paramilitary activity (past and present), crime being carried out by organised gangs was also of particular interest. Moreover, activity being led by groups funded by Communities in Transition to address some of the key issues in the areas was another key focus of the research.

After an exhaustive fieldwork process, which included engagement with 1400 unique participants, the authors produced 10 Area Reports. Although Communities in Transition is active in 8 areas, two of the location based reports (New Lodge and Ardoyne; Carrickfergus and Larne) were divided in two, due to local demand for the areas to be dealt with separately. This demand was based on a belief that the areas should not have been considered as one entity. The research team agreed that were different social/political issues present within the adjoining sites.

In this document, the authors will identify the key findings that emerged throughout the Area Reports – including notable trends present throughout all the areas and any significant findings in one particular location. We will start by presenting an overview of the methodology that was adopted, before discussing notable anomalies in the survey findings and key data uncovered by our in-depth interviews.



METHODOLOGY

The research team adopted a mixed methods approach, which included a Household Survey (administered by market research company, Perceptive Insight) and a mapping exercise that was produced alongside a collection of in-depth interviews.

- 1205 participants completed the Household Survey (proportional sample across age range, gender and community background).
- 208 participants undertook our Participatory GIS mapping exercise, Spraycan. This involved presenting participants with a computer based programme where they were shown a map and asked to 'spray' their responses to a series of questions (e.g. can you please spray the areas where you feel safe?). This task was administered by a researcher who carried out an in-depth interview as the participant moved through the exercise, asking them to explain why they were marking a certain location (e.g. can you describe what makes you feel safe in the area which you are spraying?). The interviews were recorded and data collected via the mapping exercise were stored securely. Again, a proportional sample was achieved across key demographic headings.
- All of the research was approved and guided by the Ethical Committee at Queen's University Belfast.

KEY Household Survey FINDINGS

Despite our earlier acknowledgment that each Communities in Transition site is considered as being a location within which there has been a significant amount of crime and disorder, in the past and in the present, a large amount of positive community sentiment was expressed by our participants. The following are the aggregate findings across all of the sites surveyed:

- 68% of the total number of participants agreed or strongly agreed that there was a strong sense of community in their neighbourhood.
- 64% felt connected to their local area.

Both of these findings are notable, given that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) routinely records high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) in each Communities in Transition area. In this regard, the research team had anticipated lower levels of community capital, though we also note that 94% of participants in the NI Life and Times Survey feel 'fairly' safe or 'very safe' in their area (NI Life and Times Survey, 2021).

Participants were also likely to indicate that they would know who to contact if they identified a problem in their area (84% felt this way) and most felt that that residents in their area abided by the rule of law (61%).

Despite these notable positive findings, a large number of participants still recorded concerns about an array of issues that were present within their community. Again, the following findings are the aggregate across all of the sites surveyed:

- 71% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their area would be in the same condition or worse off, in five years time.
- 60% felt that changes to the local environment (including alley-gating and/or extra street lighting) would help people feel safer in their area.
- 59% indicated that improved relationships with the PSNI would help make people feel safer.
- 57% felt ASB was a problem in their area.
- 57% felt drug-related crime was a problem in their area.

Participants were also asked to respond to a series of questions about the degree of paramilitary influence/activity that existed in their area:

- 32% of participants agree or strongly agreed that paramilitary groups had too much influence on young people in their area (this was well over double the response to the same question in the NI Life and Times Survey, where 12% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement).
- 34% felt that paramilitary groups created fear and intimidation in their area (this was double the response to the same question in the NI Life and Times Survey, where 17% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement).



- 52% indicated that paramilitary groups contributed to crime, drug dealing and ASB in their area (this was double the response to the same question in the NI Life and Times Survey, where 26% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement).
- 27% noted that paramilitary groups had a controlling influence in their area (this was over double the response to the same question in the NI Life and Times Survey, where 13% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement).

While there was a significant alignment in regards how each area felt about the issues discussed in the Household Survey, there were some notable anomalies. For example, when participants within the Shankill site were asked for their views on local policing, only 15% agreed or strongly that local residents were confident reporting incidents of ASB and/or crime to the PSNI (the average across all the areas was 36%). Moreover, only 10% of respondents in this site felt that the PSNI kept their area safe (the average across all the sites was 34% and the NI Life and Times Survey finding for the same question was 42%). These anomalies could be connected to a locally held view that people in this area were less likely to abide by the rule of law than any other area (38% in the Shankill vs. 61% average across all areas and 69% in the NI Life and Times Survey).

A further anomaly was recorded in Lurgan, when participants were asked about drug related crime – almost half of the participants in this area (47%) felt it was a significant issue, which was significantly higher the average recorded across all of the areas (28%).

Furthermore, participants in North Down were most likely to specify that their area had a problem with organised crime (29% vs. 14% average).

Lastly, participants in East Belfast (59%) were most likely to indicate that changes to the physical environment (alley-gating and/or extra street lighting) would help make local residents feel safer (31% average).

SPRAYCAN – NOTABLE FINDINGS (COMMUNITY BELONGING)

Participants who completed our Spraycan mapping exercise regularly demonstrated significant understanding of ‘their’ local environment – see Figure 1. **They regularly perceived space in segregation and explained that they either completely avoided spaces associated with the ‘other’ community or only travelled through them when in a car.**

FIGURE 1: Community attachment in the New Lodge/Tigers Bay area.

Few shared spaces were marked in any area. Where this occurred, it was generally what we would describe as low-level sharing (e.g. shops).

When participants were asked to identify points of belonging and points of threat, there was a significant tendency to mark most of the locations they associated with ‘their’ community as being safe and most of the spaces associated with the ‘other’ community as being unsafe – see Figure 2 and Figure 3.

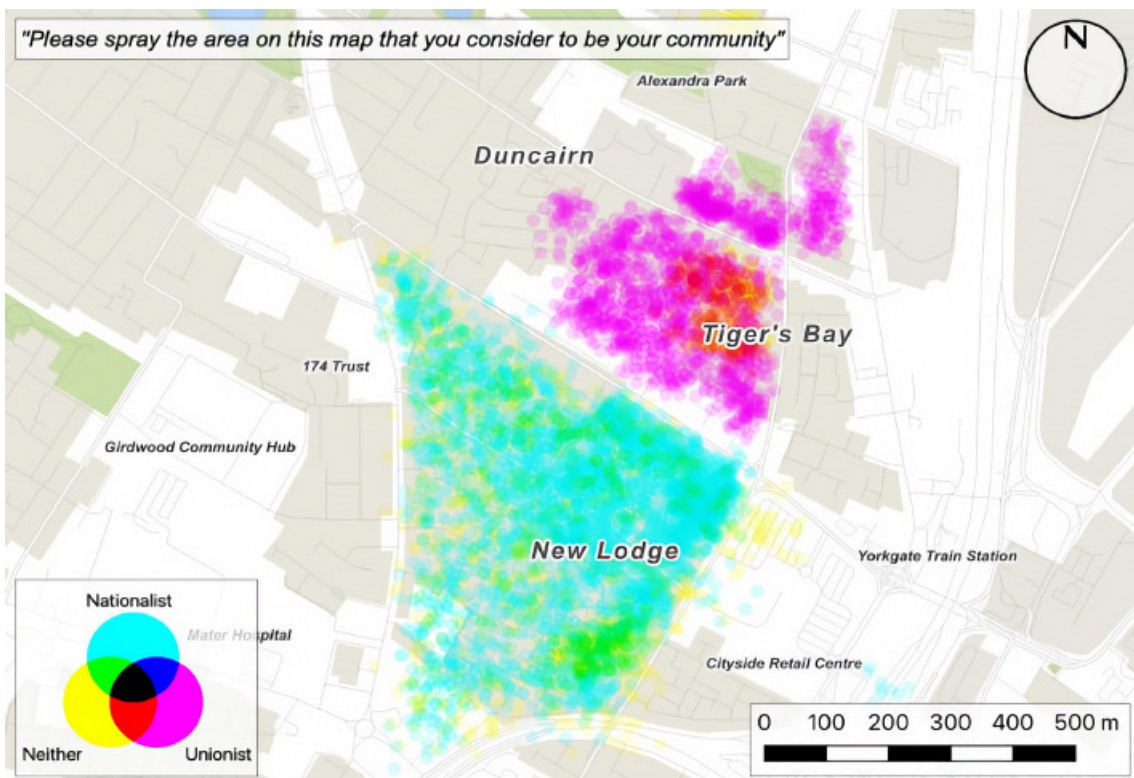




FIGURE 2: Points of belonging in the New Lodge/Tigers Bay area.

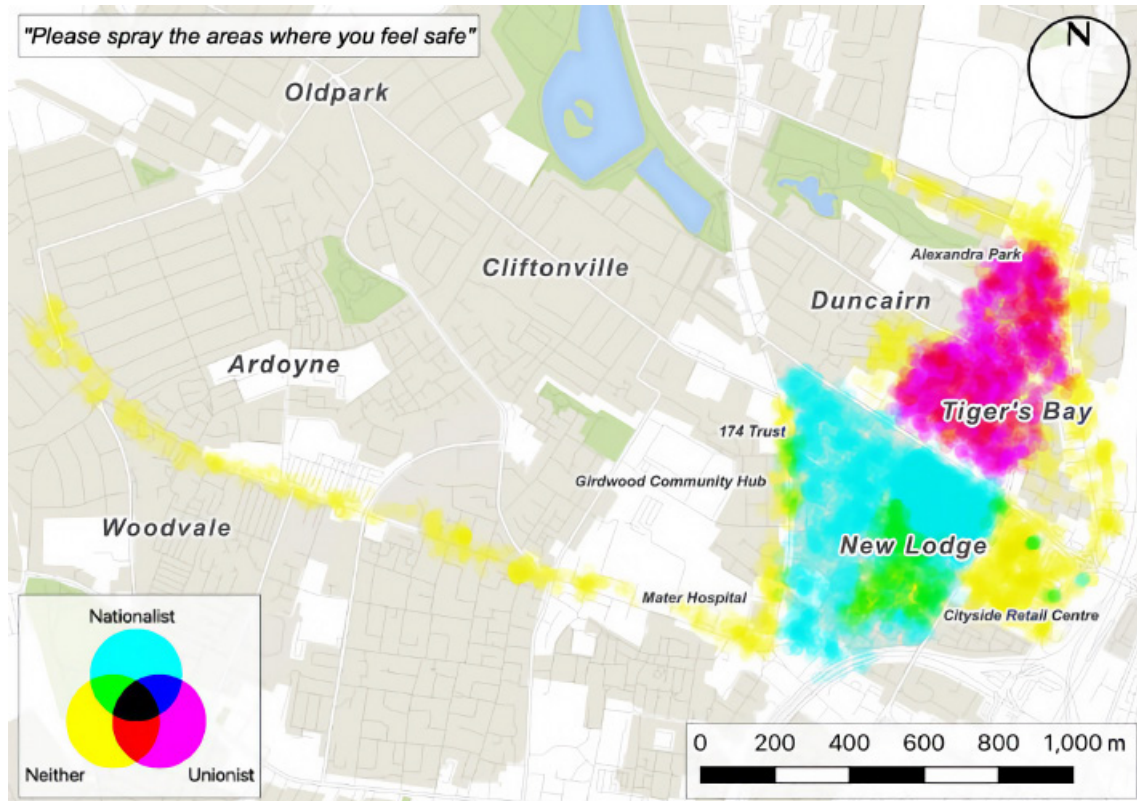
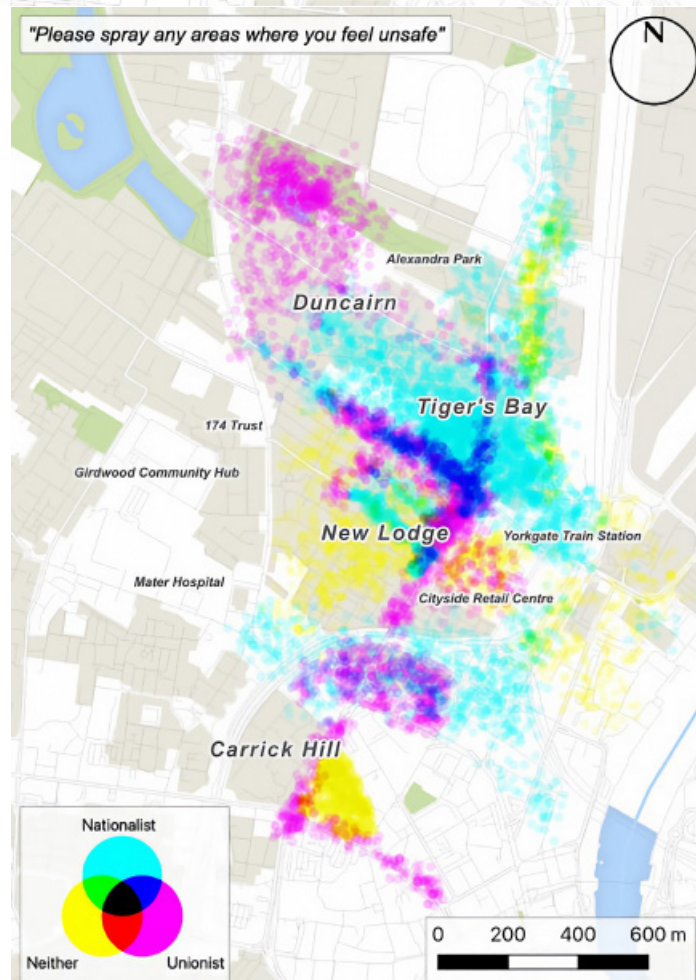


FIGURE 3: Points of threat in the New Lodge/Tigers Bay area.

The data obtained from the Spraycan mapping exercise presents a largely sectarianized view of the ways in which paramilitary groups remain active in Northern Ireland. It was common for participants who identified as Nationalist to mark sites in spaces associated with the Unionist community when they were asked to indicate where paramilitary groups were active. Conversely, they then left most of the spaces associated with their own community unmarked. Unionist participants largely adopted a similar approach, from their own perspective.



FIELDWORK NOTES

In one area, fieldworkers were encouraged to refer to paramilitary groups as organised crime gangs.

The range of interviews carried out alongside the mapping exercise are notable for the degree of trauma revealed about personal/family experiences of living in areas within which crime and disorder is prevalent. We have populated each Area Report with quotes from the interviews for the respective areas. In this instance, the identities of our participants has been carefully obscured. In some instances, where the level of personal detail involved in a particular account has exceeded our ability to protect an individual's anonymity, we have decided to omit it from our reports. However, we would like to reference the degree of sexual exploitation that was mentioned throughout the interviews. This included, forced prostitution (often used to clear personal or family debt) and grooming. Though the authors feel that the Area Reports, which are designed for public circulation, was not the appropriate platform to present accounts of this, we wish to stress that these are serious matters that require further examination within an appropriate setting.

All of our fieldworkers noted that the language/framing of the discussions they were involved was at times challenging. Many participants, understandably, asked if the research was about paramilitary groups or organised crime gangs. In some areas (notably West Belfast), participants indicated that there were 'no paramilitary groups in their area'. Consequently, it is suggested more precision/better framing of the issue moving forward seems important. The authors of this report are currently looking at this matter in further detail in a follow-up study.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

A striking contradiction has emerged throughout our work on the Area Reports. These sites were selected for participation in the Communities in Transition programme due to the range of difficult issues evident in each area, specifically related to crime being carried out by organised crime gangs, yet we have discovered that our participants often feel that there is a strong sense of community in their neighbourhood and many feel closely connected to their local area. While participants have also identified a range of other social, economic and political issues that need to be addressed, the existence of this apparent social capital likely offers Communities in Transition and other projects of this kind, a notable opportunity to develop further connections and collaboration in the future.

In closing, the authors would like to register their gratitude to all of our participants, especially given the sensitivity of the matters discussed throughout the different strands of our methodology.

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For enquiries contact:

Dr Brendan Sturgeon *Research Fellow*

**Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for
Global Peace Security and Justice**

**School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics
Queen's University Belfast, BT7 1NN**

Tel: 02890 975052 Email: b.sturgeon@qub.ac.uk



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