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Direct, Structural and Cultural Violence in a 'Post-conflict' Society: Lived Experiences of 'At Risk' and Incarcerated Young Men

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ABSTRACT

Studies of violence among young men often focus on individual acts of direct violence, without reference to structural and cultural dimensions. To address these omissions, interviews with 46 'at risk' or incarcerated young men (aged 18–24) and 25 professional support or prison staff in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland, all recruited through purposive sampling, were analyzed using inductive reflexive thematic analysis. Galtung's violence triangle was applied during the interpretive stage of analysis to contextualize and theorize emergent themes, demonstrating how direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence intersect and mutually reinforce one another across four interrelated domains that shape marginalized young men's identities and lived experiences. *Structural exclusion* creates systemic barriers that prevent young men from fully engaging in social, economic, and political spheres, perpetuating cycles of marginalization and alienation. *Legacies of violent conflict* transmit psychological and social trauma across generations, normalizing violence and fostering pervasive mistrust in communities. Through *paramilitary recruitment*, non-state armed groups make use of deprivation, territorial control, and perceived cultural legitimacy to sustain their allure and ongoing presence. *Paramilitary-style attacks* employ overt and direct violence, using 'community punishment' and vigilantism to maintain social regulation, dominance and fear.

KEYWORDS

Masculinities; prison; transgenerational trauma; paramilitaries; Galtung's violence triangle

Introduction

Studies of violence among young men often focus on individual acts of direct violence without connecting these behaviors to structural and cultural contexts. Violence remains deeply ingrained in many 'post-conflict'¹ societies, where the challenges young men face often stem from the entanglement of current socioeconomic conditions with legacies of past political violence. Few interdisciplinary studies have examined how direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence shape the lives of young men, reinforcing marginalization and facilitating continued violent activity. This article utilizes Galtung's violence triangle to analyze how direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence shape marginalized young men's identities and lived experiences in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland (NI).

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Since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) (1998),² NI has gradually transitioned away from one of the longest-running violent conflicts in contemporary European history, euphemistically known as the Troubles. Paramilitary ceasefires, initiatives to promote intercommunity cohesion, criminal justice reform, and a dramatic reduction in direct political violence indicate progress toward peace. However, no comprehensive transitional justice process has taken place, due to political crises, competing narratives of victimhood, and limited political commitment to reducing social divisions (Gray et al., 2023). Although the GFA was signed 28 years ago, many legacies of the conflict remain deeply embedded and continue to shape the everyday lives of marginalized young men, especially those ‘at risk’ of, or already imprisoned for, involvement in criminal and/or paramilitary activity. To design interventions and policy that will reduce experiences of violence, exclusion, and marginalization among young men, ‘post-conflict’ scholarship needs to show how these legacies persist.

To explore these overlaps and map the relationships between past and present, this article draws on primary data from two qualitative research projects focused on marginalized young men aged 18–24 who were either incarcerated or considered to be ‘at risk’ of becoming involved, or further involved, in criminality and/or paramilitarism. Drawing on 71 in-depth interviews, the article examines how direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence shape marginalized young men’s identities and lived experiences in a society emerging from protracted conflict.

The article highlights four interrelated domains of violence:

- (1) Structural exclusion, marginalization, and alienation: the systematic disenfranchisement of young men and their perceived exclusion from full participation in social, economic, and political life.
- (2) The legacies of violent conflict: experienced by young men in the present, including or due to ongoing psychological and social trauma.
- (3) Paramilitary recruitment: the continued enlistment of young men in paramilitary organizations.
- (4) Paramilitary-style attacks (PSAs): young men’s direct experiences of violent victimization by paramilitary actors.

Through examining these four domains, the study makes three contributions: (1) it extends Galtung’s violence triangle framework to unpack the dynamics of ‘post-conflict’ violence and adds power as an important analytical concept; (2) it provides a nuanced, interdisciplinary insight into the ways in which historical legacies, marginalization, and identity intersect to shape the lived experiences of young men; (3) it offers evidence-based insights for policy and practice in post-conflict settings, arguing that interventions to address the effects of conflict must more explicitly and holistically confront structural and cultural forms of violence.

Using Galtung’s violence triangle as an analytical lens

Violence beyond physical harm

Violence has been defined and interpreted in many ways (Krause, 2013). Narrow definitions suggest that violence is “a simple concept: it is the act of doing harm, injury, or desecration through physical force” (Mitchell, 1996, p. 156). However, such definitions overlook how

power is exercised and how harms (including verbal, psychological, emotional, and economic abuse) are inflicted and experienced. Both nationally (for paramilitary activity, see NI Affairs Committee, 2024) and internationally (for intimate partner relationships, see United Nations, 1993), it is increasingly recognized that such abuses constitute coercive control. Physical force may be latent rather than manifest and may be buttressed by structural and cultural forms of violence (Galtung, 1990, 2004). This broader understanding of violence provides the basis for analyzing its structural and cultural dimensions in more depth, particularly through Galtung's violence triangle.

Galtung's violence triangle: direct, structural and cultural violence

To understand the complex ways in which violence and power affect young men, we draw on Galtung's (1990) violence triangle. This recognizes three interrelated forms of violence: direct, structural, and cultural. Direct violence is relatively easy to recognize and categorize (see Mitchell above) and includes physical harm and threats of violence. Structural violence is a combination of social, economic, and political exclusion (McGill, 2019); it shapes everyday patterns of behavior and increases or restricts the life chances of groups and individuals (Farmer, 1996). It identifies suffering caused by deeply entrenched and inequitable relationships at every level in society (Crawshaw et al., 2015; Farmer, 2004). These societal arrangements are "*structural* because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world" and "*violent* because they cause injury to people" (Farmer et al., 2006, p.1686; emphases in original).

Such patterns of inequality illustrate how structural violence is produced through the persistent denial of care, support, resources and opportunities (Kent, 2006), manifesting in patterns of social exclusion, particularly among young people. One key indicator is "Not in Employment, Education or Training" (NEET) rates, which for young people in 2025 were 10.4% in high-income countries and 28.5% in low-income countries (O'Higgins, 2025). NEET status is regarded as a reliable indicator of vulnerability (O'Higgins, 2025), and wide differences at country level imply structural violence. Such violence is not generated by individuals' direct actions but by wider processes and practices that restrict the opportunities of individuals, communities, and societies (Crawshaw et al., 2015).

Structural violence persists even in societies espousing egalitarian ideals. This is where Galtung's third element, cultural violence, has analytical value. Most simply, cultural violence legitimizes direct and structural violence, and renders them acceptable, by morally recoding acts and facts: wrong becomes right, or at least acceptable. For example, to kill for the nation is deemed acceptable but to kill for personal reasons is not (Galtung, 1990). For Galtung, examples of cultural violence include militarism in the US and Japan after the Second World War, and the idea of a promised land for a chosen people in Israel (Galtung, 1990). Roberts (2008) applied the framework to show that normalization of gender inequities (patriarchy, a form of cultural violence) drives acts of gender-based violence (direct violence) and social sanctions that do not target those who commit gender-based violence but those who try to discuss or challenge it (structural violence).

Galtung's (1990) violence triangle illuminates violence from several angles. It suggests that direct violence is an event, structural violence a process, and cultural violence an invariant (given the slowness of cultural change). Galtung further theorizes that cultural violence flows causally via structural to direct violence; it is an underlying substrate that

nourishes the other two types of violence. Direct violence arises out of structural violence. It may include revolutionary violence (to reform social structures), but more usually causes individual criminal activity to “‘get out,’ redistribute wealth, get even, get revenge” (Galtung, 1990, p. 295). Alternatively, structural violence (by generating apathy and hopelessness) may lead to self-directed violence (Galtung, 1990), including suicide, drug-taking and other risky behaviors.

Power, normalization and contemporary applications of the violence triangle

Galtung’s concepts have been applied to various contemporary contexts. Luciano conceptually grounded the Timor-Leste armed conflict in the violence triangle, arguing that violent actors rebelled against structures and legitimized their use of violence, and further stating that “the direct violence may be less bad than the structural and cultural damage” (2023). The violence triangle has also been used to analyze the construction of checkpoints, Israeli-only roads, and settlements in Israeli Occupied Palestine. These structures—infrastructural and social—facilitate multiple forms of direct violence, normalized by neo-colonial ideologies and narratives that justify Israeli privilege (cultural violence) to the point that people are unable to see the violence that their society cause and that their own actions (and inactions) reproduce (CPT Palestine, 2024).

Two recent Colombian studies demonstrate the relevance of the violence triangle to post-conflict situations. Ospina (2020) clearly differentiates between massacres, structural inequity, and the propagation of national narratives that serve the interests of specific segments of society. Canola (2022) showed that civilians who are caught between the structural violence of poverty and direct violence by armed actors have few choices, while cultural violence is deployed to legitimize both direct and structural violence. Systems and structures embedded in violence shape expectations through imitation and attempts to escape structural violence, promoting recruitment into the drug trade and paramilitary structures (Canola, 2022; Ospina, 2020). The persistence of precarious societal conditions that impede reintegration and the acquisition of capacities means that in the ‘post-conflict’ period, formal peace accords do not of themselves generate social peace (Canola, 2022; Ospina, 2020).

These recent studies highlight an issue that Galtung only touched on obliquely: the link between violence and power (Paulson & Tikly, 2022). Galtung wrote in abstract and metaphorical terms of top-dogs and under-dogs, but did not adequately show how, or by whom, power is acquired, materialized, and asserted nor how it relates to the violence triangle. For Kent (2006), all forms of violence apply power to meet the interests of one social group at the expense of others; asymmetrical societal relations ensure that the powerless suffer while the powerful benefit (McGill, 2019). Structural violence is therefore characterized by the uneven distribution of resources and by unequal access to the power to determine their distribution (Paulson & Tikly, 2022). Marginalized people in society tend to lack power (Kent, 2006); and are likely to be marginalized precisely for this reason. An illustration of this is Tombs’ argument that “power, in the historic, structural factors circulating through the present – racism, colonialism, class contempt – meant that the lives of those in Grenfell Tower counted for less” (Tombs, 2026, p. 13). According to Tombs’ analysis, the operation of power helped produce the 2017 fire as authorities ignored residents’ safety warnings, installed substandard materials and had inadequate safety procedures. Yet power plays a deeper role than that, with

authorities causing ongoing harms by not appropriately rehousing tower residents (who were mainly poor and mainly poor and from racially minoritized groups), many of whom have instead effectively been displaced from London's wealthiest borough to allow further gentrification and capital accumulation by finance capital (Tombs, 2026). The point is that harm and violence are overwhelmingly enacted by, and for the benefit of, the most powerful in society (Canning & Tombs, 2021).

Violence associated with power is characterized by (in)visibilization and normalization. In many cases, the visibility of direct violence masks the presence of cultural and structural violence. Recent research has also shown that socially dominant groups turn to direct violence when structural violence and the societal status quo are being challenged (McGill, 2024). Galtung suggested that direct violence resembles waves on otherwise tranquil water (Galtung, 1969). The water is a reservoir of latent structural violence, whose invisibility permits it to flourish. Paulson and Tikly (2022) make the deeper point that all three forms of violence are invisibilized, normalized and made to appear inevitable by the exercise of power that entrenches violence and its effects. Winter (2012) argued that the everyday repetition and reproduction of violence enable it to seem invisible, latent and an enduring part of life.

These analyses of power supplement some lacunae in Galtung's violence triangle. We conceptualize that power operates in three interconnected ways across the triangle. First, power is the ability to control life chances and opportunities (structural violence); acting in the economy, political system, or through other institutional arrangements, individuals produce and reproduce societal inequalities by allocating or withholding goods and services in society. Second, cultural power creates narratives that shape social views of what is normal and justifiable; it reframes harms and inequities as tradition, inevitable, a form of necessary discipline, or the fault of certain groups. Third, power is expressed in terms of direct violence that applies force or threats to enable and sustain structural and cultural power, or control the lives of groups or individuals.

Operationalizing the violence triangle

The contemporary applications of Galtung's concepts discussed above suggest that explaining crime and violence among young people requires an analysis of the interrelationship between direct, structural, and cultural violence. Whereas reductive definitions of violence limit understanding, more inclusive approaches show that harm is produced in many intersecting ways. We have therefore adopted a definition of violence that updates Galtung and foregrounds systemic influences and power:

Any act of power, whether directly or via systemic and cultural forms, that results in physical, psychological, emotional, environmental or spiritual harm and that has the effect of limiting the capabilities (opportunity freedoms) available to individuals, groups, other species and natural systems. (Paulson & Tikly, 2022, p. 11)

This definition makes it possible to frame power and its relation to violence in two linked ways. Structurally, power is exercised through institutional and policy arrangements which gatekeep access to resources and opportunities (including, housing, education, employment and criminal justice decisions) that cement social exclusion and marginalization and shape and condition the life chances of young men. Culturally, power is exercised via community

and societal narratives that legitimate or normalize harm, and recast coercion, exclusion and vigilantism as necessary, deserved, or inevitable. Together, these applications of power create the conditions in which direct violence (including threats, assault, and intimidation) becomes thinkable, permissible, and, for some actors, strategically useful.

‘Post-conflict’ Northern Ireland

The Troubles and their ‘post-conflict’ legacies

The Troubles have been described as an ethnonationalist, political, religious, economic, and psychological conflict (Cairns & Darby, 1998). The conflict caused over 3,700 conflict-related deaths and up to 100,000 physical injuries, and left long-lasting impacts, particularly in communities experiencing multiple deprivation (Breen-Smyth, 2012). Individuals and communities continue to be affected by political, cultural, and social divisions, as well as the legacies of victimization by paramilitaries and state violence. These effects are spatially concentrated in areas of multiple deprivation, clustered in specific urban neighborhoods and interface-adjacent communities which were often hardest hit during the Troubles (Mesev et al., 2009). This section indicates that historical harms were not temporally bounded; inequalities in safety, opportunity, and protection became unevenly distributed across communities, creating environments in which multiple forms of harm became structurally embedded over time.

Research in NI aligns with scholarship in other ‘post-conflict’ societies, which consistently shows that communities suffer long-term social, economic, and psychological effects after conflict, due, *inter alia*, to intergenerational trauma, paramilitary influence, and social exclusion (Abbasi, 2022; Bangura, 2024; Grajales & Lévy, 2024). These issues are not residual conditions but evidence of an ongoing system of disadvantage that shapes life-course trajectories. Examining their effects on the formation of identity, Harland and McCready (2015) found that marginalized young men from areas of multiple deprivation held narrow and contradictory notions of what it meant to be a man. They idealized expressions of masculinity characterized by power, strength, independence, and intelligence, but experienced low educational attainment, high unemployment, and high rates of family breakdown that left them feeling powerless, fearful of violence, and pessimistic about the future (Harland and McCready 2015). Young men felt excluded from decision-making processes (Walsh & Harland, 2021) and were “regularly perceived as ‘problems’ as opposed to resources, by adults in their communities” (Harland & McCready, 2014, p. 280).

This pattern of structural marginalization, socio-economic disadvantage and conflict-related trauma has profoundly affected mental health (McAlister et al., 2014; O’Neill & Rooney, 2018). Compared with regions in Britain, young people in NI show the highest prevalence of mental health issues (Office for Statistics Regulation, 2021). For example, rates of anxiety and depression are approximately 25% higher than elsewhere (Health and Social Care NI, 2020). NI’s age-standardized suicide rate was 13.3 deaths per 100,000 population in 2023, which was lower than Scotland (14.6) and higher than England and Wales (11.4) (NISRA, 2025, p. 14). Approximately 77% of suicides were male; the age-standardized rate for males in 2023 was 20.9 deaths per 100,000 population (NISRA, 2025, pp. 8–9).

Idealized notions of masculinity may also be associated with neglect of mental health and reluctance to seek support (Harland and McCready 2015; Murray, 2021, 2023). The tendency to individualize mental health problems and attribute them to personal weakness has obscured the degree to which psychological distress is produced and sustained by systemic inequalities, institutional neglect, and marginalization. To illustrate, 53.4% of deaths by suicide in 2023 were registered in the lowest two quintiles on NI's multiple deprivation index (NISRA, 2025, p. 12); an analysis of suicides between 2005 and 2011 found between two and four times the expected number of deaths in certain wards, and an evident association with deprivation (Bunting et al., 2016). For a long time, the contemporary psychological impact of the Troubles on young people was underestimated. However, its transgenerational effects are now increasingly recognized (Gallagher et al., 2012; Rodríguez-Davis, 2025). Young people have been "implicated as actors in a process of absorbing trauma across generations" through the "reception and transmission of inter- and trans-generational trauma" (Templer & Radford, 2007, p. 18). These patterns reflect opportunities that have been denied across generations: social institutions and community attitudes have systematically stigmatized young men, constrained their agency, and reinforced cycles of marginalization (McGill, 2017).

Contemporary paramilitarism and 'post-conflict' persistence

The enduring impacts of the conflict have created fertile ground for paramilitary activity, criminality, and coercive control. In particular, there is an "overlap between paramilitary activity levels and areas of high deprivation and socioeconomic disadvantage" (IRC, 2025a, p. 20). While direct political violence has fallen to relatively low levels since the 1998 peace agreement, it has not been eradicated. A formal assessment of paramilitarism in 2025 noted that "paramilitarism remains a live and serious issue, with paramilitary groups imposing a threat to communities, individuals, and society" (IRC, 2025a, p. 4). At the time of writing, MI5 considered the threat from NI-related political violence to be "substantial," meaning that an attack is "likely" (2026). The deployment of two high-profile car bombs in early 2026—one detonating in a residential area and the other being neutralized after being driven into a police station—provides evidence supporting the MI5 assessment and demonstrates the continued presence of political violence in NI (AP, 2026). These events formed part of a broader pattern of political violence, with 18 bombing incidents and 12 shooting incidents recorded between 1 August 2025 and 31 July 2026 (PSNI, 2026).

During the decades of ethno-national conflict, community-based networks of violence were often positively valued. Paramilitaries were regularly considered protectors, and young men involved in the conflict experienced power, respect, and socially recognized purpose (Gallagher & Hamber, 2014). It was widely believed that joining paramilitary organizations was a way for young men to protect their communities (McAlister et al., 2014; Walsh & Harland, 2021). In the post-Agreement era, these functions have become increasingly redundant. Some community members who once valued paramilitary aggression now believe it is socially problematic (Gallagher & Hamber, 2014). However, many communities, predominantly those characterized by multiple deprivation and simultaneously most impacted by the conflict, still celebrate and display culturally violent practices: militaristic bands parade, military and paramilitary flags are flown, murals depict armed paramilitaries, and commemorations are held for violent figures and events. Those who organize or

participate in these activities are not necessarily directly violent, but they reproduce a culture that treats violence as normal, legitimate, and useful (J. Byrne et al., 2016). The “normalisation of violence” (Murray, 2023, p. 78) indicates the contribution that cultural narratives, symbols, and commemorative traditions make in socio-political contexts where violence is understood to be historically justified, socially meaningful, or necessary for community protection, even in the absence of widespread armed conflict.

For some, particularly people living in middle-class contexts, paramilitarism is largely invisible. However, many young men from areas of multiple deprivation experience ontological dislocation and must navigate complex relationships with paramilitary organizations. Some live under constant surveillance and threat, while others are drawn to the solidarity, status, and financial benefits that paramilitary membership offers (J. Byrne et al., 2016; Harland, 2007; Lucas et al., 2019; McAlister et al., 2018). Marginalized young men are the demographic most likely to be harmed by paramilitaries in NI. Paramilitary-style attacks (PSAs³) ‘discipline’ young men for perceived antisocial behavior, such as drug-dealing, burglary, car theft, pedophilia, child abuse, or infidelity (McAlister et al., 2018; Napier et al., 2017). Police statistics reported 3,260 PSAs (1,369 shootings and 1,891 assaults) between 10 April 1998 and 14 February 2023, of which 1,196 were recorded as republican PSAs and 2,064 as loyalist PSAs (Morrison, 2025). Almost 98% of victims were male. People aged between 20 and 24 were targeted most frequently, followed closely by 15- to 19-year-olds (Morrison, 2025). Police statistics reported that 24 PSAs took place between 1 August 2025 and 31 July 2026, two of which were paramilitary-style shootings (PSNI, 2026). The number of PSAs is broadly consistent with the pattern observed over the previous ten years (Morrison, 2025). Incidents where people are ‘put out’ (exiled or intimidated into leaving their communities) were not recorded. It is likely that police records significantly underestimate the number of PSAs, particularly those committed in communities that are traditionally considered to be Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR), due to historical mistrust of the British state and police force (Murray et al., 2023b; Rickard & Bakke, 2021).

Few studies have qualitatively accounted for young men’s lived experiences of paramilitary recruitment or PSAs, both of which function as mechanisms of control that reinforce paramilitary authority, reproduce fear, and further embed the social role of paramilitaries. This is despite reports suggesting that 41% of people in communities particularly affected by paramilitary activity feel that paramilitary groups have a controlling influence in the community (IRC, 2025a), and 35% support PSAs in certain circumstances (Department of Justice, 2019). These statistics highlight the degree to which there is systemic and entrenched institutional mistrust and a collective perception that state mechanisms do not deliver legitimate security and justice (Hogg & Butler, 2018; McEvoy & Mika, 2001). Acts of so-called ‘community justice’ in the form of PSAs, and the complicity of adults in reporting, allowing, and administering them, shape how young people in NI understand law and order, distort their perception of violence, and displace other methods that might be used to deal with disputes or anti-social behavior (Harland & McCready, 2014).

Carceral outcomes for marginalized young men

Incarcerated young men mirror the demographic characteristics of victims of PSAs: they are male, aged 18–24, marginalized, from areas of multiple deprivation, with low levels of educational achievement (Feenan, 2002; Morrison, 2025). Penal research in NI has

focused predominantly on political or women's imprisonment, and young men in prison for 'ordinary' crimes have been described as a "forgotten group" (Prison Review Team, 2011: 70). Their situation is rarely the subject of public discussion or research (Simpson, 2018). Though many individuals in prison have passed through the formal care system,⁴⁵ been abused, or faced other adverse childhood experiences, on release they are often placed in hostels where they may be exposed to substance misuse and people convicted of sexually violent crimes (Maguire & Nolan, 2007). Imprisonment inflicts harm in the absence of direct physical violence by means of socially normalized and accepted mechanisms that involve invasive practices and create experiences of helplessness and lack of privacy (DeVeaux, 2013; Sykes, 1958). Imprisonment exacerbates marginalization, particularly among young people who are transitioning into adulthood. It affects employment prospects, living arrangements, and the ability to form and sustain meaningful relationships. It can lead individuals to seek socially and personally destructive forms of belonging and cohesion that constitute negative forms of resilience (Murray, 2023). Young men in prison in NI experience high rates of physical and mental ill-health, suicidal ideations, PTSD, and problematic substance use (Linden et al., 2020; Murray, 2019, 2021, 2023). The small amount of research completed on incarcerated young men in NI has shown that remnants of conflict dynamics penetrate the prison walls, affecting young men's identities, postures, and prison experiences (Murray, 2023).

Young men's exposure to harm is not episodic or individualized, but structurally patterned across community, institutional, and carceral spaces. Over time, historical issues have become systemically embedded and culturally normalized. This article applies Galtung's triangular framework to unpack the dynamics of post-conflict violence, empirically demonstrating that its different forms of harm are connected in the lived experience of marginalized young men.

Methodology

Genesis of the data

In this article, the authors combine and analyze two qualitative datasets, one from a community-based study and one from a prison-based study, using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They then apply Galtung's violence triangle to contextualize and theorize the findings. The primary unit of analysis is the lived experiences and narratives of marginalized young men aged 18–24. The community-based study involved young men considered to be 'at risk' of involvement, or further involvement, in criminality or paramilitary activity (discussed in more detail below). The prison-based study concerned young men who were already incarcerated. Interviews with support and prison staff personnel were used to contextualize and triangulate data sources and better understand the institutional, community and relational environments that shape young men's experiences.

The studies are analytically compatible because both examined how marginalized young men aged 18–24 experience and negotiate structural, cultural and direct forms of violence in 'post-conflict' NI. Rather than treating prison and community experiences as separate phenomena, the analysis recognizes that they are shaped by the same structural inequalities,

conflict legacies and gendered expectations. Applying Galtung’s violence triangle to both datasets allowed structural, cultural and direct violence to be examined in multiple social locations and stages of criminalization and victimization.

The primary data were collected between 2012 and 2016. The article does not claim to provide a contemporary snapshot of NI. It applies Galtung’s violence triangle to examine how structural, cultural, and direct forms of violence shape young men’s lived experiences across four domains: structural exclusion; conflict legacies and transgenerational trauma; paramilitary recruitment; and paramilitary-style attacks. The aim is to examine enduring structural and cultural mechanisms that continue to shape young men’s experiences of direct violence, exclusion, and marginalization.

Above we noted that violence in NI has evolved rather than disappeared (IRC, 2025a; Morrison, 2025; NISRA, 2025; PSNI, 2026; Rodríguez-Davis, 2025). In its various forms, violence does not undergo rapid temporal change in the way that more technological or policy-sensitive phenomena might. Instead, it reflects enduring social and institutional conditions that remain relevant over time. Given that structural violence is a process and cultural violence changes slowly, the analysis illuminates mechanisms that have enabled violence to persist and evolve in post-Agreement NI, especially when read alongside the wider literature and other more recent studies.

Table 1 summarises the combined dataset and participant composition of both studies, covering settings, participant groups, sample sizes, data collection methods and timeframes. Taken together, the two datasets included 71 interviewees (46 young men and 25 staff).

Table 1. Overview of combined dataset.

Study	Setting	Participant group	Number	Data collection methods	Timeframe
Study One	Community-based	Young men aged 18–24	20	Semi-structured interviews	2012–2013
Study One	Community-based	Support staff	19	Semi-structured interviews	2012–2013
Study Two	Prison-based	Young men aged 18–24	26	Semi-structured interviews	2016
Study Two	Prison-based	Prison officers and support staff	6	Semi-structured interviews	2016
Study Two	Prison-based	Ethnographic observations	N/A	Participant observation and fieldnotes	2016

Study one: community-based study

Research context

The first study was conducted by Hamber and Gallagher between 2012 and 2013 and examined how conflict-related experiences shaped young men’s identities, vulnerabilities, and engagement with support interventions in post-agreement NI. It was based on semi-structured interviews with young men who were regarded as ‘at risk’ of becoming involved, or further involved, in criminality or paramilitarism owing to a range of factors, including their experiences of multiple deprivation, problematic substance use, mental health issues, and exposure to conflict related harms. Some participants described previous involvement in criminal and/or paramilitary activity, while others were regarded as being ‘at risk’ because of their social circumstances and community contexts. These categories were not

mutually exclusive and were not used as formal sampling strata. Participants were recruited through four psychosocial support groups: two general support groups focused on psychosocial and political issues associated with growing up in a divided society, and two victim/survivor groups linked to direct experiences of the Troubles (e.g., direct harm or losing a family member to political violence). Participants from both types of support group described varying levels of exposure to criminal and paramilitary influence.

Recruitment and sampling

Using a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2023), Hamber and Gallagher recruited young men aged 18–24 and staff working in community-based support interventions. Access to participants was negotiated through community organizations which acted as gatekeepers, an approach commonly used for research with vulnerable or hard-to-reach populations (Liamputtong, 2007). Eligible participants were informed about the study by staff and given participant information sheets. Young men who expressed interest were then approached by the researchers; participation was voluntary. Staff were recruited based on their professional roles and experience of working with young men affected by marginalization, trauma, and criminalization. In the general support groups, nine young men (five from group one and four from group two) and eleven support staff (six from group one and five from group two) were interviewed. In the victim/survivor groups, eleven young men (five from group one and six from group two) and eight support staff (four from group one and four from group two) were interviewed. A total of 39 interviews were completed: 20 young male participants (18–24 years old) and 19 staff (16 men and three women).

Interviews with young men

Semi-structured interviews followed a flexible topic guide, in line with established qualitative interviewing approaches (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The guide explored young men's experiences of marginalization, trauma, conflict legacies, criminalization, community life, and support engagement. This format enabled participants to discuss experiences they considered significant while ensuring that interviews were consistent (Clark et al., 2026).

Questions explored how young men understood their social experiences, the impact of conflict-related issues on their lives, and their experiences of support services and help-seeking. Interview questions included:

- “How would you describe your experiences growing up in your community?”
- “Do you think the conflict has had an impact on your life or experiences?”
- “What kinds of support or services have been most helpful to you, and why?”

Interviews with support staff

Semi-structured interviews with the 19 support staff also followed a flexible topic guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), which explored organizational understandings of trauma, psychosocial support, and social transformation in ‘post-conflict’ NI. Staff were asked to describe the impact of conflict-related experiences on young men, the role of support interventions, and the relationship between psychosocial work and wider processes of peacebuilding and social change; and young men's experiences of marginalization, conflict legacies, criminalization, and inter/transgenerational trauma. Interview questions included:

- “How do you understand the challenges facing young men in these communities?”
- “Do you think conflict-related experiences continue to affect young men’s lives?”
- “What role do support services play in addressing young men’s needs and vulnerabilities?”

Ethical approval, data management, recording and anonymisation

Interviews were conducted in-person, audio recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The study received ethical approval from Ulster University. The reference for the study was REC100148. No incentives were provided to any participants. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and identified according to the location in which data were collected (i.e., community), and the type of support group to which they belonged (general or victim/survivor group).

Study two: prison-based study

Research context

The second study, conducted by Murray in 2016, involved ethnographic research with young men aged 18–24 in Hydebank Wood College, NI’s prison for young men. The study explored the needs and experiences of young men in custody in the context of ‘post-conflict’ NI. Participants were drawn from the general prison population, and the research was conducted through semi-structured interviews and participant observation over a nine-month period. The study examined how marginalization shaped young men’s identities, masculinities, vulnerabilities, and experiences of imprisonment. It also explored how masculinities were performed and negotiated in the prison environment, particularly through practices associated with violence, stoicism, territorialism, and anti-authority norms.

Recruitment and sampling

A purposive sampling strategy (see Patton, 2023) was used to recruit imprisoned young men aged 18–24 and staff working in Hydebank. Consistent with ethnographic approaches, Murray initially prioritized participant observation and rapport-building before formal interviews to develop participants’ trust and familiarity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Eligible participants were informed about the study verbally and via information sheets and posters, a well-established approach to information dissemination and participant recruitment in prison research (Liebling et al., 2015; Bennett, 2015). In this study, most young men volunteered for interviews following interactions with Murray during participant observation. Prison officers and support staff were recruited on the basis of their professional roles and experience of working with young men in custody. Participation or refusal to participate had no impact on prisoners’ conditions or relationships with staff. Murray interviewed 26 young men, three prison officers and three support staff.

Interviews with young men

Semi-structured interviews followed a flexible topic guide, consistent with established qualitative interviewing approaches (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). It explored young men’s experiences of imprisonment, marginalization, violence, trauma, relationships, institutional trust, and future aspirations. The semi-structured format enabled

participants to discuss experiences they considered significant while maintaining consistency (Clark et al., 2026). Questions explored how young men understood their experiences of imprisonment, the impact of social and structural disadvantage on their lives, and their experiences of institutional support and help-seeking. Interview questions included:

- “How would you describe your experiences in the community before coming into prison?”
- “Do you think your past experiences have influenced your life in any way?”
- “What kinds of support or services are available to you while in prison?”

Interviews with prison officers and support staff

Semi-structured interviews with prison officers and support staff also followed a flexible topic guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Staff were questioned about the impact of imprisonment on the wellbeing and future life trajectories of young men from marginalized communities; about young men’s experiences of violence, trauma, institutional relationships and rehabilitation while in prison; and the challenges that young men face in custody, the impact of prior social experiences on imprisonment, and the role of institutional support in the prison environment. Interview questions included:

- “How do you understand the challenges facing young men in custody?”
- “Do you think past experiences continue to affect young men during imprisonment?”
- “What role do prison-based services play in addressing young men’s needs and experiences?”

Participant observation and fieldnotes

In accordance with established prison ethnography approaches, participants were observed in educational, vocational, association, and recreational settings (Crewe, 2009). Murray visited the institution three to four days each week, including weekends, evenings, and public holidays. He adopted a fluid observational role that varied according to the research setting and stage of fieldwork. In educational settings, he mainly adopted an “observer as participant” role (Gold, 1958, p. 217), with limited engagement during classes and activities. In vocational training and recreational settings, he more often adopted a “participant as observer” role (Gold, 1958, p. 217), taking part in activities such as industrial cleaning, cooking, football, pool, and external prison events. Observations focused on the everyday social dynamics of imprisonment, including prisoner-prisoner and staff-prisoner relationships, performances of masculinity, violence, coping practices, and the impact of institutional routines on young men’s identities and wellbeing.

Fieldnotes were recorded after each session in a fieldwork diary. The notes documented the institutional environment, interactions between prisoners and staff, informal conversations, emotional atmospheres, and recurring patterns of behavior in the prison setting.

Ethical approval, data management, recording and anonymisation

Interviews were conducted in person, audio recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The study received ethical approval from Ulster University. The reference for the study was REC160008. No incentives were provided to any participants. Participants were

assigned pseudonyms and identified according to the location in which data were collected (i.e., prison), and the collection method (interview or fieldwork diary).

Analysis strategy

We adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) staged approach to thematic analysis. We uploaded transcripts and fieldnotes from both projects to Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) in the form of NVivo 11, which was used to support systematic coding, organization, and analysis of the data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The software supported data organization and management, including coding to nodes, retrieval and comparison of coded extracts, and exploration of the relationships between categories. No AI or automated thematic analysis was used.

Transcripts and fieldnotes from both projects were integrated in NVivo to form a single dataset. The integration and analysis of the combined dataset reflected principles of combining small-scale data sets using a "breadth-and-depth method" (Davidson et al., 2019, p. 363). Themes were identified after inductive thematic coding had identified patterns in the material. Theme selection was informed but not determined by prevalence across accounts, and "conceptualised as patterns of shared meaning, organised around a central concept or idea" (Braun & Clarke, 2024, p. 613). The final list of themes was selected based on internal coherence between coded extracts, analytical distinctiveness from other themes, and explanatory value in relation to the broader research questions. To enhance analytical rigor, the authors applied checks during the analysis process to ensure their findings were credible and consistent (Sparkes, 1998). The analysis was led by Hamber and Murray; Hamber, McGill and Murray then discussed identified themes until they reached a consensus. This cross-verification process corresponds to the concept of intercoder agreement described by Campbell et al. (2013), where two or more coders resolve differences in coding through discussion. The authors considered this step crucial to the rigor of the analysis.

This iterative method of coding and refinement generated four overarching themes: structural exclusion; conflict legacies; paramilitary recruitment; and paramilitary-style attacks. Galtung's framework was not used to inform the initial coding process. Rather, in the later stages of analysis, Galtung's violence triangle was employed as a sensitizing concept to help narrow and focus the research (Tracy, 2013), as well as interpret and organize the findings.

In sum, we adopted an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to generate themes from the data rather than from preexisting theoretical categories. This approach is consistent with Braun et al. (2023) reflexive thematic analysis, in which coding is conducted inductively and themes are subsequently interpreted in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks (see D. Byrne, 2022). The framework enabled us to theorize the relationship between less visible forms of structural and cultural violence and more overt expressions of direct interpersonal harm. In the results described below, we begin by examining less recognized forms of violence and then show how they underpin and generate more visible forms that are often understood primarily as interpersonal violence.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. Despite the steps taken to minimize bias and inconsistent interpretation, the nature of thematic analysis is such that subjective bias is possible.

While the interview sample was purposively selected, and qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, the sample size may limit the degree to which the findings can be generalized; a larger sample or additional perspectives could provide a more comprehensive view. That said, as noted, our findings chime with other research with young men in NI.

The research focused on young men aged 18–24, therefore it does not capture the experiences of boys under 18, older men, girls, women, or people who do not identify with binary gender categories. It would be mistaken to conclude that other age groups and genders do not experience various forms of violence in ‘post-conflict’ NI; their experiences, meanings and effects may be different, and further research is required to gain a fuller picture of violence. Though the study refers to young men’s interactions with paramilitary organizations, the dataset did not permit us to disaggregate interactions with specific paramilitary organizations. The specific nature and activities of these organizations is also complicated because, within the “landscape of paramilitarism,’ there are individuals and groups who use paramilitarism as a cloak for overt criminality” (IRC, 2025a, p. 20). In addition, attribution is often contested or absent from official statistics, and interviewees themselves referred to paramilitaries in relatively homogenous terms. For all these reasons, the article foregrounds the forms of violence with which paramilitaries are associated, rather than the different organizations. With respect to PSAs, the figures provided are indicators of overall magnitude drawn from police data and secondary analysis; we acknowledge issues of underreporting as well as the imprecision of broad categories such as ‘loyalist’ and ‘republican’ (as the police data capture these) and have not attempted specific organizational attribution.

A final limitation concerns the age of the dataset, with primary data collected between 2012 and 2016. Accordingly, the findings should not be interpreted as a snapshot of the current situation in NI. Rather, they illuminate the evolving and cumulative influences of structural and cultural violence through time, which makes clear that much of the context of violence that young men described remains in place and that, although paramilitarism has declined and fragmented, it “still exists . . . [and] is hugely damaging” (IRC, 2025a, p. 21).

Findings and discussion

Domain one: structural exclusion, marginalization and alienation

Inductive analysis of the combined dataset revealed that experiences of structural exclusion, marginalization, and alienation were recurring features of young men’s testimonies. Participants consistently described lives characterized by unemployment, poverty, educational disadvantage, and other structural barriers that limited access to social and economic opportunities:

We are all dealing with unemployment, poverty, low educational attainment and barriers blocking us from moving forward, such as drugs, drink and paramilitary forces. (Donal, community, general support group)

These concerns were echoed by Mason (community, victim/survivor support group), who summarized the challenges facing young men as “no jobs, no prospects, [and] little education.” Participants consistently described employment, housing and financial insecurity as interconnected barriers that undermined their ability to establish independent and secure

lives: “There are no jobs out there and flats are very expensive so it’s hard to set up on your own” (Conal, community, general support group).

Constant deprivation, coupled with financial and psychological despair, generated a complex mix of trauma and need that contributed to involvement in violence or criminal activity (Galtung, 1990). Deprivation was compounded when young men were released from prison into communities that lacked the capacity to offer meaningful opportunities or support and into a wider society that participants felt had neglected deprived individuals and communities:

They’re threw out with nothing really set up for them, go out there with no money and no jobs and they just get straight back into trying to steal what they can . . . they go put money in their pocket the wrong way . . . There’s just no opportunities there. (Brendy, prison, interview)

The failure to support and reintegrate young men who have been convicted of crimes is associated with dominant cultural narratives that continue to stigmatize and trap those convicted of crime:

Society needs to wake up and understand you can’t call someone a criminal and then send them for rehabilitation and then refuse to accept them back into the community because it just creates a vicious circle. (Gerard, prison, interview)

Prison staff also recognized the rupture between prison-based provision and support after release:

That link [between prison and community] for me has always been broken . . . I just feel that when they do get out it [the system] is letting them down. (Prison Staff 1, prison)

Incarceration is embedded in a broader cycle of social abandonment and structural harm. Young men spoke about their experiences of economic, educational, and social exclusion, often compounded by a lifetime in state systems and institutions, including being ‘looked after’ in the care system since childhood. Participants described a pervasive absence of genuine care in these systems. Many said that they were made to feel they were a burden. Prison staff acknowledged that institutional responses were often standardized rather than tailored to young men’s individual needs, Prison Staff 2 stated that provision is “not one size fits all” and staff could only “gauge it to fit the mass,” concluding that “that is why the cycle continues . . . they go out and come back in.” This reflects an institutional recognition that generic prison regimes are unlikely to address the specific educational, relational, psychological, and material needs of young men, thereby contributing to repeated imprisonment.

The perceived absence of support was evident in the interview of Phillip, an incarcerated young man entangled in the care and justice systems since he was five: “I can’t trust any of them, they are all snakes in the grass. Anyone who works for the system⁶ I don’t like.” In his experience, such institutions consistently acted to shackle rather than develop his potential:

I was being released on licence and told probation I’m not going to a hostel with a load of fucking roots⁷ in it, and old people and all. I don’t like old people because of what happened to me in my foster home, I don’t feel comfortable around them and so that point was brought across . . . When I got out, they took me to the Housing Executive, they couldn’t get me a house, so they made up a load of shit and recalled me . . . They want me to do it all [licence in prison], they are just wankers because I won’t give in completely. I’ll co-operate to an extent, and they

are saying you know more or less stick your hand in the fire . . . if they are pushing it too far in then I'm going to say no. I'm my own man. (Phillip, prison, interview)

In Phillip's case, the institutions that governed his life offered neither care nor flexibility but reinforced and reproduced violence he had experienced earlier. Although he had been abused in the state care system as a child, on his release from prison the state placed him in temporary accommodation with people who had committed sexual offenses. Phillip's testimony revealed a collision of agency and powerlessness. In saying that he was "his own man," he asserted a masculine autonomy that was contradicted by the structural constraints he experienced: denied housing, recalled to prison, and subject to punitive oversight and the potential violence of other men. These are manifestations of structural violence that constrain the resources and opportunities available to young men, leaving them with few dignified or non-confrontational avenues for fulfillment or support (Farmer, 2004). Structural violence is therefore experienced not as an abstract process, but as repeated exposure to insecurity, institutional control, and the narrowing of dignified pathways.

Many young men in prison have experienced the formal care system as noted above (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021). Rather than recognizing a failure of the state, policymakers and institutions often assert that individuals who have been in care are over-represented in the criminal justice system because of their own, or their parents', inadequacies. The issue is presented as a problem of individual behavior, a framing that obscures the degree to which societal inequality and systemic failures of the care system contribute to the criminalization of young people and the creation of a care to prison pipeline. By locating responsibility within individuals rather than institutions, these narratives constitute a form of cultural violence: they individualize responsibility for social harms, legitimize unequal outcomes, and obscure the structural conditions that shape pathways into deprivation, crime and imprisonment.

Systematic marginalization, neglect, and disenfranchisement cause young men to lack trust in the various systems that are supposed to protect and support them. The mutual mistrust between these young men and state institutions is a product of systemic inequalities and injustices that inflict harm on individuals and communities (Pease, 2021) and deny people the right to survive with dignity (Farmer, 2004). Participants frequently linked long-standing mistrust of institutions and a lack of meaningful support to young men's reluctance to seek help. However, these barriers were not solely institutional. They were also shaped by idealized expressions of masculinity that characterized vulnerability, emotional disclosure, and help-seeking as signs of weakness. In Galtung's terms, these culturally idealized masculine traits help to legitimize the harms produced by structural inequalities because they discourage young men from accessing support, even when it is available. Ethan reflected on how expectations surrounding masculine strength and emotional resilience can prevent young men from seeking help:

Men have to deal with the stereotype of being big and strong and able to deal with their problems, and this isn't the case, and they end up harming themselves or others. (Ethan, community, general support group)

Drawing on his own experiences, Ethan further explained how these expectations shaped his own reluctance to seek support:

Men find it hard to come forward and say they need help and they feel it weak. I, myself, took a long time to say I needed help and just bottled it all up and stayed in my room a lot or went out on the streets drinking. (Ethan, community, general support group)

The consequences of these idealized expressions of masculinity were visible in participants' communities, where unresolved trauma and poor communication were frequently linked to self-harm and suicide. Noah reflected:

In this town for a while there were a lot of suicides, people were letting everything build up and didn't talk to anyone about their problems. If you keep something bottled up it's only going to get worse and lead to a lot more mental problems. People were committing suicide because of the lack of communication . . . especially [regarding] problems/issues related to the conflict. (Noah, community, general support group)

Together, these accounts demonstrate how structural exclusion and cultural expectations of masculinity combine to shape young men's experiences of marginalization. Long-standing experiences of institutional neglect eroded trust in the systems designed to provide support, while dominant ideals of masculine self-reliance encouraged many participants to conceal vulnerability and manage distress alone. As a result, exclusion was experienced not simply as a lack of material resources, but as a broader sense of disconnection from the social institutions and relationships through which support, recognition, and opportunity are ordinarily accessed. Power operated less through overt coercion and more by what and who decides whose needs are recognized, whose voices are heard, and whose lives are considered worthy of investment. Structural violence was therefore experienced in terms of material deprivation, but also the denial of dignity, belonging, and meaningful participation in society. For many participants, exclusion amounted to a form of conditional citizenship in which access to support and social recognition remained uncertain and contingent. This sense of exclusion also extended to participants' perceptions that communities affected by the conflict had been forgotten. As Brian (community, victim/survivor support group) reflected: "They don't want to know about people who are affected by the conflict, they want to forget the victims so they can move on and away from the Troubles." While this perception reflects the structural exclusion described throughout this section, it also points to the enduring influence of the conflict, a theme explored in the following section.

Domain two: the legacies of violent conflict

Young men's experiences of exclusion, marginalization and alienation were compounded by the legacies of conflict in NI. Some young men were "stuck" somewhere between a ceasefire mentality and ambiguous messages of peacebuilding (Harland, 2011, p. 414). Rather than produce stability and inclusion, the 'post-conflict' peace dividend has in some cases deepened exclusion, especially for young men attempting to construct a masculine identity in opposition to mainstream expectations and contemporary social norms:

Men are at a loss of knowing what their role is about and given our past thirty to forty years of conflict and ten years of peace, the roles of men are even more cloudy, especially young men who arguably are the most unemployable, most marginalised, and most stereotyped. Their niches to have a role are becoming so small and diminished that they don't know what they are about. (Staff 1, community, general support group)

Young men's own accounts suggest that structural violence in NI cannot be understood solely in terms of contemporary institutional practices. Structural violence is historically sedimented in the unresolved legacies of violent conflict, operating through memory, historical continuity, and the transgenerational transmission of trauma and insecurity. As Mason (community, victim/survivor support group) observed: "[young men] have been affected by the Troubles, and not just issues of the past, but the Troubles of the present, because it's still here." While the GFA significantly reduced direct political violence, it did not dismantle the structural inequalities, segregation, and community-level marginalization that decades of conflict shaped and sustained. Nor did it fully address ongoing psychological and social trauma. Young men born after the ceasefire are frequently positioned as 'post-conflict' subjects, yet their accounts reveal that their social worlds remain conflict-affected.

Where support is available, it often focuses narrowly on addressing a specific concern (for example, anti-social behavior or mental health needs) rather than broader systemic issues. Observers generally do not consider that current problems are effects of the conflict or its prolongation in a different form. Its effects have been transmitted intergenerationally but, according to participants, their trauma is often denied or minimized, particularly when experienced by those born after the GFA:

People patronise you, and they think because I'm only 20 years old that I couldn't have suffered, but I am still traumatised and have been affected. (Mason, community, victim/survivor support group)

Several young men felt that people did not acknowledge "how traumatised they actually are" (James, community, victim/survivor support group) and assumed that, because they were born after the GFA, the conflict did not affect them. They reported that society did not recognize the conflict's transgenerational effects or understand that the trauma of violence on older family and community members may be experienced vicariously by subsequent generations. As Corey explained:

"[Young men] understand the conflict has been their life as well. They've grown up with stories of the past and have a good understanding of the history and a lot of the trauma has filtered down to them." (Corey, community, victim/survivor support group)

While Corey described these processes collectively, Fionn demonstrated how they become embodied within individual biographies:

A family member of mine was killed, and my family's history has affected me but I'm still living in it now and it's very real for me and my family. So, I feel like I'm still in it, I've been brought up in it, and I have a clear understanding of the conflict. (Fionn, community, victim/survivor support group)

Participants described how trauma is transmitted through family narratives of bereavement, imprisonment, injury, and fear, and did not end with the GFA. Stories of loss and violence circulate in households and communities, shaping identity formation and emotional development. Young men spoke of feeling "still in it" (Fionn, community, victim/survivor support group), despite not having directly experienced the conflict themselves. Their suffering is often minimized because of their age, reinforcing a form of symbolic erasure that compounds existing marginalization. Structural violence, therefore, operates

temporally as well as institutionally: it constrains access to material resources but also access to the emotional and symbolic resources that young men need to construct meaning, belonging, and future orientation. The effects of conflict therefore continue to shape contemporary identities, relationships, and emotional lives:

The years of conflict has had a major effect on people's lives, and they have been deeply traumatised by losing a family member or friend, witnessing violence and shootings and being injured. Also, young people are traumatised by what their families have gone through, and this carries the hurt through the generations. (Staff 2, community, victim/survivor support group)

Many young men were acutely aware of the impact the legacy of the conflict was having on them but remained reluctant to seek support:

My problems are all to do with the past conflict . . . I bottled everything up and if someone said something to me it set off a wee trigger and I'd lash out. (Ethan, community, general support group)

These accounts illustrate how unresolved trauma was internalized until it manifested through violence, self-harm, or problematic substance use as outlets for fear, distress, and hopelessness, reflecting Galtung's (1990) argument that structural violence, by producing conditions of hopelessness, can contribute to self-directed violence and risk-taking behaviors.

Many young people in NI consume problematic quantities of drugs that create health risks but also put them in contact with paramilitaries involved in the drugs trade (Lucas et al., 2019). As a result, some young people become targets because they have drug debts (Lucas et al., 2019), while others consume more drugs than they would otherwise, due to the stress and fear created by paramilitaries that control the trade (McAlister et al., 2018). For some young men, these transgenerational effects are compounded by personal bereavement, exposure to conflict narratives during childhood, disengagement from education and employment, substance use, and subsequent pathways into paramilitary involvement:

I tried to commit suicide. It started off when my Aunty died. It was the way that she died that really got to me. I grew up hearing all about the conflict, it was the norm. I didn't do my exams in school, didn't really care about a job, just took drugs and got into trouble. I got drawn into a paramilitary group and thought it was great because nobody could touch me as I had backing. (Donal, community, general support group)

Domain three: paramilitary recruitment

Young men's accounts illustrate how structural deprivation and cultural legitimization interact to produce overlapping logics of tradition, belonging, protection, and coercion that make paramilitary membership both appealing and culturally accepted. In Galtung's terms (1990), structural and cultural violence together shape conditions in which paramilitary authority has become socially meaningful, practically necessary, and, at times, appealing.

Some continue to glorify and respect paramilitary groups, their members, and activities:

See down my way there is paramilitaries . . . they are all old school. They are all about fifty or sixty, they are all old men that went through all the Troubles years ago . . . That's a proper paramilitary. (Jordan, prison, interview)

Despite the many successes of the peace process, violent aspects of NI culture have combined with a strong sense of ethno-national identity and a desire for masculine status to make young men more likely to join paramilitary groups. This reflects the cultural reproduction of legitimacy across generations, where paramilitary identity is embedded in community narratives of history, protection, and masculinity. This can be seen in the continued celebration of violence in militaristic parades, flags, murals, and commemorations, which reproduce a culture in which violence is treated as normal, legitimate, and useful (J. Byrne et al., 2016). Stories transmitted through older family members and community figures further reinforce these narratives, embedding a sense of continuity, belonging, and shared history across generations:

The stories that a lot of young men have heard coming from their grandfathers and fathers and filtering down to them. This type of trans-generational effect makes a lot of young men want to get involved [in paramilitarism], they want to be part of the story, they want to keep doing the things that the generations before them done. (Staff 3, community, victim/survivor support group)

The conflict is having a strong hold on young people, and it's putting that perception in their head: well, if my father done this, well, I'm also going to get involved. (Noah, community, general support group)

Recruitment can operate through processes of social inheritance, where young men may seek connection to previous generations and a sense of participation in an ongoing collective narrative. Importantly, this does not mean that young men passively inherit paramilitary identities; rather, these narratives provide cultural resources through which involvement can be perceived as meaningful. Together, these accounts demonstrate that paramilitary recruitment is embedded within wider struggles over memory, identity, and belonging. The appeal of paramilitary involvement is therefore not reducible to political ideology alone, but can also reflect attempts by young men to locate themselves within established community narratives and forms of masculine identity.

In this way, recruitment is not only about individual choice but about culturally embedded belonging and identity formation. Paramilitary organizations offer recognition and stability in contexts marked by insecurity and limited legitimate opportunities. For some young men, they provide alternative sources of status, purpose, and social connection where conventional pathways to recognition appear inaccessible:

Young people are still getting drawn back into paramilitary groups especially those with low educational attainment and have no outlook in life and are trying to find an outlook. They're being told a story, and not both sides of a story, but just enough to get them to join and told that they are doing this for their country. It gives them a sense of purpose as they have little else to do. (Donal, community, general support group)

Donal's account highlights the interaction between structural and cultural violence. Structural disadvantage, including limited educational and employment opportunities, can create conditions of insecurity, while cultural narratives provide explanations and legitimizes paramilitarism, by making paramilitary involvement appear a meaningful form of belonging.

Paramilitary grooming is common in NI (J. Byrne et al., 2016). Marginalized boys and young men from areas of multiple deprivation, who are vulnerable due to their age or personal circumstances, are socialized into relationships of dependency and obligation

before becoming recruited into paramilitary organizations (Murray et al., 2026). To start with, paramilitary members often offer companionship, support, or even financial incentives, with the aim of cultivating a relationship based on trust and dependence (J. Byrne et al., 2016; Walsh & Schubotz, 2020). Gary described how older paramilitary members from his community befriended him as a 15-year-old boy after his release from a two-year prison sentence:

I got out on licence after I think it was 22 months or something, fucking just went bananas for the next year or two, fucking with paramilitaries and fucking drug dealers and just everything . . . [The paramilitary members] were friends. I fucking partied with them. I was the kid of the group, and these boys were all in their late twenties. [*Did you look up to them?*] Yeah, and it kind of got stability in my life. I thought right this [a paramilitary member] is what I want to be. (Gary, prisoner, interview)

In addition to providing a sense of identity or belonging, for many young men paramilitary groups offer a masculine resource that enables them to acquire status and control in an environment marked by insecurity and powerlessness, where they have few legitimate paths to standing and security. In this context, paramilitary organizations function as alternative sites of masculine recognition, authority, and protection. Paramilitary membership also protects young men from other young men in their community:

Our family has always been involved [in paramilitarism] and you would find that other people would show me a lot of respect because my family were involved. I think that you get a status when your family have been involved, and people would be feared to say anything to you. So in that way men would be more reluctant to challenge those that have been involved. (Scott, community, victim/survivor support group)

However, this protection is inherently contradictory because it is produced through the same structures of fear and violence that place young men at risk. The price is that they become stuck in cycles of coercive control and fear. Despite the outward displays of masculinity associated with paramilitarism, many young men who join paramilitary organizations inwardly feel anxious, have low-self-esteem, and are deeply afraid (also see Hamber & Gallagher, 2015):

They're obviously scared of someone, or they have done something that they need protection for, that's the only reason why I see people joining it. They are scared of someone, and they have done something, and they need protection. (Dee, prison, interview)

In practice, the protection that paramilitary groups provide is often from themselves. Paramilitary recruitment can be a highly coercive process:

[*Have the paramilitaries ever asked you to join?*] "Fuck, they've threatened me and all before. They beat you and they say pay us such and such, or you can join us. Take the beating. Fuck, I'm never joining them like, never joining them . . . [After I said no] four of them gave me such a hiding." (Dee, prison, interview)

Gary's experience confirmed that belonging and coercion are not sequential but simultaneous. Initial interactions with paramilitary organizations may provide a sense of belonging and friendship; but refusal or hesitation to join can result in violent victimization:

That big scar on my head, I got stabbed by a fella one night when I was 15. I was at a party with a lot of older fellas who, at that time, were all in a very dominant paramilitary . . . At that time that's when I was asked to join up and stuff, but I always put it off . . . I was at a party with them one night . . . the conversation picked up again about me joining up and . . . to cut a long story short, things got heated and two of them laid into me, fucking started punching me, kicking me, fucking really, really brutal like . . . He grabbed a bottle, smashed it on the side of the wall and stuck it into my head three times. (Gary, prison, interview)

Across these accounts, recruitment emerged as a process in which tradition, belonging, protection, and coercion are co-constituted in the same social field under conditions of structural, cultural, and direct violence. In Galtung's (1990) terms, structural violence is expressed via deprivation, marginalization, and restricted access to legitimate opportunities, while cultural violence takes the form of narratives that normalize paramilitary authority and reframe coercion as protection, discipline, or tradition. Direct violence is experienced through threats, assaults, and punitive harm that accompany processes of recruitment and refusal. This triadic configuration shapes the conditions under which recruitment becomes both intelligible and appealing, despite its risks, to young men in structurally marginalized contexts.

Within such conditions, paramilitary organizations can offer a contradictory combination of belonging, status, protection, and opportunity, reflecting Ospina's (2020) argument that coercive forms of non-state authority become normalized where legitimate civic and economic pathways are scarce. For Galtung (1990, p. 295), the involvement of some young men can be an attempt to obtain identity, recognition, and survival to "get out." However, these perceived forms of exit remain inseparable from fear, coercion, and violence, because paramilitary recruitment uses both inducement and control embedded in the structural and cultural dimensions of the communities from which it emerges.

Overall, recruitment demonstrates how structural, cultural, and direct violence interact to produce the conditions under which paramilitary authority becomes socially intelligible, culturally embedded, and locally legitimate, while simultaneously constraining young men's opportunities to obtain alternative forms of belonging and social progression.

Domain four: paramilitary-style attacks

PSAs should not be understood as isolated acts of direct violence but as socially embedded practices, informal systems of discipline and community enforcement in areas where paramilitary authority remains influential. They therefore illustrate the interaction of direct, structural, and cultural violence. Thomas, formerly a member of a paramilitary group, described how he was treated after he became involved in unsanctioned criminal activity:

I've had my fair share of paramilitary beatings. [*More than one?*] Four, I've had a gun put to my head twice. [*What was that for?*] Drugs and money . . . I was in there (a member of a paramilitary group) and then I started fucking about and started getting a bad name and that's sort of when things went bad. (Thomas, prison, interview)

Paramilitary groups present themselves as moral arbiters of behavior, but young men say that many PSAs serve paramilitaries' interests, for example, by settling personal scores or promoting criminal enterprises. The data also suggest that violence and intimidation were

used to enforce social control and protect paramilitary networks. One incarcerated young man was threatened for “fucking about with families [with strong connections to paramilitary organizations] that I shouldn’t have been fucking about with” (Adam, prison, interview). Although they publicly condemn drug-dealing, the data indicates that paramilitary groups seek to control the trade, and use violence or threats to intimidate rival dealers (Kyle, prison, interview), secure protection money (Dee, prison, interview) or control their own dealers:

There is ones out there who do deal for paramilitaries and then end up getting fucking beat, getting their knees done in and all because they owe that money out . . . There is a couple of boys who have been shot and stuff. (Jordan, prison, interview)

Young men described experiences of direct physical violence during PSAs, including beatings with hammers, baseball bats, and metal rods; attacks with objects dropped on them to break bones; and being shot with low-velocity handguns or shotguns. PSAs are a product of entrenched institutional mistrust, a collective perception that state mechanisms do not deliver legitimate security and justice (Hogg & Butler, 2018; McEvoy & Mika, 2001). Paramilitaries portray themselves as legitimate substate authorities and often arrange ‘appointments’ for young men to come and receive their ‘punishments.’ Dermý outlined how the process works:

They ask you to meet them somewhere, like in an alley, and they shoot you twice, three times; or if they have to come and get you, they shoot you five, six times. (Dermý, prison, interview)

Paramilitary members who carried out PSAs sometimes forced entry into people’s houses or gardens. For example:

They just come, probably kick your door in, come in and beat you in the house or else if you’re round the back they’ll come round and beat you . . . (I’ve) been beat in my back garden a couple of times. (Dermý, prison, interview)

I was lying in bed when I felt a pain in my knee . . . Then I got cracked in the face with the bottom of the gun and realised it was the Provos.⁸ I moved back against the wall, and they shot at me again and missed fuck sake. They fired two more times and both fucking hit me in the same knee . . . the blood was shooting out like a super-soaker. (Jack, prison, fieldwork diary)

Other young men described repeated, opportunistic and sudden attacks and being forced for safety reasons to leave the area in which they lived:

I’ve been beat by them [paramilitaries] loads of times like . . . I was walking somewhere and they saw me and bounced out of the car and battered me. [*Do they tell you why?*] You know why like. If they don’t tell you why, someone is gonna tell you why. Someone in your family is gonna know. [*Have you ever had to leave your area?*] I’m put out now . . . It’ll not stop me going back like . . . that’s where my family lives. (Ryan, prison, interview)

Ryan’s account indicates that PSAs have become embedded in community life through shared knowledge, collective acceptance, and the expectation that violence is a legitimate response to perceived wrongdoing. The fact that explanations for attacks are often communicated through family and community networks reflects a form of collective conditioning in which violence becomes normalized, justified, expected, and, in some cases, repeated and persistent.

For some victims, the effects of PSAs extended far beyond immediate physical injuries and imposed a lasting psychological burden. Threats of future attacks shaped how young men understood their own safety, movements, and prospects, creating an enduring sense of vulnerability and anticipation of violence:

I've a lot of things I need to deal with and sort out just to have an easy life. All the things you do in the past, you don't know how it's going to affect you when you grow up . . . See if someone came up to me with a gun, you can't do anything, know what I mean, you're gonna get shot . . . you just have to face the music. (Adam, prison, interview)

Many participants appeared to have internalized the justificatory narratives surrounding PSAs. Although they often criticized paramilitary organizations and expressed resentment of attacks, they were frequently able to explain or rationalize why violence had been directed toward them. They implied that paramilitary punishment was a legitimate, if undesirable, response to perceived wrongdoing:

I have had run ins before with them [paramilitaries] when I was younger all over the place. [*What for?*] Just being a wee shite growing up. (Stuart, prison, interview)

(I have been beaten) about five or six times, beat with sewer rods and all . . . [*Why did they do that?*] Just getting up to no good in the area. (Alfred, prison, interview)

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that PSAs involve direct, structural, and cultural violence simultaneously. Direct violence causes the physical injuries inflicted on young men, while structural violence is reflected in the social inequities, institutional mistrust, and limited access to legitimate forms of security and justice that enable paramilitary authority to persist. Cultural violence is visible in the communal norms, long-standing traditions, and narratives that normalize paramilitary punishment and render it intelligible as a response to perceived wrongdoing.

The internalization of these narratives helps sustain the legitimacy of PSAs. Through practices such as reporting wrongdoing to paramilitaries and arranging attacks by 'appointment,' violence becomes sanitized as a form of community governance, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which direct violence is facilitated and justified by what could be considered cultural violence in Galtung's terms. The persistence of PSAs reflects a failure to deliver peace, security, and justice, creating conditions that both sustain the authority of paramilitary organizations and further marginalize vulnerable young men, even within their own communities. The line between 'victim' and 'offender' has become blurred, since young men may be the victims of, but also sometimes participants in, a violent system designed to manage, rather than address, the consequences of deep-rooted social inequality. While PSAs may satisfy demands for immediate justice, they simultaneously reinforce paramilitarism as a culturally accepted form of social control, undermining the authority of the criminal justice system, altering perceptions of justice and perpetuating cycles of harm, exclusion, and violence.

Translating insights into policy and practice

As noted earlier, this article does not describe the current context or policy environment. It makes the argument that violence is not well understood in isolation and needs to be analyzed as an expression of power, taking account of structural and cultural

factors as well as direct violence. Nevertheless, there are clear macro implications for policy and practice, since NI's experience raises many of the issues that peacebuilders encounter globally. Though political violence in NI has been decreasing, and patterns of violent conflict evolve over time in a process of continuity and change (Simpson, 2018), many aspects of this analysis remain pertinent to contemporary policy. The GFA was signed 28 years ago, but some young men still experience forms of conflict-related violence: physically, through PSAs; socioeconomically, through deprivation; politically, through exclusion; and psychologically, through stress and ongoing trauma. Meaningful reduction of harm, exclusion, and marginalization will not occur without integrating these insights into policies and research. It is imperative therefore that these interventions are underpinned by an analysis of power.

At the broadest level our analysis demonstrates that, if the causes of violence are multifactorial, solutions must be multidimensional, and policies must address structural and cultural violence alongside direct violence. This requires a shift, away from approaches that treat violence as a set of discrete behavioral or service-delivery problems and toward ones that understand violence is an embedded feature of social systems shaped by inequality, exclusion, and historical conflict. Although a number of recent NI policy documents acknowledge the challenges that young people face (Department of Justice, 2024; NI Executive, 2020; PSNI, 2023), most reduce these challenges to questions of service delivery (drug awareness, buddy schemes, mental health services, domestic violence) rather than question the social system that generates them. Criminal justice interventions frequently target the most 'problematic' locations and fail to adopt a population-wide approach; while mental health challenges are generally seen as individual problems to be treated rather than stemming from the structural and cultural violence we have shown. Most peacebuilding work takes a similarly narrow view, focusing on the needs of young victims who have lost a parent, individuals who have been traumatized, or those living in specific conflict interfaces. This often results in adoption of so-called apolitical harmonizing approaches that promote contact between young people, seeking to improve tolerance and relationships between young Catholics and Protestants but making little effort to analyze why there is mistrust, who is divided, or how this division and its links to deprivation are maintained (Hamber & McArdle, 2026; Hamilton et al., 2025).

The experiences of young men in NI show that structural, cultural, and direct violence are enmeshed in systems of power that make them mutually reinforcing and generationally persistent. This draws attention to the importance of interventions that are holistic, integrated, and population-aware, requiring collaboration across disciplinary divides. PSAs provided a good example of this. Saying that a mental health or criminal or security intervention is needed to address PSAs overlooks the interrelated nature of the problem. PSAs are the result of a wide range of political, social, and community problems which are embedded in long-established justifications and practices, and generally target relatively powerless young men from specific socio-economic backgrounds. The crimes that some young men commit, as paramilitaries or so-called 'ordinary' criminals, cannot be divorced from paramilitary activity, poverty, community fragmentation, under-achievement, schooling, family life, or the politics of the past.

Likewise, at broader policy level, NI's history of conflict is seldom mentioned, and peace is mentioned generically or in over-arching terms (NI Executive, 2025). When reports acknowledge that disadvantage causes education inequalities, for example,

they seldom connect this to past political conflict. It has been recognized that there are clear “links between vulnerability and paramilitary harm” (NI Executive, 2025, p. 49), and furthermore that ending “paramilitarism can only be achieved if the social and economic conditions which are linked to the continuing existence of paramilitarism today are comprehensively addressed” (IRC, 2025b, p. 36). Yet a holistic policy approach to societal change has not been forthcoming. This mirrors a shortcoming shared by youth policies globally (Simpson, 2018). In general, these fail to adopt holistic approaches to deal with the complex legacies of conflict and deprivation.

This is not to say that no attempts have been made to deal with the issue of violence in NI. A great deal of creative and positive work is being done in NI (see, for instance, Coyle et al., 2026a; Coyle et al., 2026b; Hamilton et al., 2025; McArdle & Morgan, 2018; Murray et al., 2023a; Murray et al., 2025; Walsh & Harland, 2021). However, mirroring other cases around the world (Simpson, 2018), such work is often fragmented, under-funded, and short-term, and tends to favor “new” or “pilot” schemes rather than invest in sustaining and deepening initiatives that have delivered proven results (Lucas et al., 2019, p. 42). Programs tend to operate in silos, attempting through separate programs to increase the life chances or education of specific groups, or increase the agency of young men (self-awareness programs, buddy schemes), or address the legacies of conflict, or provide medical and psychological care (for example, to address drug dependency). For many young men these issues are interconnected and must be addressed holistically. There are few signs of initiatives that might challenge the underlying power relations that structure vulnerability, deprivation, and exclusion that reduce young people’s ability to shape their own lives in the face of more powerful actors and institutions, even though global comparative studies find that violence is more likely to occur when economic frustration coincides with the social and political exclusion of young people (Simpson, 2018).

Masculinities are an additional factor here. Masculinities are a prism through which young men interpret their frustrations, anger and sense of exclusion, and some masculine identities fuel violence (Hamber & Murray, 2022). The complex social, psychological and economic contexts in which young men operate, including the pervasive presence of paramilitaries and their associations with violent masculinity (as evidenced in PSAs), suggest that interventions to build the capacity of young men need to extend well beyond access to education, training and qualifications, crucial though these are (Hamber & Gallagher, 2015). Profound structural and cultural change is necessary.

A more integrated approach to young men and violence is needed that directly considers the relationships between the socio-economic context, masculinities, the political context and the social and political determinants of mental health. Put differently, violence by and inflicted on young men is not merely a security problem. We need to avoid the trap of seeing problematic masculinities as a threat that needs to be contained or resolved by hard security responses, and instead invest “in meaningful inclusion and resilience for peace which address underlying causes of violence, youth marginalisation and exclusion” (Simpson & Altiok, 2020, p. 3).

This does not mean however that no interventions can take place until more systemic change takes place. As the NI case and lived experience of the young men in this research

shows, work should take place at the level of the ‘everyday,’ where violence is experienced and manifests. This means working to confront narratives that stigmatize and exclude, and enabling communities in areas of multiple deprivation to participate actively in decisions and processes that affect them (McGill et al., 2024). It is important to engage with the daily experience of others and the wider community, in the spaces where young people deal with, respond to, participate in, and resist conflict, violence, and exclusion (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015).

Conclusion

The issues explored in this article highlight that the boundary between criminal and political violence is porous, problematizing the idea that ‘peace’ and peace agreements mark a clear rupture in time (Gready, 2010). Many of the problems that young men face in NI are legacy issues that sit at the intersection of crime, politics and socio-economic relations—bringing into question the idea of being a post-conflict society. In a society divided by walls, symbols, narratives, and segregated schooling and living, direct violence is common, whether it is social (bullying, street fighting, racism) or criminal (drug dealing, associated harms). In communities characterized by multiple deprivation, these problems are so routine that they are regularly subsumed and normalized in youth policies that address issues associated with the past conflict—though often they are labeled euphemistically as initiatives to promote community relations, or build tolerance and social cohesion. Such language obscures the complexity of NI’s environment and does not adequately consider how crime, politics, poverty, and different forms of social exclusion intersect and reinforce one another. NI is a systemically violent society based on ethno-religious-nationalist foundations and settler-colonial ideologies that differentially excluded and included particular population groups (McVeigh & Rolston, 2021; cf. CPT Palestine, 2024). At the same time, structural violence has been directed inwards especially as the direct political violence has decreased, and is observable in class differences within ethno-nationalist ‘communities’ that have only become sharper as ethno-religious-nationalist exclusion has been challenged.

This point highlights the limits of defining the problem of young men in NI solely as a peacebuilding issue, or as a youth concern to be addressed by individualized mental health support or violence prevention strategies, community development work or increased inter-community contact. In reality, the challenge is both larger and more intricate. Despite NI’s relative wealth compared to many of the societies considered in Simpson’s global study of youth, peace and security (Simpson, 2018), its experience shows that the challenges young men face are global and shared. It is necessary to move away from a narrow set of assumptions about how violence is experienced by and enacted by young men. To address the various forms of violence, it is necessary to understand how they form and evolve in systems of power within specific cultural contexts. It is not enough to focus only on threats to peace, because structural and cultural violence will not be eradicated by a peace accord between conflict parties (Canola, 2022). What is required is an inclusive social agenda that includes the voices of all young men (not just those engaged in violence), as well as the voices of young women (Morgan and McArdle, 2018). Such an approach will clarify the gendered meanings of violence and promote forms of peacebuilding that more meaningfully confront entrenched systems of power and domination. This is where Galtung’s violence triangle contributes most to understanding post-conflict society, because learning

to diagnose the persistent impacts of structural violence on our societies is a precondition for finding remedies (Kent, 2006).

Notes

1. We use single quotation marks for terms such as ‘post-conflict’ and ‘at risk’ to signal that these are contested and externally applied labels rather than neutral descriptors. In the context of this study, such terms are not universally accepted and may obscure the complexity of participants’ lived experiences, particularly when applied to young people. Our use of double quotation marks is reserved for direct quotations from participants and literature. The distinction separates participants’ voices and established sources from critically engaged terminology.
2. The Good Friday Agreement was a 1998 peace agreement that is widely considered to have brought the Troubles to an end.
3. Many people still refer to paramilitary assaults on children and young people as ‘punishment attacks’ or ‘punishment beatings,’ implying deserved retribution for a fault. To avoid any appearance of legitimization, the NI Department of Justice, as well as the authors, prefer to use the term ‘paramilitary-style attacks’ (PSAs).
4. A child is considered ‘looked after’ or ‘in the care’ of an authority if they have been provided with accommodation by the authority (in the exercise of its social services functions) for a continuous period of more than 24 hours. Children may enter care for a range of reasons, including to protect them from abuse or neglect (Department of Health NI, 2024).
5. Less than 1% of all children in England are in care. By contrast, around two-fifths of children in secure training centers (44%) and more than half of those in young offender institutions (54%) have been in care (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021).
6. When participants referred to “the system,” they were typically referring to state institutions, policies, and power structures that govern, regulate, and shape their lives, often in ways that are impersonal, bureaucratic, and difficult to challenge.
7. “Roots” is a colloquial term for individuals who have been, or are suspected to have been, convicted of sexual offenses.
8. Participants sometimes used colloquial labels. They sometimes said “Provos” to indicate a generic/community, shorthand for republican paramilitaries rather than a precise organizational identification.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Conor Murray:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Brandon Hamber:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Daire McGill:** Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing; **Elizabeth Gallagher:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration.

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