

**Is there a 'culture of violence' in Northern Ireland? Hate crime and paramilitarism**

**by**

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**Comments welcomed.**

## **Is there a ‘culture of violence’ in Northern Ireland? Hate crime and paramilitarism**

Societies that have experienced violent intra-state conflicts often experience continued violence in the post-conflict or peace process period (Hamber and Lewis, 1997; Jarman, 2004; Knox and Monaghan, 2002). One explanation put forward to explain this is the ‘culture of violence’ thesis. Such an explanation suggests that the conflict has affected the society’s norms and values in such a manner as to allow a greater tolerance of violent behaviour. As Steenkamp (2005: 254) notes ‘the conflict thus created a culture of violence, which produces a socially permissive environment within which the use of violence continues, even though violent politics has officially ended’. Communities have become desensitised to violence in light of their experiences of the conflict. The following paper is concerned with two manifestations of this ‘culture of violence’ within Northern Ireland, namely hate crime and paramilitary ‘punishment’ attacks.

It is often said that Northern Ireland has a lower rate of ‘ordinary’ crime than other parts of the United Kingdom. In 1994, for example, Northern Ireland had a lower crime rate than in any of the 43 police forces in England and Wales. This, however, disguises a high level of violent crime. According to a Home Office report on international crime statistics, Northern Ireland’s percentage increase (28 per cent) in recorded crime was second only to South Africa where it rose by 37 per cent in 1998. Northern Ireland also experienced the largest rise of the 29 countries examined in the report in the area of recorded violent crime, with an increase of 21 per cent while England and Wales, and Ireland recorded decreases of 6 per cent and 17 per cent respectively (Barclay and Tavares, 2000). More recent figures show an increase in the number of violence against the person offences recorded, for example in 2001/02 these equalled 26,104 offences and rose in the two subsequent years to 28,455 in 2002/03 and 28,982 in 2003/04 (Lyness *et al*, 2004).

The term hate crime covers a range of incidents and/or crimes which are motivated by a hatred or prejudice of other groups within society, the most common of which are racist and homophobic hate crime. The police in Northern Ireland have monitored racially

motivated incidents since January 1995. However, the format for recording data changed in 1996 and annual figures have been published from 1997 onwards (Jarman and Monaghan, 2003). Research published on the minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland has continually acknowledged the ongoing presence of racist harassment in the lives of members of the minority communities (Bell *et al*, 2004; Connolly and Keenan 2000a and 2000b; Hainsworth 1998; Irwin and Dunn 1997; Mann-Kler 1997). As we can see from the table below the number of recorded racist incidents has increased:

Table 1: Racial Incidents recorded by the police

Year	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04	04/05
No. of incidents	25	90	237	260	185	226	453	813
% change on previous year		260%	160%	10%	-29%	22%	100%	80%

Source: PSNI

A number of reasons can be put forward to explain the increase in recorded incidents:

1. There has been a real increase in the number of racist incidents that have occurred in Northern Ireland.
2. There has been an increase in the number of incidents being reported to the police.
3. There has been an increase in the willingness or the awareness of police officers to record incidents as racist incidents.
4. The changed definition of a racist incident, which focuses on perception rather than motivation, may also have been a contributory factor. (Jarman and Monaghan, 2003)

While all four factors have probably contributed to the increase in recorded incidents, it is perhaps the willingness to report to the police that is the major factor in this increase (Jarman and Monaghan, 2003). Research in England and Wales in the 1990s suggested

that perhaps as few as 1 in 20 incidents were being reported to the police (Holdaway, 1996) while more recent studies contended that it was the increased willingness of members of minority ethnic groups to report incidents, in the wake of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry that has accounted in large part for the 107 per cent rise in recorded incidents in England and Wales from April 1999 to April 2000 (Rayner, 2001).

Homophobic incidents have been recorded by the police since 2000 and include attacks on lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender men and women as well as persons perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Table 2 illustrates the number of recorded homophobic incidents by the police since recording began.

Table 2: Homophobic incidents recorded by the police

Year	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04	04/05
No. of incidents	57	40	35	71	196
% change on previous year		-30%	-13%	102%	176%

Source: PSNI

Research conducted in Northern Ireland in the 1990s found that nearly 40 per cent of lesbian, gay or bisexual respondents in the Ulster television area reported experience of homophobic violence, 36 per cent had experienced homophobic harassment and 67 per cent had been verbally abused<sup>1</sup> (Cited in Jarman and Tennant, 2003). More recent research undertaken by the Institute for Conflict Research (ICR) found that 82% of survey respondents had experienced homophobic harassment and 55% homophobic violence (Jarman and Tennant, 2003). Indeed, Jarman and Tennant (2003: 6) noted that ‘the percentage of people who had experienced [homophobic] violence and harassment was higher than indicated by comparable surveys in Great Britain and Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are taken from Stonewall’s survey of lesbian, gay and bisexual men and women’s experience of homophobic violence, harassment and abuse conducted in 1996 throughout the United Kingdom. For more details see Jarman and Tennant (2003).

Furthermore, many people reported repeated experiences of both harassment and violence’.

As with racist hate crime, the true number of homophobic incidents is unknown as many people who experience homophobic attacks do not report them to the police. ICR’s research found that only 26 per cent of survey respondents who had experienced some form of homophobic violence or harassment reported it to the police. Respondents were also asked the reasons for not reporting incidents to the police, these included views that the police could not help, would not be interested or would respond in a homophobic manner (Jarman and Tennant, 2003). As we can see in Table 2, the number of reported homophobic incidents increased considerably in 03/04 and in 04/05. Possible explanations for this cited in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee’s *Ninth Report* (2005) include increased incidents, more confidence in reporting and an improved ability by the police to record such attacks.

In addition to racist and homophobic incidents, the police in Northern Ireland also began recording disability related (physical or mental impairment) hate crime and sectarian or religious hate crime in September 2004. UK-wide research conducted by Mencap in 1999 of respondents with learning difficulties found that nine out of ten had experienced bullying, harassment or intimidation in some way (Mencap, 1999). Furthermore, two-thirds reported being bullied on a regular basis and almost one-third suffered from bullying on a daily or weekly basis. Police figures for April to December 2005 recorded 63 disability motivated incidents.

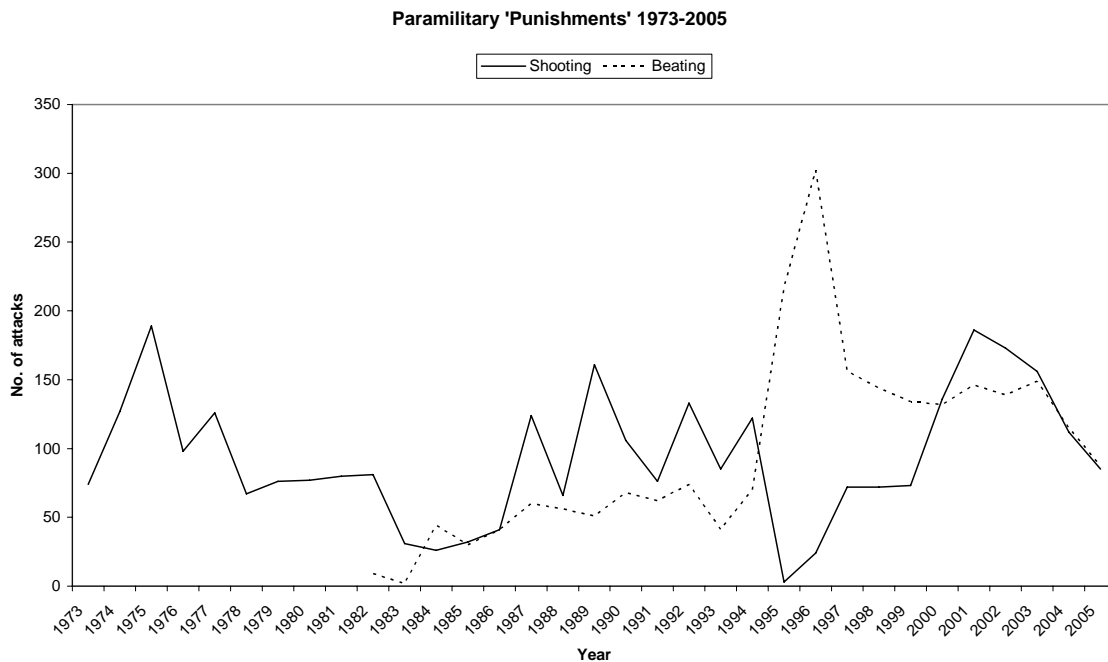
Although the police have only recently begun to record sectarian or religious hate crime in a systematic fashion, they had previously monitored incidents. As of September 2004, an agreed upon definition was adopted by the police of what constitutes sectarian hate crime. Thus according to the police’s website ‘the term sectarian, whilst not clearly defined, is broadly understood to describe incidents by one individual or group against another on the basis of that individual or groups perceived religion or political opinion. These groups or individuals are generally regarded to be from within the two main

groupings within Northern Ireland i.e.: Catholic/Roman Catholic or Protestant, Nationalist or Unionist, Loyalist or Republican'. Figures for the period between September 2004 and March 2005 record fifty sectarian incidents throughout Northern Ireland. Research by Jarman (2004) drawing upon police data for sectarian disorder in interface areas in north Belfast between 1996 and 2004 noted 6,581 incidents and 936 incidents of sectarian attacks on symbolic property such as Orange Halls, GAA clubs, places of worship and education between 1994 and 2002 throughout Northern Ireland. Initial police figures for sectarian hate crime should be treated with caution as the Community Relations Council point out 'sectarian crime is subsumed largely within the wider body of criminal violence and anti-social behaviour, and that many incidents motivated by sectarian attitudes probably go unreported, especially verbal abuse and the minor vandalizing of private property' (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2005: 3)

In contrast to the limited amount of data on hate crime in Northern Ireland, shootings and beatings undertaken by paramilitary groups against members of their own communities has been well-documented in comparison. Paramilitary 'punishments' have been a feature of many Catholic and Protestant working class areas from the early days of the Troubles albeit for different reasons (See Boulton, 1973; Connolly, 1997; Hillyard, 1985; Monaghan, 2004 for a discussion on this). Paramilitary 'punishments' are in part a response to community pressure for the organisations 'to do something' about crime in their areas. Activities liable for 'punishment' can be divided into two main categories, 'normal' and 'political' crime. 'Normal' crime would include vandalism, car theft, joyriding, muggings, the selling of alcohol to minors, rape and drug dealing. Offences of a sexual nature attract harsh 'punishments' and those punished are usually shot or badly beaten. In one case, an ex-Presbyterian minister given a warning by the police for possession of an illegal homosexual pornographic video, died from injuries sustained from a UVF 'punishment' beating. 'Normal' crime also encompasses 'anti-social behavior'. Activities considered 'anti-social' by the paramilitaries are diverse in nature and range from youths gathering at street corners, the playing of music too loudly, the verbal abuse of senior citizens, the dumping of trash and fighting with their volunteers or members.

Police statistics on reported paramilitary ‘punishments’ have been kept for shootings since 1973 and for beatings from 1982. It should be noted that police statistics represent only the tip of the iceberg in terms of actual numbers of individuals ‘punished’ as many incidents do not get reported for a variety of reasons including fear of reprisal. Between 1973 and 2005 there were 3090 recorded ‘punishment’ shootings. Republicans were responsible for 1553 (50 per cent) and loyalists 1537 (50 per cent). Although beatings occurred in the 1970s, they were not reported in the republican and loyalist press in the same way as shootings and police statistics are only available from 1982 onwards. Between 1982 and 2005 there were 2328 recorded ‘punishment’ beatings. Republicans were responsible for 1125 of these (48 per cent) and loyalists 1194 (52 per cent). The overall trends can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Police recorded paramilitary assaults and shootings



Source: Police Service of Northern Ireland. (2005 figures are provisional and subject to minor change).

The use of shootings as a 'punishment' peaked in 1975 with 189 being recorded by the police. Republicans were responsible for 139 of these. While the Provisional IRA is not the only republican paramilitary organisation to undertake 'punishments', it is fair to assume that it was probably responsible for the majority of 'punishment' shootings given its size, resources and support and/or control of working class Catholic areas. Silke (1999) suggests the peak can be attributed to the Provisional IRA cease-fire of 1975. At this time Sinn Féin was attempting to establish itself as a political power in nationalist areas, in addition there were more Provisional IRA Volunteers available to mete out 'punishments'.

Loyalists have also meted out 'punishment' shootings. In 1986 an increase in 'punishment' shootings can be observed with loyalists undertaking more shootings than republican paramilitary groups for the first time. The signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November 1985 is cited as the reason for this as many loyalists felt betrayed by the British state. This agreement established 'a joint ministerial conference of British and Irish ministers, backed by a permanent secretariat...to monitor political, security, legal and other issues of concern to the Nationalist minority' (Flackes and Elliot, 1989: 7) A policing vacuum began to develop in working class Protestant areas due to the growing mistrust between the communities and the police. The police had also begun to direct counter-terrorism measures against loyalist paramilitaries and to enforce bans on loyalist marches. This situation has been exacerbated by community perceptions of the perceived leniency of the formal criminal justice system, the inability of the police to deal with ordinary crime and the recruitment of petty criminals as informers. For example, in 1989 the West Belfast Brigade of the UVF shot a convicted sex offender in the legs and elbows and ordered him to leave the area after he received a lenient sentence from the court.

Like 'punishment' shootings a number of changes can be observed in the use of 'punishment' beatings. Republican 'punishment' beatings begin to rise in 1984, the same year as a perceived increase in petty crime in nationalist areas evidenced by letters within the republican press calling on the Provisional IRA to 'punish' local petty criminals. A

300 per cent rise in the number of loyalist beatings can be seen in 1986, the year following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Thus, it would appear that 'punishment' beatings and shootings are linked not only to changing circumstances in the communities in which paramilitaries operate but also to the wider political context.

In the initial period after the cease-fires of 1994 both republican and loyalist paramilitaries resorted to 'punishment' beatings rather than shootings. As Winston (1997: 123) notes this 'change came about as a result of the cease-fire emphasis on removing the gun from the political picture'. Paramilitaries have tried to deflect criticism from their political representatives regarding the maintenance of their cease-fires and thereby preserving their inclusion in the peace process. Under the terms of inclusion in the multi-party talks which culminated in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (April 1998), political parties were required to affirm their commitment to six fundamental principles (the Mitchell Principles) of democracy and non-violence. The sixth principle urges that 'punishment' killings and beatings cease and political parties take effective steps to prevent such actions. Indeed, in 1995 the year following the cease-fires there were no reported 'punishment' shootings by republicans and only three by loyalists. Beatings, however, increased by over 300 per cent on the previous year.

In terms of 'punishment' shootings an increase can be observed in the year 2000, when recorded numbers of 'punishment' shootings (136) exceeded the number of beatings (132). This increase can in part be explained by the failure of Northern Ireland Secretaries of State to rule that 'punishment' shootings and indeed beatings constitute a breach of the cease-fires. Interestingly in the year following the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement up until the end of 2005, the number of loyalist 'punishment' attacks has been greater than the number of republican attacks in each year. Loyalist paramilitaries have accounted for 65 per cent of 'punishment' beatings and 69 per cent of shootings between 1999 and 2005. Since 2003, we can observe a reduction in the number of 'punishments' and last year (2005) the total number was at its lowest since 1994. The Independent Monitoring Commission (2006: 19) noted that since the IRA's statement of

28 July 2005 it has ceased sanctioned 'punishment' attacks although it was aware of at least six unreported assaults mostly resulting from 'personal disputes ...[that] have been without leadership authority or planning, though in the process can carry with them the aura of PIRA threat'.

While it appears that recorded paramilitary 'punishments' are on the decrease other forms of violence, most notably racist and homophobic hate crime are on the increase. More data on sectarian and disability related hate crime is required before any trends can be identified.

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