

Difficult Terrain and Unreported Successes: Young People and Community-Based Restorative Justice in Northern Ireland

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Summary: Community-based restorative justice (CBRJ) initiatives in Loyalist/Unionist and Nationalist/Republican communities in Northern Ireland emerged in 1998 with the intention of providing a non-violent alternative to punishment violence. Schemes have diversified and have been described in research literature. However, there is limited research on young people's involvement with CBRJ. Drawing on qualitative research conducted with a number of CBRJ stakeholders, this paper explores some of the developments CBRJ initiatives have enabled for young people in their communities, by facilitating positive relationships between young people and the police and creating meaningful 'needs-based' diversionary programmes. It analyses contemporary challenges to CBRJ's interaction with young people. The most significant barriers appear from within the communities CBRJ serves. The complex relationships many young people have with paramilitaries are linked with their sense of space and place. Feelings of political disenfranchisement, particularly in the Loyalist/Unionist community, have created difficult terrain for CBRJ. The paper highlights how narratives of community development, conflict transformation and early intervention strategies complement one another.

Keywords: Community-based restorative justice, conflict transformation, youth marginalisation, NEET, educational under-attainment, unemployment, paramilitaries, young people in Northern Ireland.

Introduction

Community-based restorative justice (CBRJ) in Northern Ireland remains a contested subject on many fronts (McEvoy and Mika, 2001, 2002; Eriksson, 2009). CBRJ initiatives operate in acutely deprived communities across Northern Ireland: communities where marginalisation, isolation,

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exclusion and deprivation are daily characteristics of the lives of young people (McGrellis, 2011; McAlister *et al.*, 2014). Notwithstanding the body of research on CBRJ and marginalised youth in Northern Ireland, there is limited research linking the two. Of late, media attention has been given to the positive contribution CBRJ and young people often make to the wider community; however, academic literature has yet to reflect this.

This paper draws on qualitative interviews conducted with a sample of CBRJ stakeholders, which formed the basis of academic research. Through analysing a number of positive differences that initiatives have made to the lives of young people, and exploring the contemporary challenges that initiatives must overcome, the paper sheds some light on the complex relationship between CBRJ, youth marginalisation and the legacy of ‘the Troubles’.

Background

Beginning in the late 1960s and lasting for 30 years, ‘the Troubles’ was a period of chronic violence in Northern Ireland. The administration of justice did not escape this violence. ‘Paramilitary policing’ of largely youthful elements of low-level crime and antisocial behaviour through shootings, punishment beatings and banishments acted as an informal code of justice. Though barbaric, such forms of retribution were legitimised through a degree of community support (McEvoy and Mika, 2001). This support reflected both the illegitimacy of the police, particularly in Republican and Nationalist communities (Ashe, 2009), and the appetite for some form of order and justice (Jarman, 2007). In contrast, within Loyalist and Unionist communities, the belief that the police were preoccupied with the threat of the IRA meant low-level crime control became the assumed responsibility of local paramilitaries (Ashe, 2009).

During the 1990s Northern Ireland underwent a process of transition with the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 and the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, widely regarded as signalling the end of ‘the Troubles’. Although paramilitary policing did not cease following the declaration of ceasefires, a combination of international embarrassment, pressure from human rights organisations and decreasing political palatability created an environment where this form and scale of ‘justice’ was unsustainable (Jarman, 2004). These events coincided with independent, concerted

efforts within the Loyalist/Unionist and Republican/Nationalist communities to bring about a legitimate alternative to paramilitary policing (McEvoy and Mika, 2001).

Largely owing to this sequence of events, Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA) and Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) were formed in 1998, completely independently of one another.

CBRJ in practice

NIA and CRJI are community-based restorative justice projects that attempt to address socially harmful activities through the use of restorative practices. Historically, such activities include antisocial behaviour, violence, intimidation, drug abuse, etc. In many instances NIA and CRJI act as mediators between the parties involved. Projects are staffed by a small number of paid workers, although unpaid volunteers predominantly make up the workforce for both projects. Many of the staff are ex-combatants, and as will be discussed, this has been a common criticism for sceptics. NIA operates through six offices in the predominantly Loyalist/Unionist locales of greater Belfast and Bangor, whereas CRJI has eight offices in the Republican/Nationalist areas of Belfast, Derry and Newry. In recent years, projects have attempted to address some of the behaviours outlined above through youth diversionary programmes. The work undertaken by these programmes forms the basis of this paper.

CBRJ in Northern Ireland is grounded in restorative justice, which emerged in the 1970s as an 'alternative justice paradigm', responding to a growing acknowledgement of the failings of punitive and retributive formal justice (Zehr, 1990). During the initial stages, the greater part of CRJI's and NIA's caseload involved antisocial behaviour, youth offending, paramilitary threats/punishments and community exclusion. Although this still forms part of the workload, following the establishment of the Youth Justice Agency in 2003 and state accreditation for community-based projects, most offending is, in theory, processed through the criminal justice system.¹ CBRJ programmes focus on the harm caused by a crime; the aim is then to restore or repair this harm through a series of meetings or interventions (Braithwaite, 1993). The idea is that through facilitated

¹ Following state accreditation, protocols are in place whereby CBRJ projects are required to interact with the criminal justice system in order for offending behaviour to be processed through that system. Inspections indicate that the number of referrals through the protocols has been low (McGuigan and McGonigle, 2010; McGuigan *et al.*, 2011).

mediation involving the victim(s), perpetrator(s) and other relevant parties connected to the crime, a sustainable and peaceful solution can be sought. However, the objectives of CBRJ have expanded in recent years (Eriksson, 2009), with both NIA and CRJI being framed in a politically and socially transformative context (McEvoy and Eriksson, 2006; Chapman, 2012). Advocates have referred to the importance of CBRJ as a building block in terms of conflict transformation (McEvoy and Mika, 2001; Chapman, 2012); others have discussed the wider societal benefits CBRJ has offered, such as the creation of jobs for local people, social cohesion and improved relations between communities and the state (Eriksson, 2009).

This expansion has prompted praise and criticism in equal measure. Proponents cite the initial dramatic decrease in paramilitary-style punishments that has coincided with the inception of CBRJ projects (Mika, 2006).² State accreditation of CRJI and NIA in 2008 has gone some way towards appeasing sceptics who question the legitimacy of programmes (McGrattan, 2010). Similarly, a form of community acceptance in areas most adversely affected by ‘the Troubles’ has afforded credibility to programmes (Eriksson, 2011). In practice the peace-building and conflict transformation qualities of CBRJ have been hailed as an integral piece in the conflict transformation jigsaw (McEvoy and Mika, 2001; Gormally, 2006). In recent years, the ‘bottom-up’ approach of community-based initiatives has been cited as an effective transformation tool because of its impact on the daily lives of those living in these communities (MacGinty, 2014). Comparison of the organic origins of CBRJ projects with the imposed, state-led approach to restorative justice (McEvoy and McGregor, 2008) lends support to this argument. Arguably, one of the most significant strengths of CBRJ has been the reconstruction of legitimate state–community relations (McEvoy *et al.*, 2002). Since 2007, both CRJI and NIA have worked towards establishing a formal partnership with the PSNI (Eriksson, 2009).

Criticism of projects has come from various quarters. Lundy and McGovern (2008) note that issues of social justice are further down the pecking order than the internationally attractive goal of ‘conflict transformation’. According to Chapman (2012), this is evidenced through an inability of projects to balance the aims of restoring and strengthening civil society with the goals of political and economic transformation.

² Between 2003 and 2005, CRJI was been credited with stopping some 82% of ‘potential paramilitary punishments’ and NIA with stopping 71% (Mika, 2006).

Furthermore, as Haydon and McAlister (2015) note, restorative processes in Northern Ireland have little remit to challenge the structural inequalities confronting the most marginalised groups in our society, including young people.

Youth marginalisation and CBRJ

Arguably, the ongoing debate surrounding CBRJ is dated; more importantly, for the purposes of this paper, it neglects the narrative of marginalised young people in Northern Ireland. Youth unemployment rates in Northern Ireland are higher than elsewhere in the UK (Simmons and Thompson, 2016). Academic attainment is a further major challenge: the latest peace monitoring report noted educational underachievement as a severe problem among Protestant working-class boys, with only 19.7% attaining at least ‘five good GCSE results’ (Nolan, 2014). Related to the educational development of young people are the devastating effects of child poverty: it is estimated that one in four children in Northern Ireland grow up in impoverished conditions (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2014).

It is no coincidence that the issues outlined above are most acutely felt in areas most adversely affected by ‘the Troubles’. For example, young people’s mental health and emotional wellbeing has suffered as a result of ‘intergenerational trauma’ (McGrellis, 2011). Suicide rates among young people in Northern Ireland are among the highest in the UK (O’Hara, 2011). Varying pieces of research have linked all of these socioeconomic problems to the areas in which CBRJ programmes operate (Nolan, 2014; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2014). While there are evident gaps in the literature linking CBRJ and youth marginalisation, during the research process it became apparent that practitioners and stakeholders working at the forefront of CBRJ programmes were acutely aware of this link. How they challenged such structural inequalities is discussed below.

Research methodology

The focus of this research related to the core CBRJ tenets of ‘community’ and ‘transformation’. The study attempted to critically consider whether such terms (a) included young people in the vision of ‘community’ and (b) attempted to redress barriers and transform the lives of young people, or whether this terminology was reserved for funders and international conflict resolution onlookers. The research was subject to institutional

ethical review.³ Participants were provided with information on the nature of the project and the aims and objectives of the research. All participants provided written consent. To safeguard confidentiality, all interviewee names and place names have been changed.

Research participants were selected on the basis of working within the CBRJ field. While most respondents were involved from the beginning of CBRJ in Northern Ireland, some had gained experience in the sector only recently. The research sample ($n = 11$) comprised one Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), two neighbourhood police sergeants, one youth worker, a youth counsellor, a human rights lawyer, four CBRJ practitioners and one CBRJ director. All interviewees had gained experience in the greater Belfast and Bangor area. Research was confined to this area in the interests of time management and because of financial constraints. A semi-structured interview approach was used due to its flexibility in enabling participants to articulate their opinions on subjective and often complex phenomena (Bryman, 2012). Questions on the central themes were supplemented with more general questions regarding the contemporary landscape of austerity and the documented rise in punishment attacks (Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), 2015a).

Results

A number of competing narratives emerged during the interviews. For example, with regard to austerity and funding cuts, the majority of interviewees expressed deep concerns; however, some also saw this as an opportunity for CBRJ projects to promote their worth as a legitimate, cost-effective alternative to formal justice measures. The following focuses on work undertaken by CBRJ social integration projects.

Education and employment

The most recent Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) statistics indicate that 17.1% of young people in Northern Ireland are considered NEET (not in education, employment or training), which is much higher than the UK average of 13% (DEL, 2015).⁴ NIA has attempted to address this through the Start programme, a partnership

³The research was conducted as part of the MSc in Youth Justice, Queen's University Belfast.

⁴Young people are classified as those aged 16–24.

initiative between NIA and Include Youth,⁵ which has been operational since 2013. This programme seeks to ‘up-skill young people through delivering essential skills in English, Maths and ICT, which they may have missed out on in school’ (Interview 9, youth work coordinator), while also providing work experience, vocational training and practical support in accessing further training or education or in seeking employment. Further, NIA was involved in a multi-agency consortium with CRJI and Challenge for Youth.⁶ The programme is entitled WAYS (Wrap Around Youth Support), and provides a range of services to people aged 10–17, such as one-to-one mentoring, counselling, personal development and independent living skills. Referrals to the initiative can be made through a number of avenues such as self-referral, youth workers and schools. The programme offers support to the most vulnerable young people, most commonly those classified as NEET, at risk of offending or from a care background, and is unique in that CRJI and NIA work collaboratively to address the same social needs from within their respective areas. Despite its success, due to financial uncertainty around funding and an over-reliance on volunteers, the project may be consigned to the short-term interventionist scrapheap.

Because the Start and WAYS programmes are still in their infancy, there has been limited external evaluation of them. They deploy an informal approach to addressing educational attainment and employment; programmes are youth-work based and unlike school or formal recruitment agencies. Essential skills tutors are flexible, and project workers are empathetic to the reality that many of their participants lead chaotic lives, impacted by poverty, school expulsion, truancy, neglect, abuse, mental and physical ill health and placement in alternative care, amongst other barriers (Haydon and McAlister, 2015). For young people, the results are twofold: firstly they are offered a pathway away from offending; secondly the programmes seek to address the well-documented problems of educational under-attainment and unemployment in working-class neighbourhoods (Nolan, 2013). According to Start statistics, from April 2015 to March 2016, 30% of programme participants moved on

⁵ Include Youth is a children’s rights-based organisation with more than 30 years’ experience of working with and for the most marginalised young people in Northern Ireland, both in practice and at a policy level.

⁶ Challenge For Youth is a cross-community youth organisation which, due to funding cuts, was forced to shut down in 2014 after 24 years of working with vulnerable young people. The work vacated by Challenge for Youth on the WAYS project was divided up between NIA and CRJI.

into employment (22% full time), 42% into training or education, and 12% into volunteering (Include Youth, 2016). Based on the opinions of young participants, Boyce (2012: 4) notes that the ‘informality in approach and delivery’ of such programmes is a key element of their success.

This holistic approach to reintegrating young people exemplifies how projects have diversified to meet changing societal needs, in this case related to the shrinking of the labour market (Roberts, 2013). In facilitating programmes that address unemployment and educational under-attainment, CBRJ seeks to tackle the broader social problems confronting young people while maximising diversion from the criminal justice system. Having local people staffing projects is referred to as the ‘bottom-up’ approach to justice, and has been hailed as an effective tool in addressing the complex needs of the young people it serves. However, the sustainability of such schemes will depend on funding. Previous research and the current climate of welfare reform suggest that truly transformative initiatives may be consigned to ‘insecure and short-term interventions’ (Haydon *et al.*, 2012).

Promoting inclusive communities

Research outlines how media characterisation helps shape negative societal perceptions of various types of young people in Northern Ireland (Gordon, 2006, 2012). This representation also increases the likelihood of further marginalisation (Gordon *et al.*, 2015).

Young people are not the only victims of negative media depiction. Ethnic minorities are arguably even more marginalised. Montague and Shirlow (2014) cite the growing number of hate crimes as evidence of this. Both schemes have attempted to alleviate this through a range of partnership programmes engaging marginalised and diverse groups from within local communities. For example, the NIA Good for Nothing campaign attempts to challenge negative stereotypes of young people by empowering them to take part in various activities within their communities. This has included decorating a room for a disabled person, packing food bags for refugees, and organising social events for the elderly. Referrals to the scheme can be made via the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), PSNI or from within the community.

The scheme has garnered positive media attention, and may facilitate a more impartial view of young people in working-class communities. Furthermore, this represents a socially transformative approach to problem-solving (Lederach, 1997). Empowering young people to actively

promote inclusive communities provides hard evidence of Chapman's (2012: 2) claim that CBRJ forms part of 'a strong network of community and voluntary organisations delivering services to the unemployed, to women, to the elderly and to youth'. Formal approaches to young people and criminality have been criticised for their emphasis on 'criminal justice disposals rather than combating the impact of social injustice on the lives of children, young people and their families' (Haydon *et al.*, 2012). By offering a range of services to young people, CBRJ initiatives such as the Good for Nothing initiative have attempted to make a genuine and lasting impact on the lives of both vulnerable groups within their communities and those at risk of offending.

A grassroots youth-work ethos

All staff on CBRJ projects must have some form of restorative qualification to practise, and many are trained in youth work. Staff are specifically trained on the problems confronting young people in their area: 'Our staff are trained in suicide awareness and have successfully intervened on a number of occasions' (Interview 12, CBRJ project worker). In 2015, 14% of CRJI's caseload involved suicide intervention/support/advice (CRJI, 2016). Training in the specific areas of poverty, suicide awareness and mental health issues represents a proactive approach to addressing structural inequalities. By successfully intervening in attempted suicides, CRJI is countering a social problem prevalent in its operational constituencies, thus presenting further evidence of how a grass-roots ethos enables schemes' flexibility to adapt to local problems (MacGinty, 2014). This is far beyond the remit of CBRJ, and, as noted by one practitioner, 'should be the work of other statutory agencies' (Interview 11, CBRJ project worker). However, CBRJ has a unique vantage point in that it is community led, meaning that practitioners experience first-hand some of the structural inequalities confronting young people.

The youth-work ethos developed by CBRJ initiatives shares the restorative ethos of empowerment, working alongside individuals to make decisions instead of making decisions for them. The growing number of practitioners with a youth-work background embody what Lederach (1997) refers to as 'middle-range leaders' who are essential to conflict transformation. These leaders can channel the necessary links with 'top-range' leaders and grass-roots initiatives, thus strengthening civic society. Restorative justice and youth-work approaches have a number of important similarities, such as their non-authoritarian and informal

delivery (Banks, 2012), the individualistic approach to each person, and the skilled helper action-plan model (Egan, 2013). These similarities lend support to the argument that acquiring experience or knowledge in both fields can be complementary and informative for future development.

Rights-based, youth-centred

There is also evidence that the CBRJ addresses welfare and child protection concerns that are not being met elsewhere. This was commented on by a study participant, a legal expert in human and children's rights: 'they [CBRJ] meet and go beyond some of the standards that have been set worldwide ... the Beijing Principles, the Riyadh Guidelines. I think the moral will in trying to intervene where a young person is about to be attacked or beaten up ... answers any question marks surrounding the rights of the child' (Interview 8, human rights practitioner). Furthermore, NIA's involvement in children's rights issues extends beyond its moral will to be involved. According to one director, 'we have forged a partnership with Include Youth in terms of lobbying around key issues ... around the minimum age of criminal responsibility, child poverty, educational attainment, the demonisation of young people in the media' (Interview 3, CBRJ Director).

CBRJ initiatives attempt to address many of these social harms through collaborative work, specific programmes and day-to-day practice. This multifaceted approach to reducing social harms at practice and policy levels evidences Lederach's (1997: 149) assertion that peace-building and conflict transformation initiatives must 'adapt to the realities and dilemmas posed by the very nature of these conflicts'. It has been argued that many of the problems depicted above are indirectly, if not directly, linked to the legacy of 'the Troubles' (McAlister *et al.*, 2009; Hargie *et al.*, 2010). In attempting to redress these imbalances and promote and protect children's rights, projects can rightly be referred to as a socially transformative approach to problem-solving (Lederach, 1997).

Improved relations: PSNI and young people

Over the years since the establishment of the PSNI in 1999, police legitimacy and credibility have steadily improved (Nolan, 2013). This research suggests that both PSNI officers and practitioners viewed CBRJ work as necessary in order to continue developing relationships between young people and the police. For example, the aim of the MAD (Making a Difference) project, run in collaboration between CRJI and the PSNI,

is to 'educate young people on their rights around stop and search, and familiarise themselves with local police officers' (Interview 12, CBRJ project worker). The project entailed CRJI facilitating in-house workshops for local PSNI officers to come down and meet young people in a neutral space and attempt to build relationships by getting to know young people in the area. For one neighbourhood police officer, the most effective outcome of projects is to 'humanise policing for young people ... and break down barriers' (Interview 7, neighbourhood police officer).

Initiatives such as the MAD project are an important indicator of how far policing–community relations have come in Nationalist/Republican areas, where mistrust of the police was most acutely felt during 'the Troubles' (Monaghan, 2008). In attempting to 'humanise' policing, projects facilitate meaningful and positive contact between the PSNI and young people. Positive contact also challenges the 'judgemental' and 'antagonistic' attitudes displayed towards young people by some police officers (Graham *et al.*, 2011: 39). Research suggests that a large percentage of young people hold negative perceptions of policing (Byrne and Jarman, 2010). However, it appears that these attitudes may be mellowing, with young people currently transitioning in Northern Ireland expressing more positive views about policing than previous generations (Devaney *et al.*, 2014). This is in part due to the PSNI incorporating young people's viewpoints on strategies involving police–young people interaction (McAnulty and Lindsay, 2015). Community projects such as CBRJ have been instrumental in facilitating and co-ordinating this interaction.

However, this research suggests that the picture is somewhat different regarding the relationship between the PSNI and Protestant Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) communities. A number of NIA practitioners commented that young people's relationships with the police were impacted by the political situation and wider community feelings of grievance with the PSNI. It was found that the relationship between young people in NIA communities and the police seems to have stagnated, in some cases even deteriorated. Incidents such as the flags dispute⁷ have been detrimental to relations (Wilson and Glendinning, 2013; Nolan *et al.*, 2014). Young people's negative perceptions of the PSNI are somewhat reflective of the growing Loyalist political disenfranchisement (Shirlow, 2012; Nolan *et al.*, 2014). According to interviewee 11, this has impacted on how young

⁷ A protracted dispute over the flying of the union flag over Belfast City Hall, after Belfast City Council voted to limit the number of days the flag flies over the hall on 3 December 2012. Mass protest ensued.

people perceive the PSNI. Furthermore, while Devaney *et al.*'s (2014: 2) research suggested an increased acceptance of policing among young people, it also made a contrary but equally important finding: that young people who did not possess a 'strong sense of belonging, pride and investment in wider society' were not as likely to display positive feelings towards policing in their areas. High levels of educational under-attainment, child poverty, marginalisation and unemployment explain the absence of a 'sense of belonging' for many young people in NIA communities (Haydon and Scraton, 2008). This in turn helps one understand young people's negative perceptions and relationships with authoritative figures such as PSNI members.

Further complicating young people's relationship with the PSNI is the appetite within sections of both Nationalist/Republican and Loyalist/Unionist communities for a return to 'paramilitarism' (Wilson and Glendinning, 2013). The increase in dissident activity in recent years presents contradictory narratives for many adult observers of the Northern Ireland conflict. It is therefore no surprise that young people's complex relationships with paramilitaries not only represent a major obstacle for relations with the PSNI, but also hinder CBRJ engagement with young people in their respective communities. This will be discussed at greater length in the following section.

Difficult terrain

Young people and paramilitaries

The most significant obstacle to the effective practice of CBRJ has been the continuance of paramilitary activity. This was reflected to varying degrees in all interviews conducted during the research. One youth worker gave a brief overview of the effects of paramilitary violence: 'out of a group of 15 [young people] I was working with, eight of them had a real negative experience with paramilitaries, who had threatened them ... punched one of their mothers, one of them had even witnessed their uncle being shot dead in front of them' (Interview 1, youth worker). Research on the lived experiences of young people documents the normalisation of such acts (McAlister and Carr, 2014; Harland and McCready, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the recent rise in 'paramilitary-style shootings' at the time of the research (36 compared with 28 during the previous year) and 'assaults' (58 compared with 42 during the previous year) (PSNI, 2015a, 2015b) had undermined much of the positive work done on many fronts

by CBRJ initiatives. The prevalence of this activity explains why there is still a need for CBRJ, but also plays into the hands of those who are sceptical about the 'true aims' of projects (McGrattan, 2010). Part of this critique stems from the reality that CBRJ needs to work in close proximity to paramilitaries on a daily basis: 'we still mediate with paramilitaries, yeah we will do that every day of the week to stop a young person being beaten or shot' (Interview 3, CBRJ Director).

This changing role of paramilitaries often does not sit well with young people who feel alienated from their objectives and 'the cause'. This alienation is often displayed by the FAP (F**k All Paramilitaries) graffiti, which a number of participants described. 'I have seen young people from both sides of the community using it on their homework books, casts and walls from Divis to the Shankill road' (Interview 1, youth worker). This illustrates how alienation is felt at the intra-community level and is not just inter-community. Further alienating young people is that they 'are being beaten for drug abuse ... drugs that they seem to be accessing from within that [paramilitary] organisation' (Interview 11, CBRJ project worker). These findings resemble Harland and McCready's (2014: 273) research on young males as victims of a 'catch-22' form of justice: 'Many of the boys recalled the injustice of paramilitaries inflicting punishment on them and their friends for so called antisocial behaviour, while those inflicting this punishment were not being held to account for their own actions in drug dealing and other crimes.'

It must however be stressed that the relationship between young people and paramilitaries was often difficult to label and unpredictable. In recent years research carried out on working-class communities has suggested that an element of support exists for paramilitarism (Hayes and McAllister, 2005; Wilson and Glendinning, 2013). In attempting to understand this, it is worth referring to the problems of marginalisation confronting working-class youth transitioning in Northern Ireland (Haydon *et al.*, 2012). This offers an insight into the complex relationship young people hold with paramilitaries in that their feelings of marginalisation from the community, family and economic setting mean they have nowhere else to turn to for a sense of belonging or identity (McAllister *et al.*, 2011): often paramilitary affiliation can fill that void. It is apparent that paramilitaries prey on this marginalisation to further their agendas (Harland and McCready, 2014). According to a youth counsellor, 'when they see young "so-and-so" has gone in and done a bit of time for car theft ... once he comes back out, [they see him] as an easy target for them to

recruit to do some of their dirty work ... It gives some people a bit of purpose' (Interview 5, youth counsellor).

Geographical barriers

Levels of paramilitary control arguably influenced young people's perceptions of their geographical constraints. One respondent observed that fear prevented many young people from basic activities such as 'getting a bus into the city centre' (Interview 1, youth worker). A neighbourhood police officer commented: 'most people within [area name] and [area name] have a six-street mentality, in that they had never been beyond six streets from their home ... and had a fear factor, and a total lack of knowledge of what happened outside six streets from their home' (Interview 7).

Such accounts expand upon Leonard and McKnight's (2011) findings on the physical segregation of space and its effect on young people. While peace walls physically segregate young people, fear of the unknown helps create other boundaries (Nolan, 2013). As noted by one practitioner, perceived geographical barriers prevent young people from venturing outside their communities: 'people can't understand why a young boy from [area name] or East Belfast doesn't just go down the town and go into one of these places and get their level 2 [English or Maths qualification]' (Interview 10, CBRJ project worker).

Restrictions on young people's space and place crossed the ethno-sectarian divide.

Lack of community support

Support for CBRJ is variable within communities and is linked with perceptions about young people. These perceptions are informed by widespread negative media stereotypes of young people living in deprived communities, which ultimately heighten feelings of marginalisation and stigmatisation (Gordon *et al.*, 2015). CBRJ must encourage young people to take part in its initiatives, but also convince the wider community (often negatively informed about young people) to buy into its vision of a better future.

A lack of community acceptance of CBRJ ranged from simple mistrust to repeated acts of violence committed against the two organisations. Violent acts such as petrol-bombing of CBRJ offices not only undermine CBRJ as an institution but also challenge its *raison d'être* – 'a non-violent alternative to justice' (Eriksson, 2009: 60). This illustrates the task at hand:

CBRJ is attempting to teach young people about non-violent alternatives to resolving disputes, while societal tolerance and subsequent normalisation of violence contradict this approach (Haydon and Scraton, 2008).

The difficulties faced by CBRJ are also impacted by a lack of political buy-in. 'I think the lack of political buy in makes it so much more difficult ... who politicians choose to align themselves to at times, is very unhelpful as well' (Interview 9, youth work co-ordinator). Respondents (both practitioners and stakeholders) depicted limited awareness about what CBRJ actually does: 'I think just there's a lot of people don't realise what CBRJ is about, what they do ... Sometimes even that it exists' (Interview 2, CBRJ project worker). Further, the current climate of welfare reform and austerity ensures that the future of the community and voluntary sector is engulfed in precariousness. Such issues are outside the scope of this paper and, as evidenced above, both CRJI and NIA have a more immediate task at hand in attempting to overcome the obstacles from within their respective communities of service.

Moving forward

Examples of good practice that can inform the development of strategies at both statutory and non-governmental levels do exist, and should be drawn upon going forward. Although in their relative infancy, projects such as Start and WAYS represent innovative approaches to address education and employment barriers. The direct benefits of such initiatives are twofold in that they attempt to create a diversion for young people at risk of involvement in criminal activity while also up-skilling individuals in an attempt to prepare them for entering an increasingly inaccessible employment market. It appears that the youth-work approach effectively complements the restorative ethos of empowerment (Braithwaite, 2002). Where restorative justice attempts to empower both the victims and perpetrators of a crime to repair the harm caused (Zehr, 1990), a core principle of youth work is to empower young people to be actively involved in shaping their own development (Hamilton *et al.*, 2004). Giving young people ownership of projects such as the Good for Nothing campaign is an effective example of the shared empowerment ethos in practice. Further strengthening this approach are the burgeoning number of practitioners within CBRJ schemes who have a youth-work background. Although all CBRJ practitioners have restorative qualifications, mandatory youth-work

training may enhance the transformative potential of programmes. Narratives of community development, conflict transformation and improving the quality of life for marginalised youth complement one another, and this should be recognised.

In order to serve a purpose in contemporary society, CBRJ projects have had to diversify and develop to meet changing societal needs, yet maintain a focus on the age-old problem of paramilitary activities that often engulf young people as both victims and perpetrators. While previous research focuses on transformation for communities (Eriksson, 2009), this paper illustrates transformative potentials for young people, while uncovering some of the difficulties that projects must overcome in order to help those most in need of service.

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