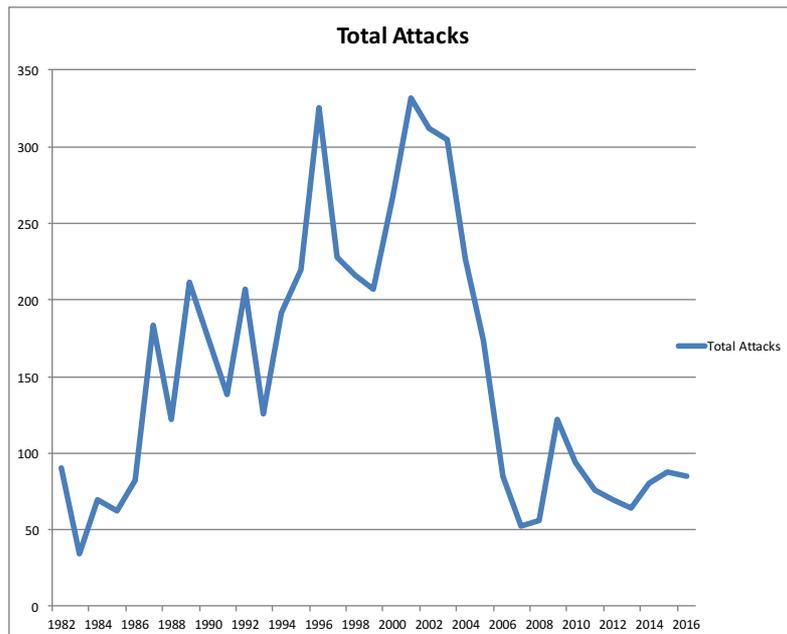


Stop Attacks - *Beyond the Societal Shrug:*

Addressing Paramilitary Attacks on Young People in Northern Ireland





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Stop Attacks - *Beyond the Societal Shrug:*

Addressing Paramilitary Attacks on Young People in Northern Ireland

Introduction

My concern about the issue of paramilitary threats and attacks goes right back to my involvement with the Peace People as a teenager in the late 1970s, when I became aware of the number of people coming under threat from these organisations. More recently, in my work with Public Achievement, young people involved in the WIMPS (Where Is My Public Servant?) project highlighted the issue, and held the Chief Constable and the Policing Board to account for the poor clearance rate for these crimes (still less than 4%).

Whilst I set out to have direct conversations with victims of the attacks, this has proven very difficult for a range of reasons - not least the vulnerability of these young people and their disengagement from civil society. In the end I had several 'no shows' from victims, others who had offered to connect me with victims were unable to do so for a

"The Panel is conscious of the influence members of paramilitary groups have over young people. Young people face distinct challenges growing up in our society, particularly those living in the most disadvantaged areas, which also tend to be where paramilitary groups have a strong presence."

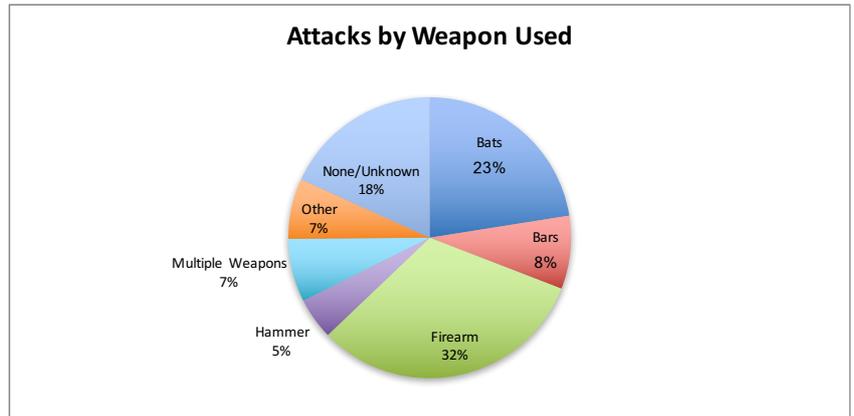
- Fresh Start Panel on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups, May 2016

number of reasons, and I was able to have one conversation with a young man who had recently been shot in the knees. I was also able to talk to a young man in prison who had recently been shot in the knees and ankles¹. However, I have been greatly informed by the experiences of local youth workers across Belfast and in Derry/Londonderry, most of whom have been dealing directly with the consequences of this brutality for decades.

¹ See <https://wiseabap.com/2017/08/08/he-jumped-on-it-to-see-what-it-would-feel-like/> This interview was also carried by the Belfast Telegraph, and became the focus of a discussion on Radio Ulster's Talkback programme.

I have also found it difficult to find people in the medical world - paramedics, emergency medicine practitioners, surgeons and psychiatrists - who will talk to me about this issue, but I have made some progress, and am planning to engage with them in a second stage of this project.

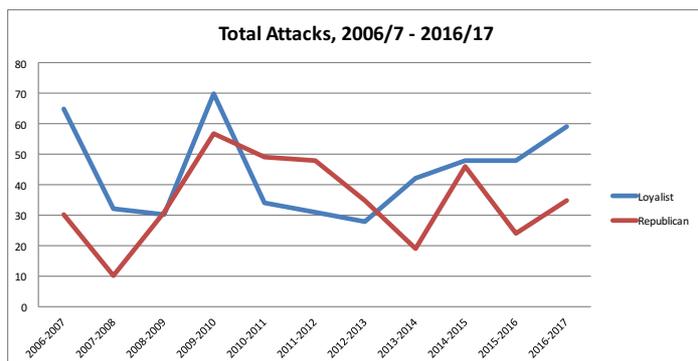
I am extremely grateful to the youth workers who gave up so much time to talk to me, and also did their best to get young victims of paramilitary attacks to speak to me. I have an even deeper respect for these workers and the issues they face as a result of this project. I am also grateful to others who got involved in this issue with me, and to senior staff in the PSNI with whom I have had useful and frank discussions - which are still ongoing.



The Current Context

This research has been carried out in response to the ongoing brutalisation of young people by paramilitary groups. I wanted to find out more about the young people who were being attacked, and the implications for both them and their wider communities. I have been working directly on this issue since 2009 when a group of young people involved in Public Achievement's WIMPS (Where is My Public Servant?) project starting highlighting the issue, working to create greater public awareness and to hold politicians and the police to account.²

In the 2016-17 fiscal year³ there has been an increase of over 30% in the number of attacks over the previous year - and they are currently at the highest level since 2010. Of the total 688 attacks between 2009 and the end of 2016, 326 (47.4%)⁴ were attacks on young people aged 25 or younger. There is no clear statistic for the number of children attacked, but we know that 11 of these victims were less than 16 years of age, and a number of 16 and 17 year olds have been shot and beaten, including in recent months. Significantly more children are threatened by these groups, or excluded by them from their communities.



I do not wish to in any way demonise the communities where these attacks are happening, or the sense of desperation of those who report young people (and others) to paramilitaries. There are serious levels of crime in many areas - and many of these involved in these crimes seem to do so with relative

impunity. It is unfair that communities are expected to carry this burden. This is an enormously complex issue, and will take a multi-agency and multi-systemic strategy to eliminate. However I am a youth worker, and my focus has been on young victims of these attacks and the consequences of them for their lives and their communities.

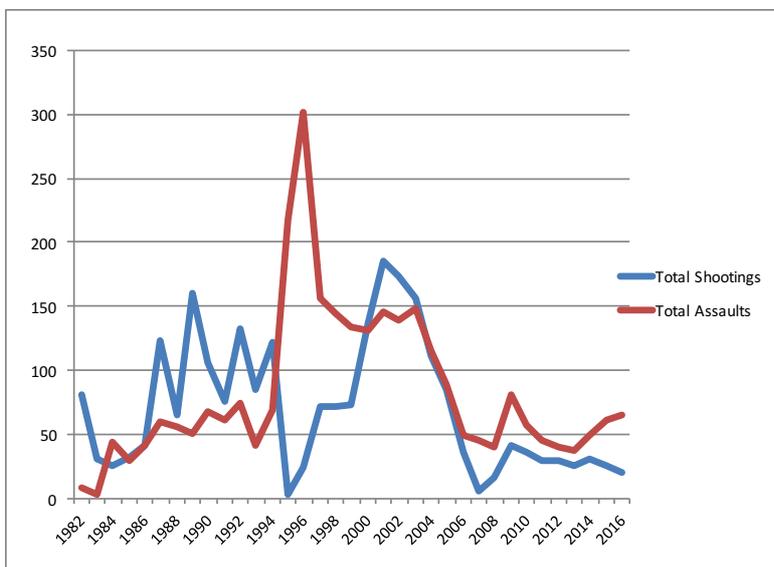
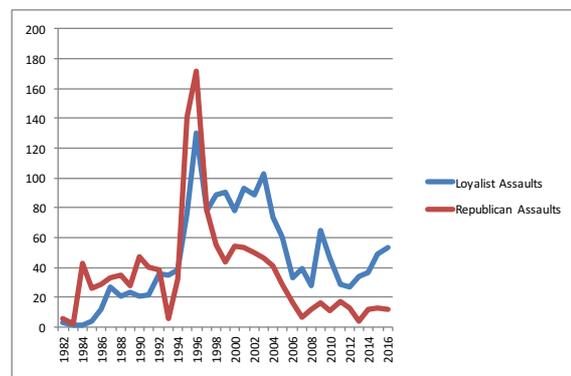
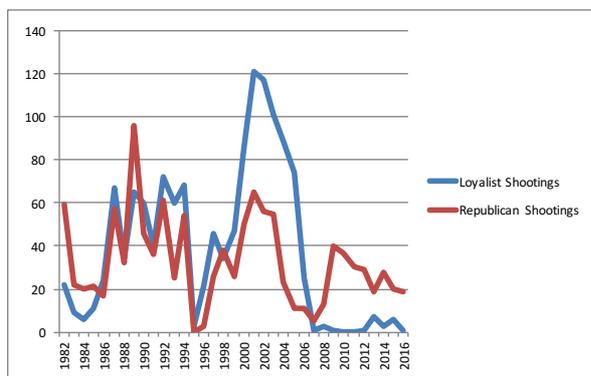
² Public Achievement - and with it the WIMPS project - closed in early 2016. However much of the video content created through the project can still be viewed on <http://youtube.com/wimpstv>

³ The PSNI tend to use the fiscal year in reporting (April to March) - so I have stuck to this metric for most of the tables in this document. However, prior to 1990 the monthly figures are not available, so for longer time-periods I have used the calendar year in the charts.

⁴ PSNI statistics

History of Attacks

Paramilitary attacks - often called 'Punishment Shootings' or 'Punishment Beatings' are part of the legacy of the former conflict. It was a tactic developed by both Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups to 'deal' with what they saw as antisocial behaviour in their communities, with paramilitaries stepping into a vacuum where communities didn't trust or have confidence in the police. It worked for them in that they were seen to be dealing with local problems, and it allowed them to retain power in their communities, through a culture of fear and intimidation.



These attacks continue to serve the same purpose for a new generation of paramilitary and organised crime groups, and there has been very little public discourse about this issue.

Indeed the highest levels of attacks were in the immediate aftermath of paramilitary ceasefires (1994) and the Good Friday Agreement (1998). We have not seen any concerted attempt on the part of either

politicians, civil society or church leaders to bring the practice to an end. There has been a culture of the 'societal shrug' when these attacks take place - and an assumption by many that the attacks are at some level both justified and necessary.

The attacks take the form of both shootings (usually to the main joints - particularly knees) and violent beatings with a series of weapons. The shootings are primarily (though not exclusively) carried out by groups in the Republican community, and the beatings

mainly (though again, not exclusively) carried out by Loyalist groups. The total number of attacks actually grew after the 1994 ceasefires - peaking in 2001 (332) - and then saw a significant decline between 2003 and 2007 (to a low of 52) - but there has been an increase in attacks in recent years, particularly physical assaults (see above for a breakdown of the

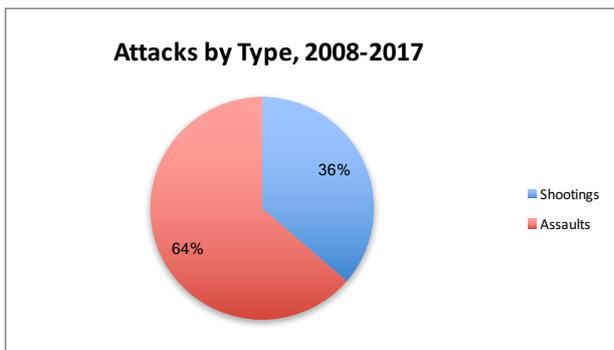
There has been a culture of the 'societal shrug' when these attacks take place - and an assumption by many that the attacks are at some level both justified and necessary.

levels of attacks over a 35 year period). Shootings usually receive low-level attention by the media (often only reported on line and not in main news bulletins). Most news outlets simply repeat the wording of the press releases sent out by the PSNI. Beatings are rarely reported at all.

Young People

For each young person who is shot or beaten in an area, there may be a dozen others who are under threat from paramilitaries⁵, or who have been excluded from their communities. Others are involved in low-level drug dealing for which they pay a weekly 'tax' to local groups, which if unpaid leads to violent consequences. Many of the young people who are attacked are already damaged through a range of experiences such as drug abuse and mental health issues (often inter-linked), family breakdown/dysfunction and poor educational achievement. They are often traumatised through other events in their lives, and then face the additional trauma of a brutal and violent assault. The attacks make things even worse for these young people, and make them harder to reach and engage.

In several of the areas, there are multiple paramilitary factions (some of the youth workers joked that it is very difficult to keep track of the number of factions in an area, and who is in which one), and young people have to try to negotiate life without coming into conflict with these groups, and avoiding the attentions of the police. For example one worker told me about young people who were sold fireworks by one group, then beaten by another for letting them off in the street.



These groups assert multiple pressures on young people. Often the groups themselves are volatile and heavily involved in criminality, including extortion and drug-dealing. In a number of cases youth workers talked about these organisations 'bleeding' other young people - demanding that they carry out 'punishment attacks' on other youths as their

ticket into the organisation, or to avoid a similar sanction themselves for drug debt or some other 'offence'. Younger children are groomed by these groups - lured into drug use, then low level selling, and then the system of 'tax' ensures that they have to keep paying the

⁵ Given the nature of these threats, there are no reliable statistics on the number of young people being excluded from their communities. There are however figures for adults (and families) who have to move house due to paramilitary threat and intimidation. According to the Fresh Start Panel report, there were 1,223 cases where people presented as homeless due to paramilitary intimidation over a 2 year period (NIHE figures)

organisations or face the consequences. Even in areas where there are very few attacks, the young people are surrounded by a culture of fear, violence and trauma.

The young people who are being threatened and attacked don't trust authority – including the police, justice agencies, and sometimes local restorative justice practitioners – who they see as 'aligned' to paramilitary organisations. There is certainly a belief in the communities that the presence and constant threat of paramilitary groups has influenced the epidemic of suicide in several areas - particularly among young men. This means that the local youth worker can be an extraordinarily important person in keeping young people safe and out of the hands of paramilitary groups, and in helping them to access the care and support they need. However these young people live on the very fringe of society and even youth workers struggle to engage and support them, and to protect them from both paramilitaries and self-harm.

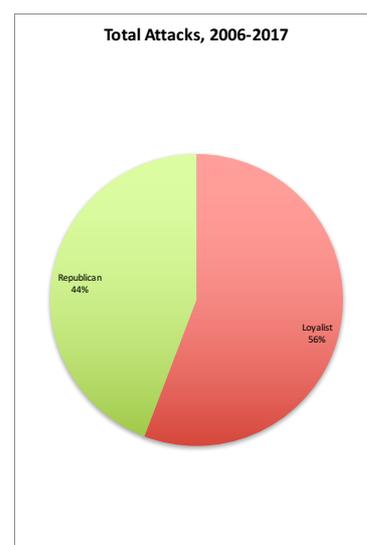
There is a perception that the attacks have little impact on their victims - that they 'brush it off'. I don't believe that this is true. These are enormously traumatic events in the lives of these young people and their families, and are likely to impact on the rest of their lives - leaving both physical and psychological scars. There are certainly a number of victims who have gone on to take their own lives. Whilst it is impossible to know if these suicides are a direct consequence of the attacks, they certainly don't help the mental health of the victims - and likely the perpetrators - and add to the overall levels of trauma and stress in local communities.

Communities

Part of the reason why these attacks persist is that there is community support for them. They are demanded by members of the community, supported by others, and carried out (in large part) by members of the same community. Some young people (and older people) are seen to be “out of control” - carrying out crimes with apparent impunity. There is a widespread view that the PSNI are ineffective in dealing with crimes in these areas, and indeed a view I heard repeated many times was that the Police⁶ have other agendas - prioritising gathering intelligence on particular people within the community over dealing with the issues communities face. There is also a widespread belief that the PSNI are using “£10 Touts” - young people being used as low-level informants. This view means that when young people are arrested, it is assumed that they are giving information, therefore when they are shot or beaten, it is seen as retribution for their ‘touting’ and/or other activities. Because of the lack of any kind of due process it is impossible for anyone to know what actually is going on, so the practice is fed by rumours and counter-rumours.

These perceptions - whether well-grounded or not - need to be taken very seriously by the PSNI if it is to build community confidence in policing. In particular, local discussions need to happen about what ‘effective community policing’ looks like in practice. Communities also face a significant challenge - if there is to be effective community policing, then giving information to the police about local crime should be seen as part of the role of a good citizen - not a betrayal of the community itself.

There need to be wider discussions about these attacks and responses to crime in the area and the needs of local young people. Although some in communities provide unequivocal support for these attacks (indeed some say they should go much further),



⁶ This intelligence gathering may be being done by other state agents, but the perception is that certain criminals are protected from prosecution - and this perception is doing huge damage to the reputation and credibility of the PSNI in these areas.

there tends to be a more nuanced range of views and a culture of fear around speaking out about these human rights abuses. There seems to be little understanding of the complex needs of many of the young people who are shot, beaten or excluded from their areas, and even less sympathy for them.

Listening to local stories, I was struck by the amount of trauma that surround this practice. For example, many of those who become the subjects of the attacks are already traumatised through other life experiences. They are then traumatised further by the attacks and their consequences. Those carrying out the attacks must also experience trauma. I have also been told repeatedly about young children witnessing the immediate aftermath of shootings - traumatising the wider community and a new generation. Approaches to dealing with the attacks must take trauma into account - and ensure that all involved are given adequate support to deal with the impact of what they have experienced or witnessed. One young youth worker recounted her experience of being first on the scene of a brutal gun attack, where the victim was in agony and had four open wounds in his knees and ankles. She had clearly found it a traumatic and highly stressful experience.

The perpetrators of the attacks are often involved in the same kinds of crimes that they accuse their victims of. For example, in a number of areas members of paramilitary gangs are selling drugs to young people for onward distribution, and then 'taxed' on those sales. Some of the attacks are due to young people not paying this tax - which can happen easily when they become addicted to the substances they are selling. In loyalist areas I was told repeatedly that the view was that many of the attacks were due to 'internal issues' within and between paramilitary groups. Although the level of these attacks is even higher than the numbers for shootings, they go un-reported by the media.

From area to area the issues are different. In some areas for example there are multiple paramilitary factions - struggling for supremacy and resources. In other areas (notably Sandy Row) the community have been able to get the paramilitaries to stop attacks and to allow community workers to help resolve issues around local crime, largely due to the relative age of local paramilitary leaders who want to move off the stage. For these reasons, it will be necessary to develop bespoke responses to ending these attacks, based

on the local realities. However in all areas, the youth worker (or community worker) was a key person in helping to protect young people and to intervene and try to help them develop more constructive ways of living in the community. It would also make sense to build services around the adults that the victims of these attacks trust, and to link projects, creating a forum to discuss practice and lessons learnt.

Wider Issues

It is vital that we start to change the language around these attacks and the impact on their victims. 'Punishment Beating/Shooting' is often the term used by members of the local communities and sometimes politicians. The PSNI use the language of 'paramilitary-style attack' – often accompanied by the statement that 'the injuries are not life-threatening'. This language is simply repeated by the media. For people reading these reports they may assume that the attacks were in some way justifiable, and may also assume that the consequences are not significant. While few attacks result in life-threatening injuries, they are often life-changing. Both the Police and the media have a responsibility to communicate these consequences more accurately and in ways which diminish support for this practice⁷.

We need to challenge the 'societal shrug' around this issue, by bringing together key agencies⁸ to work on multi-systemic approaches to address these issues, centred around the young people and trusted adults. There needs to be a long-term strategy to address this problem and its consequences – and this needs to be properly resourced⁹.

There is a need to quickly develop innovative approaches to addressing this issue at local level. Many of the locals I have spoken to have good ideas (a youth work centred restorative approach is one example) – and need resources to work on the issue which is often time intensive. These should be done as high-risk experimental projects to test a

⁷ In recent weeks the PSNI have started to use stronger language in relation to the attacks and there appears to have been a reaction from the media who are giving the attacks more coverage.

⁸ See appendix 1 for wider explanation

⁹ The Fresh Start Panel report cites a PSNI figure of £297 million (27% of their total budget) going into 'policing the security situation'. A tiny fraction of this amount could help to transform this problem, particularly if statutory agencies (HPA, DPP, PSNI, Education Service etc) apply some of their existing resources in support of locally based activity.

range of different models quickly. There needs to be community ownership of these projects rather than imposing models from elsewhere, and the workers need to be adequately resourced and supported – including helping them to deal with their own trauma.

Policing:

For people in communities the “lack of effective community policing” is a very significant issue. This perception is the main reason why many people turn to the paramilitaries in the first place, and I heard this everywhere I went. It would be useful to have a series of meaningful conversations between the PSNI and local communities on what effective community policing would look like, and how it is achievable within current resources. For example, there is often little understanding of the operational restraints on the PSNI and their requirements under human rights legislation at the local level. Equally there may be very little appreciation amongst serving officers in these communities of the issues that young people, youth workers and others face.



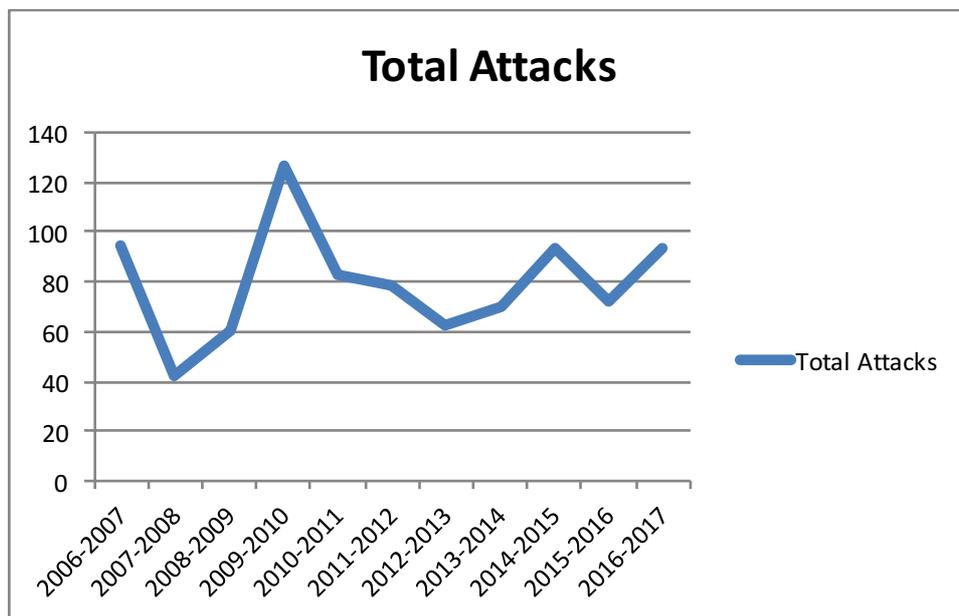
The more serious and difficult issue is the belief in the “£10 Tout” mentioned above. Again this is something I heard in every community. All the youth workers I spoke to believe that it is important to work with the police and to build young people’s confidence in policing - but most of them also had concrete examples of when they felt the police operated in ways that left young people vulnerable to the exploitation and violence of these groups.

It would be helpful if the PSNI could immediately start using different language when reporting these attacks. In particular they should highlight when children are being attacked, and they should help the media to understand that these attacks have significant consequences for their victims. A wider strategy should help ensure that the PSNI work more closely with the media in the reporting of these abuses and their consequences.

DPP and the Courts:

Another significant issue for communities is the pace of the justice system. Even where members of the community report crimes to the police and the alleged perpetrators are questioned and/or charged, they are likely to be back in the community very quickly and it may take many months for the case to go to court. If this person is continuing to offend against the community then the frustration of neighbours is hugely increased, and their belief that our justice system is ineffective is compounded.

There are many good examples around the world¹⁰ of community based court systems, that can help build the confidence of communities in the justice system and also help to restore the damage that has been done to the local neighbourhood. Such models could be hugely effective in helping to develop diversionary and restorative approaches to crime at local level, and would build on the strong record of restorative practice in Northern Ireland through organisations like Northern Ireland Alternatives, Community Restorative Justice Ireland and others.



¹⁰ See for example the work of the US based 'Center for Court Innovation' and their Community Justice Centre in Red Hook, Brooklyn <http://www.courtinnovation.org/project/red-hook-community-justice-center> or the anti-violence and youth court programmes in Brownsville <http://www.courtinnovation.org/project/brownsville-community-justice-center>. Much closer to home, the Gardai have a Youth Diversion programme which has significantly reduced rates of incarceration and recidivism amongst young people in the Irish Republic <http://www.iyjs.ie/en/IYJS/Pages/GardaDiversionProgramme>

Recommendations and Next Steps

We need to have better public discourse around this issue in all its complexity. This includes holding public agencies to account for their action and inaction - and creating **multi-agency and multi-systemic approaches** to ending this practice. This dialogue should happen with the active involvement of local communities and the young people who live there.

It would be useful to re-frame much of the thinking around this problem and develop a **trauma-centred approach**. Instead of seeing young people as criminals and anti-social elements within the community, we should examine what has happened to that young person and to the wider community (including those carrying out these attacks) through the lens of trauma. New kinds of services can be designed which help change the outcomes for this group, and can also help to change how the community sees these young people. These services should see young people in terms of their capacity and potential, not in terms of deficit models, and should help to ensure that young people can be healthy, productive and valued citizens of their communities.

In any new approaches, there should be a **significant involvement of young people¹¹ in design, implementation and evaluation of projects**. They should be long-term¹², properly resourced and centred around young people and those they trust - particularly local youth clubs. These projects would also need to be flexible¹³ and responsive to the local context. Committing resources through the local youth clubs can help to secure these valuable resources, retain committed and skilled staff and further build their capacity.

There is a need for ongoing research on the scale and impact of these attacks and the wider culture of exclusion and threat. It would be useful to have a **steering group¹⁴** that can

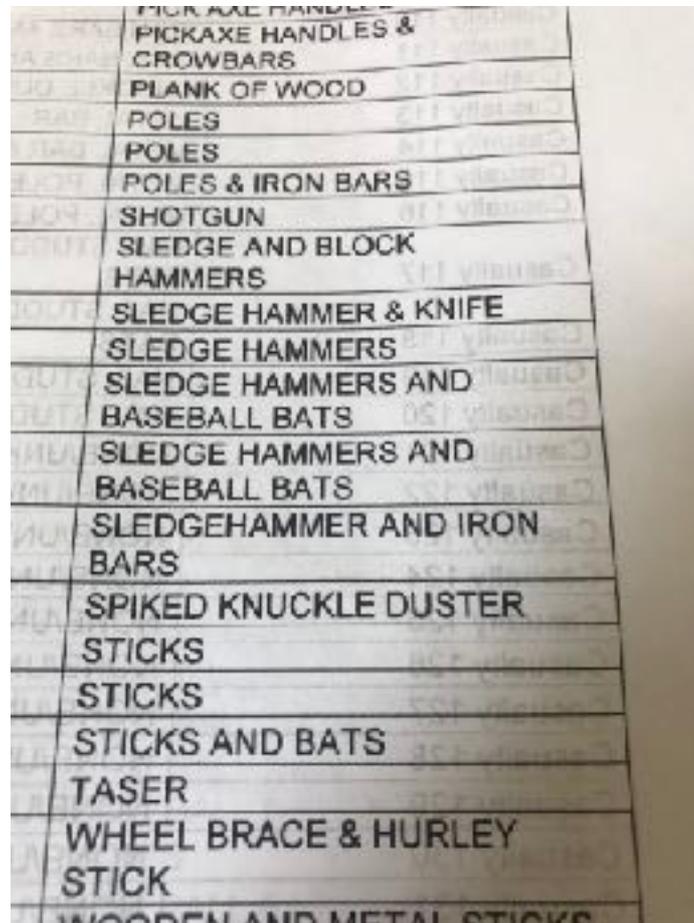
¹¹ Including young people who have been threatened and attacked

¹² Given the history of this problem, it may take well over a decade to see significant change, and resources should be committed with this in mind.

¹³ This flexibility will need to include a **risk taking** approach to funding projects - and can be best achieved through a mixture of public and private philanthropic funds.

¹⁴ Any such group should include youth work practitioners and young people from the communities affected

monitor this issue, evaluate the efficacy of any approaches developed, hold policy makers to account, and promote effective practice.



Just some of the weapons used in paramilitary beatings. (Source, PSNI)

Appendix I: Stop Attacks – Beyond the ‘Societal Shrug’

Paramilitary attacks – often referred to as ‘punishment shootings’ or ‘punishment beatings’ are a legacy issue from our former conflict, blighting many of our most disadvantaged communities. They are seen by many as a form of community based ‘justice’ – dealt to those who are accused of having offended against the community and carried out by remnants of the Loyalist paramilitaries, or the new paramilitary factions within the Republican community. They are also an effective mechanism for paramilitary groups to retain their grip on communities, through a culture of fear and intimidation.

These attacks are happening at a rate of one to two per week, and are primarily (though not exclusively) shootings (to the knees, elbows and/or ankles) in the Republican community, and beatings with a variety of cudgels in the Loyalist community. In the past 3 years there have been 262 such attacks, and nearly half (111) were against young people aged under 25 years. At least 5 were against children, including 3 already this year. For every attack on a young person, there are dozens of ‘exclusions’ – where children are forced to leave their communities for their own safety. They are almost exclusively against men, though there have been 9 attacks against women over this period.

While the shootings are normally given a brief mention in the media – ‘paramilitary style attack, injuries not life-threatening’ – the beatings go largely un-noticed except to their victims, the perpetrators and those who have demanded the attack. This is in spite of the beatings being the larger number of attacks (181 out of the 262).

There is little media interest in these attacks, and politicians issue condemnations, but have yet to develop any coherent strategy to eliminate this problem. Police clearance rates are extremely low (below 4%) as both victims and other members of the community are unwilling or too frightened to pass information about the perpetrators. We have not to date seen strong leadership on this issue from church leaders, or indeed other strands of civil society. It is an enormous human rights abuse, and perpetuates trauma in our communities, both among the victims and their families, and also among those carrying out these attacks.

We are a group of youth workers, academics and other activists, who have come together to try to develop robust and long-term strategies to eliminate this vile practice, and to build trust in our policing and justice systems. Dealing with these issues comprehensively will require massive effort by a wide range of agencies and sectors, and there is scant evidence at present that there is any desire to take this on.

We know that many of those attacked were already broken. They often have mental health or addiction issues (often these are inter-related) and come from hugely unstable family environments. We should be wrapping services around these people, not shooting them! We have also seen evidence that the attacks are used to ‘blood’ new recruits to organisations – building another level of trauma among the perpetrators.

Local youth workers are often the only adult that the victims of these attacks and threats trust. They often stand as a buffer between the attackers and their victims, displaying colossal courage and integrity. However, many of those posts are currently vulnerable to funding cuts, and local youth clubs are having to reduce their provision in the face of shrinking budgets.

In the current political vacuum this is acutely dangerous. We believe we are witnessing an upsurge in these attacks – and that any prolonged delay on re-establishing local government will play into the hands of groups who seek to destabilise our society and increase their criminal activities.

As a start to addressing this issue, we suggest the following:

- An immediate release of additional resources to front-line youth services to support vulnerable young people. Including the development of high-risk pilot projects to address this issue in terms of new approaches to working with young people, new ways of creating dialogue in local communities, and new locally based innovations around community based justice processes.
- The resourcing of a two-day (minimum) seminar to pull together all the available information about this problem and any existing responses to it, and to develop multi-systemic and proactive responses to it that are victim centred, and which acknowledge the complexity of challenges in building community support for our systems of policing and justice. This should lead to a periodic series of follow up events to share good practice and talk about what is being learned. There should be senior level commitment to addressing this issue demonstrated within
 - the PSNI,
 - the Justice agencies, including the Youth Justice Agency, Probation and the PPS
 - the Health Service (including mental health services),
 - Education (including youth services within EA)
 - The Department of Communities
 - Civil society actors – including the commissioners for Human Rights, and Children and Young People
- Change to the language used by the PSNI, the media and others when reporting these crimes. We need to change the nature of public discourse on this issue, and a good place to start is with the language used. These are gross human rights abuses, and the injuries are often life-changing even if they are not life threatening.

The Stop Attacks Forum – April 2017

Appendix II: Interviewees

I am grateful to the following people for their assistance with this project and for helping to deepen my understanding of the issues involved.

Keith McCaugherty and staff, Holy Trinity Youth Centre, Belfast

Stephen Hughes and staff, St Peter's Youth Centre, Belfast

Michelle Fullerton, Ledley Hall Youth Centre, Belfast

Stevie Mallet, St Mary's Youth Centre, Creggan, Derry.

Pete Wray, East Belfast Alternatives

Glenda Davies, Sandy Row Community Centre

Father Martin Magill

Jim Deeds

Brian McKee

Dr Duncan Morrow

Tim Mairs and colleagues, PSNI

Siobhan McAlister, QUB

"Jacko"

The members of the **2017 Ambit**¹⁵ programme to the USA for allowing me to pick their brains while we were away, March 2017.

¹⁵ Ambit is a programme of the International Fund for Ireland