

# Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

## RESEARCH UPDATE

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### Social Activity and Interaction in Northern Ireland

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#### Introduction

The term *social capital* has become increasingly important in the vocabulary of centrist politics, urban regeneration and community development. Robert Putnam (2000) argued that Americans have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends and neighbours and social structure, and that the shrinking stock of social capital is a consequent threat to personal, civic and economic health. For Putnam, the term 'social capital' refers to the social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from their maintenance and development. The appeal of the concept and its overtones of community, communitarianism, empowerment and stake holding has had a powerful effect on New Labour ideology, as well as on local policies on the EU Structural Funds, the development of the voluntary sector and the promotion of the social economy.

Large scale audits of social capital and survey-based accounts of its depletion underpin much of Putnam's work, and campaigning organisations such as Better Together USA have gathered wide ranging statistical audits of social capital accumulation across major American cities.

In 2000, the Life and Times Survey attempted to measure social capital activity in the routines of daily activity in Northern Ireland. Empirically, it draws on some of the methods developed by Putnam and the Better Together Project, but seeks to understand behaviour, as well as opinion, in the particular constraints of society in Northern Ireland. The survey measured respondents' involvement in 46 activities, which have been grouped into the four categories of social, sporting, church and club and society membership.

#### Activity and space

Table 1 details the number of activities measured under each category and shows that, far from being residual phenomena, social engagement and interaction characterise a range of activities and sectors. The issues are whether these patterns have declined or increased over time and how this has been shaped by the distinctive socio-political character of Northern Ireland. However, regional comparisons are healthy. For example, in Britain, 21% of respondents to the 1998 British Social Attitudes Survey were members of a sports or cultural association (Johnston and Jowell, 1999), compared with the 28% who are involved in sports clubs in Northern Ireland.

Table 1: Activity by category

Category	Number of activities	% of respondents participating
Social activity	6	86
Sports clubs	15	28
Church centred	10	13
Clubs and societies	15	20

Table 2 summarises participation by religion for some of the key activities measured. Catholics were proportionately more likely to go out for a drink than Protestants, while the reverse was true for going out for a meal. In addition, Protestants were more active in sports (28%) than Catholics (25%), and Protestants (17%) were also more than twice as likely to engage in church or religion based activities than Catholics (8%). Much of this challenges simplistic notions about the relative strengths of Catholic community infrastructure and capacity for self-organisation compared with Protestants

**Table 2: Activity by religion**

Activity	%		
	Prot	Cath	All
Visit a friend in their home	86	86	86
Go out for a meal	79	74	77
Do the weekly shopping	76	76	77
Out for a drink	62	70	67
Go to the cinema	37	40	39
Go to a play or concert	28	29	29

Table 3 also shows that a considerable level of activity also happens in a mixed religion environment. A total of 20% of Catholics and 21% of Protestants were members of clubs and societies. Sixty one percent of Protestants and 70% of Catholics conduct club and society activity in an integrated setting. Again, this suggests that the assumptions we make about sustained levels of segregation and exclusivity may not be totally valid. But mixing is selective in terms of the activity, social class and geographic area.

**Table 3: Activity in clubs and societies by religion of membersip**

Religion	%				
	Take part	Membership of club or society			
		Mainly Cath	Mainly Prot	Mixed	DK
Catholic	20	27	3	70	0
Protestant	21	0	30	61	9

For example, Table 4 shows that most people who go for a meal or to a play or concert do so away from their neighbourhood, and in a mixed religion environment. Increasingly, the regeneration of Belfast is being shaped by selective consumption opportunities in the city centre, the string of riverside restaurants and bars and in new, highly priced ice hockey and multi-media playgrounds in the former docks. New identities are being formed and reproduced around lifestyle, income and consumptive opportunities that are less bound to traditional notions of ethno-religious identity in Northern Ireland. Increasingly, these are worked out spatially in suburban and apartment developments, but more especially in the service economy of the 'new' city.

**Table 4: Social activity by environment**

Activity	%		
	Take part	Own n'hood	Mixed religion
Visit a friend in their home	86	35	48
Go out for a meal	77	25	63
Do the weekly shopping	77	55	63
Go for a drink	67	38	58
Go to the cinema	39	38	66
Go to a play or concert	29	15	72

Table 5 profiles social activity by social class, and suggests that people in the higher socio-economic categories are more likely to go to a play, concert or to the cinema compared to both lower socio-economic groups and the population as a whole. For example, 37% of people who go to a play or concerts are from the top two socio-economic group categories compared with 21% from the bottom two groups.

**Table 5: Social activity by social class**

Social Group	%			
	Play or concert	Out for a drink	Cinema	Total pop
Professional	5	4	4	3
Manager	32	22	25	21
Skilled non-manual	30	24	31	23
Skilled manual	10	17	12	18
Partly skilled	17	22	21	21
Unskilled	4	10	5	11
Not known	2	2	1	3

The social class patterning of a range of social activities and lifestyle preferences is not especially surprising, but read within the context of the urban renaissance of Belfast and other centres, it raises questions about the selective nature of the opportunities now being produced and sub-vented by the planners and urban managers. Table 6 plots the relationship between activity and territory and distinguishes between activities shaped by economic interests that are externally orientated, and some sporting pursuits that have a more local character. The table identifies the mixed clientele and location of activity around professional organisations as well as golfing. Bowling clubs, soccer and in particular Gaelic games are more likely to be conducted locally, in segregated places and where the opportunities for mixing tend to be lower.

**Table 6: Activity profile for key activities**

Activity	%				
	Take part	Within neighbourhood	Carried out in a mixed area	Go through out-group area	Mixed religion membership
Professional organisation	3	14	66	45	89
Bowling club	3	53	47	64	41
Golf	6	40	79	27	81
Keep Fit	6	61	57	33	69
Soccer	4	55	37	31	42
GAA	2	65	15	29	3

The analysis also highlights the effects of ethno-religious segregation on mobility patterns and fear in the conduct of even the most routine activities in daily life. A total of 4% of the adult population played soccer and of these, 55% played within their own neighbourhood. Over one-third played in a mixed-religion setting and 31% had to go through an area populated by members of the other religion. Clearly, the cumulative layering of these activities suggests that segregation and territoriality have an important effect on the way in which social capital is constructed, used and reproduced.

This also raises questions about the scope and content of community relations activity in Northern Ireland. Putnam draws a distinction between *bonding* social capital designed to build in-group solidarity and capacity and *bridging* social capital that has a more external focus and is best placed to produce trust, reciprocity and mutual understanding. ‘Single identity’ work in a Northern Ireland context is designed to build community confidence to a stage where cross-community contact and reconciliation can be attempted at some point in the future. Yet this is a spurious and uncertain connection, and there is little in the way of significant empirical evidence to suggest that this happens in practice. In short, the assumption that bonding capital sets the context or prepares the way for bridging capital in Northern Ireland needs to be more thoroughly interrogated. Bonding identities through single identity work contains the danger that exclusive, imagined or politically convenient identities can be reinforced thus minimising, not reinforcing, the chances for bridging or integration.

Given the self-contained and exclusive nature of much of the activity measured here, the potential to deepen exclusive social capital networks through community relations practice is a very real one. This does not suggest that community development, infrastructure and capacity building are not vital especially given the social turn in a range of urban programmes, housing management and planning policies. The point is that limited community

relations resources should be directed at a range of activities likely to create, reproduce or deepen a denser network of bridging social capital which is harder to do, has a high resistance factor and is much more difficult to maintain in any meaningful way. Building these social networks outside a limited set of activities, social class or geographic areas is the vital challenge for community relations in Northern Ireland’s transition from conflict to uncertain and unpredictable peace.

#### **Who participates and who does not**

Thus, religious cleavages and spatial opportunity are only part of the matrix of variables that determine the configuration of social capital and interaction in Northern Ireland. The data suggest that people active in clubs and societies are more likely to come from the higher than the lower socio-economic categories. For example, 8% of people active in clubs and societies were ‘professional’, although this group comprises 4% of the population. Only 6% of active people were ‘unskilled’, despite the fact that they comprise 11% of the population overall.

Similarly, activity in clubs and societies tends to be highest among people aged between 35 and 65. For instance, 22% of people active in clubs and societies were aged between 35 and 44, although this age cohort comprises 19% of the population. Activity tended to be lower among the younger and older age category extremes: although 13% of the population is aged 18-24, they comprise 9% of people participating in these activities.

#### **Conclusions**

This brief review of some of the headline data resulting from the Life and Times Survey highlights a number of points about the nature of social interaction in Northern Ireland.

The stock of social capital in the region is widely distributed and in some sectors intensively developed. The analysis also showed that Protestants are more likely to join clubs, societies and church based activities than Catholics.

Residential segregation has an important effect on the way in which social capital is constructed and reproduced. However, despite the anxiety at crossing the territory of the out-group a high proportion of activity is conducted in mixed religion settings. But integration tends to be acted out in selective areas, activities, social classes and age groups. The data questions the validity of single identity work that bonds in-group cohesion without reaching out to other or competing identities. The challenge for community relations work is to build cross-cutting understanding, networks and trust in areas and among groups where the stock of social capital is weak.

*The Life and Times Survey involved face to face interviews with a random and representative sample of 1800 adults in their own homes. Figures do not always add up to 100 because of rounding. Brendan Murtagh is a Reader in the School of Environmental Planning, Queen's University Belfast.*

### References

Johnston, Michael and Jowell, Roger (1999) 'Social capital and the social fabric' in Roger Jowell, John Curtice, Alison Park and Katarina Thomson, *British Social Attitudes: the 16<sup>th</sup> Report*, Aldershot: Ashgate

Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

### KEY POINTS

- The stock of social capital in Northern Ireland is widely distributed, and intensively developed for some activities.
- Protestants are more likely to join clubs, societies and church based activities than Catholics.
- Residential segregation has an important effect on the way in which social capital is constructed and reproduced. However, a high proportion of activity is conducted in mixed religion settings.
- Integration tends to take place in selective areas, activities, social classes and age groups.
- The results question the validity of single identity work that bonds in-group cohesion, without reaching out to other, or competing, identities.
- The challenge for community relations work is to build cross-cutting networks and trust in areas, and among groups, where the stock of social capital is weak.

The *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2000, 1800 adults were interviewed on the main survey and 259 young people on the accompanying Young Life and Times Survey. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The *Life and Times Survey* is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey directors on 028 9027 3034 with any queries.