ARK Working Papers

Understanding the persistence of armed/paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland

Brendan Sturgeon, Duncan Morrow, Lucy Geddes, Dominic Bryan, Siobhán McAlister,
Claire Hazelden and Peter Sheridan

The authors of this paper have spent many years working on peace building in Northern Ireland. The document is our attempt to provide a simple way of understanding a set of complex social practices. We hope that it adds to the discission on how we further ensure and sustain positive peace.

We have drawn on our collective knowledge to identify what we believe are the three main features that define paramilitary/armed groups in contemporary Northern Ireland – Legitimacy, Utility and Threat. These key features are consistent, although they have manifested differently over time. It is our view that their existence goes some way to explaining the persistence of paramilitary/armed groups in the region.

Introduction

Despite measurable political and social change in Northern Ireland (NI) since the Peace Agreement of 1998, the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) has indicated that the presence and activity of armed/paramilitary groups in some areas throughout the region remains 'enduring' and 'significant'. In 2022, the IRC observed that while 'paramilitary groups' have little or no direct impact in many areas, there are also places where their influence and presence remain 'visible' and 'powerful'. In these instances, the Commission indicated that the groups remain 'embedded' in certain sites. In areas of this kind, they are also 'part of the routine fabric of daily life'.

The continued presence and impact of these groups is evidenced through data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey. In 2023, 18 per cent of respondents agreed that paramilitary groups 'create fear and intimidation' in their area, and 15 per cent agreed that these groups have a 'controlling influence' in their area (ARK, 2024). Over one-quarter of respondents (27%) also agreed that 'paramilitary groups contribute to crime, drug-dealing and anti-social behaviour' in their area. While relatively few respondents felt that paramilitary groups kept their area safe (3%), there was a significant drop in confidence in the capacity of the police. In 2017, 54 per cent of respondents agreed that the police kept their area safe, whereas in 2023, only 32 per cent felt this way. This snapshot, at least in part, demonstrates some of the challenges that remain.

The sustained presence and activity of paramilitary groups poses both practical and analytical challenges in post-conflict Northern Ireland. The practical consequences of the continuing existence of these groups are relatively obvious. The criminal justice system and local media regularly report on so-called paramilitary style assaults (sometimes referred to as 'punishment attacks')[1], gang-related drug dealing, attacks on police officers and national security related issues, linked to paramilitary groups.

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[1] Historically, these were widely referred to as 'punishment' attacks. In recent years, a concerted effort has been made to move away from this language, but colloquially both terms are used.

The related economic costs, both in distorting local economies and in deterring wider investment are less visible, but if we account for the sustained divisions that exist across Northern Ireland and the persistent correlation of the presence of these groups and poverty, there can be little doubt that they are considerable.

Related *analytical* issues are also hugely problematic. Crucially, the language and terminology of 'paramilitarism' has become impossibly imprecise. In our experience, the term 'paramilitary' is currently applied only to and by Loyalists, and it is never used as a self-description by Republican groups. In the hands of the state the term is sometimes used as a generic synonym for organised non-state 'terrorism', by both Loyalist and Republican groups.

Any assessment of the groups will inevitably depend on (and be measured by) which definition is applied. For this reason, we have sometimes preferred the term 'armed groups' to encapsulate the wider issue of the legacy of non-state armed activity in the history, institutions and culture of Northern Ireland.

Understanding the problem

Importantly, there has been a 'hollowing out' of any clear behavioural or ideological 'meaning' to paramilitarism. Violent armed group activity re-emerged in the 1960s and 70s in Northern Ireland as part of explicitly political campaigns, but a subsequent decline in violence directed against defined external 'enemies' of each community since 1998 has left a residue of criminality and coercive control in the very communities the organisations claim to defend. The uncoordinated and politically differentiated nature of this mutation from organisations profiled as violent actors in politics into groups defined by coercive or criminal behaviour has, in our view outpaced the evolution of public discourse. Furthermore, while the IRC, among other key stakeholders, has indicated that the groups remain 'a clear and present threat in Northern Ireland' (IRC, 2023), the nature and intensity of that presence varies enormously by location and leadership. Too much of the narrative about 'paramilitarism' is nonetheless still conducted at a level of generality, which obscures its complex, organic and changing nature in communities, leading to a debate that is at times characterised by sensationalism, cliche and generality. This context makes it challenging to both shape policy and to deliver effective interventions.

Framing the problem

At the outset, we recognise there is a large existing collection of varied and valuable studies dedicated to the examination of the post-conflict nature of Northern Ireland and the associated continued presence of paramilitary/armed groups.

There have been detailed (and disturbing) accounts (Radden Keefe, 2019) of how some armed groups have brutalised, tormented, and victimised members of 'their own' community, despite a general reduction in cross-community violence throughout the region. Other studies have chronicled the history and respective journeys of individual groups (English, 2012; Crawford, 1999) and some have documented the significant extent to which these groups have controlled, and continue to control, areas where they traditionally had strong support (even if that support has gradually declined over time). Some of these works have produced important analyses that present Northern Ireland as existing in a form of 'everyday' peace (Mac Ginty, 2021), within an 'unfinished' society (Rowan, 2015) still grappling with the idea of sharing space and identity (Dixon et al., 2022).

The scale of what we 'know' about armed and paramilitary groups is significant and continuously growing, as our analysis evolves. What is clear from all of this work is that very few of these groups have 'disappeared', or unilaterally disbanded. More often than not, each has 'mutated' or 'morphed' in different ways in the changed political circumstances of post-Agreement Northern Ireland. For example, the path of what was once the 'Provisional IRA' into community activism and politics has been accompanied by the emergence of a variety of smaller militant 'dissident' groups under different internal command routed in specific local and familial loyalties. Other Republican groups have also changed their profile and priorities. Loyalist organisations, generally more decentralised and local in structure, were largely unsuccessful in their efforts to gain a foothold in electoral politics and have evolved in multiple ways in different localities with little evidence of disappearing as active presences in community life. By 2024, any effort to analyse this complex legacy within a 'like for like' binary framework, has become both implausible and even distortionary.

We are also highly likely to systematically underestimate the scale of the problem, due to the following issues:

- Underreporting
- Lack of trust in state (even recognition of state)
- Normalisation of harms
- Hidden harms
- Stifling impact of coercion
- Data collection bias

Origins and purpose of this paper

The origins of this paper lie in decades of empirical research and engagement by the authors on issues of peace and conflict in Northern Ireland. Our primary concern in this work has been to use research, policy, and academic tools to understand and enable change in communities from violence towards a more peaceful society, in which disputes are resolved by exclusively peaceful and democratic means within the principles of human rights and equality, as envisaged in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

More than a quarter of a century since the 1998 Agreement, Northern Ireland has not yet escaped the legacy of community conflict and the cultural 'intuition' that violence remains part of the political language and landscape. As a result, Northern Ireland has been characterised by intermittent government, persistent polarisation over symbolic and cultural issues and violence and threat. While some areas of Northern Ireland are no longer marked by the reminders of political division, others remain dominated by the imagery and the presence and/or legacy of conflict of the organisations most associated with it.

The first coordinated response to paramilitarism and armed groups emerged 18 years after the Agreement: The NI Executive's Action Plan to Tackle Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime. The Programme emerged from the Fresh Start Agreement, itself a response to a political crisis with its genesis in paramilitary-related murders in Belfast in 2015. An assessment of ongoing activity was commissioned by the then Secretary of State for NI and the Action Plan and subsequent programme was developed and jointly funded to deliver a range of interventions.

We are aware of the complexities of definition and understand that programmes designed to address paramilitarism may have been formally approved, but often largely exist without the active engagement of society. Consequently, much of the public narrative around paramilitarism is ambiguous, confusing and often misrepresentative. This also leads to challenges around measuring policy and programme successes and understanding the broader impact of interventions.

This paper seeks to account for only one aspect of these reflections: the persistence of paramilitary and armed groups in communities across Northern Ireland, despite changing political circumstances. It takes the form of a discussion paper, designed to widen rather than narrow debate. We have not yet reached the point where we can firmly define this complex phenomenon, but we consulted with numerous colleagues in public and private to inform our thinking when we were preparing to write this paper. We believe this is a topic that should be considered more widely, and we hope that the content of this paper can help inform and shape the discussion.

The nature of armed and paramilitary group presence in communities in Northern Ireland

Our collective research indicates that armed and paramilitary organisations cannot be reduced to single-issue organisations with a single purpose and rationale. Rather, although they all share a common origin in the inter-community and post-partition conflicts of Northern Ireland, they have evolved as persistent elements in the narrative, history, and institutional structures of many parts of the north of Ireland.

The use of the term 'north of Ireland' indicates in this instance that the groups regularly trace origins to a conflict with roots beyond the existence of Northern Ireland itself, although in their modern form they are all decisively marked by their prominent place in the conflict that dominated Northern Ireland between 1969-1998, often referred to as 'the Troubles'. Over a period of three decades, the activity of paramilitary organisations dominated most urban (and some rural) areas of public housing, leading to whole districts self-identifying as either 'Loyalist' or 'Republican', which in many cases continues to this day. This binary format has directly influenced the nature of the housing market and the design of the education system throughout the region.

Our collective experience has led us to question the current lens through which the continued existence of paramilitary and armed groups is viewed. Instead, we propose that these phenomena can be better understood by exploring three intersecting factors:

a. **Legitimacy:** Violence in pursuit of a political cause and/or in defence of a community against external 'enemies' has a centuries-long pedigree in Ireland. Armed and paramilitary activity in Ireland, and specifically in Northern Ireland has always drawn legitimacy from this tradition. The narrative, visual representation, annual rituals and ideology of the organisations is traced back to the legitimacy of 'cause', which is invariably described in terms of national identity, structured along lines of historic religious identity and practically shaped by class and locality. In Weberian terms, the legitimacy of the leadership of armed groups has been rooted in ideological claims to represent a just cause (legal-rational), in historic association with prior generations (historic/traditional) and in the charismatic claims of individuals (charismatic/personal). The legitimacy of the group is established in their repeated association with this tradition and cause, evidenced in:

    *   Commemoration
    *   Flagging and control of symbolic landscape
    *   Memory and storytelling

Although formally illegal, paramilitary and armed groups have tacit, informal and, sometimes, formal recognition as organisations with internal bureaucracy and imprecise boundaries. Their ranks and hierarchies are implicitly and explicitly recognised, and they are 'consulted' in regular and ad hoc interactions as informed partners in community action by politicians, community representatives, statutory agencies, journalists, and academics. Whether these interactions have been 'direct' or 'through intermediaries' has varied over time; however, the boundary between armed and paramilitary groups, community organisations established for a variety of other purposes and community members is imprecise and varies by geography, purposes, and time. Critically, it extends into families and inter-personal relationships in ways which are complex, difficult to define and widespread.

b. **Utility:** The existence of a locally present bureaucracy with a devolved existence in local communities makes armed and paramilitary groups a prominent presence in many areas. After decades of politically legitimatised violence, armed and paramilitary groups are not in any way exceptional in many communities, but part of the developed infrastructure of 'normal' political life. Either directly (or through community co-ordinations), armed and paramilitary groups influence the collective and personal lives of all those living in the territories within their reach. This extends beyond 'welfare' of identified members to the provision of 'services', both legal and illegal, which present themselves as the most efficient and effective ways to 'get things done', in often poor and marginalised communities. The boundary between armed and unarmed community leadership is largely porous with activists and promoters of armed groups integrated into the community infrastructures. Ex-activists, including those who have spent time in prison, are part of this bridge. The tacit, unelected legitimacy of these practices, the 'normality' of the porous interface and the practical effectiveness all contribute to both the implicit 'value' of armed and paramilitary groups in communities and the identity of the community. Among the 'services' provided or supported by armed and paramilitary groups are (inter alia):

    *   Political leverage and advocacy
    *   Cultural protection and voice
    *   Alternative justice mechanisms, including 'tackling' anti-social behaviour
    *   'Simplified access' to goods and services
    *   Community leadership and linking social capital
    *   Community 'policing'
    *   Status and social capital
    *   Illegal money lending
    *   Drugs – supply
    *   Informal 'employment'

c. **Threat:** Beyond 'embedded toleration' and even active support for armed group or paramilitary activity and presence, groups in some parts of Northern Ireland appear to be able to maintain a degree of control of community activity and resource allocation in their area, through the application of threat or use of violent coercive means. The nature and levers of this type of coercive control vary from place to place. The range of tools available to groups and their value in specific local circumstances differs, but are often economic, exploitative and/or violent in nature. There are persistent allegations of association with illegal and prescription drugs. What data exists in this area is, by its nature, very difficult to verify. Yet while we have made no complete map of this activity, it is the subject of repeated allegation and anecdote as well as police and media information. We have all also routinely encountered examples of this activity in our own work.

Among the mechanisms of control available to armed and paramilitary groups are:

- Gatekeeping of community assets and resources
- Paramilitary style attacks
- Ongoing 'recruitment', sometimes through grooming or coercive means
- Child criminal exploitation (sometimes erroneously described as 'recruitment')
- Child sexual exploitation
- Sexual exploitation of adults (specifically women)
- Trafficking
- Drug supply and the manipulation of drug debt
- Illegal money lending
- Intimidation
- Coercive control of relationships with public agencies, including the police and housing bodies
- Continued access to weapons
- Attacks on competitors in illicit economies
- 'Power to expel' and control residency in some areas
- Extortion of local businesses

In our experience, the nature of paramilitarism and armed groups exhibits elements of all three of these categories, albeit in different combinations. Crucially, tackling paramilitarism requires strategies that address ALL of these inter-related and changing aspects.

Projecting a model

By considering variations in legitimacy, service utility and threat we can begin to map changes to different groups, and elements of groups over time. Our hope is that this will help to inform future policy, interventions, and investments.

Figure 1 is a visual of the three key factors outlined above. Achieving a detailed understanding of these factors (through robust data collection and analysis) would enable the creation of a model with even more functionality. It would be possible to see the extent of each in relation to the other, for example if a group has more threat than legitimacy.

Figure 1:
Factors explaining endurance of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland

For now, even without that detailed understanding, it is possible to see that this model has potential. When one category is removed, it is possible to see different types of paramilitary/armed group, each requiring different analysis and a different combination of responses.
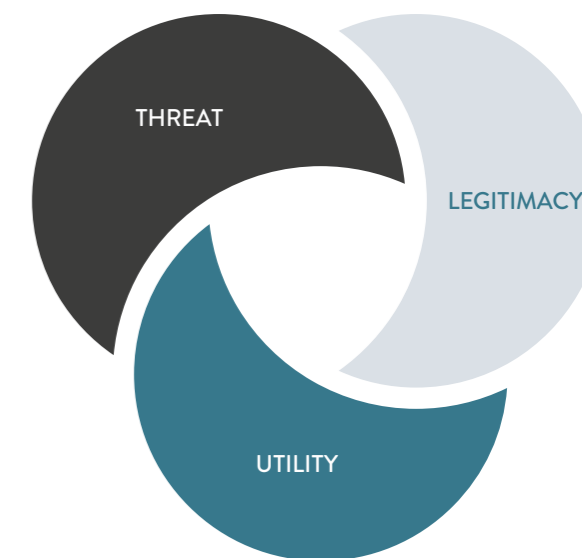

THREAT · LEGITIMACY · UTILITY

Figure 2:
Residual legitimacy and extant threat

For instance, in Figure 2 when we remove the category of utility, paramilitary and armed groups can be characterised as organisations relying on coercive control, via the credible threat of violence.

THREAT · LEGITIMACY

Figure 3:
Service utility and residual legitimacy

In Figure 3, when we remove the category of threat, we reduce the associated risk and change the approaches, policy and interventions required to address service gaps and residual legitimacy. Indeed, a group which has abandoned coercive control, but is providing services while drawing on political legitimacy may be close to being a community development agency.
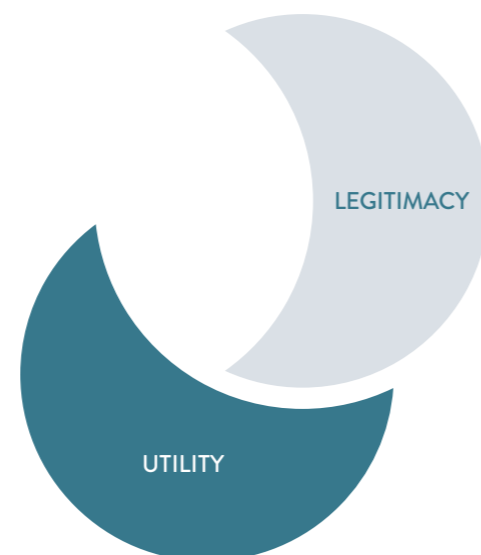

LEGITIMACY

UTILITY

Figure 4:
Service utility and extant threat

When we remove the concept of legitimacy from the model, as in Figure 4, the associated group resembles an organised crime gang. This type of paramilitary/armed group poses considerable threat to the areas where it is active. A group of this kind has also often penetrated service utility for criminal enterprise.

THREAT

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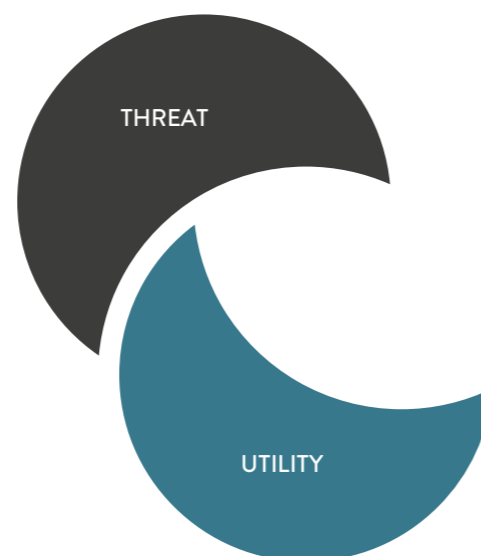
Conclusion

It is important to recognise that armed and paramilitary groups are not a single entity, but are instead a complex phenomenon, which have emerged in Northern Ireland on the boundary of conflict, community resilience and criminality. By framing this within the context of this model, one can begin to understand why 'tackling paramilitarism' is a complex and challenging task. To make matters even more difficult, each element is not static, and they are often influenced by socio-political changes. Even if one element is reduced, it can return again to lesser or greater degrees than before (for example, threat in Figure 3).

We believe this model has multiple practical implications. Crucially, addressing the continued existence of paramilitary and armed groups, as well as the harms they continue to perpetrate, will depend on producing policy and action which deal with a combination of all three factors:

- Removing any form of legitimacy for armed action

- Addressing the perceived 'service deficit' in communities

- Managing out the ability to employ threats to achieve goals.

As a complex rather than a simple phenomenon in communities, any policy to 'tackle paramilitarism' must take this into account. By rethinking what we understand 'paramilitarism' to mean, three broad areas of intervention emerge as interdependent. Change in paramilitarism as a whole will therefore require change in all three dimensions. Firstly, for as long as paramilitaries enjoy substantive political or community legitimacy, change will remain complex, facing both explicit and tacit resistance in practice. Secondly, by acknowledging, however unpalatable, that paramilitary groups are part of the infrastructure of services in some communities – both legal and illegal – any policy response will have to consider how to ensure that services, especially in areas of high deprivation, are not negatively impacted. This applies especially to policing and community development. Finally in relation to coercive control, change implies the development of genuine policing with the community, which can both improve reporting, alongside co-ordinated inter-agency public health interventions that support communities and individuals at risk from paramilitary engagement.

This model is not without its challenges. As stated throughout the paper, we recognise that the framework and behaviour of just one paramilitary group vary by location and leadership. Both matters are also directly influenced by the relevant political and social discourse. That said, this paper provides an insight into the complexities of analysing and addressing these groups in Northern Ireland, especially in developing a much more nuanced and real time picture of how they can be framed, understood and dismantled.

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About the authors

Brendan Sturgeon is Global Research Development Manager at Queen's University Belfast. Previously he was a Research Fellow at the university, during which time he was Research and Lead of the Communities in Transition project (one strand of the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime).

Duncan Morrow is Professor of Politics and Director of Community Engagement in Ulster University. He was previously the CEO of the Ni Community Relations Council.

Lucy Geddes is Head of Policy, Research and Business Services at Co-operation Ireland. She has a background in Peacebuilding and community capacity building, including initiatives to build community resilience to paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime.

Dominic Bryan is Professor of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics at Queen's University Belfast. His work focuses on power and public space. He is interested in how identity is expressed through rituals and symbols in the public sphere and how these activities bond social groups and create conflict.

Siobhán McAlister is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology, and a member of the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University Belfast. Her research focuses on youth conflict, marginalisation and children's rights.

Claire Hazelden is a research analyst for Strategic Investment Board. She has been working on the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime since 2020 at the exciting intersection of policy, practice and academia, with a key focus on violence reduction.

Peter Sheridan CBE is the Commissioner for Investigations for the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (IRCIR). Previously he served as CEO of Cooperation Ireland – a peace building organisation working to address the legacy of the past and promote reconciliation.

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