

# In Northern Ireland, political violence harms youths through families

February 8 2012

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War, the aftermath of war, and political violence are harmful to children's and teens' mental health and well-being. But few studies have looked at how this happens. A new longitudinal study of neighborhoods in Belfast, Northern Ireland, has found that political violence affects children by upsetting the ways their families function, resulting in behavior problems and mental health symptoms among the youths over extended periods of time.

"Our findings suggest that working with families in communities affected by political violence may have long-term benefits for children in those families," according to E. Mark Cummings, professor of psychology at the University of Notre Dame and the study's lead author.

The study, in the journal *Child Development*, was carried out by researchers at the University of Notre Dame, The Catholic University of America, Queen's University Belfast, and the University of Ulster.

Researchers looked at almost 300 families living in segregated, socially deprived neighborhoods in Belfast, neighborhoods that ranked low on measures of income, health, education, proximity to services, crime, and quality of life. Mothers and children filled out surveys annually for three years, addressing such factors as how their families functioned, children's emotional and [behavioral responses](#) to conflict in the home, and how much they knew about antisocial behavior in the community. [Antisocial behavior](#) included, for example, blast bombs or petrol bombs exploded by members of another community or someone beaten up by

people from another community. Researchers also recorded the number of politically motivated deaths in families' neighborhoods as an index of political violence.

The study found a tie between historical levels of political violence, on the one hand, and current reports of conflict and violence in the community. Awareness of community conflict and violence between Catholics and Protestants was related to higher levels of family conflict a year later. Children who experienced [family conflict](#) as a result of [political violence](#) reported greater emotional insecurity about family relationships and those responses were related to more [mental health](#) symptoms and behavior problems over time.

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

Citation: In Northern Ireland, political violence harms youths through families (2012, February 8) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-02-northern-ireland-political-violence-youths.html>

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