

The risks of growing up in interface communities in northern Ireland

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A joint report produced by the University of Liverpool's Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University Belfast and the University of Notre Dame, Indiana released today sheds new light on the risks encountered by young people and children growing up in places of high religious segregation.

Produced for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, a devolved Northern Ireland government department in the Northern Ireland Executive with overall responsibility for the running of the Executive, the report assesses what types of risk affected young people and children growing up in places of high religious segregation or interface communities.

Interface communities are areas in Northern Ireland where segregated nationalist and unionist residential areas share a physical boundary. Within Belfast these are the sites most commonly linked to sectarian violence and social deprivation.

Negative impacts

Within this report the authors looked at a series of risks faced by youth and children linked to that violence, both sectarian and non-sectarian, alcohol and illegal drug use and wider behavioural problems.

It was found that the risk and experiences of harm and violence may

have negative impacts upon development, [emotional well-being](#) and future prospects of youth and children. As such the aim of the report was to gain a better understanding of the types of risk that young people and children encounter to help develop appropriate responses in terms of aiding better personal and community development with regard to health, work, education, fear and prejudice and wider opportunities.

The report found that many young people's lives are negatively affected by risks tied to violence within and between communities, exposure to drink and drugs, conflict within the home, transgenerational exclusion, behaviour problems in school and low aspirations.

Behaviour and attitudes

The research also found that there was a link between those most at risk and their behaviour and attitudes as well as the relationship [young people](#) and children have with their families. The more trust and interaction they had in a family relationship the less likely they would be of engaging in risky behaviour.

Professor Peter Shirlow, Blair Chair and Director of the University's Institute of Irish Studies, said: "What this research shows is that there are links between emotional and [mental well-being](#), and engagement in sectarian and other anti-social behaviours and crime.

"We also observe that those who engage in sectarian behaviour tend to identify much more strongly with being Catholic or Protestant than those who never or rarely engage in such activity. Although youth and children generally experienced the same level of sectarian violence against them their reaction to it was different. Those who had good family relationships were those less likely to respond to those experiences'.

"Therefore what is interesting is that in terms of engaging in anti-social

or sectarian behaviour is the link with mental well-being, youth adjustments problems and crucially family relationships. This would suggest that in terms of tackling issues of risk within interface communities that it is important to assist families to deal with risk, anger, youth adjustment and emotional and mental health issues. This is a departure from other ideas that concern how best to tackle sectarianism in such communities."

Family cohesion

As noted by Dr Clare Dwyer School of Law at Queen's University Belfast: "In the past conflict within and between communities was linked to ideology, experiencing harm and the role of groups in shaping forms of community response to violence.

"What is found here is that the link to identity, sectarianism and violence is related to family cohesion, emotional well-being and levels of risk aversion. This research provides a platform for the development of responses to ensure these risks are eradicated or at the very least diminished."

More information: The full report, entitled 'Growing Up On an Interface: Findings and Implications for the Social Needs, Mental Health and Lifetime Opportunities of Belfast Youth', can be found here once the embargo has lifted: www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/articles/g...esearch-publications

Provided by University of Liverpool

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