

# Caught in crossfire.

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## 'Caught in Crossfire: Children and the Northern Ireland Conflict' by Ed Cairns

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*The following extract is taken from the book:*



## Caught in Crossfire

### Children and the Northern Ireland Conflict

*by Ed Cairns (1987)*

ISBN 0 86281 186 4 Hardback 179pp

(Out of Print)

Published by:

[Appletree Press Ltd](#) {external link}

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*From the back cover:*

Since the start of the current 'troubles' Northern Ireland's children have been the focus of much media attention. Variouslly portrayed as innocent victims of adult violence or unwitting accomplices in the continuing conflict, they have featured widely in the press and on television. But just how accurate is this popular image of children 'caught in crossfire'? Ed Cairns has gone behind the dramatic, headline-snatching consequences of growing up in Northern Ireland to examine the more subtle, long-term effects.

How do children become aware of the violence around them? How do they become involved - directly or indirectly - in it? How is their moral and political development affected by the situation? And what is it that so effectively ensures the perpetuation of the bitterness and violence between the two sections of the community from generation to generation? These and other key questions are investigated in this important book. It is essential reading for everyone concerned about children growing up in Northern Ireland.

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violence or the threat of violence. And unfortunately to the Irish, as Stewart (1977) has so aptly put it, all history is applied history:

. . . that is history they learn at their mother's knee, in school, in books and plays, or radio and television, in songs and ballads. (Stewart, 1977, 16.)

Nevertheless it came as a shock to the people of Northern Ireland — no less to the rest of the watching world — when the media revealed, in the early days of the troubles, that at least some children in Northern Ireland had learned their history lessons only too well and were applying what they had learnt in the streets of Belfast and Derry.

### **Involvement in Violence**

At first this involvement in violence was confined almost exclusively to rioting in one form or another (although as time progressed the 'rioting' became less haphazard and more organised) and headlines such as 'Teenagers attack police in Belfast' or 'Bogside youths clash with British troops' became common. Children were reputed to be involved in burning homes and intimidation, and one writer (Fields, 1973) even went so far as to claim that children had become so expert in stone throwing 'over vast distances with great accuracy as to surpass adult athletes.' (Fields, 1973, 126).

The Report of the National Advisory Commission (1968) into the riots in the USA had reported that the typical American rioter in the summer of 1967 was an unmarried male between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. Press reports of the early 1970s record that children as young as ten years were involved in rioting in Northern Ireland at this time and that some were actually arrested and charged with rioting offences. Nevertheless these children were the exception rather than the rule and an analysis of those arrested between May 1969 and April 1971 (Lyons, 1972a) revealed that of over 1,500 people arrested only about 15 per cent were nineteen years or younger, the vast majority of these being young men. There may of course have been a tendency, if not a policy, on the part of the army and police at this time not to arrest younger rioters but to concentrate on adults, assuming perhaps these were the riot leaders. Some suggestion of this comes from data reported by Mercer and Bunting (1980). Mercer and Bunting, instead of using official statistics on those arrested (after all only a small proportion of rioters at any time) simply asked about 800 adolescents (average age seventeen years) whether they had ever taken part in a demonstration. Of course, being in a riot and being in a demonstration are not the same thing. Nevertheless it could be argued that at this period in Northern Ireland one was often a forerunner to the other. Also young people were much more likely to respond honestly to questions about their

participation in demonstrations than they were to being questioned about being in a riot (even on an anonymous questionnaire). And what Mercer found was that about a third of these young people admitted to having taken part in a demonstration. This incidentally is very similar to the figure obtained from a random sample of adults in the early 1970s (Boyle, *et al.* 1970). This suggests therefore that indeed rather more adults may have been arrested for rioting and that those figures therefore underestimate the number of young people who participated in riots. However, like the official statistics, Mercer's research revealed that more males than females admitted to having taken part in demonstrations and also more Catholics. Of the young males who responded to Mercer's questionnaire 47 per cent of the Catholics and 22 per cent of the Protestants indicated that they had taken part in a demonstration but for females the corresponding figures were lower at 25 per cent and 16 per cent respectively. Interestingly Mercer and his colleagues did not simply attempt to catalogue these facts but also tried to explain why these young people were motivated to demonstrate in the first place. Surprisingly they found few differences between those young people who had engaged in demonstrating and those who had not. For example, demonstrators were no more aggressive or tough minded, no more (or less) religious nor were they simply young people who could be labeled as sensation seekers. Instead it appears that demonstration participation was more likely to be linked to feelings of social powerlessness and normlessness and adolescent demonstrators were more likely to rate themselves as unhappy rather than happy. However, what Mercer's research could not explain was whether this unhappiness was due to personal reasons, or because of discontent with the Northern Irish political situation.

Gradually the pattern of violence began to change however and street confrontations between large numbers of people and the security forces became much less common. Unfortunately the changing pattern of violence and the movement towards greater use of the bomb and the gun did not end all children's or young people's direct involvement in the violence. To be sure, many fewer children were now involved but those children who were caught up in the violence were of course involved in a much more dangerous way. Obtaining hard facts about children's involvement with violence during this period is difficult for several reasons. First of all, not many social scientists were active at this time and those that were faced definite problems about obtaining hard data. Further, children's involvement in the violence at this time became something of a propaganda issue with the government suggesting that the paramilitaries were making use of children and literally hiding behind children on occasion to escape detection. Certainly, newspaper reports of the time suggest that more than once children were used to create a diversion while gunmen escaped. Indeed, children were even alleged to have been used as shields, placed between a gunman and the security forces.

If the interviews Fraser (1974), a child psychiatrist, reports verbatim with children at this time are to be believed then children were indeed very directly involved, for example to the extent of being taught how to make petrol bombs and even at times encouraged to use them. However, one must treat these reports with some caution. The temptation for an eleven-year-old boy to exaggerate the importance of his involvement in the violence of the time must have been enormous especially when Belfast was apparently filled with gullible adults only too willing to listen. Fraser's (1974) informant however strikes a note of truth when questioned about allegations that children were paid by older men to throw bombs:

If they were paying, the whole street would be out. But they'd be wasting their money because we'd do it for nothing. (Fraser, 1974, 17.)

Unfortunately the information available in official statistics which indicates how many children and young people have been charged, over the years, with 'terrorist type' offences also suggests recruitment of young people and children by paramilitary organisations has been a particular problem. Indeed, Curran (1984), writing on 'Juvenile Offending and Political Terrorism', suggests that the data available indicate that the extent of young people's involvement in 'political terrorism' in Northern Ireland appears to be considerable. Curran presents figures for the years 1975, 1976 and 1977 for under-sixteens charged with various offences. These reveal that during this period seven under-sixteens were charged with murder and six with attempted murder while forty-one were charged with firearms offences and two with explosives offences. In the older age category, sixteen to eighteen years, these figures are virtually trebled! This information has been updated in a recent publication (PPRU, 1984) which provides information from 1978 to 1982. Unfortunately the information is not presented in exactly the same way as Curran's in terms of labelling of the offences committed nor are the age categories used exactly the same. Nevertheless the information provided by Curran (1984) and by the PPRU paper gives the impression that children and young people's direct involvement in serious violence increased steadily from 1975 to peak in 1978 when nearly one hundred young people in the ten to seventeen-year-old category were charged with such offences. These numbers then dropped dramatically to twenty-four in 1979 and have remained at that level, except in 1980 when only four young people were charged with 'terrorist type' offences.

### **Who Gets Involved?**

Something of a controversy has however grown up concerning the type of children who have become involved in serious violence in this way. On the one hand there is the theory that these are innocent children who, had it not been for the 'troubles', would never have seen the inside of a courtroom or a police cell. For example, Taylor and Nelson (1977) reported that:

teachers in training schools, and lawyers, for example, are often aware that political offenders frequently have no criminal record, come from impeccably 'respectable' homes and do not believe they have done 'wrong' — all factors distinguishing them from many of their non-political fellows in borstals or training schools. (Taylor and Nelson, 1977, 16.)

This idea has been challenged however by some empirical work in which young people on 'terrorist' charges have been compared with those charged with 'ordinary' criminal offences. For example, Elliott and Lockhart (1980) compared some forty 'terrorist' offenders with a matched group of non-terrorist offenders and reported some interesting differences. For example, the 'terrorist' offenders were older on average (sixteen years) compared to the comparison group (fourteen years). Perhaps more significantly the scheduled offenders (as they are technically known) were not just older but also more intelligent, had better educational attainments and were more socially outgoing. Prior to getting into trouble with the law they were also less likely to have been truants at school or to have been referred to a child psychiatrist. On the other hand the 'ordinary' delinquents and the scheduled offenders came from very similar backgrounds. Most (almost half) came from the lowest social-class, while about one-third came from one-parent families and in both groups some forty per cent had either a parent or, more likely, a sibling who had a criminal record.

A further study by Curran (1980) compared a group of juvenile 'terrorist' offenders and a similar group of juvenile delinquents, this time using a self-report measure, the Jesness Inventory. This consists of 155 statements to which the boys involved were required to answer either 'true' or 'false'. These statements were then used to provide five measures in terms of Social Maladjustment, Value Orientation, Alienation, Manifest Aggression and Autism. Curran (1984) reports that overall the results revealed 'a complex pattern of similarities and differences' between the two offender groups with the major differences being that the 'terrorist' offenders scored lower in terms of aggression, autism and value orientation (a measure of among other things toughness and sensation seeking). Once again therefore it appears that the young people convicted of 'terrorist'-type offences emerged with a rather better profile. Yet from these results it must be concluded that despite their superiority in various ways, the scheduled offenders do not come from such a different sub-culture that they would all have remained out of trouble with the law had it not been for the troubles. Rather it appears that some probably would have run foul of the law at some time but because of the troubles in Northern Ireland more young people there are becoming involved with the law and involved on much more serious charges (Boyle, Chesney and Hadden, 1976).

But why are the more intelligent, less aggressive young people more likely to

become involved in paramilitary activities? One simple explanation may be that the paramilitary organisations, on both sides of the religious divide, only accept or recruit the more intelligent to their organisations. Or perhaps the more intelligent young people are more aware of what is going on around them and hence more likely to volunteer. For the moment however, just what makes a young person opt for political violence as opposed to ordinary crime must of course remain a matter of speculation.

This is because surprisingly little attention has been devoted to this question. Instead, as the story of Northern Ireland began to unfold, what really caught the imagination of the media and their viewers and readers around the world was not that children and young people were involved in serious violence but rather the tender age of some of the participants. Children as young as five and six years could be seen throwing stones, laughing, jeering and generally challenging the forces of law and order. Indeed, on some occasions, if reports are to be believed, children acted as if they were themselves responsible for law and order, redirecting traffic, setting up road blocks, stopping and questioning pedestrians. Even greater alarm was aroused when it was learned that children too young to actually take part in the violence were apparently involved with violence at least at a fantasy level, incorporating what they saw going on around them into their play activities. Thus according to newspaper reports one of the favourite street games of this period was 'playing riots'. An authoritative report, from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1971, stated that in play groups (where children were generally aged about four to five years) many of the children, especially the boys 'spend considerable time erecting barricades across the floor and pretending to shoot and throw petrol bombs.' Soon these verbal reports were being reinforced by photographs of children erecting street barricades or posing, toy gun in hand and dressed in quasi-military uniforms. It must be added however that according to rumour at the time, photographers who could not actually find children spontaneously behaving in this way were not above paying in order to get the desired picture.

### **Awareness of Violence**

Despite all this journalistic interest in children's involvement in violence in Northern Ireland — or perhaps because of it — social scientists were slow to show a similar concern. In fact the first research paper in this area was not published until a study by Jahoda and Harrison appeared in 1975.

Fortunately when they did become involved social scientists tended to show a healthy scepticism for the wealth of media reports by addressing first the fundamental question — are the children of Northern Ireland actually aware of the violence going on around them? What social scientists, particularly psychologists were interested in specifically was how much children's thinking and behaviour had been influenced by living in a violent

environment. But first they felt it necessary to establish that the children themselves regarded their environment as a violent one. To do this Jahoda and Harrison chose to study children from two schools, one Catholic and one Protestant, located in an area of Belfast where the troubles had been greatest. The children were all boys, half aged six years, half aged ten years. Rather than ask children directly about the violence Jahoda and Harrison decided to adopt an indirect approach which involved presenting each child with a street made up of model houses. In this street were positioned four cardboard figures — a postman, a milkman, an 'ordinary' man and a soldier. Each child was asked to imagine he was walking along a street either in the (mainly Catholic) Falls district or in the (mainly Protestant) Shankill Road district. Four objects were then handed to the child one by one and the child was asked if he found this object in the street which of the people in the street would he hand it to. The objects were a cigarette packet, a letter, a milk bottle and a parcel. These were chosen because, while they are innocent everyday objects yet each had been used fairly regularly to make bombs in the early 1970s in Northern Ireland. Of course this was precisely what the investigators were interested in; how would these Belfast children regard a parcel, a milk bottle, etc. — as harmless everyday objects or as potentially lethal weapons of urban guerrilla warfare? Jahoda and Harrison therefore simply recorded the number of children who perceived one or more of these objects as a bomb and these results were compared with those from a similar group of children who carried out exactly the same task but who lived in Edinburgh in Scotland.

And their results showed that while almost one third of the thirty six-year-old Belfast children identified at least one of the four objects as a bomb, only one of the thirty six-year-olds from Edinburgh did so. Similarly 80 per cent of the ten-year-old Belfast children identified at least one of the objects as a potential bomb compared to only two of the Scottish children. As the authors noted, the fact that even six-year-old children were beginning to learn to treat ordinary everyday objects as sources of danger was in itself an eloquent testimony to the kind of world in which these children were growing up, and could in fact be regarded as an appropriate adaptation to the reality of life in Belfast in 1973.

This study can of course be criticised on several grounds. To begin with it is rather limited in scope involving only a small number of children from a geographically very restricted area of Belfast — some would say an area not typical of Belfast as a whole let alone Northern Ireland. Perhaps the most important criticism that could be levelled at the study is that the children may have been cued, that is unwittingly encouraged, to give the sort of 'bomb' responses the investigators were looking for. Particularly the fact that the people in the street included a policeman and a soldier plus the fact that the children were told that the street was located in an area of Belfast notorious for violence at that time. Nevertheless this study did

include one very important feature which had been missing from the earlier media reports and unfortunately missing even from some subsequent academic studies in this area. That is the inclusion of a comparison or control group — a group of children from an area outside Northern Ireland (in this case Scotland). Only the inclusion of a group like this alongside the responses of children from Northern Ireland permits an investigator to say if children in Ulster are in some way different with regard to what they have been learning about violence.

Fortunately this study by Jahoda and Harrison has been followed by others which have also involved a control or comparison group from outside Northern Ireland. And the next study which was carried out in 1976 (Cairns, Hunter and Herring, 1980) went some way to overcoming the criticism that the materials presented to the children were perhaps suggesting violent type responses. This time the children, who were all aged five to six years and were living in either a virtually trouble-free part of Northern Ireland or in a south London suburb, were presented with ten line drawings of scenes such as a train crash or a derelict house. Each picture was accompanied by a standard question requesting an explanation for the scene depicted and the child's response recorded. Again a count was made of the number of children mentioning bombs or explosions at least once. This revealed that while some 20 per cent of the London children mentioned bombs or explosions 90 per cent of the Northern Irish children did so. Again however this study was limited in scope comparing only twenty children from one small town in Northern Ireland with twenty children from London.

This study was therefore repeated one year later, in 1977, as before involving five to six-year-olds from a trouble-free part of Northern Ireland compared this time to a similar group of Scottish children (Cairns, *et al.*, 1980). And once more the results suggested greater awareness of bombs and explosions among the Northern Irish children (45 per cent) as compared to the Scottish children (4 per cent). Overall therefore the results of both these studies reported by Cairns *et al* (1980) are in broad agreement with the results obtained by Jahoda and Harrison (1975) roughly three years earlier. More children in Northern Ireland it seems are aware of Northern Irish type violence compared to children in other parts of the British Isles, and this holds, it would appear regardless of whether these children live in the ghettos of Belfast, at the very heart of the conflict, or in the quieter rural parts of Northern Ireland. This latter finding is particularly intriguing and is one which will be returned to later.

Northern Ireland is of course not the only part of the world today where children may be exposed to violence. An interesting question then is are children in Northern Ireland any more or less aware of the violence in their country compared to children in other countries which have also experienced violence? This is the question Hosin and Cairns (1984) tried to

answer in a study carried out during 1979-80. The children were somewhat older than those in the earlier studies being either nine, twelve or fifteen years of age and this time information was again elicited indirectly, by asking them to write, in not more than ten minutes, a short essay entitled 'My country'. Approximately 200 children at each age level took part in this study, with equal numbers from either a society which (at the time of the study) was directly involved in a conflict (Northern Ireland and Jordan) or from a society on the fringe of a conflict (Iraq and the Republic of Ireland). In order to find out if children in the 'violent' societies really were aware of the conflict in their country the essays (a total of 2,785) were searched for any reference to violence — for example mentions of shooting, killing, bombs, guns, etc. What is of interest here is that at virtually every age level more children from Northern Ireland mentioned violence at least once in their essay (34 per cent at nine years, 70 per cent at twelve years and nearly 90 per cent at fifteen years). In all 66 per cent of Northern Irish children mentioned violence at least once compared to 30 per cent from the Republic of Ireland, 19 per cent from Jordan and 7 per cent from Iraq. Once again this is evidence that children in Northern Ireland are well aware of the violence in their society. But this time there is also the suggestion that the kind of violence experienced in Northern Ireland — urban guerrilla warfare — may have a bigger impact on children than even out and out warfare with another country such as that as experienced by the children in Jordan.

The surprising feature of this last study is that not only were the Northern Irish children apparently the most aware of violence but that these children did not come from areas in Northern Ireland where the violence had been worst. Does this mean that all children in Northern Ireland are equally aware of the violence in their country? Or does it mean that the children in the most troubled areas are somehow more aware or at least have a more detailed knowledge of violence? And regardless of which of these alternatives is true, how did the children in the more peaceful areas learn about the violence going on elsewhere, especially children as young as five or six years? These are the kinds of questions social scientists in Northern Ireland have now begun to tackle.

The answer to the question as to whether children in the more peaceful parts of Northern Ireland know more or less about the troubles (or are more or less aware of them) has turned out to be neither a straightforward yes nor a straightforward no. This is illustrated in a series of studies reported by McIvor (1981). In the first of these (Taggart, 1980) 192 Catholic and Protestant children, aged five, nine, and twelve years, were selected from two towns, one that had experienced a considerable amount of violence and one that had been relatively peaceful. Each child was then presented with two unfinished stories and asked to supply an ending. The stories of course were deliberately designed so as to be ambiguous in a Northern Irish context. In other words they were capable of being interpreted in terms of

Northern Irish violence or in an ordinary everyday manner. The first story in fact referred to boys throwing stones and the second to the discovery of a discarded parcel outside a shop. The most interesting feature of the results was that there was no difference in the number of children interpreting these stories in terms of Northern Irish violence in the 'quiet' town and the 'violent' town. There was however a tendency for older children to provide more 'troubles' related endings to the stories and for more children (24 per cent) to interpret the parcel story in this way (that is suggesting it might be a bomb) compared to the stone throwing story which provoked a troubles related ending from only 1 per cent of the children.

McIvor (1981) extended this study by repeating more or less the same procedure with 120 children (all Catholics) this time living in a violence prone area of west Belfast. Once again children were more likely to interpret the stories in terms of the troubles as they got older but this time 45 per cent saw the stone throwing incident and 38 per cent the parcel story in Northern Irish terms. In other words, looking at the results over both studies it appears that the parcel story called to mind a possible bomb in about a third of the children — regardless of whether they lived in a high violence area of Belfast, a high violence rural town or a relatively trouble-free town. The stone throwing story, however, meant something special only to children from west Belfast. The most obvious explanation for this is that bombs have been a feature experienced by many more parts of Northern Ireland and also explosions have always been well reported by the media. Stone throwing as a violent political act has however been less common, confined largely to the two main cities of Northern Ireland — Belfast and Derry — and has attracted little media interest. It is not surprising therefore that detailed knowledge about the violence or awareness of specific forms of violence could vary from location to location. In general terms however this research suggests that children in Northern Ireland, regardless of where they live, appear to be equally familiar with the violence.

This differentiation between specific and general knowledge about the violence has been illustrated in further studies, this time using the technique of asking children to write essays. In the first of these (McIvor, 1981) nearly 1,000 children aged seven and eleven years from violent and less violent areas in Belfast were asked to write an essay entitled either 'Belfast' or 'Where I live'. The most important result was that when the essays were examined for references to Northern Irish violence no differences were found between the high and low violence areas, with as many children in each area (about 45 per cent) alluding to the troubles. McWhirter (1982) carried out a somewhat similar exercise only this time the focus was more closely on the troubles *per se* because this time the children were asked to write an essay simply entitled 'Violence'. Again the children (637 aged nine and twelve years) came from a troubled area (in Belfast) and a relatively peaceful rural town. McWhirter's (1982) study differs from McIvor's however

in that she made a particularly detailed study of the responses given by the children in their essays. This showed that although the children from both areas were well aware of the Northern Irish context of violence, they did differ to a certain extent in terms of the specific types of violence they wrote about. In particular children in the troubled areas mentioned five specific violent acts more often than did the children from the more peaceful areas; these were writing slogans, shooting, stealing cars, rioting and stoning police. Once more these are all activities more likely to occur in the violence prone urban areas of Belfast than in a more rural setting.

## **The Role of Television News**

The surprising outcome of all these studies is not of course that the children from the more violent area have a fairly detailed knowledge of the troubles but rather that the children from the quieter areas are, comparatively speaking, so well informed on this topic. The next question therefore is how are the children in the peaceful parts of Northern Ireland learning about the violence? Two obvious sources are first adult conversations and second the media — particularly the television news. The television news, rather than other forms of news reporting, is a likely source because while children, especially young children, do not read newspapers very much (and yet are aware of the violence), they may well see the television news. Of course, five-year-olds do not usually settle down in their favourite armchair to watch the news but they undoubtedly are exposed to it accidentally. Also the television news because of its predominantly visual nature is likely to have a bigger impact than say the radio news. Certainly, some reports from the earlier days of the troubles had mentioned children's preoccupation with the television news. For example, it was reported that in the early 1970s children rioting in the streets, usually in front of a barrage of TV cameras from around the world, made sure they always got home in time to enjoy their own performance on the early evening television news. To appreciate the potential impact of television news in Northern Ireland one has to realise of course that coverage of violence there by the local news organisations has been almost one hundred per cent. To people in other parts of the world it may seem that violence in Northern Ireland has been over-reported. In fact, reporting outside of Northern Ireland has been fairly selective (Elliot, 1976). Today only 'outstanding' acts of violence in Northern Ireland appeal to the world's media. In Northern Ireland itself however, it appears the media have felt an obligation to report virtually every incident however trivial. This has meant that at times when the level of violence has been particularly high a ten or fifteen minute local newscast could consist almost entirely of a 'string of violent episodes' (Blumler, 1971) with little or no contextual material. For example, in 1976 over a one month period the word 'bomb' was used on average twice per bulletin in the BBC's national newscasts from London while it was used eight times per bulletin in the same month on the BBC's local Northern Irish newscasts from Belfast

(intended only for viewers in Northern Ireland).

Surprisingly, despite the massive amount of attention that has been paid to the possible influence on children of fictional violence on television, very little research has examined the impact on children of the real-life violence shown daily on the television news. One reason for this may be because early studies in the USA (Lyle and Hoffman, 1972) suggested that very few children choose to watch the news on television, especially younger children. Indeed, the opinion was that children could be said to be actively averse to the television news. However, as usual it was probably a mistake to translate findings from the USA into an Irish setting. This is because in the USA there are many more television channels to watch and indeed more television sets in the home. It is undoubtedly easier therefore for children in the USA to avoid being exposed to the television news. Not so in Northern Ireland, where only a small number of channels is available and most houses contain only one set, a set which is usually to be found in the main family room. Under these circumstances avoiding television news is a much more difficult process. Indeed preliminary research by Cairns and his colleagues (Cairns, 1981) had suggested that whereas American research (based on children's self-reports) had reported that about 30 per cent of children almost never watched the television news, in Ireland the comparable figure was about 5 per cent.

With this evidence in mind the present author undertook a series of studies to examine the role of television in informing children in Northern Ireland about the violence occurring in their country. The main difficulty in such research was of course that children who are exposed to Northern Irish television news are exposed to the Northern Irish media generally and also to adult conversations. Fortunately however Cairns, Hunter and Herring (1980) were able to find a group of children who were more likely to be exposed to Northern Ireland television news broadcasts only. This was possible because at the time the research was conducted (1976-7) certain parts of Scotland's west coast could receive television only from a transmitter situated in Northern Ireland. In other words, children who were not actually living in Northern Ireland were nevertheless being exposed to Northern Irish regional television news broadcasts. These children (from two different locations in western Scotland) were compared with another group actually living in Northern Ireland and with a third group living in Scotland but not exposed to Northern Irish news broadcasts. In all locations the children were aged either five to six years or seven to eight years. The younger children were shown drawings of such things as a train crash and a house on fire and were asked to say what had happened, while the older children were asked to write a short essay which was to begin 'Here is the news...' A simple word count based on the words 'bomb' or 'explosion' was carried out on the younger children's stories and the older children's essays. This revealed that the children who lived in Scotland who could not see

Northern Irish television virtually never mentioned bombs or explosions. On the other hand, one third to half of the children living in Scotland but exposed to Northern Irish television used these words, particularly at the older age level. The essays in particular revealed that children living in a relatively remote, almost idyllic location in western Scotland were well aware of the tenor of local Northern Irish news broadcasts, writing such things as:

There has been a bomb in Belfast it killed sixty people and it injured thirty people. Good night.

*and:*

A bomb let off in Belfast yesterday and it exploded four houses. . . .

*or, perhaps most aptly:*

A bomb has just gone off in Belfast and that is the end of the news.

What do the initials RUC and UDR stand for? Where are the Falls Road and Crossmaglen? What is a Control Zone? These are some of the questions, in multiple choice format, which Cairns (1984) presented to children in the next set of studies examining the possible role of television news in informing children about the violence in Northern Ireland. Direct questions such as these were employed this time because it could be argued that the word counts of the earlier studies provided at best only a crude index of awareness as opposed to knowledge about violence. The study involved nearly 500 eleven-year-olds who lived in five different parts of Ireland, chosen because they could be thought of as forming a rough continuum along the island of Ireland of increasing distance from where the actual scenes of violence took place. All completed this eleven-item multiple choice questionnaire and also indicated how often they saw the television news; 'frequently', 'sometimes' or 'never'. Overall the results showed that those children who watched the television news more often knew more about the troubles than did those who were not frequent news viewers, again implicating the television news as one possible source of children's knowledge about the violence. Also, the closer children lived to the actual scenes of violence the higher they scored on the test. Surprisingly however the children from the most northerly town only scored at a slightly higher level (6.86 out of eleven on average) than did those in the town situated on the southern-most tip of Ireland (5.55).

Another odd aspect of these results was that although television as suspected was obviously a source of knowledge about the violence for children, it was apparently acting equally to inform children who lived close to the violence and children who lived far away from it.

One possible reason for these quirks in the results of the first study was that the northerly town though closer than all the others to Belfast and Derry had itself been relatively trouble-free. Perhaps what is important is psychological distance from the troubles not geographical distance. To test out this idea a

further study was completed in 1982. This time approximately 600 children took part at two age levels — eight years and twelve years. The children were selected from five different towns, all of approximately the same size. One of these towns was again in the extreme south of Ireland but the remaining four were in the north of Ireland — two in separate areas where the level of violence has been below average and two in areas where the violence has been above average. Again the children completed the questionnaire which contained the eleven-item multiple choice test dealing with the troubles and again they were asked how often they saw the television news. Once again among the eleven-year-olds those who watched the news frequently knew more about the troubles than did those who watched it less frequently. But this effect did not obtain at the eight-year-old level, where news viewing behaviour was not related to knowledge about the troubles.

However, the most important result in the present context is that the children who lived in the two 'quiet' towns scored at exactly the same level as the children who lived in the two 'violent' towns. Once again this suggests that, at least where constant features of the violence are concerned, children in quiet and violent areas of Northern Ireland appear to be equally knowledgeable. Of course, once more children who lived in Northern Ireland scored at a higher level than did children who lived in the Republic of Ireland. Finally, an interesting aspect of these results is that in this most recent study the difference between children in the north of Ireland and the Republic was much more marked than it had been in the first study. More remarkable still the mean score for eleven-year-old children from the Republic was almost exactly the same in both years (1979 and 1982). The mean score for children at this age level in the north had however increased from around 6.8 to 8.5. It is not clear how much stress should be laid upon this increase but certainly it appears to lend some credence to the suggestion that children in the north may be steadily increasing their knowledge about the troubles over time.

### **The Violence: in Perspective?**

Having established that children in Northern Ireland are indeed aware of the violence going on in their country the next important question is: have the children got the violence out of perspective? After all many of these children, the evidence suggests, depend upon the media as a main source of information about the violence. And as noted earlier, the media image of Northern Ireland is of a land of perpetual violence and nothing but violence.

Happily, the evidence available to date suggests that children in Northern Ireland have not been influenced by media coverage of 'the troubles' in this way. For example, both McIvor (1981) and Hosin (1983) report that violence is not usually the first thing that comes to children's minds when asked to write about 'where I live' or 'my country'. Many children do mention the

violence of course, but just as many also mention things such as the geography of Northern Ireland or the climate (Hosin, 1983). So Northern Irish children do not appear to think of their homeland as a place noteworthy only because of the violence going on there. Similarly, children appear to be sensitive to the fact that all parts of Northern Ireland are not equally caught up in the violence. This came to light when Cairns (1982) asked children in two relatively high violence towns and in two relatively low violence towns whether there had been 'much trouble' in their district in the last three years (the children answered on a four-point scale 'none', 'little', 'some', 'a lot'). Only 27 per cent of the children from the two 'quieter' towns thought 'some' or 'a lot' of violence had occurred in their district compared to 46 per cent from the more 'violent' towns (an interesting question of course is why this figure was not 100 per cent, a point taken up again in Chapter 3). This seems to suggest that despite possible exposure to a daily diet of Northern Irish violence in the media children, happily, have the violence rather more in perspective than might have been expected.

This observation is reinforced by a further study by McWhirter, Young and Majury (1983). They had the interesting idea of investigating Northern Irish children's knowledge about the causes of death. In order not to make too much of an issue of the question these investigators simply added the word 'death' (or 'dead' for younger children) to the end of a standard vocabulary test in which children are asked to give the meanings of words. Over 200 Belfast children were individually questioned in this way ranging in age from three years to fifteen years. Having explained what the word meant to them the children were then asked some additional questions about experience with death and about the causes of death. And it was this latter question that produced the most fascinating result because it revealed that overall death was attributed more often

to sickness than to accidents or violence. On a more specific level, just as many children cited heart disease or old age as explosions or shooting and more children ascribed death to road accidents and cancer than to violence related specifically to the Northern Irish conflict. In short, the children's perceived realities quite accurately reflect the objective situation. (McWhirter *et al.*, 1983,91.)

## **Conclusions**

Despite journalistic enthusiasm for the proposition that violence must have touched the life of every single child in Northern Ireland, social scientists have approached the topic in a more cautious fashion. This caution has been partly fuelled by the knowledge that many of the children of Northern Ireland live in parts of the province virtually unaffected by the violence.

Careful research carried out over the last ten years has however suggested

that indeed the majority of children in Northern Ireland almost certainly are well aware of the violence going on around them and that this applies equally to children who live in the unscathed areas and to those who live in city ghettos. Local variations are of course to be found in terms of detailed knowledge about specific forms of violence peculiar to, for example, urban rather than rural locations — such as street rioting. But by and large the evidence is that as children get older, they become increasingly knowledgeable about the general features of Northern Irish violence.

This widespread dissemination of knowledge about violence among children in Northern Ireland, it has been suggested, may be due to two particular aspects of the Northern Irish conflict. First there is the fact that it is a 'guerrilla' based conflict rather than a conventional war. This may well mean greater awareness on the part of the population in general, and perhaps particularly on the part of children in comparison to children whose country is involved in a conventional war. The second and related aspect is the intense local media coverage of the violence and especially coverage on the part of that medium most readily accessible to children — the television news.

Yet despite all this exposure to violence — either directly or indirectly — the evidence is that children in Northern Ireland have not become totally overwhelmed by the troubles. That is they have not absorbed Northern Ireland's media image to the extent where the very names 'Northern Ireland' or 'Belfast' conjure up nothing but thoughts of death and destruction. Indeed, despite the media concentration on violent death in Northern Ireland children have apparently been able to retain a perspective which allows them to understand that in most years since 1970 more people in Northern Ireland have died in road accidents than have died as a result of the 'troubles'!

Given then that children in Northern Ireland are in general relatively well informed about the violence the next question is what impact has the violence had upon these children, either directly or indirectly? Again this has been a subject of much speculation — often ill-informed speculation — since the troubles began. The next chapters will therefore examine the evidence that has begun to accumulate on this topic, in an attempt to decide if the early prophesies of growing moral disintegration and mounting psychiatric casualties among young people in Northern Ireland have indeed come to pass.

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