

# *Divided We Stand?: Mapping patterns of shared and separated space*

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*Divided We Stand?* is a project led by the Nerve Centre in partnership with the Institute for Conflict Research, Ulster Mediascapes, with support from the UU School of Education and funding from the Community Relations Council. The project sought to explore the day to day movements of school pupils from across Northern Ireland in everyday life. These movements were then analysed to give an indication of how factors such as religion, gender, place, time of day etc can impact on the physical way in which we live our lives. It builds on the 2007 report produced by the Institute for Conflict Research, *Segregated Lives*, which highlighted ongoing sectarian division in Northern Ireland. In a bid to move beyond anecdotal evidence of segregated patterns of movement, Global Positioning System (GPS) tracking devices were used to explore the patterns of movement of some young people, and the resulting data has been analysed in tandem with qualitative evidence. This paper is a synopsis of the information gathered and seeks to shed light on young peoples' movements and how this is informed by existing sectarian division and attitudes.<sup>1</sup> It also reveals how new technologies may be used to track these movements, and reflects on the potential of such technologies to support and enrich social research in the 'post-conflict' context.

## **Segregation and movement in Northern Ireland**

Segregation of residential space along ethno-sectarian lines in Northern Ireland has long been noted and much analysed. Recent research has identified how teenagers' perceptions of space have been studied in Belfast.<sup>2</sup> They used a range of methods, surveying 442 teenagers drawn from Catholic and Protestant schools from across the city. The centre of Belfast was perceived as a 'shared space' by their respondents and 'over 90% of young people suggested that they felt safe using these places and regarded [city centre] locations as arenas where religion was not overly important.'<sup>3</sup> In addition to this 62% of respondents expressed the view that Belfast was a city shared by Catholics and Protestants.

However, it is important to note that one quarter of those questioned by Leonard and McKnight emphasised the continued relevance of sectarianism for them. Leonard and McKnight cite Komarova's comment (2008) that there has been 'little transformative impact on the existing sectarian geography of Belfast, and that the political agreement itself has been unable to affect any real transformation of the ethno-national division in society and politics'.<sup>4</sup> While much of the research into residential segregation has focused on Belfast, territoriality is not restricted to that city. Hamilton et al. (2008) established through their research that segregation and sectarianism are everyday realities for many Northern Ireland residents outside urban areas. Individual experiences of segregation and sectarianism differ and are impacted on by age, gender, social background and place of residence. Hamilton et al. note that these, and individual experiences, are used to construct 'mental maps' of the places in which individuals move which develop and change over time. These '... are used to guide and structure personal routines and practices, and the mental maps are in turn reinforced and at times challenged by routine experiences'.<sup>5</sup> There is considerable evidence to suggest that these mental maps are important to individuals and can influence behaviour.

## **Methodology**

It is from this point of departure that *Divided We Stand?* was formulated as a research project. It sought to interrogate the above findings further by concentrating on young peoples' movements. Six Post Primary schools in Northern Ireland were involved in the pilot. Two of these were integrated schools; two were located in a suburb of Belfast; and two in Armagh. The respondents were 16-17 year old students at those schools. There were two main components of the study.

### **1. Learner questionnaires**

All of the students taking part in the tracking also completed questionnaires which examined the students' experience and perceptions of segregation. There were insufficient tracking devices to supply all of the students from each school, but those who did not take part in the tracking were given the same questionnaire. As a result a further 36 students from the schools completed questionnaires, providing 72 participants in all.

### **2. Technology**

The movement of 36 students was tracked over seven days using satellite enabled Global Positioning System (GPS) devices. The data of the movements

of the individuals who carried the device are exported as shape files which are a geospatial vector format used for displaying data in Geographic Information System (GIS) software.

The data from the GPS tracking devices was extracted and each of the student's movements was plotted for every day on which the device was carried. Sample points were plotted, sufficient to see the route taken without overloading the viewer with information. These were then plotted onto base mapping and the viewer could select one of the six schools involved, select one of the students and see the movement for each day of the week. Subsequent processing provided data aggregated by all the students on all of the days on which mapping took place and it is two images derived from those data which will form the basis for later discussion.

## **Findings**

### **1. Learner questionnaire data**

40% of those questioned described themselves as 'Protestant' while 54% viewed themselves as 'Catholic'. A question on national identity showed that the largest group viewed themselves as Irish (44%), closely followed by British (36%). The majority of those identifying themselves as Northern Irish were Protestants. However, there were nuances in the responses. Some 5% saw themselves as both Catholic *and* British and 3% as Protestant *and* Irish. 14% of respondents said that they were Catholic and Northern Irish. Respondents were also asked how they perceived the area in which they lived, with the largest number perceiving the area in which they lived as 'Mostly Protestant' (35%). In all, 70% of the answers given identified their areas as either mostly Protestant or mostly Catholic, with only 30% identifying their areas as 'mixed'. The largest number of people who perceived their area as 'mixed' were Catholic. In terms of travel to school, the largest number of participants used buses (38%); this was followed by those who got a lift in a car (21%) and those who made their way to school on foot (21%). In all, 83% claimed access to a car.

Respondents were presented with a range of statements relating to segregation and territoriality, and they were asked whether they agreed or not. The results are documented in table 1.

**Table 1: Views on segregation and territoriality**

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
Segregation is an issue in everyday life	45	55	0
Segregation impacts upon all people but with differing levels and intensities	94	6	0
Segregation is a continuing legacy of the troubles	80	20	0
Levels of segregation have changed in recent years	90	10	0
Living in a small community highlights identity and religion: people tend to know ‘who and what’ you are?	95	5	0
Wearing school uniforms in public places can create problems for young people	90	7	3
Shopping environments are increasingly neutral	98	2	0
Asserting community (i.e. religious) identity can undermine social cohesion	88	4	8
Denying opportunities to display community identity can erode a sense of belonging	82	9	9

The findings relating to identity, community and sectarianism would suggest a perception of high levels of segregation, albeit with considerable change in recent years – presumably this suggests a perception that segregation has reduced. While there is some evidence of issues to do with mobility, some places, and particularly shopping areas, are increasingly neutral urban spaces. This would seem to corroborate findings in other surveys.<sup>6</sup>

Answers to more open questions in the survey relating to issues of identity, community and sectarianism appear to converge on the issue of segregation. There was an apparent awareness among the respondents of the impact and legacy of the conflict on current perceptions of community and identity. This seems to inform the current nature of segregation that many of the young people appear to experience, or are aware of, as reflected in the following answers:

‘Yes, people are affected at different levels depending on your location of home and activities etc. Older people feel more segregated and this has a knock-on effect on us.’

‘...many families pass on sectarian views to the younger generation, meaning they too are impacted ... Children now take on views of parents and therefore the division continues.’

This is indicative of a sense of a ‘transmission’ of perceptions of the ‘other’ community between generations, particularly when we consider the age of those participating in the study. They would have been between three and four years old when the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was signed. Despite this, the legacy of ‘The Troubles’ appears to impact acutely on these young people’s lives in a contemporary context. However, these views were countered by those respondents who view the current social climate in their areas in different or perhaps more positive terms:

‘...some people let segregation and divisions affect them, others just get on with life ... it is getting better, more people are getting over it.’

‘...people now are not as strict as in who you are allowed to know. There is more encouragement to integrate both religions, especially within school.’

There is a general consensus however that sectarianism, or aspects of it, informs young respondents’ perceptions and experiences of segregation. This is also reflected in relation to the students’ perceptions of the communal composition of the areas in which they live.

This is also represented by perceptions of community identity in relation to the schools the students attend, as well as their feelings of being identified by the school uniforms they wear. The following statements articulate this viewpoint:

‘...nowadays you don’t ask ‘are you Catholic or Protestant’, you ask ‘what school did you go to?’’

‘...people are still bitter and a uniform can tell you what religion you are and the opposite religion may not like that.’

It was clear from the responses that urban and rural respondents had different views in relation to school uniform. Both rural and urban respondents alluded to the issue of school uniforms and the potential for threatened or actual

violence. However, it was much more prevalent as an issue for urban-based students. Students from urban-based schools stated the following when asked if wearing a school uniform influences areas they go in to:

‘Definitely, because people will know you’re Catholic or Protestant and can get you in fights.’

‘Yes, because you can wear a [school name] uniform, walk into a Catholic area and get beat up.’

These comments reveal the very real experience of segregation and sectarianism for school pupils, the perceived communal affiliation of segregated educational institutions in Northern Ireland and the potential impact that this might have on mobility.

Despite concerns articulated about the real or perceived threat of violence triggered by school uniform providing visual clues to ethno-sectarian affiliation, students claim that this had little bearing on how they order their movements to and from school. This is perhaps because the dominant mode of travel, car or bus, insulates the young person from the community through which he or she travels. In the case of cars, there will be little or no opportunity to engage with the community. School buses are generally mixed so there is a potential for building inter-communal relations, although it is unclear to what extent this happens.

Movement during free time, when pupils are less inclined to wear school uniform, appears to be less oriented around segregation and more preoccupied with spaces that are considered ‘shared’, such as shopping centres and cinemas:

‘...it has nothing to do with ‘territory’ at all.’

‘...there are no problems inside the shops as everyone only really cares about themselves.’

There appears to be a very notable distinction between areas which are considered to be ‘off limits’ to particular communities and areas open to all, or considered to be ‘shared’ space, which are generally commercial areas. One participant commented:

‘You can wear school uniform there and no one cares. It’s a place where everyone can go and relax and forget all the segregation that is apparent in other areas.’

Many of the activities in which these students are involved are conducted within the realm of commercial spaces. For example, 69% cite shopping, 64% the cinema and 53% cite “hanging out” in the town/city centre. Therefore, while much commentary has been made about the limited mobility and movement of the students as a result of their particular background, as well as the perceived communal affiliation of their schools, little concern is given to these issues in the context of commercial spaces of the various areas of Northern Ireland included in this pilot. While this may be an apparently positive step in terms of how these groups of young people engage on a 'shared' and non-segregated basis in their spare time, there remains an awareness of the nature of the issues surrounding 'community' for them when they return to the, often highly segregated, areas in which they live. Hence, issues of identity and its expression pervade the discussion of community cohesion and influence the movements of respondents.

A range of views were expressed on displays of community identity. Some young people agreed with displays of identity as a prerequisite for community cohesion within defined areas.

‘...everyone has a right to show their beliefs and be involved in their culture.’

‘If we don't allow people to be themselves in their own environment or someone else's, we are stopping them from being themselves. This is quite sad. If you have to hide who you are in some areas you live in then there is no hope for the world.’

However, many young respondents were aware that expressions of identity may cause offence to others:

‘...it can be seen as rude / imposing or disrespectful. Putting their identity in different peoples' faces ... If you display your identity in an insensitive way you may cause problems.’

‘for example flying flags and painting pavements [can undermine social cohesion].’

There was also a recognition that these issues could cause tensions or increase the likelihood of sectarian violence:

‘Painting footpaths and having parades can cause fights in some areas.’

‘...things such as band parades and GAA matches can somewhat 're-open wounds' and flare up tension again.’

It was clear that many of the young people were well aware that expressions of identity, community or culture in a given space are often shaped by the reaction of the 'other' community. The respondents also displayed an awareness of the impact of expressions of identity on social cohesion and ultimately how there can be both positive and negative connotations of cultural or community identity in Northern Ireland.

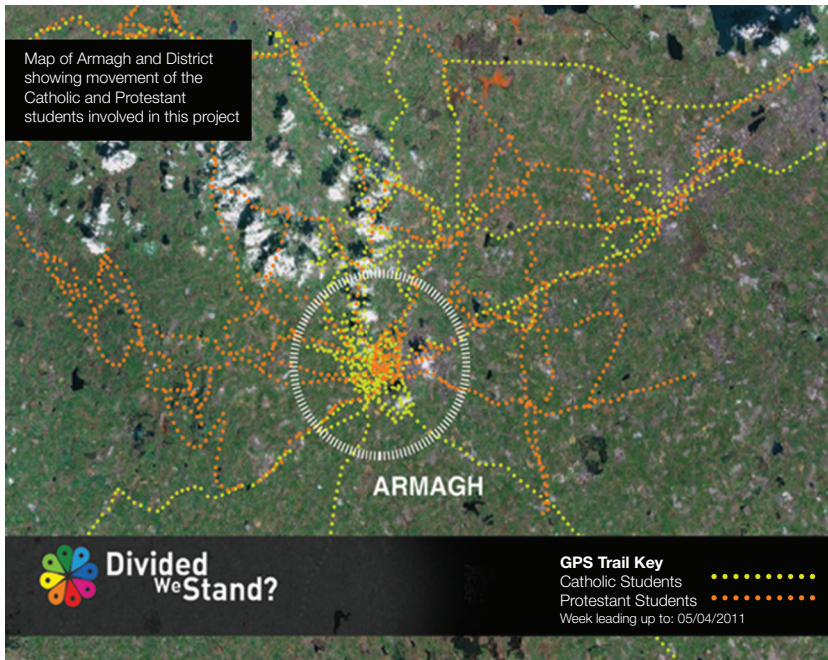
It is imperative to note that the quantitative and qualitative results of the survey appear to produce some anomalous results, particularly on the issue of segregation. Only 26% of respondents stated that segregation was an issue in everyday life for them. However, overall, the questionnaire suggests that segregation has a much bigger role to play in the lives of these young people than is perhaps initially suggested. This suggests that the causalities and impact of segregation are more nuanced than some of the questions were able to accommodate for. Any lack of awareness of the impact of segregation at a basic level may also suggest that it is an increasingly normative feature of how the respondents view and order their social world. That is not to say that there are not exceptions (such as much of the students spare time being spent in 'shared' commercial spaces), but the vast majority of their movement and mobility is informed by an 'us and them' construct, and, for most students the school day is spent with others they perceive to be from 'their own' community.

## **2. Mapping of GPS data**

A study of the GPS data from all six schools is beyond the scope of this paper and a specific case study of one settlement has been developed instead: Armagh. In all, twelve students from two schools in Armagh were involved in the tracking. Six were from a school which describes itself as 'Catholic', while the others were from a school which, while *de jure* open to all denominations, is *de facto* viewed as largely 'Protestant'. The twelve students used the tracking devices for seven days and the data was then extracted and plotted. Two compound images are to be examined here.

The students from the Catholic school have had their aggregate movements plotted in light green (Figure 1). They seem somewhat less mobile than the Protestant students, whose movements have been plotted in orange. While there are trails to the north and the northeast of the city, most of the overall movement seems concentrated in the city itself. There is less activity to the south of the city by both sets of students but what activity there is seems predominantly to be by the Catholic students.





**Figure 1**

Some of these contrasts may represent differences in residence between the two groups, but it is likely that there are also some differences in social interaction being reflected here. Some visits may be kinship related and this may help to reinforce different patterns. It had been noted that one of the most common activities in which the students were involved was ‘hanging out in friends’ houses’ and if friendship groups are based on ethno-sectarian grounds, this may suggest segregation in visits. Additionally, while hardly definitive given the small sample size, the predominance in southward movement from Armagh by Catholic students would support a suggestion that Protestants have a northwards orientation for shopping and trade compared to Catholics.<sup>7</sup>

It might be expected that more microscale movements within the city itself would show fewer differences. In fact, differences are still apparent (Figure 2). While some of the main concentration of movements may be disregarded, as they show attendance at the two schools, or attendance at one of Armagh’s cathedrals, the other movements within the settlement suggest some differences. Many of the major arterial routes seem to be used by both groups, but there are parts of the settlement which seem to be dominated by movements of one of the two groups. As some of these are within the centre of the city, it would seem

that certain areas of the city centre are not ‘shared spaces’ as much as might have been anticipated.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, much of the map shows space that is shared.



**Figure 2**

More work would need to be done to investigate whether these spaces are shared and what the nature of this ‘sharing entails; in effect, whether the young people actually come into direct contact.

The mobility patterns were shared with the students after they were processed. The respondents had to recollect journeys that they had taken, and they often reported that they had forgotten them and it was seeing the trace on the map which brought back a memory of the trip. The use of this technology may be more accurate than asking respondents to report movements, such as in a diary format, as those techniques may not be fully representative of the movements undertaken. However more work would need to be done to examine more closely the accuracy and user responses to each type of data gathering.

## **Conclusion**

Divisions within Northern Ireland society were examined and the impact of these on the opinions and mobility of young people was identified. It is clear that divisions still exist in Northern Irish society which impact upon the views and subsequent mobility of young people, although there was some evidence that issues related to sectarianism and segregation were less important for them than for previous generations. While the consequences of division are apparent, shared space did exist, largely around shopping and entertainment venues.

GPS tracking devices were used to produce images of the mobility patterns of some young people. The emerging patterns seemed effective in engaging the interest of young people and their teachers, providing mapping images which stimulated much debate. It raised awareness of the deep social divisions which remain in Northern Ireland society, and which, without such technology, would be difficult to measure and describe so graphically. Catholics and Protestants showed some differences in their movements, although the small numbers involved in this study preclude any definitive conclusions being drawn.

However, the innovative methodological approach employed in this pilot project served to highlight to the participating pupils the potential differences of the 'worlds' inhabited by different groups within Northern Ireland society, whether those groups are based on gender, age or ethnic/religious affiliation, and the distance still to be travelled to achieve a truly 'Shared Future'.

## Notes

- 1 The divisions in Northern Ireland are multifaceted and complex, but for the purposes of this paper the communities referenced have been reduced to the terms 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' so as to reflect the language of the research participants
- 2 Leonard and McKnight, 2010.
- 3 Ibid., p27.
- 4 Ibid., p11.
- 5 Hamilton et al, 2008, p144.
- 6 Such as Leonard and McKnight, op.cit.
- 7 Hamilton et al, p35.
- 8 Leonard and McKnight. op.cit.

## **References**

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