Interface violence in East Belfast during 2002: The mechanisms and programmes employed to limit the impact on local residents

Jonny Byrne

In the last decade there has been a dramatic upsurge in the levels of violence between Nationalists and Unionists in areas where these communities exist side by side. The areas where these violent sectarian confrontations take place have been labelled interfaces:

> *An interface is a common boundary line between a predominantly Protestant/Unionist area and a predominantly Catholic/Nationalist area. An interface community is a community which lives alongside an interface .*[1]

There are strong similarities in the areas where interface violence occurs. There are usually high levels of social deprivation, high unemployment, and low educational attainment, and it usually occurs in large urban developments. However, attributing a universal cause for the violence has proved difficult, and subsequently developing a consistent approach to preventing interface violence has been problematic.

Introduction

Jarman examined violence and disorder in North Belfast and indicated that no single cause could be attributed to the high profile sectarian disturbances that had been synonymous with the area since the cease-fires in 1994.[2] Instead, a number of individual factors, when combined together, provided the catalyst for violent confrontations between the Nationalist and Unionist communities.

Jarman points to 'parades, territory, segregation, power, young people, policing, the peace process and ambiguity' as significant factors in developing and sustaining the interface violence.

Subsequently, developing a generic solution to addressing interface violence has had limited success, with the majority of approaches simply attempting to manage the disorder. A number of community based initiatives and programmes based on principles of intervention and prevention have been created in the hope that violence along the interfaces throughout Northern Ireland can be curtailed. The NIO have increased the number of barriers and peace walls, and the PSNI have increased their levels of CCTV coverage across interfaces.

Furthermore, a number of educational and interventional programmes have been developed to restrict the number of young people frequenting interface areas. Organisations such as Groundwork NI, BELB and the Belfast Regeneration Office have developed strategies based around youth diversion, in an attempt to stop young people participating in 'recreational rioting' and educate them on the impact of the violence and disorder on local residents.

Community representatives with the support of independent organisations such as Mediation Northern Ireland, TIDES and Belfast Interface Project have established forums and contact groups where opposing communities have an opportunity to engage in dialogue and debate contentious issues. Several community groups have also adopted Mobile Phone Networks (MPN) as a mechanism for elevating potential trouble at their interfaces and dispelling rumours and scare-mongering that often has the potential to develop into large scale violence and disorder.[3]

Short Strand/Inner East Belfast Research

It is important to understand the various techniques and initiatives that have been employed in managing interface violence, and on occasion bring it to an end. It is clear that one interface is very different from another, and finding a common cause to the violence is problematic. However, by documenting previous incidents of violence, and analysing people's responses, a clearer picture can be developed as to the most appropriate method of reducing and ultimately eliminating interface violence.

This paper is drawn from the findings of a research study that examined the impact of prolonged interface violence on two communities in East Belfast during 2002.[4] The Institute for Conflict Research (ICR) was contacted by community workers from Nationalist and Unionist communities affected by the interface violence and asked to document and highlight the impact that the events of 2002 had on local residents. The research funded under the Peace II Programme was conducted over nine months from January to September 2005 and involved a number of interviews and focus group discussions with community workers and representatives, statutory and voluntary organisations, political representatives and individuals and families who lived on an interface. The research focused on people's experiences and knowledge of the interface violence that impacted on the Short Strand and Inner East communities during 2002.

Throughout 2002 there was persistent and recurrent violence in the interface areas of East Belfast around the Short Strand. The fact that the violence had erupted so quickly and continued at an intense level for several months surprised many commentators. Up until 2002 the interfaces in East Belfast had been relatively stable, the majority Protestant/Unionist community had lived in relative calm beside the minority Catholic/Nationalist Short Strand community. Since the cease-fires community representatives from both sides had worked tirelessly to monitor and control behaviour along existing interfaces. They had created a MPN and participated in discussions about issues that impacted on both their communities.[5] In comparison to the rest of Belfast, the interfaces around the Short Strand were known for their lack of disorder, and close working relationship between community representatives.

The developing interface violence

In May 2002 an apparent random, isolated incident materialised into a prolonged violent confrontation between neighbouring Nationalist and Unionist communities that only reduced eight months later. The research was unable to clarify who was responsible for initiating the violence. Both communities strenuously defended their own actions and attributed blame to the 'other' community. There was however a consensus that existing safety measures had failed to alert key people, and were unable to prevent the violence that engulfed both areas.

The violence and disorder began in Madrid Street but quickly spread to other parts of the area, encompassing large sections of the Unionist and Nationalist communities. This was vividly depicted by the very public images of large scale communal violence, riots and disorder. Incidents of pipe, petrol and blast bombs along with victims of shootings, and people displaced from their homes were common occurrences throughout the year. Streets such as Clandeboye Gardens in Short Strand and Cluan Place on the other side of the peace line became synonymous with nightly violence and running battles with the police.

The majority of interviewees were surprised that Cluan Place and Clandeboye Gardens became the focal point for much of the violence and disorder. Prior to 2002 local residents previously associated them with places '*that nothing ever happened in*'. However, this area was identified by the majority of respondents as encompassing the worst and the most destructive of the violence and disorder. Two videos, one released by the Inner East Forum 'Cluan Place: The Terror and the Truth' and the other by The Short Strand Community Forum 'The Siege of Short Strand', depict in graphic detail the extent and ferocity of the violence experienced by communities living directly on the interface. The videos, although clearly one-sided in their portrayal of the violence, clearly provide the viewer with a sense of the anger, hurt, desperation and isolation experienced by residents from both communities.

Escalation in violence

There was a dramatic change in the level of disorder at the beginning of June 2002. Five people from the Protestant community were shot in and around Cluan Place. According to many interviewees the victims were either assisting people to leave Cluan Place and surrounding areas or helping to board up the windows of some of the recently uninhabited properties. They were also adamant that the shots were fired from within the Short Strand. These shooting incidents sent shock waves through the Protestant/Unionist community in East Belfast. There was a sense of real desperation, with many looking towards Loyalist paramilitaries for retribution. The research findings reported that both communities expected a strong military response from the Loyalist groups, but this was not the case.

Interface violence in East Belfast during 2002: The mechanisms and
programmes employed to limit the impact on local residents

19

Impact of violence and disorder

The research provided people with an opportunity to discuss the impact that the violence had on their families and themselves. In some cases the effects were short term, while in other cases the effects have yet to emerge. It was difficult to determine whether one community was more badly affected, and it was both impossible and insensitive to judge one person's pain and suffering over another's. A large number of families were forced to abandon their homes due to petrol and blast bomb attacks. The research indicated that the majority of displaced families came from the Protestant/Unionist community in Cluan Place, with several families refusing to return. There were several reported incidents of parents having to lift children from their beds in the middle of the night, often leaving personnel belongings behind. There were fewer cases of displaced families in the Short Strand, because most people owned their homes, and so were not in a position to leave them. However, in several cases mothers and children had to be placed in accommodation in other parts of the Strand, while fathers remained and defended their properties.

There was a general consensus that young people were detrimentally affected, some more so than others, by the interface violence. Accounts of children behaving more aggressively, bed wetting, having nightmares, being overly dependent on their parents, poor concentration levels and refusing to play outside were common from both sides of the community. Discussions with education authorities revealed that several young people who lived within the immediate interface area underwent significant behavioural changes both during and after the communal disorder. Children were frightened to play outside during break times; those that did engage in play, often participated in role play scenarios acting out violent exchanges between Catholics and Protestants; and in some cases children would refuse to participate in school activities because they thought some harm would come to their parents while they were away from them.

Many of the adult interviewees talked about a sense of disbelief, paranoia and denial expressed by long term residents of the Short Strand and Inner East Belfast. Large sections of both communities felt that they were caught up in a conflict that they knew nothing about nor wanted to be involved in. Several vivid accounts highlighting the mental stress adults went through were recounted to the author. There was a strong feeling of helplessness expressed

by adults. This was heightened when their children would constantly bombard them with questions about the violence:

Why do the people hate us so much?

Why do they want to hurt us?

Am I going to be safe tonight?

In most cases adults did not have the answers to these questions, because they could not comprehend the situation themselves. The inability to answer truthfully made many feel inadequate and believe that they were failing their children. Several adults noted that at the time there was a growing dependence on alcohol and prescription drugs, as a way to calm nerves and assist in sleeping. In most cases this decreased as the levels of violence minimised, but for some the memories are still too raw and their dependence on drugs and alcohol continues.

Documenting the full impact of the violence and disorder has proved difficult. There are adults and young people who have yet to show signs of being affected, but many respondents who live within both communities feel that substantial numbers of people will require future assistance to deal with the implications of what happened in 2002.

Decreasing interface violence

Nobody was categorically able to identify a date when the violence finally subsided. Everyone was able to confirm the beginning of the communal disorder, but there was great difficulty in identifying an end. Instead, there was general agreement that the violence gradually became more sporadic and isolated near the end of 2002. A number of reasons for the diminishing violence were offered, which provide an opportunity to highlight the ad hoc, but ultimately successful approaches used to reduce interface violence.

1. Community leadership

The majority of respondents felt that community representatives and leaders were instrumental in reducing the interface violence. It was apparent

Interface violence in East Belfast during 2002: The mechanisms and
programmes employed to limit the impact on local residents

21

that after nearly six months of constant violence and disorder, both communities were suffering from the strains and pressures common with living on an interface. Several prominent figures from each community took control of their respective areas and controlled and managed behaviour along the interface. This created an environment where people could re-group, assess the situation, and address their concerns in a sensible and constructive manner.

Furthermore, local residents requested that anyone who did not live on or close to the interfaces would not be welcome in the area. Residents became aware that the main protagonists in the violence were outsiders, who never experienced any of the consequences of their actions. This finding has been reflected in previous research into interface violence[6] that noted that violence is often perpetrated from 'hinterlands' close to the interface, and that interface communities are the site, rather than the sole source, of intercommunity violence. [7]

2. Outside support

It was apparent that organisations from outside the area, along with political representatives played a pivotal role in creating an environment where discussions could take place between the two communities. Groups that had no vested interest in the disputes and which were perceived as neutral facilitated discussions and provided guidance and advice on contentious issues. Ultimately co-operation and participation were required from the communities themselves, but the input from outside organisations should not be under valued.

One avenue of support was the deployment of independent monitors from BIP, Mediation Northern Ireland and TIDES along the interfaces to observe and monitor behaviour. A MPN was also re-established to provide a further mechanism for monitoring incidents. It was clear from discussions with community workers that many of the previous violent exchanges were the result of lies and rumours. These would be spread throughout the community and often resulted in young people initiating attacks on the 'other' side. It was envisaged that the independent monitors along with the MPN would dispel the opportunity for lies and increase levels of communication between both sides.

3. Paramilitary influence

There is no doubt that paramilitaries from both sides showed high levels of restraint, when others expected them to engage in open warfare. At the time when the five Protestants were shot, people expected Loyalist paramilitaries to retaliate in kind. However, the Loyalist groups, which were part of the Inner East Forum, an ad hoc body consisting of statutory, voluntary and community groups representing the residents of Inner East Belfast, resisted. This Forum was crucial in advising and assisting Loyalist groups in confronting the violence in their community. Several interviewees from the Unionist community were critical of the non-response by the Loyalist paramilitaries, and noted that sections of their community had not forgotten, and at particular times it is brought up to mock and ridicule the leadership of Loyalist groups.

Similarly, representatives from Republican groups were criticised by some residents from the Short Strand for not standing up to the Loyalist violence emanating from Inner East Belfast. People witnessed their homes being set on fire and their children injured by nail and blast bombs, and they felt that Republicans were either not doing enough to defend their community or pursing retaliation for the injustces that they were experiencing.

However, it is important to note that the research findings did not absolve paramilitaries of total blame for what happened in 2002. There was evidence that at times paramilitaries initiated and encouraged violent confrontations at the interfaces, especially in relation to the behaviour of young people. However, in retrospect the fact that neither Republican nor Loyalist paramilitaries embarked on a concerted campaign to destroy the other community meant that no lives were lost throughout the prolonged interface violence.

4. Increased security presence

In most cases, interviewees were very critical of the policing throughout 2002, regardless of their community background. The general view from the Unionist community was that the police ignored attacks from Nationalists and instead forced down Protestants who were trying to defend their own communities. On the other hand, those from the Nationalist community felt that the police facilitated Loyalist attacks on their homes, and ignored their

calls for assistance. Others, however, felt that the police were in an impossible situation, and that sometimes they became the victim of the rumour mill that was circulating at the time; that is, people started to believe unsubstantiated claims about police behaviour and in effect distanced themselves from the police without provocation.

In the latter part of the year the police, along with the army, began to swamp the interface areas with large numbers of personnel. Huge resources were placed into the area in an attempt to curtail the nightly disturbances. To many observers, this was a success and created an environment with no rioters, or petrol and blast bombs. As a result tensions began to decrease and the stage was set for both communities to establish contact and ultimately engage in dialogue. However, there were those from the Nationalist community who were critical of this policy adopted by the security forces. They felt in particular that the deployment of the Royal Irish Regiment in Short Strand was un-necessary, insensitive and simply increased anger and frustration within the Catholic community.

5. Economic implications

The research highlighted the detrimental effect that the interface violence had on the local economy and the potential economic regeneration programmes for the area. Further attempts to determine whether there was a significant link between the failing local economy and the decline in interface violence proved inconclusive. However, a small number of interviewees felt that the closing of local businesses and the lack of investment had an impact on local residents who were ashamed of what their community had become. They speculate that this negative perception of the area spurned some people into seeking a peaceful solution to the interface violence.

The importance of each of theses programmes, initiatives and group decisions cannot be understated. They were each critical in managing the interface violence and ultimately bringing a sense of control to the situation. Determining who or what was most influential in minimising the violence is difficult. They all played a significant role, and should best be viewed as a collective process and not as individual approaches.

Summary

There are two important conclusions that can be drawn from the research findings. The first refers to the actual process that interviewees went through while participating in the research, and the impact that it had on their lives. The second outcome relates specifically to the monitoring, managing and preventing of violence at interfaces.

The process that interviewees went through involved informal discussions with the researcher on their experiences of the interface violence in 2002. For many this was the first opportunity that they had to talk to anyone about what had happened and how it had impacted on their lives, in some respects it provided some degree of closure. Currently, within society there is a debate surrounding the most appropriate method of providing closure for those affected by the Troubles. Recent media attention has focused on two initiatives that many believe will go some way to creating an environment where people can move on and shape their own futures. The debate still rages about the merits of having some form of Truth Commission[8]; also, the PSNI have recently established a new Historical Enquires Team.[9] These projects, if fully adopted, will allow people a chance to provide their experiences of painful incidents, and give voices to those who have never been heard.

The research in East Belfast is one form of coming to terms with the past. It involved looking back, documenting and analysing a controversial period in the history of two communities whose relationship had been severely fragmented. People had an opportunity to recount their understandings, experiences and perceptions of what happened in the Short Strand and Inner East area of Belfast throughout 2002. The findings attempted to convey the differing and sometimes contrasting interpretations that the two communities had of what happened and why it happened. In retrospect this was very successful, with many interviewees simply grateful to have the chance to bring a degree of closure to a painful event in their lives. Furthermore, for many it was an opportunity to read for the first time from the published report the experiences of the 'other' community, and there was an acknowledgement that one person's suffering was no different than another's.

In relation to the interface violence in East Belfast, it was apparent that several events and programmes minimised and limited the levels of violence. These initiatives can be seen at three levels: voluntary (the role of community workers), statutory (police tactics and expanding peace lines) and

Interface violence in East Belfast during 2002: The mechanisms and
programmes employed to limit the impact on local residents

25

governmental (direct funding for interface communities). It was clearly
evident that input was required from all three to create the environment where
co-operation and dialogue could exist between the Unionist and Nationalist
communities and bring an end to the prolonged interface violence. These
approaches could be applied to interfaces throughout Northern Ireland. Issues
around housing regeneration, economic and social development, youth policy
and capacity building at a community level need to be addressed at all levels,
so that interface violence will be prevented and not just managed.

Notes

1   Belfast Interface Project, 2004.
2   Jarman, 2002.
3   Hamilton, 2001.
4   Byrne, 2005.
5   Belfast Interface Project, 1999.
6   Heatley, 2004; Jarman, 2002.
7   Belfast Interface Project, 2004.
8   Lundy, 2005.
9   www.psni.police/media

References

Belfast Interface Project (1999), *Inner East Outer West*. Belfast, Belfast
    Interface Project.

Belfast Interface Project (2004), *A policy agenda for the Interface*, Belfast,
    Belfast Interface Project.

Byrne, J. (2005), *Interface Violence in East Belfast during 2002: The impact
    on residents of Short Strand and Inner East Belfast,* Belfast, Institute for
    Conflict Research.

Hamilton, M. (2001), *Working Relationships: An Evaluation of Community
    Mobile Phone Networks in Northern Ireland,* Belfast, Community
    Relations Council.

Heatley, C. (2004), *Interface: Flashpoints in Northern Ireland*, Belfast, Lagan Books Publishing.

Jarman, N. (2002), *Managing Disorder: Responding to Interface Violence in North Belfast.* Community Development Centre North Belfast.

Lundy, P. and McGovern, M. (2005), *A Critical Evaluation of Community Based 'Truth Telling' Process in Conflict Resolution: A case study of the Ardoyne Commemoration Project*, Belfast, University of Ulster.