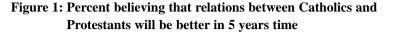# What Now?: Exploring Community Relations among 16-year olds in Northern Ireland
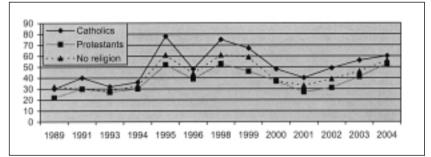
Dirk Schubotz and Paula Devine

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey was launched in October 1998. Set up by Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster and run every year, the survey aims to put on record the attitudes, values and beliefs of the people in Northern Ireland on a wide range of social policy issues. NILT has its roots in the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes surveys, which were conducted from 1989 to 1996. On a regular basis, reports were published summarising selected key findings of the surveys.[1]

However, as with its predecessor NILT was restricted to people aged 18 years or over. In order to provide a voice for younger people within selected households, the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey was set up to run alongside the adult survey. One of the main aims of YLT was to provide a mechanism to compare the views of adult respondents with those of all 12 to 17 year olds living in the same household. However, in 2001 a review of YLT was undertaken. A consultation with users of YLT found that although the interest in a young people's survey was generally very high, directly comparing young people's attitudes to those of the adult population was of relatively limited concern to those asked. The broad age-range of respondents resulted in problems of questionnaire design. For example, questions and topics appropriate for 17 year olds were not appropriate for 12 year olds. There was also considerable unease about the methodological approach of the YLT survey in the then existing format. Interviewing young people in their homes, often in the presence of their parents, raised questions about the reliability of the collected data and the ethical implications of this approach. At the same time, interviewing young people in their schools in front of their peers seemed equally problematic.

**Figure 1: Percent believing that relations between Catholics and
Protestants will be better in 5 years time**

In terms of the human impact of the Northern Ireland conflict on young people, those under the age of 24 accounted for 40 per cent of conflict-related deaths.[3] It was estimated that between 1969 and 1998, 257 young people under the age of 18 years died as a direct result of the conflict, a figure that had risen to 324 by 2003. The impact on young people living in the areas worst affected by the conflict was found to be most acute.[4]

In addition to death and injury, the impact of the Northern Ireland conflict on children and young people has also manifested itself in psychological and emotional trauma. Much of the earlier research had focused on the short- and long-term psychological effects of living in a divided society.[5] Many children and young people have experienced trauma in a variety of ways, for example the loss of family members, witnessing violence and murders, and experiences of rioting and bombs. Nearly one third (27 per cent) of all respondents to the 1998 Young Life and Times Survey (young people aged 12–17 years) reported having been threatened or verbally abused because of their religion.[6]

YLT respondents directly affected by the Northern Ireland conflict

In September 2004, the YLT survey asked 16-year olds across Northern Ireland about their attitudes to, and experiences of, community relations. The questionnaire also included questions on potentially traumatic events for young people and on the experience of sectarian intimidation.

About one quarter of respondents (25 per cent in 2003 and 26 per cent in 2004) said they had felt intimidated or threatened by republican murals, kerb painting or flags in the past twelve months. The proportion of respondents who

felt intimidated by loyalist murals, kerb painting or flags was larger (35 per cent in both years). Interestingly, over half of Catholics felt intimidated by loyalist markers of territory whereas only just over one third of Protestants felt intimidated or threatened by republican markers of territory.

Table 1:
Respondents who felt intimidated by murals, kerb paintings or flags

	%			
	Catholics		**Protestants**	
	2003	**2004**	**2003**	**2004**
Loyalist murals, kerb paintings or flags	54	55	15	14
Republican murals, kerb paintings or flags	14	15	35	36

In relation to this issue, one respondent commented:

'I think all flags, kerb and wall paintings - sectarian slogans and band parades should be made illegal. I also think Northern Ireland should have its own flag and national anthem (not England's or Ireland's).'

Another respondent felt that:

'Murals are there as they illustrate history, but when it comes to sectarian murals, that's when the paint and brush should come out to paint over it!'

Less than one in ten (eight per cent) respondents reported to have been personally threatened by a paramilitary group. Six percent of respondents said they were injured in a sectarian incident and three per cent reported that they had had to move house or that their houses were damaged by a bomb. The figures were much larger when respondents were asked about sectarian incidents that involved their friends or family members. Nearly one third (30 per cent) of 16-year olds said that a close friend or family member had been injured due to a sectarian incident. The proportion of those reporting paramilitary threats to friends or family members was similarly high (28 per cent). In addition, 16 per cent of respondents reported that a friend or family member had had to move house because of intimidation (Table 2).

Males were unsurprisingly more likely than females to report exposure to sectarian intimidation or threats. Interestingly, though, respondents who said they had no religion were most likely to report exposure to sectarian violence and intimidation. For example, one fifth (21 per cent) of those who said they had no religion said that a friend or family member had had to move house because of intimidation compared to 15 per cent of Catholic and Protestant respondents who said the same. Similarly, respondents without religion were also significantly more likely than Catholic and Protestant respondents to report that they and their families or friends were victims of paramilitary beatings.

Table 2:
Respondents reporting exposure to sectarian incidences (YLT 2004)

	%					
	Cath	Prot	No religion	Males	Females	All
Ever threatened by paramilitary group						
Respondent	8	8	8	9	7	8
Respondent's friends or family	26	28	33	29	27	28
Ever moved house because of intimidation						
Respondent	2	2	5	3	2	3
Respondent's friends or family	15	15	21	12	18	16
Ever been victim of paramilitary beating						
Respondent	1	1	3	3	1	2
Respondent's friends or family	16	14	21	15	16	16
Ever home damaged by bomb						
Respondent	4	2	3	3	3	3
Respondent's friends or family	17	12	11	11	16	14
Ever injured due to a sectarian incident						
Respondent	6	4	6	8	4	6
Respondent's friends or family	34	27	29	32	29	30

YLT did not record data on the socio-economic status of respondents. However, information about the school type (grammar, secondary or other) and plans about the future (intention to continue school, to go to university or to work full-time) give some indication about respondents' background and educational aspirations. Respondents who said they would continue to attend school after their GCSE exams were three times less likely than those who said they would work full-time after school year 12 to report to have been threatened by paramilitary groups (6 per cent and 18 per cent respectively). Respondents who said they would continue to attend school beyond age 16 were also significantly less likely than those who said they would work full-time to report that a member of their family or a friend had had to move house because of intimidation (15 per cent and 22 per cent respectively). Grammar school students, in general, reported less exposure to sectarian violence and intimidation than secondary school students. In particular, the former were only half as likely as the latter to say that a family member or close friend had ever been injured in a paramilitary beating (10 per cent and 20 per cent respectively). This would indicate an inverse relationships between exposure to sectarian violence and social class and affluence. Some respondents to the YLT surveys expressed this view, as the following quotes show:

> *'In my experience, inter religion relations tend to be better between better educated and more affluent people than those people with a more limited education. I think that people who have a better education come into more contact with other people from the other main religious group. I also think that those who are better off accept people on the size of their bank balance or address and don't limit this to one religious group.'*

> *'I have noticed people who are living in rougher areas tend to be more defensive of their particular belief.'*

Feelings of national and religious identity

YLT found that feelings of national and religious identity remain strong among 16-year olds. In 2003, similar proportions of respondents (60 per cent) said that their national and religious identities were important or very important to them. In 2004, 54 per cent of respondents said religious identity was important, but 64 per cent felt that their national identity was important.

Table 3 confirms the close interconnection of religious and national identities, with most Catholics identifying as Irish and most Protestants identifying as British. However, one fifth of 16-year olds (25 per cent in 2003 and 24 per cent in 2004) also identified as Northern Irish. Catholics were least likely to do so, as Table 3 shows.
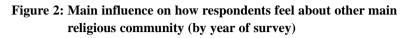
Table 3: National identity by religious identity of YLT respondents

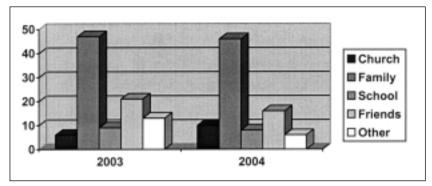|	%					
	2003			**2004**		
	Cath	**Prot**	**Neither**	**Cath**	**Prot**	**Neither**
British	4	51	37	2	43	29
Irish	77	3	16	77	2	25
Ulster	1	10	3	0	17	6
Northern Irish	16	33	32	16	31	31
Other	1	1	2	3	3	6
Don't know	1	1	9	0	1	3

Respondents who either identified as Catholic or as Protestant were asked what they thought was the major influence on their thinking about the other main religious community in Northern Ireland. Figure 2 shows that the vast majority of these respondents felt that family influence was strongest. This was also reflected in the many comments that YLT received from respondents with regard to the relations between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. One respondent said, for example:

'Parents should be teaching their children that religion should not make people different. Parents should set good examples.'

Another respondent said:

'I don't think relations between Protestants and Catholics will ever be better because everyone is being brought up in a prejudiced culture and the younger generations are being influenced by the older generations who already hold that attitude.'

Figure 2: Main influence on how respondents feel about other main religious community (by year of survey)

Other influences in community relations that were highlighted by respondents were the media and the politicians. Politicians were particularly strongly criticised for the role they play:

'The news and politics do a lot to reinforce rifts as they are so visible on T.V.'

'I put a lot of the blame on our politicians. How can they expect to move forward if they won't even talk to one another?'

'Politicians do absolutely nothing to help the matter in Northern Ireland. They are overpaid, useless and only aggravate problems.'

'Community relations will always be bad because of political groups like the DUP and Sinn Fein.'

The current state of community relations

Ironically, the negative opinion expressed in the previous quote was not replicated in voting patterns in the last two years. The second Northern Ireland Assembly elections took place in November 2003. This election resulted in the DUP replacing the UUP as strongest Unionist party and Sinn Feín winning most seats in the Nationalist/Irish Republican camp. The victory of the DUP and Sinn Feín was repeated in the European Parliament elections in June 2004. As a result, the political landscape in Northern Ireland appears to be more polarised now than 15 months ago. Both elections took place between the two YLT surveys conducted in 2003 and 2004. So, is there any

evidence that the election results impacted on young people's views of community relations?

Interestingly, a number of respondents in the 2003 Young Life and Times survey had already sensed this developing polarisation, as the following quote shows:

> 'Politically people are polarising. The DUP and Sinn Féin will soon be the target parties. This can only lead to a deterioration in community relations.'

In both 2003 and 2004 respondents were asked how they viewed the current state of community relations compared with five years ago and in relation to five years' time.

Table 4:
Would you say relations between Catholics and Protestants are better than they were 5 years ago, worse, or about the same?

	%							
	Catholics		Protestants		No religion		All	
	2003	2004	2003	2004	2003	2004	2003	2004
Better	48	53	34	42	39	45	41	48
About the same	13	15	22	17	14	11	17	16
Worse	44	29	40	35	39	37	37	32

Table 5:
In 5 years time, do you think relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better than now, worse than now, or about the same as now?

	%							
	Catholics		Protestants		No religion		All	
	2003	2004	2003	2004	2003	2004	2003	2004
Better	44	44	27	35	37	32	36	39
About the same	9	11	21	14	15	20	15	14
Worse	41	39	45	44	38	37	42	40

Overall, there was a significant increase in the proportion of respondents who thought that community relations had improved over the previous five years, with a smaller increase in those thinking that community relations would improve in the future. Tables 4 and 5 indicate that Catholics were significantly more likely to say that community relations had improved, and were also most optimistic about community relations in the future. In 2003, 16-year old Catholics had very similar opinions about the future to those in 2004. Protestants, on the other hand, were much more optimistic about community relations in 2004. Until most recently, MacGinty identified a continuous decline in Protestant confidence in community relations among respondents to the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey.[7] Similarly to YLT, a significant increase in Protestant confidence in community relations was only noted from 2003 onwards, and notably in 2004, as Figure 1 shows. Whether or not the increased optimism among Protestants is related to the voting gains of the DUP in previous elections is as yet unclear. The comments received from 16-year olds in the YLT surveys would rather indicate that many respondents felt that Sinn Feín and the DUP had an adverse affect on community relations, as the following two examples show:

> *'Community relations will always be bad because of political groups like the DUP and Sinn Fein.'*

> *'Until there is a party that will represent a peaceful and 50/50 type of community in Northern Ireland, community relations will never reach the potential that is there in Northern Ireland. Because DUP and Sinn Fein MPs are holding community and relations back!'*

Interestingly, those with no religion were the only group that was slightly less optimistic about community relations in 2004 than in 2003 (Table 5). Again, one possible explanation could be political polarisation. Across all groups, the proportion of respondents in 2004 who thought that community relations are worse now than five years ago or that they would be worse in the future is lower than in 2003.

Will religion always make a difference?

Respondents remain convinced that religion will always make a difference to how people in Northern Ireland feel about each other (86 per cent in 2003

and in 2004). Protestants were most likely to have this view (91 per cent in both years), whilst a slightly lower proportion of Catholics (86 per cent) thought so in 2004 (84 per cent in 2003). Of those respondents with no religion, 78 per cent felt that religion would always make a difference to people's feelings about each other (79 per cent in 2003). Many comments from young people confirmed this view, for example:

'I don't think relations between Catholics and Protestants will ever really improve because religious prejudices are passed down from parents to their children. Religious hatred is not a natural thing; it is not in-born, it is created by people.'

Does religion make a difference?

If young people perceive that religion will always make a difference, what difference does religion make in reality? In 2004, 11 per cent of YLT respondents attended schools that they described as religiously mixed, that is about half Protestant and half Catholic. Five percent of respondents said they attended a planned integrated school. Just over one quarter (28 per cent) of respondents lived in mixed-religion neighbourhoods. So, how does this territorial and educational segregation impact on friendship patterns?

**Table 6: How many friends do you have from the other main
             religious community?**

	%					
	Religious composition of neighbourhood			Religious composition of school		
	Mainly Catholic	Mainly Protestant	Mixed	All or majority Catholic	All or majority Protestant	About half and half
None at all	42	32	25	40	31	9
One	9	11	7	10	10	2
Two to five	26	25	29	26	25	38
Six to ten	7	12	16	8	13	20
More than ten	11	12	17	11	13	22
Don't know	4	8	4	5	7	9

Table 6 shows that one in four (25 per cent) respondents living in mixed religious neighbourhoods said they had no friends from the other main religious community, compared to one in three who lived in mainly Protestant communities (32 per cent) and over four in ten (42 per cent) who lived in mainly Catholic communities. The difference between respondents in terms of schooling was even starker. Respondents who attended schools with a mixed religious intake were three times less likely than respondents who attended mainly Protestant schools and four times less likely than respondents who attended mainly Catholic schools to say that they had no friends from the other main religious community.

Three out of five respondents (61 per cent) had taken part in cross-community projects. Three quarters of these respondents described their contact with people from the other religious community either as positive or very positive. Catholics were more likely (78 per cent) to report positive experiences from these events than Protestants (70 per cent). Only four per cent said this contact was negative or very negative, thus suggesting support for the long-term cross-community contact schemes. Again, the following respondent's comment support this claim:

'I think the government should increase cross-community relations at an earlier age, after all the children of today are the adults of tomorrow. We carry the opinions we receive at a young age into our teenage and adult years.'

How much contact do young people want?

So, how much contact do young people want? YLT asked respondents if they preferred to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood, work in a mixed-religion environment or send their children to a mixed-religion school. Table 7 indicates that overall, support for mixed-religion schools and workplaces has decreased since 2003. Respondents who were neither Catholic nor Protestant were most likely to prefer mixed-religion environments. Catholics were least likely to want their children educated in mixed-religion schools. Protestants, on the other hand, were least likely to want to live in mixed religion neighbourhoods.

Table 7: Support for integration

	%					
	Catholics		Protestants		No religion	
	2003	2004	2003	2004	2003	2004
Mixed neighbourhood	56	52	45	47	64	67
Mixed workplace	72	69	70	64	76	76
Mixed schools	41	34	50	45	70	68

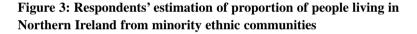**How about minority ethnic communities?**

Although relations between Catholics and Protestants will continue to
dominate debates about community relations in Northern Ireland, an increase
in the number of people from minority ethnic communities living in Northern
Ireland – and more so an increased awareness in racially-motivated attacks –
has resulted in a growing consciousness that good community relations have
to be developed across all sections of society. One respondent to the YLT
survey said:

*'As I am not originally from this country I am able to look at the matter
from an outsider's perspective. I find that most people in this country are
very racist.'*

Racially-motivated violence is often associated with a lack of knowledge
and a distorted perception of people from different ethnic backgrounds.
According to data from the 2001 Census of Population, 0.85 per cent of the
population living in Northern Ireland identified themselves as having a non-
white ethnic background.[8] Although the Census figures are now four years old,
this data does provide the most accurate estimation of the actual number of
people from minority ethnic backgrounds living in Northern Ireland.

In the 2004 YLT survey, 14 out of 824 respondents said they had a non-
white ethnic background (1.7 per cent). Respondents were asked to estimate
the proportion of the population of Northern Ireland who were from a minority
ethnic community and how favourable or unfavourable they felt towards
people from minority ethnic communities.

The perception of the proportion of people living in Northern Ireland from minority ethnic communities was that it was high: Figure 3 indicates that four out of ten respondents (42 per cent) thought that the figure was at least eleven per cent. Only two per cent of respondents thought that the percentage was below one per cent, which matches the closest estimate available from the Census.

Males were three times more likely than females to make an estimate close to the Census data, and much less likely to highly overestimate the number of people from minority ethnic communities living in Northern Ireland. Protestants tended to estimate the actual number better than Catholics and students from grammar schools estimated the figure most realistically, although only four per cent of grammar school students felt the accurate number was less than one per cent and 12 per cent felt the proportion was over 20 per cent.

Figure 3: Respondents' estimation of proportion of people living in Northern Ireland from minority ethnic communities
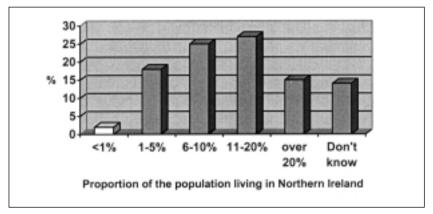

Table 8 shows that two out of five (39 per cent) respondents said they felt favourable or very favourable towards people from ethnic minority backgrounds. While nearly half of respondents (48 per cent) said that they felt neither favourable nor unfavourable, seven per cent said they felt unfavourably (see Table 8).

Table 8: How favourable or unfavourable do you feel about people from minority ethnic communities?

	%						
	School attended				**Religion**		**All**
	Grammar	**Secondary**	**Planned integrated**	**Protestant**	**Catholic**	**No religion**	
Favourable	44	36	35	46	34	35	**39**
Neither nor	48	47	49	44	49	52	**48**
Unfavourable	6	7	7	4	11	4	**6**
Don't know	2	9	7	6	4	8	**6**

There were no significant differences between the attitudes of males and females. However, there were significant differences according to religious background, and also depending on the type of school attended. Catholics and respondents attending grammar school felt most favourably.

Respondents were also asked if they thought that most people in Northern Ireland would mind if a close relative would marry someone of a different race or ethnic origin. One in five (22 per cent) young people felt that most people would mind a lot, almost half (46 per cent) thought that most people would mind a little, and 22 per cent said that most people would not mind. As Table 9 shows, there were significant differences among respondents from different religious backgrounds. Protestants were significantly more likely than Catholics to say that most people would mind a lot.

Results from other surveys, such as the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, has found that respondents perceived most people in Northern Ireland to be less tolerant than they themselves were.[9] Following this pattern, the majority of YLT respondents (72 per cent) said that they would not mind if a relative married someone from a different race or ethnic origin, considerably higher than the 22 per cent who thought that most people would not mind (see Table 9). Again, Protestants were significantly more likely than Catholics and respondents of no religion to say that they would mind a little or a lot. Whilst there was little difference between males' and females' views on how other people would feel about a close relative marrying someone from a different race or ethnic background, males were significantly more likely to say that

they would mind a lot or a little. Over three quarters of females (78 per cent) compared to less than two thirds of males (64 per cent) said they would personally not mind.

Table 9: Would most people mind if a close relative would marry someone from a different race or ethnic origin? And would respondents mind themselves?

	%					
	Catholics		**Protestants**		**No religion**	
	Most people	**Respon-dent**	**Most people**	**Respon-dent**	**Most people**	**Respon-dent**
Would mind a lot	17	4	27	9	22	2
Would mind a little	43	14	51	28	44	10
Would not mind	30	80	15	60	21	83
Don't know	10	3	7	3	13	4

Conclusion

In conclusion, one of the most interesting aspects of the results of the 2004 YLT survey was increased confidence in community relations among young Protestants. This trend was mirrored by the results of the most recent 2004 NILT survey that were published in June 2005. It will be interesting to see if this upward trend is maintained in future years, and if these attitudes reflect voting preferences.

The YLT data provide optimism for the future of community relations, as those respondents who experience mixed-religion schools and neighbourhoods have developed friendships across the socio-religious divide, which will potentially last into adulthood. The positive experiences that young people had in cross-community projects will hopefully also be recorded and encourage more such projects to take place and be set up.

There is also room for pessimism, as despite these positive cross-community experiences, support for mixed-religion schools and workplaces has actually decreased since 2003.

In addition, despite fairly positive attitudes towards minority ethnic communities, the gross overestimation of the size of such communities living in Northern Ireland gives some cause for concern. This blurred perception, as well as the rise in the number of racially-motivated attacks, reinforces the need for community relations projects to address the issue of race now.

Notes

1 Breen, Devine and Dowds, 1996; Breen, Devine and Robinson, 1995; Dowds, Devine and Breen, 1997; Gray et alia, 2002; Lloyd et alia, 2004; Robinson et alia, 1998; Stringer and Robinson, 1991,1992, 1993.
2 Devine and Schubotz, 2004; Fullerton, 2004.
3 Faye et alia, 1999.
4 Smyth et alia, 2004.
5 Cairns, 1987; Trew, 1992.
6 Connolly, 2002.
7 MacGinty, 2004.
8 NISRA, 2003.
9 Wigfall-Williams and Robinson, 2001.

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