The landscape of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland

Marie Breen-Smyth
Charlotte Dean

Maps:
Antoine Yenk

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Abstract

This paper examines urban-rural differences in paramilitary violence through an analysis of data on paramilitary violence from 1998-2023. This is triangulated with field experience of direct engagement specifically with loyalist communities since 2020. The data shows a steady decline in levels of violence attributed to paramilitaries over the period, comparable levels of violence in loyalist and republican organisations, and concentrations of violence in urban areas, albeit in distinct location for loyalists and republicans. Despite its limitations, we investigated the relationship between poverty and concentrations of paramilitary violence, since some impoverished areas are comparatively free of such influences. The analysis also examines how the data tracks alongside the measures designed to end paramilitarism that have operated since 2015 and comments on the prospects for paramilitarism's demise.

Introduction

That paramilitarism in Northern Ireland persists two and a half decades after a peace agreement has frustrated policy makers and law enforcement agencies. There is widespread agreement, including amongst some paramilitants themselves, that it is time to end it, despite a lack of consensus of how that might be achieved. One of the measures set out in the Fresh Start Agreement of 2015 was the establishment of The Independent Reporting Commission, the latest of a number of bodies charged monitoring paramilitary activity and recommending to government methods to end it. They first reported in 2018 and in the last four of their eight annual reports, they recommended direct engagement with the armed groups in order to bring about their disbandment. In 2024, the British Irish Intergovernmental Council announced their intention to appoint an independent expert to assess prospects for paramilitary transition. However, the Northern Ireland Assembly's Minister for Justice announced that she had 'no confidence' in the plan and described this move as 'madness' (Belfast Telegraph, 25 February 2025), cautioning that any engagement with paramilitary groups would lend them legitimacy. This troubling lack of consensus and willingness of the devolved administration to condemn the approach of the Intergovernmental Council is symptomatic of the need for a dispassionate, evidence-led, unified and pragmatic approach to ending paramilitarism.

The context for this analysis is the appointment by the British and Irish governments of an Independent Expert, Fleur Ravensbergen in 2025, to assess the prospects for paramilitary group transition to disbandment. The expert's brief is, "through independent scoping and engagement, to assess whether there is merit in and support for a formal process that ensures the transition to disbandment of paramilitary groups and to produce a report by mid-August 2026." The role is positioned within the existing Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) legislative framework and is expected to report by mid-August 2026.This analysis aims to contribute to the available evidence on paramilitarism and is informed by fieldwork undertaken by International Peace Education Resources (IPER) in communities affected by, and individuals involved in paramilitarism.

The task of the reviewer is daunting. The many attempts to end paramilitarism in Northern Ireland during the 1998 Good Friday Belfast Agreement process include paramilitaries on both Republican and Loyalist sides announcing ceasefires, issuing apologies and engaging with

processes of decommissioning of weapons - Republicans were under pressure, especially from UK and Unionist politicians, to do so. Under comparatively less pressure, eventually Loyalists too, participated in a decommissioning exercise some years later.

The Provisional IRA's political proxy, Sinn Féin became a successful political party to the point where it became the largest political party in Northern Ireland and has held the First Minister's office since February 2024. By contrast, Loyalist paramilitaries have been held at arm's length or intermittently spurned by Unionist and Loyalist parties with the exception of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), the political proxy for the Ulster Volunteer Force. However, the PUP has had limited success, winning no seats in the Assembly and only one in local government elections in 2023. Thus, whilst the republican political project has been mainstreamed into electoral politics, the politics of loyalism as expressed by the physical force tradition of the paramilitaries remains largely without electoral expression.

Despite the apparent success of Sinn Féin, after 1998's political developments, elements of the Provisional IRA were unconvinced by their political direction and became increasingly alienated, initially from Sinn Féin's participation in electoral politics from 1986 onward. After the 1994 ceasefire and the 1998 Agreement elements broke away, seeing the end of armed violence as a betrayal of the cause of Irish independence from British rule and forming a series of breakaway groupings. Thus, various armed dissident republican groups such as Arm na Poblachta, Continuity IRA, the New IRA and Óglaigh na hÉireann continue paramilitary action, largely against the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) since their old and preferred enemy, the British Army, are largely training in barracks and only deployed to defuse IEDs, usually set by some of these organisations. McGlinchey (2026) argues, however, that the potential they hold for greater violence is held in check by 'internal brakes' although she bases this analysis on interviews eleven, mostly elderly republican veterans, five of whom have died, one in 2015[1]. Given the highly localised nature of dissident republican activity and the age profile of those who are currently active, the influence of these veterans and their knowledge of contemporary dissident operations is open to question.

As it stands, republican dissident groups are deemed to constitute a national security threat and thus attract the continued attentions of the Security Service, MI5. A 2009 estimate (Gilmore, 2009) set the numbers of dissents at 200-300 citing intelligence sources, whilst

[1] The eleven interviewees were 1) Billy McKee in Belfast, who died in 2019, a founder member of the Provisional IRA whose activism dates back to the 1930s, 2) Phil O'Donoghue in Kilkenny, who joined the 'old' IRA in 1954, honorary President of the 32-CountySovereignty Movement, 3) Peig King in Dublin (from Tyrone) who died in 2019 was active since the 1940s and was a senior figure in Republican Sinn Féin and Cumann na mBan, 4) Paddy King in Dublin, a member of the Republican Sinn Fein Movement, whose activism dates back to the 1940s, 5) Dan Hoban in Mayo who died in 2021 was alleged Chief of Staff of the Continuity IRA and whose republican activity dates back to the 1950s, 6) Richard Behal in Killarney in County Kerry, whose activism dates back to the 1950s, 7) Gerry McKerr in Lurgan in North Armagh who died in 2015, was one of the fourteen hooded-men who were subjected to torture in 1971 after being interned without trial,38 8) Máire Drumm in Belfast who was first arrested for her activism in 1975, is the daughter of Sinn Féin Vice President Máire Drumm, 9) Kevin Hannaway in Belfast, died in 2025, was one of the hooded-men and a former Quarter-Master General of the PIRA, whose activism dates to 1963, 10) Francie McGuigan in Belfast, one of the hooded-men, who was active since the early '60s, and 11) Angela Nelson in Belfast, a former Sinn Féin Councillor who was active from 1970.

others calculate a wider supporter network of a thousand or so. They continue to conduct attacks on the PSNI and government targets (BBC, 2023[2]).

The persistence of armed violence following a peace agreement is a well-documented feature of peace settlements (Quinn and Sharif, 2022; Steenkamp, 2005; 2011; Merz, 2012).
The UK government review[3] of 2015 concluded that paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland:

> '…still have leadership structures and sub-groups… [and] …still organise themselves along militaristic lines and use labels familiar from the Troubles e.g. 'brigades' or 'army council'. These labels make the groups look more prepared for a campaign of violence than they are. Even in the highly unlikely event that the groups were minded to return to terrorism, we judge that they would be unable to resurrect the capability demonstrated at their peak' (p1)

The 2015 assessment is perhaps more applicable to Loyalist groupings given the continuing campaigns conducted by some of the dissident republican groups. Loyalist violence on the other hand is often internecine rather than motivated by their stated political goals of defending the union.

The role of evidence and analysis

The continuation of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is a topic that can generate more heat than light in a discussion, especially amongst those who have a vested interest either in its ending, its justification either in the past or the present and those who have suffered at the hands of paramilitaries. Recent collection of available evidence on paramilitarism has been limited to the collection of crime statistics by the PSNI and the canvassing of attitudes by the Department of Justice who appear to prioritise social attitude change as a strategy. Given the primacy of evidence led policy, it is, perhaps, remarkable that data on paramilitary activity largely comprises the broad descriptive statistics issued periodically by the PSNI and replicated in reports by the Independent Reporting Commission. A possible exception is Morrison's 2024 article, discussed below, which analyses raw PSNI data acquired through a Freedom of Information (FOI) Request. This paper aims to further examine the data elicited by Morrison, aiming to contribute to an evidence-based discussion of policy on paramilitary transition. We also triangulate the quantitate data with that acquired through in-depth field work within communities affected by paramilitarism, some of which was set out in IPER's annual report 2025.

Data on paramilitary violence from 1998-2023: the data and its limitations

This paper is based on an analysis of PSNI data on paramilitary violence since the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. According to PSNI data**,** there have been 3,260 paramilitary style attacks in the period from 14th April 1998 until the end of 2023. Of these 1,891 were paramilitary style assaults and 1,369 were paramilitary style shootings. The PSNI caution that

[2] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-10866072

[3] UK government (2015) Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80ee03e5274a2e8ab52f76/Paramilitary_Groups_in_Northern_Ireland_-_20_Oct_2015.pdf

these attacks may or may not involve a paramilitary group, although it seems reasonable to assume a paramilitary connection in the case of shootings at least. Of this total, 2,064 attacks were attributed to Loyalists and 1,196 to Republicans. The data categorises all loyalist attacks in one grouping, without disaggregating them and attributing them to, for example, Ulster Volunteer Force, or Ulster Defence Association. Likewise, all republican attacks are reported in one category, so it is not possible to attribute to any individual dissident grouping. Attacks are listed by year of occurrence, and from January 1999 forward, a postal area is listed for each attack. Attacks are categorised as either 'paramilitary style assault' or paramilitary style shooting' and then attributed to either 'loyalist' or 'republican. This affords some more detailed analysis of violent attacks, and some limited data on weapons and victims of attacks was also provided as part of the FOI disclosure.

NISRA and the PSNI produce monthly statistical reports which are available online and provide a biannual comparative base. These reports are based on statistics collected by the PSNI, who, from 2006, have used Niche Records Management System (Niche RMS) as the central, integrated platform for capturing and managing data. On Niche, officers in record information on suspects, victims, witnesses, locations, vehicles and incidents. Niche is also used for record-keeping for intelligence, custody records, and case preparation. They also use ControlWorks (CMC) as a Control Room & Dispatch Interface for frontline incident intake and dispatching in the three regional Contact Management Centres (CMCs) from which data is passing cases to Niche. The PSNI also use an online reporting portal on their website), where the public may report "nonemergency" incidents such as crimes, antisocial behaviour, fraud, road traffic collisions, domestic abuse. Since September 2023, nearly 37,000 incidents have been reported online. These reports go straight to CMC, where they are assigned an incident number and managed through to conclusion, whether that entails police attendance, virtual resolution, or referrals to victim support.

The utility of PSNI data is dependent on the accuracy and consistency of input as well as the categorisation system used on each interface. Even then, the data captures only those paramilitary incidents that are reported to the PSNI and that fit into their categorisation system, so it is possible that some violence goes unrecorded. Furthermore, the system of categorisation does not lend itself to certain types of analysis.

Data on the weapons used in attacks and the injuries caused according to the age and gender of victims of paramilitary style attacks between 10 April 1998 and 14 Feb 2023 were provided in a separate sheet. However, these data did not contain data on date or postal areas, was not standardised, and contained some patchy observations. This was of limited utility aside from perhaps frequencies of weapons used and average ages of those targeted by paramilitary violence. Data on charges brought was also provided, although no data was provided on convictions obtained.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the data can assist in identifying certain paramilitary 'hotspots' and crucially whether those hotspots are consistent over the period of the data. We also consider the relationship between deprivation and paramilitary crime but faced several challenges in doing so. First, the most recent comprehensive deprivation indicator available for Northern Ireland is the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Monitor (NIDMD) https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/deprivation/northern-ireland-multiple-deprivation-

measure-2017-nimdm2017 , was published in 2017. As such, it provides a snapshot of deprivation at one point in time whereas the dataset on paramilitary crime covers a period of 25 years. Furthermore, the NIMDM data and data on population density was not readily available by postal area, impeding comparison with the paramilitary crime data. Spatial tags used in data varied from super output area (SOA) in census data, to postcode, to postal district, to ward, to district council area and limited the kind of analysis we could undertake. In some instances, data was aggregated to work around these limitations. As a result, we provide cautions for specific pieces of the analysis, which, despite the limitations were still worth undertaking

Descriptive Statistics

Morrison (2025:11) published descriptive statistics based on the data, alongside an analysis of post settlement paramilitary violence. He examined how overall levels of violence have varied over time from 1998-2023, disaggregated by type of attack (shootings and assaults) and by the cohort responsible (Loyalist or Republican).

He also usefully tabulated the types of injuries and found injuries to the legs, arms and ankles to be the most common, with gunshots to the legs being the most common type of attack.

Table 1 **5.** Victims' injuries

	Fracture	Gunshot	Puncture Wound	Laceration
Legs	229	976	60	34
Ankles	53	245	4	3
Knees	7	151	4	4
Arms	292	17	28	28
Head	25	0	8	364
Elbow	45	28	4	3
Hand	97	1	8	7
Foot	8	48	2	2
Face	78	0	0	39

Source: Morrison, 2025:13.

Prevalence of victimhood

Using 2021 census data, Morrison calculates that a rough estimate of 1 in 584 people is a victim of paramilitary attacks overall, but when applied to the sub-population of younger men, he found 20–24-year-olds to be most at risk, with one in every 81 male between 15-19 years old, one in every 73 male between 20 and 24 years old, and one in every 103 male between 25 and 29 years old being victims of attacks.

Morrison considers the ratios in Belfast and Derry Londonderry where attacks are concentrated and finds the highest ratio of attack, one in every 22 males, is in the 15-19 age group, compared with one in every 24 in the 20-24 age group and one in every 31 in the 25-29 age group is a victim. Morrison found that those in the age range 20–24-year-old was the range in which victims were most numerous, with an overall mean age of victims of 27.68 years with a standard deviation of 10.16.

Morrison notes the very low level of charges brought against perpetrators reporting a total of 29 charges over the period from 2009- 2023 for recorded total of 1,084 attacks , 25 charges for assault for a total of 741 assaults and 4 charges for a total of 343 recorded paramilitary shooting. He did not have data for the numbers of percentages of these charges that led to a conviction. These data alone illustrate the inadequacy of reliance on a purely policing response to paramilitary crime.

Weapons

We examined the FOI data on weapons used, injuries sustained, age and gender of victims, tabularised in Table 2. Some caution is necessary with this analysis as in almost half the cases (46.6%) the type of weapon used is unknown or not recorded. Where the type of weapons is known we found that just over 42% of all paramilitary style attacks involved a firearm, the most common weapon used in the paramilitary style attacks, with firearms being used in 1,370 cases. This suggests comparatively easy access to weapons by the paramilitaries involved in these attacks, with the analysis suggesting that firearms tend to be used on younger victims. Figure 1 shows the frequency of use of each weapon type diagrammatically.

Table 2: Frequency of Weapons (Categorised)

Weapon Category	Number	%	Modal Victim Age	Average Age
Firearm	1379	42.3%	19	27
Firearm and Other	3	0.1%	18	30.7
Fist Fight	57	1.7%	19	30
Both Metal and Wooden Weapons	60	1.8%	25	31.2
Metal Weapon	144	4.4%	23	29.9
Wooden Weapon	91	2.8%	23	29.9
Other	7	0.2%	20	30
Unknown	1519	46.6%	18	27.7
Total	**3,260**			

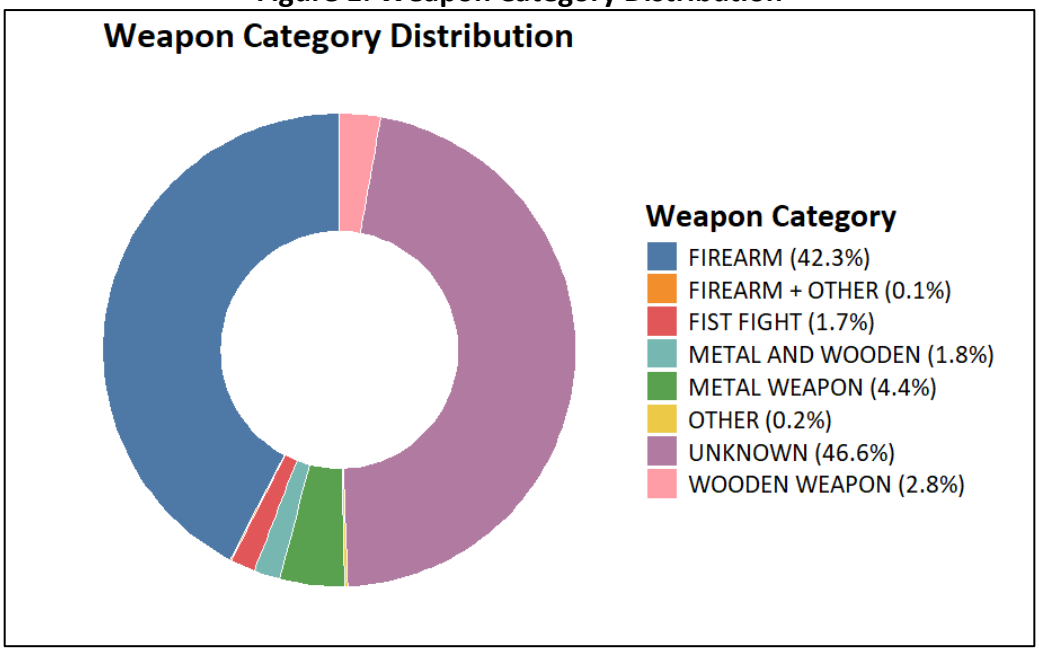
Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

Given the prevalence of knife crime elsewhere in the UK, the 144 (4.4%) attacks conducted with a metal weapon is noteworthy, being much less favoured by attackers than firearms. Other weapon use could be opportunistic, with bats recorded as being used as a weapon in 145 attacks and a baseball bat in 107 of these, while a hammer was used in 109 attacks[4]. Other

[4] Bats appear in both single weapon attacks and double weapon attacks that could include bats and are as they also appear in both 'wooden weapons' and 'wooden and metal' categories so are potentially double counted, hence the inconsistency in the figures.

weapons that have been used in attacks include knuckle dusters (11), metal poles (70), crowbars (15) and sledgehammers (14).

Figure 1: Weapon Category Distribution

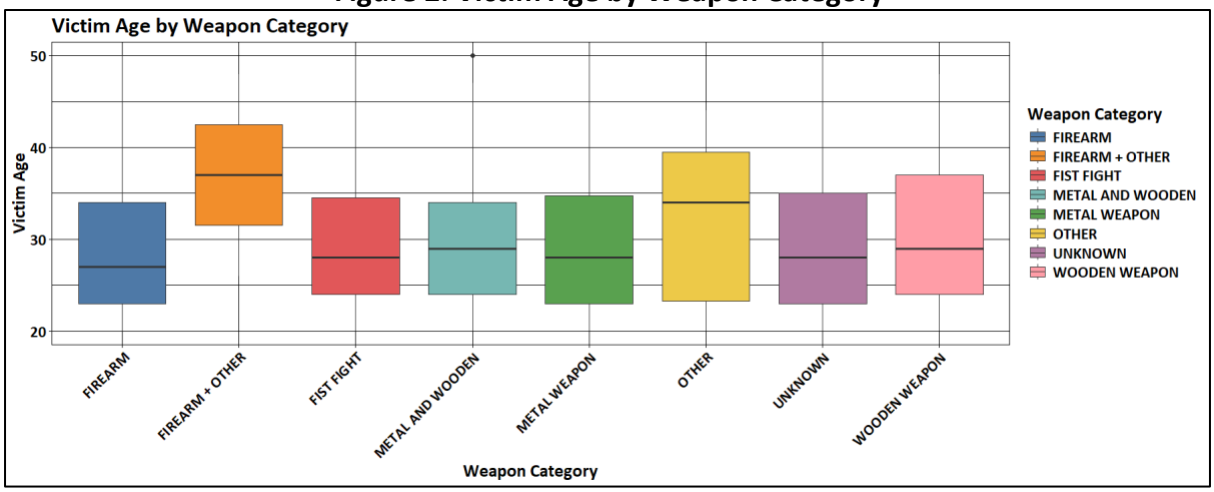


Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

The prevalence of the use of firearms in these attacks must give pause for thought and perhaps calls for a revisiting of the issue of weapons decommissioning. Firearms are the most easily accessed of any of the weapons categories recorded.

Figure 2 shows the type of weapon used according to the age of the victim, noting the salience of the use of firearms on younger victims.

Figure 2: Victim Age by Weapon Category



Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

It is not clear from these data whether any of these victims are members of paramilitary groups or whether they are members of the public. From data elsewhere we know that

roughly half of all recorded crime in Northern Ireland is comprised of anti-social behaviour[5], so it is likely that some of these attacks are attempts to 'police' local areas, on occasion at the request of members of those communities who have low levels of trust in the PSNI and have become frustrated at the lack of police action on these issues.

Efforts to end paramilitarism

The 2015 Fresh Start Agreement between the UK government, the Irish government and the Northern Ireland Assembly set out " a set of inter-related proposals which seek to provide a far-reaching and comprehensive framework for addressing some of the most challenging and intractable issues that have impacted on our community." Amongst those intractable issues was the persistence of paramilitarism.

Section A of the Agreement established a trilateral cross border Ministerial meeting to agree law enforcement cooperation in tackling crime and paramilitarism and a cross-jurisdictional Joint Agency Task Force to oversee and coordinate operations and set strategic direction. They further agreed measures on seizing the proceeds of crime, community engagement aimed at ending recruitment and, significantly, 'support for transition' in the form of "Initiatives to help moves away from paramilitary structures and activity [and] …The reintegration of people previously involved in the Troubles…" (p17)

The Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) was established by measures in that Agreement with the purpose of monitoring progress on ending paramilitarism (and continues its work to date.) Subsequently, the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC) a cross departmental programme was launched in 2016, which set out:

> "…to achieve: ultimately, a society where citizens and communities feel safe and confident; where paramilitarism has no place; where the public support and have even more confidence in the justice system; and where those who wish to move away from paramilitary activity and structures are supported to do it.[6]" (Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime: Executive Action Plan 2016: p2)

The Executive Programme contained two main elements. The first of these is the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF), operational since November 2017, comprised of the PSNI, the National Crime Agency, Revenue and Customs focussed on law enforcement and seizing of illegal assets. Since its mobilisation until 2024, the PSNI reported in 2022[7] that the PCTF had conducted 795 searches, recovered £3.1 millions of controlled drugs; seized 183 weapons; made 351 arrests; charged or reported 287 people for prosecution; seized £512,475 cash and £2.3 million worth of property; issued £1.5m in property Recovery Orders; and prevented over £5,154,666 million in revenue loss. In their evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select

[5] NISRA (2026) Police Recorded Crime in Northern Ireland: update to 30th June 2026. Available at https://www.psni.police.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/official-statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics

[6] https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/newnigov/Executive%20Action%20Plan%20-%20Tackling%20Paramilitary%20Activity.pdf

[7] https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/109808/html/

Committee Inquiry[8] into the effect of paramilitaries on society in Northern Ireland, the PSNI reported that PCTF were investigating 6 paramilitary groups which they assessed as responsible for the highest levels of community harm but were not deemed to pose a national security threat. These are likely to be mostly, if not all, loyalist groups. Meanwhile the national security threat at that time was lowered for the first time in 12 years, referring to the threat posed by republican paramilitary groups. The PSNI also reported improvements in public trust and confidence on community safety.

The second part of the Executive Programme focuses on community interventions targeted at specific geographical areas where Communities in Transition funding is made available in each area.

Communities in Transition

In December 2016, the Department of Justice (DOJ) commissioned independent research[9] to provide an evidence base for the location of Communities in Transition initiatives, backed by funding from them. "*The purpose of the task is to identify areas which are at particular risk from on-going paramilitary activity."* This involved ranking geographical areas which are impacted by paramilitary activity to determine the locations of 6 – 8 areas across Northern Ireland where they would locate interventions. The number of interventions was pre-determined. The DOJ emphasise that these interventions are only part of a larger action plan which is not geographically limited.

The method was to:

- Survey a range of media sources from the period January 1st, 2016, to January 1st 2017 (main papers but not an exhaustive list);
- Review and analyse multiple data sets; they list the following indicators which they used:
    - Verified incidents of paramilitary intimidation; (NIHE- location of)
    - Claimed incidents of paramilitary intimidation; (NIHE- location of)
    - Paramilitary assaults; (PSNI: location of?)
    - Paramilitary shootings; (PSNI: location of?)
    - Community Supervision Orders; (Probation Service for NI (location of?)
    - Terrorist and/or Political Motivated Offenders (Probation Service - numbers in each location?)
    - Location of bonfires, murals and memorials; (Unspecified: location of?)
    - Public perceptions of local crime and perceptions of policing agencies and perceptions of anti-social behaviour; (DOJ attitude surveys)
    - Security situation statistics; (NISRA/ PSNI)
    - Community Priority Index data;

Community Priority Index data is composed of the following:

- Civic Assets: Measures of the presence of key community, civic, educational and cultural assets in and in close proximity to the area

[8] Ibid

[9] See https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/communities-transition-b4-evidence-based-research

- Connectedness: Measures of connectivity to key services, digital infrastructure, social isolation and strength of the local jobs market
- Active and engaged community: Measures concerning the levels of third sector civic and community activity and low levels of participation and engagement
- Media reporting of paramilitary activity. (unspecified)

In addition, the research:

- Reviewed the academic literature and research reports on the issues associated with paramilitary activity and behaviours, and
- Conducted informal discussions with a range of stakeholders, facilitated through the DOJ Programme Board

This led to the formulation of a series of indicators :

- Verified incidents of paramilitary intimidation;
- Paramilitary assaults and shootings;
- Supervision orders for Terrorist and/or Political Motivated Offenders;
- Paramilitary symbols;
- Security situation statistics;
- Community vulnerability;
- Review of literature and stakeholder contributions

A scale of 1-3 was used with (1) being minimal and/or limited activity, (2) a significant amount of activity, and (3) as extremely problematic. The level of activity on each indicator was scaled in each geographical area. The geographical unit used for this exercise is not specified. The total was calculated to render a final score for each geographical unit. The indicator 'security situation statistics' was scaled from one to six to weigh this indicator as more significant. This yielded the results in Table X below.

Table 3: Top eight areas experiencing on-going paramilitary activity across Northern Ireland Area

Area	**DOJ Score**
New Lodge and Greater Ardoyne	23
Lower Falls, Twinbrook, Poleglass, Upper Springfield, Turf Lodge and Ballymurphy.	23
Shankill (upper and lower, and includes the Woodvale)	20
Brandywell and Creggan	20
Larne area, including Antiville and Kilwaughter and Carrickfergus area including Northland and Castlemara	19
The Mount (1) (2) and Ballymacarrett (2) and (3) in East Belfast	16
Drumgask and Kilwilkie in Craigavon/Lurgan	15
Clandeboye (2) and (3) and Conlig (3) which includes Kilcooley.	15

The PSNI concluded in their evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Selection Committees Inquiry into paramilitarism that it was "difficult to assess the effectiveness of current measures on tackling the socio-economic issues that either contribute to, or result from,

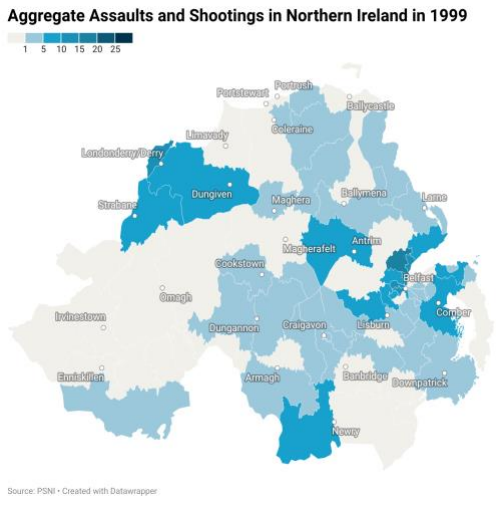
paramilitary activity given the lack of research and evidence to identify a direct causation[10]". An evaluation of this CIT research and allocation is provided below.

Paramilitary violence over time

The next stage in our analysis was to consider how levels of paramilitary violence had varied over time. Specifically, we were interested in how efforts to end paramilitarism had acted on levels of this violence. There was an expectation that paramilitary violence would end with the signing of the Good Friday Belfast Agreement in 1998 and subsequent paramilitary decommissioning of weapons, the IRA completed decommissioning in September 2005 and the UVF in June 2009 with the UDA in January and February 2010[11]. However, even by 2015, it was clear that paramilitarism on both the loyalist side and with the rise of dissident republicanism was far from over. The persistence of paramilitarism was seen as one of the most intractable problems dogging political progress, (see for example, Mitchell, 2014) alongside the lack of agreed truth recovery mechanisms and the fragility of the Northern Ireland Assembly. So it was that it formed the substance of negotiations between the British and Irish governments and local politicians in 2015.

Loyalist and republican paramilitaries combined have been responsible for 3,260 PSAs from 1998 to February 2023 with paramilitary republicans responsible for 1,196 attacks and loyalists responsible for 2,064. Morrison notes a downturn in violence in the most recent data indicate a reduction in paramilitary style attacks (PSAs) in the more recent data amongst both loyalists and republicans (see Maps 1 and 2 below).

Map 1[12]



Map 2



Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

[10] See https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/109808/html/

[11] CAIN web service 'Irish Peace Process - Brief Note on Decommissioning' Available at https://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/decommission/

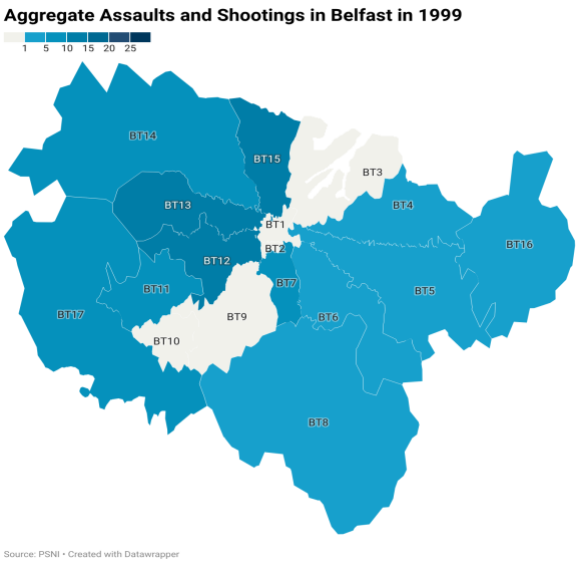
[12] See table B1 in annex

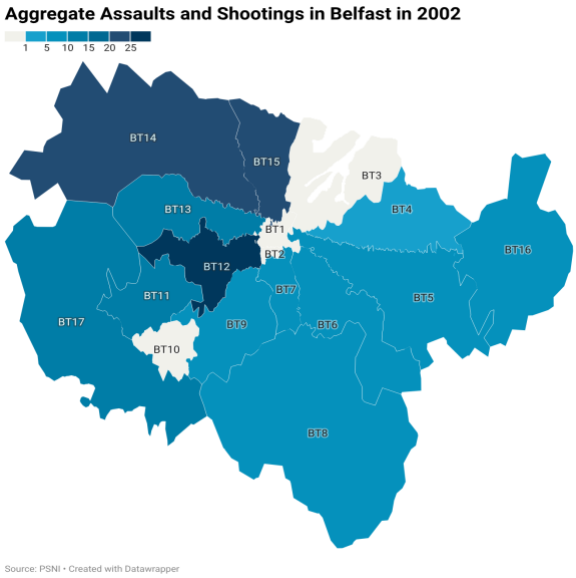
Map 1 shows all shootings and assaults in 1999 (Figure 3) compared to 2002 (Map 2) and some change is evident over the three intervening years. Whereas the intensity of attacks in the city of Derry appears diminished, there has been an expansion of areas involved in attacks west of Coleraine, attacks south of Ballycastle along the coast have diminished, and attacks in Carrickfergus and surrounding area have intensified.

Similarly, attacks around Belfast appear more concentrated, but South Down attacks appear diminished. These were eventful times; in 2000, there were loyalist feuds on the Shankill and Portadown and the Assembly was suspended from February until May of that year; in 2001, the attack on the World Trade Center in New York took place in September, the Holy Cross dispute took place and there was a UK general election where Tony Blair was again elected as Prime Minister. Shootings hit their all-time peak in Belfast.

In 2002, the Holy Cross School dispute continued, involving loyalist protesters rioting in the Ardoyne area and attacking Catholic schools**;** In January, following the murder of Catholic postman Danny McColgan by the Red Hand Defenders, up to 25,000 people attended rallies across Northern Ireland calling for an end to paramilitary violence; in April the first recruits of the newly formed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) graduated, officially replacing the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC); gun and petrol bomb attacks occurred around the Short Strand and inner East Belfast in June, and during the marching season in July; and in October, the British government suspended the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive following a police raid on Sinn Féin's offices at Stormont, which uncovered allegations of an IRA intelligence-gathering.

Map 3





Map 4

Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

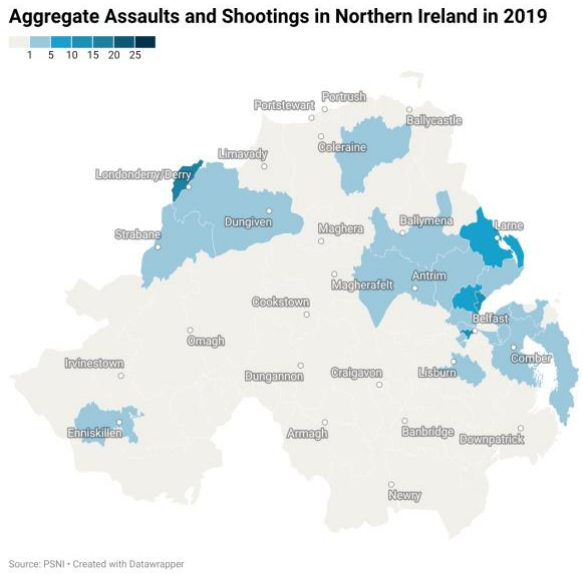
Maps 3 and 4 show the total attacks in the Belfast area, where there has been a deterioration over the period. BT12 (South Belfast: Sandy Row, The Village, Boucher Road, Donegall Road), BT14 (North Belfast: Crumlin Road, Ballysillan, Upper Ballysillan, Ardoyne, Carr's Glen) and BT15 (North Belfast: York Road, Yorkgate, Seaview, Mount Vernon, Antrim Road, New

Lodge, Sailortown) all become area of intense violence over this period, reflecting the political events taking place.

BT13 (Greater Shankill) remains at a similar level with BT 11 (West Belfast, Andersonstown, Suffolk, Ladybrook and Turf Lodge and BT17 (Dunmurry, Hannahstown, Twinbrook, Poleglass, Lagmore, North Lisburn: Derriaghy, Seymour Hill) deteriorating to a lesser extent than BT12, BT14 and BT15. This would suggest, given the location of CIT projects in several of these areas, that any progress can be overwhelmed by political events, and perhaps conversely, positive political developments – and, as we shall see, pandemics – can bring about significant reductions in paramilitary violence. We will consider the implications of this concentration within Belfast further in what follows. A closer examination of urban-rural differences and a comparison between Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland will be undertaken below.

What is notable here is that Map 5 shows all assault and shootings for 2019 compared with Map 6 which shows all attacks in 2023, the latest data in the dataset. This shows a remarkable change during the four-year period with the disappearance of a number of areas from the mapped attacks: the Enniskillen area; the Dungiven area; a large area of mid Ulster; northeast Antrim; the Ards Peninsula. Remaining areas of concern are largely in the Belfast and Comber areas, an area in Causeway Coast and Glens and the city of Derry. Of these areas, northeast Antrim is the only area where a CIT is located.

Map 5



Map 6



Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

Politically, this was a much quieter period, despite the Brexit withdrawal agreement, and the pandemic began in February 2019 and lockdowns restricted movement, alongside the beginnings of the Operation Arbacia arrests in 2020. The lockdown lasted until the final removal of all restrictions in 2022, the Assembly elections were held and the security threat level assessment was reduced by MI5, only to be raised again in 2023.

Whilst there is an overall trend of diminishing paramilitarism over time, the impact of political events, rather than those of any policing or social intervention has the biggest effect on levels of paramilitary activity. Thus, political stability in the form of commitments to democratic governance, reductions in sectarian and racist tensions are arguably the most effective mechanisms to ensure paramilitarism's demise.

Loyalist and republican violence

Of the 14 proscribed organisations listed seven are on the Loyalist side: the Loyalist Volunteer Force, Orange Volunteers, Red Hand Commando, Red Hand Defenders, Ulster Defence Association, Ulster Freedom Fighters and Ulster Volunteer Force. None of these are considered a threat to national security, so are policed and surveilled by the PSNI. The exception occurs in incidents where they may involve themselves in international incidents, such as attacks or threats to visitors from another government, including officials from the Irish Government. Such instances are jointly policed by MI5 and the PSNI's C3 as set out in Annex E of the St Andrew's Agreement.

On the republican side the Continuity Army Council and Continuity IRA (CIRA); Cumann na mBan; Fianna na hÉireann; the Irish National Liberation Army, the Irish People's Liberation Organisation; the Irish Republican Army; and Saor Éire are listed, although several of these are inactive. The threat landscape on the republican changes rapidly as new allegiances form, arrests such as those effected by Operation Arbacia impact on a groups capacity and splinters occur. Amongst those considered to pose a threat recently are the New IRA (NIRA) and its political wing, Saoradh which is not listed but currently considered a threat, the CIRA and Arm na Poblachta (ANP), a smaller, more recently emerged dissident group that has claimed responsibility for isolated attacks and security threats since 2017; and Oglaigh na hÉireann, although their main grouping is technically on ceasefire, it has splintered.

According to Andrew Silke and John Morrison's evidence to the UK Parliament[13], there are fewer than 250 active dissident republican militants across the entire island of Ireland and a core "hardcore" of 40 to 70 highly active operatives. Within Northern Ireland, the Belfast Telegraph reported approximately 45 active members in Derry Londonderry; roughly 40 in County Tyrone; 25 in Belfast; 20 in County Armagh; and approximately 15 in County Fermanagh.

Each dissident republican grouping is estimated to have a support base of no more than a couple of hundred people, indicating that these groups are marginal to the main body of republican opinion in Northern Ireland, who vote for Sinn Féin, who are despised by dissidents for what they see as their abandonment of the goal of reuniting Ireland.

By comparison, a 2020 estimate of the numbers involved in Loyalist paramilitarism cited 7,500 members in the UVF and 5,000 in the UDA. The political context for continued Loyalist paramilitarism is significant alienation and political insecurity amongst working class loyalist communities. In the face of a growing nationalist population, the growing success and now predominance of Sinn Féin as a political party and proliferating discussions about the

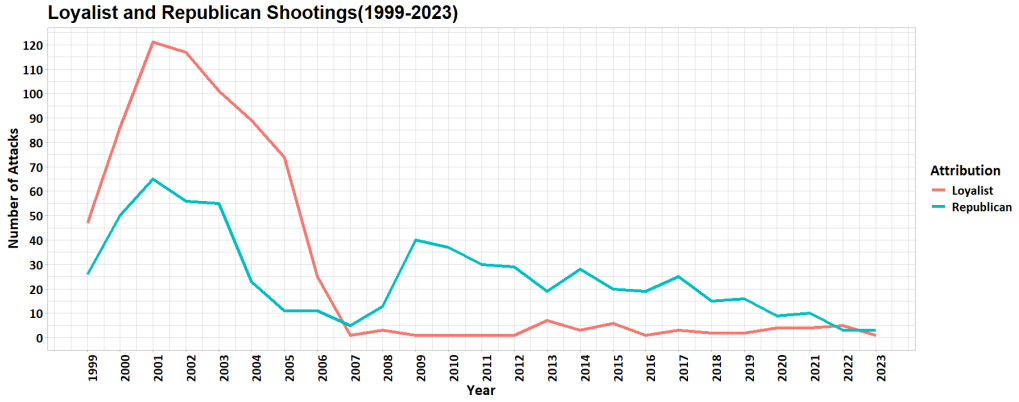
[13] https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/151843/html/

likelihood of a border poll voting to end the union with Britain - a cornerstone of Loyalist identity - is now seen by many as insecure.

Compounded by the failure of Loyalist paramilitants to establish their own electoral voice, the ambivalent attitude of some Loyalist political representatives to armed Loyalism results in strong feelings of comprehensive betrayal and political homelessness. Some paramilitants have sought and found roles as much needed community organisers and activists in loyalist communities with levels of social capital considerably below that found in nationalist areas, whilst their oaths of loyalty to organisations entails simultaneous membership of proscribed organisations that have not yet been disbanded.

When loyalist and republican levels of violent activity are compared longitudinally, whereas loyalist shootings surpassed the numbers carried out by republicans until 2007, when loyalist shootings declined to a low level where they have remained until the present. At that time, the number of republican shootings, too, fell, but rose again and from 2007 on, republican shootings have outnumbered those by loyalists. The difference may reflect their respective wishes to be seen as more or less militant but given the comparatively small number of active dissident republicans suggests a high level of weapon access and usage amongst dissidents.

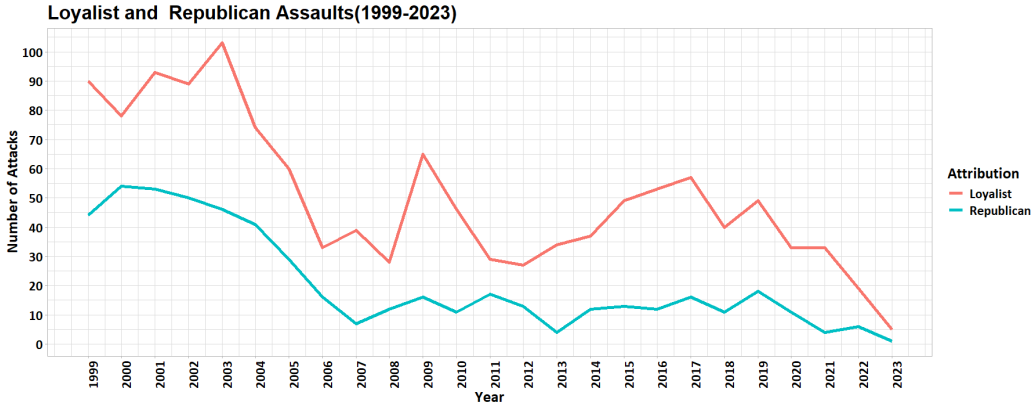
Figure 3



Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026

When the respective levels of republican and loyalist assaults are compared in Figure 4, we see a consistently higher level of assaults carried out by loyalists over the entire period.

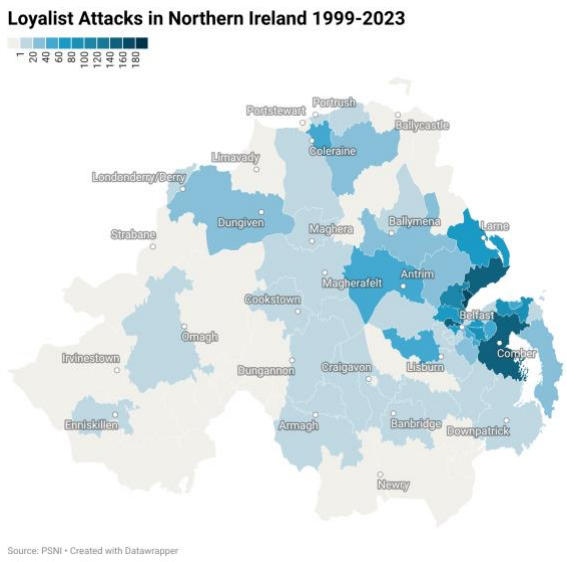
Figure 4



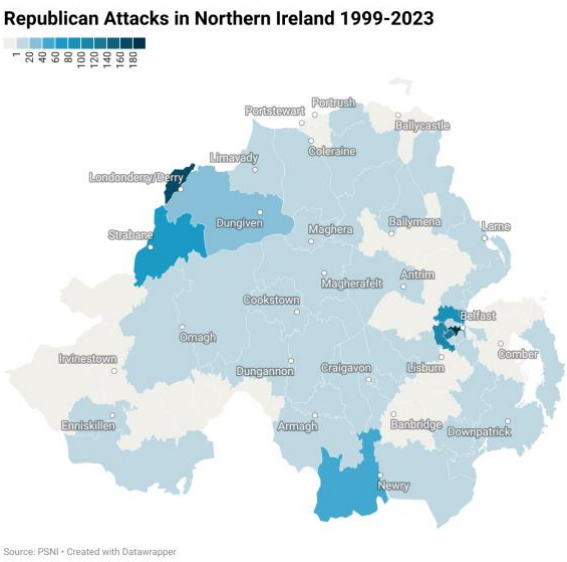
Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026

Again, around 2007 is a low point for assaults for both groups, and republican assaults have remained lower since then, whereas peaks in loyalist assaults in 2007 when Ian Paisley became First Minister and Martin McGuiness' Deputy First Minister and the British Army announced the conclusion of Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. Apart from the election of Boris Johnston as British Prime Minister and the Assembly elections of 2017, how the political context could account for the increase in 2017 is unclear.

Map 7



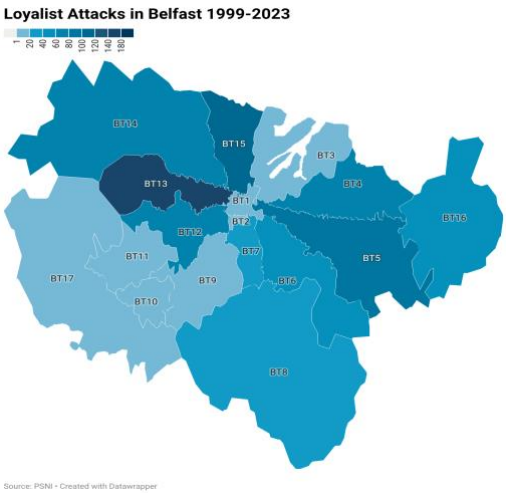
Map 8



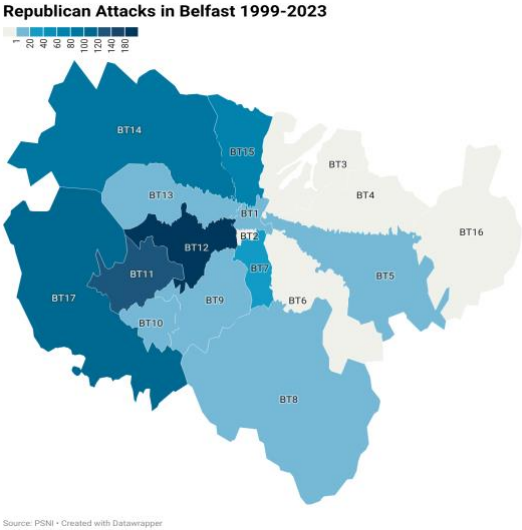
Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026. [14]

When all loyalist and all republican attacks for the entire period are mapped, the distinct distribution of each is clearly apparent. Whereas republican attacks are much more

Map 9



Map 10



[14] Figures for these attacks are in Tables 4 and 5

Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026

geographically defined, although few areas are entirely clear, the concentrations are in Derry city and Strabane areas, Belfast and to a lesser extent South Armagh, loyalist attacks are concentrated in the east, in Belfast, North Down, Carrickfergus with lesser concentrations in Lisburn, Antrim and Coleraine.

In maps 9 and 10, the differentiation between loyalist and republican attacks is even more stark, with large areas of east Belfast being devoid of attacks, and no equivalent for loyalist attacks. In both instances, there is a consistent intensity of attacks in west Belfast.

Comparing the quantum of attacks in Belfast compared to the rest of the country, Table 4 shows the pattern over the period since the inception of the Fresh Start initiative and Figure 5 depicts this in graphic form.

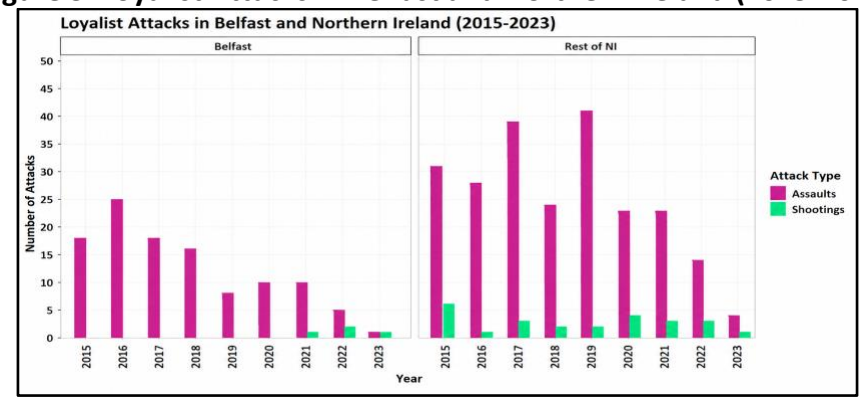
TABLE 4: LOYALIST ATTACKS IN BELFAST VS REST OF NORTHERN IRELAND

YEAR	Belfast #	Belfast %	Rest of NI	Rest NI %	Year Total #	Year %
2015	18	32.7	37	67.3	55	15.0
2016	25	46.3	29	53.7	54	14.8
2017	18	30	42	70	60	19.1
2018	16	38.1	26	61.9	42	11.5
2019	8	15.7	43	84.3	51	13.9
2020	10	27.0	27	73.0	37	10.1
2021	11	29.7	26	70.3	37	10.1
2022	7	29.2	17	70.8	24	6.6
2023	1	16.7	5	83.3	6	1.6
TOTAL	114	31.1	252	68.9	366	

SOURCE: BREEN-SMYTH AND DEAN 2026.

Figure 5 shows that loyalist attacks outside of Belfast outnumber those in Belfast, with that difference increasing over time. A total of 70% of attacks in 2022 and 83.3% of the 5 that took place in 2023 were outside Belfast.

Figure 5: Loyalist Attacks in Belfast and Northern Ireland (2015-2023)



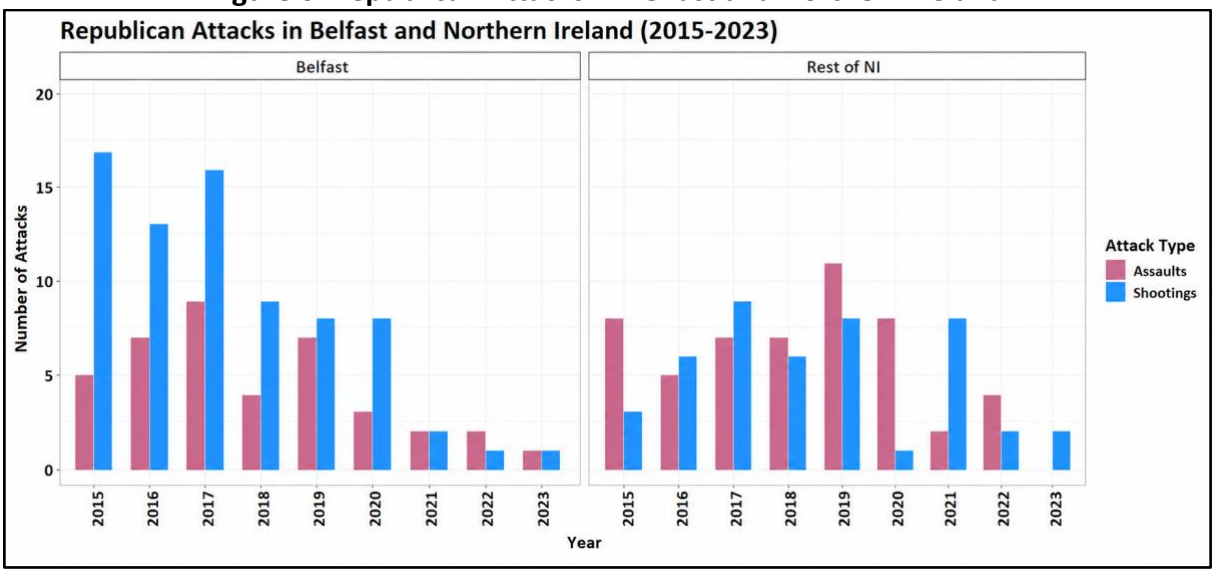
Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

Whilst a similar trend is apparent in the location of republican attacks, with an increasing share occurring outside Belfast, the distribution is much more evenly spread. This can perhaps be explained to some extent by the targeting practices of dissident republicans, whose targets are largely police officers, who are to be found throughout the six counties. In only two years, 2021 and 2022, did republican attacks outside Belfast surpass those in Belfast, although attacks in 2023 were evenly divided between Belfast and outside Belfast.

Table 5: Republican Attacks in Belfast Vs rest of Northern Ireland						
Year	**Belfast**	**Belfast %**	**Rest of NI**	**Rest of NI %**	**Year total #**	**Year % 100%**
2015	22	66.7	11	33.3	33	15.6
2016	20	64.5	11	35.5	31	14.6
2017	25	61.0	16	39.0	41	19.3
2018	13	50.0	13	50.0	26	12.3
2019	15	44.1	19	55.9	34	16.0
2020	11	55.0	9	45.0	20	9.4
2021	4	28.6	10	71.4	14	6.6
2022	3	33.3	6	66.7	9	4.2
2023	2	50.0	2	50.0	4	1.9
Total	115	54.2	97	45.8	212	
Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.						

Figure 6 shows this graphically, the absolute decline in Belfast-based attacks in apparent over time, with a much steadier level of attacks taking place outside Belfast.

Figure 6: Republican Attacks in Belfast and Northern Ireland

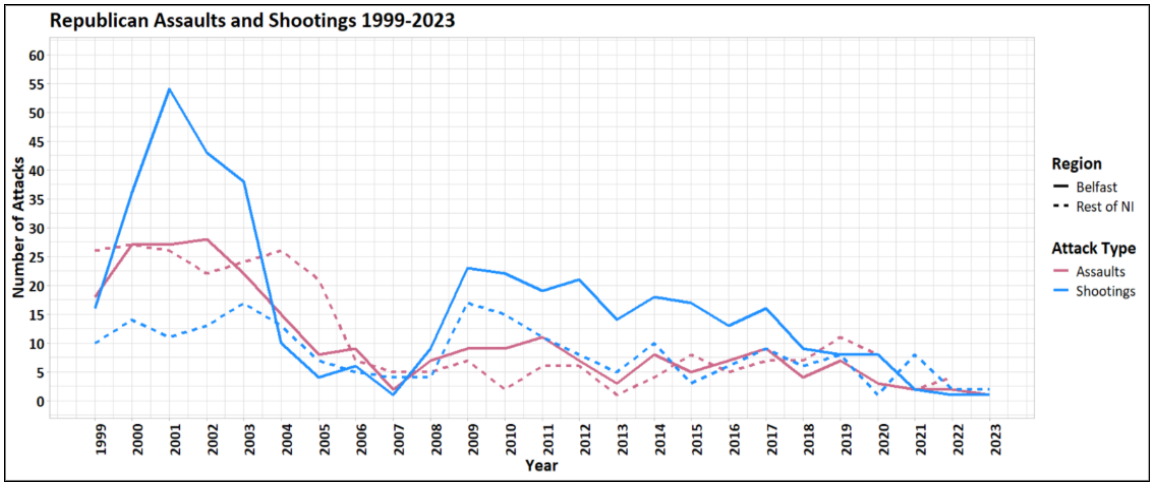


Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

These graphs highlight a notable geographical distinction in the operational patterns of republican and loyalist paramilitary activity since 2015. These findings suggest differing territorial priorities and operational environments between the two traditions.

Figures 7 and 8 show the over trends in republican and loyalist assaults and shootings over the entire period, and the overall decline is apparent over time.

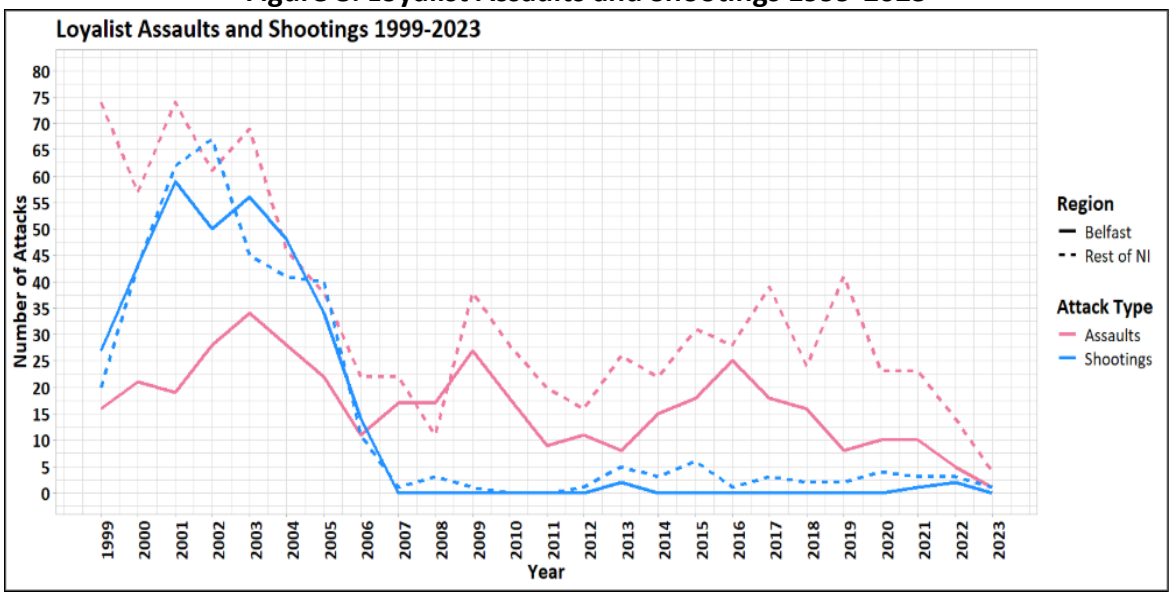
Figure 7: Republican Assaults and Shootings 1999-2023



Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

Both loyalist and republican attacks have followed a broadly similar trajectory, declining substantially in frequency over the period examined, regardless of whether incidents occurred in urban or non-urban locations. Comparing the two graphs, the higher level of republican shootings contrasts with the preference of loyalists for assault over shooting is apparent. Again, the downward trend in both assaults and shootings in both Belfast and else

Figure 8: Loyalist Assaults and Shootings 1999-2023



Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

where is notable, although the level of loyalist assaults remains higher than that of shootings, and is higher outside Belfast.

Urban rural differences: international perspectives

It is well established that the effects of paramilitarism are not felt equally in all places and the identification of areas worst affected can be undertaken using hard data. Paramilitarism is largely confined to working class areas and, as we have seen, loyalist violence is more widely distributed geographically compared to republican paramilitarism which is more geographically concentrated.

Crime in general tends to be concentrated in urban areas and is also manifest to some extent in paramilitary violence. In relation to 'ordinary' crime, this concentration is usually explained by a number of factors: high population density where wealth is concentrated in relatively small areas offers lucrative incentives for criminal behaviour of various kinds; urban areas also contain high levels of income inequality, with deprivation sitting alongside areas of comparative wealth and cities are comparatively anonymous, with weaker social bonds, permitting anonymity and less visibility which facilitates criminal behaviour (Sampson, 2006). Physical decay in urban spaces also provides a supply of waste land, empty buildings which, again, facilitates crime and violence and cities typically contain higher populations of young adults, who compose the demographic that is more likely to be involved in crime, both as victims and as perpetrators.

Historically, paramilitaries on both sides have financed their operations by carrying out robberies, extorting money from businesses, and operating money lending and other lucrative schemes. The overlap between 'ordinary' crime and paramilitarism is therefore not a new development. What is new is that, with the changed political landscape following the Good Friday Belfast and subsequent Agreements, the extent to which some elements of paramilitary group are solely motivated by financial gain. Politics, if they arise at all, are merely flags of convenience for criminality.

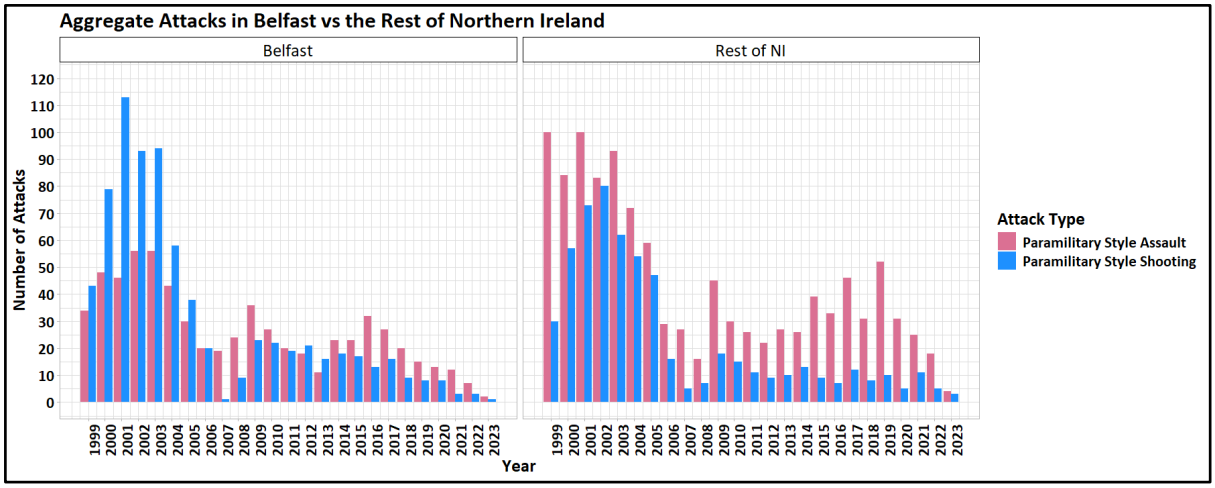
Since opportunities for such crime are greater in urban areas, it is predictable that financial gain is more prominent as a raison d'être in city-based groups and branches of organisations. This is particularly notable in loyalist organisations, where, despite a lack of support from the CIT programme, there has been a consistent interest in paramilitary transition, both within brigades of the UDA and the UVF.

Urban rural differences: Belfast -v-rest of Northern Ireland

For this part of the analysis, we separated the data for Belfast from that for the rest of Northern Ireland to facilitate comparison.

First, we compared the chronological changes in all attacks in both Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland (Figure 9). The increase in assaults outside Belfast is apparent whereas shootings are at a comparatively low level. When we looked at the available data on weapons, the wide range of weapons used in assaults means that ease of access may account in part for differential. Belfast attacks, both shootings and assaults stay at a steady level and slightly in decline, whereas attacks outside Belfast seem much more variable and in sharper decline since 2019.

Figure 9: All attacks 1999- 2023 Belfast and Rest of Northern Ireland



Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

Population Density Results- Attacks Per Capita

Whilst giving a useful indicator of whether an area is improving or deteriorating, raw numbers of attacks are misleading about the intensity of violence in a location. Although Northern Ireland postal districts have roughly equivalent size of populations, Belfast postal areas together comprise only 17.1% of the total population of Northern Ireland. To identify the *intensity* of violence geographically, we calculated per capita rates.

To do this, we used the number of people living in a postal district and the number of attacks in that area to produce a 'paramilitary attack rate per 10,000 people' for each postal area. We used NISRA population census data[15] for postal areas in Northern Ireland. Mid-year population estimates are not available for postal areas between censuses, so we used the main census data for 2021 to calculate rates. Technically speaking, we ought to have used the census data for 2001 to calculate rates from 2001-2011, then the census data for 2011 for rates until the census of 2021. However, in the interests of time we simply used the 2021 census "Person and Household Estimates" for postcodes in Northern Ireland to calculate rates for all years. In our view, the impact on the result is likely to be marginal. (For example, from 2011 to 2021 the population of Causeway Coast and Glens grew by 0.3% the highest growth was in Lisburn and Castlereagh (11%)).

Population density data was sourced at the council district level and subsequently mapped onto individual postcode areas within the existing dataset. For instance, postcodes BT1 through BT17 were identified as falling within the Belfast City Council boundary, and thus each was assigned the corresponding population density value for that district. While this approach allowed for a consistent integration of spatial demographic data, it does present a limitation: population density is not uniform across council districts, particularly those encompassing

[15] https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/census-2021-person-and-household-estimates-postcodes-northern-ireland

both urban and rural zones. As such, attributing a single density value to all postcodes within a district may obscure some of the regression results.

These data were then used as the independent variable in a linear regression model testing the relationship between this and attacks per capita to ascertain whether rural and urban experience diverging intensities in paramilitary violence. The results reveal some useful and statistically significant ($p<0.05$) insights. The model coefficient predicts that for each additional 100 persons per km squared there would be a 0.88 increase in attacks per 10,000 people.

However, the coefficient of determination (R^2) is 24.7% which is a moderate score and explains only a small coefficient of 0.88. In other words, only 24.7% of variation in attacks per capita can be explained by population density, emphasising that understanding triggers in paramilitary violence is complex. In essence, we must dig deeper and realise that a solution would lie in a mutli-pronged approach. Finally, the limitations of the model are exposed by our standard error score of 15.9. This is quite a high rate of variation. Figure x depicts this clearly. For example, BT postcodes in Belfast which have low rates of paramilitary violence have been coded as densely populated, yet they may be commercial or green spaces making.

Given the differential in population density, we used the Northern Ireland Census data for Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland to calculate the per capita rate of attacks per 10,000 population in each year, bearing in mind the caution above about variation between census periods. The last column shows the multiple of the 'NI) figure that Belfast attacks represent, so in 2001, Belfast had 3.81 times more attacks that the rest of Northern Ireland.

Table 6: Shootings and Assaults Per Capita 2001-2022 (Range) of Census)

YEAR	REGION	ATTACKS	POPULATION	ATTACKS PER CAPITA (PER 10,000)	RATIO	DISTINCTION
2001	Belfast	159	328,695	4.84	1:2067	3.81x
	NI	173	1,360,300	1.27	1:7863	
2002	Belfast	149	328,471	4.54	1:2205	3.82x
	NI	163	1,369,200	1.19	1:8400	
2003	Belfast	150	327,176	4.58	1:2181	4.09x
	NI	155	1,377,800	1.12	1:8889	
2004	Belfast	101	326,268	3.1	1:3230	3.41x
	NI	126	1,387,700	0.91	1:11013	
2005	Belfast	68	325,483	2.9	1:4787	2.75x
	NI	106	1,402,200	0.76	1:13228	
2006	Belfast	40	325,985	1.23	1:8150	3.84x
	NI	45	1,417,100	0.32	1:31491	

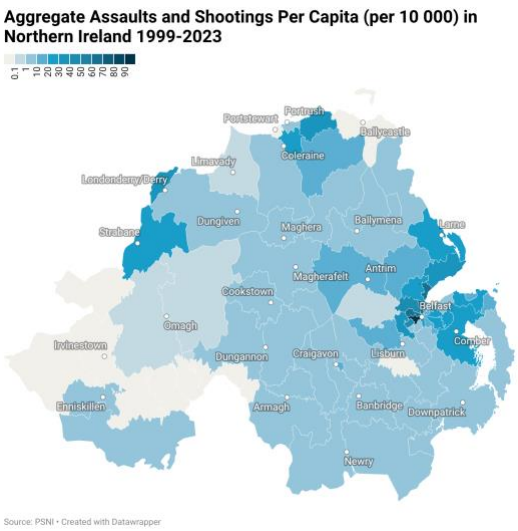
Table 6: Shootings and Assaults Per Capita 2001-2022 (Range) of Census)						
Year	**Region**	**Attacks**	**Population**	**Attacks per capita (per 10,000)**	**Ratio**	**Distinction**
2007	Belfast	20	327,383	0.61	1:16369	2.77x
	NI	32	1,434,300	0.22	1:44822	
2008	Belfast	33	330,052	1.0	1:10002	6.67x
	NI	22	1,449,100	0.15	1:65868	
2009	Belfast	59	331,763	1.78	1:5623	4.14x
	NI	63	1,461,700	0.43	1:23202	
2010	Belfast	49	333,489	1.47	1:6806	4.74x
	NI	45	1,471,200	0.31	1:32693	
2011	Belfast	39	333,895	1.17	1:8561	4.68x
	NI	37	1,480,500	0.25	1:40014	
2012	Belfast	39	334,322	1.17	1:8572	5.57x
	NI	31	1,490,400	0.21	1:48077	
2013	Belfast	27	335,881	0.8	1:12440	3.2x
	NI	37	1,495,900	0.25	1:40430	
2014	Belfast	41	337,382	1.22	1:8229	4.69x
	NI	39	1,505,400	0.26	1:38600	
2015	Belfast	40	340,194	1.18	1:8505	3.69x
	NI	48	1,514,900	0.32	1:31560	
2016	Belfast	45	341,111	1.32	1:7580	5.08x
	NI	40	1,525,000	0.26	1:38125	
2017	Belfast	43	341,915	1.26	1:7952	3.32x
	NI	58	1,533,200	0.38	1:26434	
2018	Belfast	29	343,690	0.84	1:11851	3.36x
	NI	39	1,542,500	0.25	1:39551	

Table 6: Shootings and Assaults Per Capita 2001-2022 (Range) of Census)						
YEAR	**REGION**	**ATTACKS**	**POPULATION**	**ATTACKS PER CAPITA (PER 10,000)**	**RATIO**	**DISTINCTION**
2019	Belfast	23	345,391	0.67	1:15017	1.68x
	NI	62	1,553,200	0.4	1:25052	
2020	Belfast	21	344,994	0.61	1:16428	2.65x
	NI	36	1,555,500	0.23	1:43208	
2021	Belfast	15	344,992	0.43	1:22999	1.87x
	NI	36	1,559,500	0.23	1:43319	
2022	Belfast	10	348,005	0.29	1:34800	1.93x
	NI	23	1,562,400	0.15	1:67930	
SOURCE: BREEN-SMYTH AND DEAN 2026.						

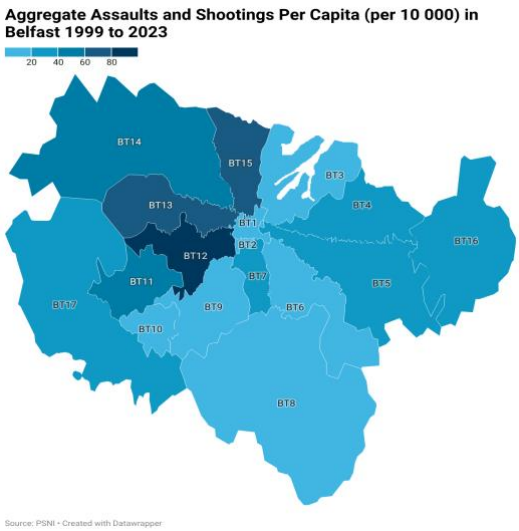
Table 6 shows the results of this exercise for both assaults and shootings taken together for each year 2001-2021. In all years from 2001 to 2022, the number of attacks per head of population in Belfast attacks are several times those of the rate the rest of Northern Ireland. In 2008, Belfast rate per capita was almost 7 times that for the rest of Northern Ireland, and in more recent years the differential has reduced but the Belfast rate is still almost twice that for the rest of Northern Ireland. The rates come closest in 2019 when there is a large increase in paramilitary assaults outside of Belfast, but even in 2019, the rate per capita for Belfast was higher.

Map 11 shows the per capita rates of attack in the rest of Northern Ireland, and Map 12 shows the per capita rates in Belfast. When we look at the rate of attack per head of population as opposed to the raw numbers of attacks, it is an indicator of the intensity of paramilitarism in a postal district provides a better indicator of the impact of attacks on the area and its population.

Map 11



Map 12



Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

Table 7 lists all the postal areas in which the rate of attack is higher than 10 per 10,000 population and an asterisk denotes those in which a Communities in Transition (CIT) intervention is being made. Whilst the CIT projects will not encompass the entire postal district, these rates provide an indicator of the experience of violence in each area. Per capita rates vary widely for postal areas in which the intervention is being made - from a high of 69.93 per 10,000 in BT13 Shankill Road, Woodvale, Ballygomartin, Springmartin, Glencairn, Highfield to the lowest - 11.99 per 10,000 in BT65 Craigavon (East): Drumgor, Legaghory, Tullygally, Brownlow.

Table 7: Attacks Per Capita 1998 - 2021
Postal area with over 10 Attacks per 10,000 People

Postcode District	Residents	Attacks	Attacks Per Capita	Female	Male	Household
BT12*	28,784	265	92.07	14,889	13,895	12,741
BT13*	24,025	168	69.93	12,732	11,293	11,135
BT37	26,056	181	69.47	13,376	12,680	11,455
BT15	28,073	179	63.76	14,234	13,839	12,328
BT11*	27,264	134	49.15	14,207	13,057	11,341
BT14*	34,336	158	46.02	17,891	16,445	14,499
BT38	41,273	153	37.07	21,269	20,004	17,935
BT57	3,780	14	37.04	1,909	1,871	1,699
BT17	34,150	114	33.38	17,824	16,326	13,352
BT48*	59,948	181	30.19	31,004	28,944	24,662
BT23	57,126	157	27.48	29,341	27,785	24,390
BT4*	25,994	71	27.31	13,524	12,470	11,842
BT5*	39,464	107	27.11	20,300	19,164	18,169
BT52	17,472	47	26.90	9,053	8,419	7,418

Table 7: Attacks Per Capita 1998 - 2021 Postal area with over 10 Attacks per 10,000 People						
Postcode District	**Residents**	**Attacks**	**Attacks Per Capita**	**Female**	**Male**	**Household**
BT7	20,456	53	25.91	9,941	10,515	9,237
BT82	26,859	68	25.32	13,719	13,140	10,672
BT36	47,611	118	24.78	24,508	23,103	19,814
BT16	18,552	45	24.26	9,590	8,962	7,969
BT40 *	26,207	62	23.66	13,345	12,862	11,636
BT19*	39,043	87	22.28	20,238	18,805	16,456
BT21	8,320	16	19.23	4,321	3,999	3,695
BT6	30,644	55	17.95	15,757	14,887	13,966
BT20	26,289	41	15.60	13,340	12,949	12,129
BT53	25,827	40	15.49	13,135	12,692	10,401
BT2	1,939	3	15.47	963	976	584
BT39	25,471	35	13.74	12,989	12,482	10,361
BT3	807	1	12.39	348	459	409
BT1	4,120	5	12.14	2,018	2,102	1,099
BT65*	8,338	10	11.99	4,238	4,100	3,162
BT41	44,204	51	11.54	22,391	21,813	17,558
BT28	45,831	51	11.13	23,067	22,764	17,931
• Denotes postal areas in which CITs are located						

Table 8 list the postal areas that are free of paramilitary attacks over the 25-year period. It is notable that they have a higher degree of rurality than those where the violence has been concentrated. The stark geographical concentration is shown clearly in Maps 11 and 12. The areas where attacks have been at their highest lie in the greater Belfast area, and in the Derry City and Strabane District, with slightly higher rates in some of the hinterlands. As you move further away from these urban areas, with few exceptions, the intensity of attacks tends to decrease.

According to some analysts (Sampaio, 2026), it is population density that drives paramilitary violence in urban areas in contrast to rural areas. Broadly, there are two views on this: the first argues that density provides opportunity for violence, it reduces mobilisation and coordination costs to the armed group, allowing them to recruit and control territory more easily. The second view is that population density in deprived areas delivers more political, social and economic leverage. These findings derive from studies in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Ireland and elsewhere. A more in-depth discussion of the various views on this (see, for example Napier et al., 2017; Morrow and Byrne, 2020; Ungor, 2021; Aliyev, 2016) is beyond the scope of this paper, some explain intra-community violence, but fall short of explaining inter-sectarian violence. Murtagh et al.'s (2024) paper suggests that cross-identity violence happens in densely populated areas because of the urban process. As space, resources and local influence become scarcer, 'opposing' sides are more likely to be forced to compete, often leading to violent outcomes. This however does not account for

areas in Northern Ireland that are comparatively resource rich. For example, Belfast is more resource rich than rural areas yet still sees higher rates of violence.

Deprivation Results

The assertion that part of the underlying cause of paramilitarism, or at very least part of the conditions facilitating its development and persistence is poverty and deprivation. In order to examine this assertion, we set out to test it using the available date. To examine the extent to which deprivation can explain the distribution of paramilitary violence, we analysed the available deprivation measure for Northern Ireland against the data on paramilitary violence.

The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure was last published in 2017 (Ijpelaar et al, 2019) and aggregated seven weighted domains to produce a single indicator of deprivation for Northern Ireland. The domains were weighted as follows:

- Income Deprivation – 25 per cent
- Employment Deprivation – 25 per cent
- Health Deprivation and Disability – 15 per cent
- Education, Skills and Training Deprivation – 15 per cent
- Access to Services – 10 per cent
- Living Environment – 5 per cent
- Crime and Disorder – 5 per cent

First, there has been no equivalent deprivation measure produced since, and previous measures are not directly comparable to the 2017 measure. This created a limitation in the analysis. The analysis also uses longitudinal data from 1998- 2023 with a static measure of deprivation in 2017. However, a perusal of the available evidence indicates that the crude distribution of deprivation in Northern Ireland has not altered substantially. A further limitation was that NIMDM is not published in postal area format. Given the constrictive geographical format of the PSNI data, it was difficult to find data that neatly corresponded. However, we did find that NISRA had available data on deprivation, yet this had not been logged in the same format to our PSNI data. Instead, it had been broken down into more specific postcodes. However, it was possible to combine the values attributed to the smaller postcode areas into the larger BT parameters that we were working with. For example, the values from areas within BT12 were combined to get a score for BT12 as a whole[16]. Whilst this is not ideal, as it does not reflect socioeconomic homogeneity in each postcode, concessions had to be made in our analysis. .

A linear regression modelling the effect deprivation on paramilitary attacks per capita within our distinct postcodes contributed to our understanding further. The results indicated a statistically significant and positive association ($\beta=1.69$, $p<0.05$). Translated: for every point that deprivation increased, the attack rate per 10,000 people increases by 1.68. The model indicates that deprivation can account for 31% of variation in attack rates (R^2 squared = 0.31), which is a moderate determinant coefficient level. These findings support the hypothesis of the relationship between deprivation and increased paramilitary activity. However, this does not prove causation, merely an association, a co-existence of the two phenomena, so poverty may be seen either as an effect or a cause or both.

[16] Deprivation and poverty | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Interventions on paramilitarism

In the financial year 2024-2025 the programme expended £16m dispersed to a network of 7 NI Civil Service (NICS) Departments, 22 statutory agencies, over 50 public sector and 180 community/voluntary sector organisations.

Table 9: Ending the Harm- allocation of funding[17]		
Organisation/ Department	**Amount of funding**	**Purpose**
PCTF / PSNI	£5.5m	law enforcement
CIT projects	£2.9m	Communities in Transition programme (DOJ community funding)
Education	£2.3	Education initiatives
PSNI	£2k	Public safety
DOJ EPPOC	£1.8m	Public health approach to harm reduction and violence reduction & programme management (£1.56m)
Probation	£1.69	Projects on women, boys and young men
Communities	£0.88m	Drug related intimidation
Health	£8k	Drug related intimidation

Resilience and paramilitarism

Of this funding, £2.9m was dispersed by the DOJ to Communities in Transition programmes. The goal of work in the CITs, as Mr Irwin told the committee, is to build community resilience. The Chair pointed out that the approach of the work in project areas focused on youth development, which is the responsibility of the Department of Education; on health and well-being, addiction and mental health, which is for the Department of Health; and on employability and youth participation. She pointed out that there were good relations funding and employability programmes and other programmes run by the Public Health Agency. She questioned whether CITs were 'drifting' areas of responsibility for other Departments. She also wondered whether the work was tackling paramilitary activity and associated criminality, and the negative influence of paramilitary organisations.

In response, Mr Irwin pointed out that CITs worked alongside the rest of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme but did not directly address the contribution of CITs to tackling paramilitarism other than to rest his case on the building of resilience.

The Communities in Transition programme of the DOJ appears to be based on the thesis that paramilitarism occurs in where communities lack the resilience to resist paramilitary influence and control. Whilst this may well be the case, it is not clear that community resistance alone will contribute to the end paramilitarism, since paramilitaries renegotiate their territorial base and compete for territory with one another, rather than with communities. Armed organisations exert power by virtue of their possession and use of weapons, indicating that

[17] Figures are rounded; exact figures are at https://www.endingtheharm.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/EPPOC-Investment-2526-final.pdf

even the most resilient community will succumb to paramilitarism when subjected to sufficient threat, intimidation and coercion. Their possession of weapons and the willingness to use them is key to their ability to occupy territory and thus communities.

Location of CITs

Since their inception following the 2015 Fresh Start Agreement, the projects have remained focused on the same eight core geographic areas across Northern Ireland. In March 2025 the DOJ's Ricky Irwin told the Committee for the Executive Office[18] that:

> CIT has worked to concentrate resources on those communities that continue to experience the biggest challenges emerging from our past. … It has been over six years since CIT was established as part of the wider tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime programme, and much has been achieved during that time, with the delivery of 83 projects, which total £23 million. In the past year alone, CIT projects have engaged many thousands of individuals across the eight areas through numerous events, activities and interventions to support them in building community resilience….

In response to a question from the Committee chair, Paul Bradshaw MLA, about other geographical areas not included in the scheme, Mr Irwin told the committee that other areas had argued for their inclusion on the basis of their experience of paramilitarism, and that a review had taken place the previous year, 2014, that indicated they should revisit the targeted areas and extend into other areas. However, they were not granted the funding to do so. Therefore, the locations of the CIT projects have remained unchanged since their inception ten years ago.

On this basis, we examined the location of CITs, using our findings to determine how an updated geographic allocation might be made. In Table 8 we compare the results of the DOJ-commissioned research aimed identify where CIT ought to be located with our ranking of postal areas based on their rate of per capita attacks from 1998-2021. This list includes all the postal areas with a rate of more than 10 attacks per 10,000 population, some of which are not ranked by the DOJ research.

Table 8: Top eight areas experiencing on-going paramilitary activity across Northern Ireland Area (according to DOJ commissioned research)[19]

Area	DOJ research Score	Postal area	Rank – per capita attacks 1999-2021[20]
New Lodge and Greater Ardoyne	23	BT14 & BT15	BT14= 6 BT15 = 18

[18] https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/minutesofevidencereport.aspx?AgendaId=35653&eveID=17853

[19] https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/research-communities-transition-project-b4.pdf

[20] Calculated to 2021 which is the date of the last census

Table 8: Top eight areas experiencing on-going paramilitary activity across Northern Ireland Area (according to DOJ commissioned research)[19]			
Area	**DOJ research Score**	**Postal area**	**Rank – per capita attacks 1999-2021[20]**
Lower Falls, Twinbrook, Poleglass, Upper Springfield, Turf Lodge and Ballymurphy.	23	BT11 & BT12	BT12 = 1 BT11 = 5
Shankill (upper and lower, and includes the Woodvale)	20	BT13	BT13 =2
Brandywell and Creggan	20	BT48	BT48= 10
Larne area, including Antiville and Kilwaughter and Carrickfergus area including Northland and Castlemara	19	BT40	BT40 = 19
The Mount (1) (2) and Ballymacarrett (2) and (3) in East Belfast	16	BT4 & BT5	Bt4= 12 Bt5=13
Drumgask and Kilwilkie in Craigavon/Lurgan	15	BT65 & BT66	BT65= 29 BT66 =ns[21]
Clandeboye (2) and (3) and Conlig (3) which includes Kilcooley.	15	BT19	BT19=20
Source: DOJ with addition of columns 2 and 3			

From a comparison of the two methodologies, we see several areas with high per capita paramilitary violence that do not appear on the DOJ ranking.

Table 9: Postal areas with the highest per capita scores in rank order showing DOJ score and rank.			
Postal area	**Location**	**Designation**	**DOJ score and rank**
BT12	South Belfast: Sandy Row, The Village, Boucher Road, Donegall Road West Belfast: Falls Road	loyalist with some republican	23 & 2
BT13	North Belfast: Shankill Road, Woodvale, Ballygomartin, Springmartin, Glencairn, Highfield. West Belfast: Clonard	loyalist	20 & 3
BT37	(Newtownabbey) Newtownabbey, Whitehouse, Rathcoole, Monkstown, Jordanstown	loyalist	Not ranked or included
BT15	North Belfast: York Road, Yorkgate, Seaview, Mount Vernon, Antrim Road, New Lodge, Sailortown	loyalist – some republican	23 & 1
BT11	West Belfast: Andersonstown, Lenadoon, Suffolk, Ladybrook, Turf Lodge	republican	23 & 2

[21] Not included in postcodes with over 10 attacks per 10,000 people

Table 9: Postal areas with the highest per capita scores in rank order showing DOJ score and rank.			
Postal area	**Location**	**Designation**	**DOJ score and rank**
BT14	North Belfast: Crumlin Road, Ballysillan, Upper Ballysillan, Ardoyne, Carr's Glen	loyalist with some republican	23 & 1
BT38	Carrickfergus, Ballycarry, Greenisland, Kilroot, Whitehead.	loyalist	Not ranked or included
BT57	Ballintoy, Bushmills, Castlecatt, Dunseverick, Portballintrae	loyalist	Not ranked or included
BT17	West Belfast: Dunmurry, Hannahstown, Twinbrook, Poleglass, Lagmore. North Lisburn: Derriaghy, Seymour Hill	loyalist	Not ranked or included
BT48	Derry, Cityside, Ballynagard, Coshquin, Rosemount, The Collon, Culmore.	republican	20 & 4
BT23	Newtownards, Ballygowan, Comber, Conlig, Killinchy, Moneyreagh.	loyalist	Not ranked or included
BT4	East Belfast: Sydenham, Belmont, Stormont, Knocknagoney, Upper Newtownards Road, Newtownards Road, Ballyhackamore (Part)	loyalist	16 & 6
BT5	East Belfast: Castlereagh, Clarawood, Crossnacreevy, Gilnahirk, Connswater, Braniel (Part), Ballyhackamore(Part)	loyalist	16 & 6

In all, we found five postal districts with high levels that did not appear on the DOJ list and consequently were not the target of their interventions. These areas are as follows:

- BT37 (Newtownabbey) Newtownabbey, Whitehouse, Rathcoole, Monkstown, Jordanstown
- BT38 Carrickfergus, Ballycarry, Greenisland, Kilroot, Whitehead.
- BT57 Ballintoy, Bushmills, Castlecatt, Dunseverick, Portballintrae
- BT17 West Belfast: Dunmurry, Hannahstown, Twinbrook, Poleglass, Lagmore.
- North Lisburn: Derriaghy, Seymour Hill
- BT23 Newtownards, Ballygowan, Comber, Conlig, Killinchy, Moneyreagh.

All but one of them, BT17, are loyalist areas. Arguably these calculations should include only the most recent data, but a cursory the most recent data will still include BT23 Newtownards and BT17 Twinbrook and Poleglass. The rationale for the inclusion of data from 1999 on paramilitary violence captures the issue of persistence and intractability of violence, whereas limiting consideration to more recent data ignores the histories of particular communities. As we have cause to know, histories cast long shadows in Northern Ireland, and paramilitarism is inscribed in family and community histories.

As it stands, our analysis would suggest that the current allocations of CIT projects represent an underinvestment in ending paramilitarism in loyalist areas. Such allocations in Northern Ireland tend to adhere to a 50-50 principle, where allocations between the two communities are done evenly. In this instance, there are two main justifications for a larger allocation to loyalist areas. First, additional security and intelligence resources are devoted to ending or containing dissident republican paramilitarism in the form of MI5, and these are not pointed at loyalist paramilitary groups by and large, except when they engage in activities that are deemed to be a threat to national security, which they rarely do[22].
Second, the political stance of most dissident groups, namely that physical force is the best or only way to achieve their political goals of uniting Ireland, raises questions about the feasibility of interventions such as CIT in areas affected by dissident republican paramilitarism. Should the DOJ adopt two distinct social strategies for dealing with residual loyalist and republican paramilitarism this would appear to reflect the approach of policing, security and intelligence to paramilitarism and law enforcement in general in Northern Ireland where enforcement is more focused on communities where dissident republicans operate (see Table A10).

Moving closer to paramilitary transition
In 2023 the IRC concluded that:

> By any measure, the situation inregard to paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is significantly better than it was during the height of the Troubles/conflict. But as the need for the Fresh Start Agreement demonstrated, there continues to be a residual problem in respect of paramilitarism. Paramilitarism represents a continuing threat to individuals and society and must continue to be given sufficient attention and focus. Policing and criminal justice measures are essential in bringing paramilitarism to an end, but they are not enough in themselves and need to be situated within a wider, more holistic approach that includes tackling the deep and systemic socio-economic issues facing communities where paramilitaries mainly operate.(IRC, 2023: 19[23])

The Department of Justice campaign 'Ending the Harm' was launched in October 2024 aimed to change attitudes, to "raise awareness and encourage the difficult conversations that are vital to keep people safe from the harm caused by paramilitary gangs[24]" and to 'actively changing perceptions about the harms perpetrated by paramilitary gangs in Northern Ireland[25]". Phase 1 ran to March 2021 and the Programme's second phase ran officially until 2024 with the overall aim to achieve "safer communities, resilient to paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control". The Department commissioned a survey that found that "77% of respondents regarded the campaign as believable, 66% of respondents thought it was

[22] The UK definition of national security is narrow, focusing on the protection of the UK, its overseas territories, its citizens, and its system of government from hostile actors. Attacks on the PSNI means that dissident republicans are considered a national security threat, whereas loyalists espouse the protection of the UK, and became the focus of attention when they attack visitors from other governments, for example.
[23] https://www.ircommission.org/files/ircommission/2024-07/Independent%20Reporting%20Commission%20Annual%20Report%20and%20Accounts%202023%2024.pdf
[24] https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/campaign-highlight-paramilitary-harms-making-difference
[25] https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/campaign-highlight-paramilitary-harms-making-difference

impactful and 89% of respondents fully supported what the campaign was saying and trying to do.[26]"

The campaign was perhaps designed to address the fact that attitudes to paramilitants and ex-prisoners may not be as punitive as the media and other sources seem to suggest[27]. Rickard and Bakke (2021) describe how "… armed groups create informal institutions to maintain social order during conflict. The remnants of these informal institutions form a key challenge for governments in post-conflict societies in their attempts to reestablish themselves as credible state authorities." In fieldwork, we found that some communities where trust in the PSNI is at a low level, local people continue to turn to paramilitary organisations to deal with local problems more properly dealt with the authorities.

The "Ending the Harm" billboard campaign drew significant criticism[28], particularly in West Belfast, where local businesses and politicians have called for the billboards to be removed[29]. indicates They argue the signs unfairly stigmatise the community and harm the area's economic reputation, while the Justice Department defends their placement as being strictly based on evidence of paramilitary harm.

The DOJ's campaign raises several issues. First the focus on public attitude change merits further interrogation. The advent of social media has offered opportunities for agencies to mount campaigns to shift social attitudes, and indeed social media has also been a medium for various political tendencies to attempt to marginalise various groups in Northern Ireland, including migrants and is the chosen medium of some of reproduce sectarian division. Research indicates that heavy social media consumption is related to the development of punitive attitudes towards offenders. In comparison to neighbouring jurisdictions, Northern Ireland social attitudes have historically tended towards conservatism and religiosity, both factors that are associated with more punitive attitudes to crime and offenders[30].

Are campaigns to further disimprove the already negative attitudes to paramilitary groups likely to change the behaviour of paramilitants and contribute to the demise of paramilitarism? Whilst attitudes can inform intentions to act in a particular way, psychological research would suggest that behaviour is shaped by context, habits, and immediate conditions

[26] See Department of Justice website at https://www.endingtheharm.com/news-and-events/campaign-to-highlight-paramilitary-harms-is-making-a-difference/

[27] op cit.

[28] Rory O'Reilly 12 February 2025 Paramilitary signs 'stigmatise' west Belfast - former Lord Mayor https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd0j8ry99r7o and "Mind your own business says the Justice Department as we search for controversial billboards" Belfast Media Group. https://belfastmedia.com/mind-your-own-business-says-doj-as-we-search-for-controversial-billboards

[29] op cit.

[30] Public Attitudes to Crime and Punishment: A Review of the Research (n.d) Jane L Wood & G. Tendayi Viki. Wood, J.L. and Viki, G.T. (n.d.) Public Attitudes to Crime and Punishment: A Review of the Research. Department of Psychology University of Kent at Canterbury. Esme Fairbairn Trust https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/322997.pdf

rather than by internal beliefs or intentions[31]. Members of paramilitary groups are citizens who will continue to live amongst us unless they are convicted of a crime, and even then, after their sentences they will resume life in our communities. Bringing about an end to paramilitarism must surely involve their resumption of life in their communities as law-abiding and ideally useful citizens. For this reason, increasing their stigmatisation may be counterproductive. Clubb et al (2025) examined how using the opposite approach, namely trusted authorities messaging about the redeemability of terrorist offenders was effective in promoting their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

By 2024, the DOJ programme reported success in shifting public attitudes to paramilitarism, yet negative community attitudes to paramilitarism, as with negative community attitudes to crime in general, have been insufficient to end paramilitarism – or crime.

Penal populism and privileging criminal justice solutions

The Department of Justice's approach is to view paramilitarism primarily or solely through the lens of justice and law enforcement. Paramilitary members and former combatants seen solely as criminals. In a society that has seen significant numbers of former combatants and paramilitants enter the halls of government and one to rise to the position of Deputy First Minister, this cements political division between those politicians with associations or past sympathies with paramilitary groups and those without such associations.

Paramilitaries have historic family links with certain areas where they live, they are known to the community and are part of it. They are often people with status and influence, which they can choose to use for benign or malign purposes. There is evidence in some communities of the benign use of paramilitary influence, for example during the riots in Ballymena in 2015[32] and of people with paramilitary associations working for the good of their community. Such people are keen to transition, to see their organisation take formal steps to transform and to end the militancy of the past. Paramilitary groups, like other human organisations are complex and contain a variety of elements, and efforts to further stigmatise them creates further impediments to reintegration of those who would wish to do so (see Altier, 2021; Clubb et al 2024).[33]

Conclusions

A number of factors has divided opinion on how to end paramilitarism. These are generational politics; the lack of truth and reconciliation processes; and the growth in Northern Ireland and elsewhere of penal populism.

Generational politics

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[31] Bas Verplanken, Sheina Orbell. 2022. Attitudes, Habits, and Behavior Change. *Annual Review of Psychology* 73:327-352. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-020821-011744.

[32] Ballymena riots not linked to loyalist paramilitaries, senior police officer says, Irish News June 11, 2025, https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/ballymena-riots-not-linked-to-loyalist-paramilitaries-senior-police-officer-says-7CULDELDXJCV5CWIB3AFGV5JNI/

[33] Altier, Mary. (2021). Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reintegration: Lessons from Over 30 Years of DDR. 10.37805/vedr2021.1. & Clubb, Gordon & Altier, Mary & Kobayashi, Yoshi & Davies, Graeme & Brownsord, Eliza. (2024). Combating the Terrorist Stigma: Communicating Rehabilitation and Reducing Barriers to Reintegration. Terrorism and Political Violence. 37. 1-18. 10.1080/09546553.2024.2317801.

The generation that participated directly in achieving the Good Friday Agreement and arms decommissioning by negotiation with the armed groups is in the process of leaving the political stage and some have already left. A younger generation without the experience of living through the worst of the violence of the past is replacing them. Exposure to violence shapes political attitudes, including attitudes to those who carried out acts of violence, shapes attitudes and understanding. For example, the 1978 Social Attitudes Survey reported that 35% of Protestants and 46% of Catholics saw the IRA as patriots an idealists and 44% of Protestants and 25% of Catholics thought that Loyalist paramilitary actions were justified. In 1998, Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) asked:

> *Thinking about the reasons why some Republican/ Loyalist groups have used violence during the Troubles, would you say that you have any sympathy with the reasons for the violence - even if you don't condone the violence itself? Would you say you have a lot of sympathy, a little sympathy, or no sympathy at all?*

In 1998, when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, 7% of Protestants and had lot of sympathy and 24% had a little sympathy for the loyalist organisations' use of violence. By 2007, this had changed to 3% with a lot of sympathy and 27% with a little sympathy and in 2022, 2% of Protestants had a lot of sympathy and 17% with a little sympathy (NILT).

In 1998, 6% of Catholics had a lot of sympathy and 18% had a little sympathy for republican use of violence, this increased in 2007 to 11% of Catholics with a lot of sympathy and 31% with a little sympathy. In 2022, it increased again with 20% of Catholics having a lot of sympathy and 41% having a little sympathy for republican violence. Sympathy tended to be greater amongst the younger age groups (NILT).

The current generation of politicians is a mixture of those who lived through the violence and those who entered politics with the expectation that such negotiation was complete and no longer appropriate to a mostly 'normal' society. Yet, according to the evidence, Northern Ireland continues to contain the largest threat to national security of any region in the UK, and additional powers are available to the PSNI and the prosecution service in acknowledgement of this. However, national security is not a devolved matter and oversight of the additional powers is not conducted locally but at Westminster. This division of responsibility may contribute to the perception of paramilitarism as a purely criminal problem, with national security aspects obfuscated. Paramilitarism is, of course often a criminal problem, but it also has political dimensions that other forms of criminality lack.

Lack of truth and reconciliation processes

One significant impasse in the peace agreements was on how to deal with outstanding past crimes and human rights violations that had not been disposed of by the justice system. Other peace processes instituted some form of truth recovery process which not only afford the opportunity to deal with outstanding cases but the process itself can uncover the nature of past violence form which no faction emerges with clean hands. That realisation made in a public process can improve the prospects for reconciliation in the wider society, narrowing the moral high ground and increasing the humility with which past transgressions are understood. No such truth process has occurred in Northern Ireland, nor has the moral high ground narrowed. Consequently, much public political discourse takes the form of a war by

other means. Belligerence is part of the political culture, and while some of this can be attributed to social media, the verbal battle lines often map neatly onto the armed contests of the past.

Ending paramilitarism: lessons from fieldwork

It is an unfortunate effect of the centralisation of services, the increasing professionalisation of policing and other public services that relationships between local working-class communities and the local police, housing agency and health service has been characterised by bureaucratisation, difficulty of access, waiting lists, and triaging of only the most severe cases in times of public service austerity. The gap between local communities and state agencies and authorities is wide, and often characterised by distrust, resentment, anger and strong feelings of betrayal.

In working class loyalist areas where communities complain about the lack of policing and law enforcement by the PSNI, local people, often women who are at home carrying out caring responsibilities are confronted with evidence of drug abuse on the streets, or the use of vacant housing to accommodate newly released prisoners, some convicted of child abuse, to use two examples. When their appeals to the authorities fail to yield results over time, faith in the ability of those authorities to address local concerns disappears. In such instances, local people turn to paramilitary groups to solve local problems. Even when those groups wish to operate within the law, they come under pressure to act in the absence of other effective and legal remedies.

An alternative approach to ending paramilitarism could rely on recognising these community dynamics and attempt to disrupt them by building functional relationships between the state agencies, the authorities and local people with concerns, ensuring effective channels of communication and reasonable response times. This involves two areas of work:

1. Engaging in basic community development work by supporting local people to form local organisations to advocate for local people on local issues of concern. This is slow and painstaking work, building the confidence of local people, challenging their attitudes and introducing them to alternative methods of addressing their concerns and grievances.

2. Working with state agencies and authorities at senior levels to ensure that their staff, structures and lines of communication are serving the needs of people in the community of concern. This may well involve the reallocation of staff, the selection of staff with attitudes, skills and knowledge that is aligned to working with marginalised communities. It may also involve reviewing and revising channels of communication between communities and local people. It may also involve explaining policy decisions to lay people in simple language that makes sense to them, so they can understand the rationale behind decisions and learn about the way agencies work.

3. Building trust between local agencies and local people. There is no avoiding the early days of fraught relationships, forthright communication and confrontation. Agencies need to demonstrate the willingness to work through the strong feelings of local people who have been feeling let down for a considerable time. It is by having these

> tough conversations and demonstrating the willingness and commitment to engage that trust is build. We insist that public servants are treated with respect, yet very often members of the public are not treated in the same way. To undo the legacy of that history will require patience, commitment and understanding. Some parts of some agencies, such as the PSNI and the NIHE have demonstrated the willingness to engage in this work.

Were there functional relationships between these agencies and working-class communities, the relationship between local people and paramilitaries would also be transformed. Perhaps a reallocation of funding to support state agencies to do this work and a refocusing of CITs, first of all in geographical areas which are identified through robust and contemporary data analysis, and the revision of the goals of their work to focus on building trust between authorities and local people in those targeted areas.

Paramilitary groups' persistent existence beyond their military campaigns may be explained by a number of factors: failure of politics to represent their political aspirations; rivalry with other armed groups including contest over territory; the prospect of rolelessness should they disband for those whose identities have been based on paramilitary power and status; pressures from local communities to step into policing roles where the official police (PSNI) are deemed to be untrustworthy ineffective or unreliable; unwillingness to relinquish personal access to weapons for criminal purposes, and consequent person financial gain; and a lack of sufficiently lucrative or attractive alternatives to paramilitary membership. The hope that the organisations will simply 'go away' is based on a misunderstanding of the intergenerational and sworn nature of membership in many instances, where allowing an organisation to simply wither away would be seen as a dereliction of a duty owed to dead and living comrades with whom strong wartime bonds (Sharif, 2023; Whitehouse, McQuinn, Buhrmester, and Swann, 2014) had been developed and of previous generations and familial links. These bonds are strong in both Loyalist and Republican organisations but perhaps are more significant to Loyalist paramilitants given the greater stigma associated with paramilitarism in unionist and loyalist communities. Paramilitarism, particularly in Loyalist communities is a profoundly working-class phenomenon, representing a further gap between policy makers and the communities in which they intervene. These factors are in addition to any political motivations specific to Loyalist and Republican communities.

A formal process of transition

To make progress towards the goal of ending paramilitarism, in 2023, the IRC saw the need for an added dimension to the work:

> In our more recent Reports, we have given prominence to our view that a further dimension is required in addition to the ongoing work to tackle paramilitarism: an agreed formal process of Group Transition, involving direct engagement with the paramilitary groups themselves, in order to bring about disbandment. We have developed this suggestion because in our view, 'you cannot arrest your way out of the problem'. The disbandment of paramilitary organisations has to involve voluntary action by the groups themselves. (IRC, 2023: 20-21[34])

[34] Op cit

In their evidence to the 2023-2024 Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee's Inquiry into paramilitarism in Northern Ireland, the PSNI likewise pointed out that measures additional to law enforcement, prevention and early intervention strategy and saw the need for additional measures:

> The Police Service recognises that transition is a highly sensitive issue. However, the IRC notes that a process of transition is an important component of achieving a society free from terrorism and organised crime. In our assessment, moving towards transition will be a critical addition to the current law enforcement and prevention, early intervention and resilience building approaches already in underway. In this respect, whilst the Police Service acknowledges that previous efforts have not come to fruition, a renewed focus and effort in this area, led by government, will be important for further progress. (PSNI evidence, para 4.1[35])

The recommendations in Fleur Ravensbergen's are important in relation to the feasibility of such formal approaches, but the political obstacles to establishing a formal process of transition persist. As we conclude our work, it is to be hoped that those involved in paramilitarism, who became involved for political reasons, however misguided their espoused violence methods of the past, will have their political objectives respected and their wish for a pathway to a formal conclusion to their organisations' past is negotiated and agreed with the two governments.

Some of those associated with paramilitarism have watched with dismay at the infiltration of their ranks by individuals and cohorts intent on criminality and devoid of any political motivation beyond the acquisition of power and wealth. For whose sincerely wish is to remove from the stage any flags of convenience that have been hijacked by criminals the two governments must offer leadership to the devolved administration by building and opening those pathways to transition.

Some prominent local actors who have suffered directly at the hands of paramilitary groups passionately oppose any direct engagement with people for whom they understandably have strong antipathy. If Northern Ireland is not to be held captive by the crimes of the past, it is important that pragmatic measures that offer a definitive end to paramilitarism are put in place. Only then can the criminals be isolated and dealt with by a purely law enforcement approach, and those who became involved in paramilitarism in the past for political reasons can leave the field in an orderly and publicly acknowledge process.

[35] https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/109808/html/

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ANNEX A: Weapons codes

1. All Firearms including air weapons, handgun
2. Firearm and other weapon
3. All wooden weapons, baseball bats, bats, hurley bats including nail studded, planks, sticks,
4. All metal weapons, sledgehammers, hammers, iron bars, knives, golf clubs, wheel braces, metal poles, crow bars, dumb bells, hatchets, knuckle dusters, machetes
5. Both metal and wooden weapons
6. Other, bricks, chairs, blunt objects, taser
7. None, punched
8. Not available / unknown object

Injury codes

1. Single gunshot wound, GSW
2. Multiple gunshot wounds, GSW
3. Fractures, broken limbs/ bones
4. Abrasions, cuts, lacerations, puncture wounds
5. Multiple injuries including fractures (including suspected fractures)
6. Limb injuries, arms legs, feet, hands, wrist, shins, thighs, elbows
7. Head injuries, facial injuries, fractures to jaw, black eyes, broken nose, cheekbone, teeth, skull fractures, ear injuries, temple, forehead, scalp
8. Injuries to torso, trunk, broken ribs, collar bone, shoulders, back, stomach, spine
9. Paint and tar poured, tar and feather
10. No serious injuries/minor injuries, superficial, bruising, welts
11. Other injuries
12. Not specified/ unknown

ANNEX B: ADDITIONAL TABLES, FIGURES AND MAPS

Table B1: List of Attacks by Postcode in 1999, 2002, 2019 and 2023				
Location	**Attacks in 1999**	**Attacks in 2002**	**Attacks in 2019**	**Attacks in 2023**
BT1	0	0	0	0
BT2	0	0	0	0
BT3	0	0	0	0
BT4	2	4	0	0
BT5	4	7	1	0
BT6	3	8	0	0
BT7	5	6	0	0
BT8	1	5	0	0
BT9	0	5	0	0
BT10	0	0	1	0
BT11	7	10	4	0
BT12	14	28	10	1
BT13	14	12	1	0
BT14	8	21	1	2
BT15	10	22	4	0
BT16	4	5	1	0
BT17	5	11	0	0
BT18	0	1	1	0
BT19	6	4	3	0
BT20	2	0	0	0
BT21	1	1	0	0
BT22	0	3	2	0
BT23	7	14	4	2
BT24	1	2	0	0
BT25	1	0	0	0
BT26	0	0	0	0
BT27	1	3	2	0
BT28	8	6	0	0
BT29	0	0	0	0
BT30	2	3	0	0
BT31	0	0	0	0
BT32	0	2	0	0
BT33	0	0	0	0
BT34	0	4	0	0
BT35	6	7	0	0
BT36	16	8	8	0
BT37	13	28	10	0
BT38	8	25	2	0

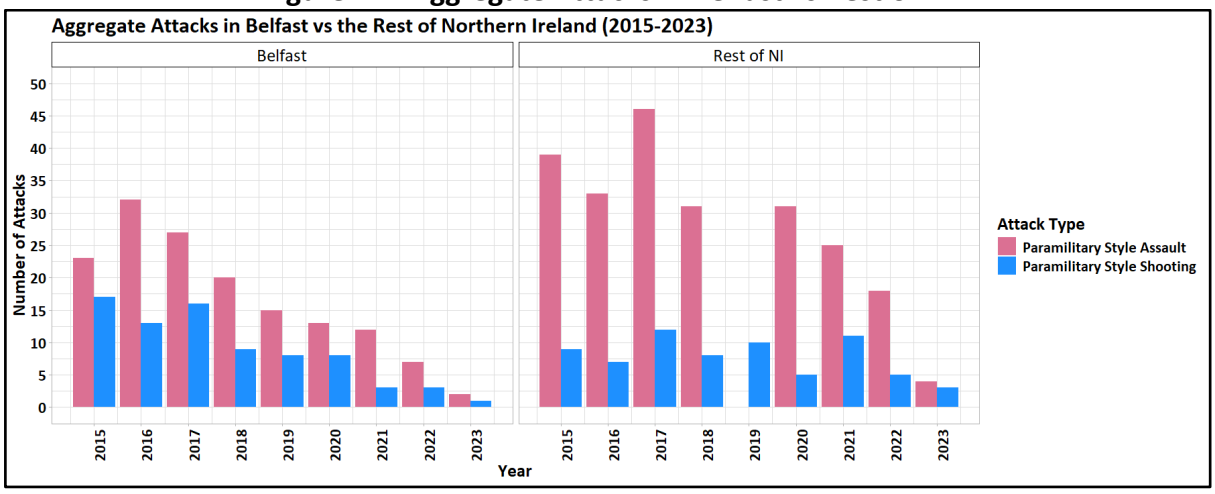
Table B1: List of Attacks by Postcode in 1999, 2002, 2019 and 2023				
Location	**Attacks in 1999**	**Attacks in 2002**	**Attacks in 2019**	**Attacks in 2023**
BT39	0	6	1	0
BT40	4	4	5	0
BT41	7	3	1	0
BT42	1	2	3	0
BT43	0	0	0	0
BT44	1	0	0	0
BT45	0	0	0	0
BT46	1	1	0	0
BT47	6	7	2	0
BT48	13	2	15	2
BT49	0	0	0	0
BT51	0	2	0	0
BT52	2	6	0	0
BT53	3	3	1	3
BT54	0	0	0	0
BT55	0	0	0	0
BT56	0	0	0	0
BT57	2	2	0	0
BT60	1	0	0	0
BT61	0	2	0	0
BT62	1	1	0	0
BT63	1	0	0	0
BT64	0	0	0	0
BT65	1	0	0	0
BT66	2	2	0	0
BT67	1	0	0	0
BT68	0	0	0	0
BT69	0	0	0	0
BT70	1	2	0	0
BT71	2	1	0	0
BT74	0	1	1	0
BT75	0	0	0	0
BT76	0	0	0	0
BT77	0	0	0	0
BT78	0	0	0	0
BT79	0	0	0	0
BT80	2	1	0	0
BT81	0	0	0	0
BT82	6	5	1	0
BT92	1	0	0	0

Table B1: List of Attacks by Postcode in 1999, 2002, 2019 and 2023				
Location	**Attacks in 1999**	**Attacks in 2002**	**Attacks in 2019**	**Attacks in 2023**
BT93	0	0	0	0
BT94	0	0	0	0
Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.				

Table B2: Aggregate Attacks Belfast vs Northern Ireland 1999-2023						
Year	**Belfast**	**Belfast %**	**Rest of NI**	**Rest of NI %**	**Year total**	**Year %**
1999	77	37.2	130	62.8	207	6.7
2000	127	47.4	141	52.6	268	8.6
2001	159	47.9	173	52.1	332	10.7
2002	149	47.8	163	52.2	312	10.0
2003	150	49.2	155	50.8	305	9.8
2004	101	44.5	126	55.5	227	7.3
2005	68	39.1	106	60.9	174	5.6
2006	40	47.1	45	52.9	85	2.7
2007	20	38.5	32	61.5	52	1.7
2008	33	58.9	22	41.1	56	1.8
2009	59	48.4	63	51.6	122	3.9
2010	49	52.1	45	47.9	94	3.0
2011	39	51.3	37	48.7	76	2.5
2012	39	55.7	31	44.3	70	2.3
2013	27	42.2	37	57.8	64	2.1
2014	41	51.2	39	48.8	80	2.6
2015	40	45.5	48	54.5	88	2.8
2016	45	52.9	40	47.1	85	2.7
2017	43	42.6	58	57.4	101	3.3
2018	29	42.6	39	57.4	68	2.2
2019	23	27.1	62	72.9	85	2.7
2020	21	36.8	36	63.2	57	1.8
2021	15	29.4	36	70.6	51	1.6
2022	10	30.3	23	69.7	33	1.1
2023	3	30.0	7	70	10	0.3
Overall Total	1,407	45.4	1,695	54.6	3102	
Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.						

Table B3: All Attacks in Belfast vs Northern Ireland (Loyalist and Republican)						
Year	**Belfast #**	**Belfast %**	**Rest of NI #**	**Rest NI %**	**Year Total #**	**Year %**
2015	40	45.5	48	54.5	88	15.2%
2016	45	52.9	40	47.1	85	14.7%
2017	43	42.6	58	57.4	101	17.5%
2018	29	42.6	39	57.4	68	11.8%
2019	23	27.1	62	72.9	85	14.7%
2020	21	36.8	36	63.2	57	9.9%
2021	15	29.4	36	70.6	51	8.8%
2022	10	30.3	23	69.7	33	5.7%
2023	3	30.0	7	70	10	1.7%
Total	229	39.6	349	60.4	578	100%
Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.						

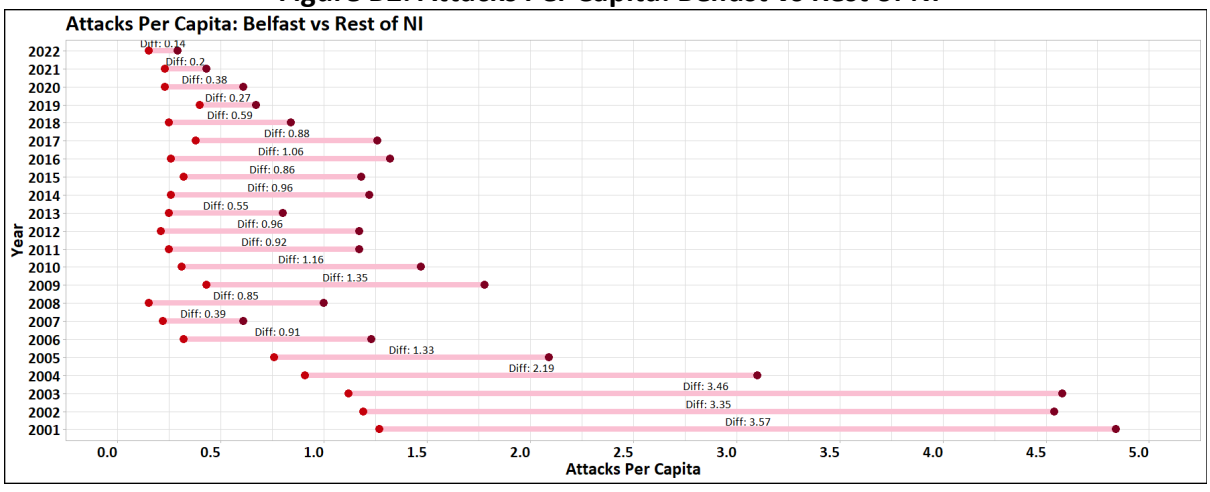
Figure B1: Aggregate Attacks in Belfast vs Rest of NI



Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

Table B4: Attacks per Capita 1998-2021 Postcodes with Fewer than 10 attackers per 10,000						
Postcode district	**All usual residents**	**Attacks**	**Attacks Per Capita (per 10,000)**	**Female**	**Male**	**Households**
BT26	9,153	0	0.00	4,653	4,500	3,743
BT54	8,058	0	0.00	4,053	4,005	3,386
BT55	8,003	0	0.00	4,199	3,804	3,551
BT68	1,054	0	0.00	533	521	414
BT69	2,725	0	0.00	1,369	1,356	978
BT75	3,665	0	0.00	1,784	1,881	1,439
BT76	1,973	0	0.00	999	974	721
BT77	1,460	0	0.00	709	751	515
BT81	7,862	0	0.00	3,954	3,908	3,109
BT93	10,799	0	0.00	5,333	5,466	4,341
BT94	16,066	0	0.00	8,042	8,024	6,298
Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.						

Figure B2: Attacks Per Capita: Belfast vs Rest of NI



Source: Breen-Smyth and Dean 2026.

Table B5: Results of FOI-2021-02398 to PSNI/ NISRA **Request 1:** Please can the PSNI provide me with data relating to all arrests and charges broken down by religion in the last five years.						
	People who identify as 'Roman Catholic'		**People who identify as 'Protestant'**		**People who identify as something else ('Other')**	
Year	**Arrested**	**Charged**	**Arrested**	**Charged**	**Arrested**	**Charged**
2016	13244	6187	6824	3231	10378	4875

Table B5: Results of FOI-2021-02398 to PSNI/ NISRA **Request 1:** Please can the PSNI provide me with data relating to all arrests and charges broken down by religion in the last five years.						
	People who identify as 'Roman Catholic'		**People who identify as 'Protestant'**		**People who identify as something else ('Other')**	
Year	**Arrested**	**Charged**	**Arrested**	**Charged**	**Arrested**	**Charged**
2017	11434	5378	6268	2953	10229	4674
2018	11216	5131	6438	3044	10704	4809
2019	11159	5194	6058	2951	11239	5304
2020	10000	4749	5118	2494	10362	4676

Annex C

Figures published by district by the policing board 2025 and how does this compare it to the figures on the hotspots analysis above.

[Data held on 'Threat to Life' processes | Northern Ireland Policing Board]

District	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
Belfast	567	360	399	319	171	**1,816**
Lisburn & Castlereagh	92	126	87	99	120	**524**
Ards & North Down	87	87	77	207	113	**571**
Newry, Mourne & Down	47	68	68	47	49	**279**
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	161	96	47	66	72	**442**
Mid Ulster	112	77	46	43	17	**295**
Fermanagh & Omagh	60	29	25	37	26	**177**
Derry City & Strabane	46	36	39	90	65	**276**
Causeway Coast & Glens	112	52	60	68	29	**321**
Mid & East Antrim	56	38	50	125	79	**348**
Antrim & Newtownabbey	128	61	83	72	55	**399**
None (No District Data Available)	60	21	77	125	124	**407**
CONSULTANCY WORK	**1,528**	**1,051**	**1,058**	**1,298**	**920**	**5,855**

Percentage Share of Total Notices (2020-2024)

District	Total	% of All Notices
Belfast	1,816	31.0%
Ards & North Down	571	9.8%
Lisburn & Castlereagh	524	9.0%
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	442	7.5%
None (No District Data Available)	407	7.0%
Antrim & Newtownabbey	399	6.8%
Mid & East Antrim	348	5.9%
Causeway Coast & Glens	321	5.5%
Mid Ulster	295	5.0%
Newry, Mourne & Down	279	4.8%
Derry City & Strabane	276	4.7%
Fermanagh & Omagh	177	3.0%
Total	**5,855**	**100%**

Table 7: Attacks Per Capita 1998 - 2021 Postal area with over 10 Attacks per 10,000 People						
Postcode District	**Residents**	**Attacks**	**Attacks Per Capita**	**Female**	**Male**	**Household**
BT12*	28,784	265	92.07	14,889	13,895	12,741
BT13*	24,025	168	69.93	12,732	11,293	11,135
BT37	26,056	181	69.47	13,376	12,680	11,455
BT15	28,073	179	63.76	14,234	13,839	12,328
BT11*	27,264	134	49.15	14,207	13,057	11,341
BT14*	34,336	158	46.02	17,891	16,445	14,499
BT38	41,273	153	37.07	21,269	20,004	17,935
BT57	3,780	14	37.04	1,909	1,871	1,699
BT17	34,150	114	33.38	17,824	16,326	13,352
BT48*	59,948	181	30.19	31,004	28,944	24,662
BT23	57,126	157	27.48	29,341	27,785	24,390
BT4*	25,994	71	27.31	13,524	12,470	11,842
BT5*	39,464	107	27.11	20,300	19,164	18,169
BT52	17,472	47	26.90	9,053	8,419	7,418
BT7	20,456	53	25.91	9,941	10,515	9,237
BT82	26,859	68	25.32	13,719	13,140	10,672
BT36	47,611	118	24.78	24,508	23,103	19,814
BT16	18,552	45	24.26	9,590	8,962	7,969
BT40 *	26,207	62	23.66	13,345	12,862	11,636
BT19*	39,043	87	22.28	20,238	18,805	16,456
BT21	8,320	16	19.23	4,321	3,999	3,695
BT6	30,644	55	17.95	15,757	14,887	13,966
BT20	26,289	41	15.60	13,340	12,949	12,129
BT53	25,827	40	15.49	13,135	12,692	10,401
BT2	1,939	3	15.47	963	976	584
BT39	25,471	35	13.74	12,989	12,482	10,361
BT3	807	1	12.39	348	459	409
BT1	4,120	5	12.14	2,018	2,102	1,099
BT65*	8,338	10	11.99	4,238	4,100	3,162
BT41	44,204	51	11.54	22,391	21,813	17,558
BT28	45,831	51	11.13	23,067	22,764	17,931
• Denotes postal areas in which CITs are located						