1. INTRODUCTION

In an earlier paper to the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland in Dublin, we provided a statistical comparison of trends in indictable crime in both parts of Ireland between 1945 and 1993 set against other survey data on crime, trends in specific offences and geographical variations in crime trends. This drew on data from our larger research project on crime in Ireland since the Second World War. In this paper we intend to report on the ethnographic research conducted as part of the same project. The rationale behind the ethnographic study of crime in two police sub-divisions of Belfast was to use the benefits of the ethnographic method to supplement the quantitative approach to crime trends. The data are drawn from two closely matched police sub-divisions in Belfast, Castlereagh in East Belfast and Woodburn in the West of the city, the former largely Protestant and the latter largely Catholic, reproducing the city's communal spatial divide. Each sub-division also comprises a mix of inner city deprivation and suburban splendour. Fieldwork was conducted over a twelve-month period between 1994 and 1995. The paramilitary ceasefire was called four months into fieldwork.

The benefits of ethnographic data are widely documented in the methodological literature and need little rehearsal (see: Brewer, 1994, Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Ethnographic data come in the form of extracts of natural language, such as quotations obtained from in-depth interviews, notes from personal documents or records of participant observation, providing actors' own accounts. Such data capture the richness of people's experiences in their own terms, proffering a counterweight to the breadth and geographical coverage of official statistics. Actors' accounts take on added value with respect to crime statistics because of the well known limitations in crime statistics.

*The research on which this paper is based was funded by the Northern Ireland Office and forms part of a larger project on crime trends in Ireland since 1945.
The ethnographic part of this study therefore sought to supplement the quantitative analysis of crime trends at national and city levels by addressing people's experiences of crime and policing, to permit the expression of these concerns in the actors' own terms, and to capture the richness and depth of the crime problem in two localised areas of Belfast. Thus, the ethnography focused on issues such as people's perceptions of the crime problem in their locality, levels of fear of crime, people's reporting behaviour, local crime management in the absence of reliance on the police, the frames of reference through which people approach crime, such as perceived levels of crime in other societies or historical comparisons with the past, and people's fears about future crime in their areas after the ceasefire. Only a few of these concerns can be addressed in this paper, where we focus primarily on local crime management and its implications for policing in the future.

2. THE REALITY OF LOCAL CRIME

The majority of respondents in both study areas thought that ordinary crime in their locality was real and not a product of moral panic or media hype. It comprised mainly the visible crimes, such as anti-social behaviour by youths (drink, solvent abuse, vandalism, stone throwing, graffiti, joyriding), drugs, theft (shoplifting, car theft, electrical and domestic goods, bikes) and burglary. Joyriding was seen as a West Belfast problem rather than one generic to the city, although it was recognised by most people in West Belfast to be on the decline, being replaced by drugs as the single most commonly perceived crime in the area. The drug problem is becoming the new moral panic for most people we interviewed irrespective of where they live. Crime was seen as overwhelmingly against property not the person. Community definitions of crime tended to exclude from mention the 'invisible' crimes like domestic violence, child abuse and fraud, or the socially acceptable crimes such as social security fiddles or 'doing the double'. Levels of fear of crime are contextual and particularly high for certain categories of people, particularly the elderly. Fear of crime is much lower in West Belfast than East. However, the frames of reference through which crime is approached today ameliorate against high levels of fear of crime for most people except the elderly, because Belfast's crime rate is located against the much higher levels of crime that are thought to exist in other Irish and British cities. However, crime is universally seen as having increased in recent years. This increase in crime is explained by several processes, including broad social changes that have led to a moral decline and a loss of discipline in the home, peculiar factors special to Northern Ireland's civil unrest and political violence, and social deprivation. However, given the very high levels of social deprivation that exists in some parts of the study areas and the years of political violence, people commented that crime is lower than might be expected.
3. REPORTING OF CRIME

With local crime levels perceived to be high, and increasing, the reporting behaviour of people becomes of critical importance in any measure of how well the official statistics for crime in the two study areas capture the real level of crime. All those who were asked felt that the crime statistics for their area are unreliable. When asked how he thought local residents would respond to police crime statistics for the area, a West Belfast resident said, 'they would laugh, it is not the crime that is happening'. Crime figures reflect only the crime that is reported. Thus, people's reporting behaviour becomes a critical problematic, and it is apparent that there is considerable under-reporting, especially of petty crime (also claimed by Geary and Morison, 1992, Morison, 1995).

Reporting behaviour involves witnessing a potentially criminal act, defining it as a crime, seeing it as something worth reporting, and then only finally contacting the police (thereafter all sorts of other processes are involved for the act to be recorded as a crime). Failure to report can occur at any of these stages. Describing her reporting behaviour, an East Belfast community worker said, 'there are a lot of things that people wouldn't bother reporting, like small petty theft, that people just take for granted, that seems to be sort of acceptable. For some strange reason you don’t even think of it as crime'. But it is impossible for most people in Northern Ireland to discuss reporting behaviour in isolation from their feelings towards the police. Thus reporting behaviour here must be located primarily in the context of its final stage.

Some people report crime for insurance purposes, others because it is seen as the normal and proper thing to do, but there is under-reporting of crime on a wide scale. The data cannot provide a statistical measure of its extent, but can usefully describe the nature of the problem of under-reporting as people account for it in their own reporting behaviour. One important factor is fear of contacting the police, which is based on the fear of being seen by the community as a tout or informer, reprisals from the paramilitaries or perpetrators, ostracism from neighbours, and harassment, threats and intimidation from criminals. There is also a reluctance to report to the police for several reasons. Some feel alienated from the police because of ideological antipathy based on the sectarian image of the RUC or experiential distance, grounded in experiences of harassment, intimidation and past atrocities. In this regard, some people have long memories and mention atrocities back in the 1970s, events which have entered the neighbourhood's collective memory. Another process involved in the reluctance to involve the police is the inefficacy of doing so, which is itself based on several factors. One of these is pejorative judgments of the RUC's effectiveness, based on the reluctance of the police to do anything in the past, partly for fear of the call being a trap or because of the under-valuation of certain forms of ordinary crime with the focus on terrorism, the inability of the police to respond quickly enough, or to clear up the incident to the victim's
satisfaction, although some respondents, even in West Belfast, recognised the dilemma of the RUC in trying to deal with ordinary crime in the midst of civil unrest. A second dimension in the lack of efficacy of reporting crime to the police is the effectiveness of other local crime management agencies, which satisfy people's wish for immediate 'justice', although paradoxically the same people express reservations about the punishment beatings and shootings by which this immediate 'justice' is dispensed. A related process is dissatisfaction with the formal criminal justice system, which fails to provide victims with the justice they see as their deserts. There is also a sense that the police have lost control of the fight over crime and have given up.

These processes affect working class Protestants nearly as much as Catholics, and under-reporting appears to be nearly as common in hardline Loyalist areas as Nationalist ones. One of the reasons for this is that working class Loyalists have as poor a relationship with the RUC as their equivalents in Republican areas. There is also a shared sense of the ineffectiveness of the RUC. This is not always rooted in political opposition to the police but also in experience of the RUC's service delivery in the past, for even moderate Catholic opinion in West Belfast complained of the RUC's slow response to calls, as did people in Protestant East Belfast. This militates against telephoning the police to report crime and undercuts the brave efforts some people make to rise above community pressure against involving the police. Some people in West Belfast commented, however, that the RUC's response rate had improved markedly since the ceasefire.

4. MECHANISMS OF LOCAL CRIME MANAGEMENT

In the absence of much police involvement, the issue thus arises of how crime is managed locally. By the local management of crime, we mean those structures in the local neighbourhood and community which have a role in preventing and suppressing crime or offer alternative ways of dealing with it once committed. Most elderly respondents sense a loss of community, experienced as a decline in respect for authority amongst the young, especially a decline in respect for elderly people, the rise of sexual immorality and one-parent families, and the rise in individualism and selfishness. However, most other respondents recognised that community structures in the neighbourhood had survived, such as extended family kinship patterns, a strong sense of neighbourliness and a vivid sense of locality and community identity, which played a part in local crime management. The widespread availability of authority figures in the community, such as youth workers, priests or ministers, teachers and representatives of community organisations, who become involved in crime management, is also critical. There is also available for ready mobilisation in the management of crime an array of community agencies and organisations, as well as ground level community initiatives to stem crime problems as they arise. And there are the paramilitaries.
Reference needs to be made to all these processes in discussing local crime management.

*The survival of community structures*

*Senses of community*

Senses of community and local identity are very relative, contingent upon the frames of reference people use, the locality in which they live and personal experiences of the quality of relationships that exist in their neighbourhood. With respect to frames of reference, people display a curious duality when discussing senses of community, in that most invariably draw an unfavourable contrast with the greater sense of community that purported to exist in their locality in the past, yet also point to its continued survival today. Likewise, not every locality retains the closeness and quality of relationship people associate with community as a result of broad social changes and housing redevelopment, among other things. But these social changes have affected localities in varying degrees, ensuring that respondents from many areas, particularly working class neighbourhoods, retain a sense of community and local identity, especially where this is reinforced by kinship patterns which show the survival of an extended family network, even though this sense of community and identity might be weaker than they recall in the past.

People from West Belfast invariably portray it as having a strong sense of community. Community is not experienced in the same way as it was in the past, but most people, save the elderly, recognise that it has not been lost. An elderly resident from Twinbrook recounted her experience of community on the Falls Road when she was young: 'people were clannish, everybody was helping one another. They were all poor people, just working people you know, but if they thought anybody hadn’t their dinner, they would have been out giving it to you, if anybody was stuck for money, they would have been around lifting a collection. They were close.' If they use the frame of reference of their parents, people admit that things are not the same, but nonetheless their own experiences support a sense of community. Most people's experience of community incorporates the loss of the clannishness which senior citizens associate with community, and describes instead a more loose sense of shared identity and real but less close social relationships. Residents on West Belfast's many housing estates thus still firmly believe that they possess a sense of community. Referring to Poleglass, a young father said, 'because all the streets are cul-de-sacs I think they are starting to become close knit. This estate is very young and I think people are still finding their way but a lot of people have settled into their little cliques'.

In accounting for this sense of community, people from West Belfast locate it in processes such as neighbourliness, the survival of an extended family kinship
network, and the effects of civil unrest in uniting people as an in-group. The first two processes will be discussed further below, but it is worth highlighting at this point people's perception of the role of civil unrest in retaining the area's sense of community. Some residents used this as the key factor in the survival of community structures in West Belfast. 'The troubles have acted', said one West Belfast community worker, 'as a unifying force in various communities.' 'This community', said another, 'if there is an attack on it, you make a stand. There has always been strong links in the community, it is due to the troubles that have kept the community together.' Conflict with out-groups always reinforces the sense of solidarity of the in-group, which is why residents from enclaves encircled by another community always articulated the strongest sense of community, whether it be Protestant or Catholic enclaves. The following view, from a Protestant estate in West Belfast, is typical of all residents in enclave situations. He described the area as 'like a very small village'. However, not every resident from West Belfast grounded their sense of community in civil unrest, for some believed that the violence had fractured their neighbourhood. Many of the elderly residents used the troubles to account for the changes they were experiencing in their neighbourhood. 'It completely ruined Ballymurphy' said an elderly resident. Others said that it raised fears about who their neighbours were, by which they meant which organisations they were connected with. 'You don't know who is living next door to you, who they're working with'; 'you wonder what people do, what their husband does, if they are in any organisation'.

This sense of community is on the whole weaker in East Belfast, where there is a sense of greater social change, housing relocation and social dislocation. The neighbourhoods have not lived under the same sense of siege because of the relative absence of security force presence, and Protestantism is known to be a less communal religion. Far greater numbers of residents from the East Belfast study area reflected on a decline in the sense of community in their neighbourhood. Most of those who lament thus locate their complaint in experiences of housing redevelopment, population relocation, and patterns of geographic and social mobility which have led to the decline in the old neighbourhoods. A resident from the Ravenhill Road said, 'families are brought in, people are rehoused, the shift in tenants is unbelievable. I think town planners have a lot to answer for. When they knocked down streets they didn't automatically put people back. You can't have a community spirit if there are people moving in and out of the area regularly'.

However, not all respondents from East Belfast felt that community structures were struggling to survive. With different experiences and frames of reference, some commented on the strong sense of community they perceived. Referring to Bloomfield, a resident said that there was more of a sense of community now than in the past because the new residents had settled into neighbourly patterns of social interaction. After making several significant comparisons, a Church of Ireland
minister thought that on balance the sense of community survived: 'it is not as tight a community as it was, there is still a sense of community, much more spirit than in England, and the result of that is less crime here. People still do know one another and watch over each other.' And some people live in neighbourhoods where the old streets have not been redeveloped. One resident described his area: 'a lot of good living people, close knit families, not a lot of movement, so people have been here for several generations, there is a stable social fabric.' A youth worker from the Roslyn Street area made the same remark, linking it to the local crime rate.

*It is a very established community, it hasn't underwent the redevelopment that a lot of other places have. This area has remained intact. By and large the houses have been renovated but they have remained intact, still have granny and granddads, aunts and uncles, there are networks of families within the area. As a result there wouldn't be as big a crime rate as other areas. There is a sort of feeling of identity and whole sense of belonging.*

**Neighbourliness**

It is clear from the views of people who believe that community structures are under decline that most people understand community as good quality relationships with neighbours. Looking back on community life in West Belfast after the Second World War, one respondent said there was a close neighbourhood, 'the street was a family'. Another described the neighbourliness: 'it was the street, it went further than the home, further than the house, it was the street.' Thus, some people in East Belfast thought a sense of community was returning to their locality because neighbourliness was returning. 'Years ago it was different. I remember running in and out of each other's houses, but I think it's starting to come back round to that now. My area is closer now, we tend to sit around and talk.' Knowing and being able to talk to your neighbour is one measure of neighbourliness, and thus of the area's sense of community. So is being able to call on them in times of trouble. Others associate neighbourliness with trusting neighbours so well to be able to keep one's door unlocked.

People in West Belfast used all these as indices of neighbourliness and community in their locality. While not everyone has neighbours they consider gems, Ballymurphy was described by one resident as a great place because neighbours still looked after one another. A community worker in Divis said the same of his area because his door has never needed to be locked: 'my door never has been shut since I moved in 1971. I didn’t have a key then and I still don’t have a key now. Never ever locked my door, not during the whole troubles.' On these measures, however, some localities in East Belfast were described as unneighbourly and thus lacking in a sense of community. A person from the lower Ravenhill area commented sadly of her area: 'it is a dump with new houses. We have hot water and a bath now but in the new houses you could be lying dead for weeks on end and nobody would come
near you. Nobody would miss you.’. Of course, people from the same area can contradict this view and extol the same neighbours, depending upon their biographical experiences.

Extended family kinship patterns

The survival of an extended family kinship pattern is another important measure of an area’s sense of community. It reinforces a sense of localism and shared identity and adds to the sense of cohesiveness which people associate with ideas of community. The extended family is strong in West Belfast because there has not been massive population relocation, in part due to the voluntary restrictions on mobility arising from the troubles but also because redevelopment schemes have not required distant moves. A West Belfast community worker involved in an anti-crime initiative described the situation as he saw it.

I think it is all to do with the family structure here, more to do with closer communities and families here. I mean, there have been a lot of sociological studies recently about the extended family, and how people have moved on and out of their own communities, and that is true for certain areas of England. Here there is still the extended family network. I mean the troubles have contributed to that because people are afraid to move out of their own communities. I am doing a course at the minute and we are looking at the breakdown of the extended family, but I said during the discussion that I didn’t think that was the case in Northern Ireland. The class is fifty-fifty Catholic and Protestant, so the lecturer decided to do a comparative thing, by asking us if we still lived in the community we were brought up in and I think about out of eighteen of us, there was two that didn’t. And everybody had brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles living in the same area as them. I would see that as normal here.

This was indeed the experience of most West Belfast respondents.

The matriarchal figure of the grandmother is thus still important in areas of West Belfast. Looking back to just after the war, an elderly resident of the area said that the ‘old granny was the prince of all’; she stabilised society because ‘there was always a stable influence, the child wasn’t handed to somebody who didn’t know it, it was the granny who raised the child’. ‘That’s the way Belfast used to be years ago’, a young mother from West Belfast remarked, ‘you know, your mammy was in the street and when the girl got married you tried to get a house up the street, and you’re getting the same sort of thing today. Everybody is related to everybody else here.’ While housing patterns in some neighbourhoods thus undergird the role of the matriarchal grandmother, a school Principal from the area commented, however, that the role is under threat from employment patterns. ‘I’m not going to write to the mammies and daddies any more, I’m going to write to the grannies.'
"Where's your school bag", "it's at me granny's". Now thank God we still have grannies, it's good, but the sad thing now there are fewer and fewer grannies because they too are younger people and have wee part time jobs.'

Again, however, the greater population relocation and geographic mobility evident in East Belfast has led to more extensive demise of the extended family network, especially outside the closer-knit, working class inner city areas. A mother in the Ravenhill area said of her own children: 'they don’t mix with the family. There aren’t the same family networks, you can’t call on relatives like you used to.' A youth worker described his experience of the decline of the extended family network in East Belfast: 'you see, the extended family is missing in this area - a lot of people moved out to estates, then new people moved in, people didn’t know them, people stopped bothering with each other. No bowls of sugar, you know.' Perhaps associated with this greater sense of the demise of the extended family in East Belfast, complaints about the deleterious effects on the neighbourhood of the rise of one-parent families were more frequently made by East Belfast respondents, indicating that the two processes are at least linked in people’s minds.

Community structures and crime management

The structures associated with close community life, such as a sense of community and local identity, neighbourliness and an extended family kinship pattern, exist to a greater or lesser degree in both study areas, although East Belfast pales in comparison to the West of the city. However, it is likely that these structures survive there to a far greater extent than in neighbourhoods in most other large industrial cities. This has meant that the social fabric of the local society has remained solid in spite of (some would say because of) twenty-five years of civil unrest and violence. There is a sense of stability and continuity in most neighbourhoods in the study areas, especially those that have experienced the least population relocation, some of which are also the most socially deprived areas.

This sense of community, stability and tradition is a factor normally associated with lower levels of crime. But it is possible to establish the role it also plays in local crime management. Strong senses of community, neighbourliness and extended family kinship patterns facilitate the management of crime locally in several ways. First, they provide for the survival of a local moral economy. The values of this moral economy were expressed most frequently in the form that 'you don’t steal from your own'. Members of a mother and toddler group in Twinbrook explained that 'you would get people in the private estates to talk more about crime, they're more burgled than we are. Off the record, we are sort of cocooned from criminals, they don’t steal from their own'. An East Belfast worker with young offenders repeated the view: 'individuals who commit the crime have a lot of respect for the area that they live in, they don’t break-in in their own area.' This moral economy
therefore rules out crime in certain close-knit areas, at least by its own local criminals.

But it also rules out crime against certain categories of people who are protected by the local moral economy. Thus, several people identified that crimes against children, the elderly and Church property were defined as beyond acceptable bounds locally. An East Belfast community worker said of his neighbourhood: ‘this is a parochial community around here and if the crime is against a pensioner, nobody will be spared. I have known a case where a parent actually contacted the police when they found out that their son had broken into a pensioner’s house.’ A youth worker from East Belfast repeated his view of how the local moral economy works to protect certain people.

The paramilitaries will punish a young person for particularly crimes against their own community, and that would be house breaking, windows being broken, petty theft, especially of vulnerable people like old-age pensioners or disabled and that sort of stuff. And also just damage in the community against community property, like youth centres or leisure centres. Those are the sorts of areas where paramilitaries will feel that they have to exercise their authority. But if it’s against a large store, they’re not really too concerned.

A West Belfast probation worker identified the categories he felt were protected by the local moral economy in his neighbourhood: ‘I think the one that would cross all boundaries would be crimes against the elderly and crimes against children. I was going to say crimes against women, but I’m not sure whether that’s true.’ Many also identified that it is wise not to commit crime against members of paramilitary groups, although this is grounded in reasons other than morality.

This moral economy only works for criminals who are from the area and who share the code. Local crime is often perpetrated by outsiders who are escaping the constraints of the moral economy in their area or by people who do not subscribe to the code. The anti-social behaviour by local youths inflicted on elderly people, for example, seems to suggest that the values are not shared by all. Some people even comment on the decline in the ethical code of local lags. A women from Braniel pointed out, ‘there never was as many car thefts or house break-ins, stealing from your own area. You never heard of that before. You could have gone out and left your door open and not be afraid, you wouldn’t do that now’. But even if local criminals defy the code, the existence of a moral economy results in greater outrage, with its knock-on effects of increased effort to apprehend them by the community itself or by the paramilitaries, or successfully overcoming resistance to involve the police.

Another factor involved in local crime management that arises from the survival of community structures is the existence of a ‘local grapevine’, a network of informal
contacts which passes on knowledge about perpetrators, the whereabouts of stolen property, and of the sorts of people who can best apprehend or provide immediate satisfactory justice in the absence of reporting it to the police. The grapevine is also the mechanism by which the local moral economy is disseminated within the neighbourhood. As a resident from Whiterock said, 'if a crime happened against an old person or a child, maybe if it happened in Turf Lodge, everybody would be talking about it'.

A young adult from Poleglass indicated how the grapevine worked even on a large estate. 'Although this is a large estate, there is always somebody who knows something, always somebody. There is not too many people that keep things to themselves. There is always “did you hear about that”, and then it works its way around the grapevine.' The grapevine ensures that knowledge is passed on to victims or even the relatives of perpetrators, which is where neighbourliness and an extended family kinship network particularly come in useful in local crime management. A very young girl, associated with a youth club in the Glen Road area of West Belfast described how this network of contacts constrained her. Referring to possible victims of crime she said, 'they would always know who you are or know your ma or something. This is a close knit community and people often do tell your ma or friends of your ma sees you'.

Finally, the survival of community structures is relevant to local crime management because these structures permit do-it-yourself policing. Many respondents told of how they responded as victims when they knew the perpetrator as a result of the local grapevine. Some went straight to the paramilitaries, some to the police. Others, however, used the neighbourhood's network of informal contacts to confront the parents. A member of a women's group in Poleglass, who was opposed to the paramilitaries, explained how she would respond: 'you wouldn't like to see a child get punished in a beating, you wouldn't like to see your own harmed, so we went around and let the parents know.' A woman from the Ravenhill Road area of East Belfast said the same, 'you would just go to the family'. In the absence of good quality relationships with neighbours or a close knit community, this confrontation can provoke as much disorder and it seeks to solve, for some respondents described how parents can sometimes 'stick up for wayward kids'. Do-it-yourself policing thus depends for its efficacy precisely on the survival of community structures.

Mobilisation of community resources

Because a sense of community survives, reflected in the continuance of structures like neighbourliness, local identity and extended family kinship patterns, the neighbourhood is able to be readily mobilised to manage crime locally. Perhaps the greatest effect of these community structures in local crime management is the resources they provide the community to mobilise against crime and criminals.
One of the resources is the remnant of authority which community representatives still possess, such as teachers, priests and pastors, and community and youth workers. This authority has diminished compared to the past, since many people experience social change as a decline in respect for authority among the young, but the data reveal that many of these figures are still drawn into the management of crime. A youth worker in the Cregagh district of East Belfast, for example, explained how local people have come to her to deal with specific incidents concerning youngsters rather than go to the police. Clerics repeated the point. One pastor in East Belfast told of how the clerical collar can be useful in dealing with juveniles; one group, he said, were frightened of him. A priest in West Belfast agreed that he was like a policeman sometimes, being called out before the RUC: 'the people wouldn’t ring the police, they’d ring you directly, you got out and you went and dealt with it.’ He had been called out over the years to deal with rowdy youths, joyriding, house break-ins and vandalism. The active role churches play in trying to keep youngsters off the streets by means of organised events and clubs is another important community resource, although the opening hours of these facilities sometimes reflects an unawareness of the nocturnal life-style of young people today.

Most community workers almost see it as part of their sense of mission to become involved in crime management when asked to do so by the communities amongst whom they work. An East Belfast community worker said that she was often asked by victims to talk to the people alleged to be the perpetrators: ‘they might have heard a name or know something, and they would say to me, is there any chance that you could talk to them, because it’s different me saying something than somebody else who doesn’t know them.’ A West Belfast community worker explained how they were routinely called to deal with domestic disputes.

The areas where community structures are at their strongest (even if they are not recognised as being so strong as in the past) are on the whole also those with the highest social deprivation. This is a paradox which confounds most common sense understandings of the cause of crime, which link it to social deprivation. People who live in these areas are aware that their neighbourhoods are often very socially deprived, yet also that this has not led to the crime explosion which they think has affected similarly socially deprived areas in other Irish or British cities. Some directly allude to the survival of these community structures and resources as a reason to explain the paradox, since ‘a sense of community’ is seen as assisting both in the suppression of local crime and its management. A youth worker from the Roslyn Street area of East Belfast is typical of many in this respect: ‘whole communities have been wiped out and have gone to big estates. The opposite has happened here, the greater Woodstock and Castlereagh area. Another reason why there wouldn’t be a big crime rate here is that sort of feeling of identity. There would be lots of kids who would live with their granny and stuff, and that creates this whole sense of belonging. There is an incredibly high rate of single parents,
poverty related issues, alcoholism and abuse. It is a very rough and ready area. It is a real paradox when you have all that and this sense of community which is still there.' It is because many people see these community structures and resources as a counterweight to the crime generic tendencies of social deprivation, that people who live in these socially deprived areas often associate crime with other causes than deprivation (although some do associate it with deprivation) such as moral decline, broad social change, displays of machismo and the search for status. However, the very same people’s solutions to crime address deprivation, such as providing better housing, more employment, improved education and better opportunities for young people.

The paramilitaries and local crime management

Paramilitary organisations play a role in civil unrest and political violence which extends beyond the local communities where their members live and wherein they find more general support and succour. But their role in local crime management is one entirely played out in these neighbourhoods and is heavily conditional upon the close-knittedness that comes from the relative survival of strong community structures. This is not to claim that the paramilitaries police with the consent of the entire community, although this is precisely what many respondents argued. But this role is facilitated by the survival of networks associated with close-knit communities because these networks disseminate the information that makes paramilitary policing possible and efficacious, and provides the push for the paramilitary organisations to engage in it in the first place. Paramilitary policing thus cannot be separated from the communal structures that survive in the areas where it takes place. Whereas these community structures, such as neighbourliness, extended family patterns, and community-wide resources are themselves useful in independently managing petty crime, the paramilitary organisations that are likewise embedded in these close-knit communities also deal with more serious crime.

Perceptions of the paramilitary role

In the West Belfast study area, some respondents extolled the contribution made by the paramilitaries to the relatively low crime rate in the area: ‘I think it is to the credit of the IRA that crime has been kept so low, because it has nothing to do with the RUC, absolutely not.’ Another said: ‘the community have recognised the IRA as their police. On many occasions people who have been mugged and have known the hoods, have gone to the IRA and asked them to deal with it.’ This is also perceived by people who disclaim any support for the IRA. A middle-aged man from Poleglass, otherwise deeply critical of the IRA, described matter-of-factly the situation in his neighbourhood: ‘the paras would have been very much a big force here in curbing any sort of crime.’ Reflecting the code of the local moral economy, he explained that the paramilitaries allowed repeated offences outside the area, but
if offenders were active in West Belfast ‘well then, they were fair game to be shot, but if they were outside the area, they weren’t hurting their own people, and that was OK’. A well-known Loyalist politician in the Protestant areas of West Belfast said of his neighbourhood: ‘I think about thirty per cent goes through the police but I reckon that ninety per cent of the thirty per cent also goes to the paramilitaries afterwards, they return to the paramilitaries and ask for justice. The paramilitaries will continue to carry it out until people don’t report it to them.’

In East Belfast the paramilitaries were described by several people as the unofficial police force. ‘The paras get things done’, said one youth worker, ‘things are done.’ Referring to crime in East Belfast, a local development worker said: ‘the paras’s influence has kept a lid on it, sort of controlled it. My experience and perception would be that the paras have definitely kept a lid on it.’ A youth worker in the Dee Street area said that he knew ‘ordinary law-abiding people who would go to the paras before they would go to the police’. He went on: ‘they are an unofficial police. You even hear pensioners shouting at the kids “well, I’m going to see the UDA”, they use it as a threat. They will then come and slap them about.’ Many people recounted stories of victims using the paramilitaries in preference to the police.

Members of a women’s group in East Belfast estimated that four crimes out of five are dealt with by the paramilitaries, especially, they said, rape cases. ‘They are the unofficial police force, especially in the case of rape. Paras deal with rapes, breaking into houses and cars. [People] steal the stuff and then they go into bars in the area, the paras see them and they cop it.’ In dealing with rape, for example, the paramilitaries are associating themselves with, and simultaneously helping to reproduce, the moral economy of the local area which defines certain categories of crime or victim as unacceptable. Thus, several people told of how the paramilitaries are particularly involved in dealing with sex crimes and offences against the elderly (on the IRA’s involvement in domestic violence see McWilliams, 1995: 20). With respect to the former, a development worker in East Belfast said that sex attacks were at the heart of most punishment beatings and knee cappings. ‘Even if somebody has been lifted under suspicion or the social services have been brought in, all these things travel very quickly within a fairly closely knit community, so in my experience a number of ones I would have known have been beaten because of sex attacks or maybe they had broken into some old person’s home.’

This moral code, however, essentially adheres to the local moral economy, which the paramilitaries wish to identify with, rather than comprising a personal code of ethics: terrorists can hardly lay claim to the latter, but they can give themselves credibility by appropriating the former. In this way, the policing role of the paramilitaries is premised in part on the survival of community structures in the close-knit communities in which they function. It is these structures which make it known that the paramilitaries are an available resource in local crime management.
and encourages the paramilitaries to become involved so that they might be better integrated into the communities they police. However, in appropriating the neighbourhood's moral economy, paramilitary organisations can have some problematic moral dilemmas imposed on them, not least of which is the requirement occasionally to co-operate with the police in the pursuit of crimes that are defined locally as beyond the pale.

The policing methods used by the paramilitaries also in part depend upon the survival of strong community structures in local neighbourhoods. One method is that of 'shaming', particularly associated with Republican paramilitaries, which requires for its effectiveness that communal disgrace will be experienced as a constraint by offenders. In West Belfast people have been forced to stand in public places (especially outside churches and supermarkets) with placards stating that they are a hoodlum or identifying what it is that they had stolen; some have had paint daubed on them as well. Some are tied to lamp posts to ensure they stay put. There is also a primitive 'house protection scheme', whereby paramilitary organisations place a sticker in the window of a housing warning that criminals enter at their peril. Members of a women's group in the Dee Street area of East Belfast explained how it worked:

A. If your house has been broken into, they give you a wee form to put in your window to say [what would happen] if you ever try to break into this house.
B. Even if you're moving house they would give you one if you asked them.
C. They gave us one after our house was broken into, to say if they ever caught anybody in the house they would be severely dealt with.

Dialogue with the perpetrators is also tried. One community worker in Whiterock, West Belfast, said that most incidents were dealt with 'just on a one-to-one basis, just talking to kids': 'I've seen them doing it, speaking to the youth, trying to impress on them the damage they are doing to this community.' They also try to impose curfews on young offenders, instructing parents to keep the offender indoors after a certain time, as well as a system of graded warnings and cautions.

Mostly, however, people perceive force as the main policing method of the paramilitaries. Some people perceive that this force comes in proportional degrees depending on the circumstances of the crime and the criminal background of the perpetrator, although others claim it to be quite arbitrary. Sometimes the paramilitaries match violence with violence; recently two men stabbed a woman they raped, the paramilitaries stabbed them back. The violence is occasionally low key - a 'slapping about' as respondents describe it. But this escalates into something much more severe under special conditions - when the crime is perpetrated against a member or supporter of the paramilitaries, when the community's outrage has been inordinately offended, or when the perpetrator has ignored repeated warnings (on the gradation in paramilitary punishment beatings
see Thompson and Mulholland, 1995). It is circumstances like these which allow some supporters of the paramilitaries to claim that punishment beatings are done reluctantly and only after the community has demanded them.

The efficacy of paramilitary violence

What adds further legitimacy to the involvement of paramilitaries in local crime management is the efficacy of doing so. People may object for several reasons to this role, but experience shows them that the paramilitaries 'get things done'. Evidence indicates that people are reporting crimes to them, even some community figures, like youth workers, who might be expected to act otherwise. They do this because it is often more efficacious to do so compared to reporting the crime to the police. Part of the reason for this lies in the ineffectiveness of the police rather than any intrinsic merit of the paramilitaries. It is also the case that the crime management methods of the paramilitaries better meet some people's wish for swift 'justice', so that they appear effective in exacting retribution or even restoring stolen property. However, this efficacy is premised on an illusion, namely, that criminals are scared of the paramilitaries because of their reputation for violence. This illusion gives credence to their role in the face of all other objections.

Many respondents attributed to the paramilitaries an efficacy or effectiveness based on the belief that criminals are scared of the paramilitaries' violence. For example, a member of a women's group in East Belfast said that crime was lower in Northern Ireland than England because of the paramilitaries, in that criminals know that 'if they do it, the paras will take care of them'. People attributed quaking fear to criminals as a result of them knowing that the paramilitaries would be dealing with them. 'I know the younger ones are afraid of paramilitaries, it stops them'; 'people who may normally do break-ins do not do it because they are afraid of the paramilitaries. I feel if the paras were not here the level of crime would be very high'; 'people are afraid to get into crime because they know the paras will soon find out'; 'young people are too scared to commit crime for fear of punishment attacks'.

Yet the paramilitaries' efficacy can be exaggerated because their violent methods of crime management can be accorded too much influence over the behaviour of criminals or potential offenders. Some respondents drew on experiences which made them believe that reporting crimes to the paramilitaries was as pointless as doing so to the police because, as one said, 'punishment shootings don't really put them off'. Another said, 'while they are being punished by being beaten, it doesn't cure it.' Some supporters of the paramilitaries also claim this. Referring to Whiterock, a Sinn Fein activist said, 'from personal experience of the area, knee cappings didn't work'. The number of offenders who seem to require repeated beatings proves that it lacks the deterrence commonly attributed it. A worker from a Poleglass youth club described its users in a way that bears out this point: 'a lot of
people that would come to this club would be involved in all sorts of crime, and a
good percentage of them would have had beatings from paras, some of them had
legs broke. One fella comes here who would have been shot about eight times,
knees, elbows and ankles.’ Having said this, punishment attacks could not be
considered lightly by any offender, and one young joyrider explained that he was
more scared of the paramilitaries than the police, although this did not stop him
from joyriding. Indeed, to some offenders it adds to the thrill by making the crime
more exciting, which is why joyriders have been known to deliberately steal the
cars of leading members of paramilitary organisations (Thompson and Mulholland
have shown how some young offenders valorise their beatings and see it as a rite of
passage, 1995: 55-9). Some residents from West Belfast, for example, believed that
criminals wore their punishment beatings like badges of status, thus almost
encouraging crime rather than deterring it.

Defenders of punishment beatings describe them as effective even if personally
distasteful. Some even draw on notions of community consent. ‘Now I have a
problem with knee capping, everybody has a problem with knee capping for all
different reasons, it is an extreme remedy. But at the end of the day you can’t just
keep doing crime. In 1981 the IRA made a public statement that they weren’t doing
anymore knee cappings. The IRA didn’t want to go back to knee capping, ordinary
people went to the IRA and said you’ve got to start doing something about this
crime. It’s not the answer but there is still no solution.’ Others believe that the
victims of beatings deserve it. As young mother from Poleglass said, ‘you feel sorry
for them, it’s terrible, then you think the wee shite’s been torturing somebody, he
hasn’t been getting that [beating] for nothing’. Someone else from Poleglass said
emphatically, ‘I do agree with punishment beatings, I really do, not in all cases but,
and I do think it has kept crime low, crime could have been ten times worse’. In
short, efficacy, if nothing else, is a justification.

For many respondents, a consideration which undercuts any claim by the
paramilitaries to hold the moral high ground because of their role in local crime
management is the perception that they are also directly involved in committing
ordinary crime or licensing others to commit it. This involvement is commonly
believed and some respondents used it to explain why criminals do not fear the
paramilitaries - they are either ‘protected’ or licenced by them or known by the
criminals to be part of the same sub-culture and to engage in the same nefarious
behaviour: ‘punishment shootings don’t really put them off. The paras are involved
in crime themselves, they are giving them the drugs, take a cut of house break-ins
and so on. There is a misconception that paras look after the community - they are
involved in crime as well’ (on Loyalist involvement in crime see Bruce, 1995).
5. CONCLUSION

There is an issue prompted by these findings which is worthy of more extended discussion. A policing vacuum exists where there is an unmet need for ordinary civil policing. The existence of a policing vacuum is a measure of the illegitimacy or ineffectiveness of the official police service which is supposed to dispense ordinary civil policing. Evidence for this vacuum is shown by whether people manage crime themselves locally and whether there are other informal mechanisms for policing.

On this count, therefore, there is a policing vacuum in working class Nationalist and Loyalist areas.

In these areas, ordinary visible crime is high and rising, even though much of it is unreported to the police. The communities recognise the need for social control to stem the problem of crime and many fear for the future precisely because they believe that social control will diminish. All age groups and social categories in these working class communities, from young to old, male to female, young parents and elderly alike, recognise the need for ordinary civil policing. Yet, for a variety of reasons, many feel unable to support the RUC, leaving a vacuum filled by the paramilitaries, vigilante groups or other community initiatives for dealing with crime. Politically partisan respondents have few problems with this vacuum because it gives the paramilitaries or their political representatives a socially legitimate policing role, although they are sensitive to community criticism of the barbaric methods used by the paramilitaries to control crime. However, ordinary members of the public in both study areas do not want to have to rely on the paramilitaries or other structures for local crime management. They want a properly constituted, trustworthy and effective police force because of the crime problem but, regretfully, many see little evidence of such policing. Some thus refer to policing as being in limbo.

A young West Belfast father gave expression to this policing vacuum or limbo in the following way.

Well, the community is actually saying, this is a major problem. That is why I see that you'd better get a police force up and running shortly who we can go to and start dealing with this. It is a problem. I would reckon if that doesn't happen, what you're going to end up with is people taking action themselves. I want to live in Belfast for the rest of my days. I love West Belfast and want to rear my kids here, and even through the worst times, everything we went through, you stuck at it. I don't want my kids growing up in an area infested with crime, where it has become accepted, part of life. I don't want that, I want it stamped out now.
A mother from Poleglass articulated the same concern.

The way I see it now, when there’s nobody now to control all these evil pigs who’re coming up with their drugs and everything else, there’s going to be more. There’s going to be more burglaries. They can do what they want now and I would rather have it the way it was before [the ceasefire], but then, if there was a proper or half decent policeforce you wouldn’t have any problem in these communities.

A co-member of the women’s group repeated the same.

Sinn Fein can’t speak for the ordinary people. A small minority maybe want it but the rest of us don’t. There’s bound to be another route. You know, maybe if the community and the police both find a way. I mean, not vigilantes, there’s bound to be something, that people know they can lift the phone and know there’ll be help at the end, but not for these cowboys [vigilantes] that come out and do it, cos it’s not right. I mean, some of them deserve the beatings.

Ordinary people want a policeforce they can rely on and trust to be effective; crime can be dealt with properly in no other way. Paramilitary policing has not stemmed the tide. ‘No it hasn’t. It has never been a long term solution. We need to address the long term issues if we want to make any impact into criminal behaviour in the area. It is unfair, it’s not the community’s responsibility, but they know nobody else is going to deal with it effectively. Everybody realises there is a need for a policeforce. I mean, it would be great if you could lift the phone and say “hello constable, could you help”, but it’s not going to happen.’ The following is an extract from the fieldnotes of an unrecorded conversation amongst a women’s group in West Belfast: ‘the women were all concerned about ordinary crime in the area. They made it clear that they believe West Belfast now more than ever needs a policeforce to deal with the issues. They would like to be able to lift the phone and contact the policeforce who they believe they can trust and who has their genuine welfare in mind. At the moment the women would not dream of contacting the RUC. Sense of having no one to turn to when in trouble. There are people who wouldn’t go to the police but also don’t want to do to the Sinn Fein ones either. They gave examples of the community having to tackle crime themselves in the absence of an effective crime force.’

This policing vacuum presents the RUC with an opportunity. There is a heart-felt cry in people for a policeforce to fill the void in working class Nationalist and Loyalist areas, and it remains feasible to most ordinary people that the RUC can be reformed sufficiently to make them acceptable or effective enough so that they can fill the vacuum themselves. Sinn Fein supporters, of course, believe that the RUC cannot ever fill the vacuum because of the legacy of the past. Some respondents articulated this view and attribute it widely to working class Nationalists. ‘You go

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to any street and house in these areas and people will give you their own particular story as to why the RUC should be disbanded. It is not some sort of general hysteria. People can tell you specifically why the RUC should be disbanded. The RUC’s opportunity lies in the fact that Sinn Fein’s abolitionist views are not widely held outside the party.

‘If the ceasefires are to work’, said one West Belfast community worker, ‘there’s going to have to be something done about the RUC just because if it stays the way it is, the people here won’t accept them.’ The key to the RUC’s acceptability in working class Nationalist areas is that they are able to be trusted: ‘there should be a policeforce that you feel you can trust, that you can go to and they’ll sort it out if there’s any trouble, but you see, some people would be afraid to ring the RUC.’ People in West Belfast volunteered views on the reforms that they thought were necessary for that trust to be developed. Two essential ideas lay behind such opinions. The first was that the RUC needed to lose its sectarian image as a Loyalist policeforce; the second that it needed to be locally based.

In terms of the former, calls were made to make the RUC more impartial and representative of the social composition of Northern Ireland as a whole. Thus, it was widely advocated that there should be more recruitment of Catholics to make the RUC more representative, and that they should be unbiased in their conduct. It was also suggested by some that there should be a neutralisation of its symbols in order to shed its sectarian image. A local priest said: ‘they’re going to have to change the name. They got their “Royal” for putting down the Fenians so many years ago. I mean, you go into a police station and you’re walking under the Union Jack. They are not the local police, they owe their allegiance to the crown not the people. They should be here for the protection and looking after of the people.’ Although, another West Belfast resident said that she ‘didn’t care what letters you call them, as long as they’re honest and work with the letter of the law’.

Demands were also made to make the RUC more locally accountable. Many respondents eulogised the old neighbourhood bobby and wanted a return to a locally based policeforce again. ‘I would like to see the old-fashioned policeman, you know, that gets to know the area, gets to know the people, the type of policeman who can come in for a cup of tea.’ Achieving this in the modern era is the difficult task for any police service, but some respondents from West Belfast advocated effective liaison committees and community policing or problem-solving policing structures in order to increase local contact, and urged recruitment from the local area. A mixed, unbiased, locally representative and accountable policeforce was one that they said could be trusted. A politically radical community activist can perhaps be left to speak for most respondents from West Belfast:

There is nobody knows we need a policeforce more than me, there is nobody wants a policeforce more than me. And there is nobody would use them more
than me. I believe if we had a policeforce in this area that could be trusted, you know a representative, accountable policeforce, people in it who come from the area, then the RUC will remain by and large intact.

However, having the opportunity to fill the policing vacuum and actually grasping it are different things. If the RUC does not take it and resists extensive reform, the policing vacuum will remain to be filled by a range of structures and bodies which are incapable of managing the rise in crime in isolation from a socially acceptable and effective RUC. Local crime management is ineffective in dealing with sophisticated, organised crime which is not amenable to the local moral economy or community structures. Thus, in a policing vacuum, organised crime expands; rich criminals become richer at the expense of petty criminals who are forced to increasingly prey on relatively poor victims from their local neighbourhood. This is clear from experience in South Africa’s townships and in the urban centres of settler societies prior to decolonisation (see Anderson and Killingray, 1992), where similar policing vacuums existed for much the same reason. Therefore, if peace is successfully negotiated yet the policing vacuum remains, the future presents a forbidding fear: the paramilitaries, up to this point the most efficacious mechanism of local crime management, may themselves move into organised crime, especially drugs, opening communities up to organised crime, which cannot be managed locally, and to increasingly desperate petty crime, which local crime management structures are unable to contain as successfully as before, particularly once the paramilitaries no longer involve themselves in policing. In this limbo, a Catholic priest said, something will need to be done ‘to keep the thing from turning to savagery’. The vacuum thus needs to be filled and quickly.
References


DISCUSSION

Brice Dickson: The authors of the paper we have just heard have done us all a service in providing such an original and insightful contribution to the debate concerning urban crime in Northern Ireland. It is an impressive piece of research and we should all be grateful to them for conducting it.

I do, however, retain some reservations about the ethnographic method in this context. Although it makes for interesting reading, it does not purport to present a representative picture in the way that a more statistically based project would do. As a lawyer, I have some difficulty in accepting the evidence presented - which at times is anecdotal or hearsay - as satisfying the required standard of proof. It seems to me that there is a tendency on the part of ethnographers to accentuate the unusual at the expense of the mundane. There is always an eye on the "quotable quote". I am reminded of the kind of documentary journalism which makes excellent television by providing good soundbites and startling images but which leaves the viewer not quite sure about what is fact and what is fiction. The ethnographic method certainly provides an alternative perspective but, as the authors of this paper concede, it is a supplementary one.

Some of my doubts might have been lessened had we been supplied with a little more information as to the exact methodology adopted, e.g. as to how many people were interviewed, what categories of people these were, whether they were asked questions about the effects of the ceasefires, whether they were interviewed just after an incident which may have coloured their views, etc. I realise, though, that there were constraints of time and space as far as today's presentation was concerned. I was pleased to see the areas of Belfast investigated called by their real names, unlike some other ethnographic studies where the identity of the localities concerned has been all too thinly disguised. I am forced to ask, though, whether Castlereagh and Woodburn are typical of East and West Belfast?

On the question of how to define crime, it is interesting that respondents tended to exclude what we call "invisible" crime. White collar crime is not mentioned in the paper at all, even though tax evasion costs more per year to the Exchequer than social security fiddles. Apparently some forms of criminal behaviour, such as non-payment of a television licence or the diversion of electricity, are not considered to be crimes at all these days. They are portrayed as examples of opportunistic, almost as expected, conduct. Some would equate them with the entrepreneurial spirit so encouraged during the Thatcherite era.

There can be no denying that the gap between reported crime and actual crime is very worrying. It is to be hoped that the results of the recent Northern Ireland Crime Survey - inexplicably delayed - will cast further light on the existing gap and reasons for it. But there is little that the criminal justice system can do about crime...
that is not reported: the challenge is for other organs in our society to achieve ways of increasing the rate of reporting. There are, of course, many ways of detecting crime other than waiting for it to be reported: employers can be interviewed, the accounts of companies can be carefully scrutinised, video cameras can be installed, etc. The paper might have mentioned that sometimes people simply cannot be bothered to report something, perhaps because they do not want to get involved. How many of us have walked past a building where the alarm is sounding and yet done nothing about it? There are also a great number of victimless crimes, such as possession of drugs. Perhaps we should take a less censorious attitude to the non-reporting of those?

I liked the paper's descriptions of surviving community structures (senses of community; neighbourliness; extended kinship) and the idea of a "local moral economy" as a management tool. Again the researchers might like to consider if there is a difference in this context between victimless crimes and other crime. House-breaking and car theft are almost victimless these days, given the prevalence of insurance (and the apparent willingness of insurance companies, in an ever more competitive market, not to increase premiums even after claims have been submitted). They might also ask why people disapprove of crime. Is it because they fear for their own or their children's safety rather than because they do not like seeing other people's property damaged?

The paper was revealing when it indicated that rape cases are often dealt with by paramilitaries in East Belfast and when it reported that one development worker said that sex attacks were at the heart of most punishment beatings. Despite there being well-known instances of these points (such as the murder of Margaret Wright on the Donegall Road), I find the general proposition hard to believe.

As far as policing is concerned, I wonder if the evidence presented for a policing vacuum is really convincing? Just because there is a "local management" system this surely does not mean that a policing system cannot co-exist alongside it (much as middle class areas may have both normal policing as well as neighbourhood watch schemes). It is asserted that many ordinary members of the public see little evidence of trustworthy and effective policing, but just how widespread and accurate is that perception? Evidence from the Community Attitudes and Social Attitudes Surveys would tend to contradict it, although I admit that a great flaw with those surveys is that they are Northern Ireland-based, not broken down more locally.

Some make a lot of the fact that most of today's RUC recruits are not working class in background, or at any rate no longer live in working class areas because they can afford to live in plusher surroundings. I, for one, do not believe that it matters very much whether police officers actually live where they work: one can still get to know an area well just by working there, especially in the evenings. Nor do I think
their social background affects them greatly once they have been “acculturated” through the RUC’s training programme.

I would be more optimistic than the researchers that policing for alienated areas could be devised - compare the use currently being made of PLO police to police supporters of Hamas in the Gaza strip. Taking on board the views of police officers themselves, as the recent study by Andrew Hamilton and Linda Moore attempts to do, would be illuminating here. Further work would also be worthwhile on liaison committees and on community partnerships. Part of the difficulty is that many of those who complain about a lack of police accountability are short of ideas as to the new accountability mechanisms that should be put in place.

The paper is valuable in that it shows that more research is required on strategies for preventing crime and on schemes for punishing criminals. Prevention should always be part of a crime management plan, and diversion should always be one of the “punishment” options. Thompson and Mulholland have elsewhere ably demonstrated that, in the long term, physical punishment (in their case by paramilitaries) adds to the level of violence in our society.¹ It is wiser to give young people back their self-esteem, a “social vaccine” that “inoculates people against a wide spectrum of self-defeating and socially undesirable behaviour.”

In short, this paper raises as many questions as it answers. That, on the other hand, is often one of the marks of a good piece of research. We are all in the authors’ debt for provoking us to think more creatively in this context.

Reply by John Brewer: One of the strengths and weaknesses of sociology is that it shares its subject matter with common sense knowledge. It is a strength because sociology has a subject matter that is immensely interesting to ordinary people, but there are at least two disadvantages. The institutions and processes within which ordinary people live their everyday lives are the very institutions and processes of interest to sociology, and its understanding of them competes with common sense understandings of the same thing. This means that sociology’s explanations have to confront habitual, traditional and common sense beliefs about the phenomenon which are resistant to change. There are not many lay people who confidently articulate reasons as to why there are super novas in the universe, or who discuss in ordinary conversation the orbit of the moons of Jupiter. But there are very many who believe they know why crime is rising and do not need telling otherwise or who feel confident to articulate the link between immigration, race and unemployment, the factors behind the rise in illegitimate births, and so on. They

talk about these things readily in everyday discourse and are convinced of the truth of what they say.

Sociology is not able, therefore, to demarcate a subject matter that is 'professional', in the sense that it does not have a subject matter about which ordinary people feel ignorant and uninformed, in which they take little interest and rarely discuss. This is not the case for the natural sciences and most other social sciences, which are accorded superficially a competence and professionalism because their subject matter is beyond the realm of understanding and interest of lay people. It follows from this that critics of sociology can easily parody it as common sensical - and many do. For these critics, sociology can win neither way. If it comes up with explanations that seem to confirm common sense knowledge, critics retort that this was known all along without the need for sociologists to tell us, and findings which contradict or dispute common sense knowledge are dismissed as counter intuitive.

Qualitative sociologists, however, find themselves in a double bind. Sociological explanations of all kinds confront considerable resistance, but the common sensical parody of qualitative research and the kind of data it collects give additional problems. Many proponents of the natural science model of social research, as well as lay people and policy makers, parody qualitative data as 'mere journalism', providing unanalytical and highly descriptive accounts of people droning on about this or that topic, with so-and-so saying this followed by so-and-so saying that. And not only are we 'mere journalists', we are tabloid journalists at that, providing interesting details of the exotically unusual, the peculiar, odd and strange, copy that titillates but does not inform. Thus, qualitative researchers are seen as simply hanging loose on street corners or in bars, going with the flow, waiting for tittle tattle, the exotic and the erotic, like a hack from the tabloids, doing our ethnography unrigorously and unsystematically.

This parody does not solely lie in prejudice against humanistic models of social research, for some ethnographers do very poor qualitative research. Qualitative research is very easy to do, but it is very hard to do well. There is no defence for poor qualitative research, yet the notion that qualitative research cannot be systematic is years out of date. Some time ago, I did an ethnographic study of the RUC (Brewer, 1991) and one of the few criticisms made - at least in writing - was that some people doubted the capacity of qualitative data to support the comments made. I naturally defended ethnographic data and later published a set of guidelines, by means of which ethnographers can do systematic qualitative research and display this fact when writing up the results, which have since become widely known and used (Brewer, 1994). These guidelines paralleled similar discussions by many authors, before and since, which have sought to show how rigorous and systematic qualitative sociology can be (for example, Hammersley, 1989, 1990, 1992; Stanley, 1990 and Silverman, 1989). Readers of the methodological literature on qualitative research have thus been aware for many years that common sense
parodies are increasingly difficult to support by reasoned argument. The prejudice against qualitative data persists only because the parodies are common sensical and thus resistant to change.

We began the paper by stating our assumption that, by now, the case for ethnography and ethnographic data did not need to be made, but the comments proved us wrong. Features of the common sense parody of ethnography are illustrated well by two of the commentators on our paper. Professor Dickson begins with an explicit statement of parody: qualitative data is interesting but mere anecdote, hearsay and unproven. It is evidence that reflects the artful, deceitful skill of the investigative journalist or documentary maker not the serious researcher; real research requires statistics. There is little point in responding to this by displaying the rigour and integrity of the research design because no satisfactory response could ever assuage such common sense. As I have written elsewhere, the objections of some critics to ethnographic data cannot be satisfied by appeals to good practice because they go beyond differences of a technical kind (1994: 237).

Yet ethnography is particularly important in criminology, as he should know. Ethnographic data capture the richness of people’s experiences in their own terms, proffering a counterweight to the breadth and geographical coverage of official statistics. Actors’ accounts take on added value with respect to crime statistics because of the well known limitations in official statistics on crime. Ethnography thus has a long and well-respected history in the criminological literature, going back to classic studies by the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s. Early studies of criminal lifestyles, such as the ‘jack roller’ (Shaw, 1930), or the street corner gang (Thrasher, 1927 and Whyte, 1955), have been complemented by modern ethnographies, such as Young’s study of drug takers (1970), Demar’s study of ‘wine alley’ in Glasgow (1976), Ditton’s work on fiddling (1977), Parker’s study of young boys (1974), Patrick’s analysis of Glasgow gang life (1973), Campbell’s study of female gangs (1984) and Hobbs’s work on crime in East London (1988).

Ethnographic findings, however, can be easily misunderstood. For some, ethnography represents the only research method because it alone captures people’s experiences in their own words (a point made with respect to crime by Rock, 1979), but for others it is denigrated as ‘mere journalism’. For the latter, the data is dismissed out of hand solely on grounds that they are ethnographic. Because of such bias, it is necessary for ethnographers to be reflexive and identify the contingencies that helped produce the extant data to allow readers to judge the validity of the findings. Let me therefore provide some methodological detail.

The methodological limitations of researching sensitive topics are now well documented (see Lee, 1994 and Renzetti and Lee, 1992), even with respect to researching sensitive topics in Northern Ireland (see Brewer, 1990 and Leonard, 1994). Ethnographic research on crime in Belfast, which touches on issues such as
policing and the role of paramilitary organisations in local crime management, fits the template of sensitive research, especially when conducted in Loyalist areas of East Belfast and Nationalist ones in West Belfast. It is important to identify what bearing this sensitivity had on the research.

The first was with respect to the sample. Because of the sensitivity of the topic of the research, we felt it necessary to work through local community-based agencies and organisations in order to access general members of the public; the public were not accessed by means of unsolicited knocks on front doors but through their involvement with local community groups and organisations. Initial contact with the organisations was facilitated by the network of contacts possessed by the investigators and by the snowball technique.

These community organisations acted as a buffer or gatekeeper between the fieldworker and the public, giving each some reassurance and security when addressing controversial and deeply sensitive questions. Interviews also took place in the familiar surroundings of the organisation’s premises. The openness of respondents suggests that this strategy worked. Fieldwork took place over twelve months between 1994 and 1995, with six months spent in each study area, and the fact that the ceasefire pertained for most of the fieldwork, and for all of that which took place in West Belfast, encouraged openness amongst respondents. People’s frankness about the paramilitaries was no doubt facilitated by their thought that peace had arrived. Dr Hamilton is correct when he notes that this difference in time explains why his respondents were much less forthcoming about the paramilitaries and crime.

The use of community organisations as gatekeepers also facilitated a measure of representativeness, a problem which hinders the reliability of much ethnographic research because of the small numbers of people studied. Our research design allowed us to ensure that the organisations selected were an accurate political and social representation of the locality, as well as covering a cross-section of key social groups, such as women, youth and the elderly; this social and political representativeness could not have been so readily achieved by means of unsolicited access to the general public, which can overlook members of minority groups. Some community groups, however, are often politically aligned to the mainline and fringe political groups in Northern Ireland but the wide variety of views obtained seems to show that we were not hijacked by representatives or supporters of any one political organisation.

Ethnographic research is both a methodology and a method. That is, it is more than just a technique for data collection, but also a whole approach to research. This approach or methodology is normally called naturalism or interpretative sociology, in which access is sought to actors’ own experiences and accounts in order to represent phenomena as they are experienced by people themselves. The methods of
data collection associated with this methodology must access these accounts and experiences, which is why ethnographic research involves the use of data collection techniques such as indepth interviewing, participant observation, personal documents and discourse analysis, among others. Our research design involved exclusively the use of indepth interviews. Interviews were arranged and conducted solely by one of the authors. In total, 115 interviews were carried out with individuals and ten with groups. They were recorded on tape and then transcribed verbatim, except where respondents objected to the interview being recorded, whereupon notes were taken during the interview. There are ninety-two hours of tape recordings. Interviews covered a fixed range of topics, although these were addressed in different ways depending upon circumstances.

Two areas were selected for study, one each in East and West Belfast, in order to reflect the spatial location of Belfast’s communal divide. Police sub-divisions were chosen as the most appropriate unit. To aid comparison it was important to select closely matching sub-divisions, and ones which provided a cross-section of social classes and housing styles. Castlereagh and Woodburn each contain large council estates, areas of inner city deprivation and suburban housing, providing a mix of community types and social classes. Fieldwork deliberately covered organisations based in most of the localities within each broad area in order to provide some geographical spread and social representativeness. While the sub-divisions largely reflect Belfast’s ‘religious geography’, each contains pockets where members of the other religious community live. In fieldwork we made sure that we covered organisations in these enclaves.

Another feature of the parody contained in Professor Dickson’s comments is found in the remark that he simply refuses to believe some evidence than runs counter to his common sense understanding of the situation. Thus, the data we provided about the role of the paramilitaries in policing sex crimes, or the negative attitudes possessed towards the RUC, are dismissed as simply ‘hard to believe’ because they are counter intuitive. Intuition, however, is often unreliable, and similar research by others supports our claims, as Dr Hamilton’s comments on his own research illustrate.

The issue of how to assess findings which are counter intuitive appears also in the comments of Professor Morison, who seems to dispute that people in our study areas possessed a sense of community. We used a sociologically broad sense of the term, reflected in a strong sense of locality, the persistence of neighbourliness and neighbourhood social networks, the persistence of extended family networks, and the development of fairly homogeneous localities in a social, class and ethnic sense. We did not equate it simply with religion, as he suggests, nor did we treat the two study areas as monoliths structured only by religion. Our analysis was sensitive to localities within each study area. Locality is an important dimension in recent
criminological research because ‘environmental criminology’ (see Bottoms, 1994 and Bottoms and Wiles, 1996) has shown the importance of place in crime.

Modernity is at once both a globalising and localising process because it throws into sharper relief the differences that remain locally under broad social transformations. The few local crime surveys undertaken in Britain (for example, Crawford et al., 1990; Hanmer and Saunders, 1984; Kinsey, 1984; Kinsey, Lea and Young, 1986; Jones, Lea and Young, 1987 and Jones, MacLean and Young, 1986) have uncovered areas of criminal behaviour and victimisation left untouched by large national surveys (the importance of locality in generating different experiences than those captured in large surveys is also apparent with respect to public attitudes towards the police, see Jefferson and Walker, 1993). By focusing on inner city districts in the large conurbations (mostly in Labour-run councils), local crime surveys revealed the worst effects of the crime problem to be localised to poor neighbourhoods and certain vulnerable social groups, such as council-house dwellers, ethnic minorities and the very poor (not women and the elderly, despite their greater fear of victimisation). This study of crime in Belfast confirms the marked differences that exist in the local experiences of crime within one city, let alone globally, and illustrates that some areas within the same city have had different fortunes under modernity, making them better able to respond to or cope with criminogenic processes. The local experience of crime in Belfast, for example, is that the criminogenic tendencies of social change are being mediated in some localities by sociological processes which reflect the persistence of social control, slowing the rate of social breakdown, with obvious effects on the incidence and nature of crime and its management. Professor Morison should substantiate the inference that locality is unimportant by hard evidence rather than that it is simply counter intuitive. I accept that parodies of qualitative research will persist, but I had assumed that some people knew better.
References


