

Riots and Rioters in Belfast: A Demographic Analysis of 1,674 Arrestees in a two-year period

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Rioting has been a feature of Belfast life for the past 150 years. Prior to 1832, civil disturbances were commoner in rural areas (Broeker 1970). Severe rioting has occurred in the years 1832; 1835; 1843; 1852; 1857; 1864; 1872; 1880; 1886; 1898; 1907; 1912; 1920-22; 1935 and 1964. Some of these disturbances have been studied in considerable detail by official Commissioners of Enquiry (1857; 1886). Others have been described by authors such as Henry (1864), Boyd (1969) and King (1965). The pattern of riots tends to be repetitive as regards:

- (a) *The season of the year*: almost all these riots have occurred in the months of July and August.
- (b) *The precipitating factors*: processions by those of one religious persuasion claiming territorial rights by marching through the districts of the other religious group. Associated with these processions are strongly emotive sermons and speeches by clergymen and politicians. In the present century, although processions remain a potent source of irritation, political events have often preceded rioting.
- (c) *The area of Belfast involved*: mainly the inner part of West Belfast, i.e., lower end of Shankill and Falls districts. As has been clearly demonstrated by Jones (1960), this area of the city is one of low socio-economic status, high density and segregation on a religious basis.
- (d) *Sectarian nature*: mobs of one religious group attack and burn property of the other religious group. Retaliation occurs, with subsequent mounting violence resulting in severe injuries and deaths.
- (e) *Army and Police intervention*: the security forces have been called in to restore law and order, with varying degrees of success.
- (f) *Sex and occupation of rioters*: from the published accounts of riots in the last century it would appear that men predominated, although women and

children have appeared among the casualties. Reference to occupation is made in the Commission of Enquiry Reports (e.g., carpenters, shipwrights and navvies figure very prominently). Also included are mill workers and foundrymen.

During the past three years Belfast has witnessed the most severe rioting ever experienced in the city. These riots have had wide coverage in the publicity media, and have been the subject of various reports (Cameron, 1969; Scarman, 1972); and various authors have given somewhat polemic accounts (De Paor 1970; *Sunday Times* Insight Team Report, 1972; Edwards 1969). These have differed from previous disturbances in several respects:—

- (a) *Duration*: commencing in Belfast early in 1969, continuing through 1970 and 1971, and up to date in 1972.
- (b) *More extensive*: both as regards area of the city involved, and also in the fact that several other towns in Northern Ireland have experienced severe civil disturbances.
- (c) The large number of people killed, injured and arrested, and the vast amount of property destroyed.
- (d) The extent and duration of military deployment.

The purposes of the present paper is to study the social characteristics of the rioters, and to assess the degree of spatial mobility.

Literature

In the past three years Northern Ireland has been a focus of attention because of continuing group violence; but civil strife has been a feature of most countries in this century. The Feierabends (1966) found that, between 1948 and 1961, group violence occurred in 81 out of 82 independent countries. Between 1961 and 1967, some type of civil disturbance was reported from 114 of the world's 121 larger nations. When these countries are rated for the total magnitude of strife, the United States ranks 41st, the United Kingdom 74th, and Ireland 97th. But when the United States is compared with other Western European countries it ranks first in magnitude of all strife (Gurr, 1969). An interesting comparison of violence in the United States and Northern Ireland is that in the five years ending May, 1968, there were 200 deaths in the USA (population 200 million); while in Northern Ireland, with only 1.5 million population, about 300 people have been killed in 2½ years as a result of civil disturbances.

Almost all the detailed studies of participants in riots have come from the United States. Three methods of study have been used: eye witness accounts, interview surveys based on residents of the riot areas of some major American

cities, and arrest records. The first two methods may be open to bias because of retrospective falsification. The latter method appears the most objectively accurate, although those arrested may not be an exact reflection of the participants, and may be influenced by the attitudes and prejudices of the police and security forces to the political issues, as also to such factors as age, sex, race, religion and social group. Even such trivial features as dress and hair style may affect police attitudes.

The Kerner report (1968) describes typical American rioter in the summer of 1967 as Negro, unmarried, male, between the ages of 15 and 24, and a life-long resident of the city in which the riot took place. Economically his position was similar to his Negro neighbours. He was slightly better educated than the average Negro of the city, but was likely to be in an unskilled job. In the Detroit study 80.8 per cent of arrestees were between 15 and 35, 89.3 per cent were male, 47.8 per cent single, and 59.4 had been born in Detroit. Of 3,395 arrestees in 15 American cities, 90 per cent were residents of the city in which the disorder occurred. No significant difference in incidence of unemployment was apparent between rioters and non-rioters. The great majority of those arrested were charged with looting or curfew violations. Looting tended to occur early in the riot; gunfire and sniping at a later stage.

The Los Angeles rioters were studied by Sears and McConahey (1969), who concluded that "the riot was not the product of a small handful of the ghetto residents". The major distinguishing characteristic of the rioters was not poverty, recent migrancy, unemployment, or poor education, but youth. In fact, the participants represented a major portion of the young men and women of the ghetto. These authors also state that the rioters in Los Angeles were residents of the area; they found it a novel, proximate and exciting experience; and that most indices of socio-economic status do not relate to riot participation.

Of those arrested in Los Angeles 79 per cent were male, and 52 per cent were young men aged between 15 and 29. Similar findings were reported from this city at the time of the Watts riots (Cohen, 1970). The Watts area of Los Angeles has ecological features similar in many respects to West Belfast, namely, narrow streets and alleys, high population density, littered streets, unpainted and run-down houses, and a general appearance of neglect. Cohen concludes: "young people were much more active than older, men more than women but young women were more active than men over 30." Murphy and Watson (1970) state that, although most of those active in the Watts riot were residents of the area, many of them had been born in the Southern States.

The characteristics of the 668 persons arrested during the Chicago riots of August, 1968, differ in that only 41.4 per cent were residents of Chicago. Of the others, the police records list persons from 36 states and five foreign countries. Of those arrested 76.8 per cent were under 26, and 32.6 per cent were students (Walker Report, 1968).

As regards the area of a city involved in riots, the 1919 Chicago Commission on Race Relations described "adjusted" and "non-adjusted" areas, and found that generally the adjusted areas remained quiet. The term "contested area" was also

used by this Commission to describe areas previously dominated by whites, but being invaded by coloured residents. Similarly Lee and Humphrey (1943) reported that mixed neighbourhoods of Detroit were free from severe rioting in 1943, and they clearly demonstrate in their "battle map" that the major flash points were at the demarcation lines between two distinct racial areas: Grimshaw (1960) describes seven ecological areas, and concludes that "social characteristics of ecological areas within the metropolis greatly influence the kind and intensity of local racial violence". He also demonstrates that, prior to World War II, the social characteristics of the population influenced where civil disturbance occurred; but in the post-World War II period the specific ecological features of the area have more influence. He also states that in the more recent riots the participants have tended to be transients on the site of conflict.

Methodology

Data were obtained from police records of all those arrested for offences related to the civil disturbances in Belfast. The police commenced keeping these records on 1st May, 1969, on which the following information is recorded: name, home address, sex, age, occupation, offence or offences, date and place of arrest. These records are filled in daily, and are reasonably accurate. The period under study was the two-year period from 1st May, 1969, to 30th April, 1971.

Belfast was divided into 13 areas namely: Shankill, Falls, Ballymurphy/Turf Lodge, Oldpark/Ardoyne, New Lodge Road/York Street, Inner South, Outer South, Inner East, Outer East, Central including Markets area, Outer West, Outer North, and Peripheral Housing Estates situated just outside the city boundary. Three additional areas of residence were also included: Elsewhere in Northern Ireland, Outside Northern Ireland, and No Fixed Abode. The boundary lines of these 13 areas of Belfast were marked out on a map. Inner and Outer regions of Belfast have been used in a previous study. Each person arrested was allocated to one of these areas, according to his home address. The area of arrest was also recorded, and a separate table was made to indicate any mobility, inward or outward.

The age groups recorded were six, viz: 0—19, 20—29, 30—39, 40—49, 50—64, and 65 and over. Social group was recorded according to occupation, as in the Registrar-General's Classification.

Offences were divided into eight groups, as follows:

Riotous Behaviour (Riotous or Disorderly Behaviour/Breach of the Peace/Resisting Arrest/Impeding the Military)

Looting (Looting/Burglary/Larceny)

Assault (Assaulting Police, Military or Civilians)

Explosives (In possession of explosive substances/causing explosions/petrol bombs)

Malicious Damage (Arson/possession of inflammable liquids)

Murder

Intimidation

The date of arrest was recorded by months only. The police did not record religion; but as there is almost complete segregation in housing (according to religion) in West Belfast, it was possible to ascertain the probable religion in most cases (Jones, 1960; Flight, 1971).

Results

In the period from 1st May, 1969, to 30th April, 1971, there were 1,674 people arrested for offences related to the civil disturbances in Belfast. Table 1 shows the sex, age group, probable religion, and social group of these people. Of this number 60 (3.6 per cent) were female, just over 60 per cent were under 30 years of age, and 5.7 per cent were over 50. Over three-quarters of the men arrested were in social groups IV and V; and just over 1 per cent in social groups I and II. As can be seen there were many more men in the lower social groups than would be expected from the social group distribution in the Belfast census figures.

When the two years are compared it can be seen that the sex ratio and social groups involved remain remarkably constant. The number of those in the two main religious groups differs with time; in the first year there were more Protestants arrested (55 per cent), but in the second year very considerably more Roman Catholics (59.3 per cent). The number whose religion it was impossible to ascertain remains constant, these being people who resided in "mixed areas". As regards offences, riotous behaviour is much the commonest; murder and intimidation were infrequent causes of arrest. The incidence of looting dropped from 16.7 per cent, in the first year, to 4.8 per cent in the second year of the study. Offences relating to explosives rose from 6.3 per cent to 16.6 per cent, although being arrested for assault or possession of weapons decreased (Table 1).

The vast majority of those arrested in Belfast lived within the city boundary or the peripheral estates immediately outside it, very few coming from elsewhere in Northern Ireland, and only five from outside the province (Table 2). This remains a constant finding when the two years are compared. When the "Area of home" and "Area arrested" are studied it is evident that people tend to move into certain areas to riot, e.g., Shankill and Falls. People move into these areas from the new peripheral housing estates, where very few were arrested; and there was also a tendency to move out of the Ballymurphy and Turf Lodge areas to riot. The rioters of Ardoyne, Oldpark and New Lodge Road were mainly indigenous to the area. When the two years are compared there are significant differences. In the first twelve months there were only 14 arrested in the Falls area, but this rose to

TABLE I: Social Data and Offences of Rioters—Comparison of Two Years

	May 1969/ April 1970		May 1970/ April 1971		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
SEX						
Male	501	96.4	1,113	96.4	1,614	96.4
Female	19	3.6	41	3.6	60	3.6
	520	100.0	1,154	100.0	1,674	100.0
RELIGION						
Protestant	285	55.0	353	30.6	638	38.1
Catholic	183	35.0	684	59.3	867	51.8
Not Known	52	10.0	117	10.1	169	10.1
	520	100.0	1,154	100.0	1,674	100.0
SOCIAL GROUPS						
I	0	—	1	0.1	1	0.1
II	8	1.7	12	1.0	20	1.2
III	121	23.2	248	21.5	369	22.0
IV	169	32.5	332	28.8	501	29.9
V	222	42.6	489	42.4	711	42.5
Not Known	—	—	72	6.3	72	4.3
	520	100.0	1,154	100.1	1,674	100.0
OFFENCES						
Rioting	243	46.7	796	69.0	1,039	62.1
Weapons	93	18.0	47	4.1	140	8.4
Looting	87	16.7	55	4.8	142	8.5
Assault	43	8.2	43	3.7	86	5.1
Explosives	33	6.3	192	16.6	225	13.4
Malicious Damage	16	3.0	17	1.5	33	2.0
Murder	4	1.0	1	0.1	5	0.3
Intimidation	1	0.1	3	0.2	4	0.2
	520	100.0	1,154	100.0	1,674	100.0
AGE						
0-19	52	15.8	164	14.2	246	14.7
20-29	237	45.6	523	45.3	760	46.0
30-39	113	21.8	273	23.7	386	22.0
40-49	59	11.3	128	11.0	187	11.6
50-64	27	5.2	65	5.7	92	5.5
65+	2	0.2	1	0.1	3	0.2
	520	99.9	1,154	100.0	1,674	100.0

TABLE 2: Area arrested, area of residence, and mobility of rioters, comparison of two years.

Area of Belfast	Area of Home						Area Arrested					
	1969/70		1970/71		Total		1969/70		1970/71		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Shankill	136	26.1	195	16.9	331	19.8	194	37.3	225	19.5	419	25.0
Falls	20	3.8	244	21.3	264	15.8	14	2.7	367	31.8	381	22.8
Ballymurphy, Turf Lodge	42	8.1	209	17.5	251	15.0	57	11.0	130	11.3	187	11.2
Oldpark, Ardoyne	68	13.1	90	7.9	158	9.4	67	11.9	87	7.5	154	9.2
New Lodge Rd., Oldpark	34	6.5	99	8.8	133	7.9	24	4.6	109	9.4	133	7.9
Inner South	21	4.0	38	3.3	59	3.5	20	3.8	19	1.6	39	2.3
Outer South	5	1.0	3	2.0	8	0.5	3	0.6	2	2.0	5	3.0
Inner East	60	11.6	40	3.5	100	6.0	72	13.8	63	5.4	135	8.1
Outer East	18	3.5	20	1.7	38	2.3	8	1.5	10	0.9	18	1.1
Central Belfast	6	1.1	14	1.2	20	1.2	45	8.7	94	8.2	139	8.3
Peripheral Housing Est.	29	5.6	96	8.5	125	7.5	—	—	26	2.3	26	1.5
Outer West	38	7.3	54	4.7	92	5.5	3	0.6	18	1.6	21	1.2
Outer North	25	4.8	28	2.4	53	3.2	13	2.5	4	0.3	17	1.1
No Fixed Abode	5	1.0	8	0.7	13	0.7	—	—	—	—	—	—
Elsewhere N. Ireland	12	2.3	12	1.1	24	1.4	—	—	—	—	—	—
Outside N. Ireland	1	0.2	4	0.3	5	0.3	—	—	—	—	—	—
	520	100.0	1,154	100.0	1,674	100.0	520	100.0	1,154	100.0	1,674	100.0

Mobility of Rioters

	May 1969/April 1970		May 1970/April 1971		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Rioting Own Area	320	61.5	749	64.9	1,069	63.8
Inward Movement	170	33.0	345	29.9	515	30.8
Outward Movement	30	5.5	60	5.2	90	5.4
	520	100.0	1,154	100.0	1,674	100.0

367 in the next twelve months. The percentage of those arrested in the Shankill and Inner East dropped in the second year. These findings reflect the increasing Roman Catholic participation in the second twelve months, as the Falls area is one of the main "Catholic ghetto" areas of the city. Large areas of the city remained free of rioting. Very few of those arrested lived in the outer areas of North, South and East Belfast, and of those who did fewer still were arrested near their homes. The majority of those arrested were rioting within their own locality (63.8 per cent). Those who did move tended to move inward (30.8 per cent) to the older central traditional areas of confrontation.

Discussion

The police records account only for those arrested. Obviously many others were actually involved and not arrested; and those committing the more serious offences of murder and intimidation were markedly under-represented in this study. During 1970 there were 19 cases of homicide in Northern Ireland, but five were arrested for murder (Police Report 1970). Much intimidation occurred, but arrests for this offence were rare, probably due to difficulties in detection. Those arrested may not be the ringleaders, but may represent the more verbally aggressive who are prepared to stand and shout abuse at the security forces rather than run away. Alcohol may also be a potent factor influencing who are arrested: many of the severe riots of 1969 occurred at week-ends, and especially about 11.0 p.m., when the public houses close and large numbers of partially intoxicated people come on to the streets. The distant sniper, the solitary bombing gang, and the intimidators, although committing much more serious offences, run less risk of detection, not only because of the nature of the offences, but also because of protection given by the local population. Although police records may not give an exact picture of those involved in riots, there is no other accurate method of studying a large number of rioters.

The figures indicated that it was young males in social groups IV and V who were the main participants in riots. Most of those in social group V were labourers, and correspond to the navvies who were involved in the 1857 Belfast riots. Women are probably under-represented because of some reluctance on the part of the security forces to arrest females for this type of behaviour; the same is probably true of juveniles.

The social data regarding the riot arrestees in Belfast are generally similar to the American urban rioter of the sixties, in that rioting would appear to be mainly an activity of young males; but there are some differences. The age distribution shows a wider scattering in Belfast, and very considerably fewer females were arrested in Belfast (3.6 per cent) than in 21 American cities (10.7 per cent; in Los Angeles 21 per cent were female). Economically and socially the Belfast rioter was further down the scale than his American counterpart, the majority being in social groups IV and V (semi-skilled and unskilled workers). This finding probably reflects the fact that the riot areas of Belfast have high unemployment, poor housing, high density. Very few professional or semi-professional people

live in this area of the city, and many of the skilled tradesmen and shop-keepers have moved out of the area to the new peripheral housing estates. As Lieberman and Silverman (1965) point out, potential riot participants are available in almost any community, and if this is the case it is of little value to attribute riots to "riff-raff", "young hoodlums", unemployed males or psychopaths. Certainly these types of male do take an active part in rioting, but their anti-social and aggressive activity is supported by many other members of the community, especially in urban areas which have experienced relative deprivation as defined by Runciman (1966), and enlarged upon by Gurr (1970).

In the first year of rioting more Protestants were involved, but in the second year the percentage of Protestants fell from 55 to 30. In addition to various political events, a factor which obviously might affect the number of the two religious groups concerned would be the policy of the security forces. When the army first arrived on the streets of the Protestant Shankill Road the people may have had a sense of guilt, and this may have been projected into aggression towards the police and army. As events progressed, the Protestant people of the Shankill Road and East Belfast tended to identify themselves more readily with the security forces. The Catholics in certain areas of Belfast on the other hand, identified themselves to some extent with the IRA, and as a result of this their home districts have been searched frequently for arms and explosives. This has resulted in resentment and rioting, with a subsequent increase in the percentage of Catholics among those arrested.

The riot areas of the city were concentrated mainly in West Belfast, but spread gradually to the adjoining areas of Ardoyne and Oldpark, New Lodge Road, Inner East and Inner South, and outward along the Falls Road to the newer Catholic estates of Ballymurphy, Turf Lodge, Andersonstown etc. These estates are inhabited for the most part by people displaced as part of a slum clearance programme in the Falls Road district, and they tend to return to the traditional battle grounds to riot. The equivalent is even more apparent on the Protestant side—the large estates of Outer West and North Belfast e.g., Gleencairn, Highfield, Springmartin and Ballysillan, have re-housed many from the Shankill area, and the rioters among them return to the Shankill Road when exhibiting aggressive behaviour. There have been no large riots in these Protestant estates, probably because they have not been subjected to army searches. In the first year of rioting the number of people arrested in the Catholic Andersonstown, Ballymurphy, Turf Lodge areas was low, but rose sharply in the second year, probably due to a change in policy of security forces.

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