

FINAL REPORT (perhaps): THEY DON'T SHOOT CHILDREN ANYMORE

Liam Kennedy



Note: Simulated paramilitary-style assault (Northern Ireland Office, 2005). However, more usually, six to ten gang members would be involved in an assault of this kind.

There is some shockingly good news from Northern Ireland. Organised criminal gangs have stopped shooting children. This might seem like a rather puzzling headline for visitors from abroad, or another planet. Is it possible that shooting children was a normal part of life in any democratic society anywhere?

Well, yes. Northern Ireland was such a place apart. Paramilitary gangs meted out ‘summary justice’, including shootings to the ankles, legs or arms of children in working-class communities in the North.

These attacks, in common currency, are referred to as ‘punishments’ which, as the psychiatrist Dr Philip McGarry has pointed out, ‘has the immediate effect of sanitising the violence, and

shifting the blame from perpetrator to the victim'.¹ These violations of bodily integrity and dignity went on for decades and were at their height in the years following the republican and loyalist paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 (see charts 1 and 2).² Ironically, the Irish and British peace process went hand-in-hand with intensified repression within socially-deprived neighbourhoods.

These attacks have stopped. Not that loyalist and republican gangs – those residues of the IRA, INLA, UDA and the UVF – have gone away. Armed criminal gangs are still with us.³

But it is the case that no loyalist gang has subjected a child to a so-called 'punishment' shooting so far this year (2022). Indeed the last such shooting was back in 2013. Criminal gangs on the nationalist side, that is the various reincarnations of the IRA, delayed until 2018 to follow suit.

Then there are the assaults by gangs of masked men. These are the vigilante-style beatings with iron bars, cudgels or other improvised weapons. Here the picture is less favourable. Still, we have to go back several years for the last recorded vigilante-style beating of a child. On the loyalist side that was in 2020 and a year earlier in the case of republicans.

Admittedly, the likelihood is that 'batterings', as some like to term them, are under-recorded. Only the more severe vigilante attacks are picked up and some victims, driven by fear, are reluctant to cooperate with the police. Probably the most frequent instances of intimidation, engendering anxiety and sometimes depression, involve threats of physical violence. These leave no traces in the records.⁴

Nonetheless, it seems clear there has been a definite swing away from attacks on children. It was not always so. Child victims of paramilitary-style shootings were first recorded as a separate category only in 1990, with children defined as those aged 17 years or younger. Since 1990 there have been 175 reported cases of shooting children and 360 cases of paramilitary-style assaults. The youngest victim of a shooting was a thirteen-year old. Suicide was

¹ *News Letter* (Belfast), 24 June 2022.

² The source of data for these charts is the Statistics Branch of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. A word of caution is necessary. These are the *recorded* cases. As with crimes such as sexual assault and rape, the true incidence was undoubtedly higher than the number of instances recorded by the police.

³ Independent Reporting Commission (IRC), *Annual Report and Accounts, 2021-22* (Belfast, 2022), pp. 18-23.

⁴ For a discussion of threats against young people, and the climate of fear thereby engendered, see chapters three and four of Liam Kennedy, *Who Was Responsible for the Troubles: The Northern Ireland Conflict* (Montreal, 2020).

sometimes the tragic sequel to an attack, the most extreme example being a spate of apparently interrelated suicides in Ardoyne, north Belfast, in 2004. In the space of two months, some 18 people took their own lives.⁵

There was a link to paramilitary intimidation in some of these cases.⁶ The then parish priest, Fr Troy, described how ‘a black pall had fallen over the community’.⁷ He pleaded with armed groups in the area to lift the intolerable burden on young people. This was after he had to supervise the cutting down of Bernard Cairns, a youth who was found hanging from scaffolding on the outside of Fr Troy’s church on the edge of Ardoyne. The discovery was made after the suicide the previous week of Bernard’s best friend, Anthony O’Neill. The two friends, both aged eighteen, had suffered ‘punishment’ attacks at the hands of armed vigilantes.

But times have changed, at least for younger working-class children. Whether the change proves permanent remains to be seen. Possibly armed groups no longer see merit in maiming and mutilating children from their own neighbourhood and political community. Not coincidentally, public opinion at local level has also shifted, with less acceptance of these grotesque forms of child abuse. Some say more traditional conceptions of humanity have gained or regained ground lost during the Troubles. Youth workers, community workers, trade unionists, journalists, peace activists, and outspoken clergymen like Fr Martin Magill and Reverend Steve Stockman have helped turn the tide of communal opinion against acceptance of human rights abuses on their doorsteps. Pushing back also, the Paramilitary Crime Task Force, linking the police to other agencies, has been both innovative and effective in weakening the different armed criminal gangs.

The larger picture in relation to paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland is still grisly. But if we are to look for a silver lining, it is that the trend in paramilitary-style attacks, not only against children but against adults as well, is on a downward incline (charts 3 and 4).⁸

⁵ *Irish Times*, 17 February 2004.

⁶ However, a report in the republican newspaper, *An Phoblacht* (19 February 2004), criticised the media focus on the role of paramilitaries as ‘simplistic and sensationalist’.

⁷ *Guardian*, 17 February 2004.

⁸ But note the cautionary comment of the IRC: ‘Disorder on the streets in Spring and Autumn 2021 had led to speculation about the potential for a resurgence of paramilitary activity.’ See *Annual Report and Accounts, 2021-22*, p. 20. It added (page 21): ‘The Commission’s view continued to be that paramilitarism remained a clear and present danger.’

That, regrettably, is of little consolation to those still being terrorised by criminal gangs who wrap themselves in the Irish Tricolour or the Union Jack. It is also of little consolation to the thousands who have suffered from vigilante attacks down the years.

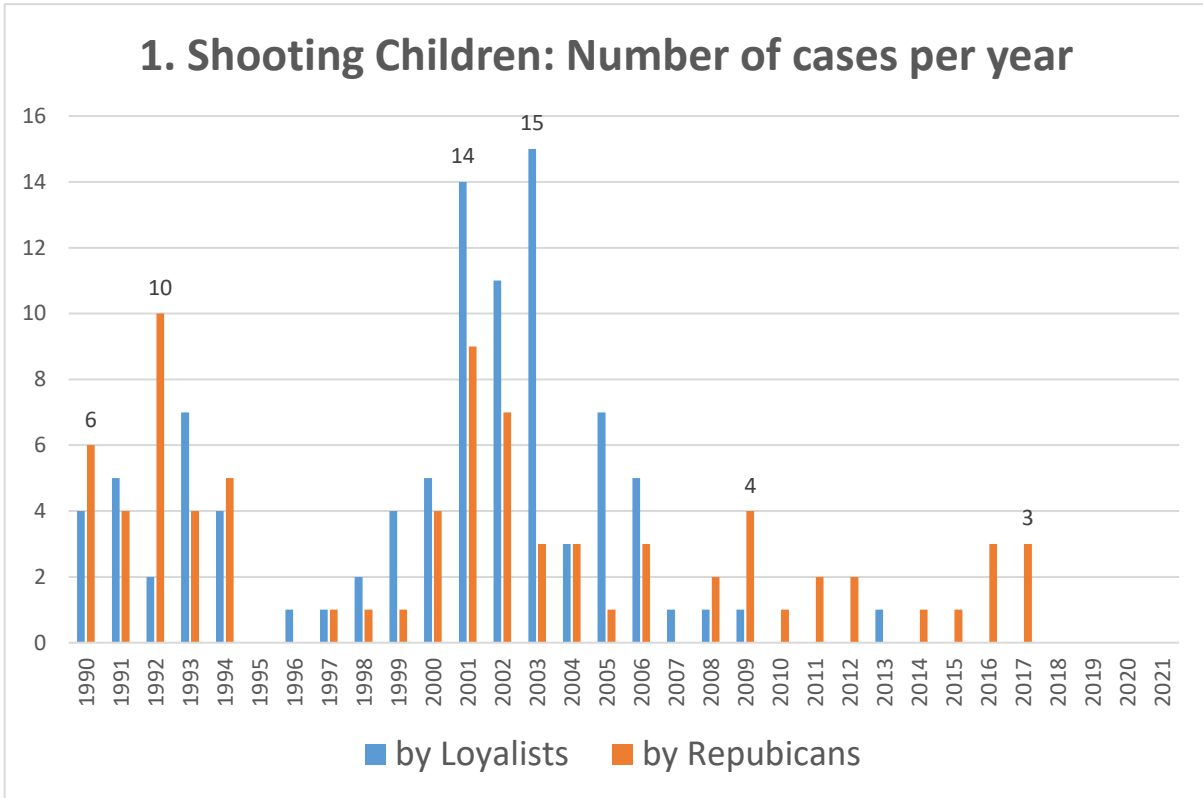
In relation to the youngest and most vulnerable victims – the terrorised children of the Troubles – is it not time there was a major public inquiry into abuse by vigilante groups, thereby giving victims the opportunity to speak, often for the first time, and have their need for justice recognised? It would be wholesome to have their pain, often of the most severe physical kind, and the mental anguish that still haunts these victims, brought into the open. Not least because it might help ensure there is no regression to the nightmare of the past.

We have had official inquiries into the physical and sexual abuse of children in institutions in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England & Wales concluded in October 2022. The failure so far to hold a parallel inquiry into children abused and mutilated by armed groups in Northern Ireland is now the real anomaly.

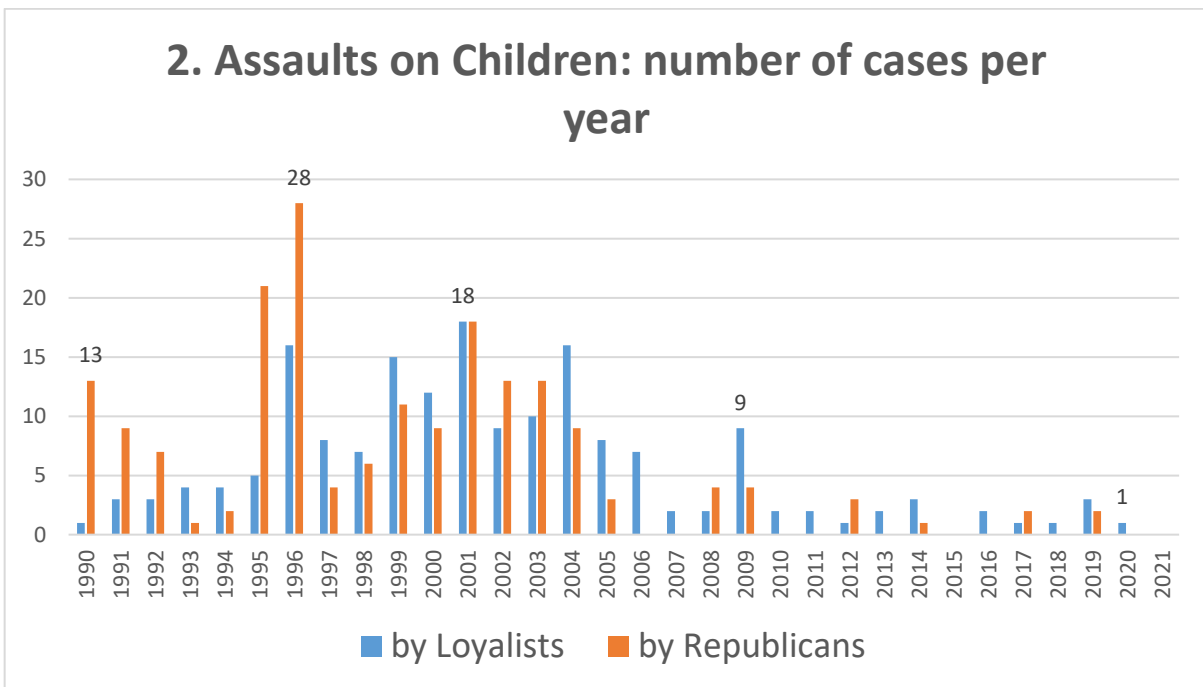
**This Report was prepared for the human rights group,
Children of the Troubles, Belfast (November 2022).**

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CHARTS

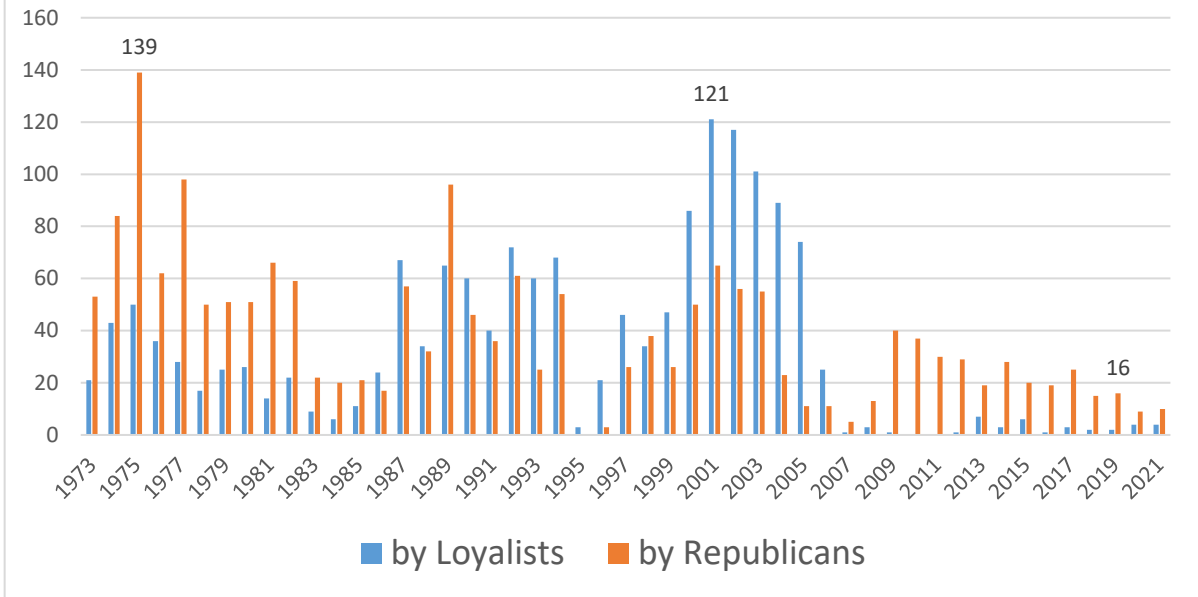


Source: Police Service of Northern Ireland.



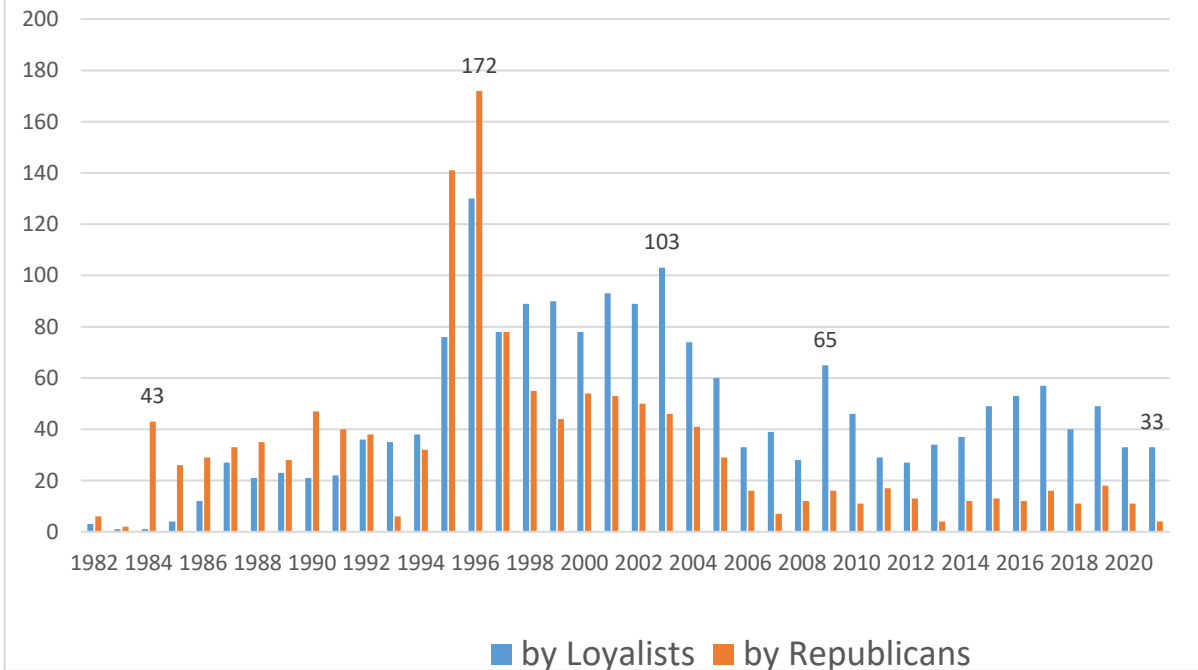
Source: Police Service of Northern Ireland.

3. Number of Shootings per year 1973-2021



Source: Police Service of Northern Ireland. Note: Victims of paramilitary-style shootings (all ages, including children).

4. Number of Assaults per year 1982-2021



Source: Police Service of Northern Ireland. Note: Victims of paramilitary-style assaults (all ages, including children).