



STRANMILLIS
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast



Centre for
Research in
Educational
Underachievement

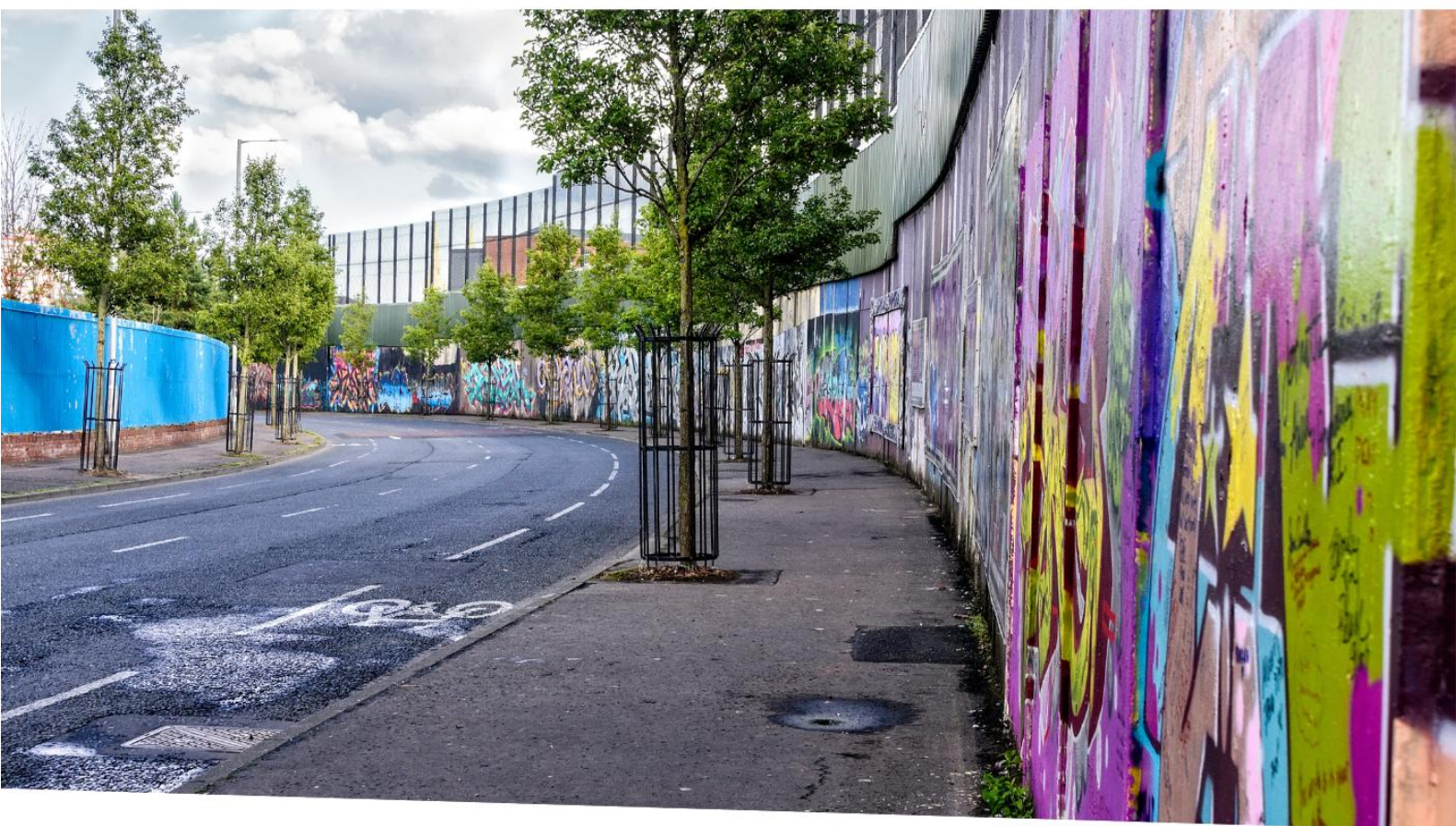


**ANTI-BULLYING
ALLIANCE**

All Together?

The Nature and Extent of
Sectarian Bullying in Northern Ireland

March 2025



Dr Katie Tate and Professor Noel Purdy OBE

Executive Summary

This original and timely study set out to explore the nature and extent of sectarian bullying among young people in Northern Ireland. The research focused on the perspectives of children and young people, as well as parents/carers and school staff. The project aimed to develop a better understanding of the nature of sectarian bullying among children and young people in Northern Ireland by investigating, firstly, the nature and extent of sectarian bullying and what forms this can take; secondly, where sectarian bullying takes place, including both online and offline incidents; and thirdly, the extent to which children and young people report incidents of sectarian bullying and their perspectives on how this is handled.

A mixed methods approach was used for this study which comprised two phases. Firstly, qualitative data was collected through focus groups conducted between December 2024 and January 2025. A total of six focus groups were held in post-primary schools with children aged 13-17. A total of 53 children and young people took place in these focus groups and the qualitative engagement took place in the interface areas of Belfast, Portadown, and L'/Derry and included children from both controlled (largely Protestant) and Catholic post-primary schools and youth clubs. Secondly, quantitative data was collected through three separate online surveys distributed to children and young people (n=100), parents and carers (n=100) and school staff (n=100) in February 2025.

This mixed methods research study was funded by the Reconciliation Fund of the Republic of Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs. Data collection was completed by the Anti-Bullying Alliance between December 2024 and January 2025. The data was then analysed by a research team from the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU) at Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

Key themes

Theme 1: Continued Existence of Sectarian Bullying

In Northern Ireland, sectarian bullying remains a persistent and multifaceted issue affecting children and young people nearly 27 years after the Belfast Agreement. Both focus groups and surveys reveal widespread incidents of verbal abuse, physical bullying, and peer exclusion, often triggered by identifiable traits such as uniforms and football tops. Social media and public urban spaces serve as common settings for these confrontations. Participants, including parents and school staff, highlight how such bullying reinforces community divisions and entrenches long-held prejudices. The evidence clearly shows that inter-community tensions continue to manifest in daily interactions among young people.

Theme 2: Acceptance and Desensitisation to Sectarian Bullying

Focus groups and surveys reveal a troubling normalisation of sectarian bullying among Northern Ireland's young people. Children and young people have become desensitised to abusive slurs and insults tied to identities, such as football tops and names. While they dismiss verbal and online bullying as trivial, they acknowledge that only physical incidents merit adult intervention. This normalisation results in underreporting and ineffective responses from authorities. Comparisons with racist bullying show that young people consider racial abuse more serious, underscoring the

urgent need for better reporting protocols and more decisive interventions to address all forms of bullying consistently.

Theme 3: Importance of Shared Education and Breaking Down Prejudices

Focus groups and surveys indicate that addressing sectarian bullying requires breaking inter-generational cycles of hatred through shared education and open dialogue. Many young people advocate for initiatives that foster understanding between communities, emphasising the need for educational programmes that highlight Northern Ireland's divided past and promote mutual respect. Participants believe that effective measures include incorporating comprehensive historical and social context into curricula, organising workshops for children and parents, and creating platforms for youth voices. There is widespread consensus that enhanced shared education can bridge community divides, challenge ingrained prejudices, and reduce bullying, creating a more inclusive environment for future generations.

Recommendations

Drawing on the analysis of the survey and interview data reported above, a number of recommendations are proposed as follows:

1. Increase Awareness of the Nature and Extent of Sectarian Bullying

There is a pressing need to enhance awareness about the ongoing prevalence of sectarian bullying among children and young people in Northern Ireland. Public awareness campaigns, supported by government and community organisations, could help highlight the forms and spaces where sectarian bullying occurs, such as social media, public areas, and schools. Efforts should focus on challenging the normalisation of sectarian slurs and promoting zero tolerance for all forms of bullying.

2. Integrate Sectarian Bullying Education in Schools

Schools should embed education on sectarianism and its harmful impacts within the curriculum. This could include lessons on the history and social context of sectarianism, as well as discussions about prejudice, identity, and respect for diversity. Using interactive methods such as storytelling, role-playing, and case studies can foster empathy and understanding. Additionally, schools should develop policies that clearly address sectarian bullying, ensuring that students, parents, and staff are aware of reporting mechanisms and support structures.

3. Enhance Initial Teacher Education and Ongoing Professional Development

To better equip educators, there should be an increased focus on addressing sectarian bullying within Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and ongoing professional development. Training should provide teachers with the skills to recognise, prevent, and respond effectively to sectarian bullying, both in physical spaces and online. It should also include strategies for facilitating sensitive discussions about identity, history, and prejudice, empowering teachers to foster inclusive and respectful classroom environments.

4. Develop a Toolkit of Resources for Educators

A comprehensive toolkit should be developed to support educators in addressing sectarian bullying. This could include lesson plans, guidance on handling incidents, activities promoting cross-community understanding, and advice on engaging parents and carers. The toolkit should also offer resources on how to facilitate difficult conversations and create safe spaces for young people to express their experiences and concerns.

5. Promote Cross-Community Initiatives

Shared Education and other cross-community initiatives should be strengthened to provide meaningful opportunities for young people from different backgrounds to engage positively. These initiatives should focus on fostering genuine understanding and relationships, moving beyond superficial interactions. Workshops, joint projects, and dialogue sessions can help break down prejudices and build empathy, supporting young people in challenging sectarian attitudes inherited from previous generations.

6. Prioritise Listening to Children and Young People

Children and young people should be actively involved in shaping responses to sectarian bullying. Platforms should be created where they can share their experiences and ideas for solutions, ensuring their voices influence school policies and community initiatives. Listening to young people will not only empower them but also provide valuable insights into effective approaches to address and prevent sectarian bullying. Further research is also required to further explore this important and under-reported issue.

7. Support Parental Engagement

Workshops and information sessions for parents and carers can help raise awareness of sectarian bullying and equip families to support their children. Parents should be encouraged to have open conversations about prejudice and respect, helping to break cycles of inter-generational sectarianism. Creating avenues for parents from different communities to engage in shared activities can also foster mutual understanding and cooperation.

8. Strengthen Reporting and Support Mechanisms

Given the current underreporting of sectarian bullying, it is essential to establish clear, accessible, and trusted reporting mechanisms in schools and online platforms. These systems should ensure confidentiality, provide appropriate support for victims, and guarantee that reports are taken seriously and addressed effectively. Training for school staff on handling reports sensitively and appropriately will be vital to restoring confidence in these mechanisms.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Key themes.....	1
Recommendations.....	2
Table of Contents.....	4
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	5
Aims and Objectives.....	5
Chapter 2: Methodology.....	6
Chapter 3: Thematic Analysis of Focus Groups	8
Theme 1: Nature and causes of sectarian bullying.....	8
Theme 2: Spaces where sectarian bullying takes place	9
Theme 3: Methods of sectarian bullying	12
Theme 4.1: Reporting of sectarian bullying.....	13
Theme 4.2: How reports of sectarian bullying are dealt with	14
Theme 5: Interventions to address sectarian bullying.....	14
Theme 6: Other forms of bullying	17
Theme 7: Impact of sectarian bullying on young people	19
Chapter 4: Survey Results.....	20
4.1 CYP Surveys.....	20
4.2 Parents/Carers Surveys	22
4.3 School Staff Surveys.....	25
Chapter 5: Summary of key findings and Conclusions	29
Summary of key findings	29
Conclusions/Recommendations.....	31
Appendix: Survey Questions.....	33
Survey Questions.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Aims and Objectives

This mixed methods research study was funded by the Reconciliation Fund of the Republic of Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs. Data collection was completed by the Anti-Bullying Alliance between December 2024 and January 2025. The data was then analysed by a research team from the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU) at Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

This study set out to explore the nature and extent of sectarian bullying among young people in Northern Ireland. The research focused on the perspectives of children and young people, as well as parents/carers and school staff. The project aimed to develop a better understanding of the nature of sectarian bullying among children and young people in Northern Ireland by investigating, firstly, the nature and extent of sectarian bullying and what forms this can take; secondly, where sectarian bullying takes place, including both online and offline incidents; and thirdly, the extent to which children and young people report incidents of sectarian bullying and their perspectives on how this is handled.

This project is important, as although research has shown that sectarianism is still rife among some adults in Northern Ireland, there is a significant lack of research focusing on sectarian bullying among children and young people. This project therefore aims to deepen our understanding of this issue among children and young people in Northern Ireland and aims to use the research findings to create resources to help teachers, youth workers, and other professionals understand, prevent and respond to sectarian bullying in Northern Ireland. This study is also timely both in relation to the Addressing Bullying in Schools (NI) Act 2016, which was commenced on 1 September 2021, and also in light of recent celebrations to mark the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.

Chapter 2: Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used for this study which comprised two phases.

Firstly, qualitative data were collected through focus groups conducted between December 2024 and January 2025. A total of six focus groups were held in post-primary schools with children aged 13-17. One of these was conducted online and the other five were conducted in person. All focus groups were audio recorded for transcription purposes. A total of 53 children and young people took place in these focus groups and the qualitative engagement took place in the interface areas of Belfast, Portadown, and L'/Derry and included children from both controlled (largely Protestant) and Catholic post-primary schools and youth clubs (see Table 1 below for a more detailed breakdown). The focus groups followed a semi-structured approach with pre-selected questions and prompts when required to gather as much information as possible. The facilitator of the focus groups nurtured an open environment to allow the young people to explore the topic of sectarian bullying through peer discussion. Discussion areas for the focus groups comprised five sections as follows: the nature and extent of sectarian bullying; personal experiences and observations; the settings of bullying (school, community, online); how young people report incidents and how this could be improved; and perspectives on inter-community relations.

Secondly, quantitative data were collected through three separate online surveys distributed to children and young people, parents and carers, and school staff. The surveys were conducted in February 2025; the surveys for children and young people and school staff both remained open for 6 days (6th-11th February) while the parent and carer survey remained open for five days (7th-11th February). A market research company was employed to recruit respondents and circulate the surveys, resulting in a total of 100 respondents being recruited for each of the three surveys. The surveys comprised a range of questions, including demographic questions to gain information on the age and geographic location of respondents; multiple choice questions to allow respondents to share their opinions on issues such as the forms sectarian bullying can take and where this can take place; while open ended sections were provided in all three surveys to allow the respondents to provide more detailed answers on certain questions.

Table 1: Focus Group Details

Focus group Number	Number of Pupils	Gender and Age	Setting and Date
Focus Group 1	11	Mixed male and female aged between 13-17 years old	Secondary School in L'/Derry (9 th December 2024)
Focus Group 2	6	Males aged between 13-17 years old	Secondary School in Belfast (13 th December 2024)
Focus Group 3	9	Mixed male and female aged between 13-15 years old	Secondary School in Portadown (16 th January 2025)
Focus Group 4	5	Females aged between 13-14 years old	Youth Club in Portadown (20 th January 2025)

Focus Group 5	11	Mixed male and female aged between 16-17 years old	Cross-Community Youth Group in Belfast (22 nd January 2025)
Focus Group 6	11	Females aged between 13-14 years old	Secondary School in L'/Derry (28 th January 2025)

Chapter 3: Thematic Analysis of Focus Groups

In the focus groups, definitions of bullying and sectarian bullying were provided by the facilitators at the beginning of these discussions. The Anti-Bullying Alliance's definition of bullying was used: *"The repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power. Bullying can be physical, verbal or psychological. It can happen face-to-face or online"*. The facilitators also used the definition of sectarian bullying provided by the Northern Ireland Assembly: *"It is the discrimination, hostility or prejudice based on religious belief, community background, or political views, and particularly between Protestant and Catholic communities"*.

Following audio transcription of the six focus groups and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several key themes emerged from the data as follows:

Theme 1: Nature and causes of sectarian bullying

Participants were first asked if they believed sectarian bullying remained an issue among young people in Northern Ireland in 2024. Five focus groups believed this definitely remained an issue, although participants in one of these focus groups did not think this was as severe as in previous generations. Only one focus group did not believe sectarian bullying was a major issue, with some not having heard of this term. For those who believed it did remain a major issue, discussion focused on the lack of interconnectivity between Protestant and Catholic areas as an influencing factor, with one participant stating:

"It's just that some areas are just more Catholic, some are more Protestant. There's just not much interconnectivity in some places" (Focus group 1)

Participants in focus group 1 discussed this lack of interconnectivity in some depth and attributed this to identifiable markers in the community which can connect an identity to a certain area. Examples such as flags and painted kerbs were mentioned, and one participant in this focus group believed that the presence of identifiable markers often *"triggers hatred"* based on what community individuals are from. Two focus groups also continuously used the terms 'us' and 'them' when discussing identifiable markers of the two communities, and this language also highlighted divisions which continue to exist.

When asked why a lack of interconnectivity and sectarian bullying remained an issue, another main theme which emerged in four of the focus groups was the idea of inter-generational influences, as many participants believed parents and grandparents pass down feelings of hatred and bitterness towards certain communities to their children and grandchildren. The influence this could have on how young people treat others was also highlighted, and this was discussed in depth by many participants who believed that sectarian bullying stems from deep-rooted attitudes which are passed down through families and communities. This was reflected by one participant who commented that:

"It's your community, it's your parents, it's your family. They have their views. And when you're brought up, you kind of tap into their views and you can tell what people's been

raised to hate, or hide and, you know, discriminate the religions of people" (Focus group 1)

In the discussions, the theme of inter-generational influences was also linked to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the historical context which has led to sectarian bullying. One participant in focus group 2 discussed how the views of young people are inherited from their parents as many people do not understand the origins and/or history of division in Northern Ireland and are not educated adequately to understand other points of view:

"There's no education around it as well. It's not educated enough. I think the one side, or each side, will just show their point of view and not the other point of views" (Focus group 2)

Participants in focus group 5 also discussed this inter-generational influence and noted that this influence could be more significant on younger children who are more immature and who also lack the knowledge to understand why they are acting in a certain way towards a different community. Many of the participants thought it was therefore important to think about how to break the cycle of inter-generational influences and to address the lack of knowledge and understanding.

Theme 2: Spaces where sectarian bullying takes place

The young people were then asked where they think sectarian bullying takes place. Responses from participants in all focus groups were similar and focused on how sectarian bullying takes place in a number of spaces: social media, community areas and public spaces, sports events, interface areas and journeys to and from school. Many participants believed they were often treated differently in these environments due to their identity.

Social media platforms were discussed in all focus groups as places where sectarian bullying takes place. Various social media platforms were mentioned including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and TikTok. Issues on these platforms included posts and the comments people made under these which could often be of a sectarian nature, while live streams were also discussed in a number of focus groups. The use of social media to organise fights between young people from different schools and communities was also noted as a problem and some participants noted that young people, particularly boys, might even brag about these sectarian encounters to gain social status. Group chats were also noted as another problem area of social media, particularly on Snapchat, as some of the participants discussed how they are often added into groups with 'random people'. Young people in focus group 5 discussed this issue in depth and noted how the discussions in these groups often focused on whether everyone is Catholic or Protestant:

Student: When you get added to group chats too, the first thing people would ask is if you're a Protestant or Catholic.

Interviewer: When you get added to a group chat?

Student: Yeah. Like, if you get added to a group chat with people you do not know.

Interviewer: Yeah. Why would you be getting added to a group chat with people you don't know? What I mean is, what type of group chat is that?

Student: Like, it's just like random.

Another student: People make random group chats with loads of people.

Interviewer: I'm going to look like a dinosaur here. Is that like a location thing or something? Like, when you say it's random people, how do...?

Student: You can just... you can add people or you can just add anyone into a group chat.

Interviewer: Okay... so people will randomly add you, and then once you're in, they are asking you what community you're from?

Students: Yeah.

Interviewer: And within that, is there ever any type of issues coming up? Is there any like sectarian comments?

Student: Like if they don't like what you say about your religion, obviously they'll start on you.

Community areas and public spaces were also highlighted as spaces where the young people often experienced sectarian bullying and five of the focus groups discussed how they often feel unsafe in certain areas.

Community identifiers and identifiable traits also emerged as a main theme when young people were discussing their experiences in public spaces, as many believed certain factors could make them stand out in public areas. This included school uniforms, names, football shirts, and Gaelic sports, all of which can often signal a Catholic or Protestant affiliation and subsequently reinforce divisions. This was evident as many participants felt they had to be careful in certain areas if they were wearing their school uniform or certain football tops and discussed how their parents often warn them about going into certain parts of town. Focus group 5 discussed an example of this, as one participant talked of how their sibling refuses to go shopping to certain shops in her school uniform as she typically receives "dirty looks" due to being in an area of town dominated by the other community. Focus group 3 also discussed this issue in some depth, and many of the young people in this group believed it was important to watch what you say and what you wear in public spaces and they were very open in their discussion of how they would not feel safe going into certain areas of town. A participant in this group also discussed an example of how identifiable traits can lead to sectarian bullying, as they stated, "someone went up the town wearing a GAA top and someone smashed a bottle over their head, just for a wearing a GAA top."

Examples of how identifiable traits often lead to sectarian bullying were further discussed in focus group 5, when a male participant highlighted how even his name can make him stand out, stating, 'You could tell by my name because it's an Irish name'. A male participant in focus group 3 also

discussed the sectarian connotations linked to questions on how he pronounces the letter 'h', due to the common difference in pronunciation of this within Protestant and Catholic communities:

"This isn't bullying, right? But where I live, it must be four times now I've been asked how do I say the letter h. Because protestants say "aich" and we say "heyh", so that is how they can tell" (Focus group 3)

Many participants therefore admitted that they feel the need to lie about their background if they are asked which "side" they are from, with one young person stating, *"if you're in like a community that maybe you don't know as well as your own, you're a wee bit fearful and if somebody asked you, you'd probably lie"*. Young people in focus group 6 also admitted they did not always want to share their religion in case they were excluded and lost their friends. There was thus a consensus among all the focus groups that the majority of young people in Northern Ireland are not comfortable sharing their religion, as they often feel unsafe or intimidated. Focus group 2 discussed other issues which could stem from sharing your religion, including the impact this could have on your chances of employment in some areas. One participant in focus group 4 also gave their opinion about sharing their religion in person compared to online, admitting that they might share their religion if they are asked in person, but would not feel comfortable sharing it in text or online in case it was screenshot and sent to other people, which also links back to the use of social media as a space for sectarian bullying.

Interface areas were also highlighted as a problem area where sectarian bullying could occur due to the close proximity of Catholic and Protestant populations. Significant cultural events were highlighted as periods when sectarian bullying and tensions could be heightened, particularly at interface areas, and participants in three focus groups believed that these spaces became more tense and dangerous at particular times, particularly around 11th and 12th July (associated with bonfires in many loyalist communities and Orange Order parades through many local towns/cities). Focus group 3 discussed this issue in depth, with many of the young people stating that they would stay away from urban areas during this period when symbols such as flags and other community markers are more prominent, with one participant (from a Catholic background) talking of how *"they have to put, like, our flags and all on their bonfire"*, and how this made them feel scared and uncomfortable.

Journeys to and from school, particularly near interface areas, were also cited in two focus groups as an everyday environment in which sectarian tensions can exist and in which sectarian bullying can take place. One focus group discussed measures that schools in their area had taken to address this, such as introducing different finishing times. It was hoped this would help avoid the congregation of children from different schools in interface areas and help limit the size of crowds around schools which had previously caused issues.

Sports matches, particularly football, were also mentioned in five of the focus groups as an area in which sectarian bullying and tension were typically evident. Focus group 5 discussed this in depth and football was discussed as an environment in which sectarian aggression and tension could build up, with one participant in this focus group claiming that *"the microaggressions build up"*, while another participant used the term *"dirty matches"* to describe football matches between the different communities. Football tops were also discussed in five of the focus groups, with four

making reference to the tension between “Rangers vs Celtic” and how this is often a question asked in social settings to determine which “side” young people are from:

“Because it's always that one question, like, Celtic or Rangers and you just don't know what to say. Yeah. Like, it's like walking on egg shells” (Focus group 3)

It was interesting, however, that a young person in focus group 1 also expressed that sport could bring people together, as they had got to know people from the other community through their rugby club whom they would not have had the opportunity to know otherwise. This view was shared by others in focus group 5, as some participants thought sports were quite integrated as there were examples of different communities playing some sports together without issue.

Theme 3: Methods of sectarian bullying

When asked what form sectarian bullying can take, **name calling** was mentioned in five of the focus groups. Sectarian terminology and offensive terms were mentioned in this discussion, such as “Hun” (Protestants) and “Taig/Fenian” (Catholics) which remain in use today among young people. Participants discussed how this took place both offline and online. In focus group 5, an interesting point was raised when discussing the use of these terms on social media: one participant said that TikTok does not censor these words as it does not pick up or understand this terminology and therefore, nothing is done about sectarian name calling on this platform. A male participant in focus group 1 also talked about a time when sectarian name calling occurred during a sports match between two different schools, while a female participant in this focus group also discussed an example of how she and her friends were called names in a public place by a group of older boys:

Student: Me and (other young person's name) and a couple of our friends, actually one time went over to the town and we were just sitting at McDonald's. But the town is a very Catholic based area. And obviously with our school being mostly Protestant...we had been shouted at to move off a table and name-called when we were walking away in what would be seen as the sectarian way by older boys. So, the imbalance of power was there too. And we had walked away... just wanting to go home.

Interviewer: I can imagine. I'm sure that was scary as well.

Student: Yeah, it was. But it was just because of our uniforms and they went to an all-boys Catholic school, and they just weren't, weren't having it.

However, three focus groups also mentioned that sectarian name calling has become ‘normalised’ and is something that remains widely accepted among young people in Northern Ireland:

“Like name-calling, I think everyone that goes out is quite used to it. And it's a thing that's brushed off quite easily” (Focus group 1)

There were also some instances in which more serious **physical bullying and** attacks were also discussed. In focus group 5, one participant shared their experience of having an egg thrown at them in a public place, while another shared their experience of being chased in a public area and having threats of physical violence directed against them, forcing them to find refuge in a public place while they waited on their friend's parent to lift them. Violence at interface areas was also a common theme and examples of physical bullying were discussed, as participants gave examples of bricks being thrown at these areas. Young people in focus group 2 also discussed more serious physical incidents at interface areas on their way to school, with examples of objects being thrown by groups from the other community, such as bottles, sticks and stones, while another participant talked of their experience of being chased when getting off the school bus. The issue of normalisation was also raised in these discussions in focus group 2: here the boys admitted that they would have been scared of this when they were younger, but claimed it was something they had got used to. They even mentioned that they found some of it funny which could indicate a desensitisation and acceptance of sectarian bullying. Examples of physical attacks were also noted, particularly at certain times of the year such as the July celebrations when sectarian tensions could lead to street riots and the throwing of petrol bombs.

Theme 4.1: Reporting of sectarian bullying

When asked how they report sectarian bullying, the issue of underreporting came through in the focus groups as many young people admitted they do not report this at all. Reasons for this lack of reporting included issues such as a normalisation of sectarian bullying, a belief that nothing would be done about it, a fear of making the situation worse, or pressure from their peers not to report it. A number of young people also admitted that they would confide in their friends first if they experienced sectarian bullying rather than telling their parents, as many were nervous that their parents would be worried about their safety and not let them go to certain places with their friends. It was also interesting that many young people did not consider sectarian bullying something they would report as they have become accustomed to this, but they thought other forms of bullying, particularly racist bullying, are worse and something that should be reported.

The severity of the bullying was also factored into the decision of whether young people decided to report it or not; many young people claimed they would not report incidents such as name calling and would only report incidents if the situation became physical. When discussing issues on social media, they also talked about how to report issues through the various online platforms to get an account banned and they noted the importance of this feature:

"On Snapchat, like, if somebody's bullying you or something like that, you can report it. And then if it's, like, serious, that account can get banned. Like, get like, taken off Snapchat. And it's, like, on every social media, I think" (Focus group 4)

A lack of trust in the authorities was also discussed as a reason for underreporting, with a distrust in the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) specifically noted in two of the focus groups. Many young people in one of these groups expressed their distrust towards the PSNI due to the apparent 'Protestant' background of this organisation who they felt would not do much to help. This was echoed in another focus group, as many young people believed that reports of sectarian bullying would be overlooked, as they believed the PSNI would not deal with issues like this. They also believed it would be overlooked as they did not think complaints made by young people were

taken seriously. They also discussed a stigma surrounding the police and the belief that they would not be fair in how they dealt with situations relating to sectarian bullying, while they also believed that not enough is done to deal with this issue. One participant stated.

"There's a lot of stigma about the police and, like, years ago, it would have been, like, Catholics had said the police were more on, like, the Protestant side. And Protestants would say, like, no, they're on the Catholic side. So, I think people have this stigma"
(Focus group 5)

Theme 4.2: How reports of sectarian bullying are dealt with

When discussing whether or not they would report sectarian bullying, many of the answers from the young people focused on how adults responded to their complaints. A good example of how adults dealt with sectarian bullying was discussed in focus group 1, as a male participant discussed sectarian name calling during a rugby match and how their teachers responded to this. He talked of how their school had meetings about how to deal with the issue which resulted in a pupil from the other school being suspended. Another insightful example was discussed by young people in focus group 2, as participants talked of how their youth club leaders often talked to them after certain events, such as rioting, and discussed these issues to help open conversations about the past. Interestingly, young people admitted that if they reported issues of sectarian bullying to their parents the responses varied, as some encouraged their children to ignore the issue, while others advised their children to stand up for themselves.

Despite these few positive examples of how sectarian bullying was dealt with, there was a general consensus among the focus groups that schools and other adults do not do enough to help address issues of sectarian bullying, with one participant claiming that, *"they (schools) do nothing"*. Many also believed that teaching staff do not follow up on issues and many found this frustrating as they did not want sectarian bullying to keep happening. The lack of pastoral care in schools was also noted in one focus group, with the young people discussing how the extent to which teachers respond to issues depends on what school you go to. This was evident, as participants did not believe that teachers in schools with poor pastoral care pay enough attention to issues such as bullying, especially if something happens in a public place and outside of school, with one participant noting the lack of responsibility the school can take: *"but if it happens, like, outside of school... outside the gates, it is not my issue. Don't really know what you want me to do about it."* In contrast to this, the young people discussed how some schools in their area have good pastoral care and care about more than just academic attainment. The young people believed that in these schools, teachers take a more proactive approach to issues such as bullying, as the young people thought some schools wanted to make sure that *"not only just are people being really smart, but also have, like, a good life at home and good mental health"*.

Theme 5: Interventions to address sectarian bullying

A major theme discussed in the focus groups was how to reduce and/or eliminate sectarian bullying among young people in Northern Ireland.

Education was considered the main way to reduce the incidence of sectarian bullying and this was mentioned in five of the six focus groups, as many of the young people admitted that the majority of people in Northern Ireland are only familiar with stereotypical views of the “other side”:

"I feel like this, we are all biased. We all go to a Catholic school and we have only heard the Catholic side. But if we hear both sides, I think we'd both agree that it's no one's fault. It's just whatever's happened" (Focus group 3)

There was another interesting observation from one participant in focus group 5 who believed that both sides are alike but do not have the right education and stated that, *"it's not that the other community is not educated. They're just educated poorly on the opposite community to them"*. Young people therefore believed it was important to educate people on the history of the differences in Northern Ireland and believed this would allow people to hear everyone's side of the story and would encourage communication between the different communities. Some of the focus groups also gave suggestions as to where this education could take place, such as focus groups in school, after school events and youth clubs. Participants in focus group 5 also believed that educating young people could cause a domino effect, as they believed young people could share their experiences with their families and believed this could help break down barriers in the wider community. One participant stated that, *"I'm able to tell my families and then they're able to tell their friends and so on and so on. Like, it betters the relationships"*. However, focus group 2 believed that the older generations were not as worried about bringing communities together, but still believed it was important to try and educate everyone on the history of Northern Ireland.

Cross-community initiatives were also discussed as an important initiative to tackle sectarian bullying, as the young people believed this was crucial for breaking down barriers and challenging stereotypes and prejudices. A male participant in focus group 1 shared his experiences of this as he was part of a cross-community project. He spoke about this in a positive way as he believed these groups helped integrate young people, made them feel safer in other communities and also helped them realise that not everyone is bad. He also spoke about how they can help break down prejudices and allow young people to rethink the prejudicial attitudes they may have picked up from their families and communities:

"I've been in all areas and I've run into people I've done programmes with and they're like, oh, you're smiling like it's grand. Like it's helped me like a lot, of me feeling safe going in all communities, passing by communities, passing by all religions because it's the feeling that maybe not everyone's bad and I'm not going to discriminate your side just 'cause of religion"

This was echoed in focus group 5 as the young people discussed the importance of cross-community youth groups, as many of them had made friends from different communities by being part of these initiatives. There was therefore a general consensus in the focus groups that more opportunities were needed to bring communities together and ideas on how to increase cross-community interaction included more youth clubs, while participants in focus group 6 also believed it was important to establish communities for minority cultures to allow people to connect.

Shared Education¹ was also considered an important and valuable programme and was discussed in four of the focus groups. A female participant in focus group 3 thought this was a useful means of dealing with sectarian bullying, as young people from different (single-identity) schools often live in the same town and she believed it was good to do things together and get to know one another. This was echoed by the young people in focus group 2 who discussed the positive impacts of youth clubs and trips as part of their Shared Education programme. However, although these were acknowledged as important initiatives to help tackle sectarian bullying, it was interesting that a number of participants also admitted that Shared Education did not always work. Many admitted that although Shared Education might look like a good idea on the surface, it did not always guarantee positive relationships:

"Because, like, we did shared education and...we just hated each other. We, like even though we had shared education every year since P1, like, there's a few people we'd get along with, but then there would just be other people that, like, we just didn't like"
(Focus group 4)

Many of the young people therefore believed that although some work was being done through Shared Education, they did not think this went far enough and believed more structured initiatives would help and that it needed to be taken more seriously. More integrated schools were also discussed as a positive way to help break down barriers, as young people in focus group 5 thought it was good for young people to mix from an early age as they thought this might help tackle prejudices. The need for mixed areas and shared public spaces were also discussed as further ways to help break down barriers between the different communities.

Appropriate sanctions and increased involvement of schools were also mentioned as solutions to address sectarian bullying, as many believed it was important to have sanctions. For instance, boys in focus group 1 talked of an example of pupil suspension as a consequence of making sectarian slurs at their football matches. Participants in focus group 5 focused on the need for stronger school and community responses to sectarian bullying and thought schools and local organisations needed to take a more proactive role in addressing this issue, such as introducing stricter disciplinary measures and conflict resolution initiatives:

"There's organisations that are good that help, like sectarian bullying. I think like Youth Justice. I mean, that's a pretty good organisation that helps young people evolve in the place. And, like, they're not just one-side for the community...so conflict resolution is one of the main things they would do...And, like, they have both Catholics or Protestants in the room and resolve things like that. I think that's kind of a good way to resolve things"

Participants in focus group 4 also discussed initiatives such as introducing a ban on social media for a period of time and making bullying illegal, as well as trying to promote kindness by not talking behind people's backs, not spreading rumours and suitable sanctions such as being sent home

¹ Shared Education funds opportunities for children and young people from different communities, as well as social and economic backgrounds, to learn together on a regular and sustained basis, for both social and educational benefits. (See <https://www.eani.org.uk/parents/shared-education>).

from youth clubs. There was thus a general consensus among the young people that the issue of sectarian bullying needs to be taken more seriously, although they did not believe this would totally stop it.

The importance of involving young people in the process was also discussed in one focus group. The young people in focus group 5 believed that opportunities like these focus groups could help young people become involved in the discussions and believed that initiatives where the voices of young people are heard are important. They thought this was especially true for the younger generations as they believed it is important to start these conversations early to try and help people understand different religions and to help break down barriers from an early age. The importance of engaging sessions which had a strong conversational element was also noted, as the young people believed these would be more successful compared to sessions in which young people were simply being "talked at" with presentations, as they admitted sessions like that would not engage them: *"you get the workshops that are, like, PowerPoints, and you're just sitting there listening, and you, like you zone out, like don't even care"*.

The importance of a safe place was also discussed, as young people in focus group 2 believed it was important for young people to talk about their experiences with sectarian bullying, and they wanted reassurance that reporting the issue was going to help and they wanted a safe place to report this:

"Some people don't feel safe when they are speaking about it. Don't know if it's going to stop it or it's going to make it worse. So, reassurance of it's going to help" (Focus group 2)

Understanding the impact bullying can have on young people was also considered important, as many believed it was important for young people to understand the consequences of their actions. Some young people in focus group 1 also hoped a better understanding of the impacts bullying can have would help stop the normalisation of sectarian bullying, as they did not think it was something that should be accepted. However, there was a consensus in the focus groups that nothing would be able to stamp out bullying completely, and that emotional intelligence was important for understanding the situation.

Theme 6: Other forms of bullying

When asked what other forms of bullying also continue to affect young people in Northern Ireland, the responses revealed a number of problems. When asked what the most common type of bullying was, the young people in focus group 2 simply stated 'all' types, showing the seriousness of this issue, while participants in focus group 1 believed that cyberbullying was the most significant form of bullying which affects young people in Northern Ireland. This was evident, as cyber bullying was discussed in five of the focus groups, and participants in focus group 1 quoted examples such as Snapchat groups and using phones to take photos or videos without consent:

"Like our school doesn't have phones. We hand in the phone in the morning because of issues, past issues, you're taking photos without permission, which has led to the police

getting involved. So, phones in our school, give in at 8:50, you get them back at 3:00. And that's helped our side of it through school" (Focus group 1)

Racist bullying was also discussed as a prominent form of bullying and this came through in five of the focus groups and was considered an increasing problem for children and young people in Northern Ireland. Participants in three of the focus groups discussed how they have witnessed this taking place, and one participant in focus group 6 talked of this in some depth, stating that: *"the colour of your skin, like people make fun of you because of the colour of your skin"*. Discussion of racist bullying was particularly notable in focus group 2 and one participant in this group believed that this type of bullying was worse than sectarian bullying, *"because they're getting it because of their skin colour"*, and believed racist bullying should be dealt with more severely than sectarian bullying.

Bullying related to physical appearance, (disablist) bullying based on learning difficulties and physical bullying were also discussed. Another type of bullying discussed in depth in focus group 5 was LGBTQ+ bullying: one young person discussed their personal experience of this, stating that, *"as a gay man, like, the bullying, like, around gay people and that community is really, really big"*. Bullying related to perceived lower socioeconomic status was also cited as an issue and an example of this was discussed in relation to benefits and the prejudice which surrounds this:

"If you lived in, like, poverty... you'll be like you can't get this. And, like, if you have friends who have more money than you and, like, want to go away every weekend, do something, you'd be, like, oh, I can't do this. I don't have enough, and they will be like, "just get a job, it's not that hard". But, like, they don't know, like, you don't know if you're going to have dinner at night. You don't know if you're going to have a warm house when you go home" (Focus group 5)

Another theme running throughout the focus groups was the idea of underlying bullying such as 'banter bullying' and things that get passed off as a 'joke', which many groups viewed as an issue in schools for young people:

Interviewer: So, do you think bullying in general is a big issue for young people?

Student: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Though it isn't really classed as bullying, it's just classed as the "slegging"² thing.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. The, like, the underlying thing. We call it banter bullying in our work.

Student: It's like reverse psychology kind of. It's like, oh, like, they'll say something, like, really terrible and then just be like, I am just joking! Do you know what I mean? But they're doing more than joking.

² Colloquial term meaning to criticise or insult someone through banter.

This discussion focusing on other forms of bullying also linked to a discussion of how the young people believe people in Northern Ireland treat those who are different. When asked this question, there was a varied response, with some thinking people would be accepting, while others believed that people can often make prejudicial assumptions about people before they know anything about them. Focus groups 1 and 6 believed that how accepting people are was linked to how they had been brought up to treat others:

"Acceptance of differences depends on where you grow up. If your family says it doesn't matter, you are more likely to treat others with respect" (Focus group 6)

Theme 7: Impact of sectarian bullying on young people

When asked about the impact that sectarian bullying has on young people, a number of impacts were mentioned including anxiety, social exclusion, and a pressure to conceal religious or cultural identity. In particular, however, one of the main themes emerging in this section of the discussion was the impact bullying can have on the emotional health and wellbeing of young people. This was discussed in four of the focus groups, with participants in focus group 6 stating that bullying can make young people become protective of themselves, not interact as easily and believed that it could also lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The impact on the self-esteem of young people was also considered a big issue:

"Just make you more self-conscious on how you, like, present yourself" (Focus group 1)

"Bullying them for being different, so, like, they'll feel different and try to change themselves, and, like, not be themselves now" (Focus group 4)

Anger and frustration were also highlighted as potential consequences of sectarian bullying on young people in Northern Ireland. One male participant in focus group 1 gave an example of this during a rugby match in which he and his teammates were victims of sectarian slurs. He discussed how this made them feel angry but how they felt as though they had to show respect as they were representing their school. This view was shared by a participant in focus group 3, who claimed that they were angry after having sectarian slurs directed at them: *"I was really angry, but we didn't say anything"*.

Fear was another impact discussed, with many participants admitting they could feel scared and intimidated if they were the victim of sectarian bullying, with participants in focus group 3 talking of how they were frightened if asked in a public space which "side" they were from, particularly if they were outnumbered. This was also discussed in focus group 1, with one participant stating:

"If you're just walking about and a group of maybe older looking boys that you don't know stop you and say, where are you from? I think you're going to be quite intimidated" (Focus group 1)

Chapter 4: Survey Results

Three short online surveys were also conducted as part of this study. One was conducted with children and young people (CYP), another with parents/carers and the third with school staff. These surveys asked various questions relating to experiences of sectarian bullying, the forms this can take and where this can take place. Open response questions were also provided in all three surveys to allow the respondents space to expand on their views or opinions on certain questions.

4.1 CYP Surveys

There were 100 responses to the children and young people survey. Respondents were aged between 11-17 and most respondents in this study were from County Antrim (42), followed by County L'/Derry (22), County Down (20), County Armagh (10), County Tyrone (4) and then County Fermanagh (2). The children and young people were asked five questions and the responses were as follows:

Theme 1: Incidence of sectarian bullying

The children and young people were first asked if sectarian bullying is still an issue in 2024. The responses showed that many believe this does remain an issue, as 62% answered yes to this question. The responses also showed that this remains an issue for both male and female young people, as there was a very equal response to this question from the male and female respondents (61.82% and 62.22% respectively). Interestingly, this survey also demonstrated that sectarian bullying remains an issue for all age groups in post-primary school, as the majority of each age group included in the survey answered yes to this initial question, with the highest rate among 13-year-olds. There were also a number of respondents who were not sure if sectarian bullying remained an issue, and this could be due to a lack of personal experience of this, or they may not have wanted to provide a clear response due to the topic being discussed.

Theme 2: How reports of bullying are handled

Secondly, the children and young people were asked if they had experienced sectarian bullying first hand. Over a quarter of the young people (28%) responded yes to this question indicating that they had experienced sectarian bullying. A majority of respondents (62%) answered no to this question, while 10% were not sure if they had been a victim of this.

As part of this question, the children and young people were also asked if they reported sectarian bullying to an adult when they experienced this. Responses to this question suggested that although sectarian bullying remains an issue, many children and young people do not report these incidents. Indeed, a lack of reporting was evident as out of the 28 children and young people who had experienced sectarian bullying, thirteen did not report this to an adult. This lack of reporting was reported in children aged 11, 13, 14, 16 and 17, suggesting that this is an ongoing problem for children of all ages in post-primary school.

Theme 3: Discussion of responses to reports of bullying

The children and young people who answered that they reported sectarian bullying to an adult, were then asked to give their opinion of whether or not they believed this was handled well. Of the fifteen students who had reported this issue to an adult, less than half (40%, n=6) said they

were happy with how the adult responded to their complaint, while five (33%) were not happy and four (27%) were not sure. This question was also accompanied by an open-ended response section, which allowed the children and young people to expand on their views of whether their complaint had been handled well, eliciting thirteen responses. Five out of the thirteen (38%) responses talked of their positive experience when reporting incidents of sectarian bullying:

"I believe it is appropriate given past experience with the situation"

"Because the issue was dealt with and I was happy"

"Because when reported it was handled with care"

"The necessary precaution was taken"

"They got suspended"

However, other children and young people did not believe their reports of sectarian bullying had been handled well and six out of the thirteen (46%) responses focused on issues they had experienced when reporting this problem to an adult:

"I don't know what happened to the culprit"

"Nothing happened to the bully, and I was suspended"

"Nothing is done about it and it continues"

"Nothing usually happens when it's reported. It's usually just paper work"

"Police brushed it to the side even when my mum and teachers had spoken with them about the ongoing problem"

"The other child wasn't punished for bullying me"

Two responses in this section also demonstrated some of the difficulties of reporting incidents of bullying, as one response admitted that they were *"not too sure what's the best way to deal with it"*, while another admitted that while the level of bullying decreased after they reported this issue, it did not completely stamp it out as *"the individual that was bullying still continues to do so"*.

Theme 4: Methods of sectarian bullying

The children and young people who had experienced sectarian bullying were then asked to expand on what forms this bullying could take. They were given options of verbal bullying, sectarian slurs or threats, peer exclusion, physical attacks and "other, please specify". Responses to this question suggested that children and young people considered verbal bullying as the most common type

of sectarian bullying, as 71.4% of respondents reported that they had experienced this. Sectarian slurs or threats were also considered a main form of bullying, with 35.7% of respondents noting that they had experienced this. Peer exclusion was also seen as a big issue, with 32.1% of respondents reporting that they had experienced this, with more male students reporting this than their female counterparts, while physical attacks were also noted by seven participants as an issue. There was also an option for "other, please specify" in this question and one respondent chose this option in their response, detailing the racist bullying they had experienced, stating, *"calling paki or words like curry eater"*.

Theme 5: Where sectarian bullying takes place

The final question of the survey asked the young people where, in their opinion, sectarian bullying takes place. They were given options of the community, online, school, on the way to and from school, nowhere and "other, please specify". Responses suggested that children and young people believed the most common place where sectarian bullying takes place was within the community, with over half (53%) of the children and young people choosing this option in the survey. Online (49%) and in school (47%) were also considered common spaces in which children and young people typically experienced sectarian bullying, while the journey to and from school was also highlighted (29%). Only 5% of all respondents believed that sectarian bullying did not take place anywhere.

4.2 Parents/Carers Surveys

There were also 100 responses to the survey distributed among parents/carers. Respondents were aged from 18-55+ and most respondents in this survey were from County Antrim (42), followed by County Down (22), County L'/Derry (19), County Armagh (11), County Tyrone (4) and then County Fermanagh (2). The parents/carers were asked five questions and the responses were as follows:

Theme 1: Incidence of sectarian bullying

Parents/carers were first asked if they thought sectarian bullying is an issue for young people in 2024. The findings from this question demonstrated that the majority of parents/carers believed this remained an issue, as 81% of parents/carers answered yes to this question, with a relatively equal split between male and female respondents (76.2% and 84.5% respectively). Of the 100 responses recorded, only 11 parents/carers did not think sectarian bullying remained an issue, while 8 responded that they were not sure.

Parents/carers were given the opportunity to expand in section 1a of the survey on why they believed sectarian bullying remained an issue, and 86% chose to respond in this section (78.6% of male respondents and 91.4% of female respondents). While four respondents noted in this section that sectarian bullying is not as big an issue as it was in the past and seven noted that although it may still be an issue they do not witness it first hand, many responses focused on the issues sectarian bullying continues to cause. A total of 55 responses made reference to sectarianism and how this continues to exist in Northern Ireland, and the following two responses reflect this:

"Sectarian bullying is a significant issue as it combines the harmful effects of bullying with sectarian prejudice, often linked to religious or ideological differences. It can

manifest as verbal, physical, or emotional abuse targeting individuals based on their perceived sectarian identity, such as religious affiliation or political opinion"

"It's constant - sectarianism exists everywhere and in every community in NI. Rangers or Celtic, Protestant side of the city or Catholic, this estate or that estate. GAA top? Big give away. The twelfth is a big point of contention...It's in my everyday life even as an adult and it always will be"

One parent/carers also discussed the issue of identifiable traits, stating that *"my son has faced sectarian slurs for wearing a football shirt"*, while school uniforms were also mentioned in another response. When discussing why sectarian bullying remains an issue for young people, thirteen responses focused on inter-generational influences and how sectarianism continues to be passed down through the generations, for example:

"We live in a society where people are passing on the hatred and ideologies onto the next generation growing up"

"Sectarian bullying will always be present here; people live in the past and bring their children up hating like they do"

"Because it is passed down from parents and grandparents, I still feel it's an issue for some but most are just looking for a fight or an excuse to fight"

"Generations are passing down the hatred they inherited. There has to be a break in the chain"

Four responses noted the role of different school management types (leading to many predominantly single identity school populations) in perpetuating divisions in society, while five responses in this section also noted the role of social media in making parents/carers more aware of bullying, for example:

"It's all-over social media platforms and has been a problem in Northern Ireland since I was a child but you see it more due to social media"

"I have seen it at first hand and always hear of it in news and papers"

Eleven responses also made reference to bullying more generally and how this remains an issue, while two parents/carers also noted that guidance is needed to help address bullying among young people in Northern Ireland. The problem of racist bullying was also highlighted in this section of the survey, as three responses made reference to racist bullying and bullying directed at different cultures, with one noting the *"hatred"* this is creating in Northern Ireland.

Theme 2: Methods of sectarian bullying

Parents/carers were then asked if they had experienced bullying with their own children. Responses were varied, with 27% of parents/carers responding that their child has been the victim of sectarian bullying, while 67% of parents/carers responded that their child had not experienced this issue.

This question also allowed parents/carers to discuss which types of sectarian bullying their child had experienced. Responses suggested that the most common type of sectarian bullying was verbal bullying using sectarian slurs or threats (12%), followed by sectarian threats and slurs online (7%), peer exclusion due to religious/community background (8%) and then physical attacks (7%). Interestingly, 12% of parents/carers also said their child had perpetrated sectarian bullying, including the use of sectarian slurs or threats both in person and online, physical attacks and peer exclusion due to someone's religious or community background.

Two parents/carers chose the option "other, please specify" for this question on whether their child had been on the receiving end of sectarian bullying: one claimed their child was too young to have experienced it but they were sure they would experience it at some stage, while the theme of racist bullying was again highlighted, as the other parent/carer said their child had not experienced sectarian bullying, but was *"a victim of racism"*.

Theme 3: Where sectarian bullying takes place

Parents/carers were then asked where, in their opinion, does sectarian bullying take place. They were provided with the options of community, online, school, and "other, please specify", and parents/carers believed that sectarian bullying occurred in all of these spaces. The most common response to this question however, was in the community, as over three quarters of the respondents (78%) believed children experienced sectarian bullying in public places. Online was also seen as a space in which sectarian bullying was rife, with 66% of respondents stating that sectarian bullying took place here. School was also identified as a space in which sectarian bullying occurs, with 62% of respondents choosing this option. Two parents/carers chose the option "other, please specify", and responded that sectarian bullying takes place *"everywhere"* and in *"every corner of this country"*.

Theme 4: How to address sectarian bullying

Parents/carers were then asked what support and resources, if any, did they think parents and carers would benefit from on the issue of sectarian bullying. A number of options were provided for the respondents to choose from: workshops delivered to children and young people, access to advice and signposting on how to address sectarian bullying, workshops delivered to parents/carers, access to practical tools and guidance to use at home with your child, parents do not need support and resources on the issue of sectarian bullying and "other, please specify".

The most common response from the parents/carers was the idea of workshops for children and young people, with 67% of respondents choosing this option. Access to advice and support on how to address sectarian bullying was the second most popular option, with over half (57%) of the parents/carers believing this would help address sectarian bullying. It was interesting that the most popular options among parents/carers focused on resources for the children and young people themselves, as in comparison to the 67% of parents/carers who believed workshops for children and young people would be beneficial, only 46% believed that workshops for parents and

carers would be a beneficial resource. Access to practical tools and guidance at home was also chosen by just under half of the respondents (44%). Overall, responses in this section suggested that sectarian bullying does remain an issue and parents/carers are interested in how to deal with this issue, as only 4% of respondents believed they did not need any support to help address this issue. One respondent also chose the option, "other, please specify" and responded that a "re-orientation of the children mindset" is needed to address the problem of sectarian bullying.

Theme 5: Other views on sectarian bullying

Question 5 provided a space for parents/carers to share any other views on sectarian bullying and 61% of respondents chose to respond in this section and responses varied.

A main theme in these responses was the belief among parents/carers that sectarian bullying is a 'disgrace', with one response stating that, *"it's horrible and everyone should be treated the same regardless of their beliefs"*. Many responses discussed how the issue of sectarian bullying remains in the past and steps need to be taken to end it, with 21 responses discussing these issues, including:

"I think it needs to end. We want the younger generations to live in peace and not continue the hatred especially as they are bullying over something they didn't personally experience and probably don't know much about"

"It's outdated. Children nowadays should be taught about the past and encouraged not to follow in it"

"It's old and ready to go, let's work together for the youngest generations to grow out of it"

Eleven responses focused on how sectarian beliefs are often passed down to children from their parents, with some of these responses stating that parents should take some of the blame and responsibility, with one parent/carer stating, *"it's ludicrous that parents are still pushing these backwards ideals on their kids"*. Three responses focused on the impact sectarian bullying can have on children and young people in Northern Ireland, with a particular focus on the impact bullying was having on the mental and emotional wellbeing of their children, with one describing it as a *"psychological emotional trauma"*.

Two responses made reference to the need for additional support and guidance for parents/carers to help tackle the issue of sectarian bullying, while suitable sanctions were also noted in two responses as an idea of how to deal with it. Seven responses also noted the importance of cross community initiatives, with five making reference to the need for more Integrated Education, while another believed there was a need for more cross-community social clubs with trained staff.

4.3 School Staff Surveys

There were also 100 responses to the survey distributed among school staff. Respondents were aged 18-55+, with most from County L'Derry (31), followed by County Fermanagh (20), County

Down (18), County Antrim (16), County Armagh (13) and then County Tyrone (2). The school staff were asked five questions and the responses were as follows:

Theme 1: Incidence of sectarian bullying

School staff were first asked if they thought sectarian bullying is an issue for young people in Northern Ireland today. The majority of school staff believed this remained an issue, with 95% of respondents answering yes to this question.

Respondents were then asked to say why they had answered either yes or no to this in an open response question, and 66 responses were recorded in this section. All of the responses mentioned the seriousness of bullying in general and five noted how this occurred in schools on a regular basis, with one respondent noting that *"many students quit coming to school due to severe bullying of all sorts"*. The majority of responses focused on the impacts bullying can have on children and young people, with 22 making reference to this and specific impacts being mentioned in some of these responses; ten mentioned the effect bullying can have on the mental health of children and young people, while two mentioned the impact it can have on their confidence. When discussing the impact it can have on children and young people, one staff member also commented that, *"it affects children from a young age and stays with them forever"*. The role social media plays in this was also noted by two respondents, with one staff member commenting that:

"It's not only leading to kids being bullied in person. Now that technology is more advanced and social media is all over the place, bullying will follow on from the school ground to online abuse"

Seven responses also made reference to the continued divisions in society, the opinions this can foster and how this continues to contribute to sectarian bullying, with one stating that:

"There is still segregation here in Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland and areas with flags that let people know they are not welcome there. Which means children here are taught by an early age by their parents that this is acceptable. This spreads into the schools which is an issue"

Theme 2: Experiences of sectarian bullying

School staff were then asked if sectarian bullying was something they had witnessed between the children and young people they work with. Many of the respondents had witnessed sectarian bullying first hand, as 86% of school staff reported that they had observed this between the children and young people they deal with. Of this 86%, 20 of them reported that they observe it happening *frequently*, while the other 66 responded that they witness it *occasionally*. Of the respondents, 13 said they had not witnessed sectarian bullying occur between the children and young people they work with, while one said they were not sure.

Theme 3: Methods of sectarian bullying and where this takes place

Staff members who had witnessed sectarian bullying were then asked to select where sectarian bullying takes place and the types of sectarian bullying they have seen. Firstly, when stating where sectarian bullying takes place, they were given the options of online, in school, on the way to and from school and in the community. Secondly, when stating the type of sectarian bullying they have witnessed, the respondents chose from verbal bullying, peer exclusion, sectarian slurs or threats and physical attacks, while they also had the option for "other, please specify", when answering this question.

Responses suggest that school staff consider school as the most common place where sectarian bullying takes place, with over half (54.7%) of the respondents stating that sectarian bullying takes place here. Online (33.7%) was considered the second most common place for sectarian bullying, while the journey to and from school (26.7%) was also highlighted as an area in which this could take place. The community was regarded by school staff as the least likely place for it to occur (19.8%), which is interesting when compared to the CYP survey, as respondents in this believed that the community was the most likely place for sectarian bullying to occur.

When discussing what form sectarian bullying takes, school staff felt that the most common form was verbal bullying with over half of the respondents reporting this (58.1%). Peer exclusion (47.7%) and sectarian slurs or threats (34.9%) were also considered prominent forms of sectarian bullying, while physical attacks (30.2%) were also noted as a prominent form of sectarian bullying by just under one third of respondents.

Theme 4: Dealing with sectarian bullying

School staff were then asked how confident they felt handling sectarian bullying among the children they work with. The majority stated that they would feel confident, with 86% reporting they would feel confident dealing with this issue among the children they worked with. Of this 86%, 64 stated they were 'a bit confident', while 22 said they were 'very confident'. Only 14% of school staff responded that they did not feel confident handling sectarian bullying among the children they work with. Of this 14%, 10 said they were 'not confident', while 4 said they were 'not at all confident' dealing with this issue.

Theme 5: Other views on sectarian bullying

School staff were then given an open response section and asked to provide any further information they wanted about sectarian bullying and how this is taking place among children and young people. A total of 20 responses were recorded in this section.

Three of the responses made reference to the frequency of bullying as they noted how common bullying is in schools, and two noted the ongoing challenge this presents for school staff in how to handle this:

"It has happened in my school and even though there is a desire from the staff to tackle it and support these students, it is a huge ongoing challenge"

"Definitely exclusion with the children and for the staff this is an ongoing challenge to tackle it"

Five of the responses focused on methods of sectarian bullying, ranging from verbal abuse, physical abuse and social exclusion, while examples such as forcefully taking money or things from victims were also given. The impact of bullying was also noted in two responses, with one staff member commenting that *"bullying can be very harmful for bystanders too as sometimes they get affected"*. Interestingly, another staff member commented on the normalisation and desensitisation to sectarian bullying, stating that:

"I think sectarian bullying takes place in a way similar to the normal form of bullying but sectarian bullying is taken lightly by the North Ireland society thereby emboldening its perpetrators"

A number of points were raised in some of the other responses: one response noted the influence parents can have in passing down their beliefs to their children; another noted the impact of the divided school system in Northern Ireland and how this *'fosters mistrust'*; and another response expressed the need for more support for children who experience sectarian bullying. Two responses also noted the impact social media has had on bullying, with one believing that online is the *'main source'* for bullying.

Chapter 5: Summary of key findings and Conclusions

Summary of key findings

Following thematic analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data conducted for this project, a number of key themes emerged:

Theme 1: Continued existence of sectarian bullying

Firstly, the focus groups and surveys both demonstrated that sectarian bullying has not gone away and very much still exists for children and young people in Northern Ireland. This was particularly evident in the focus groups, as many of the participants discussed the tension and animosity that continues to exist in Northern Ireland between the two different communities. Many parents/carers and school staff also made reference to this in the open-ended section of the survey, and many discussed the impact this can have on children and the divisions these beliefs continue to foster. Responses from young people in both the focus groups and surveys, also suggested that there remain a high number of sectarian incidents and these can take many forms, including physical bullying and peer exclusion. Verbal bullying and name-calling were also highlighted by many of the participants in the focus groups as a particularly prominent form of sectarian bullying and many children and young people discussed their personal experiences of this. The surveys also highlighted this, as verbal bullying was chosen as the most common form of sectarian bullying in all three surveys.

Where sectarian bullying takes place was also a major theme running throughout the discussion in both the focus groups and the surveys, with social media platforms identified as one of the main spaces in which this takes place. Public areas, such as urban spaces, were also considered key spaces in which sectarian bullying typically occurs. Identifiable traits, such as uniforms and football tops, also emerged as a main theme when children and young people were discussing their experiences in public spaces and these were seen as triggers for sectarian bullying, with many young people admitting the need to lie about their background when in certain areas or situations. References to identifiable traits were also evident in the open-ended response section of the parent/carer and school staff surveys, with some parents/carers making reference to the negative situations their child had experienced when wearing their uniform or football top in public places. Thus, discussions in the focus groups and responses in all three surveys highlighted that sectarian bullying is still very prominent in Northern Irish society among children and young people nearly 27 years after the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.

Theme 2: Acceptance and desensitisation to sectarian bullying

Secondly, the casual acceptance of sectarian bullying and a desensitisation to this issue came through in both the focus groups and surveys. Many of the children and young people discussed how they have become accustomed to sectarian slurs and comments regarding identifiable traits, such as football tops and names, and many do not take these forms of bullying seriously. This was particularly interesting when compared to their discussion of other emerging types of bullying, particularly racist bullying (in light of recent racial tension across the UK in 2024) which was mentioned a number of times throughout the data. Indeed, this theme was highlighted in both the focus groups and surveys: many participants in the focus groups had witnessed racist bullying taking place, while one CYP participant in the survey noted their own personal experience of this and the racist name calling they have been subjected to. A number of parents/carers also made

reference to racist bullying in the open-ended section of the survey, while one parent/carer also discussed this in the survey when discussing forms of bullying experienced by their child, as they commented that their child has been a victim of racist bullying. It was also interesting, as many young people in the focus groups felt that racist bullying was more serious than sectarian bullying and something that should be dealt with more severely.

The theme of acceptance, normalisation and desensitisation towards sectarian bullying was also linked to a discussion which focused on a lack of reporting of sectarian bullying among children and young people. This was evident, as many children and young people admitted that they did not believe sectarian bullying, particularly name-calling, was serious enough to report, and acknowledged that they would only consider reporting incidents to an adult if the situation became physical. There was also a feeling among children and young people that reports of bullying are not always dealt with in a satisfactory way, and this was another reason many did not see the point in reporting incidents.

It is therefore evident that sectarian bullying (especially when it is verbal or online) among children and young people in Northern Ireland has become accepted and normalised and is therefore reported less frequently than it should be, particularly when considering the number of incidents which seem to occur on a daily basis.

Theme 3: Importance of Shared Education and breaking down prejudices

Thirdly, another main theme which emerged from the focus group discussions and the surveys centred on what can be done to address and reduce the incidence of sectarian bullying. Many of the children and young people expressed their desire to introduce measures to help deal with this issue, as many admitted that they did not want the bitterness and hatred to continue to exist as it had done for their parents' generations. This discussion was also linked to the idea of inter-generational influences, as the focus groups and surveys both highlighted the fact that beliefs of bitterness and hatred are often passed down from parents to their children and many believed there needed to be a break in this cycle. When discussing methods to deal with sectarian bullying in the focus groups, a prominent theme running throughout these discussions was the need for sectarian bullying to be taken more seriously in Northern Ireland.

Education was considered a good way to deal with this, and many children and young people believed it was important to educate everyone on the divisions in Northern Ireland to help break down barriers and challenge the prejudice which continues to exist. Shared Education was also discussed as another method which could help deal with sectarian bullying, although it was interesting that some children and young people admitted that Shared Education currently does not always foster positive relationships and they believed initiatives such as this needed to be taken more seriously.

The survey for parents/carers also offered insights into their opinion on how best to deal with sectarian bullying, with many believing that workshops for children and young people would be beneficial, while others thought workshops for parents/carers could also help. The need to have open conversations about the past was also discussed in a number of the focus groups and one focus group in particular noted the importance of including the voices of young people in these conversations, as they believed this would help society move forward and help break down prejudices from an early age.

Conclusions/Recommendations

This timely study on the nature and extent of sectarian bullying among young people in Northern Ireland has highlighted enduring, normalised patterns of often unchecked prejudice which manifests itself in (mostly) comments, slurs and verbal abuse which takes place in a wide range of settings including shared public spaces, sporting fixtures, schools, travelling to and from school, and online. The findings further expose continuing concerns among young people about disclosing their community identity in shared public spaces and their enduring awareness of and vulnerability to sectarian bullying through a range of 'identifiers' such as school uniforms, sporting tops, pronunciation (e.g., of the letter 'h') and their very names. Young people under-report sectarian bullying partly as a result of this normalisation of division in society, and partly through a lack of confidence that schools or the PSNI will deal with it effectively. Participants in this study, including the young people themselves, acknowledge that more needs to be done to address the incidence of sectarian bullying in contemporary society in Northern Ireland.

Drawing on the analysis of the survey and interview data reported above, a number of recommendations are made as follows:

1. Increase Awareness of the Nature and Extent of Sectarian Bullying

There is a pressing need to enhance awareness about the ongoing prevalence of sectarian bullying among children and young people in Northern Ireland. Public awareness campaigns, supported by government and community organisations, could help highlight the forms and spaces where sectarian bullying occurs, such as social media, public areas, and schools. Efforts should focus on challenging the normalisation of sectarian slurs and promoting zero tolerance for all forms of bullying.

2. Integrate Sectarian Bullying Education in Schools

Schools should embed education on sectarianism and its harmful impacts within the curriculum. This could include lessons on the history and social context of sectarianism, as well as discussions about prejudice, identity, and respect for diversity. Using interactive methods such as storytelling, role-playing, and case studies can foster empathy and understanding. Additionally, schools should develop policies that clearly address sectarian bullying, ensuring that students, parents, and staff are aware of reporting mechanisms and support structures.

3. Enhance Initial Teacher Education and Ongoing Professional Development

To better equip educators, there should be an increased focus on addressing sectarian bullying within Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and ongoing professional development. Training should provide teachers with the skills to recognise, prevent, and respond effectively to sectarian bullying, both in physical spaces and online. It should also include strategies for facilitating sensitive discussions about identity, history, and prejudice, empowering teachers to foster inclusive and respectful classroom environments.

4. Develop a Toolkit of Resources for Educators

A comprehensive toolkit should be developed to support educators in addressing sectarian bullying. This could include lesson plans, guidance on handling incidents, activities promoting cross-community understanding, and advice on engaging parents and carers. The toolkit should

also offer resources on how to facilitate difficult conversations and create safe spaces for young people to express their experiences and concerns.

5. Promote Cross-Community Initiatives

Shared Education and other cross-community initiatives should be strengthened to provide meaningful opportunities for young people from different backgrounds to engage positively. These initiatives should focus on fostering genuine understanding and relationships, moving beyond superficial interactions. Workshops, joint projects, and dialogue sessions can help break down prejudices and build empathy, supporting young people in challenging sectarian attitudes inherited from previous generations.

6. Prioritise Listening to Children and Young People

Children and young people should be actively involved in shaping responses to sectarian bullying. Platforms should be created where they can share their experiences and ideas for solutions, ensuring their voices influence school policies and community initiatives. Listening to young people will not only empower them but also provide valuable insights into effective approaches to address and prevent sectarian bullying. Further research is also required to further explore this important and under-reported issue.

7. Support Parental Engagement

Workshops and information sessions for parents and carers can help raise awareness of sectarian bullying and equip families to support their children. Parents should be encouraged to have open conversations about prejudice and respect, helping to break cycles of inter-generational sectarianism. Creating avenues for parents from different communities to engage in shared activities can also foster mutual understanding and cooperation.

8. Strengthen Reporting and Support Mechanisms

Given the current underreporting of sectarian bullying, it is essential to establish clear, accessible, and trusted reporting mechanisms in schools and online platforms. These systems should ensure confidentiality, provide appropriate support for victims, and guarantee that reports are taken seriously and addressed effectively. Training for school staff on handling reports sensitively and appropriately will be vital to restoring confidence in these mechanisms.

Appendix: Survey Questions

CYP Questions

1. Is sectarian bullying still an issue for young people in 2024?
2. Have you experienced sectarian bullying and did you report it to an adult?
3. If you reported sectarian bullying, do you think it is handled well? **Those who have experienced sectarian bullying and have reported it to an adult*
 - a. Please tell us why you answered this way. **Those who have experienced sectarian bullying and have reported it to an adult*
4. If you experienced sectarian bullying, what type of bullying was it? (Select all that apply) **Those who have experienced sectarian bullying*
5. In your opinion where does sectarian bullying take place? (Select all that apply)

Parent/Carer Questions

1. Do you think sectarian bullying is an issue for young people in 2024?
 - a. Please tell us why you answered this way
2. Is sectarian bullying something you have experienced with your own children? (Select all that apply)
3. In your opinion where does sectarian bullying take place? (Select all that apply)
4. What support and resources, if any, do you think parents and carers would benefit from on the issue of sectarian bullying? (Select all that apply)
5. Can you tell us anything else about your views on sectarian bullying?

School Staff Questions

1. Do you think sectarian bullying is an issue for young people in 2024?
 - a. Please tell us why you answered this way
2. Is sectarian bullying something you have witnessed between children and young people you work with?
3. Please select where and the type of sectarian bullying you have seen? (Select all that apply) **Those who have witnessed sectarian bullying between children and young people they work with*
4. How confident do you feel to handle sectarian bullying among children that you work with?
5. If you would like to add further information about how sectarian bullying is taking place among children and young people, you can do so here.



STRANMILLIS
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast



Centre for
Research in
Educational
Underachievement



ANTI-BULLYING
ALLIANCE