

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE STATISTICS OF VIOLENCE

BY MICHAEL MCKEOWN

The data below covers the period July 14 1969—April 15 1977, during which time, by my estimate, 1,750 deaths directly attributable to civil unrest had occurred in Northern Ireland.

PROBLEMS OF ESTIMATION

No-one can state with certainty how many deaths in Northern Ireland have been caused by the violence. Conflicting or anomalous figures are published from time to time, and often there is clearly some difficulty in distinguishing between fatalities arising from activities with political overtones and ones with no such overtones. Though media and security forces have been forced (at least since the early 1970s) to keep an up-to-date record of violent deaths for reference purposes, differing criteria have resulted in discrepancies between lists for certain periods.

Even given that such discrepancies produce a variation of less than 1% between the different figures published, it must be recognised that none of these figures in fact reveals the full import of the violence in terms of fatalities. Approximately 120 people have been killed in Britain and the Irish Republic as a result of acts of violence with their origins in the Northern Ireland conflict. There has also been in Northern Ireland a high number of deaths consequential upon the violence, but not directly attributable to it. (1) a very high figure of accidental deaths involving members of the security forces; (2) a considerable number of road deaths attributable to the heavy military vehicles on the streets of N. Ireland towns; (3) cases of death from heart failure of civilians placed in situations of great stress caused by specific acts of violence.

If all such incidents occurring as a consequence of the violence in Northern Ireland were included along with those outside Ulster, it is not unlikely that this violence would be seen to account for nearer 2000' deaths than the 1750 examined here. The latter however constitute a reasonably accurate total of victims in Northern Ireland whose deaths can be directly attributed to civil unrest.

PROBLEMS OF ATTRIBUTION

The main purpose of this brief analysis is an attempt to designate victims by role, and to identify the agencies directly responsible for individual killings. It has proved impossible to do so in every case—due to the inchoate nature of street violence; uncertain forensic evidence; and many assassinations which could not with certainty be attributed to one particular source. For these reasons, the totals in both the classifications employed fall below the total of 1750.

In identifying the role of the victim, the category of security force members was easiest to establish. Membership is a matter of public record (though there is some doubt about the circumstances of death in the cases of several UDR men). Members of illegal or paramilitary organisations who have died in acts of violence have generally been acknowledged by the organisations concerned, but some individuals have remained unclaimed by any subversive organisation. It should not be assumed that all 'subversives' killed died while engaged in acts of violence. Some died as victims of assassination squads, or simply as casual victims of random violence. Nearly all those fatalities who could not be identified as members of the security forces or subversive organisations have been classified as civilians.

Attributing responsibility is much more difficult. The yardsticks used, in order of diminishing reliability, have been court convictions; civil court compensation judgements, official tribunals, inquest findings; official acknowledgement; supported circumstantial evidence. But judgments about 168 of the 1750 deaths remain impossible. Attributions have been made to three broad groupings: (1) the security forces (British Army, UDR and RUC); (2) a republican category, covering a range of republican organisations and their front groups; (3) a loyalist grouping (UVF, UDA, UFF and so on).

THE FATALITIES

The stark fact that emerges from the most casual scrutiny of fatality figures is that the great majority of

victims have not been directly engaged in the physical conflict, either as subversives or as members of the security forces. They have been civilians or noncombatants killed going about their routine tasks. Some were killed deliberately because they belonged to a particular religious or sectional grouping. Some were killed incidentally, victims of crossfire or premature explosions. As the spiral of violence kept soaring and subversives became more indifferent to public reaction, their attacks became more generalised and a valid distinction could not be drawn between acts directed against property and acts directed against persons. Accordingly I have made no attempt to separate the 1054 civilians killed into those slain deliberately and those killed accidentally. It is sufficient to point out that in a three cornered conflict between the security forces and two blocs of subversives, 60% of fatalities have been suffered by individuals who belong to none of the contending groups.

In all, 447 members of the security forces have been killed inside Northern Ireland (excluding accidental deaths). Clearly these have been consistently the targets of republican gunmen, and intermittently of loyalist gunmen. Not all those killed, however, were killed as such targets. Sometimes they were incidental victims of the violence, and in the case of some UDR personnel, religion rather than UDR membership seems to have been the motive. But up to 98% of security personnel killed were slain because of the uniform they wore.

Members of British Army patrols were thick on the ground and constantly exposed to gun and bomb attack but they did operate within a tight structure of security and back up cover which improved significantly as the years went by. The RUC on the other hand operated in patrols of one and two where they lacked cover and were consistently open to attack. As well as this individual RUC men had to return to their homes where their only protection against attack was their own personally held weapon. This hazard of course they shared with members of the UDR. These high levels of exposure must

undoubtedly account in part for the high level of fatalities sustained by these forces. The break down for the three arms is as follows:

British Army	271
Ulster Defence Regiment	71
Royal Ulster Constabulary and Reserve	102

The nature of the guerilla war which has been waged is illustrated by the fact that the subversive groups have suffered significantly fewer fatalities than the security forces. A large number have died in premature explosions while many have been killed during group and intra group factionalism. The Provisional IRA has sustained the highest number of fatalities.

There is a total of 44 individuals who are impossible to identify as falling within a civilian classification or a subversive classification. The total for the categories are:

Security Forces..	444
Republican subversives.....	166
Loyalist subversives.....	42
Civilian non combatants	1054
Unclassified..	44
Total	1750

THE RESPONSIBILITY

The difficulty of attribution encountered in identifying victims becomes more acute in attempting to stipulate which group or agency was responsible for the individual deaths. Some of the reasons for this have already been indicated. Other reasons are the demands of the propaganda war which have led all the protagonists to make inflated claims—or, alternatively, to try and shift responsibility on to some other group. Finally some of the street violence has been so random that it is impossible to hold any one group directly responsible for it. For all these reasons it has been impossible to distribute responsibility in the case of 168 deaths (or approximately 10% of the total).

Of the remaining 1582, just over 53% or 842 were caused by republican groups. Of such groups the Provisional IRA were clearly the most active single group. However, taking the disparate and often feuding republican groups as one entity (which is how they tended to be viewed by loyalist opponents) that entity was responsible for the deaths of approximately 430 security personnel as the result of direct

attacks, approximately 320 civilian deaths as the result of bombing and assassination attacks and approximately 90 republican deaths as the result of premature explosions, internal executions and factional executions.

A similar if lesser element of accidental deaths and internal executions can be discerned within the pattern of loyalist responsibility. Since security personnel did not generally figure as loyalist targets the number of security personnel killed by loyalist activity does not exceed eight. Consequently the great majority of the 539 (34% of the attributable total) killed by loyalist groups were civilians. Notably, the number of fatalities which the loyalist and republican groupings inflicted directly upon each other is extremely low. On that particular side of the triangle the civilian was indeed "pig in the middle".

As indeed he was in the conflict between the security forces and the subversive groups. We have already seen that the bulk of republican fatalities were self-incurred. This indicates that the bulk of the fatalities inflicted by the security forces were suffered by the civilian population. Of the 201 deaths attributable to the security forces (13% of the attributable total) over half were civilians, due to (a) the unsophisticated methods of crowd control employed in the early years; (b) the high incidence of crossfire victims; (c) high tension on the pan of individual soldiers which induced occasional over-hasty reactions. The classifications are set out below:

Deaths attributable to republican groups..	842
Deaths attributable to loyalist groups..	539
Deaths attributable to security forces.....	200
Deaths unattributable	168
Total	1750

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS

There has long been much controversy over whether victims of the violence should be given religious labels by the news media. Such a procedure may appear to deny the victims their common humanity, but in a conflict which has a sectarian if not religious dimension this particular characteristic of the victim should surely be indicated. Thus I have tried

to identify the religious affiliation of those victims who were natives of Northern Ireland. This distinction (employed by the media) seems legitimate in that it is only within the Northern Ireland context that the religious identification is perceived as congruent with the tribal identification. Of those killed, 300 are identifiably non-natives of Northern Ireland. Most of these 300 have been members of the British Army, but approximately 35 non native civilians have been unwitting victims of the violence. Of the remaining 1450, 846 appear to have been Catholics (58%) while 604 (52%) appear to have been Protestants. The preponderance of Catholics in relation to their proportion of the population of Northern Ireland may be accounted for by three factors: the high level of republican fatalities, all but three of whom appear to have been Catholics; the high proportion of civilian deaths caused by the security personnel who were generally more active in Catholic areas than in Protestant areas; the high level of assassinations carried out against Catholic victims by loyalist groups.

Of the Protestant total approximately 26% were Protestant members of the locally recruited security forces. But it must be stressed that although Catholics tend to be identified as republicans and Protestants as loyalists, many Catholics who died were killed by republicans; just as many of the Protestants who have died were killed by loyalists.

CONCLUSION

This has been an interim report. It has identified certain trends and possibly offered the reader a more adequate perspective from which to judge the nature of the violence. Many aspects have been deliberately ignored: the cycles of violence; the nature of the legal and judicial responses to the violence; the geographical distribution of the violence.

An enquiry into the nature of the Northern Ireland violence which does not explore these areas must be partial and interim. The numbers **game does not and cannot** tell all. But it does focus attention upon the **enormity of** what has happened over the past eight years. The salient feature in terms of human suffering is the stark fact of 1750 dead and more dying daily.