



## Racial prejudice in Northern Ireland

Chris Gilligan and Katrina Lloyd

In recent years there has been a lot of public discussion about the extent of racial prejudice in Northern Ireland. There has been a significant growth in the reporting of racist incidents to the police, and media reports have dubbed Belfast the 'race hate capital of Europe' (BBC News Online, 2004). The increased reporting of racist incidents has taken place in a context where there has been a significant rise in the number of migrant workers living and working in Northern Ireland (e.g. Bell et al, 2004). In the last few years there has been an increase in government activity aimed at tackling racial prejudice, including, for example, 'hate crimes' legislation passed into law in 2004 and the publication of a Racial Equality Strategy in 2005.

In 2005 the **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey** incorporated a module on attitudes towards minority ethnic communities, including questions on racial prejudice. This Research Update uses data from the 2005 survey along with comparative data from previous years of the NILT survey (1998-2004) and the **Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA) survey** (1994) to explore changes in attitudes towards minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland over the last decade.

### The growth of racial prejudice

There has been a significant shift in perceptions of the growth in racial prejudice in Northern Ireland compared to a decade ago. In 1994, most people (64%) thought that levels of racial prejudice were 'about the same' as five years previously. The remaining respondents were more likely to think that there was less racial prejudice (19%) than they were to think there was more (12%). Eleven years on, in 2005, most people (68%) thought there

was more racial prejudice compared to five years previously and very few (6%) thought there was less (Table 1).

Table 1: Do you think there is generally more racial prejudice in Northern Ireland now than there was 5 years ago, less, or about the same amount?

	%	
	1994	2005
More now	12	68
Less now	19	6
About the same	64	19
Don't know	4	7
Total	100	100

When we look at reports of respondents' own prejudice we get a similar picture. In 1994, around one in ten respondents (11%) described themselves as very prejudiced or a little prejudiced against

Table 2: How prejudiced are you against people from minority ethnic communities\*?

	%	
	1994	2005
Very prejudiced	1	1
A little prejudiced	10	24
Not prejudiced at all	88	73
Don't know	<1	1
Total	100	100

\* The term 'race' was used in 1994 while the term 'minority ethnic communities' was used in 2005

'people of other races'. By 2005 one in four respondents (25%) said they were either very prejudiced or a little prejudiced against 'people of minority ethnic communities' (Table 2).

### Who is prejudiced?

Comparing the figures across the years provides a sense of the extent to which there has been a growth in racial prejudice. Further analysis of the data from the 2005 NILT survey also allows us to see who is more likely to report being prejudiced.

There was no significant gender difference and no significant differences according to social class. Respondents in managerial positions (27%) were as likely, or unlikely, as skilled non-manual (29%), skilled manual (26%) or unskilled workers (22%) to profess prejudice. There were also no significant differences according to level of educational attainment. There were, however, significant differences in prejudice in terms of religion, party support, national identity, age and direct contact with someone from a minority ethnic community. As Table 3 shows, Protestants (33%) were almost twice as likely as Catholics (18%), or those with no religion (19%), to say that they were either very prejudiced or a little prejudiced.

This difference by religious affiliation is a marked change from 1994 when religion was not a significant factor. In 1994, Catholics (9%), Protestants (12%) and those with no religion (10%) were almost equally likely to self-report as racially prejudiced. In other words, in 2005, Catholics were twice as likely to say they were racially prejudiced compared to 1994, but Protestants were three times more likely to say they were racially prejudiced in 2005 than in 1994.

As Figure 1 shows, respondents who supported Unionist parties (DUP 46%;

UUP 31%) were more likely to say they were prejudiced than those who supported Nationalist parties (SDLP 21%; Sinn Fein 19%), the Alliance Party (19%) or those who said they did not support any party (21%). In the case of national identity, respondents who identified themselves as British (35%) or Ulster (35%) were more likely to say they were prejudiced than those who self-identified as Northern Irish (25%) or Irish (15%). There was also an association between direct contact and reporting of prejudice. Respondents who said they had daily contact with someone from a minority ethnic background were significantly less likely to report prejudice (13%) than those who said they had contact once or twice a week (28%) or who never had any contact (30%).

As Table 4 shows, there was a significant association between prejudice and age. The youngest (22% of 18-24 year olds) and oldest (18% of those aged 75 years and over) respondents were least prejudiced overall while those aged between 45 and 64 years (30%) were the most prejudiced overall. The oldest age group (75+), however, were the most likely to report being very prejudiced (3%).

## Attitudes towards having a Chinese boss - 1994 to 2004

The figures presented so far indicate that there is more racial prejudice in Northern Ireland since the ceasefires in 1994. A more complex picture emerges, however, when we look at a specific example of prejudice. Since 1994, a number of NILT and NISA surveys have asked respondents if they thought that most white people in

Table 3: How prejudiced are you against people of minority ethnic communities by religion

	%		
	Protestant	Catholic	No religion
Very prejudiced	2	0	0
A little prejudiced	31	18	19
Not prejudiced at all	65	81	80
Don't know	2	1	1
Total	100	100	100

Northern Ireland would mind if a suitably qualified person of Chinese origin were appointed as their boss. Respondents were also asked whether they themselves would mind if this happened. The most striking thing about these figures over time is that they show that since 2001 there has been a growing divergence between respondent's own reported prejudice on these topics and their perception of the attitudes of the rest of the population.

Since 1994 there has been a fairly steady increase in the proportion of respondents who think that people in general are less willing to accept a Chinese person as a boss. In 1994 just over one third (34%) of respondents thought that most white people in Northern Ireland would mind (a little or a lot) if a suitably qualified person of Chinese origin were appointed as their boss. By 2004 the proportion had grown to over one half (55%). When it comes to respondent's own unwillingness to accept a Chinese boss, however, there has been a fluctuation rather than a steady increase. In 1994 just over one in ten respondents (11%) said that they personally would mind a little or a lot if a suitably qualified person

of Chinese origin were appointed as their boss. In 2001 this figure had almost doubled (19%). By 2004, however, the proportion that would mind a Chinese boss had dropped to 13% (Figure 2). In other words, the figures for people's own reported prejudice towards having a Chinese boss suggest that there is slightly more racial prejudice today than in 1994, but much less racial prejudice today than there was in 2001.

## How to interpret the data?

The figures for self-reporting of prejudice between 1994 and 2005 show an increase in the percentages of survey respondents who say they are a little or very prejudiced against people from minority ethnic communities. But how do we interpret these figures? There are at least three different possible interpretations. Firstly, it may be that there has been an increase in actual prejudice over the years; secondly that there is an increased willingness to report prejudice or thirdly that the increase is due to the wording of the questions in 1994 and 2005 rather than to any change in respondents' levels of prejudice.

### Increased prejudice

The increase in the proportion of respondents who said they were prejudiced against minority ethnic communities in 2005 compared to 1994 could be because more people are prejudiced. It may be the case that there is more hatred and intolerance of ethnic minorities in 2005 compared to 1994. Another possibility is that the increased reporting of prejudice is a

Figure 1: % of respondents describing themselves as 'very prejudiced' or a 'little prejudiced' against minority ethnic communities by party support

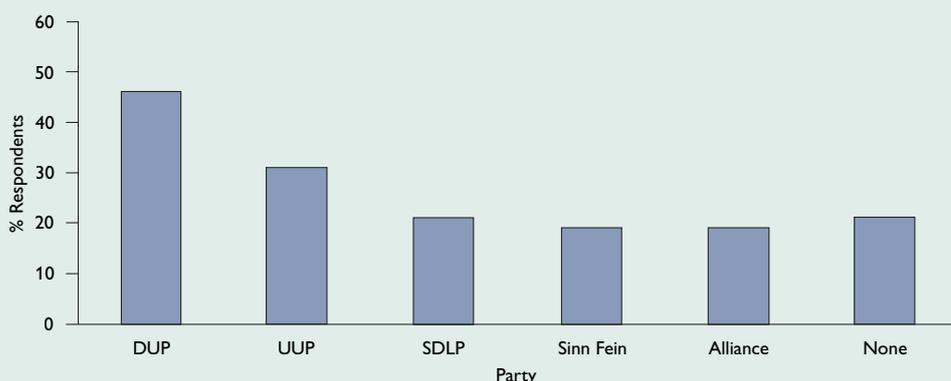


Table 4: How prejudiced are you against people of minority ethnic communities by age group

	18-24	25-44	45-64	65-74	75+	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very prejudiced	1	2	1	1	3	1
A little prejudiced	21	23	29	25	15	24
Not prejudiced at all	77	74	69	74	76	73
Don't know	1	1	1	0	5	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

direct response to the growth of minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. Research by Jarman (2002) indicates that members of minority ethnic communities are more likely to be found in 'Protestant' areas and this might help to explain the higher rise in reported prejudice amongst Protestants compared to Catholics. The fact that direct contact is associated with lower levels of prejudice, however, should caution against such a straightforward explanation. The fact that there has been a much less marked growth in hostility towards the idea of having a Chinese boss also suggests that we should ask questions about what self-reported prejudice is actually measuring.

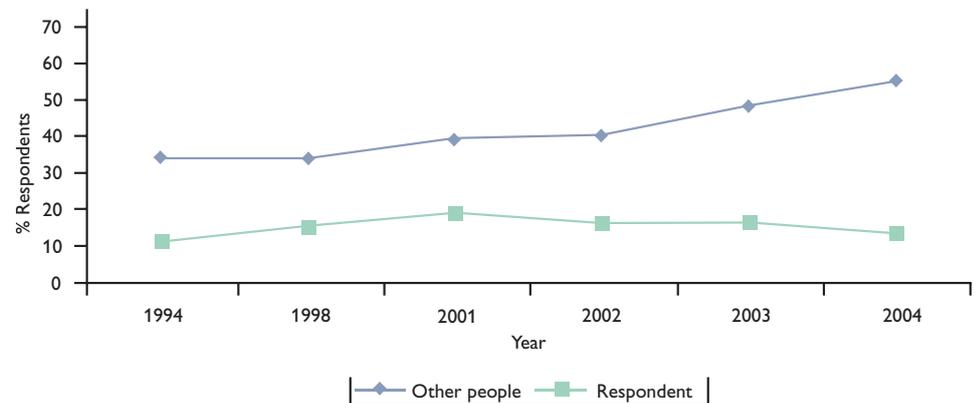
#### Willingness to report prejudice

The growth in self-reported racial prejudice may be due to changes in the reporting of prejudice, rather than to changes in prejudice. It could be that people are more aware of their own prejudices today than they were ten years ago and are therefore more willing to admit to them, or it could be that the meaning of prejudice has changed so that more trivial things (e.g. feeling slightly uncomfortable talking to someone from a different ethnic background, as opposed to favouring job discrimination) are now taken as a measure of prejudice. This might help to explain the fact that more people report some prejudice than say they would be uncomfortable with having a Chinese boss.

#### Differences in question wording in 1994 and 2005

A third possible explanation for the reported increase is to do with question wording. In 1994 people were asked about prejudice towards 'other races'; in

Figure 2: % of respondents saying that most white people in Northern Ireland, and they themselves, would mind a little or a lot if they had a Chinese boss, 1994-2004



2005 the question asked about 'minority ethnic communities'. The different levels of reporting prejudice may be due to this change rather than reflecting a real increase in prejudice. We have taken attitudes towards a Chinese boss as an indicator of racial prejudice across time, but it could be that the Chinese are more accepted than other minorities, or that prejudice against the Chinese is a sub-set of racial prejudice.

#### Divergence between perception of prejudice in Northern Ireland and own prejudice

The divergence between perception of other people's prejudice against having a Chinese boss in Northern Ireland and respondent's own reported prejudice is intriguing. We can think of two possible explanations. One is that there is a disjuncture between people's knowledge of racial prejudice and their own experience of racial prejudice. This disjuncture may be because of the high public profile of the issue of racism. People may think that there is

a lot of racial prejudice in Northern Ireland because that is the message they are getting from the media and from government, even though they personally do not have much experience of racism in their everyday lives. The other possibility is that perception of racial prejudice is in part an index of a sense that society is out of control. The growing gulf between people's own reported prejudice and their perception of prejudice in the rest of society suggests a growing alienation from the rest of society and a suspicion of other peoples' attitudes.

## Conclusion: Racial prejudice – a more complex picture

The data from the 2005 NILT survey clearly show a widespread sense among respondents that there is more racism in Northern Ireland today compared to five years ago. There is also evidence that more

people, and Protestants in particular, say they are racially prejudiced in 2005 than in 1994. However, it may be too simplistic to say that Belfast is the 'race hate capital of Europe' or that Northern Ireland is more racist. This might be the case, but it is also possible that the change has not been in levels of racial prejudice, but in what people mean by racial prejudice. This is not to deny the reality of violent attacks against minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland today, but to say that we need a better understanding of the nature of racial prejudice and its relationship to racist attacks. There is a lot of data in the 2005 survey that we have not been able to report in the short space available here. These data will allow further analysis to probe the intricacies of racial prejudice

in Northern Ireland in more detail. The survey will also provide useful background data to help guide more ethnographic research to look at the nature of racial prejudice and the ways in which, and the extent to which, these attitudes relate to actual behaviour towards minority ethnic communities.

## References

BBC News Online (Tuesday, 13 January, 2004) *Race hate on rise in NI*  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/3390249.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/3390249.stm)

Bell, K., Jarman, N. and Lefebvre, T. (2004), *Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland*, Institute for Conflict Research (ICR), Belfast.

Jarman, N. (2002), *Overview Analysis of Racist Incidents Recorded in Northern Ireland by the RUC 1996-1999*, OFMDFM, Belfast.

---

Chris Gilligan is a Lecturer in Sociology and member of the Academy of Irish Cultural Heritages at the University of Ulster and Katrina Lloyd is Research Director of ARK, based in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

---

The race questions on the 2005 NILT survey were funded by the Equality Commission and OFMDFM.

## Key Points

- Most respondents (68%) thought there was more racial prejudice in Northern Ireland in 2005 compared to five years ago and very few (6%) thought there was less.
- In 2005, one in four respondents reported that they were either very prejudiced (1%) or a little prejudiced (24%) against people of minority ethnic communities compared to 11% in 1994.
- In 2001, 19% of respondents said that they personally would mind if a suitably qualified person of Chinese origin was appointed as their boss; by 2004 the proportion had fallen to 13%.
- Protestants (33%) were almost twice as likely as Catholics (18%), or those with no religion (19%) to say they were either very or a little prejudiced. In 1994, the figures were similar for Catholics (9%), Protestants (12%) and those with no religion (10%).
- Supporters of Unionist parties were significantly more likely to say they were prejudiced against minority ethnic communities than supporters of other parties.
- Respondents who had daily contact with someone from a minority ethnic background were much less likely to report prejudice (13%) than those who said they had contact once or twice a week (28%) or never had any contact (30%).

The **Life and Times** survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2005, 1200 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The **Life and Times** survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what people think about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

In collaboration with Queen's University, Belfast and University of Ulster

Aberfoyle House Magee Campus University of Ulster  
Northland Road Londonderry BT48 7JA

Tel: 028 7137 5513 Fax: 028 7137 5510

E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)

School of Sociology Social Policy and Social Work  
Queen's University Belfast Belfast BT7 1NN

Tel: 028 9097 3034 Fax: 028 9097 2551

E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)