

Location matters? Young people and good relations

Martina McKnight and Paula Devine

While the atrocities, violence and segregation that have marked the troubled history of Northern Ireland have not been limited to urban settings, the majority have occurred there. In particular, the polarised working class interface areas of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry divided by ‘peace lines’ and marked by murals have become emblematic of sectarianism and conflict. However, the barriers that divide citizens and communities are not necessarily physical, but are built upon patterns of mistrust, ‘othering’ and contested histories which, while harder to identify, can continue to shape attitudes (McKnight and Leonard, 2014). As such, while communal divisions may be more overt in urban space this does not mean they are missing from rural spaces (Bell, Jarman and Harvey, 2010).

Drawing on data from the 2019 *Young Life and Times* (YLT) survey, this Research Update explores the attitudes of young people to good relations from, primarily, an urban/rural perspective. These spatial and age foci afford particular insights. Aged 16, these respondents have grown up in a period of relative peace, albeit when violence, particularly rioting, occurs young people are often portrayed as keen participants. Yet, for many, schooling and housing remain segregated, while their age means that they tend to live more localised lives.

Urban/rural background

As Table 1 shows, the majority of YLT respondents can be defined as urban dwellers with just over one in five saying they lived in a big city or its suburbs, and four in ten in a small city or town. The remaining 38 per cent lived in a rural area, either in a country village or

Table 1: Where respondents live

		%
Urban	A big city	8
	The suburbs or outskirts of a big city	14
	A small city or town	41
Rural	A country village	18
	A farm or home in the country	20

Table 2: Religious background of respondents

	%	
	Urban	Rural
Catholic	37	42
Protestant	25	38
No religion	38	20

a farm or home in the country. When asked to assess their family’s financial background, the perceptions of rural and urban dwellers were similar with around half perceiving this to be average; just over three out of ten well-off and 15 per cent not well-off.

When religion is analysed by location some discernible differences are evident (Table 2). While the proportion of urban respondents who are Catholic and those who have no religion is similar, only one quarter of urban respondents are Protestant. However, with regard to those living in rural areas, while the proportion who are Catholic is similar to the proportion who are Protestant (around four in ten), only one fifth have no religious affiliation.

As can be seen in Table 3, around eight out of ten Catholic respondents, irrespective

of where they lived, attended a school with pupils who were all or mostly the same religion as them. Nearly three quarters of Protestant pupils living in rural areas (74%) attended schools which were all or mostly Protestant with 17 per cent attending schools where the religious mix was more even; for their urban counterparts the breakdown was 60 per cent and 27 per cent respectively. For those respondents not affiliated to any religion the proportion, irrespective of location, attending all or mostly Protestant schools is nearly twice that of those attending Catholic schools. Interestingly, one quarter of those with no religion living in urban areas (26%) were not aware of the religious composition of their school. Overall, only 7 per cent of respondents attended mixed religion schools: 8 per cent of those living in urban areas and 5 per cent of those living in rural areas.

Table 3: Religious composition of school

	%					
	Catholic		Protestant		No Religion	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
All or mostly Protestant	8	2	60	74	36	54
All or mostly Catholic	78	81	5	1	21	23
About half Protestant and half Catholic	11	11	27	17	17	15
I don't know	4	6	8	7	26	8

Table 4: Area descriptor and perceptions of safety

Area Descriptor	%							
	Catholic		Protestant		No Religion		All	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Mainly Protestant	6	3	68	55	40	38	35	30
Mainly Catholic	53	64	4	5	11	15	24	31
Mixed	40	32	23	36	33	38	33	35
I don't know	2	1	5	4	16	8	8	4
Perceptions of Area Safety								
Very safe	55	67	50	51	39	46	48	57
Fairly safe	37	29	41	40	44	38	41	35
Neither safe/unsafe	5	4	5	6	10	10	7	6
Fairly/very unsafe	3	1	4	3	5	5	4	2
I can't choose	<1	<1	1	1	2	1	1	<1

Overall, one third of respondents described the area they lived in as either mainly Protestant (33%) or mixed (33%) and just over one quarter (27%) described it as mainly Catholic. As detailed in Table 4, the majority of Catholic and Protestant respondents lived in mainly single religion areas, but some urban/rural differences are evident. Just over a half (53%) of Catholic urban respondents lived in mainly Catholic areas with 40 per cent living in mixed areas. For those living in rural areas the figures were nearly two thirds (64%) and 32 per cent respectively. On the other hand, nearly seven in ten (68%) Protestant urban dwellers lived in mainly Protestant areas with just under one quarter (23%) living in mixed areas, while for those living in rural areas the figures were 55 per cent and 36 per cent respectively. For those respondents not affiliated to any religion, around four in ten, irrespective of

location, lived in mainly Protestant areas, one third of urban and 38 per cent of rural dwellers lived in mixed areas, with only 11 per cent of those living in urban areas and 15 percent of those living in rural areas describing where they lived as mainly Catholic.

While overall nearly nine out of ten respondents felt very/fairly safe in their areas, respondents from rural areas were more likely to report feeling very safe in comparison to those living in urban areas (57% and 48% respectively). Location did not impact on Protestant respondents' perceptions of safety. However, there was a twelve percentage point difference between Catholic rural respondents who felt 'very safe' and their urban counterparts (67% and 55% respectively), while for those with no religion the difference was seven percentage points (46% and 39%).

Belonging

Overall, around seven out of ten YLT respondents said they 'definitely' or 'probably' had a sense of belonging to the areas they lived in (72%) and to Northern Ireland (70%); in both instances this was four percentage points higher among those living in rural areas, although this was not statistically significant. However, respondents' sense of local and national belonging was not based on the ability to influence decisions, as only 7 per cent felt they had any influence on decisions taken locally or nationally, albeit that, in relation to local decision making, those living in rural areas (10%) felt somewhat more positive than their urban counterparts (8%).

As shown in Table 5, when religion is also considered some clear patterns are evident. Catholic respondents have

a higher sense of belonging to their neighbourhood than to Northern Ireland, a difference that is not evident among the other respondents. For Catholic rural

respondents their sense of belonging to their neighbourhood is higher than for those living in urban area, whilst the reverse is true for those with no religion.

Belonging to Northern Ireland is higher among Protestant rural respondent than their urban counterparts, although the reverse is true for those with no religion.

Table 5: Belonging and influence

	% saying 'definitely' or 'probably'							
	Catholic		Protestant		No Religion		All	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Belong neighbourhood	77	86	79	76	59	48	70	74
Belong NI	69	70	79	85	58	50	68	72
Influence local decision	9	11	8	10	6	7	8	10
Influence NI decision	4	7	10	10	7	5	7	7

Support for mixing

Around two thirds of YLT respondents said that they often or sometimes played sport with people of another religion to themselves. However, as shown above, many continue to attend school and live in areas with people who are the same religion as them which limits opportunities for religious mixing. In seeking to gauge support for mixing, YLT has since its inception contained questions on preferences for religious mixing across three domains: neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools.

As detailed in Table 6, overall the majority of YLT respondents were supportive of religiously mixed environments, and there has been little change in preferences over the life of the survey. Around three quarters of respondents were supportive of mixed workplaces with those living in urban areas (77%) being slightly more supportive of this than those in rural areas (73%). While support for working with people of one's own religion is relatively low, the proportion

preferring this who live in rural areas (12%) is greater than those living in urban areas (6%). While still the majority view, preference for mixed neighbourhoods (59%) is 17 percentage points lower than for mixed workplaces; with urban respondents being more supportive of mixed neighbourhoods than their rural counterparts (61% and 56% respectively). However, just over one quarter of rural respondents (27%) would prefer to live in single identity neighbourhoods compared to just under one fifth (18%) of those living in urban areas. The rural/urban divide is most noticeable in relation to schools. While overall there is majority support for mixed schools (56%), less than half (48%) of rural respondents prefer mixed schools with 41 per cent being in favour of single religion schools, while the preferences of young people living in urban areas are 60 per cent and 27 per cent respectively.

Support for mixed workplaces is quite similar irrespective of the religious background of respondent, with rural

Catholics being the least supportive of this (70%). Support for mixed neighbourhoods and schools was weakest among Catholic respondents, particularly those from rural areas. Around six out of ten Protestant respondents and around seven out of ten respondents not affiliated to any religion, irrespective of location, supported mixed neighbourhoods. However, this was the case for just over one half (53%) of Catholic urban respondents and slightly less than one half (47%) of those living in rural areas. Around three quarters of respondents affiliated to no religion, irrespective of location, were supportive of mixed schools. While 62 per cent of Protestant urban respondents were supportive only 54 per cent of their rural counterparts did so, and significantly less support was evident among Catholic rural respondents (30%) and Catholic urban respondents (44%).

Table 6: Support for mixed-religion situations

	%							
	Catholic		Protestant		No Religion		All	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Mixed workplace	75	70	77	75	78	77	77	73
Mixed neighbourhood	53	47	60	58	69	72	61	56
Mixed school	44	30	62	54	74	72	60	48

Perception of relations

Two key questions included annually since the survey began ask respondents if they feel relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities are better, worse or about the same in relation to the preceding five years, and how they think relations will be in five years' time. While their opinion of current and future relations between the two communities have fluctuated over the years, YLT participants have always been less positive about future relations. Moreover, since 2016 responses to both have shown a negative trend.

While it is heartening that overall only 5 per cent of respondents thought that current relations were worse than in 2014, the proportion of respondents who felt that they were better (44%) is only three percentage points higher than when the question was first asked in 2003. In rural/urban terms, respondents living in rural areas seem somewhat less optimistic in their assessments than their urban counterparts (see Figure 1). The proportion of urban Protestant, Catholic and no religion respondents saying that relations were better was quite similar (ranging from 43% to 48%), and a similar proportion of rural Protestant respondents and those of no religion expressed this view. However, for rural Catholics the figure was 35 per cent.

As detailed in Figure 2, when asked to assess community relations in five years' time, overall, irrespective of location, around one third (35%) of respondents felt that these would be better. This view was expressed by similar proportions of rural/urban Protestants (35%). However rural Catholic respondents (29%) were less positive than their urban counterparts (34%), while, conversely, rural respondents with no religion (40%) were more positive than their urban counterparts (34%). Overall 15 per cent of respondents felt future relations would be worse. However, nearly one fifth of urban Protestant respondents and those of no religion expressed this negative view.

Discussion

The attitudes of young people to issues of segregation and good relations may be shaped, to greater or lesser degrees, by a number of important factors, including social class, gender and education.

Figure 1: Perception of relations since 5 years ago (%)

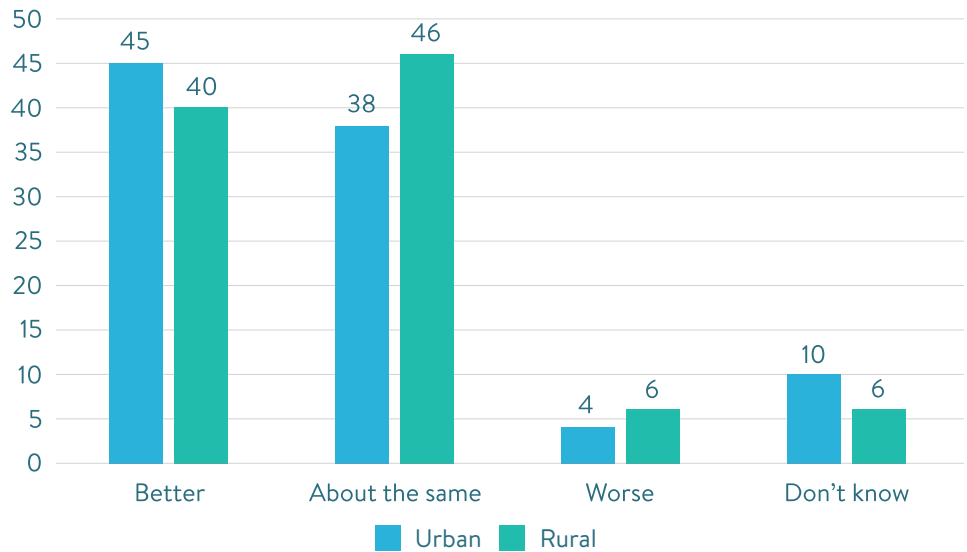
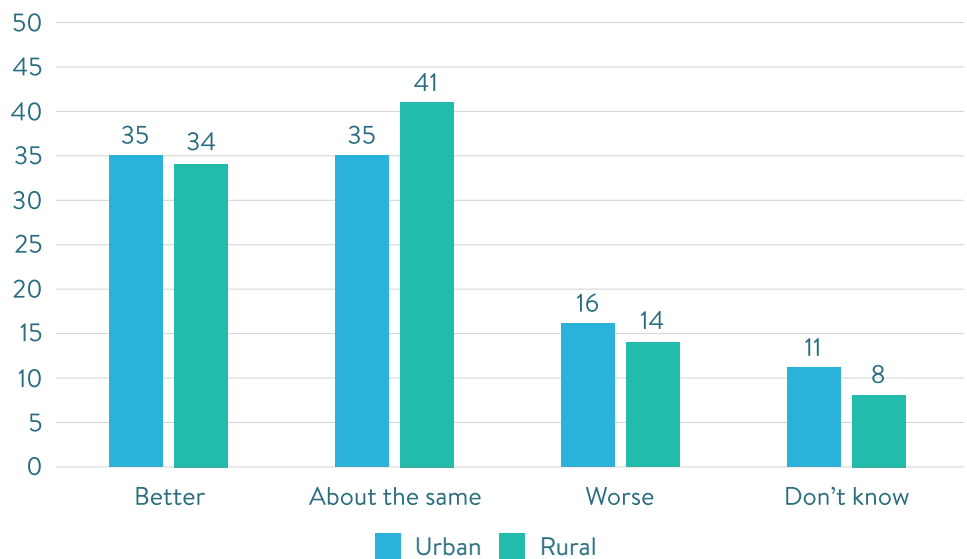


Figure 2: Perception of relations in 5 years' time (%)



However, the focus of this Research Update is, primarily, to explore how, if at all, living in a rural or urban location may influence attitudes towards good relations. More textured understandings are also provided when the religious background of respondents is examined in conjunction with their location.

The findings indicate that YLT respondents living in rural areas were more likely to feel 'very safe' in and express a more 'definite' sense of belonging to their local neighbourhoods than their urban counterparts. However, these positive perceptions could, perhaps, be indicative of a stronger sense of 'othering' and 'mistrust' as rural respondents were less supportive of mixing in either workplaces, neighbourhoods or schools

than those living in urban areas. While acknowledging that location is only one element in how attitudes are formed, these findings suggest where respondents live can influence attitudes to belonging, safety and mixing between the 'two main communities'.

A number of the questions that underpin the analysis provided here are also included in the *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)* survey of adults. Drawing on the results of the 2019 NILT survey, Research Update Number 139 (Devine and McKnight, 2021) explores adults' responses to questions on good relations through an urban/rural lens, and, as such, complements the findings presented here.

Key Points

- 57% of respondents living in rural areas felt 'very safe' living in their area, compared with 48% of those in urban areas.
- 70% of those in urban areas and 74% of those in rural areas felt that they definitely or probably belong to their local area.
- Less than 10% of respondents felt they can influence local decisions or those made in Northern Ireland.
- Urban young people were more supportive of mixing across all three domains than those living in rural areas: mixed-religion workplaces (77% and 73%), neighbourhoods (61% and 56%), and schools (60% and 48%).
- Urban respondents (45%) were more positive about current relations between Catholic and Protestant communities than those living in rural areas (40%).

References

Bell, John, Jarman, Neill and Harvey, Brian (2010) *Beyond Belfast: Contested Spaces in Urban, Rural and Cross Border Settings*, Belfast: Community Relations Council

Devine, Paula and McKnight, Martina (2021) *Good relations: an urban issue?*, ARK Research Update 139

Devine, Paula and Schubotz, Dirk (2012) 'Segregation Preferences of Urban and Rural 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland', *Irish Political Studies*, 29(2), pp. 275-297

McKnight, Martina and Leonard, Madeleine (2014) 'Bordering in transition: Young people's experiences in "post conflict" Belfast', in S. Spyrou and M. Christou (eds) *Children and borders*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 164-182

The questions on good relations were funded by The Executive Office

Martina McKnight is a Research Fellow with ARK and works on the Young Life and Times and Kids' Life and Times surveys. Paula Devine is Co-director of ARK, and directs the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey. Martina and Paula are based in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey is carried out annually. It records the opinions of sixteen year olds in Northern Ireland on a range of social and political issues. YLT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Jordanstown campus, Ulster University
Shore Road, Newtownabbey BT37 0QB

Tel: 028 9036 6339
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast
Belfast BT7 1NN

Tel: 028 9097 3034
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk