

**Can contact promote better relations? Evidence from mixed and
segregated areas of Belfast**

SUMMARY REPORT

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Bringing about more, and better, contact between members of the two main communities has long been central to community-relations policy in Northern Ireland. Despite this fact, there has never been *longitudinal* study (tracking the same individuals over time) of whether (and if so, how) contact works.

This research studied cross-community contact and tolerance in 2 mixed and 2 segregated (one primarily Catholic, one primarily Protestant) areas in Belfast. As well as investigating *direct*, face-to-face contacts between members of the two communities, we also studied *indirect* contact (i.e., the impact of knowing members of your own community who themselves have direct cross-community contact, even if you yourself do not). The longitudinal sample comprised 404 respondents who completed questionnaires in 2006 and then again in 2007; about twice that number were available for analyses based just on time 1 data, or just time 2 data.

Comparisons Between Mixed And Segregated Areas

Although there was no overall difference between segregated and mixed areas in terms of *bias* in favour of one's own community, as one might expect, the contrast between mixed and segregated areas was generally quite pronounced. People living currently in *segregated* areas:

- Had grown up in areas and attended schools with fewer members of the other community
- Had less overall contact, fewer friends from the other community (as had their parents), and they had had less, and poorer quality, work contact.
- Had stronger ethno-political identity (as did Catholics, compared with Protestants).
- Were more anxious about meeting members of the other community, felt that their own community was more threatened, and were more reluctant to share personal information with any friends belonging to the other community.

- Were less certain about their attitudes towards the other community, and reported less trust in them.

Respondents in the *mixed* areas:

- Were personally more willing to engage in cross-community contact, and viewed members of their own **and** the other community as more willing to engage in contact.
- Felt closer to the other community, showed lower support for ingroup political violence, and perceived status relations between the communities as more fair, and more likely to change in favour of their group.
- Felt less deprived, both as an individual compared with other people, and as a member of their community, compared with the other community (Protestants felt more deprived, both as individuals and as a community, than Catholics).

On some measures, the mixed areas did appear lower in 'social capital' than the segregated areas. Respondents in mixed areas tended:

- To know fewer people in their area, have fewer relatives and friends living in the area and see neighbours less often

However, the segregated and mixed areas did *not* differ in terms of perceptions concerning:

- How friendly the area is, how much you trust people, how much people help each other out, how well people are getting along, how safe the area is, and how safe it is to express one's identity).

Longitudinal Analyses Showing Effects of **Direct** Cross-Community Contact

Longitudinal analyses showed:

- A causal effect, over time, *from* contact *to* reduced prejudice.
- More superficial neighbourhood contact has its positive effect by reducing anxiety about meeting members of the other community.

- More intimate contact, measured by depth of friendship with a member of the other community, has its positive effect by promoting the sharing of personal information about oneself.
- Neighbourhood contact had an impact not only on attitude to the other community, but also on attitude to racial minority outgroups: more positive cross-community contact led to less racial prejudice towards ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland.

Longitudinal Analyses Showing Effects of **Indirect** Cross-Community Contact

Longitudinal analyses showed:

- A causal effect, over time, *from* indirect contact *to* direct contact. When people at time 1 view other members of their community involved in cross-group contact, this leads to increases in their own cross-community contact at time 2. Thus indirect contact has value and potential as a means of 'preparing' people for direct contact.
- Indirect contact has its positive effect by changing norms about accepted and acceptable patterns of cross-community interaction, by reducing anxiety about meeting members of the other community, and by increasing the 'overlap' seen between oneself and the other community.
- Indirect contact is especially effective for people who themselves have little experience of direct cross-community contact.
- Indirect contact via friends and, especially, family members, was most effective; compared with lower impact of work colleagues and, especially, neighbours.
- Indirect contact was more effective, when people were in a closer relationship with another member of their community known to have cross-community contact.

Policy Implications

The Programme for Government 2008-11, published on 28 January 2008, outlines a commitment by the Northern Ireland Executive to 'deliver a shared and better, and more sustainable future for all'. In particular it acknowledges

the need to “*continue our efforts to address the divisions within our society*”. And stresses that “*it is imperative that we all embrace the opportunity to create a shared and better future, based on tolerance and respect for cultural diversity*”. It promises “*a programme of cohesion and integration for this shared and better future to address the divisions within our society and achieve measurable reductions in sectarianism, racism and hate crime*” and warns that “*If we do not take this opportunity now there is a very real risk that the divisions of our past will be replicated in the new communities that have come here to live and work among us.*”

- In this context, - and with the programme for cohesion and integration in mind - we outline the implications of our research for a policy approach to division, with reference to the following five issues: segregated and mixed neighbourhoods, the use of direct contact, and the use of indirect contact, contact and racial prejudice; measurement of contact effectiveness.

Segregated and mixed neighbourhoods:

It is not the case that in ‘mixed’ areas the two communities simply ‘live side-by-side’; rather, there is evidence of real *integration*. Those who live ‘apart’ in segregated communities have, for the most part, also studied apart and now work apart. Although there is evidence of ‘more’ extensive social interaction in segregated areas, mixed neighbourhoods had just as much social capital when the quality of interactions was measured. Thus, living in a mixed area does *not* have to come at the cost of valued social interactions. Our findings lend support to:

- The promotion of policy prioritising the development of more mixed housing in Northern Ireland.
- Initiatives to ensure that contact in mixed areas is not just superficial, but that, where possible, it facilitates the development of friendship bonds between residents from different groups.
- The promotion of shared space and strategies to deal with chill factors

Direct Contact

Our research provides unequivocal evidence consistent with the causal direction proposed by the 'contact hypothesis': *from* contact *to* change in attitudes. Further, longitudinal analyses demonstrated that the effects of different types of contact on intergroup bias were mediated by distinct affective processes: more superficial neighbourhood contact worked via reduced intergroup anxiety, whereas more intimate friendship contact worked via increased self-disclosure. These findings have multiple implications for policy:

- Contact should be considered part of the solution, and it can be expected to work in slightly different ways in different settings.
- For those with minimal contact with members of other groups, initial exchanges engineered with others should focus on pre-existing anxiety, and how best to combat it. This might best be done in a single identity setting, however, the value of intra-group work is likely to be lost if contact is not an outcome.
- For those taking first steps towards more intimate exchanges, they should be encouraged to gradually exchange more personal information about themselves.
- Notwithstanding the evidence that contact often works via common processes for Catholics and Protestants, different approaches may sometimes be required for members of the different communities; in different settings and, at different stages of contact experience. It is not a case of 'one size fits all'.
- Strategic and enduring initiatives in relationship building, that afford opportunity to develop relationships founded on mutual trust, are likely to be more effective than short-term, one-off initiatives.

Indirect contact

Our data show that this mild, non-threatening form of contact helps to 'prepare' people for later, direct contact, and leads to an increase in direct contact at a later date.

We have also shown that indirect contact works where group members known to have contact with other group members, help to 'model' positive intergroup

relations and promote tolerance. In a segregated area opportunities to observe such indirect contact are restricted. The policy implications are that:

- A two-pronged policy approach to tackle chill factors, whilst accommodating intergroup exchange is likely to be most effective in segregated areas.
- Political and local leadership can be influential too, and one way to bring about an indirect effect might be by encouraging community leaders to collaborate on issues of mutual concern.

Contact and racial prejudice

Our research findings support the hypothesis that contact with one particular ethnic group is associated with more positive attitudes towards a range of other ethnic groups. Against a background of significant demographic change in recent years, and increasing racist attacks, policy implications are that:

- Any new framework(s) for the promotion of anti-sectarianism and anti-racism in Northern Ireland should reflect the potential relationship between motivations and activities defined by these terms
- Successful efforts to promote contact between the two main communities in Northern Ireland also have positive implications for relationships between groups more broadly defined.

Measurement of contact effectiveness

Our research has also been effective in developing reliable, empirically tested measures of contact effectiveness that relate to types of contact, contact processes and outcomes (in terms of for example, anxiety reduction, trust-building, attitudinal change). With respect to policy:

- These measures should inform policy development and should be employed in future evaluations of a range of community-relations projects.
- Accountability mechanisms, based on our measures should be put in place at the highest level of Government to ensure that policy decisions are consistent with the objective to promote a 'shared and better future'. This would be entirely consistent with the Programme for

Government's commitment that a shared and better future for all will be a cross-cutting key theme for Government and that "equality, fairness, inclusion and the promotion of good relations will be watchwords for all of our policies and programmes across Government".

Conclusions

Our report provides the most compelling data yet from Northern Ireland:

- That cross-community contact *is* effective, and has an impact on multiple measures of community relations (including responses to minority ethnic groups).
- That contact has a *causal* or *longitudinal* effect on attitudes, hence it should be central to policies aimed at improving community relations