

## **Report on the launch of a key report into the human impact of the Troubles by the Commission for Victims and Survivors**

**March 2013**

People who have experienced a traumatic event have an increased likelihood of developing a range of physical and mental health conditions, according to research undertaken by a team from the University of Ulster and the Initiative for Conflict Related Trauma.

This was the key finding of **‘Troubled Consequences’: A report on the mental health impact of the civil conflict in Northern Ireland**. The report was launched on Thursday the 14<sup>th</sup> March 2013 by Northern Ireland Victims and Survivors Commission ([www.cvsni.org](http://www.cvsni.org)) at a seminar in Belfast hosted jointly by the Commission in partnership with the University of Ulster and the Initiative for Conflict Related Trauma. The Seminar participants included representatives from a range of organisations receiving victims funding who provide counseling and psychotherapy to individuals and families psychologically impacted by the conflict. Also present were representatives from political parties and from the health and social care system. The Report presents the findings of a landmark investigation into the mental and physical health condition of individuals who have experienced traumatic events.

Researchers from the Bamford Centre for Mental Health and Well-Being at Ulster’s Magee campus and the Initiative for Conflict Related Trauma found that in addition to the many traumatic events individuals may have experienced in the course of life, that those based on conflict related events have been experienced by four out of every ten adults.

Commenting on the level of trauma experienced by the population, the lead researcher Prof Brendan Bunting said, “It is

clear from the findings that the violence linked to the Troubles has been major source of stress for the NI population – stress that has endured over the thirty five or more years of conflict. The health consequences of the conflict were all too often minimised and ignored, and not well understood until this research was undertaken.” He went on to say “The psychological consequences of trauma have been well documented in literature over the centuries. This report clearly shows that for many individuals in Northern Ireland this relationship between traumatic events and their psychological consequences has been, and continues to be, a real lived experience for all too many. For many of these individuals this is a hidden cost that has not gone away”.

David Bolton from the Initiative for Conflict Related Trauma spoke about the legacy of traumatic experiences on communities. ”Research shows that about one third of those who develop post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) will not recover unless they have access to effective trauma-focussed therapy services. Evidence from research carried out in Northern Ireland by the NI Centre for Trauma and Transformation shows that there are effective therapies and that as a community we should not give up hope for those suffering chronic and serious trauma disorders. If we are to successfully address this aspect of the past and build sustainable communities, developing effective trauma services is a key part of that task. We need to do more, to do it better and to make sure that those who need it have access to effective trauma services.”

Dr Siobhan O’Neill a member of the research team explained that it is important that those charged with shaping policy had access to relevant research to ensure that they were able to make informed decisions. “Our research provides key evidence for the Commission’s (CVSNI’s) advice for government. The findings are also relevant for those involved in developing and delivering services and point to the need for effective services

that are readily available within the community. We found that there were often lengthy delays before people sought help for their trauma problems and, as a result, many individuals with these disorders still remain untreated.”

She continued: “Previously published research by the Bamford Centre and the Initiative for Conflict Related Trauma established that people who have experienced conflict related trauma are more likely than those who have experienced other traumas to develop mental health disorders, particularly Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Also, we have now established that trauma is shown to be linked to an increased likelihood of developing a range of physical health conditions including arthritis, musculoskeletal pain, asthma and stomach ulcers.”

At 8.8%, NI has the highest rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among the 30 countries in the World Mental Health Surveys including other countries affected by war and conflict, and at least a quarter of this figure is attributable to events associated with the conflict.

“It was striking to find that NI has such high levels of PTSD even compared to other areas of conflict. We think this is linked to the years over which the violence continued and to the inter-community nature of the violence. Also, the violence has resulted in high levels of other mental health disorders and is linked with higher levels of chronic physical health problems. We found too that people suffering trauma related disorders had difficulties in both seeking help and in finding services that were helpful for them. The clear message is that the need is significant and that there need to be major advances in evidence based services for trauma sufferers.”

A spokesperson for the Commission for Victims and Survivors said, “The Troubled Consequences Report represents a very significant contribution to improving our understanding of the

serious impact of the Troubles on the mental health of the adult population. The study provides a set of evidence-based findings and recommendations that have directly informed the Commission's Comprehensive Needs Assessment, particularly of the mental health needs of those who have been directly affected by the years of violence.”

## NOTES

1. The '*Troubled Consequences*' Report is one of a series of 5, undertaken by researchers on behalf of the Northern Ireland Commission for Victims and Survivors and was used to inform the Commission on its major Comprehensive Needs Assessment report which was published at the end of 2012.
2. The Commission has concluded that the mental and physical health of people who have had experiences linked to the Troubles are the most pressing enduring needs of victims and survivors.
3. The '*Troubled Consequences*' Report is based on a series of studies undertaken by the Bamford Centre (University of Ulster) and the Initiative for Conflict Related Trauma (formerly the Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation) from 2006-2012.
4. The Report was launched at Malone House, Belfast on Thursday the 14<sup>th</sup> March 2013.
5. The Initiative for Conflict-related Trauma's website is [www.icrt.org.uk](http://www.icrt.org.uk).