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Introduction

Over the course of history, large-scale conflict like war has existed between and within nations as a means of acquiring resources, expanding territories, eliminating other cultures, and to display power. Civil wars have intensely impacted nations all over the world, including Northern Ireland, the United States, and the Middle East, but how can large-scale violence have a purpose when neighbors grow up hating and killing each other? Fueled by politics, money, or religion, war also comes with a considerable cost due to the intense and prolonged violence. When fighting occurs in one's community and on the other side of the front door, nothing feels safe no matter how it is resolved, and the negative effects can be especially harsh for children to recover from. With a focus on The Troubles in Northern Ireland and other conflicts, in this paper I examine the consequences of a violent civil conflict on children's academic performance, behavior, and psychological health as well as the interventions directly related. A brief history of the conflict in Northern Ireland is presented along with theories about the causes, then I examine and compare the consequences of The Troubles to the consequences of civil conflict in other countries. Next, I discuss resulting interventions in Northern Ireland and the success of those interventions regarding school, the community, and mental health resources, as well as why some children display more resilience than others to the negative effects of violent conflict. Finally, the implications of this research on improving future interventions is examined to better protect children in conflict or to possibly reduce civil tension in the United States.

History of Conflict in Northern Ireland

There is a long history of tension in Northern Ireland dating back to the 1600s, yet The Troubles refers to only the most recent and intense period of violence and political unrest. The Troubles officially began in 1969 after British troops were deployed into Derry and Belfast and officially ended with a signed ceasefire agreement in 1997 and with The Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Feeney, 2004). This period of the conflict resulted in the loss of over two thousand civilians, over three thousand total lives, and over thirty thousand recorded injured people (Cairns & Darby, 1998). The war was fought between the Unionists, who wanted Northern Ireland to be under British rule, and the Nationalists, who wanted Northern Ireland and Ireland to be a united nation under their own rule. Unionists view themselves as British descendants and are predominantly Protestant while Nationalists tend to see themselves as Irish and are predominately Catholic (Feeney, 2004).

Two significant events during The Troubles that involved civilians fighting on the streets are the Battle of the Bogside and Bloody Sunday. The Battle of the Bogside was an event in 1969 lasting two days that began when Unionist protesters marched through Derry, which was a predominately Nationalist area, and the two sides began throwing rocks at each other. It quickly escalated when people started using batons, petrol bombs, and tear gas as weapons which incited more violence elsewhere in Northern Ireland in support of either side. Bloody Sunday occurred in Derry in January of 1972. This day began with a civil rights march policed by British troops but turned when the troops fired on the crowd and killed a total of fourteen people and injured another seventeen (Feeney, 2004).

Theoretical Explanations for the Causes of The Troubles

As common as the violence was, there were also various attempts at peace through the signing of treaties like the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973, and Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 (Feeney, 2004). The problem with these agreements is that they did not satisfy both sides of the conflict or address the underlying issues and inequality that led up to the violence in the first place. A closer look at the underlying basis of the war has led to theoretical explanations of why The Troubles escalated and lasted so long. The underlying causes of this war include economic inequality and political and religious differences that can be well explained in part by social identity theory. Social identity theory posits that the extreme actions taken by groups are in an effort to enhance their self-esteem through the interests of their group identities (Cairns & Darby, 1998). In this case, Unionist and Nationalist identities have conflicting political and religious interests, and individual members of each group try to maintain self-esteem by fighting for their interests however they can.

Social identity theory partially explains how circumstances in Northern Ireland led each side to believe violence was an effective way to preserve their group interests and self-esteem. Other theories that have been used to explain the intense violence are realistic group conflict theory and system justification theory. Realistic group conflict theory explains that conflict is a result of competition for scarce resources, so in Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants are in competition over resources like jobs. Competition is viewed as a form of aggression, leading to both groups attributing negative biases towards others, which creates more hostility and tension (Christie, Tint, Wagner, & Winter, 2008). System justification theory is used to explain why societal norms are maintained even when they disadvantage a large number of people. While changing existing norms would be hugely beneficial, for example regarding government policies and fair job opportunities, it does not happen often because it takes a lot of conscious effort to

change norms (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). This theory explains why unfair and unequal social structures are maintained in all aspects of society in Northern Ireland, including the school system, housing, and in the workforce.

Violence in Northern Ireland became normalized during the civil war and was seen as a solution to a range of problems in the community. Individuals witnessed violent behavior, learned to avoid “the other,” and participated in destructive behavior themselves as a means of protecting their group identity and interests. Therefore, in order to create successful interventions that target all aftereffects of violent conflict, especially for future generations, it is necessary to first understand why they occurred. In the case of The Troubles, the Unionists and Nationalists believed that the war could not be over until the other side gave in to their demands. They viewed the conflict as unwinnable unless they got everything they wanted, and the other side did not get what they wanted, believing it was a zero-sum game. This view created a significant negative outgroup bias and led to escalation through violence (Lavi & Bar-Tal, 2015). Structural inequality was another major contributing factor in the escalation of violence for this conflict in terms of unequal political power and job opportunity between Protestants and Catholics, where disadvantage was experienced by Catholics (Cairns & Darby, 1998). Structural inequality can refer to when those who grow up in poverty have less opportunities in school compared to those who have better education through grammar school and better resulting life opportunities (Browne & Dwyer, 2014). The history of conflict in Northern Ireland is long, violent, and divisive, and has resulted in some challenges for children relating to academic performance, behavior, and psychological health that have been hard to overcome the past twenty years.

Effects of Civil War in Northern Ireland

The causes of this civil war are divisive and deeply ingrained in the society, and the numerous repercussions are damaging for both current and future generations, so it is important to identify the consequences as well as ways to lessen their effects. One consequence of war is death. In Northern Ireland, “between 1969 and 1998, 257 young people under the age of 17... and 1,276 under 25 years... have been killed as a result of the Troubles” (Muldoon, 2004, p. 455). Looking past the death toll however, there are still long-lasting consequences of an intense civil war for young people that have been well documented in Northern Ireland over the last twenty years: school segregation, gaps in academic performance, behavioral changes, community division, and decreased psychological adjustment and health. There has been continuous reconciliation work in Northern Ireland for years to repair the communities, yet many problems remain, like the disparities found in academic performance based on where children go to school because of how the education system is divided.

Academic Consequences

The schools in Northern Ireland are classified as either Protestant or Catholic schools and grammar or non-grammar schools. Children primarily attend Protestant or Catholic schools according to religious background and attend grammar or non-grammar schools according to academic performance and social status (Borooah & Knox, 2014). Grammar schools are more academically rigorous secondary schools for children age eleven through sixteen who also pass the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) exam compared to the less academically rigorous non-grammar schools for children of the same age. This system results in huge variations in opportunities, financial resources available to teachers, and overall academic performance. It was found that those in grammar schools perform better academically than those in non-grammar schools based on overall GCSE exam scores from each school (Borooah &

Knox, 2014). Also, children from Catholic grammar schools significantly outperformed children from Protestant grammar schools on the GCSE exam, although not on the GCSE including English and mathematics exam. Non-grammar schools compared to grammar schools are more likely to enroll children from “deprived backgrounds or [who] had special educational needs” (Borooah & Knox, 2014, p. 120), contributing to the differences in performance and financial resource availability.

In addition to academic performance differences, the amount of financial freedom or stress schools experience also widely varies depending on if they are grammar or non-grammar schools, which contributes to inequality in the education system. Schools with financial stress are often non-grammar schools, smaller in size, and perform academically worse than schools without financial stress (Borooah & Knox, 2014). Disadvantaged children with less opportunity for upward advancement in their education are likely to have gone to non-grammar schools with financial strain. As a result, those who go to non-grammar schools with financial strain are probably less likely to have many opportunities for advancement in their careers into positions of power where they might change the inequality in the school system. On the other hand, the children who had advantages because they went to wealthy grammar schools are probably more likely to advance to a position of power and would not be inclined to establish a fair education system. This division in the school system means that the majority of children are not exposed to many other children who are part of other political or religious groups. They are taught only to be tolerant of others, perpetuating stereotypes and ingroup biases, which is dangerous to the reconciliation process and does nothing to initiate positive contact between groups (Borooah & Knox, 2014). As children grow up, they continue to avoid “the other,” which impedes the peace

process and leads to continued tension and possible antisocial behavior like fighting (Muldoon, 2004).

Behavioral Consequences

As part of the peace process once the peace treaty was signed, interfaces or peace-walls that separated the Nationalist community from the Unionist community became a prominent part of Belfast. The physical barriers present are proof that Northern Ireland never truly recovered from an “us against them” mindset and do nothing to prevent small acts of violence during marching season, which occurs to this day every year in the summer months. Marching season is a tense time for remembering events in Northern Ireland like the Battle of the Boyne, when political divide is made salient and group identities are threatened by past events (Feeney, 2004). Disruptions are more likely to occur during this time because of the many activities, like bonfires, which includes participation from younger generations as well as the older generations (Browne & Dwyer, 2014).

Other behavior concerns in children during and after The Troubles include the increase in possible exposure to violence because certain children joined paramilitary groups, which sometimes resulted in them being sent to prison and exposed to harsher conditions and more violence. There was also a recorded increase in antisocial behavior problems among the youth at the time, especially for males, hypothesized to be as a result of young males attempting to protect their masculine and paramilitary identities (Muldoon, 2004). Antisocial behavior problems among youth included fighting and vandalism which died down significantly when the ceasefire agreement was signed and paramilitary groups were no longer relying on violence to enforce their group interests (Muldoon, 2004). While violent behavior during the civil war was common,

since the peace agreement, antisocial behavior or other externalized behaviors have not significantly increased but there is a sizeable and significant increase in mental health issues.

Psychological Consequences

Untreated mental health issues have a significant risk of resulting in suicide. From 2001 until 2011, suicides of young men in Northern Ireland rose from 159 to 313 respectively, as a result of “internal feelings of guilt, shame, and social isolation” (Browne & Dwyer, 2014, p. 800). Additionally, research based on DSM-IV criteria found that the most prevalent mental health disorders in Northern Ireland are anxiety disorders, mood disorders, substance disorders, and impulse-control disorders. Mental health issues in Northern Ireland are likely related to The Troubles, evident by data from the first epidemiological study of lifetime mental disorders in Northern Ireland. People who experienced conflict were shown to be more likely to have anxiety, mood disorders, or impulse-control disorders than those who did not experience conflict, mainly because they constantly feared for their lives during the fighting (Bunting, Murphy, O’Neill, & Ferry, 2012). These mental health issues are not limited to the younger population, but this age group oftentimes gets overlooked since their direct involvement in the fighting was minimal. Young people also depend on their parents or guardians to receive help, which is difficult if parents are not very attentive or refuse help because of the stigma surrounding mental health disorders.

Browne and Dwyer (2014) summarize additional psychological consequences for children growing up in Northern Ireland compared to parts of the world not involved in a recent civil war, including higher rates of low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and stress. Additionally, lifetime prevalence rates vary depending on the specific disorder, but higher rates are associated most with anxiety disorders and impulse-control disorders, both found in younger populations

and more likely to persist at a younger age of onset (Bunting et al., 2012). These behavioral and psychological effects, as well as other similar negative consequences, are found in children in other parts of the world who have had similar experiences with civil conflict. The examination of other conflicts in relation to the conflict in Northern Ireland provides a broader overview of ways to construct successful interventions for children.

Effects of Civil Wars in Other Countries

It is necessary to focus on both the short-term and long-term effects of civil war on children because children are less directly involved in the violence and fighting yet face terrible consequences. Those living in a society engaged in civil war are brought up in an unstable environment and are taught from a young age that violence is an effective solution. The statistics cited in Dimitry (2011) highlight the more noticeable consequences of war over the world, like injury. During a twenty-year span from the mid-1970s through 1990s, ninety percent of all civilians injured were injured by war. The immediate effects of war for children are obvious: from the 1980s-1990s about one million children were orphaned, two million lost their lives, and twelve million were displaced from their homes (Garbarino, Zurenda, & Vorrasi, 2008; Dimitry, 2011). However, these statistics do not account for the less obvious long-term consequences of war that include psychological trauma, injuries or disabilities, and the normalization of violence.

A regular conclusion in research on civil conflict is that it produces instability. Instability from war is hard to overcome and leaves children without a support system in their community, especially when the violence is intense and constant. Civil wars have long-term effects that are unique, since they are classified as “chronic trauma,” which is trauma that occurs due to exposure of persistent violence over a long period of time (Garbarino et al., 2008). Examples of chronic trauma can include events of regular bombings or shootings from the conflicts in

Northern Ireland, West Africa, or the United States. Generally, this trauma significantly increases a child's risk of developing post traumatic stress disorder, with a higher risk at a younger age, and can cause drastic behavioral changes and sleep disturbances. War also contributes to a constant fear in children and threatens their sense of security, which is also damaging to their mental health and increases rates of anxiety (Garbarino et al., 2008).

Other examples of civil war in the recent past beyond The Troubles occurred in Sierra Leone, the Middle East, and El Salvador. These wars also have damaging consequences for children, similar to the consequences studied in Northern Ireland. The civil war in Sierra Leone lasted from 1991 until 2002, with a large percentage of their population displaced or killed. Since Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, basic needs were not met, and children there faced different problems compared to some of the problems faced by youth in Northern Ireland. In a study by Efevbera and Betancourt (2016) done about six years after the end of the civil war, war-affected youth were interviewed about problems they faced. The most commonly cited problems after the war were poverty, poor education, and sickness or no health care, which can be directly connected to the way society functions after the destruction of war. Childhood poverty is a terrible consequence of war that further impacts possible future opportunities, overall well-being, and mental health (Browne & Dwyer, 2014). Other problems identified by youth growing up during and after the civil wars in Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone include the loss of family and friends, and experiencing violence, tension, and trauma (Efevbera & Betancourt, 2016).

The review by Dimitry (2011) examined civil conflicts and the resulting mental, behavioral, and emotional consequences for children living in the Middle East, specifically in Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq. The Middle East has seen intense fighting and as a result has

a high prevalence of mental health disorders, observed in about thirty six percent of children studied. In data collected from multiple studies discussing children ages three to nineteen, the most common mental health disorders according to DSM-IV criteria include depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, separation anxiety disorder, and conduct disorder. It was found that the best predictor of negative mental health effects is emotional or cognitive exposure to violent events, meaning that the negative thoughts, worries, and sense of fear after violent events are significant (Dimitry, 2011). These findings and the finding that boys in parts of the Middle East where there was civil conflict are more aggressive and have more behavior problems compared to girls is similar to the observation that boys in Northern Ireland have more antisocial behavior problems (Dimitry, 2011).

Furthermore, civil war in El Salvador has resulted in many of the same mental health disorders observed in children after The Troubles. It is apparent that children can experience negative emotions, and these feelings of isolation, hopelessness, or anger can contribute to mental health problems like anxiety and depression, which often go untreated by a society recovering from war. Additionally, the conflict in El Salvador is similar to the conflict in Northern Ireland because it originated from a divide in politics, high rates of poverty, and resulting social polarization (Blanco, Blanco, & Diaz, 2016), while The Troubles was partially based on structural inequality and political division. Moreover, both of these societies had violent cultural norms and intergroup conflict that was maintained through the structural institutions of the society (Blanco, Blanco, & Diaz, 2016). Common problems like poor education and depression are hard to overcome, but there have been interventions in Northern Ireland that target them, like integrated schools, community programs, and mental health resources. A deep understanding of the similar long-term consequences of multiple civil conflicts

combined with effective solutions in Northern Ireland for children informs current and future research, creating effective interventions that are easily generalized and will lessen the aftereffects of war when implemented in any future conflict.

Interventions in Northern Ireland and Resilience in Children

Growing up in an unstable environment transitioning from civil war to peace and reconciliation is tough, especially for children who have lost family members or live in areas with blatant reminders of the past. For example, people in Belfast and Derry walk past tributes to those who died during The Troubles, evidence of bullet holes, and walls separating neighborhoods daily. These constant reminders of the lives lost for older generations have passed down negative feelings and perpetuates hostility in younger generations. While a connection to culture and history is important and can be comforting, it is also necessary for younger people to grow up in an environment free from fear and that encourages open communication. Communities are still trying to unite both sides of the conflict by breaking down the physical divides in society as well as the structural differences through integrated schooling and housing, community programs aimed at reducing tension and building a dialogue, and widespread available mental health resources.

Major interventions that would lessen tension, especially in terms of education and for those living in poverty, can be established by governments and other institutions to create equality in society. One way to accomplish this would be to have programs in different schools, workplaces, and in government with affirmative action plans. Affirmative action plans intentionally favor a higher proportion than normal of those who are disadvantaged to increase their opportunities in education and employment, giving them the chance to maybe advance to positions of power and change the disadvantage they faced for future generations (Sabbagh,

2011). This would create equality for disadvantaged groups by allowing everyone access to the same opportunities. It would also be beneficial to have community programs that encourage nonviolent cultural norms, intergroup communication, and healthy relationships between the older and younger generations. Finally, a focus on mental health programs that lessen the stigma and directly target young people for early intervention would lower the prevalence of mental health disorders observed after conflict (Davidson & Leavey, 2010).

The information gathered about the consequences of civil wars in Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone, the Middle East, and El Salvador have taught us that children are resilient with the right support even under the worst circumstances. Resilience is the ability to attain desirable outcomes regarding social interaction or emotional adjustment despite traumatic experiences in life that would otherwise increase the risk of negative outcomes (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). Children who show little or no ill effects after having experienced violent trauma are especially of interest in the context of violent civil conflict, because they can point society at ways to decrease possible consequences for future conflict. For instance, there is evidence that on a macro level, interventions that focus on meeting basic needs and that increase the importance of education to provide children with a sense of stability and hope, increase resilience. Additionally, on an individual level, children who are more intelligent, easygoing, feel a greater sense of control, and have good coping skills tend to be more resilient than other children (Betancourt & Khan, 2008).

Resilience is closely associated with overcoming adversities, which can be a large part of life, especially if exposed to many setbacks at a young age. A study on children who have faced individual, family, or community adversities found that children who experience eight or more, including divorce, death, or poverty, are between five and six times more likely to develop

mental health problems than children who experience three adversities or less (Winslow et al., 2013). Resources that increase resilience are especially important when adversity due to civil conflict is a common problem in a society like Northern Ireland. Any number of protective factors can decrease the occurrence of mental health problems for children and even encourage additional positive outcomes. These resources would cover individual, family, and community adversities and include a good education, strengthened family relationships through counseling, and community youth programs (Winslow et al., 2013).

School Interventions

For children lucky enough to grow up in parts of the world not recently touched by conflict and where school is both guaranteed and constant, going to school daily provides stability, a good education, and positive peer interaction (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). Research conducted after conflict has found that regular school attendance and education programs designed to help children make sense of the conflict restore predictability and security to children's lives, and offers additional social support (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). In Northern Ireland specifically, the school system can be seen as another reminder of the divide in the society. In an effort to practice reconciliation after The Troubles, some schools became integrated. Integrated schools are schools that enroll students from any background, whether they identify as Protestant, Catholic, or other. They are designed to teach tolerance and increase contact between members of the community, so generations do not grow up in fear because of their history. In the past, some schools avoided divisive topics in society, like religion and politics (McGlynn, Niens, Cairns, & Hewstone, 2004), but integrated schools teach these topics with activities that cover dominant religions in Northern Ireland and across the world as well. Only a small proportion of schools are integrated, but creating more integrated schools, possibly

through political reforms that increases the number of schools and makes them more available, is a step in the right direction since it would decrease segregation and increase equality (McGlynn et al., 2004).

Integrated schools have been shown to positively contribute to intergroup forgiveness, positive contact, and increased interaction. They have also led to a more integrated point of view on other issues like intercommunity marriage. For example, early studies found that there were significantly more cross-community friendships among current and former students of integrated schools. Also, there was more cross-community tolerance of other points of view and more overall interaction between groups outside of school (McGlynn et al., 2004). While it is difficult to fully grasp the long-lasting benefits of integrated schools by conducting longitudinal research since they are new and there are so few, it is still beneficial to look at the short-term results of research on integrated schools. For example, this research has concluded that healing occurs in an open school environment where children talk about the traumatic events they have experienced in a way that encourages a constructive conversation not typically found in the community. These conversations cover topics on forgiveness and put children in diverse and integrated settings to further increase their sense of security with others (McGlynn et al., 2004). Talking in an open environment positively contributes to future intergroup relations and mends relationships in the aftermath of The Troubles.

Integrated schools are a good intervention, yet not every family who wants to enroll their children can because there are so few, there is often not enough room for additional students, families do not live near integrated schools, and each school needs to maintain an equal proportion of students who come from Catholic or Protestant backgrounds (McGlynn et al., 2004). A push for more integrated schools would foster the sharing of information between

schools and increase contact and cooperation between teachers. Furthermore, a policy in the education system, called the shared educational experience (Borooah & Knox, 2014), makes segregated Protestant and Catholic schools independently more effective because they share information and there is less of an educational attainment disparity between them. Increasing the number of schools participating in a shared educational experience is highly effective since it is encouraged by the government and enacts change efficiently and quickly (Borooah & Knox, 2014). Under a program called Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU), Protestant and Catholic schools are both encouraged to connect their students with each other, although since it is not required, there is not nationwide participation (Cairns & Darby, 1998). While it would be ideal for more schools to become integrated and all schools in Northern Ireland to participate in EMU and programs that teach coping strategies that increase resilience, underlying tension would need to be resolved for more parents and communities to accept these changes.

Family and Community Interventions

A major consequence of civil conflict for children is the loss of family members and loved ones, so healthy attachment to peers, parents, and community leaders is important for providing children with the tools they need to adjust emotionally to any losses they suffer. Childhood attachment is classified as secure, insecure avoidant, or insecure anxious-ambivalent attachment. Children with insecure attachment to caregivers are at risk of having anxiety, depression, and higher than average aggression (Bogels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006), which can at times be partly remedied with healthy relationships to alternative caregivers. Research shows that children and adolescents who feel they have social support from their community, family, or peers have fewer negative mental health outcomes than those who feel that they do not have adequate social support (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). Family programs build resilience in

children, so it is important to have more programs with these same resources widely available, with specialized resources for children more at risk like those who live in high conflict areas.

Connection to others, especially stable adults, makes children feel less alone, comforts them, and weakens the negative consequences of stress after civil conflict. A great way to form good relationships outside of the home is through participation in community programs and activities that promote a sense of belonging (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). Some examples include group activities that teach children to effectively problem solve and re-examine stressful situations, possibly by having them role-play probable situations. Other family-oriented programs could teach parents skills to handle excessive stress and continue to parent with effective discipline and warmth during any stressful situation, increasing resilience in both children and their parents (Winslow et al., 2013).

Another consequence of The Troubles is the lack of integrated housing communities, so government programs that incentivize people to move to integrated housing would be effective in increasing comfort in society between the Unionists and Nationalists. Bringing the community together can also be accomplished by creating neutral places where both sides of the conflict feel comfortable enough to be. According to the contact hypothesis, enough open contact between Unionists and Nationalists will allow them to communicate and discover for themselves that they have more in common than previously thought. For contact to be effective, it must be facilitated in a way that gives members of each group equal status, has higher institutional support, and includes intergroup cooperation against a problem (Amir, 1969). For example, there is intergroup cooperation and contact when members of both groups live in integrated housing communities together and discover they share basic values (Cairns & Darby, 1998), because people are more likely to interact with their neighbors than go outside of their community. In Northern Ireland,

programs through schools, community centers, or churches exist that have been designed to increase contact and have both sides of the conflict come together to open a dialogue and teach each other about the values and views of the other side.

One powerful example of open dialogue comes from storytelling. Stories are a large part of religious education and have been altered to tell the history of Northern Ireland differently according to Catholic and Protestant families, so working towards a shared understanding of history and perspectives by using this method in peacebuilding can be useful in repairing damage created by past stories that were divisive in nature (Maiangwa & Byrne, 2015). Stories about personal experience with trauma and the impact of The Troubles told by older generations to younger generations is just one way to include children in the healing process and teach them about the conflict. The result is that each side learns to appreciate the opposing views, which decreases tension and violence. Other community programs could target different age ranges and have activities designed to establish new cultural norms not centered on violence, act as a counseling group for those who lost a family member, or a sports program with intergroup teams and healthy competition.

Mental Health Interventions

Mental health services are designed to help those with existing mental health issues, promote positive mental health for the population as a whole, or target at risk groups. A look at how mental health services were utilized in Northern Ireland ten years after the war by Davidson and Leavey (2010) showed that they were not very expansive because of societal division, inequality, and stigma. Mental health services were found to not be equally divided among those who needed them and were expensive to implement by providers as well as to access the resources by families. According to data in Bunting et al. (2012), of the few existing mental

health services, only a small percentage of them are targeted at the younger populations. Even when they are specifically designed to help young people, mental health services do not often get utilized because of the negative stigma associated with psychological help. In Northern Ireland, there have been a few programs that target the negative stigma, specifically the *Promoting Mental Health: Strategy and action plan 2003–2008* which intentionally focuses on males between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four (Davidson & Leavey, 2010). This program succeeded in addressing the stigma to lessen the influence of violent cultural norms for males in this age range, which is strong because of their involvement in the violence of The Troubles.

Another way to help children in Northern Ireland experiencing mental health problems would be to redistribute extra mental health services to parts of the country that experienced more trauma and might have unequal access to these services. Additionally, screenings for at-risk populations for youth that have experienced trauma, like ones that target children after abuse, would provide services to more children who need them. It is also important that information on mental health reaches a wider audience instead of just those specifically affected, to decrease the stigma associated with getting help (Davidson & Leavey, 2010). For example, mental health services can promote self-esteem and friendships just as easily as they bring awareness to or treat disorders, because many teach children to be resilient (Winslow, Sandler, Wolchik, & Carr, 2013). Programs like these would increase the overall number of people who get help, while simultaneously decreasing the number of suicides and negative externalizing behaviors. Treatment for children is especially important since an effective early intervention significantly decreases lifetime prevalence risk of mental disorders (Bunting et al., 2012). There are plenty of proven ways to increase resilience in children with community programs like the Coping with Depression course that caters specifically to children who face conflict related

stressors (Winslow et al., 2013). Having research on resilience available to communities who need it, as well as the resources needed to run these programs, would decrease the negative consequences experienced from any future conflict.

Overall, the post-conflict environment in Northern Ireland is one of continuing but slow progress. There have been large steps towards peace and reconciliation, but there are still structural issues and underlying tension being addressed. The most effective interventions seem to be the ones that promote active healing or target structural inequality issues, which are considered peacebuilding interventions, because they also aim to create a society where violence and conflict do not return in the future (Christie et al., 2008). These include school and community programs that encourage positive interaction and open communication as well as equality in education and future opportunities. Successful interventions also include ones that help those impacted by the violence or who are struggling with mental health problems, whether they lost their overall sense of security or family members and friends.

Applying these Interventions in Current or Future Conflict

The civil war in Northern Ireland is a unique conflict to study because it is not the most intense war, did not result in massive casualties like other conflicts, and it occurred in modern Europe. Nevertheless, The Troubles were prolonged and heavily impacted civilians and the culture of Northern Ireland. This period of intense conflict was based on years of tension between the Unionists and Nationalists, so it can offer a unique perspective for future civil conflict that occurs as a result of structural inequality and changes the culture for entire generations. Applying what has been learned from this conflict about the impact on children's academic, behavioral, and psychological adjustment in the aftermath of the war requires guidelines. The essential steps, once immediate threat of harm through violence ceases, are to

establish proactive peacebuilding programs that allow for positive interaction between members of both sides of the conflict, services on individual and community levels for those most affected, and government involvement in creating policies that provide equal opportunity for everyone in society (Christie et al., 2008). Programs like this could even be created between members of opposing groups not engaging in a violent war but where there is tension, like what is occurring between white Americans and minorities or between the two major political parties, Democrats and Republicans, in the United States today.

One way to use what has been learned from the conflict in Northern Ireland to reduce tension between white Americans and minorities is to address the structural inequality in America. This occurs through voting for rights that include affirmative action and go against prevalent policies that disadvantage many minorities. Another way to reduce tension in the United States between white Americans and minorities and between Democrats and Republicans would be to have many members of the political parties and minorities come together and engage in constructive conversation in neutral locations. Participating members would recognize the shared beliefs between both sides, like the importance of family, which would hopefully lessen existing tension. While there is violence in the United States already, early interventions like these can decrease the underlying tension that often leads to more violence like what occurred on the streets of Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

Overall, The Troubles was a war that impacted many generations. Violence in Northern Ireland escalated greatly over the years, and current generations are still divided into predominately Protestant or Catholic schools and neighborhoods. Beyond the number of deaths suffered, the consequences of this war for children include academic inequality, increased

behavior problems, and increased mental health disorders. Interventions include integrated schools and housing, community programs revolved around open dialogues that encourage participation from both Catholic and Protestant members, and widely available mental health services. Interventions like these with largescale support from the government can be adapted to better serve everyone affected in Northern Ireland, or even be expanded to reduce tension in other parts of the world like the United States. There are many ways to repair some of the damage caused by war. However, it seems that interventions like improved and widely available mental health services or more integrated schools are not fully utilized by the society which slows down reconciliation efforts. Changing the norms in Northern Ireland or anywhere else after a conflict to accept changes like these is the first step towards minimizing the severity and number of consequences. Finally, one way to decrease the consequences of tension and violent conflict is to build resilience in children early on through programs that teach coping mechanisms and offer stability.

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