

# Societal Disintegration in Northern Ireland: Fact or Fiction?

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*Précis:* It has been suggested by politicians, journalists and researchers that, as a result of the prolonged civil conflict in Northern Ireland, societal norms and values may have been seriously eroded and that the future may be bleak for Northern Irish society, whatever happens politically. This hypothesis is tested using levels of indictable crime as an index of such social disintegration. Comparisons of, and predictions from, levels of indictable crime in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and England and Wales are made. Similar analyses are conducted on the cities of Belfast and Dublin. No evidence emerges to support the hypothesis.

## I INTRODUCTION

Any concerned observer of the Northern Irish situation could reasonably be forgiven for throwing up his or her hands in despair from time to time. The pictures and sketches of the province portrayed in the media throughout the world since 1969 have yielded a collage of violence, unrest and socio-economic disadvantage. But the media collage of Northern Ireland is, of course, a selection of events in the province and, as with all data selected for a particular purpose, fails to tell the whole story.

Journalistic and political commentators on Northern Ireland often make dark references to the future in the province, implying that a point may have been reached, or may be about to be reached, beyond which Northern Irish society will teeter into chaos. For example, the Taoiseach recently spoke, on the eve of a meeting with the British Prime Minister to discuss Northern Ireland, of the "fabric of society" in Northern Ireland being endangered (*Irish Times*, 20 May, 1980).

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The "fabric of society" is, of course, a very vague concept, particularly so in Northern Ireland where, as Rose (1971) has demonstrated, the political circumstances led to a situation in which, despite the lack of overt conflict, a substantial section of the population withheld its allegiance from the state. However, the implication of the Taoiseach's comments is that despite the political problems prior to the current "Troubles" in Northern Ireland, a society existed whose "fabric" was tolerably robust, and that in the wake of the conflict this may no longer continue to be the case.

How then can one define the "fabric of society" and, operationally, how might one measure its rise and fall? Clearly, this is a difficult problem. One might, for example, look towards the incidence of industrial disputes, perhaps particularly unofficial disputes, as an index of the degree to which individuals and small groups are prepared to put their own personal interests above those of society at large. However, this is a minefield of potential misinterpretation and misunderstanding given the current complexity of national and international economic affairs and the nature of industrial relations throughout these islands.

One might also consider many other variables as relating to the fabric or cohesion of society, such as the incidence of divorce, the rate of suicide, the extent of tax avoidance, but such variables no sooner come to mind than they must be dismissed for a plethora of reasons concerning both their validity as indices and the difficulties of reliable measurement.

In any case, although the "fabric of society" is an inherently vague term, it is clear from its usage when applied to Northern Ireland that it is not the above sorts of behaviours which are perceived as the focus of concern, but rather behaviours more directly linked to the consequences of the conflict and concerning specifically the issue of law and order, and public respect for, and willingness to abide by, the law. In addition, other similar expressions of concern from researchers, as opposed to politicians, have been more specific. For example, referring to the effects of violence on children from the perspective of psychiatric research, Lyons (1973) noted that "one might anticipate that when peace returns to Northern Ireland there will be a continuing epidemic of violence and anti-social behaviour amongst teenagers" (p. 167). More recently, in the context of research into deviant attitudes among Northern Irish schoolboys, Curran, Jardine and Harbison (1980) have again raised the issue, noting that "when peace and stability return, problems of anti-social behaviour among the young may emerge and persist as a major feature of life" (p. 151).

Politicians and researchers, of course, speak from different premises and have different objectives in mind. But it is clear that both views quoted here express concern that the nature of the "Troubles" is such that its effects may permeate Northern Irish society and produce a widespread anti-social climate in which respect for the law will be greatly diminished, even in the

event of a political settlement. An even sharper focus on the issue has been provided by the Chief Constable of the RUC. In his Annual Report to the Police Authority for Northern Ireland (1979) he observes, in relation to increases in the level of indictable crime that "the general climate of lawlessness brought about by a decade of terrorism has lowered community restraint and personal discipline" (p. 5).

In view of the fact that more than a decade of conflict has now passed in Northern Ireland, it would seem reasonable, at this point, to try to look objectively at the evidence underlying these fears and assertions. Although the "fabric of society" covers a broad conceptual sweep, for reasons of practicality the proposal here is to look particularly at Northern Irish society in terms of prevalence of indictable crime as indicated by official crime statistics. It is felt that this approach is justified because: (i) political crime apart, the general consensus is undoubtedly that law and order should be upheld and that failure to uphold law and order produces an unacceptable society; there have, for instance, been many reports of unofficial law enforcement in communities in Northern Ireland where, from time to time, there has been little or no police presence; (ii) as noted above, the problem has been expressed in terms of crime, either specifically or by implication; (iii) criminal trends in Northern Ireland, whatever the problems of their relationship to other aspects of Northern Irish society, are intrinsically important.

It is not, however, sufficient to look at trends in crime in Northern Ireland alone in relation to this problem for variations in crime rates might thus be spuriously attributed to conditions in the province when, even in the absence of such conditions, similar variations might have occurred. It was, therefore, thought appropriate to compare rates of indictable crime in Northern Ireland with rates of indictable crime in the Republic of Ireland and in England and Wales. This approach raises two broad issues, one concerning the validity of crime rates as indices of the extent of anti-social behaviour, the other concerning the comparability of the three areas in these terms.

It is often argued that the violation of the extant criminal law is an artificial criterion of criminality since such laws vary from location to location and in the same location over time. In this view, a more appropriate way of looking at anti-social behaviour is in terms of the conduct norms of particular groups of individuals in particular societies at particular times (Sellin, 1938). While there is undoubtedly merit in this approach from an abstract conceptual viewpoint, in practice it leads to greater problems than those which it seeks to avoid. As Tappan (1947) has pointed out, the criminal law of a given society provides precise norms of behaviour, defines meticulously its criteria of anti-social action and clearly identifies at least some anti-social individuals. The alternative approach leads towards a situation in which the norms of conduct, if identifiable at all, are at least as relative,

transient and variable, and in which there is no practical and objective means of identifying, let alone quantifying anti-social behaviour (see Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1975).

A more practical problem in regard to official crime statistics is the question of their validity as indicators of crime (as defined in law) in a given society. Official statistics are commonly held to represent only a proportion of crime and it is thought that a much greater amount of crime is committed than ever comes to the attention of the police. This is probably true, but the crucial issue is whether Northern Irish statistics are more than usually distorted in this respect as a result of the civil conflict. This possibility has been suggested by Curran, Jardine and Harbison (1980).

My own view is that the Northern Irish statistics do not, more than usually, underestimate the real problem for two substantial reasons: (1) Northern Ireland is a small country with a small population which limits the amount of crime, particularly indictable crime, that can occur unnoticed by the powers that be; (2) the extensive police and security forces intelligence operations in the province seem likely to yield at least as accurate a picture of crime as is obtained elsewhere in the British Isles, notwithstanding the probable reluctance of some people in some few areas to report some sorts of conflict-related crime. Indeed, the problem of reluctance to co-operate with the police in certain areas is by no means confined to Northern Ireland. The same problem has become a feature of life in certain areas in Britain, particularly areas with a large immigrant population, and in some areas of the Republic of Ireland, for example, certain tenement and high-rise locations in Dublin.

With the exception of Scotland, which has quite a different legal system, comparisons of broad criminal trends within the major administrative areas of the British Isles is, by good fortune, possible and without major complication. The legal system in Northern Ireland is basically the same as the system in England and Wales, apart from temporary differences arising under the terms of various pieces of emergency legislation. There are other minor differences, for example, relating to homosexuality, which remains a crime in Northern Ireland but not in England and Wales. However, in terms of the variable under study, indictable crime known to the police, these differences are insignificant or irrelevant.

The legal system in the Republic of Ireland is also basically the same as the system in England and Wales, having been inherited from Britain at the time of Partition, although subsequently overlaid with the guiding parameters of the Irish Constitution. There are differences between the two systems in the rights of the accused, for example, which are irrelevant to the variable under study, and minor evolutionary differences which are insignificant.

Finally, there are marked differences between areas in Northern Ireland in

the level and frequency of violence to which they have been exposed (Schellenberg, 1977). However, of all places in Northern Ireland where the "fabric of society" hypothesis should, if valid, find support, none is more likely than the city of Belfast, for most observers, the hub of Ulster's ills. Since the international media first focused its attention on Northern Ireland, Belfast has become synonymous with civil conflict, social unrest and danger. Dublin, on the other hand, while only one hundred miles away, has continued to enjoy its reputation as a friendly and beautiful capital city, although occasionally feeling the backlash of tourist trepidation about its proximity to its Northern counterpart. In view of the fact that Dublin is a particularly appropriate comparison city to Belfast for geographical, historical, economic, political and socio-cultural reasons, a subsidiary test of the hypothesis was conducted on crime data from these cities.

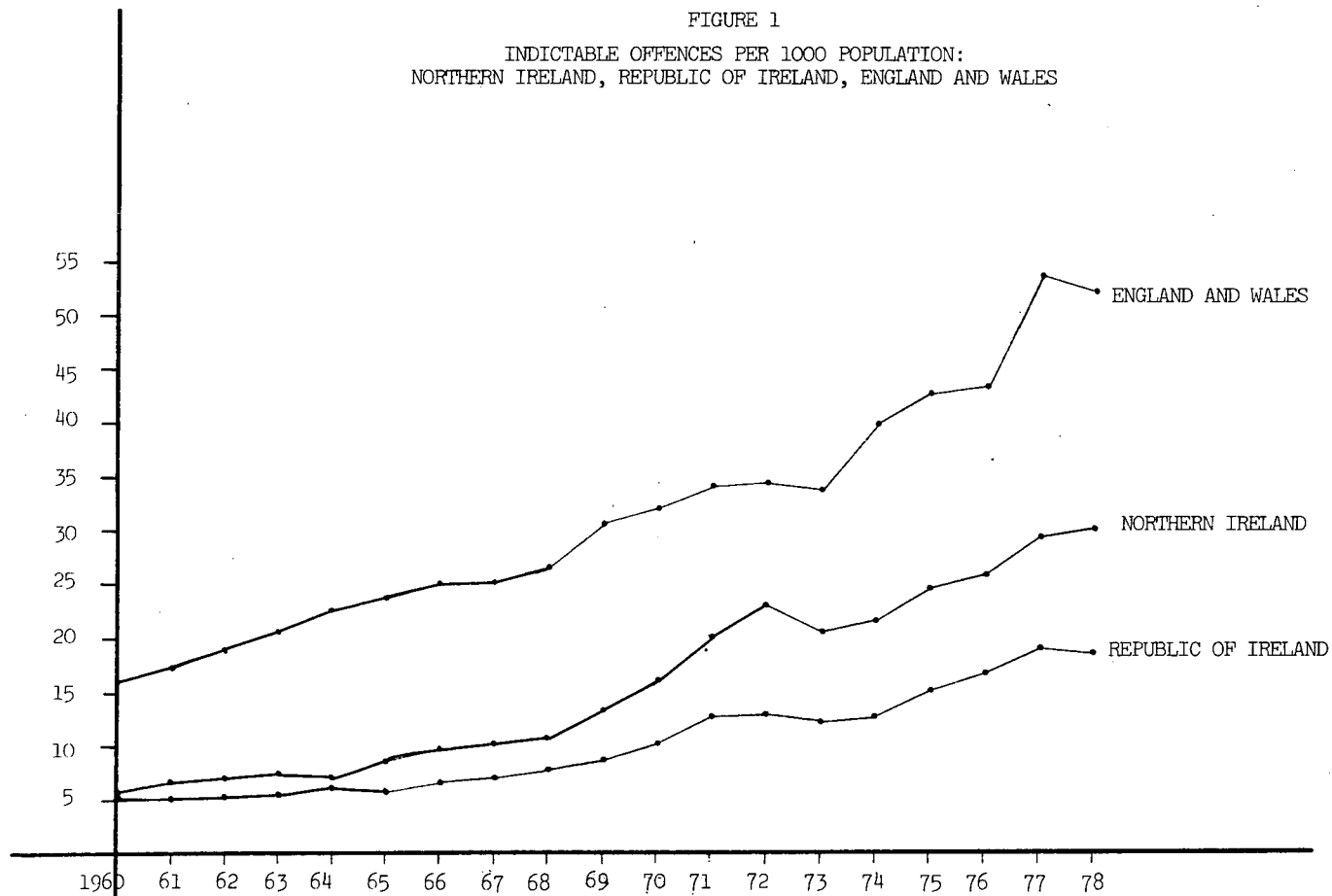
II RESULTS

Table 1 sets out the details of indictable crime known to the police in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and England and Wales for the years 1960-1978, 1978 being the latest year for which all figures are avail-

Table 1: *Indictable offences known to the police*  
(Rates per 1,000 population in parentheses)

	<i>Northern Ireland</i>	<i>Republic of Ireland</i>	<i>England and Wales</i>
1960	8460 ( 5.96)	15357 ( 5.46)	744000 (16.25)
1961	9850 ( 6.90)	14818 ( 5.24)	807000 (17.47)
1962	10286 ( 7.16)	15307 ( 5.39)	896000 (19.22)
1963	10859 ( 7.50)	16203 ( 5.68)	978000 (20.85)
1964	10428 ( 7.15)	17700 ( 6.18)	1068000 (22.62)
1965	12846 ( 8.75)	16736 ( 5.83)	1134000 (23.85)
1966	14673 ( 9.94)	19029 ( 6.60)	1200000 (25.09)
1967	15404 (10.35)	20558 ( 7.08)	1207000 (25.09)
1968	16294 (10.84)	23104 ( 7.91)	1289000 (26.66)
1969	20303 (13.41)	25972 ( 8.83)	1499000 (30.88)
1970	24810 (16.25)	30756 (10.39)	1568000 (32.21)
1971	30828 (20.04)	37781 (12.69)	1666000 (34.10)
1972	35884 (23.23)	39237 (12.96)	1690000 (34.47)
1973	32057 (20.72)	38022 (12.36)	1658000 (33.73)
1974	33314 (21.54)	40096 (12.83)	1963000 (42.84)
1975	37239 (24.23)	48387 (15.25)	2106000 (42.84)
1976	39779 (25.95)	54382 (16.88)	2136000 (43.47)
1977	45335 (29.50)	62946 (19.24)	2637000 (53.68)
1978	46499 (30.21)	62000 (18.68)	2562000 (52.16)

FIGURE 1  
INDICTABLE OFFENCES PER 1000 POPULATION:  
NORTHERN IRELAND, REPUBLIC OF IRELAND, ENGLAND AND WALES



able at the time of writing. The total number of offences and the estimated rates per 1,000 population are given. Notes on the estimation of rates of crime in this study are given in an appendix. Figure 1 plots graphically the rate of crime per year in three areas.

The first analysis undertaken was to correlate the data on indictable crime in the three areas. The results of this analysis are given in Table 2.

Table 2: *Product-moment correlations between indictable crime data (1960-1978) in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and England and Wales*

<i>Total number of offences</i>		<i>Rate per 1,000 population</i>	
N. Ire./R. of Ire.	= .9846	N.Ire./R. of Ire.	= .9909
N. Ire./Eng. and Wales	= .9717	N. Ire./Eng. and Wales	= .9709
R. of Ire./Eng. and Wales	= .9811	R. of Ire./Eng. and Wales	= .9795

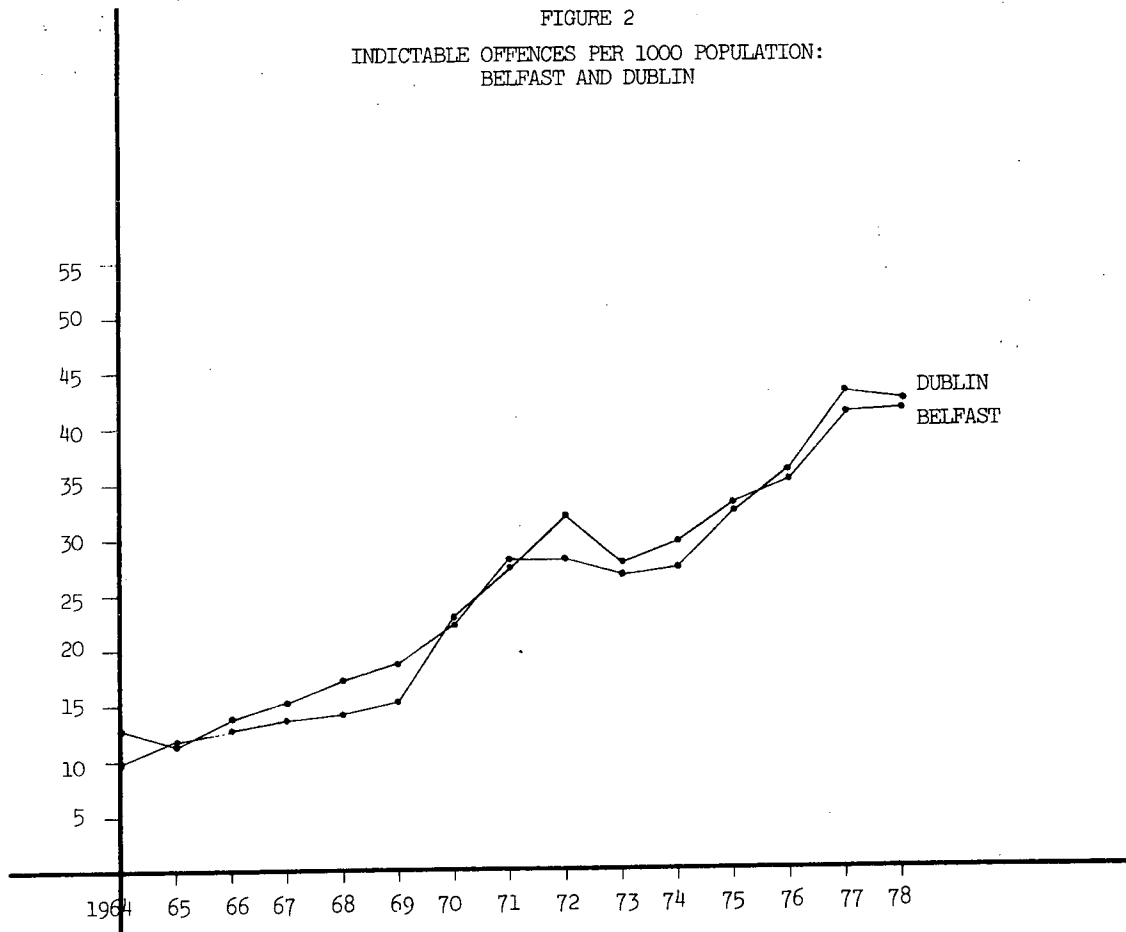
Table 3 sets out the details of indictable crime known to the police in the Greater Belfast Police Area and the Dublin Metropolitan Area for the years 1964-1978. It was not possible to include the years 1960-1963 in this comparison because the DMA was extended considerably in 1964, which makes the pre- and post-1964 comparisons misleading. Figure 2 plots graphically the rate of crime per year in the two cities.

Table 3: *Indictable offences known to the police (Rates per 1,000 population in parentheses)*

	<i>Belfast</i>	<i>Dublin</i>
1964	5844 ( 9.74)	10211 (12.84)
1965	7165 (11.94)	9192 (11.50)
1966	7677 (12.80)	11162 (13.91)
1967	8164 (13.61)	12170 (15.08)
1968	8454 (14.09)	13985 (17.24)
1969	9169 (15.28)	15270 (18.74)
1970	13790 (22.98)	18318 (22.37)
1971	16384* (27.31)	23805 (28.00)
1972	18977 (32.00)	23254 (28.00)
1973	16325 (27.81)	21957 (26.50)
1974	17226 (29.70)	22557 (27.20)
1975	18996 (33.15)	26807 (32.30)
1976	20062 (35.45)	29872 (36.00)
1977	23030 (41.20)	35899 (43.00)
1978	22898 (41.48)	35024 (42.20)

\*Actual figure unavailable. Estimated as (1970+1972)/2.

FIGURE 2  
INDICTABLE OFFENCES PER 1000 POPULATION:  
BELFAST AND DUBLIN





The correlation between the total number of indictable offences in Belfast and Dublin is .9755 and between rates of crime, .9827.

A series of trend-line analyses was computed on the data. This type of analysis is based on linear regression and enables predictions to be made on the assumption that a given trend is linear. The degree to which  $r^2$  in the analysis approaches unity gives an indication of how valid this assumption is on the basis of the available data.

First, for each of the three areas, a trend-line analysis was computed based on the 1960-1968 rates of crime and predictions were made to rates in 1975 and 1978. In addition, predictions were made in each case of when the actual 1978 rate would be achieved. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: *Trend-line analyses based on 1960-1968 indictable crime*  
(Rate per 1,000 population)

	<i>Northern Ireland</i> ( $r^2 = .925$ )	<i>Republic of Ireland</i> ( $r^2 = .837$ )	<i>England and Wales</i> ( $r^2 = .976$ )
1975 predicted rate	15.00	9.43	36.43
(1975 actual rate)	(24.23)	(15.25)	(42.84)
1978 predicted rate	16.84	10.33	40.39
(1978 actual rate)	(30.21)	(18.68)	(52.16)
Predicted date of 1978 actual rate	1999	2003	1986

Second, trend-line analyses were computed for the three areas based on the 1969-1978 rates of crime. Predictions were made to the years 1985, 1990 and 2000. In addition, in the case of Northern Ireland, a prediction was made of when the rate of crime there would reach the 1978 rate in

Table 5: *Trend-line analyses based on 1969-1978 indictable crime*  
(Rate per 1,000 population)

	<i>Northern Ireland</i> ( $r^2 = .938$ )	<i>Republic of Ireland</i> ( $r^2 = .916$ )	<i>England and Wales</i> ( $r^2 = .884$ )
1985 Predicted rate	46.57	26.48	69.02
1990 Predicted rate	56.55	31.90	81.74
2000 Predicted rate	76.51	42.74	107.20

1. Predicted date of Northern Ireland's crime rate reaching the actual 1978 rate in England and Wales = 1987.

2. Predicted date of Republic of Ireland's crime rate reaching the actual 1978 level in (a) Northern Ireland = 1988; (b) England and Wales = 2008.

England and Wales; in the case of the Republic of Ireland, predictions were made as to when the Republic's rate would reach the 1978 rates in Northern Ireland and in England and Wales. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 5.

Finally, trend-line analyses were computed for the Belfast and Dublin crime rate data in a similar manner. The results of these analyses appear in Table 6 and Table 7.

Table 6: *Trend-line analyses based on 1964-1968 indictable crime*  
(Rate per 1,000 population)

	Belfast ( $r^2 = .914$ )	Dublin ( $r^2 = .797$ )
1975 Predicted rate	21.77	25.66
(1975 Actual rate)	(33.15)	(32.30)
1978 Predicted rate	24.88	28.97
(1978 Actual rate)	(41.48)	(42.20)
Predicted date of 1978 actual rate	1993	1988

Table 7: *Trend-line analyses based on 1969-78 indictable crime*  
(Rate per 1,000 population)

	Belfast ( $r^2 = .884$ )	Dublin ( $r^2 = .889$ )
1985 Predicted rate		
1985 Predicted rate	59.17	58.95
1990 Predicted rate	71.57	71.35
2000 Predicted rate	96.38	96.14

### III DISCUSSION

It has been noted in previous research that the rates of indictable crime in Northern Ireland are considerably below those in England and Wales (Jardine, Curran and Harbison, 1978) and that there is a close relationship, on less substantial evidence, between levels of crime in Northern Ireland and levels in England and Wales and the Republic of Ireland (Heskin, 1980a; 1980b). This study extends and adds weight to these observations, showing

a very close relationship between trends in crime in the two parts of Ireland and in England and Wales.

Figure 1 shows very clearly that the rate of indictable crime in Northern Ireland was slightly above the rate of crime in the Republic up until 1969 when the "Troubles" began. The gap widened subsequently and reached a peak in 1972, the year in which internment was introduced and civil turmoil was at its worst. Indeed, the graph shows that had the trend of 1969-1972 continued, then Northern Irish society would have been heading for serious problems in terms of the premises of this study. However, that trend did not continue, although the increased level of crime relative to the Republic and Britain represents, in this logic, a net weakening of the fabric of society in Northern Ireland.

In relation to England and Wales, Figure 1 shows a converse narrowing trend in the gap between Northern Ireland and Britain between 1969 and 1972, and, indeed, suggests the possibility that had the trend continued, Northern Ireland might well have approached or even overtaken British rates of crime. However, the graph also shows that subsequent to 1972, the rate of increase in England and Wales has been higher than in Northern Ireland or, indeed, the Republic of Ireland.

At a naive level of analysis, it could be argued that the rate of indictable crime has increased more in Northern Ireland between 1960 and 1978 than has been the case in the other two areas. Thus the increase in that period, comparing rates in 1978 with those in 1960, is 507 per cent compared to 342 per cent for the Republic and 321 per cent for England and Wales. But such comparisons are highly misleading since they vary as a function of the particular base rate chosen and take no account of the much more important trend in the data. Hence, if one were to compare the increase for the period 1968 to 1978 then the increases would be as follows: Northern Ireland 279 per cent; Republic of Ireland 236 per cent; England and Wales 196 per cent. Were one to take 1972 as a base point, then the increases at 1978 would be: Northern Ireland 130 per cent; Republic of Ireland 144 per cent; England and Wales 151 per cent. Therefore, the most rational way of looking at crime rates in Northern Ireland is in terms of the overall trend in comparison with overall trends elsewhere in these islands.

In general terms, the most remarkable feature of the relationship between rates of crime in the three areas is how closely related they are. This is evident graphically in Figure 1 which, for example, shows all three areas gradually increasing throughout the 1960s, hitting an early 1970s peak in 1972, decreasing between 1972 and 1973, subsequently rising again and showing a levelling-off or decrease between 1977 and 1978. Statistically, the close relationship is evident in the very high correlation values in Table 2, closely approaching unity.

How, therefore, can we relate these data to the notion of widespread

societal disintegration in Northern Ireland as a result of the present conflict? Quite clearly, the rate of crime in Northern Ireland is increasing, but the attribution of that increase exclusively, or even substantially to the "Troubles" does not, apart from the period 1969 to 1972, appear to be justified. Correlations tell us nothing about causality, but while a case could be made for the attribution of some small amount of the increase in crime rates in the Republic to the effects of the conflict in the North, it is hardly tenable to argue that there is a causal link of any substance between the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland and crime rates in England and Wales.

Crime in Northern Ireland would have increased, on the basis of trends in the Republic and England and Wales in any case. That "normal" increase was accelerated as a result of the civil conflict between 1969 and 1972. However, subsequent to 1972, that acceleration in trend ceased entirely and the trend reverted to its previous pattern, closely linked to the general British Isles trend. Indeed, subsequent to 1972, the rate of increase of crime in Northern Ireland has been distinctly below that of England and Wales. These data do not represent uniquely catastrophic portents for Northern Irish society, but rather they indicate the remarkably robust normality of society in the province.

This interpretation is strengthened by the trend-line analyses of crime rates in the three areas. Table 4 uses the 1960-1968 crime rate data in the three areas to predict rates of crime in 1975 and 1978. The table shows that in all cases, the predictions underestimate the actual rates of crime, indicating an acceleration in the trend of crime in these islands generally in the post-1968 period.

Table 5 uses the 1969-1978 data as a basis for predicting future rates. The rate in England and Wales appears to be accelerating somewhat during this period, which is reflected in the slightly lower  $r^2$  value for the predictions for England and Wales compared to the other two areas. However, a linear estimate was still felt to be the best bet for the English and Welsh data. In addition, by maintaining a parity of approach in these predictions, such a solution obviates the potential criticism of gilding the lily of the null hypothesis by means of statistical prestidigitation.

These analyses indicate, broadly speaking, that the differentials between the three areas will remain similar for the remainder of this century. There is a very slight tendency for Northern Ireland's predicted rate of increase to be less than that of England and Wales, and a very slight tendency for the Republic's predicted rate of increase to be less than that of Northern Ireland.

Of course, the fact remains that very serious crime has increased as part and parcel of the civil conflict. Up to the end of 1978, 1,881 lives had been lost in the "Troubles" since 1969, and it is of little consolation that this figure is only 60 per cent of the total killed on the roads in the same period (3,112). One has to see these figures in the context of the fact that at no

time during the 1960s prior to 1969 did the total number of murders committed in the entire province in any one year reach double figures. In 1965, for example, there was one murder in Northern Ireland. For those who only know Belfast as a result of the present "Troubles", it may come as a surprise to learn that in the Greater Belfast Police Area, which contains some 40 per cent of the total population of Northern Ireland, the sum total of murders committed in the 1960s prior to 1969 did not reach double figures. In fact, in the five-year period 1960-1964, one solitary murder was committed in that city.

The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 lead toward the conclusion that, notwithstanding the fact that very serious crime related to the conflict is a feature of the situation in Northern Ireland, (a) it is statistically a rather insignificant element in the sum total of indictable crime in the province and (b) it appears to be largely insulated and not influential on the trend of crime in the province generally. The former of these conclusions is, consistent with the findings of Jardine, Curran and Harbison (1978) who compared the patterns of indictable crime in Northern Ireland and England and Wales and found that in both cases, the vast majority of offences were "crimes of dishonesty", and that conflict-related juvenile crime in Northern Ireland constituted a relatively small proportion of all offences.

The data on crime in Dublin and Belfast afford us a further opportunity to examine the notion of a conflict-engendered collapse in Northern Irish society. Table 3 and Figure 2 show very clearly that the two cities have been subject to remarkably similar rates of crime over recent years, "Troubles" or no "Troubles". Figure 2, plus the high correlation between rates of crime in the two cities indicate how closely related have been the trends in crime, with the 1972 peak again evident in the Belfast rate. These data are particularly damaging to the notion of a disintegrating society in Northern Ireland, since we would expect to see most evidence of such disintegration in the city of Belfast.

Table 6 shows that the trend-line predictions based on 1964-1968 rates of crime underestimated the actual rates of crime in 1975 and 1978, again indicating an acceleration in the trend of crime in both cities in the post-1968 period. However, far from heading towards its own peculiar disaster on the basis of a decade of civil conflict, Table 7 shows trend-line predictions of future rates of crime in the two cities in which Belfast is on more or less exactly the same course as Dublin. A tenacious, if bloodied "fabric of society" exponent might still argue his case on the strength of some nebulous, vicarious influence on Dublin society. However, in view of the findings in this study in regard to rates of crime in the three societies generally, such a line of argument seems untenable.

On a more general note, it is somewhat surprising to note how closely related criminal trends in the three geographical areas are. One might have

expected that the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, two contiguous, conservative, religious and traditionalist societies, would have reasonable similarity in trends, although the similarity of the trend remains remarkable ( $r = .9909$ ). However, that both should so closely match the trend of crime in England and Wales is unexpected.

But, perhaps this is only surprising to someone nurtured on the importance of small differences between one's own group and other groups in these islands. One should not prejudge the issue of causality in these relationships, but perhaps it is not inappropriate to note that to the outsider, the continental European or American, for example, it may not be so surprising that people who speak the same language, watch the same television programmes, share close cultural links generally, have the same economic problems, and intermingle freely in an insular outpost of Europe, should find that their social problems are closely related.

#### IV CONCLUSIONS

It would be foolish for anyone to ignore the fact that Northern Ireland has seen, and continues to see, a level of very serious crime, unprecedented in its history, as a result of the civil conflict that erupted there in 1969. No one should underestimate the problems facing Northern Ireland in the future. Equally, no one should overestimate the problems of a community which has enough real problems to deal with without having to contemplate imaginary ones. The "fabric of society" hypothesis, on the basis of this study, appears to be such an imaginary problem.

The data and argument presented here lead to the conclusion that the phenomena of civil conflict in Northern Ireland have pushed up the general level of crime beyond that which it might otherwise have been in the absence of the "Troubles". To that extent, the fabric of society in Northern Ireland has been weakened. However, contrary to the "fabric of society" hypothesis, there is no evidence that crime in Northern Ireland is on the brink of epidemic proportions at this point, as a result of the civil conflict.

Judging from trends elsewhere in the British Isles, trends which are closely related to the trend of crime in Northern Ireland, it is clear that the increase in crime due to the "Troubles" has stabilised at quite a low level. Statistical projections indicate that this relative position will be maintained in the foreseeable future. Comparisons between the cities of Belfast and Dublin confirm these indications and all of these indications suggest that crime in Northern Ireland is influenced largely by the same factors, whatever they are, that bear upon crime elsewhere in these islands.

However, the notion that the conflict is at the root of all of Ulster's ills is understandable. The conflict, after all, is "visible" and therefore readily presents itself as an explanation. Unfortunately, it also presents itself as an

excuse for glossing over other possible aspects of the problem, such as unemployment, low wages, high prices, poor housing and so forth. From the point of view of commentators outside the province, whether in the Republic of Ireland or in England and Wales, it also serves to distract public attention from similar problems occurring in these societies. The implication of the present study is that both of these ancillary aspects of the doomsday view of Northern Ireland, notwithstanding the hard core of the problem, may rest on very shaky foundations.

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## APPENDIX

*Notes on the estimation of rates of crime*

1. Unless otherwise stated below, the rate of crime in this study is simply the total number of indictable offences known to the police, as published officially by the relevant authority, divided by the number of thousands of total population either determined by census or official estimate.

*2. Table 2*

Census figures are available for the years 1961, 1966, 1971 and 1979 for the Republic of Ireland. The population was here taken as having increased by the same amount annually between census dates. The 1979 census revealed that the population had increased by well over 100,000 more than official predictions. Consequently, although the Garda Commissioner's annual Report on Crime had published official rates of crime for the Republic as a whole since 1968, these have been revised in this study in an effort to maximise accuracy. The effect of this revision was a slight lowering of the recent rates of crime in the Republic compared to the officially published rates.

*3. Table 3*

(i) Details of indictable crime in Belfast are not published officially. Details of the total number of indictable offences committed annually in the Greater Belfast Police District were obtained from the Statistics Section of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The 1971 figures are unavailable as they have been misplaced.

The Greater Belfast Police District does not conform precisely to any census area, but closely approximates the Belfast Urban Area. The population was therefore taken as that of the Belfast Urban Area, the population of which is not precisely known. However, a survey estimate is available for 1978 and a census figure for 1971. As the 1978 estimated population is approximately 50,000 lower than the 1971 figure, the population for the intervening years was estimated as outlined in Note 2. During the 1960s, the population of Belfast is thought to have been very stable and the 1971 census figure (600,166) is therefore used in calculating Belfast rates of crime during the period 1960-1971.

(ii) The Dublin Metropolitan Area does not approximate any census area in the Republic of Ireland. However, since 1971, the Garda Commissioner's annual Report on Crime has published a separate estimated rate of indictable crime for the DMA based on an estimate of the DMA population. These official rates are used for the years 1971-1978. Between 1960 and 1971, the population of the Republic increased by approximately a half per cent per



annum. The population of the DMA during this period was taken as having similarly increased. The DMA population prior to 1971 was therefore estimated back from the Garda Commissioner's 1971 estimated DMA population, reducing the figure by a half per cent per annum, and the rates of crime calculated accordingly.