

Victimhood and Attitudes towards Dealing with the Legacy of a Violent Past: Northern Ireland as a Case Study

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Research Highlights and Abstract

- Using Northern Ireland as a case study, this article provides the first nationally representative and systematic study of victims' views on how to deal with the past;
- Focusing specifically on Northern Ireland, it both investigates and provides a comprehensive account of the marked divisions between the various religious groupings—Protestants, Catholics and the non-affiliated—in terms of a range of truth recovery mechanisms to deal with legacy of its violent past;
- It empirically investigates and validates two key predictors—perceptions of victimhood and general attitudes towards the past—in determining the source of these divisions
- It outlines the implications of our findings for other societies emerging from conflict.

Truth recovery mechanisms have become a cornerstone of peacebuilding efforts in societies emerging from conflict. Yet, to date, the view of victims in post-conflict societies concerning such arrangements remains highly anecdotal and often second-hand in nature. Mindful of this omission and using Northern Ireland as a case study, this article investigates the views of victims towards a range of mechanisms to deal with the legacy of Northern Ireland's violent past. Based on the 2011 Northern Ireland Social and Political Attitudes Survey, the results suggest some marked divisions in relation to this issue, with victims within the Catholic community being significantly more supportive of such initiatives than either Protestants or those with no religion. Moreover, while perceptions of victimhood emerge as the key predictor of attitudes among Protestants and the non-affiliated, general opinions on how to deal with the past are the key determinant of views among members of the Catholic community.

Keywords: victims; truth recovery processes; Northern Ireland; post-conflict societies; peacebuilding

Introduction

The past is a slippery thing. There is the 'actual past' of real events and then the 'remembered past', as actual events are selectively stored in memory. The actual past disappears almost immediately when actual events are subject to normal processes of forgetting and misremembering. It is this remembered past that has social and political currency. The remembered past can be used culturally, to help define group boundaries and collective memories, and politically, as part of a political project, such as for nation building and peacebuilding. At the heart of all

efforts to bring about reconciliation in societies emerging from conflict is the question of how to deal with the violent legacy of their remembered past. The ability to deal, or come to terms, with the remembered past has now moved centre stage as a key mechanism in conflict resolution and reconciliation.

In order to better access this remembered past, various types of truth recovery process have been established, ranging from official initiatives, such as the establishment of truth commissions, amnesty dispensations, public inquiries, and criminal investigations and prosecutions to unofficial initiatives, such as local forms of memorialization, documentation, oral history and storytelling. Unlike official truth recovery mechanisms, which are state-sanctioned and often part of the negotiated peace agreement, unofficial truth recovery mechanisms are operated by civil society organisations and tend to be community-based, highly localised, and grass-root in nature. Of these various initiatives, however, formal truth recovery mechanisms like truth commissions have become one of the most common options for transitional societies emerging from conflict (Hayner 2011).

One key conundrum facing both formal and informal truth recovery processes is the peace versus justice dilemma (see Sriram and Pillay 2009). Increasingly, however, the primary purpose of truth recovery is to foster reconciliation and societal healing. Even formal truth recovery processes like truth commissions have moved from a predominantly truth-seeking model to a truth-telling process (Millar 2011). By publicly telling their stories and exposing the truth of past crimes, truth commissions, it is argued, provide victims and survivors with both a sense of justice and healing from the trauma of war. Through public performances of truth-telling, victims help to create a 'collective memory', or a shared understanding of the past, which facilitates reconciliation between former adversaries within society at large. In fact, as Mendeloff (2004, 359), points out: 'The process of truth-telling is considered just as important as the truth itself.'

Yet, as a number of commentators note, the effects of truth recovery processes appear to be extremely limited and this is particularly the case when formal mechanisms like truth commissions are considered (Mendeloff 2004). Moreover, what we know about people's views of truth commissions remains highly anecdotal, contradictory and geographically specific (see Brahm 2007). For example, whereas some studies point to the positive and cathartic effects of such truth recovery mechanisms at both the individual and societal level, others highlight their psychologically damaging and post-traumatic effects, as well as their inability to offer genuine redress. In fact, some scholars go so far as to suggest that rather than facilitating societal reconciliation, truth commissions not only fail to transform inter-group relations between previously warring parties, but they also rekindle anger and resentment among victims (Wiebelhaus-Brahm 2010).

Even the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has not been immune from such criticisms. It is now generally accepted that although the TRC did contribute to a greater understanding and awareness of the suffering and injustice inflicted by all parties to the conflict during the apartheid era, it also sharply divided public opinion along political and racial lines, and it both disappointed, and in some cases, re-traumatised many victims (Hamber 2003;

Chapman and van der Merwe 2008). Even Hayner (1994, 170), the pioneering researcher on truth commissions, commented: 'reliving horrors is not for everyone'.

Despite the growing popularity of truth recovery processes, public attitudes towards these activities as a mechanism for dealing with the past have rarely been assessed empirically. This is particularly the case when the views of victims are considered. Official truth recovery mechanisms tend to be created by political elites as top-down initiatives and the process of consultation with victims remains cursory at best (Backer 2005; McEvoy and McGregor 2008; Robins 2011). Moreover, many of the claims about the effects of such truth recovery mechanisms rely more on normative conviction than robust empirical evidence and are based not on the opinions of victims and ordinary citizens but on the views of truth commission staff and non-governmental organization workers. As Robins (2011, 77), put it: 'Indeed, much of the transitional justice literature is by experts speaking for victims.' Even when the views of victims are considered, not only is the bulk of the research based on highly selective samples, such as those who have participated in formal truth recovery mechanisms, but it is usually confined to an extremely narrow range of issues, namely the views of victims concerning their desire for retribution, rather than investigating victims' own priorities, such as providing economic and social support to meet their basic needs (Robins 2011; Kent 2012; Millar 2014).

It is with these omissions in mind that this study provides the first comprehensive investigation of the views of victims in Northern Ireland toward the establishment of a range of truth recovery mechanisms—both official and unofficial—and toward the focused support that might be given to victims to help them deal with the legacy of its violent past. The article proceeds in three stages. First, it outlines the nature of the Northern Ireland Agreement, particularly in terms of the mechanisms proposed to deal with the past. Second, building on this analytical discussion and using nationally representative data from the 2011 Northern Ireland Social and Political Attitudes Survey, it examines the views of victims towards a range of truth recovery mechanisms to deal with Northern Ireland's violent past. For the purpose of this analysis, victims are defined as those who had been either directly or indirectly exposed to political violence. Finally, it investigates the relationship between perceptions of victimhood and general attitudes towards the past in terms of their impact on victims' support for truth recovery mechanisms.

The use of Northern Ireland as a case study may be considered particularly appropriate for the following three reasons. First, the Northern Ireland peace accord is now considered an exemplar of conflict resolution throughout the world. Thus, the Northern Ireland experience has become a leading case study for students of transitions from war to peace. Second, contrary to other societies emerging from conflict, the Northern Ireland peace accord did not propose a formal truth commission and political leaders remain deeply divided on how to deal with the legacy of Northern Ireland's violent past. Third, the views of victims themselves, the primary bearers of the violent legacy of Northern Ireland's past, have been neglected in this debate.

The Agreement and the Continuing Spectre of Northern Ireland's Past

After nearly two years of multi-party negotiations, on 22 May 1998 the Northern Ireland Agreement was ratified by 71 per cent of citizens. Based on the principle of 'parity in esteem', the Agreement provided for the establishment of an elected assembly, with a power-sharing Executive and headed by a premiership diarchy possessing equal powers. In addition to the new political structures, the Agreement also included a series of discrete and 'piecemeal' measures that addressed the legacy of the conflict, such as the reform of policing, the release of political prisoners, the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, a review of the justice system, as well as the provision of services to victims (Lundy and McGovern 2008a).

However, contrary to other post-conflict societies such as South Africa, some form of formal truth recovery mechanism was not considered as part of the political settlement. In fact, not only was there no reference to the establishment of such a mechanism in the Agreement itself but none of the participants involved in the negotiations requested its inclusion, fearing that it would cause deep-seated divisions and derail the delicate peace negotiations. There have, however, been a number of government-sponsored 'truth recovery' initiatives, such as the establishment of the Serious Crime Review Team (now the Historical Enquiries Team),¹ the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR),² as well as a series of judicial inquiries, such as the Saville Inquiry, into the role of the security forces.³

A number of unofficial truth recovery processes have also been established. These range from highly localised storytelling initiatives to more extensive cross-community initiatives, such as the Healing Through Remembering Project (HTR).⁴ And, while, a number of groups and organisations since then, such as the Consultative Group on the Past (2009), have recommended the establishment of a legacy commission (a truth commission by another name) to date none of its recommendations have been acted upon, including the highly controversial £12,000 'recognition' payment to be awarded to the nearest relative of each person who died in the Northern Ireland conflict. More so than any other recommendation, it was the public fallout surrounding this proposed payment which illustrated the deep divisions within society as to who should count as a 'true' victim and how Northern Ireland should deal with the legacy of its violent past.

In fact, from the very beginning, the problem of how to deal with the rights and needs of victims generated considerable controversy and division (Smyth 2007; Brewer 2010; Brewer and Hayes 2013). Claims and counter-claims abounded about who could be considered a 'legitimate' victim, the allocation of funding for victim groups and even the choice of the Victim Commissioners. Early government-sponsored approaches to the issue, such as the Bloomfield report (1998), sought to use an inclusive definition of victimhood, suggesting at some level every citizen could be considered a victim of the Troubles, although his failure to address the issue of victims of state violence angered many nationalists and republicans.⁵ More recently, however, individuals and victims organisations, particularly with unionist

links, have sought to introduce a more exclusive definition, or a hierarchy of victimhood, distinguishing 'innocent' victims from those who engaged in 'terrorist' activities (Smyth 2007).

Similar divisions are suggested when attitudes toward the establishment of a truth recovery mechanism are considered, such as a truth commission (Lundy and McGovern 2008a, 2008b; Hayes and McAllister 2013; Lawther 2013). Many nationalists have publicly welcomed such an initiative, including many republican ex-combatants, who, as one of the main perpetrators of the conflict, not only see it as a way of drawing a line under their violent past but also as a mechanism to finally establish the truth about the involvement of the security forces—either directly or indirectly—in the death of family members (Rolston 2002; Smyth 2007).⁶ Many unionists, by contrast, are vehemently opposed to such a truth recovery exercise, viewing it as nothing more than a ploy to be used by republicans to create a moral equivalence between all victims—including those killed, injured or bereaved in paramilitary organisations—and, thus, providing them with a mechanism to legitimise their own actions as well as further traumatizing the bereaved families of 'innocent' victims (Lawther 2013). Loyalist ex-combatants have also expressed similar concerns (Rolston 2006). It is these competing moral claims to victimhood that have not only formed the major fault line of the Northern Ireland peace process but have also stymied a range of initiatives—such as a truth and reconciliation commission—to deal with the past (Nagle and Clancy 2010; Brewer and Hayes 2013).

Data and Methods

The data used in the analysis are from the 2011 Northern Ireland Social and Political Attitudes Survey. Conducted between April and August 2011, the survey is based on a multistage random sample and is representative of the adult population. Funded by the Leverhulme Trust and using a questionnaire design, it is based on personal interviews involving 1,500 respondents aged 18 years or more, with a response rate of 59 per cent. Given our research question of interest—victims' views towards a range of truth recovery mechanisms to deal with the legacy of Northern Ireland's past—only those who had been exposed to political violence are included in the analysis. As in previous research (Muldoon et al. 2005; Brewer and Hayes 2013), victimisation, or exposure to political violence, was operationalised in terms of those who had been either directly (experienced intimidation or a victim of violent incident) or indirectly (family member/relative killed or injured or know someone killed or injured) exposed to political violence. For the three main religious groupings—Protestants, Catholics and those with no religion—this accounted for 1,016 individuals or 72 per cent of the total sample, with the experience of victimisation being shared almost equally between them. For example, whereas 73 per cent of Protestants claimed to have experienced some sort of victimisation, or exposure to violence, the equivalent proportions among Catholics and those with no religious affiliation were 71 per cent and 69 per cent, respectively (see Appendix Table A1).

Attitudes on how to deal with the past was operationalised in terms of respondents' views concerning six approaches to dealing with the legacy of Northern Ireland's

violent past. These included formal truth recovery mechanisms such as a truth commission, more police investigations and prosecutions, and more public inquiries. In addition, victims' views on informal mechanisms were also included—such as public apologies from those who did wrong and initiatives within communities to help people come to terms with the past—as well as focused support for victims. For each of the six approaches, the response categories were: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

In order to assess victims' views, a series of bivariate and multivariate analyses were undertaken. Whereas the bivariate analysis focuses on religious differences in views among victims in relation to each of these mechanisms separately, the multivariate analyses are based on a summated scale of attitudes towards all six approaches. Factor analysis demonstrated that these six items form one overall scale that is unidimensional in nature.⁷ More specifically, the scale was constructed by recoding each of their component items so that the most supportive response (strongly agree) received a score of one, and the least supportive response (strongly disagree) received a score of zero. The scores were then summated and divided by the number of component items to obtain a scale ranging from zero (least supportive) to one (most supportive).

Victims' Views on Dealing with the Legacy of a Violent Past

Turning now to the result, Table 1 begins the analysis by investigating victims' views towards a range of mechanisms to deal with the legacy of Northern Ireland's violent past. Focusing initially on formal truth recovery mechanisms, such as truth commissions, the results suggest that the population is now almost equally divided—50.2 per cent versus 49.8 per cent—between those who support such an initiative and those who do not or who are undecided in their views. Some marked differences also occur when other forms of official truth recovery mechanisms are considered, such as public or police inquiries. For example, whereas only around a third of victims support a public inquiry, 61 per cent endorse more police investigations and prosecutions. Thus, at least as far as views in relation to formal truth recovery mechanisms are concerned, support for more police inquiries is by far the most preferred option.

When unofficial mechanisms are considered, it is support for locally-based or community-led initiatives which stands out as the most preferred mechanism to deal with Northern Ireland's past; 85 per cent of victims agree with such initiatives as compared to just five per cent who are opposed. Similar, albeit somewhat lower, levels of support emerge when apologies from those who did wrong are considered; 72 per cent of victims endorse such a view. Finally, when focused support for victims is considered the overwhelming majority of victims, or around nine out of every ten adults who have experienced political violence, support such a position. Thus, at least as far as the views of victims are concerned the results are clear: it is focused support for victims followed by community based initiatives which emerge as the most favoured mechanisms to deal with the legacy of Northern Ireland's

Table 1: Religious Affiliation and Attitudes among Victims towards Approaches to Deal with the Legacy of the Past

	(Percentages)			
	Protestant	Catholic	No Religion	All
Truth Commission:				
Agree	34.1	69.9	44.4	50.2
Neither	22.7	15.8	17.6	19.3
Disagree	43.2	14.3	38.0	30.5
(N)	(440)	(392)	(108)	(940)
Public Inquiry:				
Agree	20.7	48.4	32.7	33.5
Neither	12.7	16.8	7.5	13.8
Disagree	66.5	34.8	59.8	52.6
(N)	(463)	(405)	(107)	(975)
Police Inquiry:				
Agree	59.4	65.0	56.9	61.4
Neither	16.8	15.1	16.5	16.1
Disagree	23.8	19.9	26.6	22.5
(N)	(463)	(403)	(109)	(975)
Public Apologies:				
Agree	67.7	77.1	66.1	71.5
Neither	17.5	11.7	10.7	14.3
Disagree	14.7	11.2	23.2	14.2
(N)	(462)	(419)	(112)	(993)
Initiatives within Communities:				
Agree	78.7	92.6	84.3	85.2
Neither	15.0	4.4	8.3	9.8
Disagree	6.3	2.9	7.4	5.0
(N)	(461)	(408)	(108)	(977)
Support for victims:				
Agree	86.0	94.0	86.4	89.4
Neither	11.7	4.3	10.9	8.5
Disagree	2.4	1.7	2.7	2.1
(N)	(463)	(415)	(110)	(988)

Question: Here are some ways that people have suggested the legacy of the troubles could be dealt with. Please say how much you agree or disagree with the following: A Truth Commission; More police investigations and prosecutions; More public inquiries; Public apologies from those who did wrong; Initiatives within communities to help people come to terms with the past; Support for victims.

Note: For the purpose of this analysis, victims are operationalized in terms of those who experienced both direct and/or indirect exposure to violence.

Source: Northern Ireland Social and Political Attitudes Survey, 2011.

violent past. These preferences replicate earlier survey findings among the general public concerning the 'importance' of such mechanisms for dealing with the past (Lundy and McGovern 2008b).

There are some marked differences between the various religious groupings in relation to truth recovery, with Catholic victims being the most favourable in their opinion than either those from within the Protestant community or among the non-affiliated. This is particularly the case when formal truth recovery mechanisms are considered, such as truth commissions or public inquiries. For example, around seven out of every ten Catholic victims favour the establishment of a truth commission, compared to just over a third of Protestants and around half of those with no religion. Similar divisions occur when public inquiries are considered, although the level of support across all three religious groupings is much lower in this instance. While nearly half of all Catholic victims supported such an initiative, this view was endorsed by only a fifth of those within the Protestant community and exactly a third among the non-affiliated.

These patterns are replicated in opinions toward unofficial truth recovery mechanisms and toward focused support for victims. Although levels of agreement are much higher in this instance, it is again Catholic victims who stand out as the most supportive in their views. For example, whereas over nine out of every ten Catholic victims, or 93 per cent, supported initiatives within communities, agreement among Protestants victims was 14 percentage points lower at 79 per cent. Even when focused support for victims is considered, it is again Catholic victims who are the most positive in their views. While 94 per cent of victims within the Catholic community endorsed such an initiative, support among both Protestants and those who claimed no religious affiliation was eight percentage points lower at 86 per cent.

Table 2 lends further confirmation to these findings. Even when a range of control variables, such as socio-demographic background and identity, are included in the analysis, religious affiliation emerges as a strong and differential predictor of attitudes towards these approaches to deal with the legacy of Northern Ireland's violent past. Among the various religious groupings, it is again Protestant victims who stand out as being the least supportive in their views. Protestants are significantly less likely to support such initiatives than their Catholic counterparts (omitted category of comparison). A similar pattern is echoed when the non-affiliated are considered, with those who claim no religious affiliation being significantly less supportive than Catholics in their views.⁸ This is not to suggest, however, that religious affiliation is the sole predictor of attitudes among victims in this instance. Other significant predictors include the negative effects of age, marital status and national identity. For example, both older and married victims are notably more likely to oppose such initiatives than their younger or unmarried counter-parts. Similarly, victims who claim a British identity are notably more likely to oppose these initiatives than those who do not.

Results from our sample of victims parallel those from among the general public: there is no clear consensus among victims as to how to deal with the legacy of Northern Ireland's past.⁹ Although the vast majority of victims agreed with unofficial mechanisms, such as community-based initiatives, public apologies and

Table 2: The Net Effect of Religious Affiliation on Attitudes among Victims towards Approaches to Deal with the Legacy of the Past

	(Regression Coefficients: OLS)	
	b	beta
Control variables:		
Male	-0.01	-0.04
Married	-0.02*	-0.07
Age (years)	-0.01**	-0.13
Education:		
Tertiary [†]	-	-
Secondary	-0.03	-0.07
No qualification	0.02	0.04
British	-0.04*	-0.08
Unionist	0.01	0.01
Religious Affiliation:		
Catholic [†]	-	-
Protestant	-0.08**	-0.24
No religion	-0.08**	-0.13
Constant	0.801**	
R-squared	0.130	
(N)	(905)	

Notes: Attitudes towards approaches to deal with the legacy of the past are coded from 0 (least supportive) to 1 (most supportive).

* Significant at the 0.05 level.

** Significant at the 0.01 level.

[†] Missing category of comparison.

Source: Northern Ireland Social and Political Attitudes Survey, 2011.

particularly focused support for victims, this is not the case when formal truth recovery mechanisms are considered where, with one exception (more police inquires) support is either lukewarm (truth commission) or tepid (public inquiries) at best. There are also some stark differences between the various religious groupings, with victims from within the Protestant community and among the non-affiliated being significantly less likely to support such initiatives than their Catholic counterparts. This is particularly the case when formal truth recovery mechanisms, such as public inquiries and the establishment of a truth commission, are considered. What may account for these differences in findings? It is to an empirical investigation of this issue that we now turn.

Explaining Victims' Views on Dealing with the Legacy of a Violent Past

There are two potential explanations as to why victims may differ in their support for a range of truth recovery mechanisms. The first concerns potential differences in

their approach to victimhood, the second focuses on general perceptions about how to deal with the past. Dealing with the first of these, it is now generally accepted that a key factor in distinguishing between the two main religious communities—Protestant and Catholic—is their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, victimhood. In common with other societies emerging from conflict (see Kent 2012; de Waardt 2013), the question of who counts as a ‘legitimate’ victim of the conflict has moved centre stage as a key source of division within this society, with unionists and nationalists becoming increasingly bi-polar in their views (Hayes and McAllister 2013). Members of the nationalist community are seen to endorse an inclusive definition of victimhood, incorporating all those killed, injured or bereaved as a result of the conflict, which includes members of paramilitary organisations. Many members of the unionist community, however, are vehemently opposed to such a view. Objecting to any moral equivalence between so-called ‘innocent’ victims and members of paramilitary bodies who were killed or injured, they seek to impose a ‘hierarchy of victimhood’ which distinguishes the truly ‘deserving victims’ from their ‘terrorist’ counterparts. It is important to note, however, that this concern with who counts as a ‘true’ victim is not only rooted in a moral quest for legitimacy but also reflects a zero-sum approach to economic compensation and redress (Ferguson et al. 2010). To what extent is this difference replicated amongst victims?

Table 3 addresses this question by focusing on perceptions concerning the legitimacy of victimhood. Irrespective of the categorisation considered, victims within the Catholic community are notably more likely to adopt a more inclusive definition of victimhood than either their Protestant or non-affiliated counterparts. For example, whereas 60 per cent of victims within the Catholic community agreed with the universal view that everyone in Northern Ireland should be considered a victim of the violence, the equivalent proportion among both Protestants and those with no religion was significantly lower at just 47 and 48 per cent, respectively. An equivalent, albeit converse pattern, emerges when perceptions of victimhood are restricted exclusively to ‘innocent’ victims of terrorist activities. While 76 per cent of victims within the Protestant community and 59 per cent of those with no religion supported this position, the equivalent proportion among Catholic victims was just 41 per cent.

Such differences are reproduced when opinions concerning the bereaved or those killed/injured as a result of the conflict are considered. For example, whereas 89 per cent of victims within the Catholic community endorse the view that all people who are bereaved as a result of the conflict should be considered a legitimate victim of ‘the Troubles’, the equivalent proportions among both Protestants and those who explicitly claimed no religion are markedly lower—64 per cent and 78 per cent, respectively—although still a majority position. Thus, at least as far as claims to victimhood among victims are concerned, it is those who have been bereaved as a result of the ‘Troubles’ who stand out as the most publicly acceptable face of who counts as a ‘true’ victim of the conflict. Irrespective of religious affiliation, the vast majority of victims—76 per cent in this instance—support such a position. This is in direct contrast to universalistic claims to victimhood—everyone in Northern Ireland—where just over half of all victims are willing to endorse this view.

Table 3: Religious Affiliation and Perceptions Concerning the Legitimacy of Victimhood among Victims

	(Percentages)			
	Protestant	Catholic	No Religion	All
Everyone in Northern Ireland:				
Disagree	35.5	27.3	42.5	33.9
Neither	18.0	12.6	9.4	14.8
Agree	46.6	60.1	48.1	52.3
(N)	(451)	(388)	(106)	(945)
All those bereaved:				
Disagree	24.1	7.8	18.1	16.6
Neither	11.7	2.8	3.8	7.1
Agree	64.2	89.4	78.1	76.3
(N)	(453)	(398)	(105)	(956)
All killed or injured:				
Disagree	33.0	13.7	34.6	25.3
Neither	12.9	3.9	9.6	8.8
Agree	54.1	82.4	55.8	65.9
(N)	(451)	(386)	(104)	(941)
Only innocent people:				
Disagree	16.5	48.1	34.9	31.6
Neither	7.9	11.2	5.7	9.0
Agree	75.6	40.7	59.4	59.4
(N)	(455)	(393)	(106)	(954)

Questions: There are many different views as to who should be categorised as victims of the troubles in Northern Ireland. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about victims of the troubles? All those people who were killed or injured as a result of the conflict should be seen as victims. All those people who were bereaved as a result of the conflict should be treated equally. Only innocent people who were victims of terrorism can be called true victims of the troubles. Everyone in Northern Ireland is a victim of the troubles.

Source: Northern Ireland Social and Political Attitudes Survey, 2011.

The second possible explanation for religious differences in support for truth recovery mechanisms rests with victims' general perceptions of how to deal with the past. For example, it has long been suggested that a key factor in accounting for support for some sort of truth recovery mechanism within the nationalist community, especially a truth commission, rests with their desire to not only vindicate the IRA's actions but also to draw a line under the past. In fact, as noted earlier, more so than any factor, it is this issue—the belief that republicans will use such mechanisms to expunge their culpability and rewrite history in their own interests—which has inflamed unionist opposition to a formal truth recovery mechanism. To what extent do similar divisions emerge when attitudes among victims are considered?

Table 4 addresses this question by focusing on two competing positions in relation to dealing with the past. We call the first silent repression, reflected in the wish not to open up old wounds by talking about what happened in the past, and the second

Table 4: Religious Affiliation and Attitudes among Victims Towards the Past

	(Percentages)			
	Protestant	Catholic	No Religion	All
Better not open old wounds:				
Agree	48.1	35.8	40.4	42.1
Neither	16.1	16.2	11.9	15.7
Disagree	35.8	48.0	47.7	42.3
(N)	(466)	(419)	(109)	(974)
Need to draw a line under the past:				
Agree	86.1	88.5	83.8	86.9
Neither	9.8	5.5	7.2	7.7
Disagree	4.1	6.0	9.0	5.4
(N)	(469)	(419)	(111)	(999)

Questions: To what extent do you agree with the following statements: It is better not to open old wounds by talking about what happened in the past; Northern Ireland will never move from the past to the future until everybody learns to draw a line under the past.

Source: Northern Ireland Social and Political Attitudes Survey, 2011.

active engagement, reflected in the preference to discuss and then draw a line under the past. Focusing initially on silent repression, the results in Table 4 are clear. As a group it is Protestants who stand out as the most reticent in talking about the past. For example, just under half of Protestant victims endorsed silence in relation to talking about the past as compared to around two fifths of those with no religion and only just over a third of Catholic victims. A similar, albeit much less pronounced, pattern emerges when attitudes towards a more active approach are considered. While the vast majority of victims across all three religious groupings supported such a position, Catholic victims were again the most favourable in their views; 89 per cent of Catholic victims expressed the need for Northern Ireland to draw a line under its past, as compared to 86 per cent of Protestant victims and 84 per cent among the non-affiliated. This is not to discount, however, the overwhelmingly support among victims in relation to this issue, the vast majority of whom wish to draw a line under the past.

We have, then, two major explanations that may account for religious differences in support for truth recovery mechanisms—differing perceptions of victimhood and general attitudes towards dealing with the past. To what extent do these two explanations account for victims' support for a range of mechanisms to deal with the legacy of Northern Ireland's violent past? Furthermore, are there any differences between the three religious groupings in relation to this issue? Table 5 addresses this question by undertaking three separate regression equations for Protestants, Catholics and the non-affiliated. In addition to perceptions of victimhood and general attitudes towards the past, the results also control for a range of potentially confounding background variables, such as socio-demographic background and identity.

Table 5: Predictors of Victim Support for Approaches to Deal with the Legacy of the Past

	(Regression Coefficients: OLS)					
	Protestants		Catholics		No religion	
	b	beta	b	beta	b	beta
<i>Control variables:</i>						
Male	-0.01	-0.04	-0.04**	-0.14	0.02	0.05
Married	-0.02	-0.05	-0.02	-0.07	0.07	0.17
Age (years)	-0.01**	-0.16	-0.01	-0.08	-0.01**	-0.28
Education:						
Tertiary [†]	-	-	-	-	-	-
Secondary	-0.02	-0.04	0.01	0.04	-0.03	-0.07
No qualification	0.02	0.06	0.05	0.13	0.06	0.09
British/Irish	-0.02	-0.05	0.04	0.10	-0.07	-0.17
Unionist/Nationalist	0.02	0.05	0.04*	0.13	0.02	0.04
Victims (restrictive)	-0.24**	-0.25	-0.07	-0.07	-0.51**	-0.57
Attitudes towards the past:						
Not open old wounds (disagree)	0.04	0.07	0.11**	0.20	-0.06	-0.08
Need to draw a line (agree)	0.06	0.07	0.16**	0.20	-0.16*	-0.17
Constant	0.787**		0.651**		1.159**	
R-squared	0.121		0.144		0.458	
(N)	(416)		(369)		(98)	

Notes: Attitudes towards how to deal with the legacy of the troubles are all coded from 0 (least supportive) to 1 (most supportive); perceptions of victims are coded from 0 (most inclusive) to 1 (most restrictive).

* Significant at the 0.05 level.

** Significant at the 0.01 level.

[†] Missing category of comparison.

Source: Northern Ireland Social and Political Attitudes Survey, 2011.

The results in Table 5 lend some support for both explanations. Even when a range of control variables are included in the model, both perceptions of victimhood¹⁰ and general attitudes towards dealing with the past emerge as significant predictors of support for the proposed mechanisms to deal with the violent legacy of Northern Ireland's past. This is not to deny, however, some important differences between the three religious groupings in relation to this issue. While perceptions of victimhood emerge as the key distinguishing factor for victims within the Protestant community, as well as among the non-affiliated, it is attitude towards the past, and not perceptions of victimhood, which is the key determinant of Catholic views.¹¹

Focusing initially on victims within the Protestant community, the results are clear. The primary predictor of attitudes in this instance is perceptions of victimhood. More specifically, individuals who hold a restrictive view of victimhood are significantly less likely to support such initiatives than those who do not. More so than

any other factor, it is this issue—perceptions concerning the legitimacy of victimhood—that divides victims within the Protestant community in terms of their attitudes towards how to deal with the legacy of Northern Ireland's violent past. This is not to suggest, however, that views on victimhood are the sole determinant of attitudes in this instance. Another, albeit much more secondary, influence is age. As a group, older Protestant victims are significantly less like to approve of such mechanisms than their younger counterparts.

An identical, albeit converse, result emerges when victims within the Catholic community are considered. Here it is general views on how to address the past, and not perceptions of victimhood, which emerges as the key predictor of views. Individuals who express a willingness to deal with the past are significantly more likely to support such initiatives than those who do not. Moreover, this relationship remains regardless of whether we consider a rejection of the silent repression approach (not open old wounds) or an active engagement with the past (the need to draw a line). However, victims' views on how to deal with the past are not the sole determinant of attitudes in this instance. Other more secondary influences include the negative effect of gender and the positive effect of identity.

Finally, when victims among the non-affiliated are considered, it is again perceptions of victimhood which emerges as by far the strongest determinant of views. In parallel with victims within the Protestant community, individuals who hold a restrictive view of victimhood are significantly less likely to support such initiatives than those who do not. Again, this is not to suggest that views on victimhood are the sole determinant of attitudes in this instance. Other secondary influences include the negative effects of age as well as a belief that a line needs to be drawn under the past. Thus, for non-affiliated victims at least, and unlike their Catholic counterparts, it is those who wish to draw a line under the past that are the most negative in their views. What may explain this finding? Part of an explanation, we suggest, may rest with the predominantly Protestant origins of the non-affiliated, who although recognising the need to address the past remain highly sceptical of the use of such measures, fearing that they will be hijacked by republicans to validate their actions and rewrite history to suit their own interests.

Conclusion

The past is ephemeral, with the actual past filtered through natural processes of selection, forgetting and misremembering, leaving us with a remembered past that can be significantly different from what actually happened. Truth recovery can deliver only an approximation to the actual past, which has led to a proliferation of different mechanisms that try to get at the truth of what happened. These vary from the use of retributive truth recovery mechanisms (trials and prosecutions) in Estonia, restorative measures (truth commissions) in Columbia, to a combination of both trials and a truth commission in Rwanda and in South Africa (see Olsen et al. 2010, 181–188). Even though the actual past is rarely exposed by these processes, the attention given to recovering people's remembered past is itself thought by truth recovery professionals to be salutary and healing, particularly when the issue of formal truth recovery mechanisms, such as a truth commission, is considered. But do victims share the positive views of truth recovery specialists? While the

results of this study do not provide a definitive answer, they do suggest that in the case of Northern Ireland the question of how to deal with the legacy of its past remains a controversial and complex issue generating deep division as well as some agreement along communal lines.

Our evidence in support of this claim is twofold. First, the results show that there is overwhelming agreement amongst all victims that victims should be supported with focused initiatives. There is also very strong support across the communal divide for unofficial approaches, such as community-based local initiatives. This is not the case when formal truth recovery mechanisms—such as truth commissions and public inquiries—are considered. Here support among victims remains either lukewarm (truth commissions) or extremely limited (more public inquiries) at best. Moreover, there are also some stark differences between the various religious groupings particularly in relation to this issue, with victims from within the Protestant community as well as among the non-affiliated, being significantly less likely to endorse such formal truth recovery initiatives than their Catholic counterparts. This is not to deny, however, the consistently lower levels of support for all six approaches among Protestants and the non-affiliated in comparison to their Catholic counterparts.

Second, the results also show that while both perceptions of victimhood and general attitudes towards the past are the key determinants of victims' views in relation to truth recovery mechanisms, their effects differ across the various religious groupings. While perception of victimhood is the key predictor of opinion within both the Protestant community and among the non-affiliated, it is general attitudes towards the past which emerges as the major determinant of Catholic views. In fact, more so than any other factor, it is this issue—a hierarchical approach to victimhood—which accounts for the lack of Protestant support for the introduction of range of truth recovery mechanisms to deal with the legacy of the past. By contrast, it is general opinions on how to deal with the past, and not perceptions of victimhood, which emerge as the key determinant of Catholic views. Despite the high levels of support across the communal divide for a direct engagement with the past, only in relation to the Catholic community does such support emerge as a positive and significant predictor of views.

Overall, the results of this investigation point to the need to develop both a victim-led and victim-centred approach to dealing with the legacy of Northern Ireland's violent past. Such an approach should be a bottom-up initiative, reflecting victims' priorities and preferences. The results of this study suggest that a comprehensive package of financial support to meet the material and social needs of victims would be a fruitful and unifying place to start. Not only would such a package reflect the priorities of victims themselves but it would also command clear majority support across the various religious groupings. Moreover, it might also help to ameliorate divisions resulting from competing claims to victimhood, themselves derivative of a zero-sum response to perceptions of limited resources. However, the recent response from the British government to requests for additional monies for victims—including those proposed by Richard Haass,¹²—that they must be met from existing budgets, suggests that this will not be an easy task.

The results also suggest that this comprehensive package of financial support needs to be combined with a truth recovery mechanism to assist victims to come to terms with the legacy of Northern Ireland's past. However, contrary to views of truth recovery specialists who favour formal truth recovery mechanisms, such as truth commissions, the results suggest that a concentration on informal or local community-based measures would command the most support. Not only would such an approach reflect the preferences of victims themselves but it would also find support from across the communal divide as an acceptable mechanism to deal with the bloody legacy of Northern Ireland's past.

The results have a number of implications for other societies emerging from conflict. First, a successful peace settlement must recognise both the needs and priorities of victims in terms of dealing with the injustices inflicted on them in the past. As the lessons from Northern Ireland warn us, although shelving the needs and rights of victims for the sake of political progress can in the short term aid political negotiations, the sense of injustice and grievance experienced by victims will remain intact and will continue to act as a destabilising and regressive force within society at large. Secondly, any attempt to deal with the legacy of a violent past must adopt a bottom-up and victim-led approach which reflects both the priorities and needs of victims. Thirdly, the results suggest a mismatch between the views of truth recovery specialists and the priorities of victims. Finally, politicians and leaders in civil society must adopt a responsive and victim-centred approach in dealing with the legacy of a violent past. The constant hijacking of victim issues for partisan political gain, which also reflects a mismatch between the views of the political elite and the priorities of victims, can do little to progress victim issues.

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Notes

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1. Launched in January 2006 as a separate unit of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the purpose of the HET is to re-examine all deaths attributable to the violence during the period 1968–1999, currently estimated at 3,268 cases (see Lundy 2011). However a recent evaluation of the unit was highly critical of its operation and suggested that former British soldiers were being treated much more favourably as compared to non-state or paramilitary suspects (see Lundy 2012). A view which also found support under proposals suggested by Richard Haass—the former US diplomat who chaired the most recent, albeit failed, multiparty talks in December 2013—which suggested replacing this body with a single unit—the Historical Investigative Unit (HIU)—with additional powers (see Haass 2013, 25–28).
2. The ICLVR was established in 1999 in order to locate the remains of 16 people, referred to colloquially as 'the disappeared'. All had gone missing as a result of their believed abduction and murder by the IRA. To date, nine bodies have been recovered.
3. To date, there have been a number of judicial inquiries—Stevens (2003), Cory (2004) and Saville (2010)—into the role the security forces. Of these judicial inquiries, the Saville Inquiry, otherwise known as the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, was the most profligate and extensive, running for 12 years

and costing £195 million. It investigated the killing of 14 people in Londonderry in 1972 by the British army, while both the Stevens and Cory inquiries concentrated primarily on alleged collusion between the security forces and loyalists paramilitaries in the deaths of Catholic civilians. The Stevens and Cory reports supported claims of collusion, and the Saville Inquiry laid the responsibility for the deaths of civilians firmly with the British army. However, as of yet, no prosecutions have taken place of police or army personnel.

4. Formally launched in 2001, the HTR project includes individuals drawn from a wide range of political, social and community backgrounds whose primary aim is to consider how best to deal with the past. After extensive consultations, it identified 14 key approaches to dealing with the past. Along with storytelling and oral history, memorial, museums, public and collective commemorations, and a financial response for victims, it also recommended that a formal truth recovery process should be considered, though only as one part of dealing with the past (see Hamber 2008).
5. As Connolly (2006, 421–422) notes, not only did the Bloomfield Report devote only two paragraphs to victims killed by state actors, but also it made no recommendations as to how the gap in accountability for state-violence should be addressed. By contrast, it explicitly affirmed the ‘innocence’ of the police, soldiers, employees of the prison service and other state agents who died in the conflict.
6. Approximately 350 people, or 10 per cent of those killed during the Northern Ireland conflict, were killed by state security forces, the vast majority of whom—85 per cent—were Catholic. The major perpetrators of such deaths, accounting for over 82 per cent of the total number killed, was the British army (see Ní Aoláin 2000).
7. They also demonstrate a high reliability, producing a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.77.
8. Further investigation suggest that these religious differences in findings remain when those who reported multiple (both direct and indirect) and singular (either direct or indirect) experiences of victimisation were considered separately in the analysis. In both cases, Protestants and those with no religious affiliation were notably less likely to support these initiatives than Catholics.
9. A not-unexpected finding given the large proportion of individuals—72 per cent in this instance—who claim to have experienced victimisation, either directly, indirectly, or both, within the general adult population.
10. Factor analysis demonstrated that these four items form one overall scale that is unidimensional in nature. They also demonstrate a high reliability, producing a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.65.
11. These results were replicated when those who reported multiple (both direct and indirect) and singular (either direct or indirect) experiences of victimisation were considered separately in the analysis. In both cases, whereas perceptions of victimhood emerged as the key predictor of attitudes within the Protestant community, it was their willingness to engage actively with the past, and not perceptions of victimhood, which emerged as the primary predictor of Catholic views.
12. In addition to calling for greater support for the existing Victims and Survivor Service (VSS) which was established in 2012 to provide assistance to those affected by the conflict, the proposals also advocated the establishment and funding of a comprehensive Mental Trauma Service to attend to the substantial unmet need of victims in the area of high quality mental health care (see Haass 2013, 21).

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Appendix

Table A1: Religion and the Nature and Extent of Victimization

	Percentages			
	Protestant	Catholic	No religion	All
Direct victimisation:				
Intimidated	20.8	34.4	40.8	28.9
Victim of violent incident	19.7	21.2	28.0	21.3
Indirect victimisation:				
Family member/relative killed or injured	36.1	33.7	43.3	35.9
Know someone killed/injured	62.3	59.4	58.9	60.7
[Total]	[73.4]	[70.9]	[69.3]	[71.9]

Questions: The questions were: 'As a result of the troubles, were you or your family ever intimidated?'; 'Were you a victim of any conflict-related violent incidents?'; 'Were any of your family or close relatives killed or injured because of the violence?'; 'Do you know anyone (not family or relatives) who were killed or injured in the violence?'.

Notes: Total includes those who have experienced either direct and/or indirect victimization.

Source: Northern Ireland Social and Political Attitudes Survey, 2011.