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Responding to Inter-Communal Violence in Belfast

Context

- Paramilitary ceasefires in 1994
  - Peace agreement signed 1998

- High levels of residential segregation
  - Protestant / British unionists
  - Catholic / Irish nationalists

- Tensions between communities
  - Particularly during summer 'Marching Season'

- Police seen as partisan
  - Particularly by Catholics

Violent Summer of 1996

- Week of rioting across NI
  - Protests against Orange parades
  - Houses attacked, people forced to move

- Police had limited support
  - Provocative and militaristic

- Community workers struggled
  - No way of communicating
  - Rumours sparked fears

Response for 1997

- Create networks of activists
    - Among Protestants and Catholics
    - Between Protestants and Catholics

- Linked together via mobile phones
    - New and novel technology

- Agree to work together
    - Respond to rising tensions

Methods

- People physically present on streets
  - Often through the night, and night after night

- Deterring people from hanging around

- Communicating with others in network
  - Countering rumours
  - Dispersing crowds

- Liaising with statutory agencies
  - Some contacts with police

Short-term Impacts

- Helped reduce tensions
  - Calming presence

- Helped limit violence
  - Fewer people on streets

- Built better relations between
  - Catholics and Protestant activists
  - Activists and police

Longer-term Impacts

- Model adopted in areas across NI
  - Mobile-Phone Networks now ubiquitous

- Consolidated community networks

- Built relations and trust with police
  - Police increasingly rely on activists

- A slow & sustained process
  - No quick fixes

Ongoing Violence, North Belfast

Year	Riots	Disturbances
1996	90	
1997	73	
1998	67	
1999	86	
2000	0	364
2001	59	328
2002/03	0	104
2003/04	1	225
Total	376	1,021

Recurrent tensions

- Annual marching season still problematic
  - Reacts to wider political context

- Violence now largely contained
  - One major flashpoint in Belfast
  - Little impact on other areas
  - Usually only one day/evening

Wider Context of Police Reform

- Reform of policing part of peace agreement
  - Need to build trust and legitimacy

- PSNI established 2001

- New approach based on:
  - Human rights
  - Accountability
  - Policing with the community

- 'Policing too important for police alone'

Policing <u>by</u> the community

- Concerns over citizen involvement in policing
  - Vigilantism

- Diverse community based approaches in NI
  - Mobile phone networks
  - Independent monitoring projects
  - Independent mediators
  - Stewards and marshals
  - Community–based restorative justice