Has intergenerational trauma from ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland had an impact on the development of addictions?

By Jenna Barr, Masters graduate in Applied Psychology (Addictions)

Northern Ireland is a region that has experienced decades-long civil unrest, colloquially termed ‘The Troubles’ and is currently experiencing high levels of social problems, such as addiction. During The Troubles, conflict escalated between Irish Republicans and Loyalists over British rule and the unification of Northern Ireland with the United Kingdom. For my Masters dissertation, I have been conducting research which indicates that trauma from The Troubles has had a transgenerational impact on the mental health of subsequent generations. I will be giving a presentation on my study at the UK Political Psychology online conference in February.

Presenting this evidence coincides with the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday on January 30, 2022. Bloody Sunday was an event which took place in The Bog Side of Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland when thirteen unarmed civil rights demonstrators were murdered by British Army paratroopers, as recalled by a number of those who took part in the study.

Intergenerational trauma – also known as transgenerational trauma – is a form of psychological trauma passed down through generations, families, and communities, either directly or indirectly (Isobel, Goodyear, Furness and Foster, 2018). Intergenerational trauma results in the effects being experienced without exposure to the original traumatic experience or event (Hesse and Main, 2000). It can have significant implications for individuals and cause a predisposition to other secondary traumas (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999).

Despite early research concluding that The Troubles had little impact on children (Cairns and Wilson, 1984), more recent studies have shifted their focus on the potential traumatisation in the children of traumatised individuals (Bowers and Yehuda, 2016). Findings from such studies have been widely supported by research on the children of survivors of the Rwandan genocide (Daneli, 1998) and the Holocaust, where participants reported a greater degree of lifetime stress and results showed a significant increase in prevalence of both current and lifetime post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychiatric disorders when compared with other groups (Yehuda, Schneider, Wainberg, Binder-Brynes and Duvdevani, 1998).

Northern Ireland currently has the highest rates of suicide within the United Kingdom and individuals in this region experience 20 to 25 per cent higher levels of mental health problems than the rest of the UK (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2020). Evidence has demonstrated a continued increase in deaths by suicide since records began in 1970, during which The Troubles in Northern Ireland were at its early stages (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2020).

The McKinsey Report, which focused on reforming health and social care in Northern Ireland, noted that the region spent less than half of England’s per-capita expenditure on mental health problems and access to specialised support is complicated by the lack of service provision.
This study sought to investigate a link between The Troubles and substance use disorders. Building on existing work, it aimed to explore if intergenerational trauma from The Troubles in Northern Ireland has had an impact on the development of addictions. Based on a review of the literature on The Troubles and considering theories of addiction and trauma, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants from both Catholic and Protestant communities to examine experiences in further detail.

Analysis of responses demonstrated that The Troubles has had an intergenerational impact on the development of addictions. The results highlighted addiction as a major problem and the key themes that presented themselves are personal substance misuse, familial substance misuse, community substance misuse, direct and indirect impact from The Troubles, lack of support services, addiction as a public health issue and the lasting impact on the region today. On this basis, it is recommended that substance use disorders and mental health problems are treated in tandem, and a trauma-informed approach is taken in political decision-making, specifically targeting, and investing in areas that have been most affected by The Troubles and addictions.

References


