# Community Experiences of Sectarianism

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This study explored community experiences and perceptions of sectarianism and is based on qualitative research within five case study areas across Scotland. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with members of the public in Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, North Lanarkshire and the Western Isles between June and December 2014. The insights obtained provide depth and context to other research about sectarianism, including quantitative survey and national criminal offending data

## Main Findings

- A key theme was that many participants were unused to discussing sectarianism in everyday conversation, and a few were unsure of what the term meant. Many were more fluent when discussing racism: there seems to be a 'discursive deficit' relating to sectarianism particularly (compared to other forms of prejudice and discrimination).

- Experiences of sectarianism were found across all the communities, to differing degrees. Several participants said it was not a problem in their communities. Some said they were unaware of how much there was, because their background and lifestyle enabled them to avoid it. It also seemed that some who had had sectarian experiences themselves had not told others about them.

- Others appeared to 'normalise' it, saying at first that they encountered little but then later on changing their minds and describing common, even frequent experiences as being sectarian. A few said they suffered what could be described as 'virulent' sectarianism frequently.

- Sectarianism was not perceived as happening everywhere. Specific places and times were commonly mentioned, such as public drinking, football, and Loyalist and Irish Republican processions. Celtic and Rangers' rivalry was most frequently identified. Many highlighted this as both a source and a means to understand a person's cultural, religious and political background.

- There was a strong gender element to people's experiences of sectarianism. It was striking how often participants spoke about men rather than women as the cause; both sexes as the victims. Typically, what they described was bigotry such as violence, abuse or offensive behaviour.

- Despite rapid changes in Scottish society across generations, many participants highlighted the role of families and older generations in transmitting beliefs, particularly 'bitter' sectarianism: more deep-seated and virulent, as opposed to more 'casual' forms (i.e. the careless use of offensive language, which was seen as declining). Sometimes this was done by grandparents, not parents.

- Many still found sectarian significance in particular markers of group identity such as songs, clothing, school and names. These were not necessarily understood Scotland-wide, however, and all of these distinctions were cut across by age, gender and football affiliation among others.

- Suggested solutions included education and tackling poverty, and were often local. In the Western Isles, close religious relationships among neighbours were thought to be helpful. In urban life, changing populations and a secular way of life were said to diminish old divisions.

The Scottish Government
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## Introduction

In November 2013, the independent Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism in Scotland issued a report on developing work to tackle the problem. As part of this, they recommended further research to guide future policy. They identified gaps where evidence was lacking. Their report highlighted a need to explore if and how sectarianism affects particular communities, and how it may form part of everyday experience. The Scottish Government then commissioned a set of research projects, including this one.

This report offers a more detailed account of communities' perceptions of the scale and nature of sectarianism in some under-researched areas of Scotland than has been available before now. These include places where distinct Catholic and Protestant communities live, either separately or side-by-side. This report examines experiences both in areas where sectarianism appears still to persist and where it seems to be less of a problem. The report also offers insights into how these communities believe they can be strengthened to tackle sectarianism in its various manifestations.

## Methods

The methods used were qualitative: the team chose five case study sites across Scotland then visited a smaller geographical community within each one, meeting people who had social connections with each other. 35 interviews and 8 focus groups were carried out, lasting between 45 minutes and 2 hours.

The purpose of the study was not to provide a representative estimate of numbers of sectarian incidents and where they take place. Rather, the aim was to hear from a diverse group of participants, who gave up their time to talk in depth about their experiences and thoughts.

Those who took part were adults of all ages (including young parents). They included men and women of many religious and minority ethnic backgrounds, heterosexual and LGBT, with and without disabilities and from diverse educational backgrounds. Some were living in poverty, suffering lifelong social exclusion; others lived in affluent areas and had high-earning careers (e.g. doctor, solicitor). Most were somewhere between these.

One of the challenges of the topic and title of the research was that the subject is so negative. Potential participants were being asked to speak about, and perhaps criticise, their own local community. The team therefore focused on meeting people through the 'snowball' method: building trust by contacting local hubs of social activity and explaining the project to people there who would introduce the team to others with a wide range of life experiences. The team also emphasised that the project was designed to explore both the existence and absence of sectarianism.

Personal stories about nebulous problems (such as sectarianism) are sometimes best understood as part of individual and community narratives, or much of their meaning is lost. The team therefore spent time researching local histories and meeting people who had social connections to each other. A specialist in narrative analysis also took part in the team, with the task of looking for further insights in the way that people told their stories.

Although using a pre-prepared set of questions, where it seemed appropriate, the team encouraged people to tell stories and take the discussion in the direction that most interested them. As a result, many of the findings were not what the team had expected.

## Main Findings

Many participants said they were not used to discussing sectarianism, and a few were unsure what the term meant. Many seemed to be more fluent when discussing racism. Thus there appears to be a 'discursive deficit' in relation to this issue. In a couple of cases, participants did not even remember a very serious personal experience of sectarianism until late into the interview, then spoke about it hesitantly. Some of those who had had sectarian experiences appeared to be unused to talking about them, and it seemed that they had not told others about their experiences.

The team did find various experiences of sectarianism across all the case study communities, but to differing degrees. This 'discursive deficit' was however to be found across all the areas visited. It was not clear why, but several possible explanations emerged in conversation.

In some places, this may be because people did not experience sectarianism at all: some said it was not a problem within their community. Others however said that they were probably unaware of it because they did not feel they themselves were likely to be targeted, or because they led lives where they did not encounter it. This 'social indifference' can be positive if it means that Scotland is moving beyond sectarianism, or more worrying if it means that those who can avoid it take no interest in the problem.

Many said that religion and ethnicity were not important, in their everyday lives, and even some participants who were religious said they saw religion as a private matter. However some expressed the view that sectarianism was not seen as a suitable topic to speak about, even in private conversation. Others had developed strategies to avoid encountering what they saw as sectarian places or events, or concealed parts of their identity (such as school or family background).

For some, there seemed to be a process of 'normalisation' happening: when asked directly about sectarianism, they said they encountered little of it, yet then went on to describe significant and frequent problems, to which they ascribed ethno-religious reasons (anti-Irish, anti-Catholic, anti-Protestant, and such like). Sometimes, talking about these one by one, they would at that point describe them as sectarian.

Such stories indicate the contribution of qualitative research methods, where participants can be asked more about what they recall, to examine the extent to which those opinions are stable. They also perhaps reveal the limitations of past research on sectarianism that took participants' first response as their final response.

A small number of participants described how they faced what might be described as 'virulent' sectarianism frequently, because of their job (i.e. working in certain bars). Few said they had personally suffered discrimination such as in the workplace (one example is described in the full report). However, some named particular organisations where they had heard this still happened. This in itself may impact on individuals' decisions about where to apply for work and where to avoid.

Rather, most stories were of violence, abuse, offensive behaviour or something more subtle. A few participants, though, spoke about sectarianism as something that could be found at the level of local government, and some said the problem was made worse by being represented as part of the 'Scottish character' in the broadcast and news media.

Sectarianism was not seen as happening everywhere. There were specific places and times that research participants flagged up as increasing the likelihood of them experiencing it. Often, they described it as happening in 'pockets', which could be areas of a town but also individual places or flash incidents at particular times. Alcohol was frequently cited as an aggravating factor causing sectarian behaviour to spill out of contained spaces.

On the days on which football matches happened (particularly those involving Celtic and Rangers), many said they were cautious about visiting city centres or going near specific pubs, and some avoided public transport. Marches and parades (whether Loyalist, Irish Republican or both) were also mentioned frequently. Participants expressed a lot of animosity toward these. However, the negative perceptions were mostly related to marches and parades perceived as traditional 'flash points' for sectarian conflict. Social media, online environments, and email were other locations where many participants recalled experiences of sectarianism.

These places and events were often ones associated with masculine cultures. It was striking how often participants spoke about men rather than women as the cause of sectarianism, with both women and men identified as victims. Stories about sectarian jokes and abuse were usually about men engaging in unsolicited behaviour, often in public places such as shops or public transport.

Whether jokes and banter were acceptable, many participants said, depended on the intention and the context. A joke made to friends, intended to be inclusive, would be less likely to be sectarian. If it was designed to be exclusive, or to justify one way of life as better than another, it was more likely to be sectarian.

Songs were often mentioned by our participants as having a particular power to create sectarian meaning. This included not just the literal words, but also where a song was sung or the way it was sung (such as a meaningful pause in a song that hinted at missing sectarian words), or even the tune. Such interpretations are not just assumed by individuals, but are shared and understood across different social groups.

Many still found sectarian significance in particular markers of group identity such as the colour of clothing, songs, tunes and flags, a school attended, and a surname and its spelling. These were not necessarily understood Scotland-wide, however, and all these distinctions were cut across by such things as age, gender and football affiliation.

Discussions about sectarian family influences also tended to focus on men, although women were involved in this too. Many participants highlighted the role of families and of older generations in transmitting sectarian beliefs, particularly when these involved what some described as 'bitter' (more deep-seated, virulent) sectarianism. Sometimes this was done by grandparents rather than parents.

The rivalry between Celtic and Rangers was the issue most associated with sectarianism among our participants. Many spoke of this rivalry being used as a means to understand a person's cultural, religious, and political background, especially in west-central Scotland. Some supporters in other towns said that they would not go to Glasgow to see their own team play Rangers or Celtic because they expected to encounter sectarian aggression.

The rivalry of Celtic, Rangers, other teams and their fans is a sporting rivalry, and not always sectarian in nature. However, many participants argued that the two issues were so intertwined that they could not be separated.

The focus on these two teams may skew people's understandings of sectarianism. It disguises the fact that being Catholic or Irish is a minority heritage in Scotland, but it also disguises the changing status of religion in Scotland, where many people no longer see themselves as religious and no longer see others' religious backgrounds as significant to their identity. Many participants in this research who were religious said they did not see religion as something to assert in public life except as a source of personal moral guidance, and they did not judge others by it. Some of the most religious participants belonged to religious communities which worked very hard at developing good relationships with other religious groups in the near neighbourhood

## Conclusions

To consider certain incidents merely as unusual or exceptional is to discount what appears to be a lack of social support in some communities to discuss such experiences. This can make the impact of the incidents more severe, and also lead the victim to suppress or reclassify their memories. One issue for communities is not simply how much sectarianism there is, or how serious the incidents appear, but how it is spoken about and dealt with.

Sectarianism in Scotland, where it occurs, is not confined to particular communities. It does however seem to happen often at particular times in particular places, often those dominated by men. Education and tackling poverty were frequently mentioned as the long-term solutions to eradicate it, particularly among young people.

Otherwise, the solutions that participants identified were often local ones rather than necessarily applicable Scotland-wide. In the Western Isles, it was the close relationships between the long-standing religious communities, in their own local area, that several participants saw as preventing and reducing the effect of sectarianism. Elsewhere, several participants in towns and cities said that the constantly changing populations in their area had diluted older sectarian identities and values.

If one result of the 'discursive deficit' is that people tend not to talk about experiences of sectarianism, then this may make it difficult for anti-sectarian initiatives to attract community support. In such cases, a local approach may be helpful. What communities also need, however, seems to be more open discussion in everyday life about what sectarianism is and where it remains, going beyond the context of football, marches and parades.

GOVERNMENT SOCIAL RESEARCH

Social Science in Government