



ACLED Methodology and Coding Decisions around Political Violence and Demonstrations in Northern Ireland

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Background

Northern Ireland has a long history of conflict. The most recent violent period is known as ‘the Troubles’, which started in the late 1960s and ended with the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Over this period, an estimated 3,500 people were killed and 40,000 injured ([NI Direct, 2019](#)). The conflict is largely considered to have been sparked by disproportionate use of state force against protesters at civil rights marches in Derry/Londonderry, where the minority Catholic/Nationalist community mobilized to demand fairer representation in the Protestant/Unionist-dominated Northern Irish state and to oppose repressive policing by the Royal Ulster Constabulary.¹ The growth and sophistication of Catholic/Republican and Protestant/Loyalist paramilitary organizations in the early 1970s sustained and intensified the conflict into the 1990s. The conflict intensified to involve bombings and guerilla-style armed conflict between paramilitary organizations and state forces. Now, over 20 years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and after the start of the ceasefires, Northern Ireland hosts a number of militias -- as holdovers of former paramilitaries, ‘sectarian’ violence, and a distinctly political parading tradition.

Presently, locally-based militias dominate Northern Ireland’s organized drug crime, engage in violent attacks against civilians and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), and engage in journalist intimidation ([BBC News, 28 November 2020](#)). These groups, often composed of individuals from now disbanded and “proscribed” organizations, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Loyalist groups including the Ulster Defense Force (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), “continue to engage in violent activity to intimidate and exercise control in communities where they operate” ([Alderdice, McBurney and McWilliams, 2016](#)). While some of this violence is political in nature, most is criminal. ACLED’s mandate is to collect incidents of political violence, and therefore criminal violence falls outside of its scope.

Relatedly, Northern Ireland, much like the rest of Europe, has a long history of street demonstration and protest. However, demonstrations in Northern Ireland include ‘contentious’ parades, technically considered commemorations. These parades are seen as demonstrations given their distinct sectarian or ethnonationalist symbolism and subsequent risk of disorder in so-called interface areas, mostly in North and East Belfast.

How are locations coded in Northern Ireland?

ACLED provides up to three administrative divisions for each of its country datasets. Typically, these levels are based off of official administrative boundaries. In some cases, official boundaries may not exist for higher level divisions. In other cases, ACLED may forgo including higher level divisions if they are deemed to be unuseful.

Although the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as a state within the United Kingdom remains a key source of political discontent, in line with the legal name of the region used by both

¹ Ellison, G. and Smyth, J. (2000) *The Crowned Harp: Policing Northern Ireland*. Pluto Press: London.



the British and Irish governments, international governments around the world, and most of the inhabitants of the region, Northern Ireland is coded as an Admin1 within the United Kingdom, as outlined below:

COUNTRY: United Kingdom

ADMIN 1: Northern Ireland

ADMIN 2: District

ADMIN 3: *Not Applicable* (ACLED does not code ADMIN 3 in the UK)

LOCATION: A populated place (city, village, etc.), **natural landmark** (hill or mountain, bay, etc.), **or a distinct location outside the borders of a population center** (military bases, rural airports, etc.)

Are there locations in Northern Ireland coded below the city level?

ACLED's Northern Ireland data do not disaggregate the location below the city/town level. This means that the location column always features the name of the city (e.g. Belfast or Derry). However, the *Notes* column will often contain more specific information about the sub-city location when available (e.g. "Short Strand, east Belfast").

How does ACLED code certain actors in Northern Ireland?

A number of unique actors are present in the Northern Ireland data, among them sub-divisions of security forces, and sectarian militia groups (locally referred to as 'paramilitaries').

All actors in Northern Ireland are categorized with the label "(Northern Ireland)", rather than "(United Kingdom)" or "(Ireland)". This is because the legal stipulations of the Good Friday Agreement acknowledge that the North of Ireland is a unique geopolitical entity, with sovereignty similar to other countries in the United Kingdom, and oversight from both the Republic of Ireland and the Government of the United Kingdom. The area is not solely and completely under the administration of the United Kingdom or its respective authorities. Given that unique status, its agents therein are ascribed with this location categorization, and it applies to security forces and generic actor names, such as Rioters, Protesters, Civilians, and Unidentified Armed Groups.

Security Forces in Northern Ireland

ACLED codes specific sub-groups of state forces in cases when it is deemed analytically useful. In the case of sub-regions within nations which retain a significant level of security autonomy, the



local police actors are used as the standard police actors. In Northern Ireland, police are coded as **Police Forces of the United Kingdom (2010-) Police Service of Northern Ireland**. In rare cases, military actors may be included in events within Northern Ireland; in such instances the Military Forces of the United Kingdom (2010-) actor would be used since Northern Ireland does not have an independent military force.

Militias in Northern Ireland²

Non-state armed and organized violence in Northern Ireland is dominated by militia³ groups who fight along sectarian 'Republican' and 'Loyalist' lines, and stage attacks on state forces and members of other armed groups. These groups are often referred to as 'paramilitary groups' by others. However, ACLED uses the term 'paramilitary' to refer to groups with a direct link to the state. In this way, these groups, who do not have direct, formal links to a state, are not categorized as such by ACLED; rather, they are categorized as 'political militias'.

While these groups are known to have political objectives, publish manifestos, and claim responsibility for certain attacks, and may have political wings and/or deep connections to political parties, they are also known to conduct violence against civilians to support their activities, and engage in 'vigilante-style policing' of their respective territories. The former meets ACLED's threshold of political violence; this means that cases in which such groups target saliently political actors -- such as politicians, journalists, sectarian rivals, etc. -- would be coded. The latter, meanwhile, is not necessarily always political. In cases where the violence is perpetrated by sectarian groups (e.g. Republicans or Loyalists) and reporting specifically notes such identities of the two actors (e.g. perpetrator and victim), the violence is understood to be political. As such, it is coded by ACLED given that sectarian identity is salient to the event; given the cleavages between these groups in this region, sectarian identity is a salient identity in political violence in Northern Ireland. However, in cases where reporting does not note such sectarian identities, such identities are assumed to not be salient to the event, and the violence is assumed to be criminal in nature (and hence outside of ACLED's mandate).

² Militia groups in this region are often referred to as 'paramilitary groups'. ACLED uses the term 'paramilitary' to refer to groups with a direct link to the state. In this way, these groups, who do not have direct, formal links to a state, are not categorized as such by ACLED; rather, they are categorized as 'political militias' (for more, see: Raleigh & Kishi, 2018). Raleigh, C., & Kishi, R. (2018). Hired Guns: Using Pro-Government Militias for Political Competition. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32(3), 582-603.

³ Around the world, ACLED defines militias, which are a large and diverse range of actors, as armed and organized violent groups which are not formally affiliated with a state – though some may be pro-government with indirect links to a state (for more, see: Raleigh & Kishi, 2018). ACLED chooses to use the same terminology – the word 'militia' – for all regions of global coverage, particularly to underline the consistencies in the activities and incentives of such actors across geographic regions. For more on ACLED definitions, see [the ACLED Codebook](#).



In both journalistic and government reporting, the phrase “paramilitary-style attack” will often be used to imply the involvement of these militia groups.⁴ There are established modus operandi that one could use to link a certain injury or weapon to the involvement of such militia groups. These include injuries to the knee(s), thigh, ankles, arms, head,⁵ often relying on weapons such as baseball bats, sledgehammers, and iron bars.⁶ While such signatures can be used to identify events involving such militia groups, only reports in which the source specifically notes the sectarian affiliations of actors are coded by ACLED (i.e. the event is assumed to be sectarian violence, which is seen as political violence).

Where possible, ACLED will code the specific actor name for such militia groups -- for example, the **P-IRA: Provisional IRA** -- when known. However, the identification of these groups as perpetrators of specific attacks, of which the vast majority go unclaimed, is difficult for several reasons. Journalists are careful not to wrongly accuse groups of activity for reasons of personal security. Similarly, government organizations are also careful when designating perpetrators of attacks due to the political sensitivities involved. For these reasons, ACLED often defaults to general actor names, depending on the level of information. In cases where the specific group is unnamed, yet the sectarian faction is known or heavily suspected, the **Loyalist Militia** and **Republican Militia** actors are used. Beyond direct mention of “Loyalist” or “Republican” by the source, the above actors are also used in cases when the group in question is described as either nationalist/Catholic or unionist/Protestant, respectively, or when an event occurs within the context of a specific sectarian event, such as a parade/march, or within a string of similar sectarian events.

In most cases, however, neither the specific group name nor the sectarian faction is known. In such instances, the **Unidentified Armed Group (Northern Ireland)** actor is used. Again, ACLED only codes events featuring unidentified armed groups when the victim is overtly political, such as: politicians, government employees, former political actors, current or former paramilitary members, public prosecutors, lawyers, judges, journalists, etc.

How does ACLED code certain unique events in Northern Ireland?

The majority of events in Northern Ireland are coded according to [standard ACLED methodology](#), with special consideration for certain unique events with a local context.

⁴ The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) closely monitors these actors, releases press reports on attacks, and supplies definitions of what it understands to be “paramilitary-style attacks” as part of their statistics reporting. Journalists often adhere to similar definitions, relying on PSNI reporting as well.

⁵ Napier, R.J., Gallagher, B.J, Wilson, D.S. (2017) An Imperfect Peace: Trends In Paramilitary Related Violence 20 Years After The Northern Ireland Ceasefires, *Ulster Medical Journal*, 86(2):99-102.

⁶ Knox. C (2002).



Sectarian parades/marches

Parades/marches (used interchangeably in reporting) in Northern Ireland are organized processions that travel a predetermined route to celebrate, commemorate, or protest key calendar dates in Northern Ireland's history. They typically include the use of banners, flags, placards, and musical bands. Of the estimated thousands of parades that occur annually in Northern Ireland, the vast majority are peaceful. The vast majority are conducted by associations and organizations in the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist tradition. The remaining are carried out by associations and organizations in the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican tradition.⁷

Given that parades are largely ceremonial in nature and generally peaceful, ACLED's coding practice is to only code parades that are either deemed politically contentious by the Parades Commission,⁸ parade events that feature any type of politically motivated violence such as the targeting of police officers or sectarian/hate attacks, or parade events with overt protest activity. Contentious parades in which participants do not engage in any violence or destructive behavior are coded using the Event Type *Protests* because their political ethnonationalist message runs contrary to those of the local residents; those in which violence or destructive behavior is reported would be coded using the Event Type *Riots*.

The methodology used to code contentious parades involves referring to the Parades Commission website to record parades categorized as "sensitive" and then conducting targeted searches to gather more details on the event. Parade events which are not necessarily "sensitive" but which involve either overt protest activity – such as slogan yelling or calls for action – or political violence – such as rioting or targeted attacks – are coded according to standard ACLED methodology (for more on that, see [the ACLED Codebook](#)). Parade/march events coded as either *Riots* or *Protests* Event Types have the **Rioters (Northern Ireland)** or **Protesters (Northern Ireland)** actors, respectively, in the primary Actor column, and either the **Loyalist Band (Northern Ireland)** or **Republican Band (Northern Ireland)** in the *Associated Actor* column.

Funerals and commemorations

In Northern Ireland, large funerals and commemorations for victims of the Troubles and important political figures are common. Large scale funerals for political figures in Northern Ireland's history are coded as Event Type *Strategic developments*, Sub-Event Type *Other* given their political relevance to the wider context of disorder in the region. Such funerals can become solidified as key dates on Republican/Loyalist calendars, and can turn into annual commemorations. If elements of a demonstration are present at such events – such as political messaging banners, slogans, and/or calls to action – then the events are instead coded as either *Riots* or *Protests*.

⁷ Dawn, D. (2015) Northern Ireland and the Independent Parades Commission: Delegation and Legitimacy, *Irish Political Studies*, 30 (1), 20-40; Bryan, D. (2015). Parades, flags, carnivals, and riots: Public space, contestation, and transformation in Northern Ireland. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 21(4), 565–573.

⁸ The statutory body mandated to determine the threat of community safety of parades and place restrictions or conditions on their routes, times, and messaging/music.