



## Campaigns against paramilitary-style assaults

Active resistance towards paramilitary violence and intimidation has emerged in the form of the [Stop Attacks Forum](#), a coalition of youth workers, academics and activists led by youth worker [Paul Smyth](#). The campaign has set out to address what Smyth characterises as a '[societal shrug](#)' about paramilitary-style attacks in Northern Ireland, whereby they are justified by many citizens ([35% in one recently reported study](#)) who believe that the victims must have done something to deserve punishment. Stop Attacks has also sought to hold the PSNI Chief Constable to account for the poor clearance rates in relation to paramilitary-style assaults, which are [reportedly below 4%](#). What started off as a forum providing a voice to victims and their families, has evolved into a highly sophisticated campaign involving the sharing of video content on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

A key objective of #stopattacks has been to improve media reporting of these attacks, which has often downplayed the consequences for the victims and their families. Most recently, it commissioned [a short film](#) in which young people from Belfast interview victims, their families, and the emergency services who respond to such incidents. This was shared on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to facilitate discussion on this issue within schools and youth groups in Northern Ireland.

The Department of Justice in Northern Ireland has also launched its '[Ending The Harm](#)' campaign in October 2018, as part of its '[Tackling Paramilitarism Programme](#)'. While it does encourage citizens to come forward with information about these attacks, it is primarily a public awareness campaign designed to highlight the impact on victims, their families and local communities. [Four videos](#), each telling the story of a paramilitary-style attack from the perspective of the victim, the victim's mother, the paramilitary member who perpetrates such attacks and a witness, feature on a dedicated website. These campaign materials have been distributed on social media, as well as on billboards, radio and television advertisements.

Public awareness campaigns on social media are unlikely, in the short term at least, to address the 'societal shrug' in relation to paramilitary-style attacks. This is a longer-term project that will require greater levels of trust between the PSNI and those communities blighted by such incidents. However, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide stakeholders with unprecedented opportunities to shape public debates about these issues by highlighting their negative impact on these communities.

*This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit.*

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