Northern Ireland
Statistics & Research Agency

Perceptions of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland: Summary findings from the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey 2017 to 2023

June 2024

Department of
Justice
www.justice-ni.gov.uk

Key figures for 2023

Department of Justice
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Fear and intimidation

21% agree that paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation

+5.4%

Law and justice

-12.6%

50% agree people in their area feel protected by the law and justice system

Young people

18% felt young people are being influenced too much by paramilitary groups

+1.0%

Area safety

94% feel safe living in their area

-2.5%

Controlling influence

16% felt paramilitary groups have a controlling influence in their area

+1.9%

- Significant positive change from baseline
- No significant change from baseline
- Significant negative change from baseline

Summary Statistics

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About the data

The Northern Ireland Life & Times (NILT) Survey examines the social attitudes of people living in Northern Ireland. The survey provides a snapshot of the behaviour, lifestyle and views of a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population. Following on from results of the 2017 survey, further questions have been commissioned annually to provide ongoing insight into peoples' perceptions of paramilitary influence and activity in Northern Ireland.

Figure 1:Paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation (%), 2017 to 2023

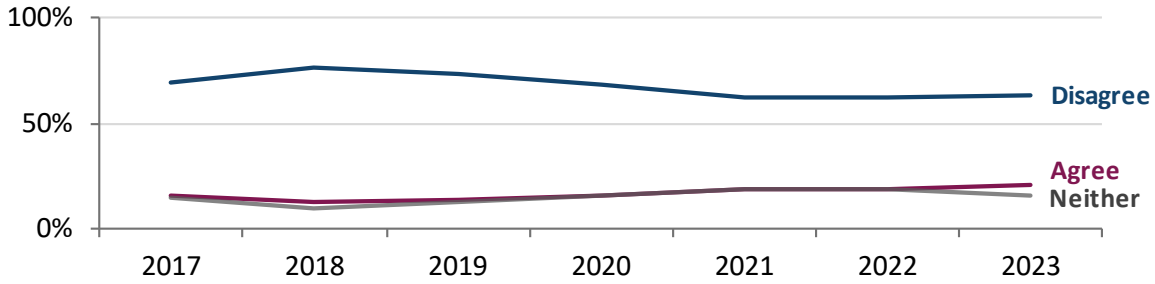


Figure 2: People feel protected by the law and justice system (%), 2017 to 2023

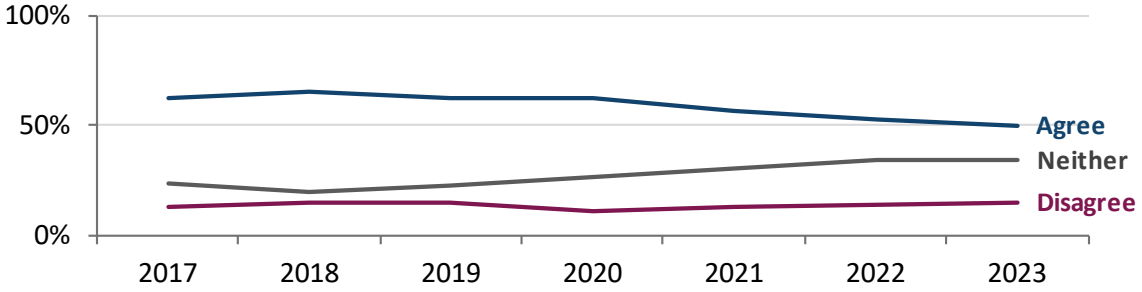


Figure 3: How safe do you feel living in this area? (%), 2017 to 2023

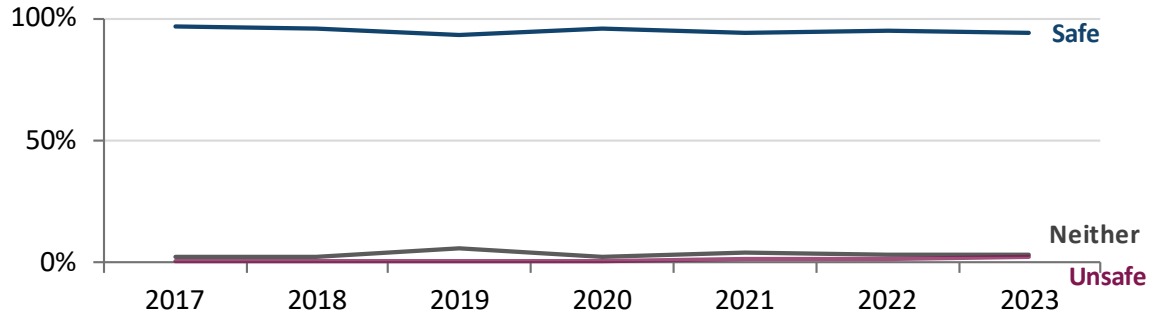


Figure 4: Paramilitary groups have a controlling influence (%), 2017 to 2023

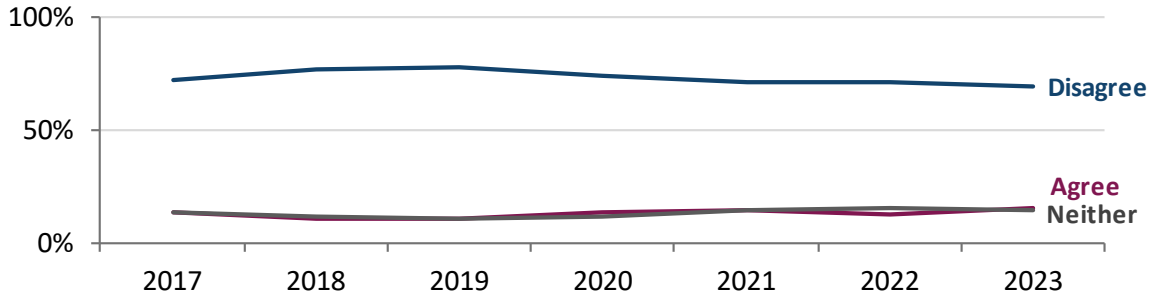
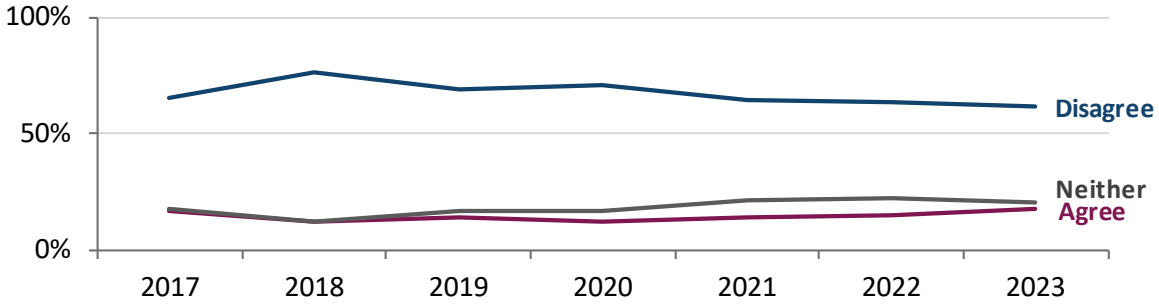


Figure 5: Young people are influenced too much by paramilitaries (%), 2017 to 2023



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End Benefit 2: People and communities are more resilient to paramilitary influence and involvement in paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime
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Introduction

The Northern Ireland Life & Times (NILT) Survey

The NILT survey was launched in October 1998 as a resource for everyone interested in the social attitudes of people living in Northern Ireland. Set up by Queen's University Belfast (opens in a new window) and Ulster University (opens in a new window) and run every year, the survey aims to put on record the attitudes, values and beliefs of the people in Northern Ireland on a wide range of social policy issues. The survey is designed to provide a snapshot of the behaviour, lifestyle and views of a representative sample of people in Northern Ireland. Further information on sample selection can be found in the Technical Annex.

The survey comprises of two distinct parts: core questions about the respondents and their individual circumstances; and a variety of mainly attitudinal questions commissioned by clients. This allows, where appropriate, for responses to the survey to be broken down by a variety of key demographic characteristics. The survey receives ethical approval from the School Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work (opens in a new window), Queen's University Belfast.

The Focus of this Publication

The Cross-Executive Programme for tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime started its second phase of delivery in 2021, with a revised overall outcome: 'safer communities, resilient to paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control'. This marks a conscious shift away from the 38 projects that existed under the original Executive Action Plan to increase cohesion and collaboration across the Programme. Sitting under this overall outcome are two complementary workstreams, each of which will deliver the following end outcomes:

- People and communities are safe from the harm caused by paramilitarism; and
- People and communities are more resilient to paramilitary influence and involvement in paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime.

Projects supported by the Programme must contribute towards the achievement or realisation of one or both of these Programme level outcomes.

In order to measure the impact of the Programme, the NILT was commissioned to provide baseline data on the public's perceptions of and attitudes towards paramilitary influence and activity in Northern Ireland. These survey questions have been repeated each year since 2017 to monitor any changes in attitudes and perceptions as work on the delivery of the Programme progresses. This publication presents key findings from the survey and compares year-on-year responses. This will be updated as additional information becomes available. The current version highlights trends and findings over a seven year period, from 2017 to 2023.

Paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation

Figure 6: Paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation (%), 2017 to 2023

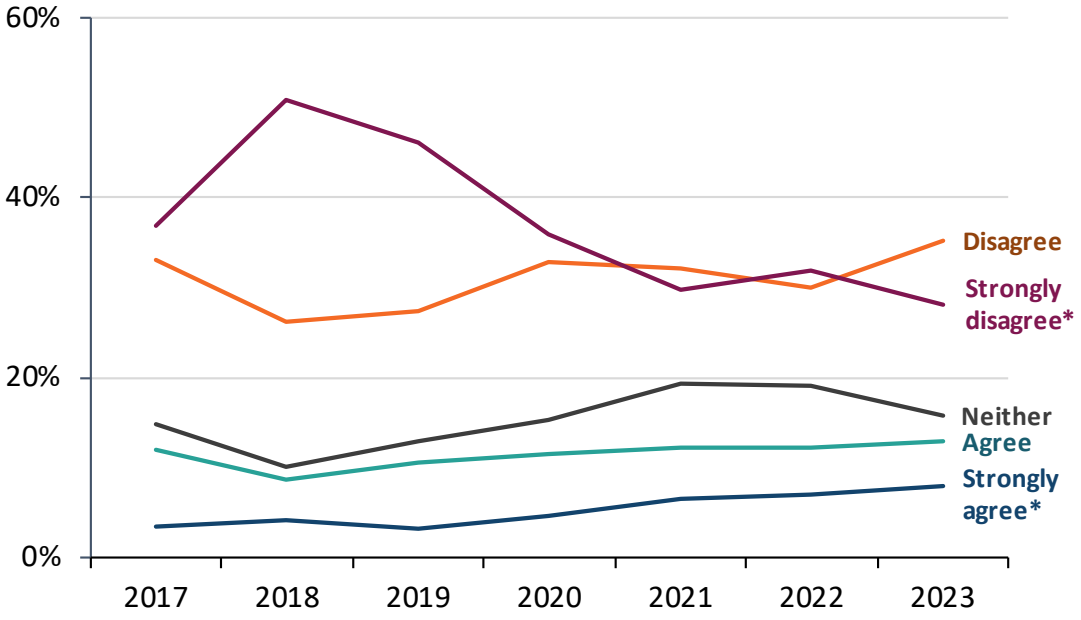
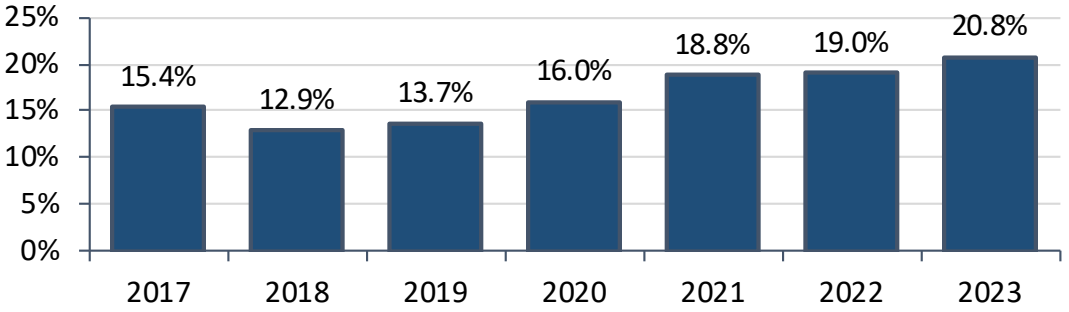


Figure 7: Proportion who strongly agree or agree paramilitaries create fear and intimidation in their area (%), 2017 to 2023



Data Trends

Over the time series, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of respondents who strongly agree that paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation in their area. Alongside this, there has also been a significant decrease in respondents who strongly disagree with this statement. The proportion of respondents who agree, disagree or neither agree nor disagree has showed no significant changes from the 2017 baseline figures.

Table 1: Paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation (%), 2017 to 2023

Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2017	3.5%	11.9%	14.7%	33.0%	36.8%
2018	4.2%	8.7%	10.1%	26.1%	50.8%
2019	3.2%	10.5%	12.8%	27.3%	46.2%
2020	4.6%	11.4%	15.3%	32.9%	35.9%
2021	6.6%	12.2%	19.3%	32.2%	29.7%
2022	6.9%	12.1%	19.0%	29.9%	32.0%
2023	7.9%	12.9%	15.8%	35.2%	28.2%
Change from baseline	**+4.4%**	**+1.0%**	**+1.1%**	**+2.2%**	**-8.6%**

*Significant changes from baseline are highlighted within the table and starred within the chart

Paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation in this area

This data shows the percentage of respondents who 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. Y axes are set at 0 to 30%, with the exception of Area Identity and Level of Qualification which are set to 40%. Within marital status, 'Separated' includes separated and divorced and 'Married' includes marriages and civil partnerships.

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Figure 8: Gender breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

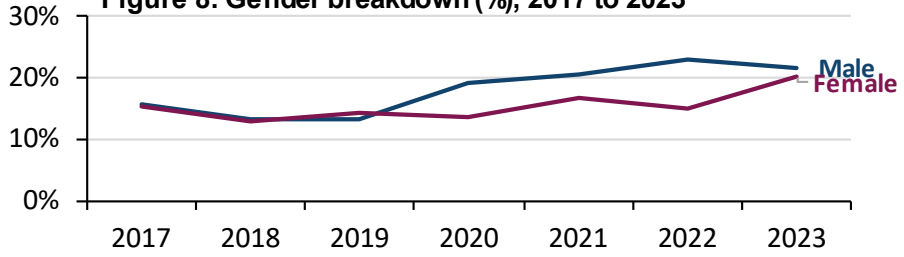


Figure 9: Employment breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

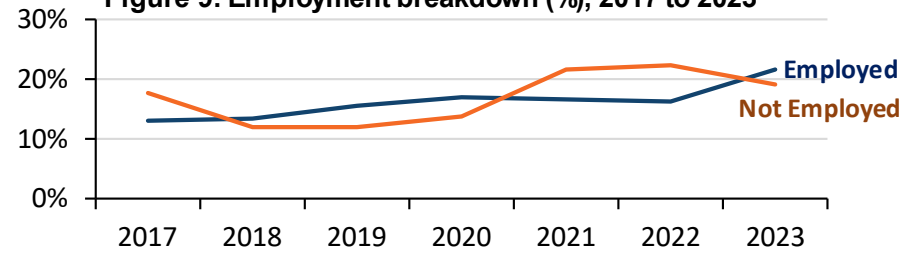


Figure 10: Area identity breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

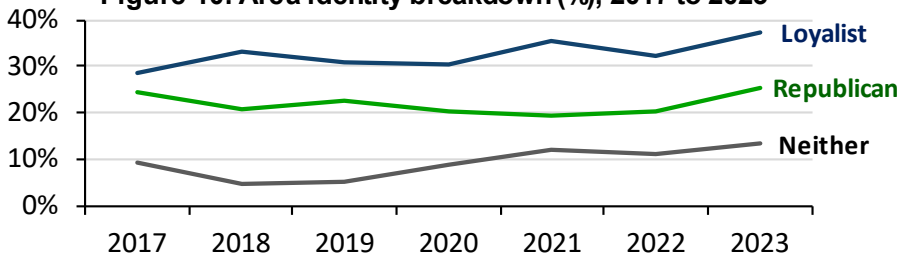


Figure 11: Marital status breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

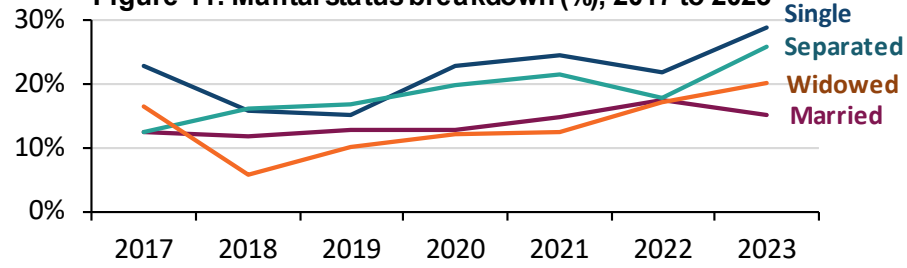


Figure 12: Age breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

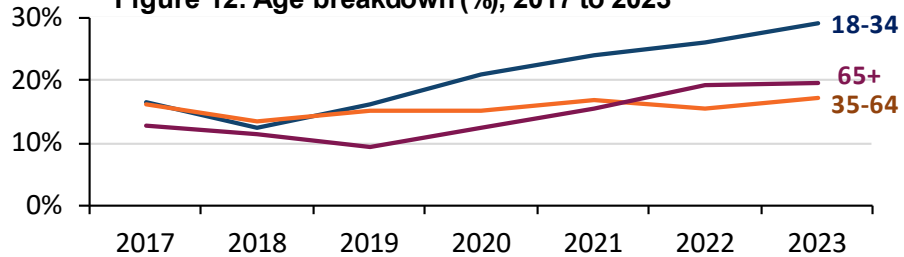


Figure 13: Area type breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

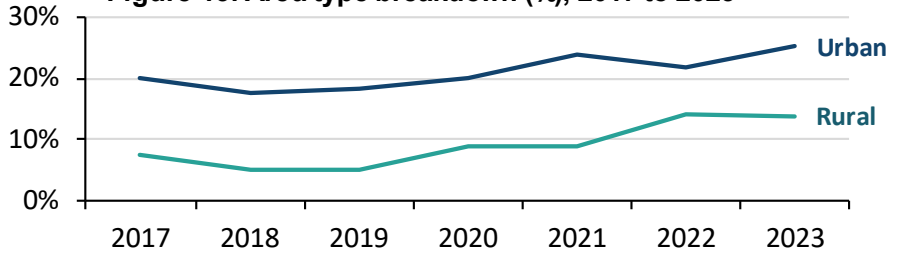


Figure 14: Religion breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

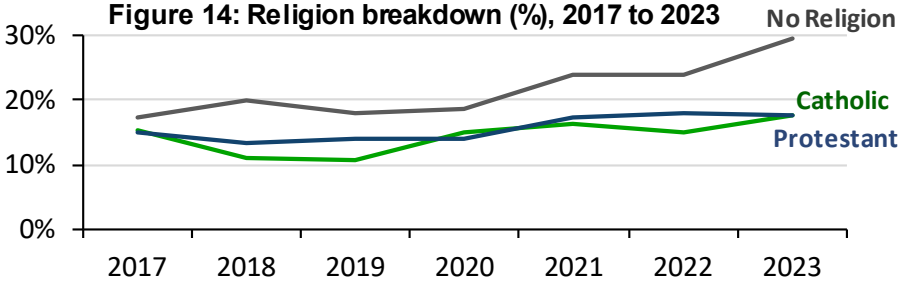
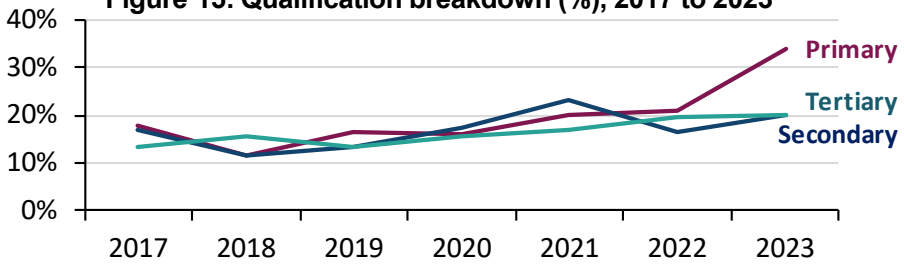


Figure 15: Qualification breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023



Data Trends

Across all years, a higher proportion of respondents who lived in urban areas agreed or strongly agreed paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation in their area. This was also true for those living in mainly Loyalist areas and those with no religious background.

Over the last four years, a higher proportion of those aged 18 to 34, and single respondents were more likely to agree that paramilitary groups create fear and intimidation in their area.

Within the most recent cohort, those educated to primary level were more likely to agree than those educated to secondary or tertiary level.

See Worksheet 12 tab in the accompanying spreadsheet for a full breakdown of figures.

People feel protected by the law and justice system

Figure 16: People feel protected by the law and justice system (%), 2017 to 2023

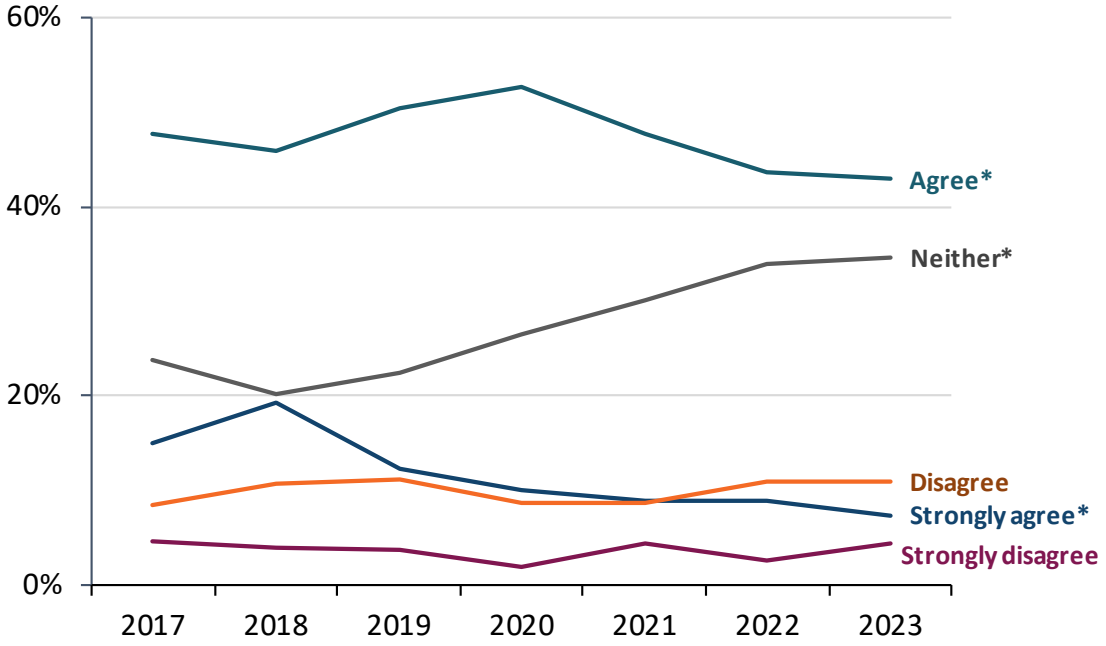
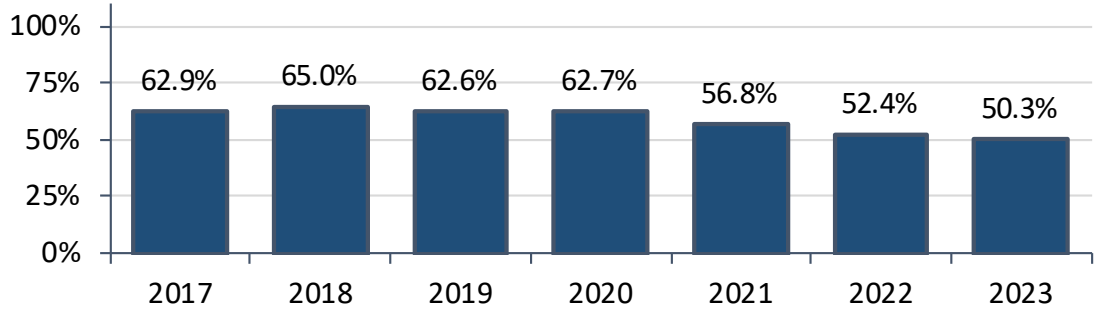


Figure 17: Proportion who strongly agree or agree people feel protected by the law and justice system (%), 2017 to 2023



Data Trends

There have been significant decreases in the percentage of respondents who strongly agree or agree that people in their area feel protected by the law and justice system. Contrastingly, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of respondents who neither agree nor disagree with this indicating increasing uncertainty within this area. There have been no significant changes in the proportions who disagree or strongly disagree that people feel protected by the law and justice system.

Table 2: People feel protected by the law and justice system (%), 2017 to 2023

Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2017	15.1%	47.8%	23.9%	8.5%	4.6%
2018	19.2%	45.8%	20.2%	10.8%	4.0%
2019	12.3%	50.3%	22.4%	11.1%	3.8%
2020	10.0%	52.7%	26.6%	8.7%	2.0%
2021	9.0%	47.8%	30.2%	8.7%	4.3%
2022	8.8%	43.6%	34.0%	10.9%	2.7%
2023	7.4%	42.9%	34.6%	10.9%	4.3%
Change from baseline	**-7.7%**	**-4.9%**	**+10.7%**	**+2.4%**	**-0.3%**

*Significant changes from baseline are highlighted within the table and starred within the chart

People feel protected by the law and justice system

This data shows the percentage of respondents who 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. Y axes are set at 40 to 80%, with the exception of Level of Qualification at 30 to 80% and Area Identity at 10 to 70%. Within marital status, 'Separated' includes separated and divorced and 'Married' includes marriages and civil partnerships.

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Figure 18: Gender breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

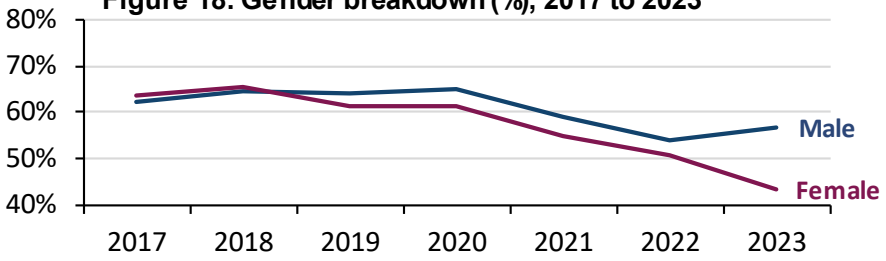


Figure 19: Employment breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

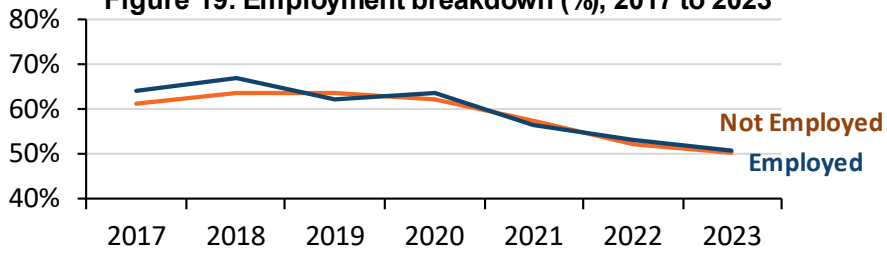


Figure 20: Area identity breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

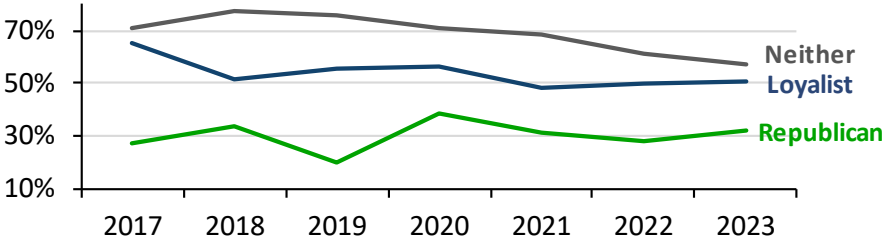


Figure 21: Marital status breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

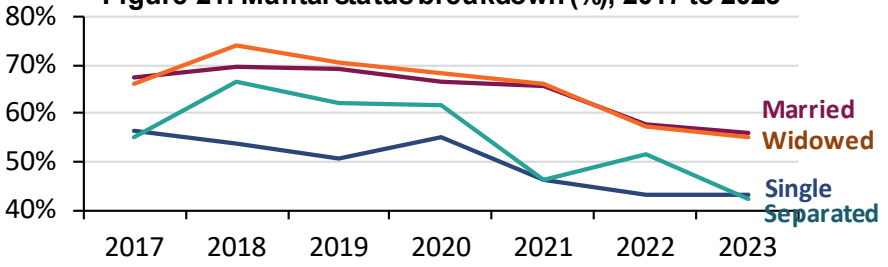


Figure 22: Age breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

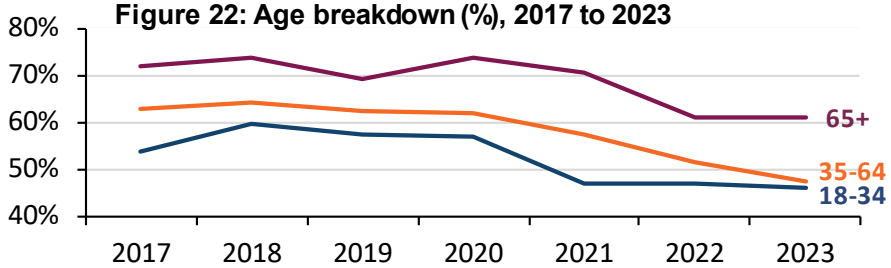


Figure 23: Area type breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

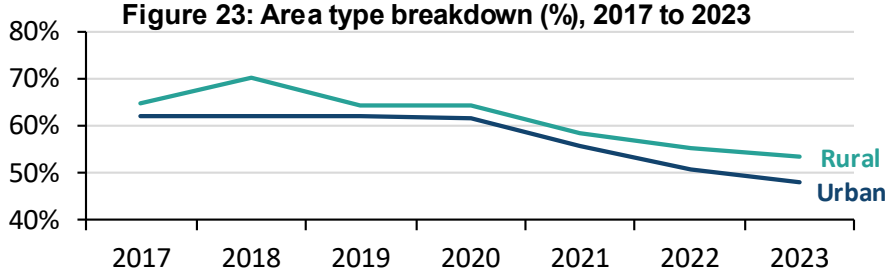


Figure 24: Religion breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

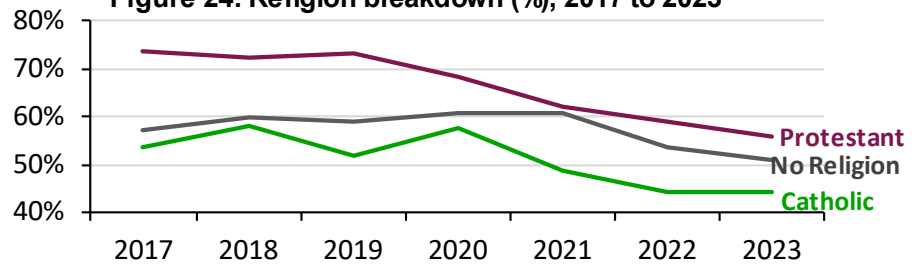
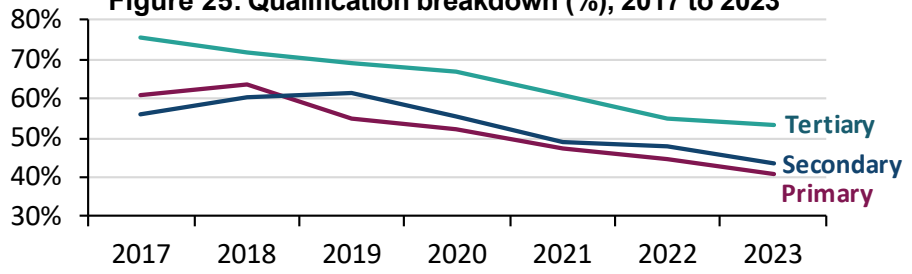


Figure 25: Qualification breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023



Data Trends

Across all years, a lower proportion of respondents aged 18 to 34, who were Catholic, or living in urban or mainly Republican areas felt that they were protected by the law and justice system. In contrast, a higher proportion of respondents aged 65 and over, those educated to tertiary level, Protestants, and those living in rural or neither Loyalist nor Republican areas agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Over the last five years, fewer females have felt protected by the law and justice system in comparison with males.

See Worksheet 7 in accompanying spreadsheet for a full breakdown of figures.

Area safety

Figure 26: People feel very safe living in their area (%), 2017 to 2023

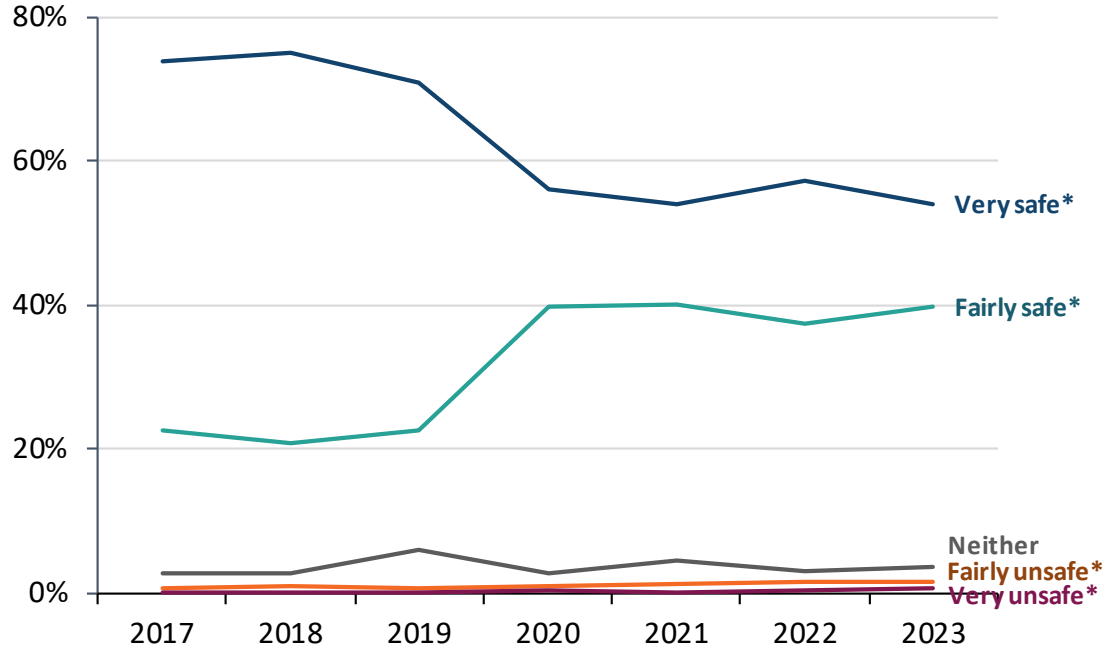
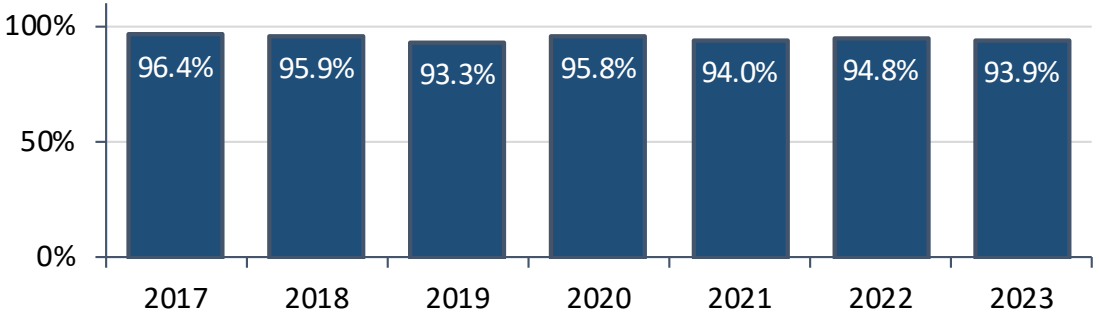


Figure 27: Proportion who feel very safe or fairly safe living in their area (%), 2017 to 2023



Data Trends

There has been a significant decrease in the number of respondents who feel very safe living in their area, whilst an increasing proportion have instead reported feeling fairly safe. Nonetheless, across all years, the overall proportion of those feeling safe has remained consistently high (approximately 95%). Across all years, a consistently low number of respondents reported feeling unsafe living in their area; however, the proportions feeling fairly or very unsafe have significantly increased from the baseline.

Table 3: People feel safe living in their area (%), 2017 to 2023

Year	Very safe	Fairly safe	Neither safe nor unsafe	Fairly unsafe	Very unsafe
2017	73.9%	22.5%	2.9%	0.6%	0.2%
2018	75.1%	20.8%	2.8%	1.1%	0.1%
2019	70.8%	22.5%	5.9%	0.6%	0.1%
2020	56.0%	39.8%	2.9%	0.9%	0.3%
2021	53.9%	40.1%	4.4%	1.4%	0.1%
2022	57.4%	37.4%	3.2%	1.6%	0.3%
2023	54.1%	39.8%	3.6%	1.7%	0.8%
Change from baseline	**-19.8%**	**+17.3%**	**+0.7%**	**+1.1%**	**+0.6%**

*Significant changes from baseline are highlighted within the table and starred within the chart

How safe do you feel living in your area?

This data shows the percentage of respondents who felt 'very safe' or 'fairly safe'. Y axes are set at 80% to 100%.

Within Marital Status, 'Separated' includes separated and divorced and 'Married' includes marriages and civil partnerships.

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Figure 28: Gender breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

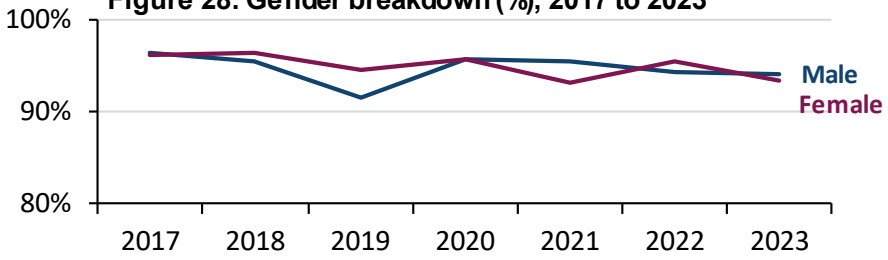


Figure 29: Employment breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

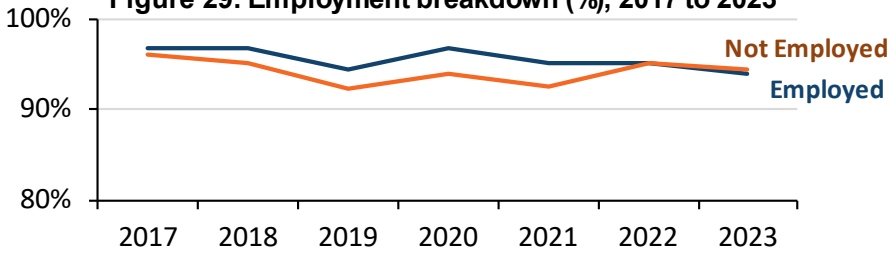


Figure 30: Area identity breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

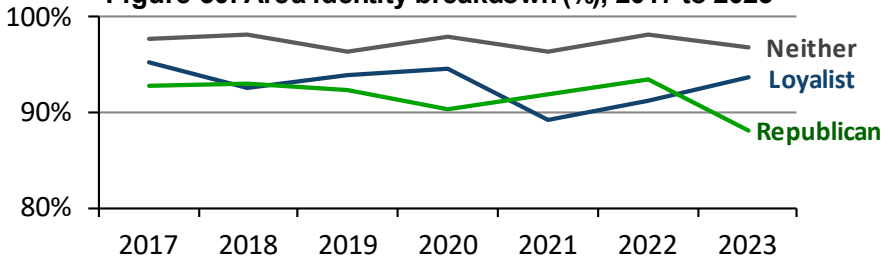


Figure 31: Marital status breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

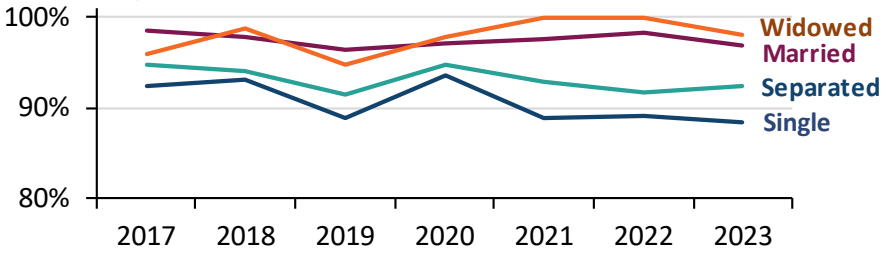


Figure 32: Age breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

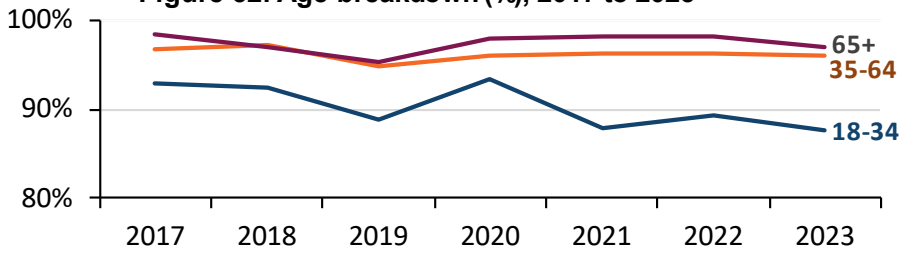


Figure 33: Area Type breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

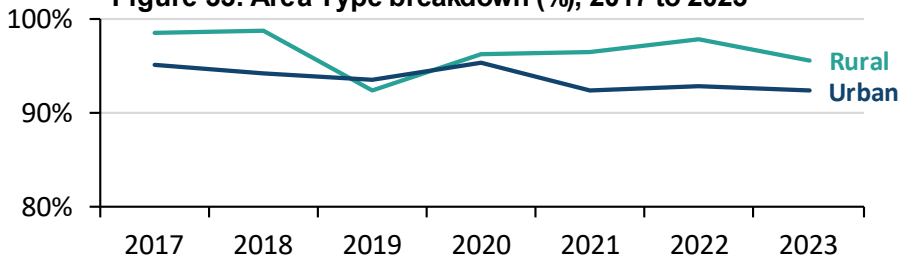


Figure 34: Religion breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

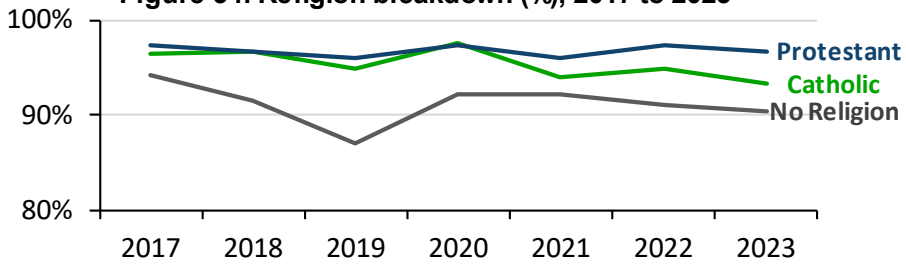
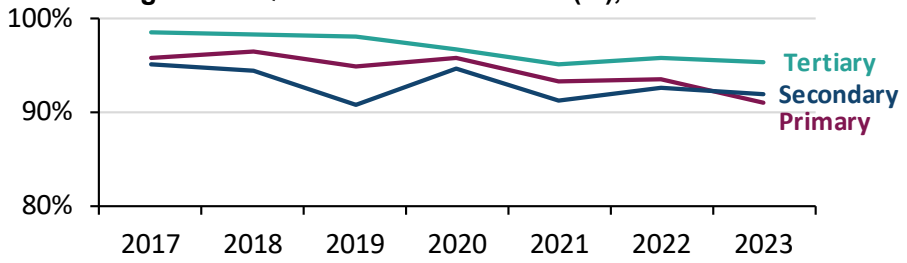


Figure 35: Qualification breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023



Data Trends

Across all years, a lower proportion of respondents aged 18 to 34, those who were single and those with no religious background felt safe living in their area. A higher proportion of people who lived in neither a Loyalist or Republican community felt that their area was safe or fairly safe, as did a higher proportion of those who were widowed or married/in a civil partnership compared to those who were single or separated. Those who received a tertiary education were also more likely to feel safer than those educated to primary or secondary level.

See Worksheet 3 in accompanying spreadsheet for a full breakdown of figures.

Paramilitary groups have a controlling influence

Figure 36: Paramilitary groups have a controlling influence (%), 2017 to 2023

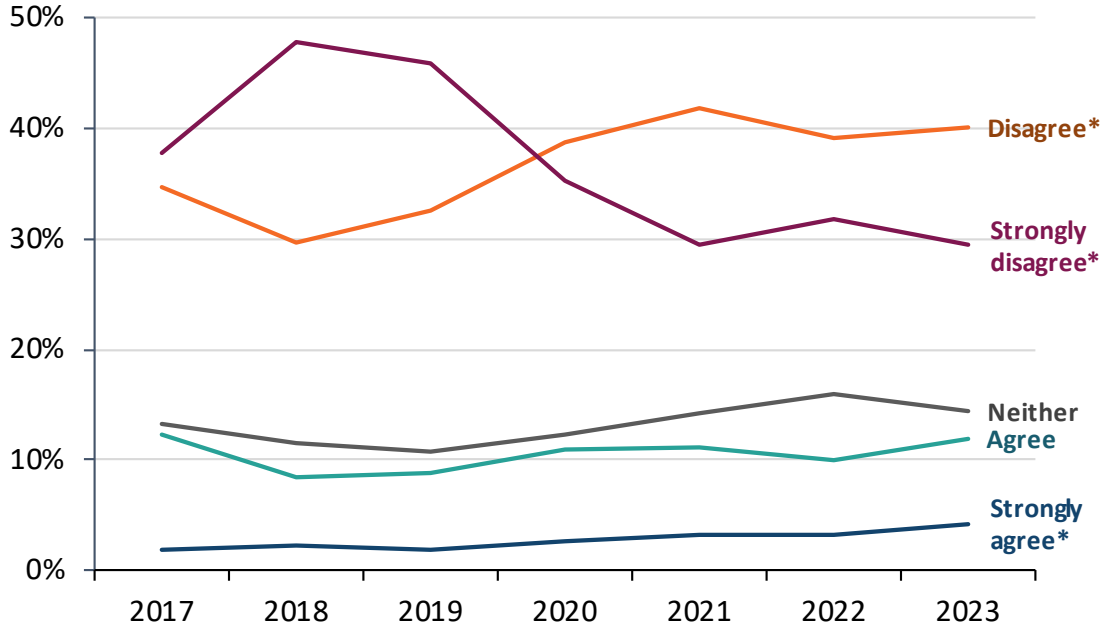
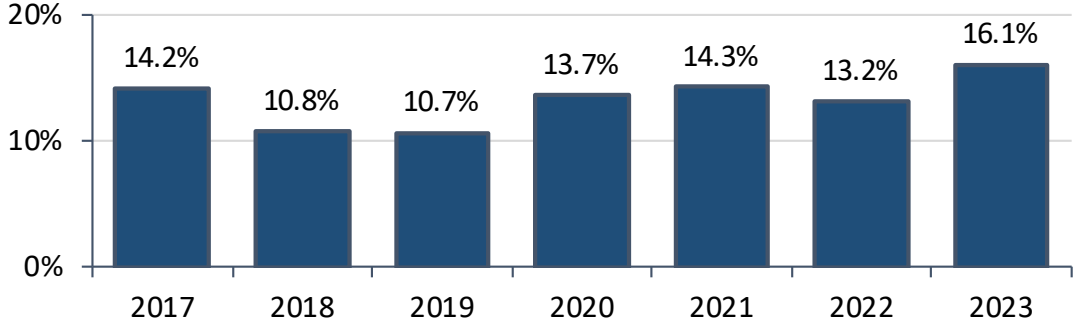


Figure 37: Proportion who strongly agree or agree paramilitary groups have a controlling influence in their area (%), 2017 to 2023



Data Trends

There has been a significant decrease in the percentage of respondents who strongly disagree that paramilitary groups have a controlling influence within their area. However, this has been offset by an increase in respondents who disagree with this statement. The proportion of respondents who strongly agree that paramilitary groups have a controlling influence has also significant increased, while the proportions who agree or neither agree nor disagree have showed no significant change.

Table 4: Paramilitary groups have a controlling influence (%), 2017 to 2023

Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2017	1.9%	12.3%	13.3%	34.7%	37.7%
2018	2.3%	8.5%	11.6%	29.7%	47.9%
2019	1.8%	8.9%	10.8%	32.6%	45.9%
2020	2.7%	11.0%	12.3%	38.7%	35.3%
2021	3.2%	11.1%	14.3%	41.8%	29.5%
2022	3.2%	10.0%	15.9%	39.2%	31.7%
2023	4.2%	11.9%	14.4%	40.1%	29.4%
Change from baseline	**+2.3%**	**-0.4%**	**+1.1%**	**+5.4%**	**-8.3%**

*Significant changes from baseline are highlighted within the table and starred within the chart

Paramilitary groups have a controlling influence in this area

This data shows the percentage of respondents who 'strongly agree' or 'agree'. All Y axes are set at 0 to 30%, with the exception of Area Identity at 0 to 40% and Gender and Employment at 0 to 20%. Within Marital Status, 'Separated' includes separated and divorced and 'Married' includes marriages and civil partnerships.

Figure 38: Gender breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

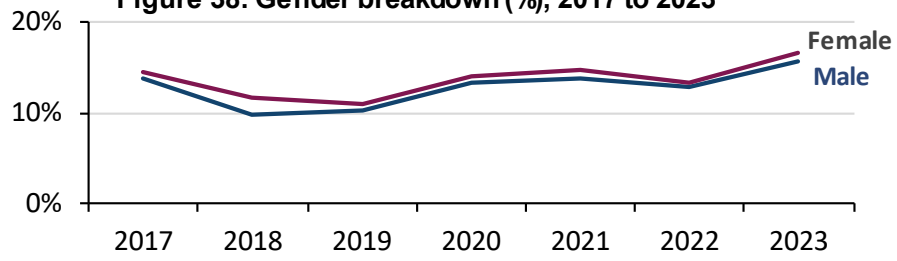


Figure 39: Employment breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

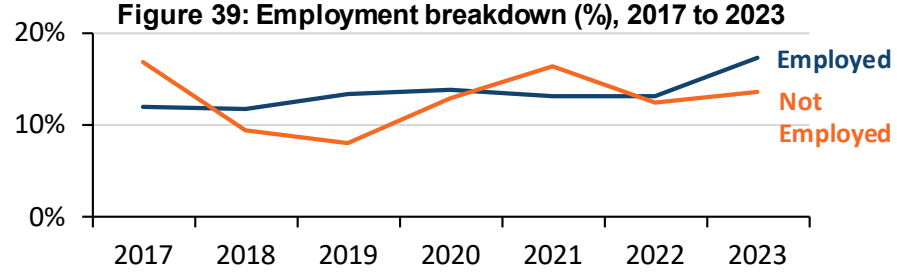


Figure 40: Area identity breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

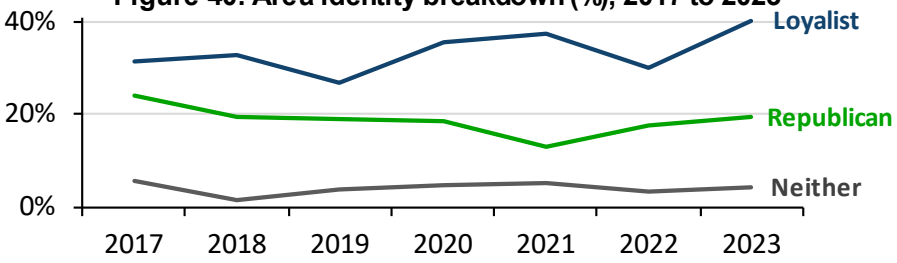


Figure 41: Marital status breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

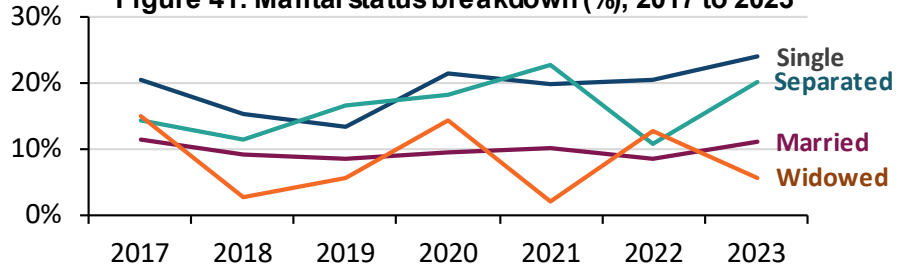


Figure 42: Age breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

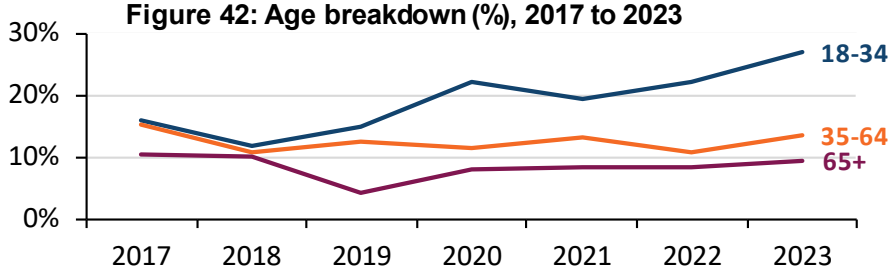


Figure 43: Area type breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

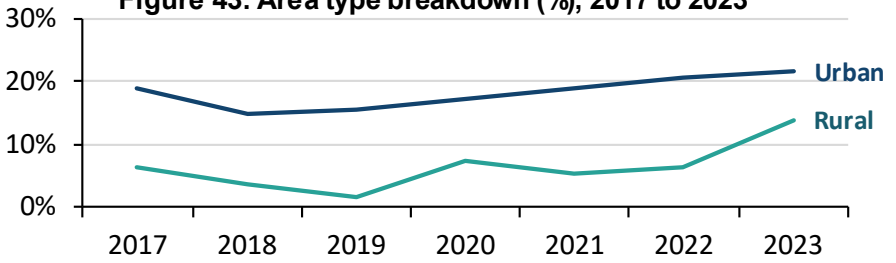


Figure 44: Religion breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

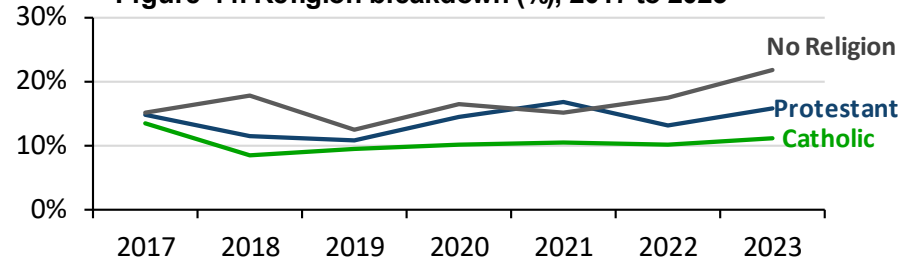
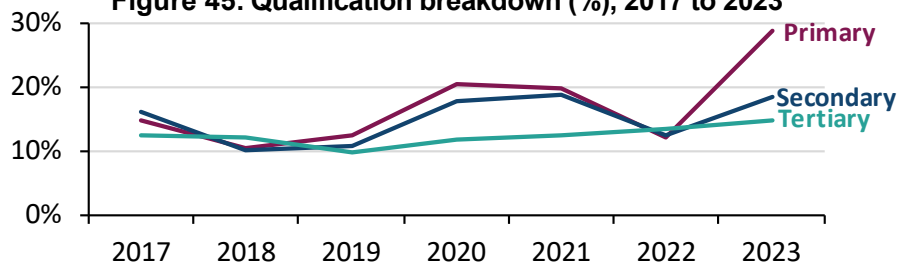


Figure 45: Qualification breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023



Data Trends

Across all years, a higher proportion of respondents in urban areas or mainly Loyalist communities felt paramilitary groups had a controlling influence in their area. Those aged 18 to 34 were also more likely to agree, as were single or separated respondents compared with those who were married or widowed. For the most recent cohort, there was a spike in respondents educated to primary level who agreed with this statement. There was also an increase in the proportion of respondents from no religious background who felt paramilitary groups have a controlling influence.

See Worksheet 10 in accompanying spreadsheet for full breakdown.

Paramilitary Influence on Young People

Figure 46: Young people are being influenced by paramilitary groups (%), 2017 to 2023

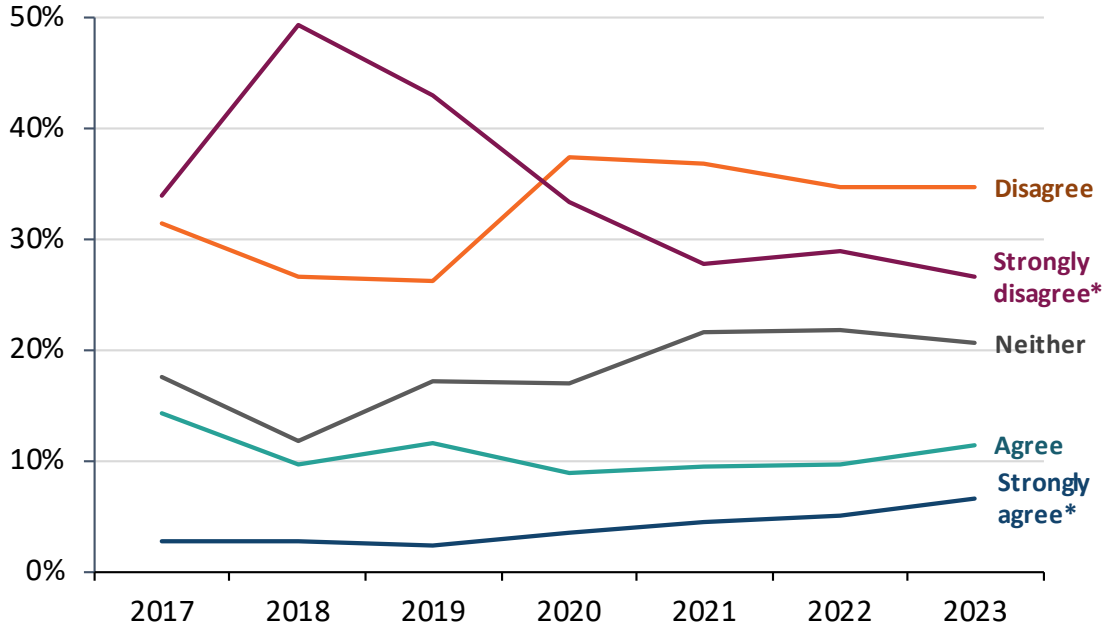
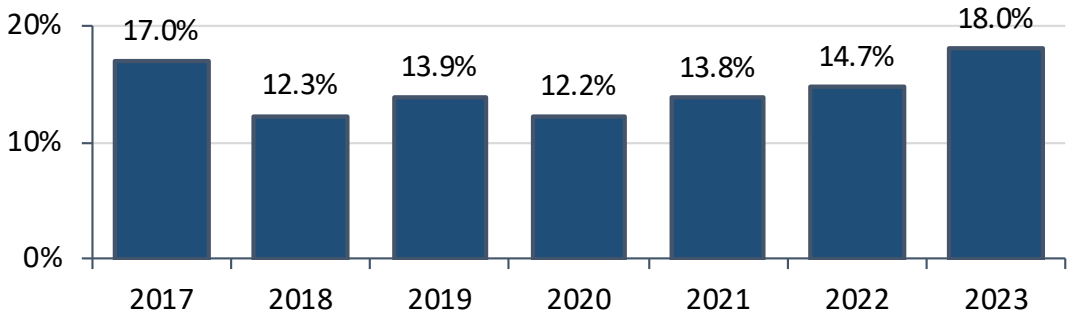


Figure 47: Proportion who strongly agree or agree young people are being influenced too much by paramilitary groups in their area (%), 2017 to 2023



Data Trends

There has been a significant increase in the percentage of respondents who strongly agree that young people are being influenced too much by paramilitary groups. There was also a significant decrease in the proportion who strongly disagree with this. There was no significant change from the baseline in the proportions who agree, neither agree nor disagree, or disagree with the statement, despite fluctuations over the data series.

Table 5: Young people are being influenced by paramilitary groups (%), 2017 to 2023

Year	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2017	2.7%	14.3%	17.6%	31.5%	34.0%
2018	2.7%	9.6%	11.8%	26.6%	49.3%
2019	2.3%	11.6%	17.1%	26.2%	42.9%
2020	3.4%	8.8%	17.0%	37.5%	33.3%
2021	4.4%	9.4%	21.5%	36.8%	27.8%
2022	5.0%	9.7%	21.8%	34.7%	28.9%
2023	6.6%	11.4%	20.6%	34.7%	26.6%
Change from baseline	**+3.9%**	**-2.9%**	**+3.0%**	**+3.2%**	**-7.4%**

*Significant changes from baseline are highlighted within the table and starred within the chart

Young people are being influenced too much by paramilitary groups in this area

This data shows the percentage of respondents who 'strongly agree' or 'agree'. Y axes are set at 0 to 30% with the exception of Area Identity and Level of Qualification which are set at 0 to 40%. Within Marital Status, 'Separated' includes separated and divorced and 'Married' includes marriages and civil partnerships.

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Figure 48: Gender breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

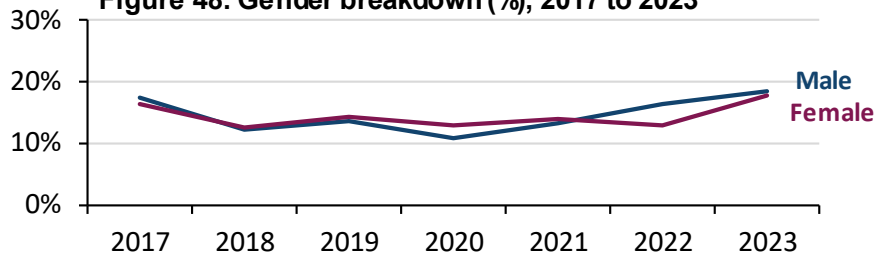


Figure 49: Employment breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

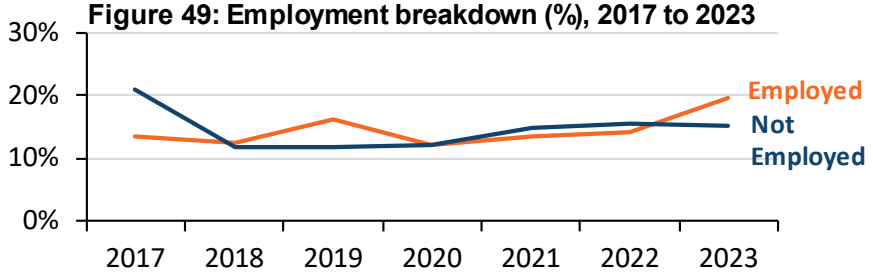


Figure 50: Area identity breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

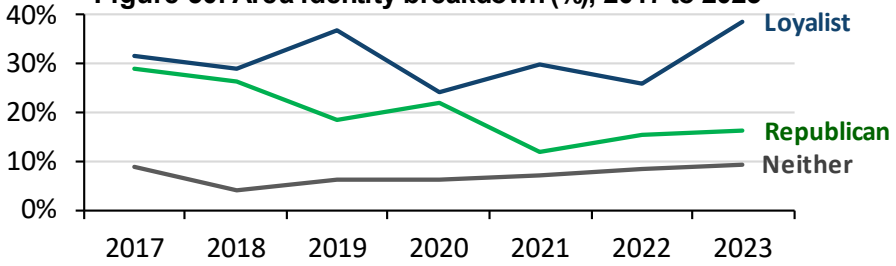


Figure 51: Marital status breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

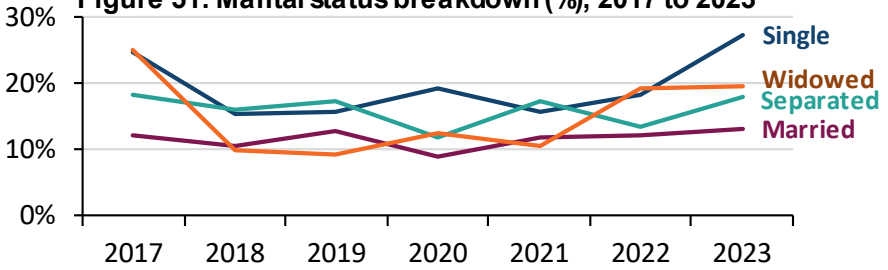


Figure 52: Age breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

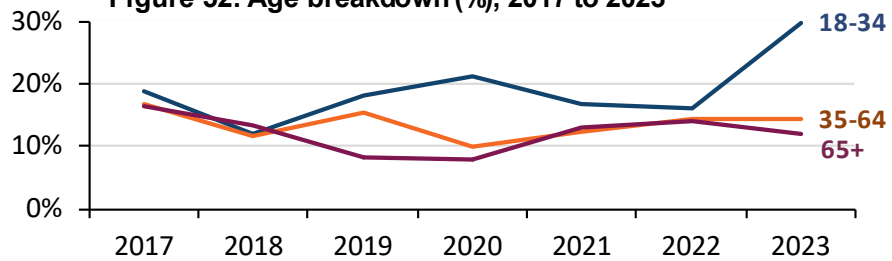


Figure 53: Area type breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

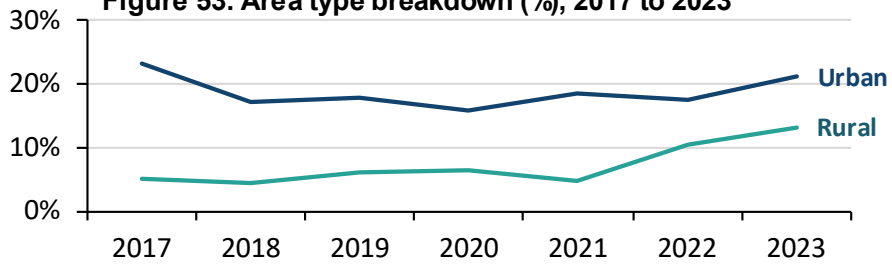


Figure 54: Religion breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023

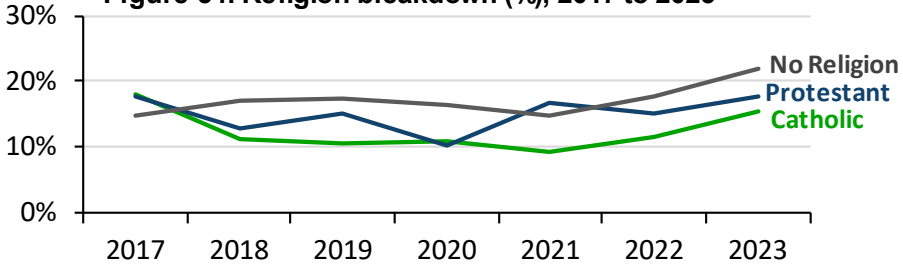
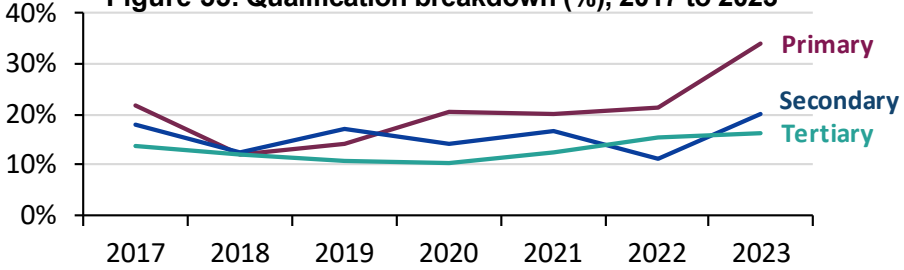


Figure 55: Qualification breakdown (%), 2017 to 2023



Data Trends

Across all years, respondents from urban areas and those living in mainly Loyalist communities were more likely to feel that young people were being influenced too much by paramilitary groups in their area. Those who were married or in a civil partnership were less likely than single people to agree with this statement. For the most recent cohort, there was a spike in those aged 18 to 34 and those educated to primary level who agreed with this statement. There are no significant differences between gender, employment status and religious background.

See Worksheet 15 in accompanying spreadsheet for full breakdown.

Annex 1 – Technical Information

Sampling and Fieldwork

The sample of those surveyed in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey consists of a systematic random sample of addresses selected from the Postcode Address File (PAF) database. This is the most up-to-date and complete listing of addresses within the UK and is maintained by Royal Mail. Private business addresses are removed from the database prior to sample selection. From 2020 onwards, to allow for a random sample of Northern Ireland households, the sample has been stratified proportionately by District Council area. In 2020, the survey was transitioned to a push-to-web methodology, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this approach has been retained since. A large-scale Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) survey was developed. However, the survey was designed to be as inclusive as possible, presenting participants with a range of ways to complete the survey. Thus, participants can also complete the survey via Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI).

The person to be interviewed is randomly selected using the 'next birthday' rule. The interviewer asks the householder to list the birthdays of all members of the household eligible for inclusion in the sample: that is, all persons aged 18 or over living at the address. The person with the next birthday, at the time of the call, is the person with whom the interview is to be conducted. Where the selected respondent is not available, an appointment is made to call back to interview them at a more suitable time. The table below shows the breakdown of sample addresses and response rates per year.

Table 6: Breakdown of sample addresses and response rates per year, 2017 to 2023

Year	Total number of addresses selected	Total number of responses achieved	Response rate (%)
2017	2,350	1,203	51%
2018	2,296	1,201	52%
2019	2,311	1,203	52%
2020	15,000	1,292	9%
2021	10,000	1,397	14%
2022	9,500	1,405	15%
2023	8,000	1,200	15%

Annex 1 – Technical Information

Weighting

As is common practice for a CAWI survey of this nature, the data are subsequently weighted to ensure representation of the general population of Northern Ireland. Weighting is the process of correcting for sample differences by increasing the relative importance (or weight) of underrepresented groups and decreasing the importance of overrepresented groups (where over/under representation is determined by comparing to a target). Given the method of collection, a weighting variable to account for age, gender and location based on Northern Ireland Census data (2011) was added. Random Iterative Method (RIM) weighting was selected as the most appropriate technique as this is most commonly used to weight market research data to known demographics, without intrinsically altering the findings of the raw data. Northern Ireland Census targets were used, given that Census data are the most accurate counts of the population at a specific point in time.

A RIM weighting factor was calculated by comparing the NILT data population proportions to the known population statistics for each variable (age, gender and location). This weighting factor was calculated using an advanced analytics tool which accounts for differences in the survey population to the general population of Northern Ireland using a pre-calculated algorithm. When applied, the weighting factor (WTFACTOR) will weight the data accordingly to ensure findings are representative of the general population in Northern Ireland.

Rounding, Error and Statistical Significance

Percentages may not always sum to 100 due to the effect of rounding or because respondents could give more than one response. Due to a combination of both sampling and non-sampling error, any sample is unlikely to reflect precisely the characteristics of the population. The number of cases upon which analysis is based is important, as it influences the precision (standard error) of the estimates. Because NILTS estimates are subject to sampling error, differences between estimates from successive years of the survey or between population subgroups may occur by chance.

For the purposes of this bulletin, where differences have emerged as being statistically significant, these have been reported in the text and/or tables. Statistical significance is reported at the 5% ($p<0.005$) level of probability. This means that for any observed result that is found to be statistically significant, one can be 95% confident this has not happened by chance.