CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Towards Safe(r)space: Disability and everyday spaces of un/safety and hostility in Ireland. Summary.
Authors	Edwards, Claire;Maxwell, Nicola
Publication date	2019-11
Original Citation	Edwards, C & Maxwell, N 2019, Towards Safe(r)space: Disability and everyday spaces of un/safety and hostility in Ireland. Summary. University College Cork, Cork.
Type of publication	Report
Rights	© 2019, the Authors.
Download date	2026-10-13 21:31:46
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/18644

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

TOWARDS SAFE(R)SPACE

DISABILITY AND EVERYDAY SPACES OF UN/SAFETY AND HOSTILITY IN IRELAND[1]

CLAIRE EDWARDS & NICOLA MAXWELL

Institute for Social Science in the 21st Century

UCC University College Cork, Ireland Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing international recognition of the disproportionate experience of hostility, violence and hate crime as it is experienced by people with disabilities. However, we know less in the Irish context about how issues of un/safety, and fear or experience of hostility affect people with disabilities' everyday lives, and how they negotiate between feelings of safety and unsafety in different spaces.

Funded by the Irish Research Council, the two year (2017-19) SAFE(R)SPACE study explored: (i) how fear and/or experience of un/safety and hostility impact on disabled people's everyday lives and the spaces and places that they use; (ii) how practitioners working in the area of community safety, planning, and disability services understand and respond to issues of hostility, and (iii) how we might promote safe(r) spaces for people with disabilities.

SAFE(R)SPACE begins from the premise that inhabiting and accessing space is a right in and of itself: all people with disabilities should have a right to access – and feel safe in – spaces and places in the same ways as everyone else.

The study involved (i) a review of the national policy context and 20 interviews with government policymakers, state bodies, and national disability organisations; (ii) research in three case study areas in Ireland: 54 people with disabilities took part in semi- structured interviews, focus groups, or mobile interviews across the three areas; 50 local practitioners, including community organisations, local Gardaí, and other statutory organisations also participated; (iii) three local area networking events.

[1]The document can be referenced as Edwards, C. and Maxwell, N. (2019) *Towards Safe(r)space: Disability and Everyday Spaces of Un/safety and Hostility in Ireland: Research Summary.* Cork, University College Cork.

KEY FINDINGS

THE NATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

Issues of safety and hostility experienced by people with disabilities sit at the intersection of three policy arenas: disability policy, justice, and planning, housing and the environment. A review of policy literature, along with interviews with policymakers and national disabilities organisations found:

- There is limited awareness or work around issues of **community safety** and potential hostility faced by people with disabilities living in the community.

- **Some organisations do not perceive un/safety and hostility to be a significant issue**, either because they do not think hostility is happening in the same way as for other groups, or because they feel they lack knowledge about it.

> **"I'm not sure that we have the hostility that there is elsewhere, but it could be ignorance that has us that way rather than anything else…I'm not sure that it's hostility with a capital H" (Research participant, Policymaker).**

- **Some organisations appear wary about raising issues of un/safety, hostility and hate crime,** particularly in the context of the decongregation agenda, insofar as it could provide a rationale for 'concerned others' to prevent people with disabilities from moving into the community.

- **Where policy does address issues of safety,** it is often in the form of 'safeguarding', or the paternalistic construction of people with disabilities as 'vulnerable adults'.

- **Participants were very aware of how the construction of people with disabilities as vulnerable** contributed to them being seen as more likely to experience hostility.

- **Organisations pointed to the need to re-define understandings of safety in policy away from ideas of control and protection** towards safety as empowerment for people with disabilities.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES' EVERYDAY GEOGRAPHIES OF UN/SAFETY

- **People with disabilities make sense of safety and unsafety in multiple ways.** The presence or otherwise of people in spaces, distinguishing between threatening and trusted others, physical access and communication issues, and assistive aids and technologies all contribute to feelings of safety or unsafety.

> **"Feeling safe means, like that, you know, thinking you can do it, like; you're able to do it" (Research participant, female, intellectual disability).**

- Many people with disabilities, and those that work with disabled people, **reported incidents and experiences of hostility.** This ranged from instances of physical assault, to theft of mobile phones, domestic violence, sexual assault, financial abuse, through to 'micro-aggressions' such as name-calling or teasing on the street.

- **People with disabilities' feelings about un/safety shape their everyday geographies, and have the capacity to significantly curtail their rights to utilise different spaces.** Concerns about being unsafe placed significant restrictions on the places and spaces that people with disabilities used: this included bars and nightclubs, shopping centres, specific streets, parks or public transport hubs.

- **While the home is a safe space for many people with disabilities, others do not view it as a space of security or refuge:** reasons for this include a lack of physical access/adaptation, fear of break ins, and in the case of domestic violence, the home being a space of violence, danger and threat.

- **People have highly developed spatial strategies and routines to ensure that they feel safe** in occupying, or navigating, different spaces, including learnt transport routes, going out at certain times of day, having someone accompany them, or using specific technologies when out and about.

- **People with disabilities are constantly aware, particularly in public space, of how they are perceived by others in terms of constructions of their 'vulnerability'.** Whether this manifests in paternalistic comments or more outright hostility, many people report operating a vigilance – particularly in public space - in a context where they are continually reminded by others of their 'vulnerability'.

- **People with disabilities develop safe spaces** based on having trusted others around, knowing and having control over their environment, and having a routine. Within public spaces, people with disabilities return to places where they are known – such as shops or restaurants – and where they know they will be welcomed.

- **Safe(r)space for people with disabilities was understood in multiple ways,** including: feelings about a place and a sense of security; having social networks and trusted people to talk to; as a process of empowerment; and having access to the built environment, appropriate housing, and community supports.

- **Many people with disabilities do not report confidence in communicating with or accessing the Gardaí,** either in the context of being unsure who to contact, feeling confident that they will be able to communicate with them, or that their concerns will be taken seriously.

RESPONDING TO HOSTILITY & UN/SAFETY

Responses to hostility & un/safety raised by agencies and people with disabilities can be grouped into four categories:

Policy and legislative responses. People drew attention to a number of pieces of legislation as being significant in terms of issues of un/safety, including the UNCRPD (2006), Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act 2015, legislation around safeguarding, as well as the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017. There were very mixed views about potential **hate crime legislation**, expressed by both people with disabilities and practitioners. Concerns related to (i) how to define hate crime and distinguish whether crimes perpetrated against people were motivated by hate, and (ii) whether hate crime legislation would further stigmatise people with disabilities.

Approaches/practices of the Gardaí. A number of issues were raised regarding the practices of the Gardaí in responding to people with disabilities. These included: (i) barriers for people with disabilities in contacting and interacting with the Gardaí; (ii) lack of, or variable, disability awareness across members of the Gardaí, and (iii) the significance of community policing, including joint working with disability organisations.

> **"Because for a Deaf person to walk into [a] Garda Station and report a serious crime… they know the world of trouble and hassle and stress that's going to land on top of them" (Research participant, Deaf organisation).**

Planning, accessibility & the built environment. People with disabilities raised the significance of accessibility to the built environment in terms of feelings of safety, and pointed to the role of local authorities in this regard. Un/safety in the context of housing was also a recurring theme. Responses in terms of housing included: (i) appropriate access to, and location of, housing (ii) the need to consider community safety in the context of decongregation (iii) specific design features of housing to ensure security for people with disabilities.

Promoting 'personal' safety. Agencies working with people with disabilities described initiatives around developing 'personal' safety, including training around bullying, 'stranger danger', road safety, as well as self-defence classes, and community mapping to enable people to navigate their locality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As an issue related to socio-spatial justice, responses to issues of un/safety need to reflect not just individual behaviours and strategies to 'stay safe', but should challenge dominant societal and structural attitudes in which people with disabilities are 'othered' and marginalised in Irish society. Key recommendations from the study are:

- There is a need for **greater awareness and discussion of issues of hostility and un/safety facing people with disabilities,** particularly at a national scale. This includes an awareness of disability within debates about re-defining 'community safety', as set out in the Report of the Commission on the Future of Policing (2018).

- There is a need to **consult with people with disabilities and their organisations about hate crime legislation.** Many participants expressed being unsure about how to define hate crime, and its effects in terms of disabled people's personhood.

- There remains significant work to be done to **raise awareness of disability across the Gardaí** so that they are better able to respond to the needs of people with disabilities, by improving communication supports, and ensuring a clear point of access.

- **Improvements to accessibility of the built environment and access to safe, appropriate housing** need to remain a priority. Accessibility remains a huge part of many disabled people's experiences of un/safety.

- There is a need to **challenge discriminatory and paternalistic attitudes towards people with disabilities** as a way of promoting community safety.