Chapter 5
Measuring and Mapping
Conflict-Related Deaths and Segregation: 
Lessons from the Belfast ‘Troubles’

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Abstract  Commonly known as the ‘Troubles,’ the disputes between Irish republicans (mostly Catholics) and British unionists (mostly Protestants) in Northern Ireland have lasted for decades and since the late 1960s have claimed around 3,600 lives. Military intervention by the British Army eventually undermined the activities of the main paramilitary groups (Irish Republican Army that sought the unification of Ireland and the Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Freedom Fighters who wished to maintain Northern Ireland’s constitutional position within the United Kingdom). Northern Ireland is now slowly transforming out of conflict, but as it does so, more debates become concerned with interpreting the past and the nature and meaning of victimhood.

This chapter maps the spatial distributions of conflict-related deaths in Belfast (Northern Ireland’s principal city) in an attempt to unravel the complex social, political, and ethno-religious underpinnings of the Troubles. Religious segregation is claimed by many analysts to be a major contributory variable to explaining the pattern of conflict-related deaths, and as such we explore a modification of the spatial segregation index to examine the distribution of Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods in Belfast. After analyzing the extensive database of deaths and their spatial occurrence, the chapter ends with a series of lessons. Most notably, politically motivated attacks can be unpredictable but also seem to cluster within highly segregated and low social class neighborhoods located within close proximity to interfaces between Catholic and Protestant communities. In addition, paramilitary attacks are difficult to profile demographically, and the vast majority involve civilian casualties.

Keywords  Conflicted-related deaths, religion, sectarianism, segregation

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5.1 Introduction

Northern Ireland remains synonymous with political unrest and sectarian-motivated violence. The legacy of the brutal early 1970s, the unpredictable 1980s, and the frustrating 1990s has survived despite the relative calm of recent years, culminating in the peace process and the de-commissioning of some weaponry (Fig. 5.1). Since 1970 approximately 3,600 deaths have been attributed to the Troubles, of which around 1,650 have occurred within the city limits of the capital city, Belfast (Fig. 5.2). In Belfast, the Troubles further divided communities along ethno-religious boundaries, resulting in higher levels of residential segregation than were evident before the onset of conflict. Parallels have been drawn with other segregated cities in the United States and religious divisions in Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia, and the Middle East (Fallah 1996; Adair et al. 2000). The Northern Irish political, social, cultural, and ethno-religious struggles are interpreted differently. Irish republicans view their engagement as being centred upon an anti-colonial struggle, whereas those who are pro-state view conflict as an internal civil war. The conflict in Belfast reflects of a deep-seated division between Catholic and Protestant ethno-religious communities, as well as between the Catholic community and the British State (Boal and Douglas 1982).

It is important to remember that ethno-religious segregation in Belfast is not new. Divisions have endured for almost 200 years, but it was only during the re-emergence of civil unrest in the late 1960s that inter-community violence intensified segregation so much that by September 1969 the euphemistic ‘peace-lines’ were erected to keep communities apart (Boal 1982; McPeake 1998). These peace-lines are not only physical barriers designed to restrict mobility and social interaction, but also present social barriers fueling sectarian mistrust even during the present cease-fire. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) recognizes at least 15 such physical interfaces,