



# **Polish Residents in Belfast**

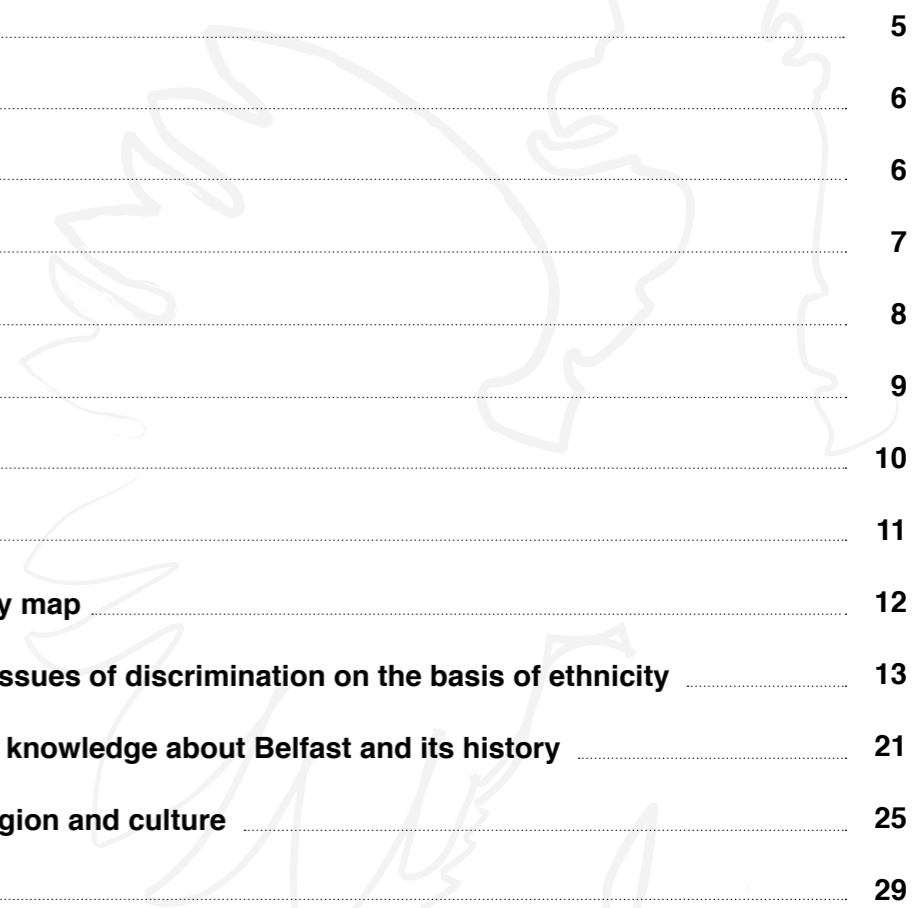
**Issues of discrimination, safety and integration**



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## Background

After Poland's accession to EU in May 2004, the UK was one of the first three countries in Europe (together with Ireland and Sweden) to grant free movement with no restrictions to all Polish citizens. According to the Office for National Statistics, at the end of 2010 there were more than 500,000 migrants of Polish origin in the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>. Considering the scale of the migration, it becomes clear that such a rapid and vast demographic and cultural change in a relatively short time must have naturally provoked mixed reactions in the host society.

Census figures for 2001 show that there were 22 people of Polish origin living in Belfast at that time. According to the data from the Institute for Conflict research, by 2007 the number of Polish people had grown to 9000, which accounts for around 3% of the population<sup>2</sup>. The 2011 census (which is due to be published in summer 2012) will provide more up to date figures as the numbers might have decreased due to the recent economic crisis. But undoubtedly, the Polish community has changed the social mosaic of Belfast quite significantly. There are growing numbers of Polish shops, community groups, sport teams, church groups, restaurants and events etc. Migrants are not a new phenomenon for Northern Irish society but considering the scale and timeframe of the new migration, the wave which started in 2004 is substantially different from what has been experienced before. Moreover, in Northern Ireland there are additional factors

which make the situation of migrants here different to the other parts of the United Kingdom. The very distinct historical circumstances which have shaped contemporary society in Northern Ireland are usually unknown to migrants before they arrive here. Belfast as a city which is still going through the peace process can be particularly difficult for new residents to settle in, integrate into society and be active in the local community.

There has been a growing concern regarding emerging issues such as discrimination and prejudice towards new migrants in United Kingdom. Problems here (Northern Ireland) escalated in 2009, after the riots following the Poland vs. Northern Ireland football match. Hooligans clashed on the streets of Belfast but those who were blamed afterwards were Polish families who had nothing to do with the violence. As reported by the Polish Association in Northern Ireland, multiple racist incidents targeted at Polish residents occurred afterwards around the Village area.

Another factor of concern currently is the recent economic recession and the migrant population is particularly vulnerable as an easy target to blame for the economic downturn and consequential job losses.

In terms of participation in local community activities, we also asked our respondents if they were active in any of the local community groups. The number of those

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<sup>1</sup> Polish People in the UK. Half a million Polish Residents, Office for National Statistics, 25th August 2011

<sup>2</sup> New Migrants and Belfast, Neil Jarman, Institute for Conflict Research, 2007

## Methodology

The main aim of this research was to look at the situation of minority Polish community in Belfast, in order to examine the main issues emerging in the process of integration of a relatively new community into local society in Belfast. The survey was conducted in Polish mainly online, and survey questionnaires were made available through various media outlets such as the Polish Association website, newsletters of numerous NGOs, migrant portals and the Community Relations Council website. Survey questionnaires were also distributed among participants of different local activity groups (English classes, support groups, schools), as well as in Polish shops in hard copy format. Altogether research generated 106 survey responses within the Belfast area, which would represent around 1-2% of the total population.

The research focuses on three main issues, which were outlined after discussions and interviews with local community leaders and are most relevant in terms of community relations. These are:

1. Community safety and issues of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity.

2. Level of integration, as well as knowledge about Belfast and its history.  
3. Freedom of expressing religious and cultural identity.

Additionally, the survey included simple demographic questions to help describe the general profile of Polish community in Belfast.

Most of the questions were closed-ended-both single and multiple choice questions were used and only two optional open questions were included. The rationale behind using this form of survey was to simplify it and minimise refusal rate. Open ended questions require effort and engagement and could result in a very low response rate. The survey consisted of 23 questions altogether and depending on the respondent, would take from 10 minutes to perhaps half an hour for those who decided to answer the open questions.

## Profile of community

The first important finding was the uneven gender representation of groups who took part in the survey. As the survey was posted online everyone got an equal opportunity to take part and surprisingly the number of women who responded was significantly higher than number of men. From 106 people surveyed only 41 were male while for females the number went up to 65. This disproportionate figure is probably as a result of different levels of participation in community activities. Women were easier to access, due

to the wider range community activities they are involved in: women's support groups, mother and toddler groups, family centers etc, while the number of community groups targeted at men is slightly lower. Increased participation in the community groups in general would be followed by increased activity in internet community forums and other websites as well.

## Age

Polish residents in Belfast are in general a fairly young population. Most of them (67.9%) are between 26 and 35 years old. The second largest age group (17.9%) is people aged 36-45. The youngest age group accounts for 7.5% of our sample and 4.7% are 46-55

years old, while only 2 respondents were aged over 55. This feature of the population has a number of consequences for the local job market as most of the people are within the age group of high economic activity.

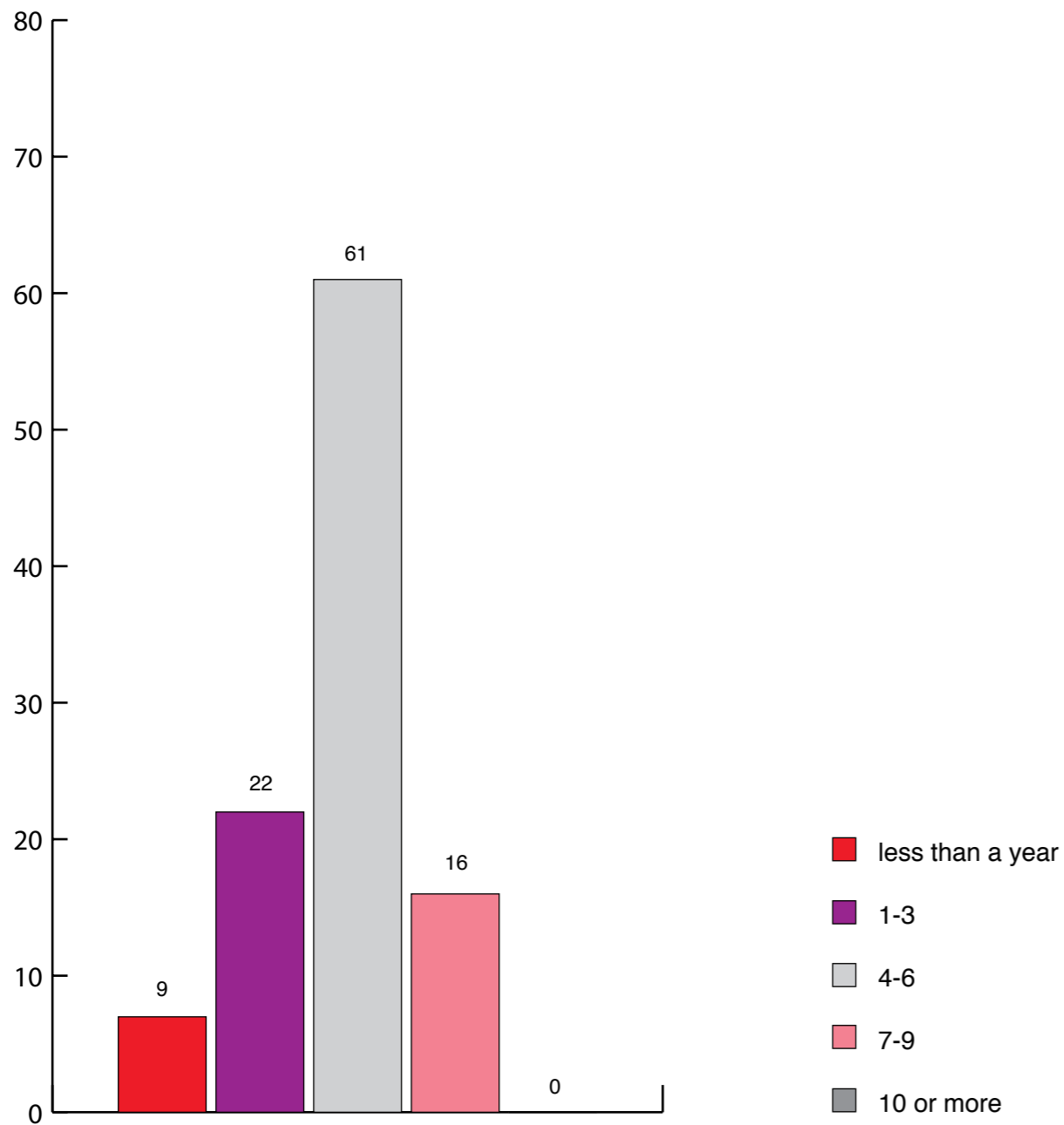


## Length of stay

The vast majority of Polish people migrated to the United Kingdom soon after the accession of Poland to the European Union, with the peak of migration being around 2006-2008,

when most of the respondents (57%) moved in to Belfast. Before 2004 there were virtually no Polish people in Belfast, due to legal difficulties with getting a work permit.

How long have you been living in Northern Ireland?

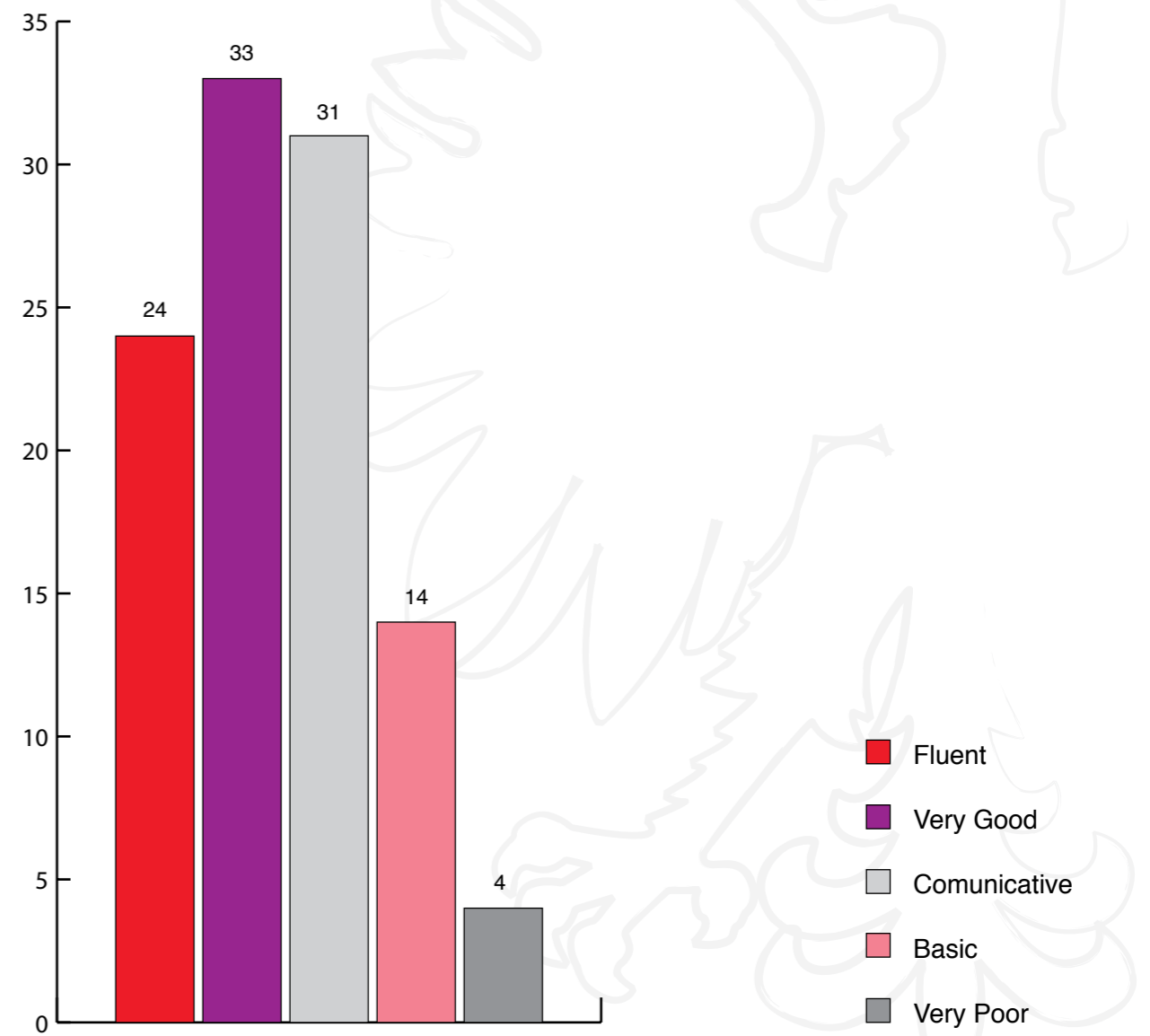


## Language level

Knowledge of the host country language is a very important factor for settling in and being able to function in a new society. The language barrier is an obstacle which influences all aspects of everyday life beginning from relations in the workplace, through coping with everyday routines, to establishing relationships with neighbours and making new friends. Those whose level of English is not sufficient to be independent would find it much harder to integrate in this environment.

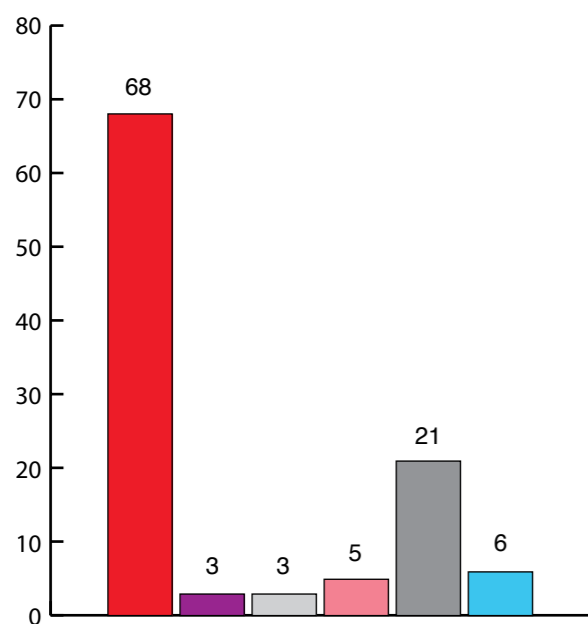
Most of the respondents are independent English speakers; only 18% assessed their level of English as basic or very poor. But in general, most of the people who made the decision to migrate have sufficient language skills to cope with their new environment independently.

How would you assess your level of English?



## Occupation

There is a very common stereotype spread widely by tabloid newspapers, which would state that emigrants in general, but especially those from Eastern Europe, would migrate to UK to claim benefits. The best example of this tendency would be the Daily Mail's approach, with titles like: "Polish immigrants take £1bn out of the UK economy" (June 28th 2007) "Immigrants claiming UK benefits" and "Stop this abuse of British hospitality" (January 21st, 2012) "100,000 Eastern European migrants now free to claim full benefits in Britain worth tens of millions of pounds after EU ruling" (March 4th, 2011) , 'We're throwing open the doors to benefit tourists" (September 30th, 2011), just to name a few. It's a very dangerous phenomenon, especially in the times of economic recession. Ethnic minorities are the easiest target to blame for financial instability. Biased opinions, usually based on anecdotal evidence, can lead to scapegoating and can influence heavily the relations between migrant workers and local societies. According to the report of UNISON from October 2009, migrant workers have been deeply affected by the recession "54% of respondents have been personally exposed to racism at work and 83% have encountered racism in their workplace;



80% of respondents working in the private care sector have experienced racist bullying, discrimination and have felt humiliated at work. Many reported that migrant workers were "disproportionately scrutinised and disciplined" <sup>1</sup> An opinion that migrants are not really contributing to the society they live in is quite widespread. We asked respondents about their occupational status, and in our sample only 5 people out of 106 were job seeking at the moment. 64% of them were employed, followed by those who do the housekeeping and those who study. Few of those surveyed would pick the 'other' option i.e. internships, exchange programmes, voluntary service etc. Because of the huge differences in the standard of living and purchasing power of money, most of the migrants come to the UK for better life conditions. Most of them would be looking for a job in order to assure their families quality of life (which would be unachievable in their home country), rather than rely on benefits.

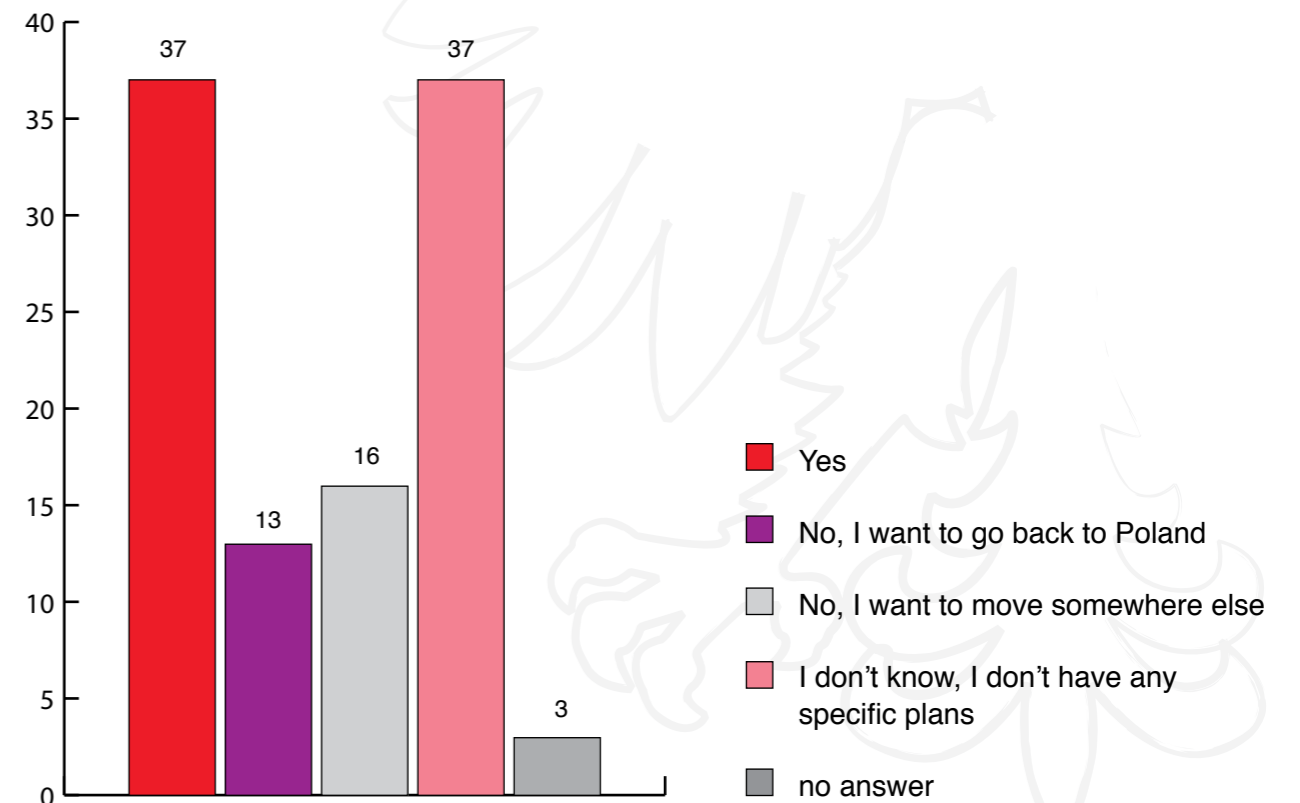
<sup>3</sup> Migrant Workers, Racism and the Recession, October 2009

## Future plans

It's important to note that attitudes of Polish migrant workers have changed over time compared to the first flow of migration in 2004. It's been already eight years - a long enough to come back to Poland for those who couldn't cope with living in Northern Ireland, and to settle here for the others who decided to stay. There is still quite significant uncertainty, in terms of future plans, but most of those who stayed in the UK are already settled down with families. They have children who go to local schools and are becoming more and more a part of the local society, even though many of them would not be sure about where they would like to live in a few years time. In Poland, the generation of migrants after 2004 is referred to as 'the lost generation' as it caused a huge outflow of the youngest workers. They were very often educated to degree level, ambitious, ready for challenges and looking for a place to settle with families and raise children.

There have been numerous national programmes introduced in Poland to bring migrants back: job portals with relevant offers for fluent speakers of English; favourable offers to buy land; loans for entrepreneurs, etc., but these interventions have not changed much. An initiative of the Polish government to send representatives to the countries of migration, to organize job fairs was mocked widely on the migrant internet forums. After the financial breakdown in 2009 there was a slight tendency for migrants to go back to Poland. Between 2007 and 2010, the number of Polish people living in UK decreased by 130,000, but Poles still remained the second largest minority group with a total number of 560,000. It's not unreasonable to assume that those who stayed after 2009 in Belfast, probably will not return to Poland very soon, but rather will become a part of the city's social landscape.

### Are you willing to stay in Belfast in Future?



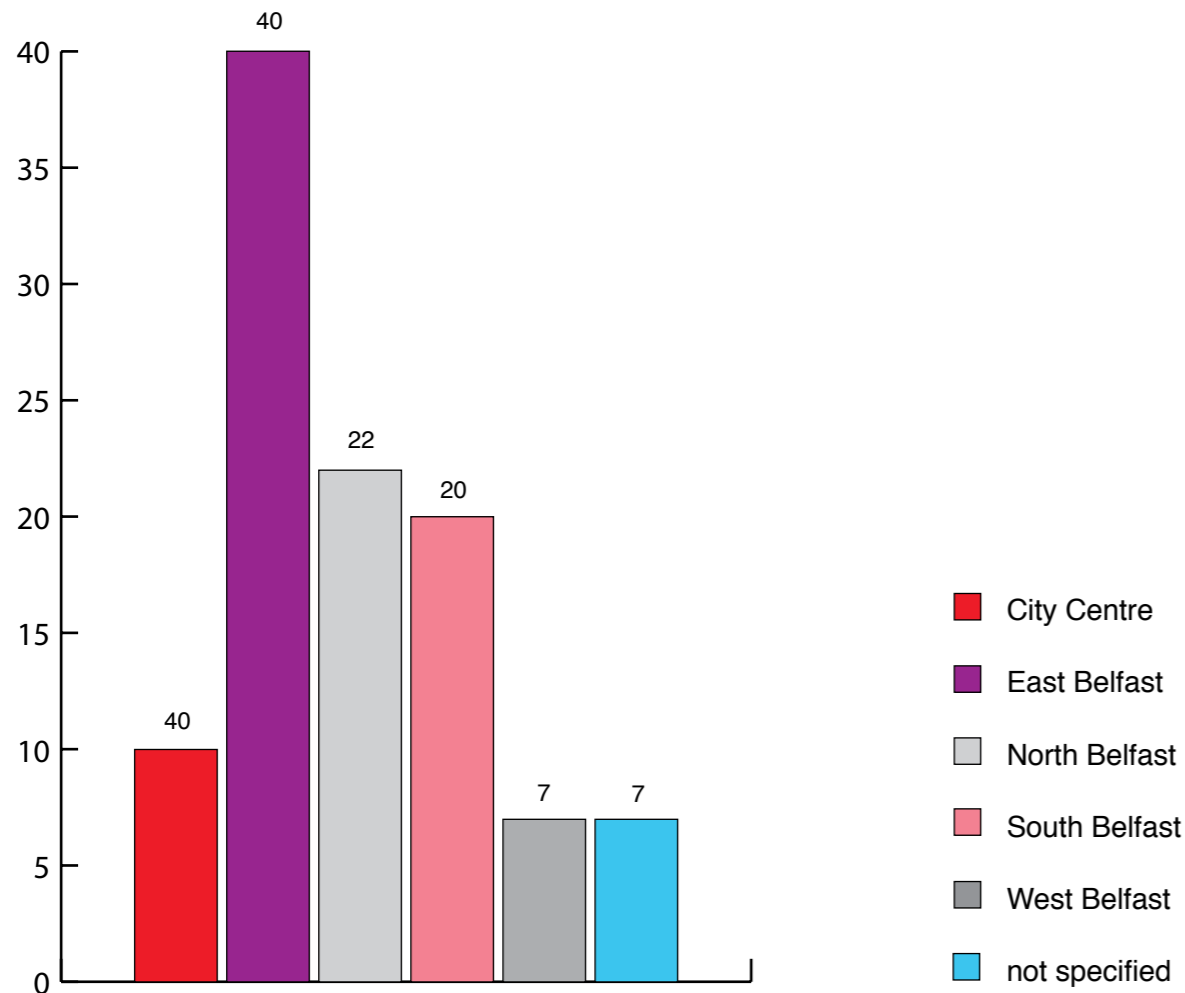
## Polish people on the city map

The city of Belfast has its very specific socio-geographic structure due to historical circumstances. It was important to know if there was any specific area where Polish people would tend to move in and how easy and safe do they feel in their neighbourhoods.

According to the survey's findings, most of the Polish people would live in East Belfast. The reason for this is quite simple: East Belfast seems to offer the cheapest housing, which is a crucial issue for emigrants who would usually come with a small amount of savings or no savings at all and have to start everything from the scratch.

With new migrants, the landscape of the city changes as well - there are numerous Polish shops, Polish restaurants and plenty of services available in Polish in East Belfast. Also, local churches started to offer services in Polish, as a lot of Polish people would be practicing Catholics.

Where do you live?



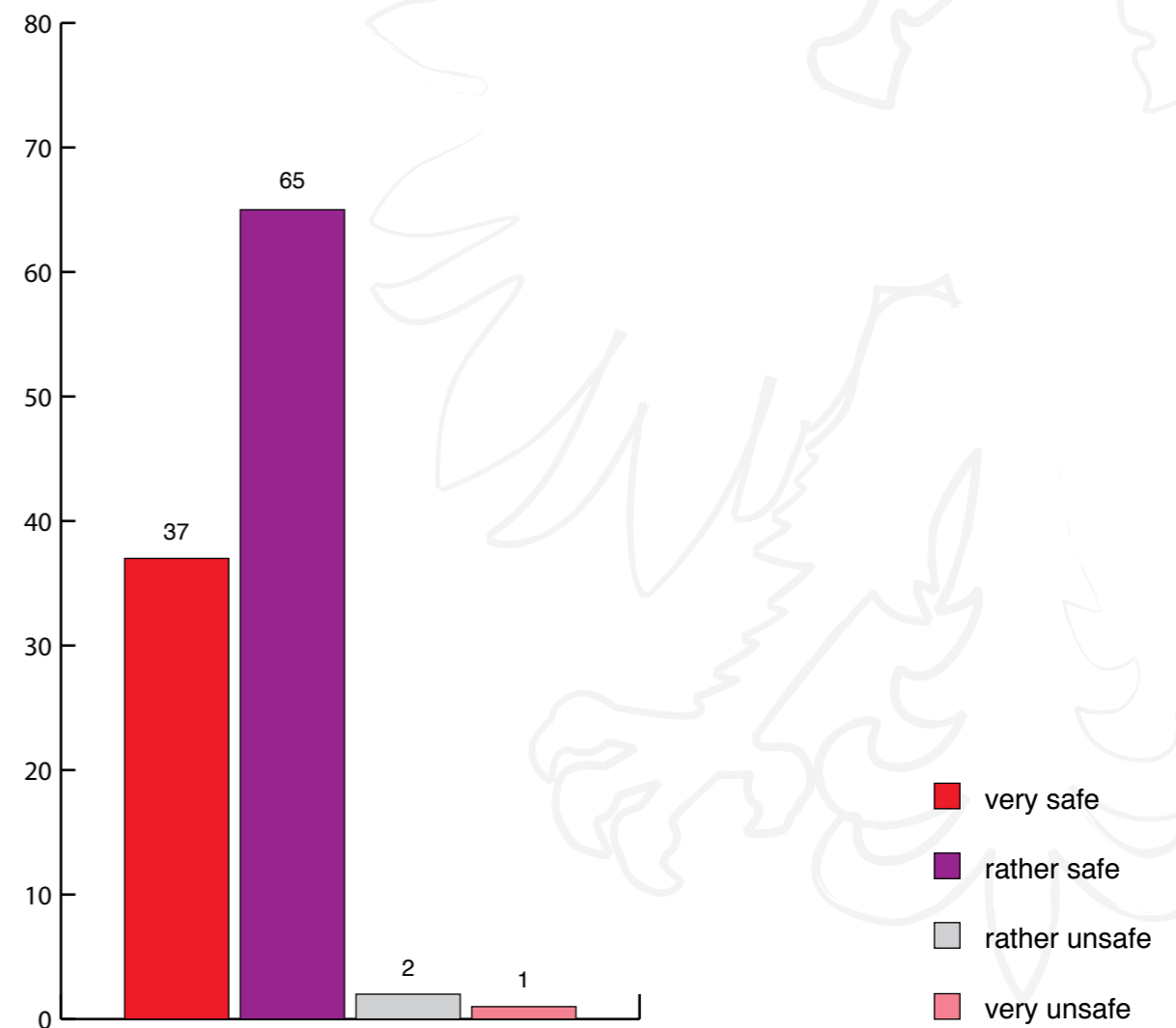
## Community safety and issues of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity

To assess the level of safety we asked respondents about how they feel in Belfast in different circumstances, assuming that responses could be different depending on the area of the city and time of the day.

Generally, people tend to feel safer around their own neighborhood, compared with the rest of the city. One person refused to answer questions concerning the safety issues. The vast majority (96%) assessed their level of safety in the place they live either as safe or very safe. When collecting the surveys in

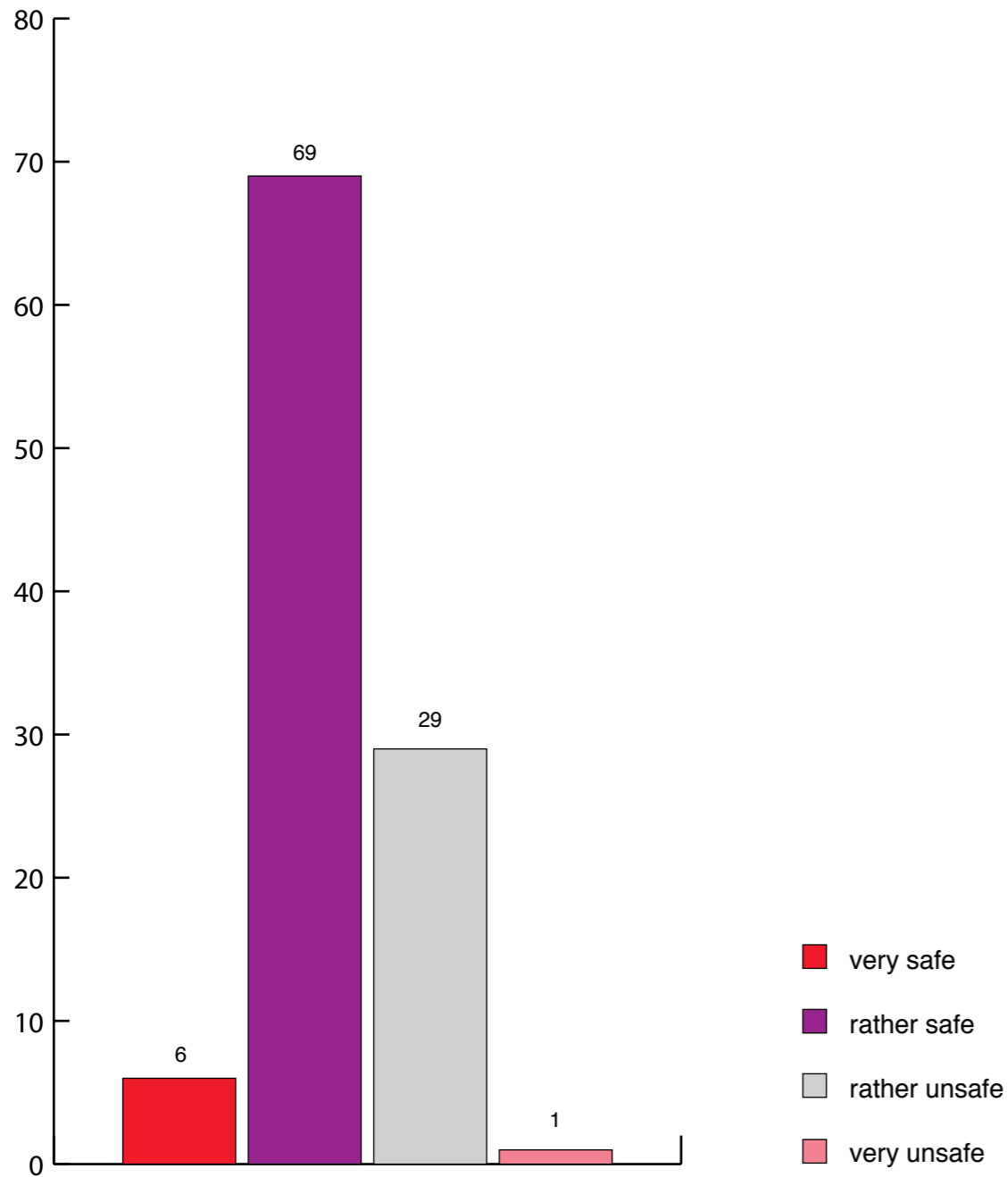
paper format in schools, community groups or in shops some of the respondents used to share their general opinions in an open conversation. Most of them stressed the good relations with their neighbors, the accommodating attitude of local people and positive experiences with building relationships in the area.

How would you assess the level of safety in your neighbourhood?



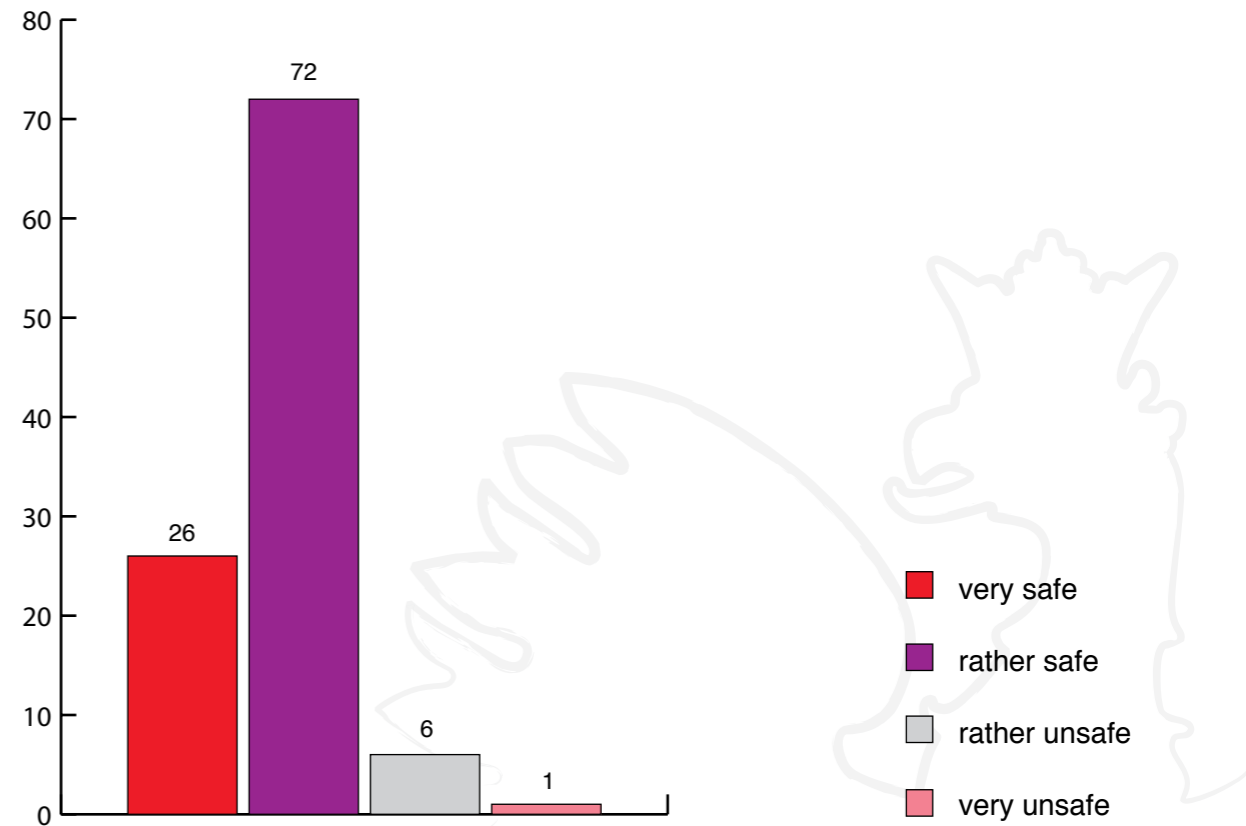
The results are little less optimistic for Belfast as a city, where 27% of people feel rather unsafe and the number of those who feel very safe drops from 36% to 5%. The question emerging from that finding is whether it is a real feeling based on personal experience or the general image of Belfast as a post conflict city as portrayed in the media.

**How would you assess the level of safety in the Belfast?**

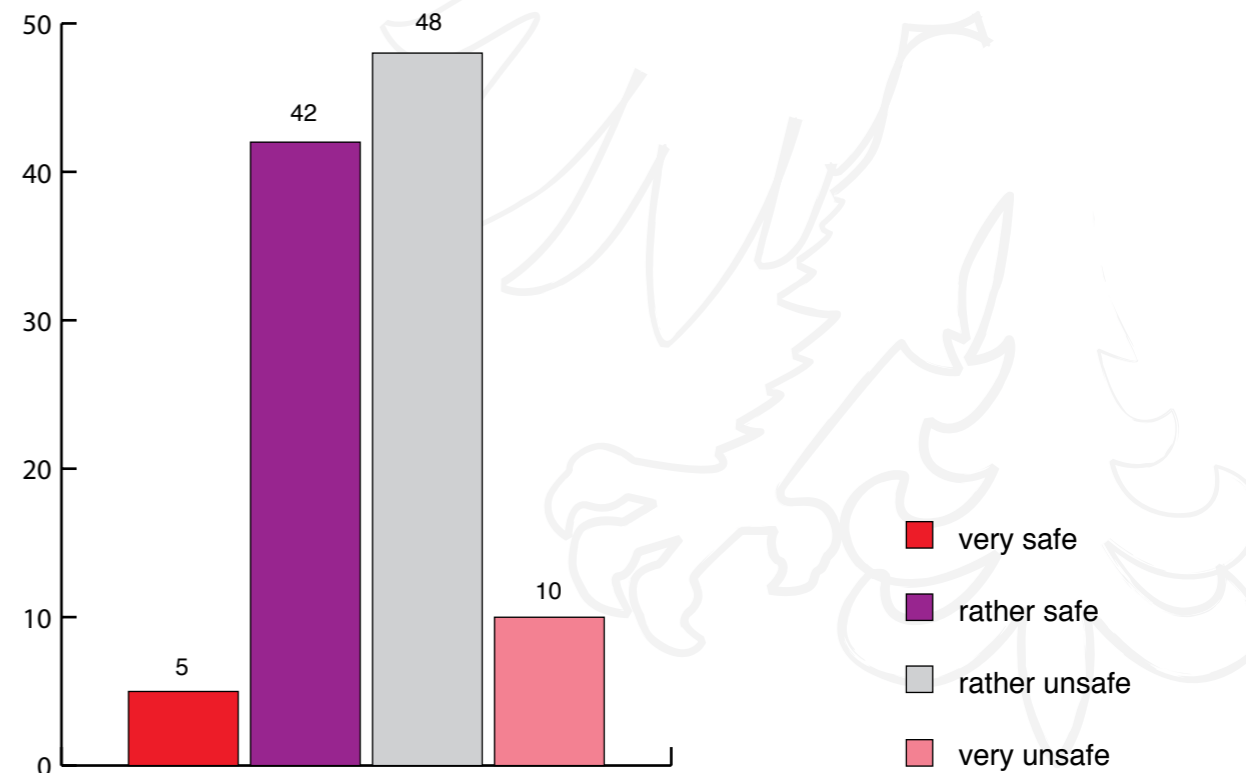


There is a significant differential in the level of safety experienced during the day as opposed to nighttime. 92% would feel very safe or rather safe on the streets in the daytime, while at night that rate drops to 44%. At the same time 54% of people would report feeling rather unsafe or very unsafe at night.

**How would you assess level of safety in the daytime?**



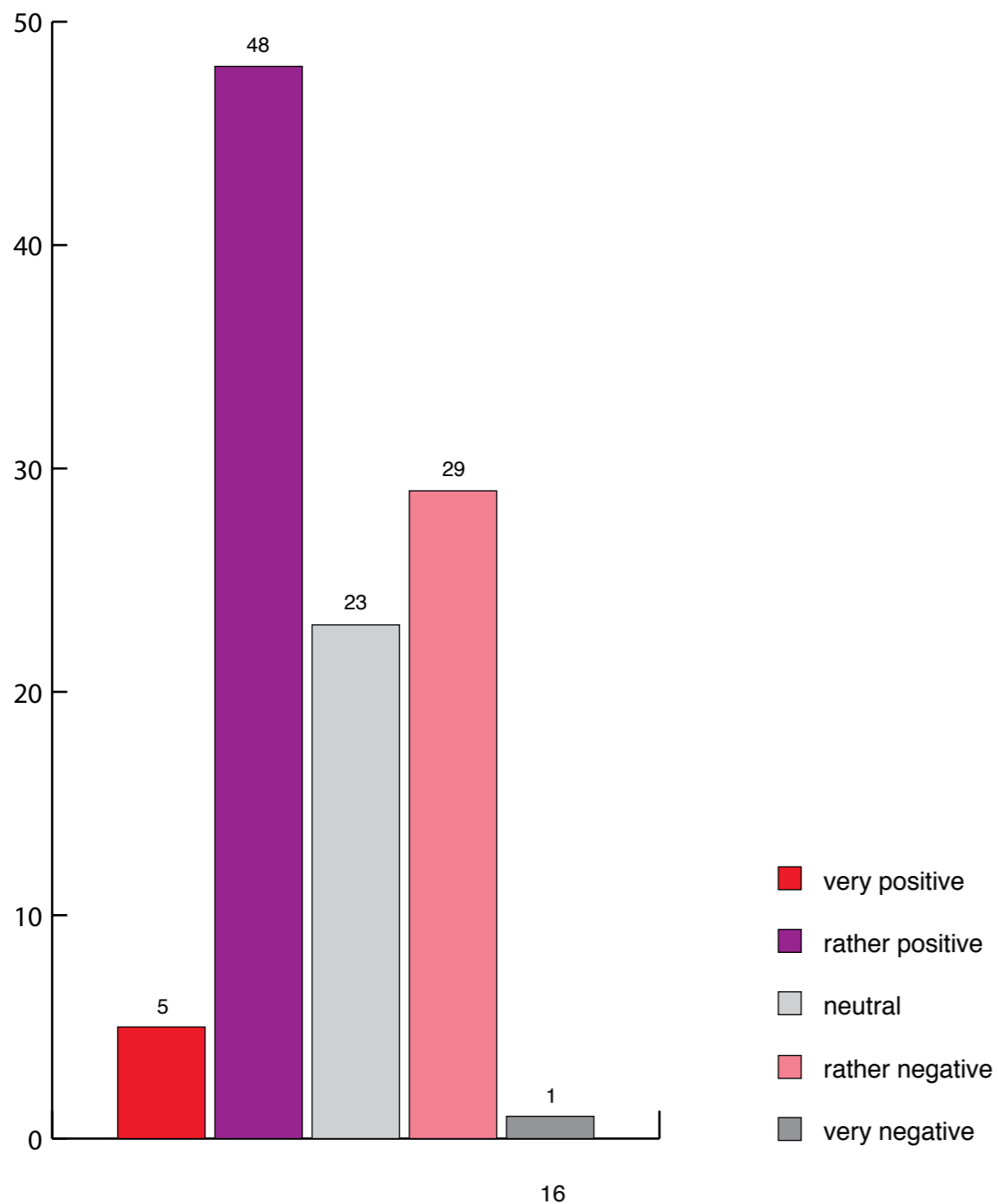
**How would you assess level of safety in the night time?**





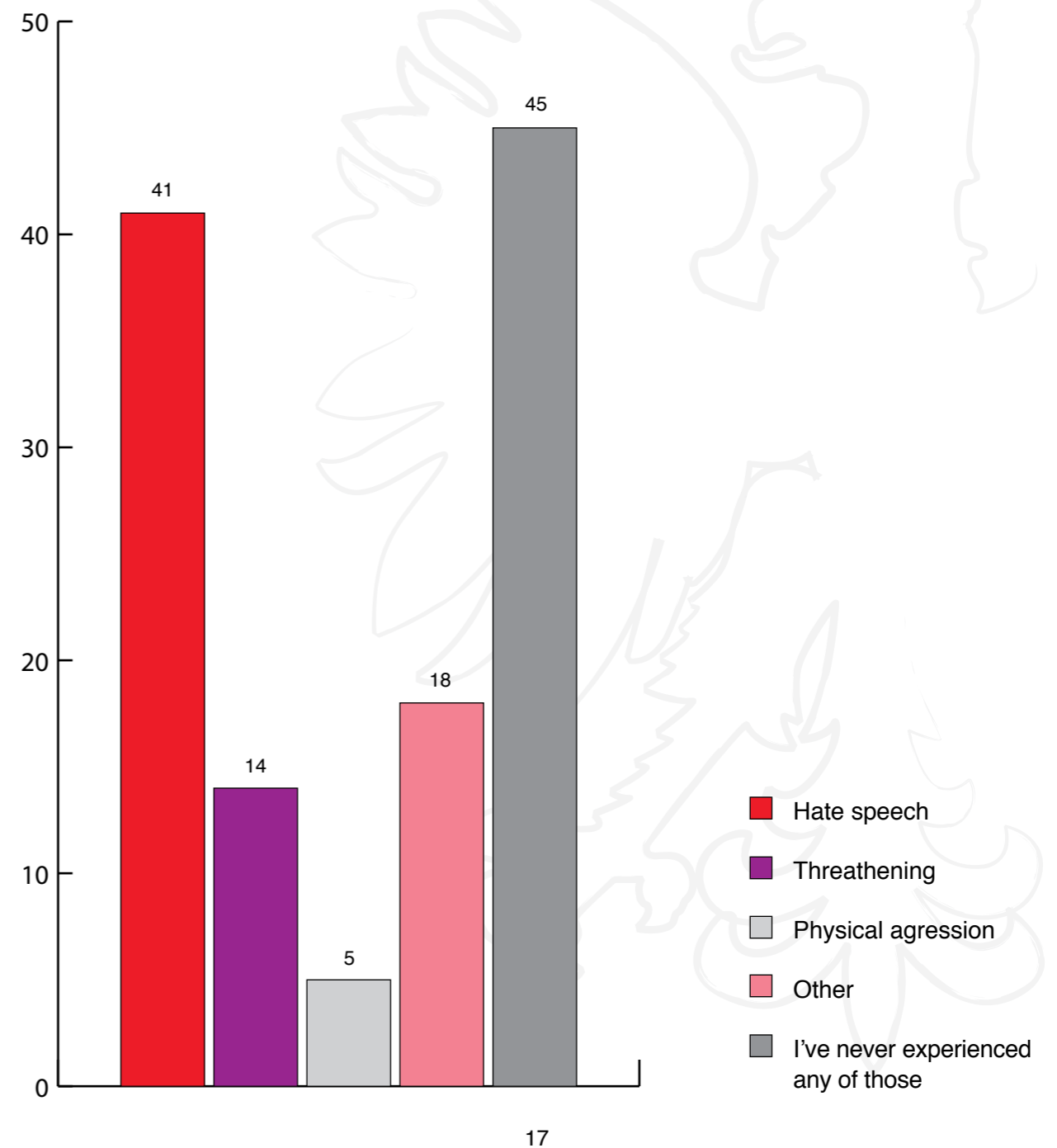
It was important to know, what Polish people think about the way they are perceived in Northern Ireland “do they feel welcome”? or feel that “attitudes towards them could be better”?. For the most part our respondents indicated that their relationships with local people seem to be good. 45% of them indicated that attitudes towards Polish migrants are ‘rather positive’ and 4% stated they were ‘very positive’. At the same time only one person described the approach of local people as ‘very negative’ and 27% as ‘rather negative’. 21% stated that attitudes towards the Polish community are ‘neutral’.

**In your opinion, what is the attitude of people in Northern Ireland towards Polish community?**



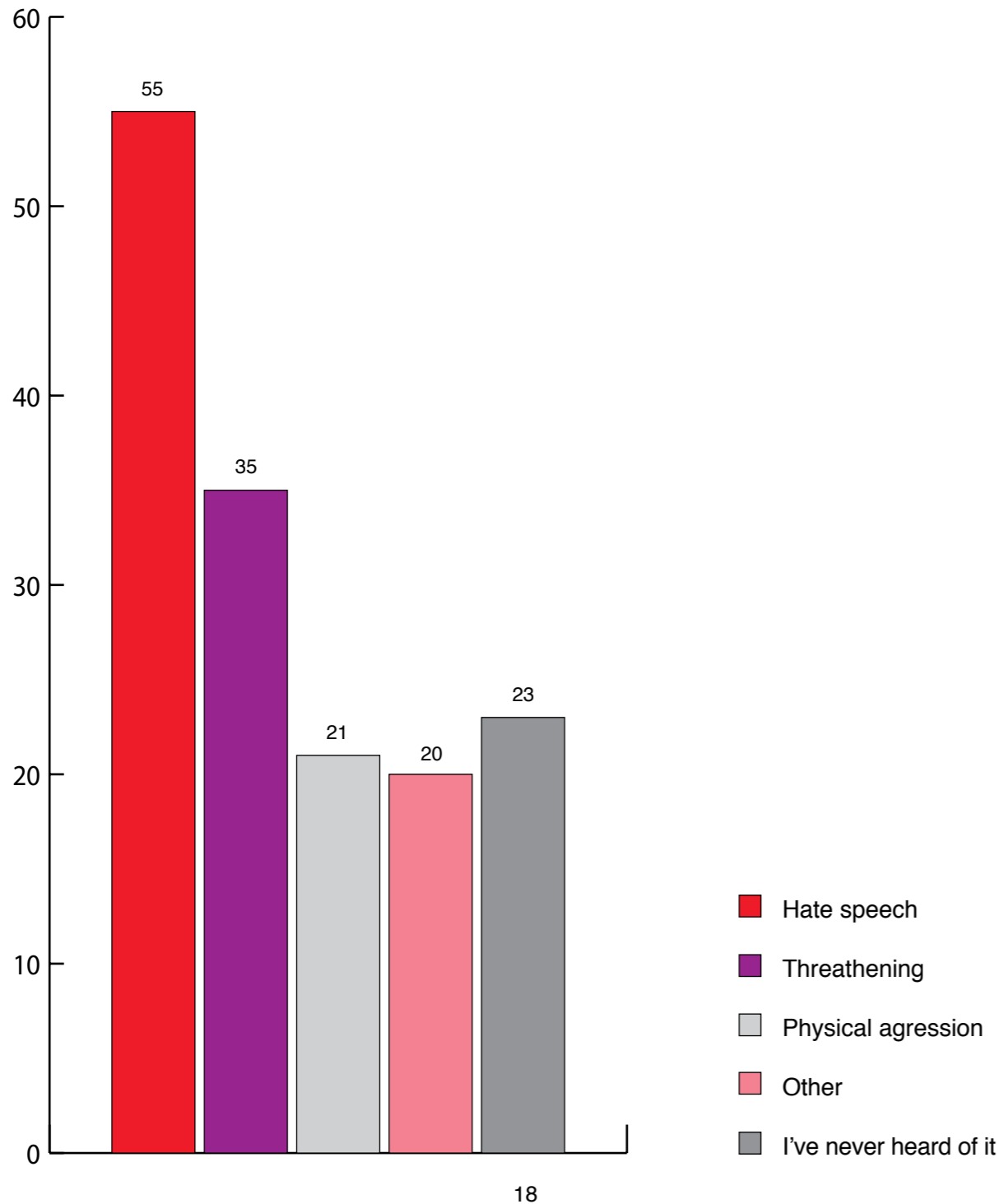
In the next part of the survey we asked people straightforwardly about experiencing any forms of discrimination. There were two questions asked, the first one where respondents had to refer to their personal experience and the second where they were just a witness of discriminative behaviour. Options with examples of those behaviors were listed and there was a possibility to choose more than one option. As can be seen below, quite a significant number of people (38%) have experienced verbal assaults. Another 16% stated that they have experienced other forms of discrimination, 13% have been threatened and 4% were physically assaulted. 42% have never experienced any of those.

**Have you ever experience any forms of descrimination?**



The numbers grew much higher when people were asked about witnessing hate crime. Only 21% of respondents have never experienced somebody in their close environment being physically or verbally assaulted; 51% reported witnessing hate speech, 33% threats, 19% physical violence and 18% other forms of threat or intimidation.

**Did anyone in your surroundings experienced any of those forms of discrimination?**



Being aware, that we cannot cover all possible forms of discrimination with close-ended questions, there was an option to describe any other places/situations where people do not feel at ease. We got 20 answers out of which the most common were:

- Shaftesbury Square (in the nighttime)
- City Centre (in the nighttime)
- East Belfast
- Around 12th of July

Some other examples would include histories of repetitive attacks, which at the end would lead to people moving out:

*"We used to rent a flat around the Malone Road area. Sometimes bottles were thrown at our house and at other times paint. Once around the 12th of July we found dog mess thrown into our yard. We felt threatened and very uncomfortable".*  
*"Around the place we live now (Newtownabbey); someone damaged the tyres on our car and once somebody threw an egg at the window."*

Other concerns were about young people being aggressive towards migrants:

*"When I pass by a group of teenagers around 13-16 years old, I never pick up my phone or talk Polish"*

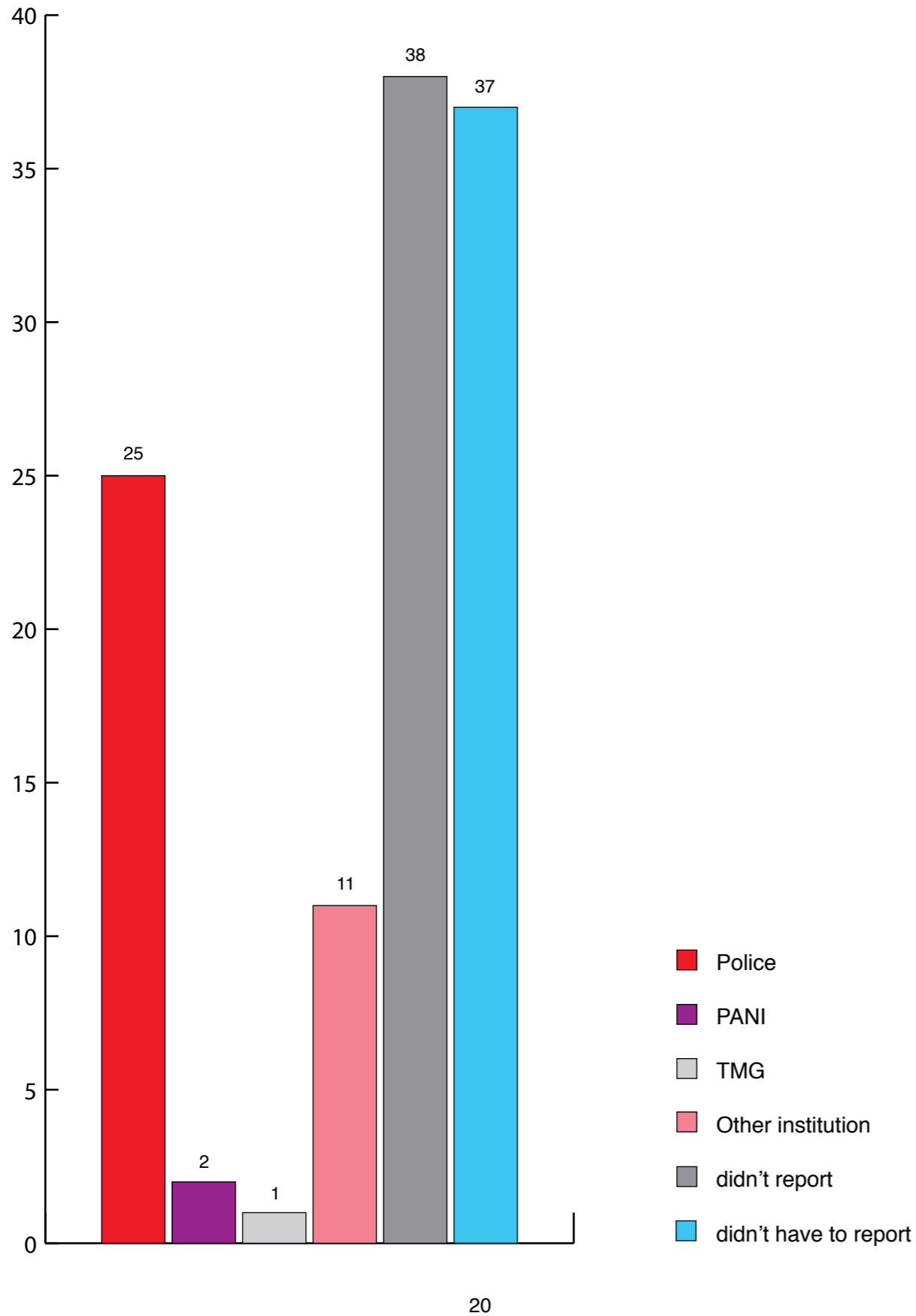
*"There are a lot of drunk and aggressive young people at night in the city centre"*

*"Everyday I go back home after work at 9pm, there are a lot of teenagers around McDonalds in the city centre who would pick on me"*

After talking to Polish people as well as police officers in the areas of high concentration for Polish residents, an issue of crime reporting emerged. Due to specific historical circumstances, Polish people wouldn't necessarily trust police officers easily and would have quite a biased image of the policeman in general. Together with the language difficulties, this can lead to a situation in which crimes are not always reported because of fear of interaction with officers. Therefore, there have been other institutions established that crimes can be reported to, namely the initiative of Bilingual Community Safety Advocate. This is assisting minority ethnic residents with translation and organizational support whenever hate crime is reported. The scheme is an initiative of the Polish Association in Northern Ireland together with the Chinese Welfare Association.

Still, it seems that there is much additional work required in terms of encouraging crime reporting, as the numbers of people who contact any institution to get and advice or help is much lower than the number of incidents. Only 23% of people have reported discriminatory behaviour to the police and 33% didn't report incidents to any institution.

Did you report those issues to any institutions?



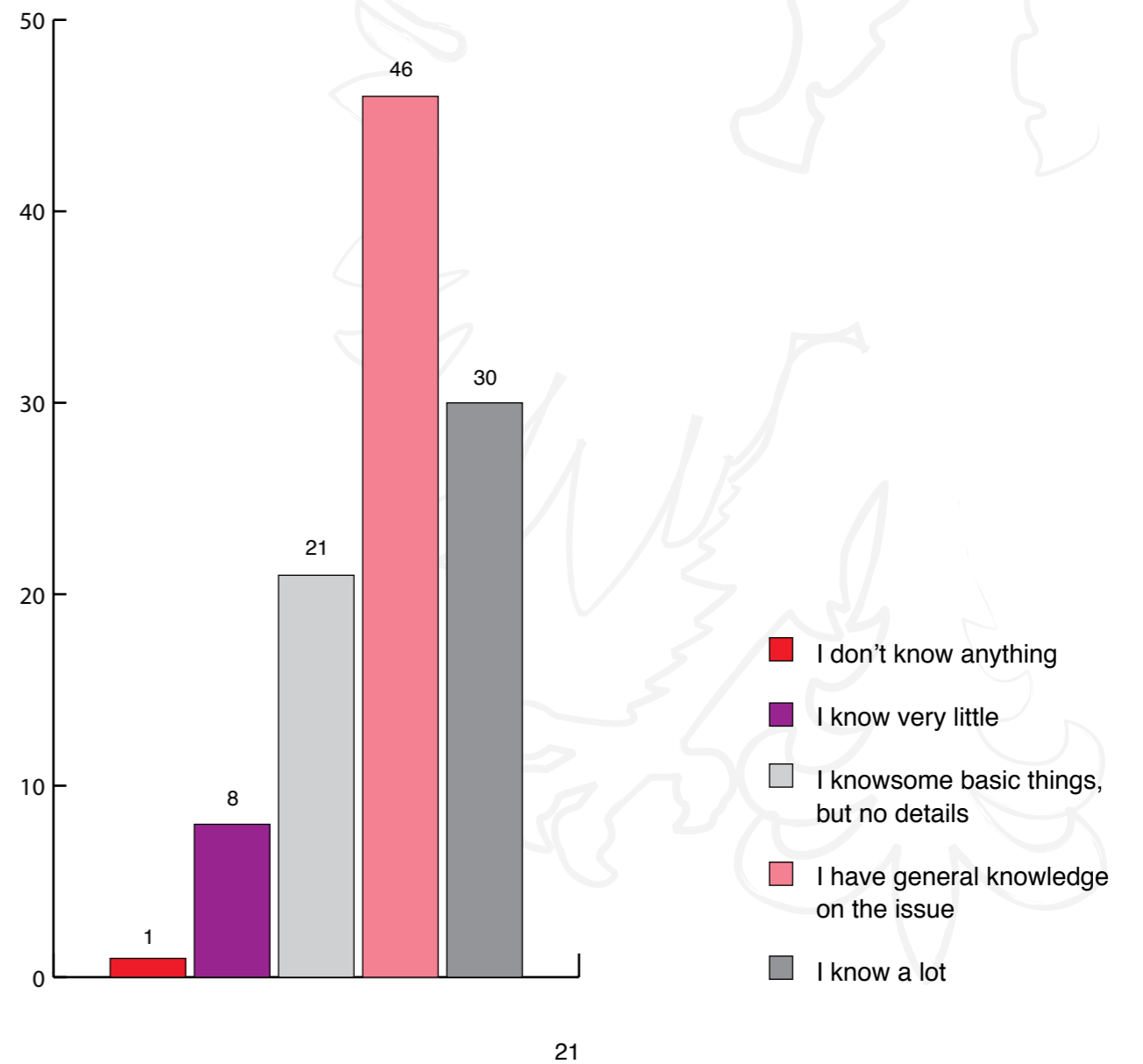
## Level of integration and knowledge about Belfast and its history

At the beginning of this research it seemed reasonable that people's perception of Belfast might depend on what had been garnered from the media or from others who live here etc. The image of Northern Ireland in the Polish media consists only of reports on riots, violence and paramilitary activity, which is usually shown without any in depth analysis or understanding of the issues. Therefore, Belfast might seem a dangerous city to live if people only know it from foreign news reports and newspapers. That's why we asked respondents to tell us

if they had heard of the conflict in Ireland before moving to Belfast. According to their answers, the majority of people had heard of the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland before moving here and only 13% had no knowledge prior to their departure.

We also asked respondents to assess their level of knowledge about the conflict in Northern Ireland and the answers are shown below.

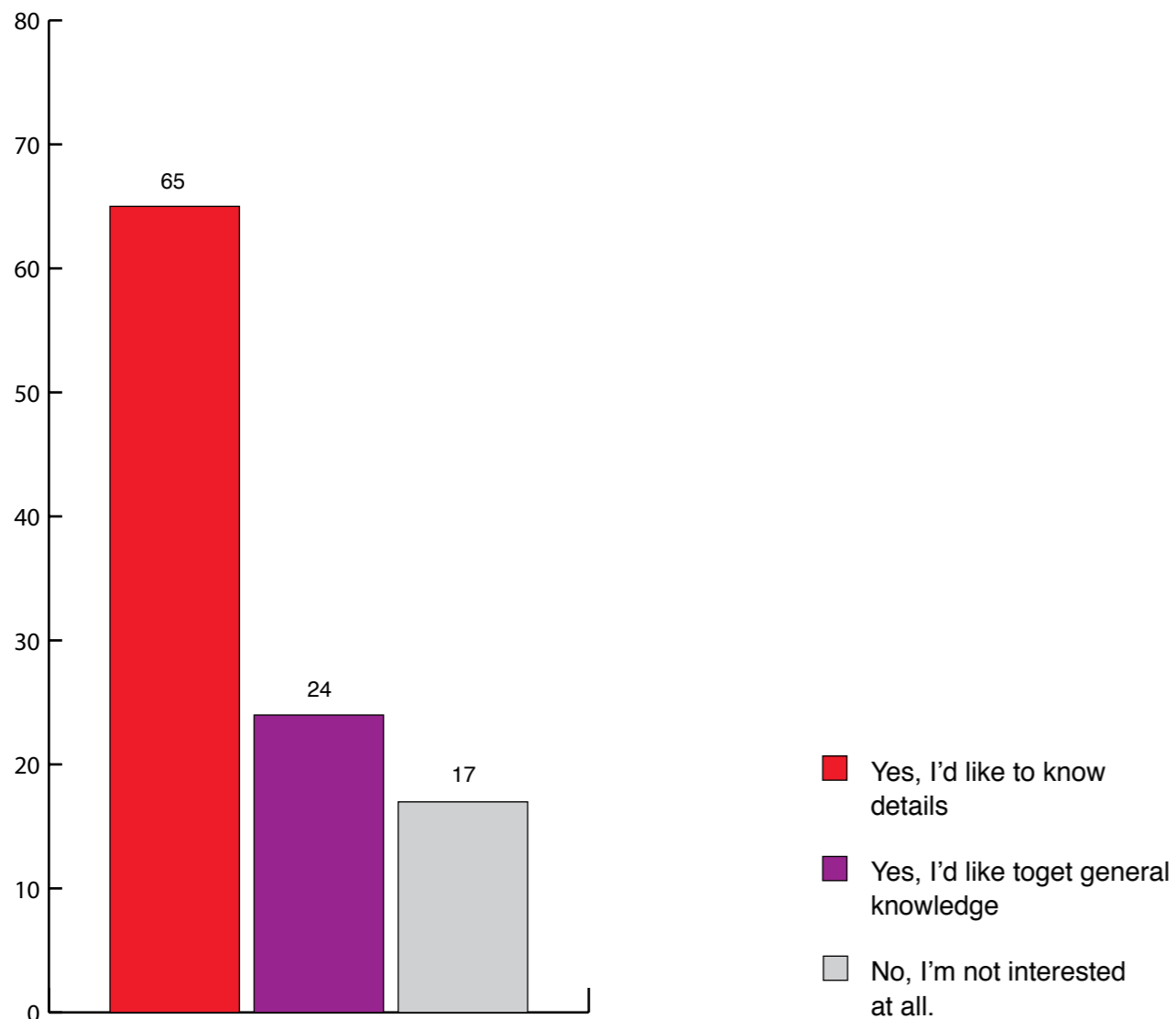
How would you assess your level of knowledge about NI conflict?



Because Belfast is substantially different in terms of local history and the shape of society from any other city in United Kingdom, there are additional issues that new migrants have to take into consideration. For example, people who filled in the surveys during face to face meetings and participated in conversations would call local people 'Irish' most of the time. Usually they wouldn't realize that it's not a neutral term in Northern Ireland. It is easy to imagine what kind of misunderstandings this could cause in their interaction with local communities. It is also important to note that migrants at the beginning would not know the importance of T-shirts, baseball caps, other accessories with national symbols and emblems of football teams etc. These, which are all sold in souvenir shops, can be the cause of potential risk to the unwary, especially in areas outside the city centre. Confusing situations caused by this are especially harmful to school kids and were reported by teachers and parents during the interviews in the Polish Saturday School.

At the same time, Polish residents in Belfast express high interest in learning about Northern Irish issues and history and only 16% stated that they were not interested at all.

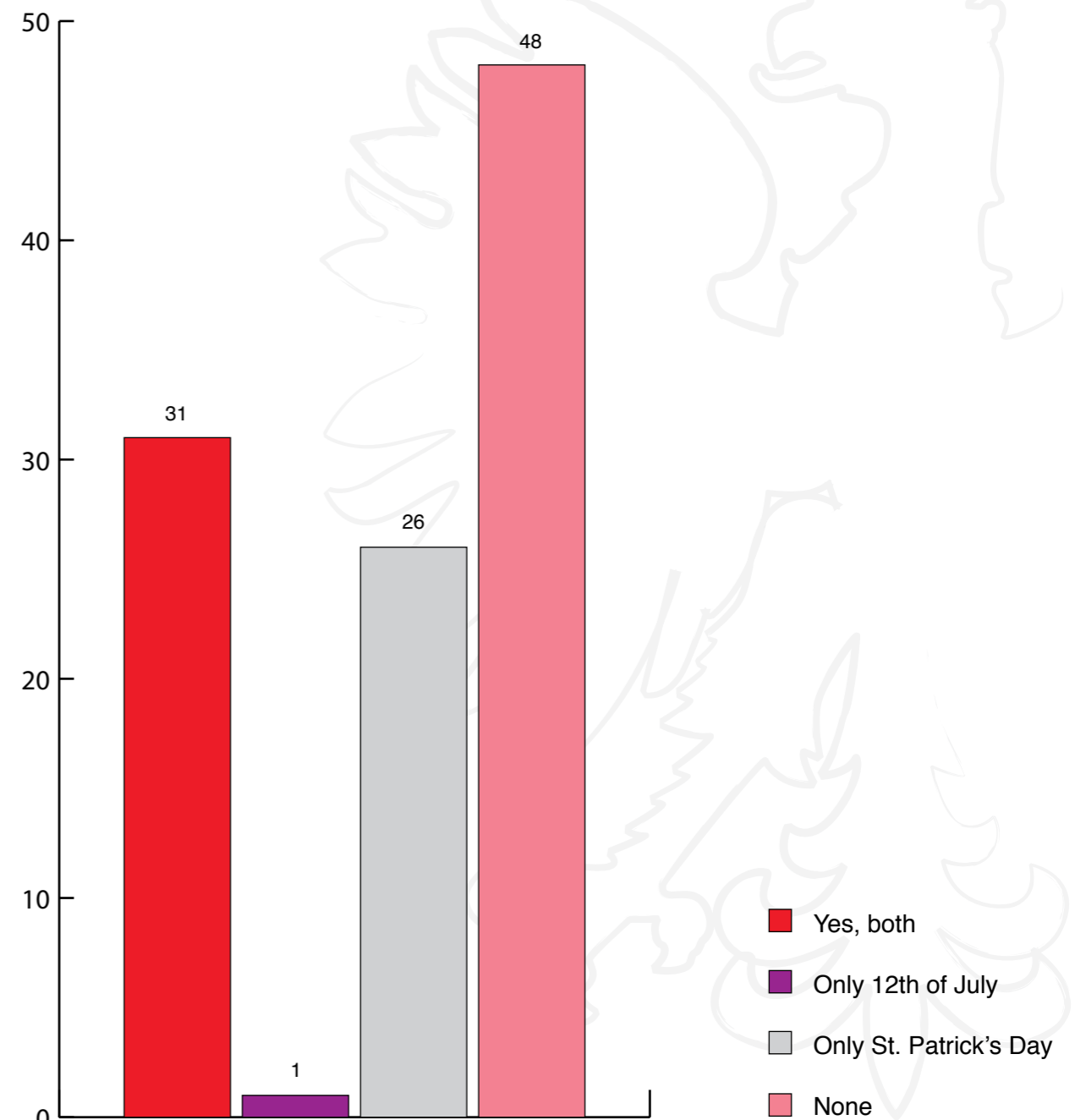
Would you like to know more about the history and conflict NI?



Another issue we wanted to examine was if Polish residents participate in local celebrations or national holidays. We asked about two main celebrations with the highest impact in the local society, which would be St. Patrick's Day and 12th of July parade.

Surprisingly, despite declaring interest in getting to know local traditions and history, 45% of the respondents have never participated in any of those events even though the majority of them have been in Northern Ireland for at least couple of years. 54% have participated in the St. Patrick's Day celebrations which are a very well known holiday all over the world and even in Polish cities some bars would organize special St. Patrick's Day evenings. Probably that's why it's so much more popular among migrants than the 12th of July Parade, which was attended by 30% of people. Almost the same amount (29%) participated in both events.

Would you ever been to St. Patrick's Day celebration or 12th July parade?



In terms of participation in local community activities, we also asked our respondents if they were active in any of the local community groups. The number of those who are in any way active in the local community was not very high but this applies in general to the population in Poland. According to data gathered for Social Diagnosis 2011, only 14.8% of Polish people were active on a community level.<sup>41</sup>

Only 20% of the survey respondents belong to any group. In Belfast, members of the Polish community are active mainly in groups which provide family support or extracurricular activities for children, such as:

- Mother and Toddler Group
- Playgroups for kids
- Kameleon (youth club)
- Parent Teacher Association
- English Club

Other organizations would include Unison, Belfast Friendship Club, Women's Support Group and Men's Support Group.

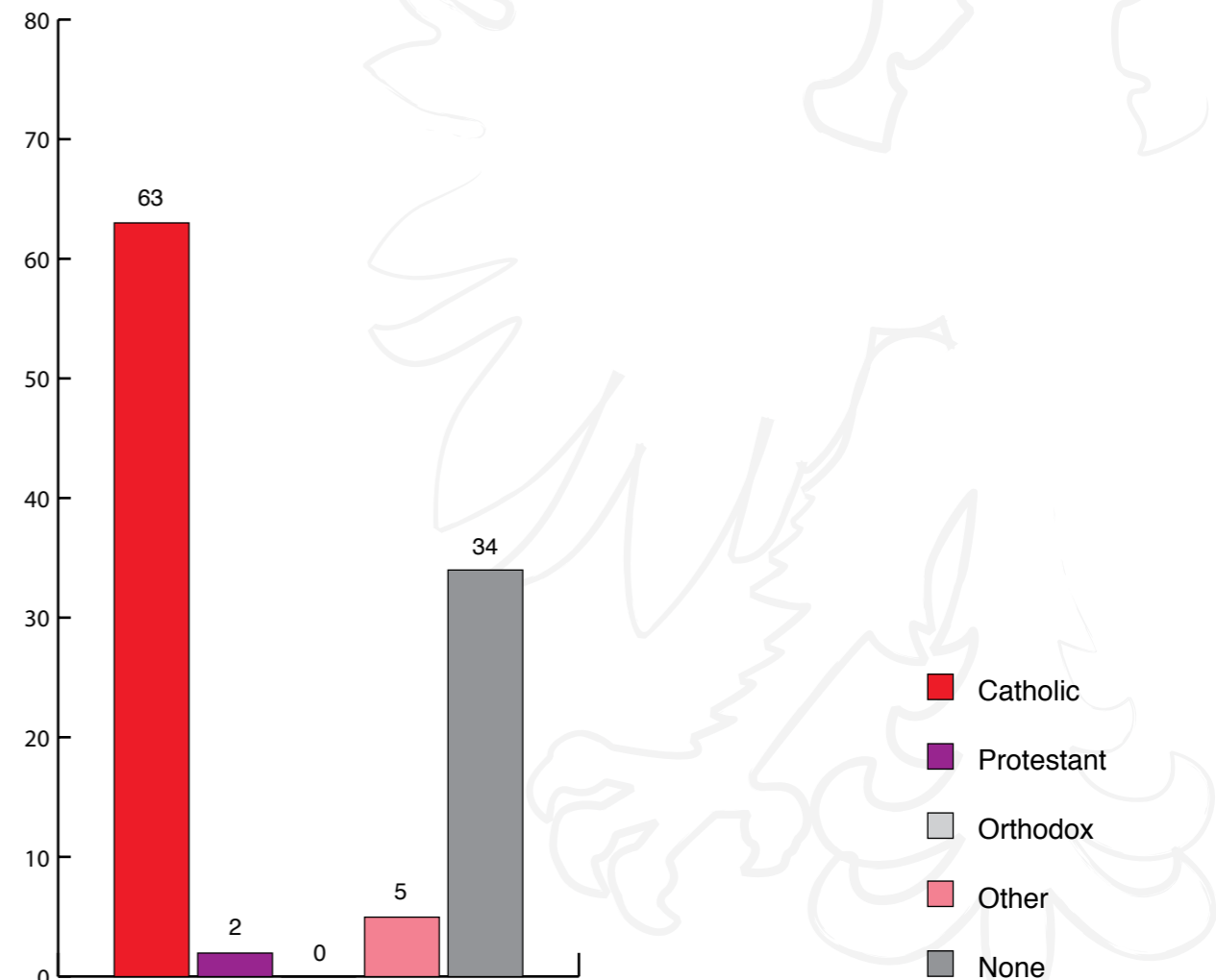
4 Diagnoza Społeczna 2011, red. J. Czapiński, T.Panek, Warsaw, 2011

## Freedom to express religion and culture

According to the Polish Public Opinion Research Centre, 93% of people in Poland are Catholic<sup>5</sup>. It is important to note that religion in Poland has different specifics than in other European countries. It is more rooted in social rituals and traditions rather than personal experiences and choice. The social pressure to participate in religious celebrations is very high, although it is diminishing recent years. Researchers of religion are talking of an emerging group in Polish society of 'practicing, but not believing', which describes those who personally don't feel any affiliation with the Catholic Church but on a social level keep rituals and traditions because they feel it is expected.

The table below shows the profile of Polish residents in the context of religious affiliation. 2 people refused to answer questions concerning religion that is why the results only total up to 104. There is a significant difference within the declaration of religious affiliation between Poles living in Poland and Polish people in Belfast. 59% of respondents declared themselves as Catholic; while in Poland self declaration resulted in 93% of the population declaring as members of the Catholic Church.

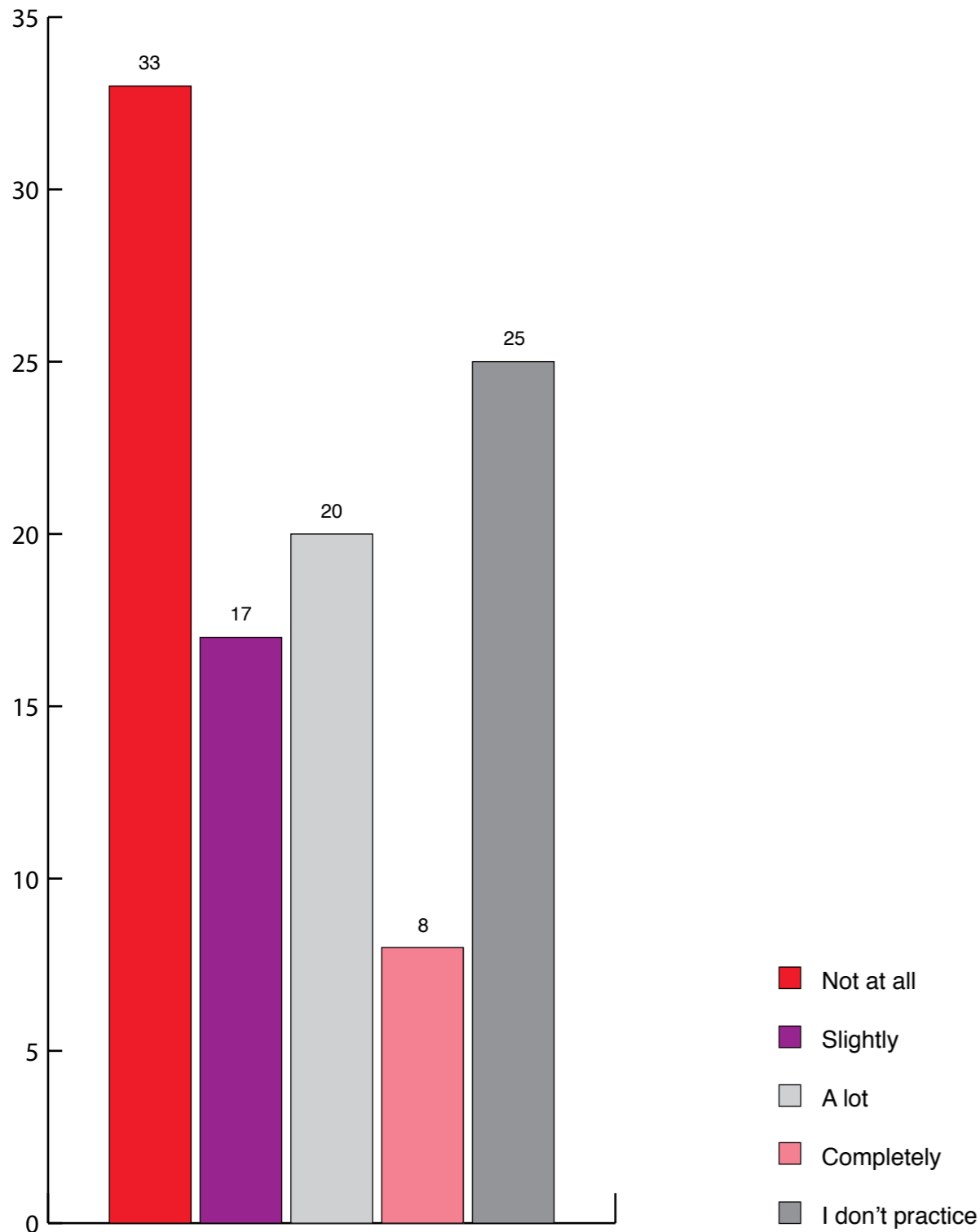
Which religious group are you a member of?



5 Zmiany w zakresie wiary i religijności Polaków po śmierci Jana Pawła II, CBOS, Warsaw, April 2012

These findings correspond with the next question we asked. A lot of people changed their religious practices after they had moved to Belfast. Only 32% stated that nothing in their religious practice changed, while the rest either don't practice or their frequency of practice, rituals and ways of celebrating have changed.

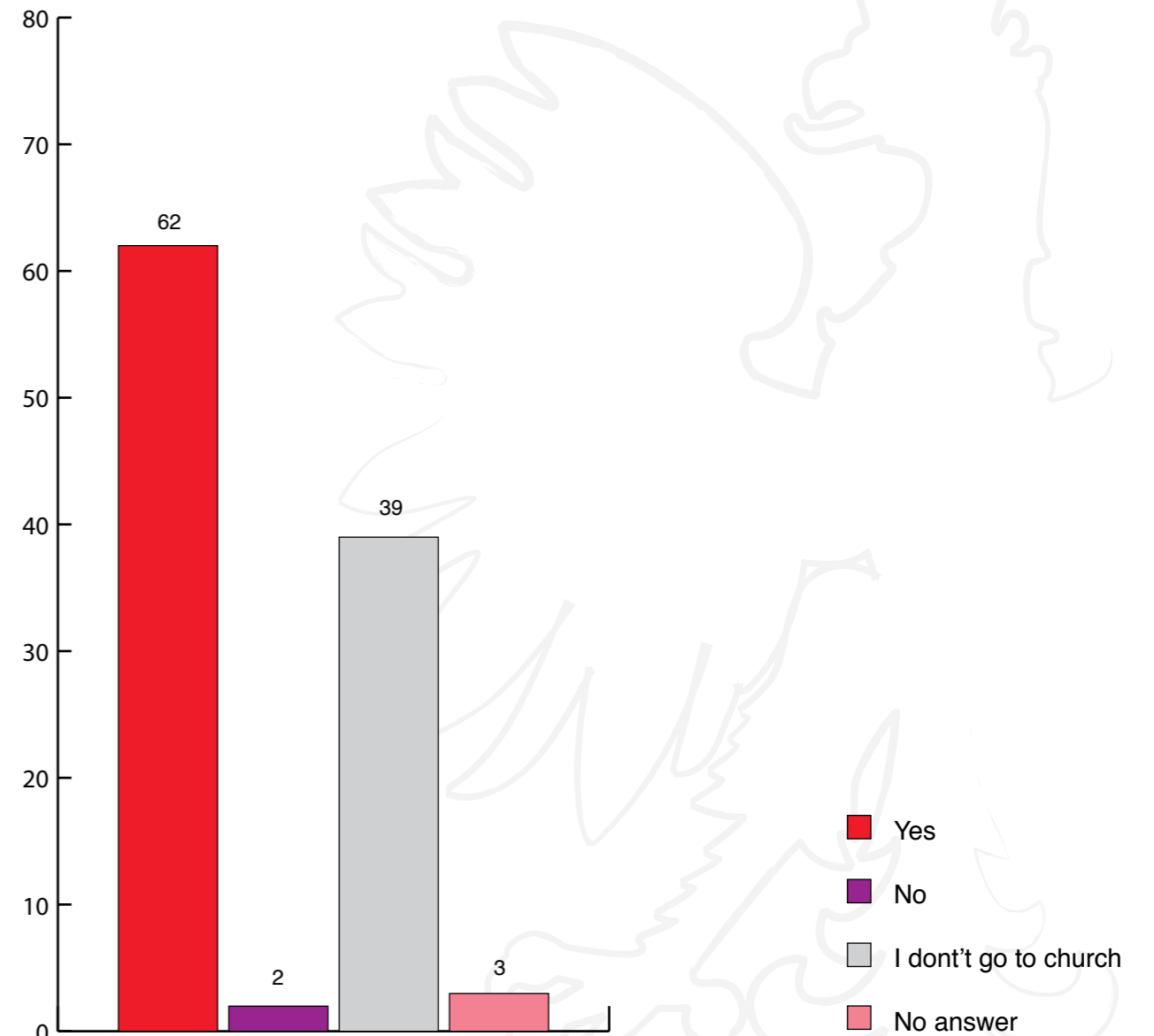
**Did any your religious habits and practices have changed since you live in NI?**



Change in religious practice could have two main reasons: either people living abroad do not feel the social pressure to show their religious engagement, or there are other obstacles that restrain them from practicing, i.e. fear of discrimination, no access to the church, unwillingness to express their cultural and religious identity.

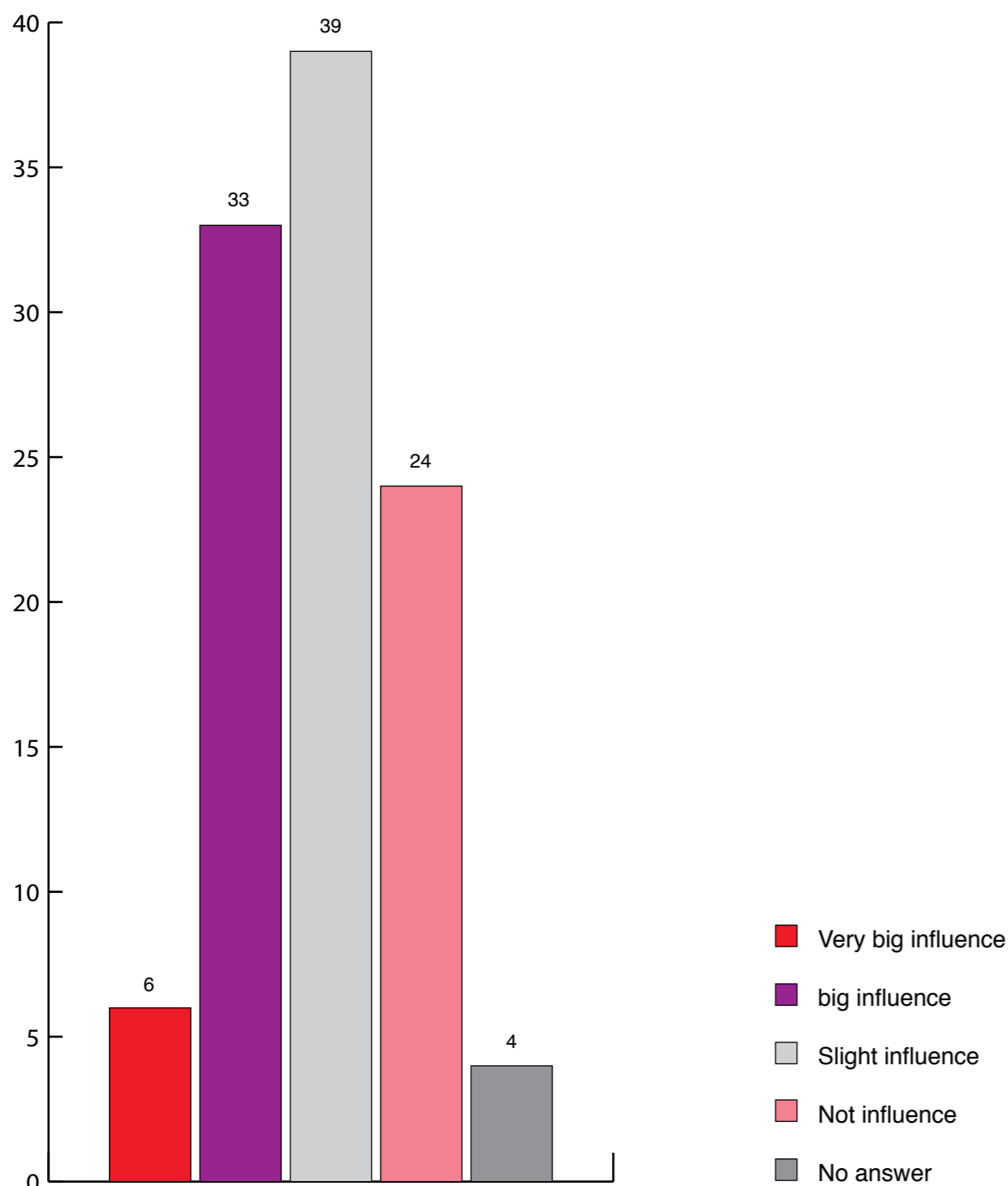
Firstly we asked the respondents if they feel comfortable to express their religion and culture. 80% of them responded positively and only 16% replied negatively. 4% skipped the question or refused to answer. At the same time, those who practice feel that they have convenient access to the church.

**If you practice any religion, do you have free access to the church/chapel?**



We also asked people if they feel that religious affiliation has any influence on how they are perceived/treated in Northern Ireland. Only 33% answered that belonging to a certain religion can influence the way people see you significantly. The other 39% stated that it may have slight influence, while 24% indicated it has no influence whatsoever.

In your opinion, to what extent your religious affiliation has influence on how people perceive you/treat you?



In those circumstances, it is reasonable to presume that change in religious practice does not derive from feelings of fear, discrimination or prejudice. It is rather a natural process of secularization of everyday life that migrants would go through faster and earlier than those who live in Poland, due to non-existent social pressure on religious practice.

## Conclusions:

The situation of Polish migrants emerging from the survey information could be formulated into the following main issues:

1. The Polish community is fairly young and economically active. Most inhabitants of Polish origin live in Belfast for around 4-6 years and possess quite sufficient English skills to be linguistically independent. The vast majority of them live in the East Belfast area, where most of the Polish shops, community groups and other migrant services are based. Although most of them are not sure about their intentions to stay in Belfast in the future, the prediction of rapid change in the number of Polish residents could not be justified.

2. Poles living in Belfast generally assess it as a safe place to be, although they face quite a significant amount of discriminatory incidents, including both verbal and physical assaults. There is an issue with the low rate of crime reporting that requires further consideration. In general, Polish people feel much safer around their own neighborhood than in the city centre. They also indicate at the same time that they feel positively engaged by the local community.

3. Most of the people had some knowledge about the conflict in Ireland before coming to Belfast, usually from Polish television reports and newspapers. Also, many feel that they need and want to know more about it and are interested in local history. There is a need to address the issue of national emblems and raise awareness about their meaning and importance. Lack of that knowledge might cause tension between the local community and Polish people in certain areas of Belfast.

4. Although there is a difference in the religious practice of the Polish population living in Poland and those living in Belfast, this does not come from a feeling of being prevented from expressing their religion or culture. People generally feel confident to practice their religion and keep their cultural identity.

