

# Breaking the bonds of poverty, drugs and crime

Community violence in Limerick must be understood in order to be solved, says

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EVEN in a week when the news was dominated by the findings of the Moriarty Tribunal and the battle to save the corporation tax rate, community violence in Limerick still featured in the headlines.

Last Thursday, five people were arrested as part of an investigation into the murder of 72-year-old ex-soldier Jimmy Boyce in St Mary's Park.

Residents of Limerick's disadvantaged estates who greeted the launch of the Limerick Regeneration programme with such optimism in 2007 dared to hope that such headlines would be consigned to the dustbin of history. Yet, in March 2011, after four years of solid work by the Regeneration team, backed by considerable investment from the state, problems generated by poverty-related criminality in the city seem intractable.

Contributors to *Understanding Limerick*, a new edited collection of essays suggest that while the problems in Limerick remain serious, a detailed understanding of the link between poverty and crime may provide the starting point to a more long-lasting solution.

Limerick is one of the most divided cities in the Republic, with sharp geographical divisions between affluent and disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Limerick has the highest rate of suicide, self-harm and marital breakdown and contains the most disadvantaged electoral districts in the Irish state.

Yet many ordinary middle-class citizens of Limerick find the city a great place to live, with good schools, sports facilities and excellent third-level institutions. They are rightly proud of the economic and technological developments in the city, the urban renewal of local landscapes and sporting achievements of Limerick's citizens.

It seems the experience of the majority of Limerick residents differs sharply from the reality experienced by residents of pockets of its most dis-



Garda officers search for weapons and drugs in Ballinacurra-Weston, Limerick. Contributors to a new collection of essays, 'Understanding Limerick' suggest that while problems related to poverty and drugs in the city are profound, they are not intractable.

Picture: Justin Kernaghan

advantaged estates. As part of my own contribution to *Understanding Limerick*, I spent three years talking to people who struggle daily to survive in the most marginalised parts of the city.

I found that while the poverty they experienced impacted deeply on their capacity to live a normal life, they struggled most profoundly with the fear of surviving alongside families engaged in feuding and criminal activity.

These vulnerable residents were the victims of systems of local intimidation which were built in many cases around the antisocial behaviour of minors. Understanding the role of anti-

social behaviour in these systems of intimidation, I argue, is critical to unravelling the hold of organised criminal gangs on disadvantaged estates in the city.

In the Children Act (2001), the age of criminal responsibility in Ireland was raised from seven to 12. This change, which I welcome, brought Ireland's juvenile justice legislation into line with other Europe-wide models. However, confining juvenile justice measures such as participation in Garda diversion programmes to those over the age of 12 only works if a robust child protection system intervenes

effectively with under-12s who are slipping into criminal activity.

Unfortunately, as reports by Geoffrey Shannon (Government Rapporteur on Children), Emily Logan (Children's Ombudsman) and HIQA have demonstrated, we do not have a robust and effective child protection system in Ireland.

In fact, along with the pressing need for a referendum on children's rights, there is an urgent requirement for a fundamental reform of the child protection system. Basic changes which should be introduced include the provision of 24/7 availability of social workers, the thorough vetting of care settings prior to the placing of children in care and specific measures to tackle antisocial behaviour.

Some of the criminal justice measures which have been instigated as part of the Regeneration programme such as community policing, CCTV surveillance and the establishment of the Emergency Response Unit have made significant inroads into criminality in the city, inroads which have resulted in decreasing crime rates.

However, these measures will not provide the basis for long-term change unless the pool of labour (minors) currently available to criminal gangs is drained. Aside from child protection reform, there are other institutions in Irish society which could also make a contribution to improving conditions in Limerick.

Eoin Devereux, Amanda Haynes and Martin J Power write powerfully

of how residents of disadvantaged estates struggle with stigma which emerges because of negative and simplistic media portrayals of life in their neighbourhoods.

Their research highlights the need for news producers to be balanced and responsible in their approach to coverage of crime in Limerick.

They highlight the difficulties local activists experience in getting coverage for positive initiatives. These positive events contribute to the incredibly strong sense of community and solidarity which continues to exist despite all the difficulties. It is this community spirit and neighbourliness which will provide the basis for future renewal.

Is there anything ordinary citizens of Limerick can do to show their solidarity with those who struggle to live with organised crime and feuding?

Yes, they can stop buying drugs. As Ciaran McCullagh highlights, the majority of drugs seized by gardaí in Ireland are cocaine and cannabis, the drugs of choice of middle-class users.

In recent years, there has been a huge growth in awareness around the need for ethical consumption. Many consumers in Ireland buy fair-trade coffee or ethically-produced clothing because they recognise that their consumer choices can contribute to the exploitation of vulnerable adults and children in other parts of the world.

During last winter's cold spell, hardly any of the fashionable women walking down Ireland's main shopping thoroughfares were wearing fur coats

because PETA has convinced us that buying these coats is ethically problematic. Well, buying drugs is not only illegal, it is also ethically problematic. There is little point in spending money on fair-trade goods in order to avoid contributing to child exploitation in South America or South East Asia if your weekend leisure habits are contributing to the exploitation of children much closer to home.

The ethical consequences of illegal drug consumption have not featured prominently in public health campaigns. This needs to change.

*Understanding Limerick* provides a range of insights which show that while the problems related to poverty and drugs in the city are profound, they are not intractable. The work already done by Regeneration and other state agencies demonstrates that problems relating to criminality and poverty can be tackled. If properly understood, we hope that the type of community violence which results in the senseless murder of a pensioner will disappear. However, it is critical that this issue does not slide off the state's political or policy agenda in the midst of our current economic crisis.

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