

# How State policy helped create a fertile gangland breeding ground

**T**HE community leaders in Limerick who welcomed the conviction of John Dundon on Tuesday for the murder of Shane Geoghegan are surely hoping that this case represents the end of an era. The conviction of a gangland criminal for a murder that he orchestrated rather than committed himself has sent a clear signal to those involved in organised crime in Ireland that such actions will not be tolerated.

However, the recognition of John Dundon's responsibility for the murder of the Limerick rugby player must be accompanied by recognition by the State of its culpability in creating the conditions in disadvantaged housing estates in Limerick that allowed criminal gangs to thrive.

As late as 1962, Limerick still had families living in slum tenements in the city without sanitation, running water or ventilation. The solution to this housing crisis was to build large housing estates on the outskirts of the city. Despite the lack of basic facilities such as shops, schools and even bus services, many who grew up in Southill and Moyross who I interviewed for my research have fond memories of their childhood, recalling kind neighbours and strong community spirit.

By the 1980s however, these communities as well as the neighbourhoods of Ballinacurra Weston and St Mary's Park were coming under severe pressure. A series of factory closures devastated Limerick's large working class. Government policy also dealt a huge blow in the form of the £5,000 grant scheme. This scheme, designed to free up local authority housing, offered £5,000 to tenants in these estates to purchase private homes.

The take-up of the scheme was widespread among the more affluent working families who left behind communities with much higher concentrations of unemployment, single-parenthood, addiction, abuse and stress linked to money-lending and general deprivation. Into the vacuum left by the £5,000 grant tenants stepped those who had always lived successfully 'on the edge' in Limerick.

Families involved in hawking, racketeering and trading stolen goods found that they had new scope to expand their activities. They now became the dominant force in parts of these neighbourhoods. By the 1990s, a massive surge in the demand for illegal drugs created a market where they could put their skills at intimidation and their criminal connections to good use. The rewards earned from drug dealing was beyond their wildest dreams with

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the illegal drug trade in Limerick being worth an estimated €30 million at its height.

With the conviction of John Dundon, the citizens of Limerick may be hoping that the tragedy and stigma which the McCarthy Dundons and other drugs gangs brought to the city is coming to an end. However, the dangers of complacency on this issue are significant.

Despite the overall decline in crime in Limerick, an analysis of the 2012 figures indicates that the city still has a high crime rate and scores highest in the country for 'criminal damage to property' and sexual offences.

It was hoped that with the launch of the Limerick Regeneration programme in 2007, the link between poverty, crime and social exclusion in the city would be broken forever. However, as early as 2008, it was clear the dream of physically rebuilding these communities would never be realised due to the implosion of the Celtic Tiger construction boom.

Instead, resources were ploughed into youth education and diversion schemes that have yielded real rewards in terms of keeping vulnerable kids out of the clutches of the gangs. This success however, could

quickly unravel in the face of a 10pc cut to Garda Youth Diversion schemes in the city this year and a similar cut to the budget of 'Ceim ar Ceim', the citywide probation and youth justice service over the last three years.

**C**UTS to these frontline services deliver the costliest of savings regardless of what the troika say. Anyone following the trial of John Dundon will have recognised the enormous amount of state resources that was devoted to investigating and trying this case.

This sum represents only a tiny fraction of the money that the State has spent policing gangland crime in Limerick since 2000. In comparison, the resources needed to provide support to a teenager at risk of being lured into a gang are paltry.

In my view, the Dundon conviction represents the end of an era of gangland crime in Limerick, but only if the State ensures that a new generation of younger criminals does not emerge to follow in Dundon's footsteps. As the pressures on these communities increase due to budget cuts, there is no room for complacency on this issue.

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