

The changing face of Irish gangsters

Niamh Hourigan

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Niamh Hourigan examines the true nature of gang crime in Ireland today and asks, has anything really changed post-austerity?

At the time that my last book *Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and Change* was published in 2011, Limerick city still retained its national and international reputation as a hotbed of gangland activity. The city had the highest rate of social housing (41%) and the highest rate of suicide and self-harm in the Republic of Ireland. It also had very high rates of lone parenthood and marital breakdown. It is from the most socially excluded communities in Limerick that serious criminal activity began to emerge in the 1980s. As the demand for recreational drugs soared in the Republic during the 1990s, criminal gangs in Limerick became significant players in national and international drugs networks. By 2006, Limerick had more than three times the national rate of firearms offences. In 2007, the murder rate in Limerick city was higher than Dublin North or South Central districts. Between 2007 and 2010, I spent a lot of time in the city's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods conducting 221 interviews with local residents, those on the fringes of criminal gangs, gardaí, social, community and youth workers.

The key finding of my study was that the status rewards for participation in criminal gangs were probably the most significant factor in motivating gang-related criminal behaviour. By being a 'hard man', gang members received a form of fear-based respect from other members

of their local communities even though they were viewed as ‘scumbags’ by citizens of mainstream Limerick society. Seanie describes one of the most feared men in his cul-de-sac in the following terms: “I don’t even want to mention his name or look at him. I get nervous just talking about him.”

The financial and economic rewards from involvement in drugs distribution were also a very compelling factor in motivating participation in criminal gangs. Garda figures for the 1990s provide a good overview of how lucrative this business became during the Celtic Tiger period in Ireland. In 1990, there were 73 drugs seizures in Limerick with a street value of £2,000 (€2,540). In 1995, the number of seizures had risen to 415 and the value of the drugs had also increased to £250,000 (€320,000). In 1999, there were 332 seizures of drugs worth £3,318,150 (€4.2 million). A scan of gang-related internet sites on Youtube, and Facebook demonstrates how the display of desirable consumer goods including cars, clothing and even guns became part of Limerick gang culture.

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Family was the central organising structure of the hierarchies within criminal gangs in Limerick. In American cities, young men and women tend to join gangs as individuals and their position within the gang is largely determined by their own physical toughness and their ethnic identity. Because family is at the core of Limerick’s organised crime networks, family relationships played a huge role in determining the individual’s position in gangs. There were only a small number of really important powerful families in these neighbourhoods and it was almost impossible for an individual with no blood relationship to these families to reach a senior position in the gang. Young men who work at foot-soldier level were often from less

powerful families on the margins of family groups with more distant blood relationships to the core criminal families.

Family was also central to understanding the recruitment of child gang participants who, through their anti-social behaviour, were being used by more senior criminals to maintain control over pockets of estates. A number of these children were either related to or part of families heavily involved in criminal gang activity. Because they were under the age of 12 and therefore, below the age of criminal responsibility, they were perceived, as more useful to undertake small scale tasks or subtly intimidate neighbours than children over 12. In some cases, local residents indicated that they thought that the anti-social behaviour of local children was being actively encouraged by parents through a process of praise and reward. When victims of their behaviours complained to their parents, the mother or father would react with hostility to the complainant, effectively encouraging the child to continue in the behaviour. Sarah explains: "If someone complains to them, they say 'Don't mind that stupid bastard, son'. Then the child thinks that's an adult and he's a stupid bastard and my mother is telling me to call him a stupid bastard so I can keep doin' what I'm doin' and my mam will think that's fine."

In other instances, it would appear that parents were too enmeshed in their own addictions and problems to punish the child or were themselves afraid of the child.

All these factors contributed to the distinctive profile of gangland crime in Limerick city during this period and were addressed in different ways as part of the regeneration/ criminal justice response to the problem. The community policing initiatives which were already developed in 2010 had yielded clear dividends in terms of increased capacity for intelligence-led policing. They also increased levels of trusts between the gardaí and disadvantaged local

communities. A number of the youth intervention schemes also appeared to be successfully tackling these problems with a clear decline in crime rates in the city from 2011 onwards.

Four years later and Ireland has been through a period of sharp austerity which has had its own impact on gangland crime. After the immediate economic crash, the demand for cocaine collapsed and a number of gangs both in Limerick and Dublin made a strategic switch to other drugs such as heroin. The success of prosecutions under the new legislation to tackle gang activity has prompted many senior figures to move outside the state directing their networks from remote locations. This has increased the challenges of dismantling gangs as increasingly those involved in distribution or gang related violence in Ireland are merely foot-soldiers who can be quickly replaced with other willing recruits.

Gangland in Ireland has also become increasingly glamorised and celebrated with the success of RTE's Love/Hate series. While this may be good news for the national broadcaster, it presents considerable challenges for those still involved in youth diversion projects attempting to steer the young and vulnerable away from the lure of the gangs. Perhaps the biggest change has been the significant cuts in garda and youth diversion resources available to tackle gangland crime and in the long term, it is this factor which gives rise to the most concern. The roots of the emergence of criminal gangs in Limerick can be traced directly back to the early austerity period of the mid to late 80s when garda resources in the city were so slender that criminal gangs managed to gain dominance in specific neighbourhoods. Now that the Irish economy is in recovery and increased affluence is apparently on the way, there will be as many new opportunities for those in the criminal fraternity as there will be for those in the conventional economy. It is essential that the state ensures that it is prepared to meet the criminal justice challenges of this new period as the Limerick experience shows that it is much harder to unravel gangland networks once they become firmly established and have begun to prey on vulnerable communities.