

Comment

Law and order meets Love/Hate in battle to fix our gangland culture

Niamh Hourigan



The tit-for-tat dynamic of a gangland feud can take a huge toll not only on gang members and their families, but also on those living in the communities that surround them

THE gun attacks in Drumcondra last Friday and the subsequent killing of Eddie Hutch Snr have brought the issue of gangland feuding and organised crime to the forefront of the current election debate.

While many would agree that the Government elected in 2011 faced an uphill struggle in terms of the economy, much of the heavy-lifting in relation to the policing of organised crime had already been done by previous administrations.

The second half of the Celtic Tiger boom had fuelled an increased demand for drugs which led to intense gangland conflicts in Dublin and Limerick. A number of these gangs were nested in marginalised communities where fear and intimidation was used by gang members to ensure that local residents did not challenge them openly or co-operate with gardai.

The effectiveness and sophistication of their drugs distribution networks was frequently masked by the broader chaos created by the anti-social behaviour of disadvantaged young people in these areas. In Limerick, the burning of Gavin and Milly Murray in a car in 2006 (aged 7 and 5 at the time) proved a watershed and prompted the then Government to launch the Limerick Regeneration project. Youth work and housing initiatives were coupled with a significant increase in policing resources in the city.

After the Regeneration launch, the high-profile murders of Shane Geoghegan and Roy Collins led to a realisation that legislative change and more targeted forms of policing would also be required. Armed response units, CCTV, community policing and new surveillance techniques were all part of a new arsenal of policing methods deployed to combat gang activities. The Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 was a particularly important development as it provided a more robust basis for the prosecution of gang members.

In Limerick, these measures were immediately effective, leading to a significant decrease in gang-related crime from 2010 onwards. When the current Minister for Justice renewed the legislation in 2014, she acknowledged that organised crime and gang activities were still a challenge in Irish society.

However, in real terms, austerity had hit gangland pretty hard as the decrease in disposable income shrunk the demand for recreational



Justice Minister Frances Fitzgerald talks to the media following the gangland killings. Photo: Tom Burke

drugs. As Ireland's economy has begun to recover, however, the drugs market has once again increased and criminal gangs can reasonably expect to see their profits increase in the coming year. The broader cuts to services which were part of austerity may also have benefited them. The toll that cuts to

Garda resources have taken on the policing of organised crime have been well-documented. However, cuts to educational supports, particularly in disadvantaged communities, cuts to health-care, housing, and youth justice projects haven't helped the situation by creating a new pool of marginalised

youth from which criminal gangs can recruit.

The lesson from Limerick is that early intervention is the most effective way to divert young people away from crime. However, those working in juvenile justice will tell you that a new generation emerges every five years.

If the supports that diverted a previous generation away from a life of crime are removed, the next generation are as vulnerable to gang recruitment as those who went before them.

By the time an individual gets enmeshed in organised crime at the level of the Kinahan gang networks, there is little chance that they can be rehabilitated or diverted away from these activities. The tit-for-tat dynamic of a gangland feud can take a huge toll not only on gang members and their families but also on those who live in the communities that surround them.

WHILE I have always been a firm advocate of mediation in Traveller feuds, the capacity to use mediation as a tool in a criminal gangland feud is much more limited. There is a strong incentive for ambitious gang members to keep the feud going. Status in this world is closely linked to being perceived as the toughest, hardest man. For a young gang member, a feud can provide an important opportunity to fight your way up the criminal gang hierarchy and make a name for yourself.

In terms of the impact of these feuds on the public, we tend to think largely of the potential dangers to innocent by-standers. However, I would argue that the public have another important role to play in feuds. In the last numbers of years, participation in criminal gangs has become somewhat glamorised in the media, particularly through the crime drama phenomenon 'Love/Hate'.

Gang members are aware of how they are perceived by the public and they are aware of how participation in gangs can be glamorised. This is a tool that they can use to recruit young members and also enhance their own reputation as hard men.

In debating the implications of this current gangland feud, it is important that politicians, the media and the public keep the dangers of glamorising gang activities to the forefront of their minds. Without this awareness, we all may unwittingly contribute to an impression of gang participation as a life of excitement and drama when, in fact, it is experienced as a life of violence, interspersed with boredom which most frequently ends in tragedy.

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