CHAPTER 26
Aspects of socio-economic development in Limerick City since 1970: a geographer’s perspective

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Introduction
Writing in 1962, the geographer GT Bloomfield found Limerick to be a city still struggling to overcome the economically ruinous aftermath of the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century. The effects of the Famine were evident in continued population decline and poverty throughout the surrounding rural counties, some of which, he wrote, had ‘the lowest standards of living in the British Isles’. The retarding effect of hinterland poverty and population loss on the city’s development were compounded by Limerick’s relative isolation from, and poor road and rail connectivity to, the main centres of economic activity in the south and east of the country. While noting that the population of the city itself had stabilised in the previous decade, and that there had been considerable progress throughout the 1950s in re-housing people from unsanitary and overcrowded accommodation in the congested city centre wards, Bloomfield considered that ‘further large-scale changes … are unlikely without fundamental alterations in the local economy’.

As it happened, the forces that would bring about these ‘alterations’ were already at play, as the Irish Government, in response to the economic stagnation of the 1950s, abandoned the long established policy of protectionism in favour of free trade under the First Programme for Economic Expansion (1958-1963). The economic benefits of the new policy direction were soon apparent in Limerick, with the attraction to the city of significant foreign direct investment, and a consequent surge in population growth based mainly on in-migration from rural areas. In the decade from 1961 the population of the City and its ‘environs’ grew by twenty-two per cent, so that by 1971 it exceeded 63,000, the highest since the 1830s. Manufacturing industry was the engine of this growth, with the numbers at work in the sector up by twenty-nine per cent in the ten year period. By 1971 manufacturing had consolidated its position as the mainstay of the
economic base, employing almost 5,700 persons or twenty-eight per cent of the total number at work. Associated with its long tradition in manufacturing, the city had a strong ‘blue-collar’ social profile, with almost one-fifth of the population in 1971 classified in the skilled manual socio-economic group. As a result of the extensive public housing programme of the 1950s and 1960s, which included construction of the estates of Ballinacurra Weston, Ballynanty, and much of Garryowen, a relatively large proportion of housing — forty-one per cent — was rented from Limerick Corporation.

However, if the initial impact of free trade was broadly positive for the city, the longer term effects, which began to emerge from the 1970s onwards, were more mixed, and indicated that the transition to the new policy regime was not going to be unproblematic. Instead, wholesale job losses in the city’s traditional manufacturing enterprises, particularly in the decade or so following Ireland’s accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, ran in sharp counterpoint to the development of new enterprises through inward investment. Together these contrapuntal processes resulted in the extensive restructuring of the city’s industrial and economic base in the 1970s and 1980s. This restructuring has been both spatially and socially uneven in its effects, resulting in major changes to the city’s social geography. The objective of the present chapter is to examine the outcome of these changes in terms of contemporary socio-spatial differentiation in Limerick, with a particular focus on the emergence of some of the social problems that have beset the city in recent years. The first section elaborates on the economic context of social change by looking in more detail at the restructuring process, and in particular the decline in indigenous manufacturing from the 1970s onwards. Industrial restructuring has been accompanied by a significant shift in the spatial distribution of population brought about by rapid suburbanisation in the period from 1970 onwards, and this process and its implications are discussed in the second section. Together the restructuring of the local economy and the changing distribution of population have led to increasing socio-economic differentiation within the city, and in particular a growing divide in terms of affluence and deprivation. Some of the key indicators of these disparities are described in the third section, before focusing, in section four, on the local authority housing estates that have experienced particularly high levels of social deprivation. The final section offers some comments on the current regeneration initiative in the light of the disparities identified.

Industrial restructuring since 1970
The Irish government’s major re-orientation of economic policy in 1958 flowed from the recognition that industrialisation based on import substitution and catering largely for domestic demand had failed to provide sufficient new jobs to absorb the outflow of labour from agriculture. Constrained by the small size of
the home market and the lack of investment capital, and sheltered from competition by the import quotas and tariffs of the protectionist era, Irish manufacturing was characterised by low productivity and inefficiency. Consequently, the switch to free trade, first under the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement of 1965 and later with Ireland’s accession to the EEC, represented a considerable threat to the sector.

Given Limerick’s high level of dependence on manufacturing, this threat was acutely felt in the city. According to the 1971 census, three sectors accounted for three-quarters of the city’s industrial employment. The food sector, comprising activities such as dairying, bacon curing and flour milling, employed almost 1,500 workers, as did metal products, machinery and electrical appliances, which included the nail and screw factory (Irish Wire Products) and the manufacture of household appliances (Krupps). The clothing, leather and footwear group of industries provided employment for a further 1,300 workers. Manufacturing enterprises in these and other industries were located throughout the city, but with a particular concentration on two main industrial zones. Activities dependant on bulky imported raw materials such as the flour mills, timber yards and the nail and screw factory, were located close to the docks, while those processing inputs derived from the region (e.g., bacon curing, meat packing and leather tanning) tended to be located close to the railway station, in areas such as Lower Mulgrave Street.

The 1970s wave of industrial closures began with the loss of Limerick Shoes in 1971, which in many respects was typical of what was to come. Founded by the O’Callaghan family in 1932, and based in Mulgrave Street, it was acquired by the UK-based GB Britton & Sons Holdings in 1968, the first of a wave of such takeovers in the footwear and clothing sector in the late 1960s. At the time of the takeover there were 360 employed. However, with import quotas on footwear products being ended in July 1969 under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement, Irish shoe manufacturers lost market share, and both turnover and profits in Britton’s, which also had a factory in Killarney, declined. The workforce was reduced to 230 by December 1970, when possible closure of the Limerick factory was announced. The company did in fact cease production in July 1971, making 120 workers redundant.

A similar fate followed shortly for two of the mainstays of Limerick’s clothing industry, the Limerick Clothing Factory located on Lord Edward Street, and the Danus clothing company in Dominick Street. Limerick Clothing Factory was founded in 1850 by a Scots immigrant, Peter Tait, and, after diversifying from an initial focus on the production of army uniforms, had established a strong export market for its range of clothing. By 1950 it employed around 500 workers. Danus, which was established by the O’Donovan family in 1918, specialised in sportswear and menswear, and like Limerick Clothing Factory was successful in developing international markers in the 1960s, with employment growing to 380
by 1971. Both companies were acquired in 1969 by the British firm Aquascutum, which announced plans to make Limerick 'the most important manufacturing centre for clothing in this country'. So far from realising these plans, growing competitive pressures in the early 1970s, and industrial unrest resulting from the introduction of short-time working, led to the closure of Danus in September 1974, with the loss of 325 jobs. When Limerick Clothing Factory was closed a couple of months later a further 250 jobs were lost.

There were also major job losses in the food sector in the 1970s, affecting both the dairying and bacon curing industries. Historically, dairying in Limerick was located on the north bank of the Shannon where the Cleeves family established the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland in 1889. After going into receivership in 1923 the company was eventually acquired by the semi-state Dairy Disposal Company in 1927, which led to considerable new investment and expansion of output. By the early 1950s the production of condensed milk was at three times the 1927 level, seventy-five per cent of which was exported, and there were approximately 500 workers employed at the Lansdowne plant. However, amid problems with milk supply following the reorganisation of the dairy industry in north Munster, the plant was taken over by Golden Vale Co-operative in 1974, and a major rationalisation plan involving the cessation of condensed milk production led to an estimated 100 redundancies in Limerick. Bacon curing had an even longer tradition in the city, with roots going back to the first half of the nineteenth century. By the 1950s the two largest firms, Shaw's and Matterson's, had developed important overseas markets, and both also produced canned meat for export. However, increasing international competition in the 1960s resulted in the loss of market share and the closure in 1977 of Shaw's, which had been taken over by the Waterford-based Clover Meats in 1949. The company, by then the largest of the bacon factories, had employed between 350 and 500 workers throughout the 1970s. Within a decade, the two remaining factories, Matterson's and O'Mara's/ the Bacon Company of Ireland had also closed.

Employment difficulties throughout the 1970s and 1980s also beset the import-processing industries that had been established close to Limerick Docks. The docks itself underwent a major rationalisation in 1974, which led to the loss of approximately 100 jobs. The following year, the largest employer in the docks area, the flour and provender miller Ranks, announced the closure of its Limerick mills, and the loss of 350 jobs, citing falling demand and high import costs through Limerick port as reasons for the decision. Though the company subsequently changed its plans, instead implementing a downsizing of its workforce by one-third, the operation did eventually close in 1983. Also in the docks area of the city, Irish Wire Products, one of the forerunner import substitution enterprises established in the early years of the State, ceased manufacturing in 1987 after fifty years of operation.
These closures and redundancies represented a major clear out of traditional sectors of employment in the decade and a half following Ireland's entry to the EEC. Of course, job losses in the traditional sectors were counterbalanced by new jobs attracted to the city and the region through foreign direct investment under the export-oriented industrialisation drive. In Limerick, such investment has been especially important in the electronics, computer and related industries, where US based firms have been prominent. These include companies such as Analog Devices (electronics), Verbatim (computer disks) and Wang (word processing equipment), all of which established manufacturing operations in the city during the 1970s. The outcome of the closure of indigenous firms and the concomitant surge in inward investment in new sectors was a radical change in the composition of the manufacturing workforce between 1971 and 2006 (fig. 26.1). Most of this change took place between 1971 and 1991. While the numbers employed in food and in clothing and textiles contracted by seventy per cent and seventy-nine per cent respectively over the twenty year period, the numbers employed in the metals, machinery and appliances sector (which includes the computer industry) increased by 163 per cent. Overall the number of jobs in manufacturing in the city showed a modest net increase from 1971 to 1991, and a more significant increase (+thirty-four per cent) in the subsequent 1991-2006 period, but growth in the sector failed to keep pace with overall employment growth so that the relative importance of manufacturing declined. Thus, where manufacturing employed twenty-eight per cent of the city’s workforce in 1971, this had declined to twenty-one per cent by 2006.

\[\text{Fig. 26.1: Industrial restructuring 1971-2006.}\]

The development of a new industrial base for the city has not been a smooth process by any means, and from the 1970s onwards there were several episodes of major job losses in the foreign-owned sector. The first of these, and one of the most damaging in employment terms, was the closure in 1977 of the Dutch-owned Ferenka steel-cord factory which began production at Annacotty in 1972. At the time of the closure, which resulted in 1,400 redundancies, the company had accumulated massive trading losses, and suffered protracted industrial relations problems. Another of the flagship projects for the new industrialisation, the US based Burlington Industries’ plant at Gillogue, which was engaged in textile dyeing and finishing, announced its closure in 1984, blaming falling prices and rising production costs. The plant had been only eight years in operation and employed 250 workers at the time of the closure announcement. Even in the so-called high technology sector there have been major casualties. These include the computer manufacturers Wang and AST, both of which were located on the National Technological Park at Plassey, and the computer games manufacturer Atari, based in Raheen. Atari closed in 1984 with the loss of 300 jobs after only two and a half years of operation, while Wang effectively ceased operations in Limerick in the mid-1990s, having at one time employed about 1,000 workers. The Atari plant in Raheen was taken over by Dell Computers in 1991 and employment rose to 3,500 by the end of the decade. However, following the opening of a new plant in Poland, a major downsizing involving the loss of almost 2,000 jobs in Limerick was announced in 2008, the company citing high production costs as the reason for the relocation of jobs. The down-sizing of the Raheen plant represents the largest ever loss of jobs in the city’s history.

Industrial job losses from the 1970s onwards had a major impact on Limerick’s macro economy, directly in terms of the loss of employment and income, and indirectly through the reduced demand for locally produced supplies and services. However, given that job creation outstripped job losses up to 2006, it is the redistributive impact of industrial restructuring that is more significant. The costs and benefits of restructuring have been both socially and spatially uneven in their distribution. Job losses in manufacturing and in the docks impacted disproportionately on the manual labouring classes (skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled) and therefore on the areas where these workers were most heavily concentrated, including the city’s public housing estates, as later sections of this essay clearly demonstrate. Often particular estates were associated with certain companies, the closure or downsizing of which therefore impacted especially severely in those estates. Thus, Limerick Docks had been an important source of employment for unskilled workers in the local authority housing estates of Ballinacurra Weston, Garryowen and the Island Field, the reduction in employment in the Condensed Milk Company impacted especially on the
Thomondgate and St. Mary’s Park areas, while the closure of Ferenka in 1977 dealt a severe blow to the Southhill estates which were then just newly settled.27

The salience of costs, in particular labour costs, in the majority of the recent computer sector closures and rationalisations points to a persistent weakness in the city’s industrial base. This is the fact that the predominant type of work in firms attracted to the city to replace the indigenous enterprises lost in the 1970s and 1980s has been relatively low skilled assembly-line work. The focus of the industrial development bodies on attracting this kind of work to the city is understandable in that it is, by and large, the kind of work lost in the older sectors such as clothing and food, and therefore the type of work that has been needed, often in short term crisis situations. However, the problem for the city is that in the modern global economy these are also the kind of jobs that are most vulnerable to competition from low cost countries. The dilemma for Irish industrial development policy in recent years is that the alternative strategy of focusing on high value added activities requiring highly qualified and skilled labour, while more likely to provide long-term sustainable employment, effectively excludes less skilled workers from these employment opportunities. Given the historical nature of the industrial base and of the labour supply, this has been a particularly difficult dilemma in Limerick.

Spatial reorganisation 1970-2006: suburbanisation and the revival of the city centre

One of the factors differentiating the manufacturing and indeed service enterprises attracted to the city in recent years from the older enterprises that closed in the 1970s and 1980s is that while the latter were predominantly located in the City, the former have been established on purpose-built industrial estates on the outskirts. As well as the National Technological Park at Plassey, these include the large estates at Raheen, Childers Road, Ballysimon Road, and Annacotty, as well as a number of smaller estates. The shift of manufacturing to the suburbs, a common trend in all the developed countries, has been driven by lower costs of land and premises, greater flexibility in the use of space and ease of expansion, lower levels of traffic congestion, and better accessibility to national primary roads. As well as suburban locations, smaller towns or rural areas close to the city have also attracted a significant part of the inward investment in manufacturing since the 1970s, examples including Wyeth Nutritional and Aughinish Alumina, both near Askeaton. This spatial pattern of industrial development has given rise to complex patterns of commuting in the Limerick city-region, as revealed by data from the 2006 census of population. In aggregate, these data indicate that two-fifths of the workers resident in Limerick commute to work outside the city (including its environs), while forty-six per cent of those working in Limerick commute in to the city from elsewhere.28 For the manufacturing sector alone,
‘cross-over’ commuting is even more pronounced, and the balance of flows is out of, as opposed to in to, the city. Thus forty-two per cent of the industrial jobs located in the city are held by in-commuters, while more than three-quarters of the manufacturing workers who reside in Limerick travel to work outside the city. These commuting patterns point to a spatial mismatch between jobs and workers, and raise issues about both the economic inefficiency and adverse environmental impacts of excess commuting in the Limerick city-region.

The decentralisation of manufacturing has been paralleled by a similar trend in the distribution of population over the past four decades. This can be traced by looking at the changing balance of population between the City and its environs as delimited by the Central Statistics Office for purposes of the census of population (fig. 26.2). This comparative analysis is made possible by the fact that the City’s boundary remained unchanged from 1950 until 2008. Whereas the population of the City decreased between 1971 and 2006 by eight per cent, the population of the environs or suburbs increased more than six-fold. In 1971, just nine per cent of the population of the urban area resided outside the City, but by 2006 this had increased to forty-two per cent. Suburbanisation of population was especially strong in the 1970s, early 1980s and again in the period 2002-2006, when the population outside the City boundary grew by an average of over 1,300 persons each year. In the 1970s the main focus of suburban development was in the Castletroy area to the east of the City, but in the early 1980s this switched to the north side of the city, where construction of the Moyross estate spilled over the City boundary into County Limerick, and the Raheen area to the south of the city. Since the early 1990s the latter area has dominated suburbanisation, with the construction of major new developments in the areas of Ballykeefe, Templemungret, Gouldavoher and Ballycummin.

The only divergence from the seemingly inexorable drift of population towards the suburbs has been the demographic recovery of the city centre in the period from the 1990s onwards. Having lost population steadily over a prolonged period of time, the city centre showed a modest recovery from 1991 to 1996, followed by a more dramatic increase in population of almost one-third (+1,548 persons) between 1996 and 2002. The turn-around of the area in demographic terms is partly due to an apartment construction boom induced by a range of tax relief schemes, beginning with those introduced under the Irish Government’s urban renewal programmes of the 1980s and 1990s. The population to occupy these apartments has been supplied by in-migration, in particular of foreign nationals attracted to Ireland and to Limerick by the growth in job opportunities during the period of the Celtic Tiger economy. This foreign in-migration has had a major impact on the cultural and ethnic composition of the population. In 2006 almost half of the population in the city centre was of non-Irish nationality, of which more than one-third was Polish. Approximately sixteen per cent of the
population was racially non-white. In general, foreign nationals resident in the city centre are young, well educated and skilled. However, there is little evidence of any significant gentrification trend, such as has been experienced for example in Dublin city centre in recent years. Moreover, while the influx of immigrants has helped to arrest the long-term trend of demographic decline, it has been small in scale compared both to the growth of population in the suburbs, and to the increase in the supply of housing in the centre. The fact that the supply of housing has run well ahead of demand is indicated by a housing vacancy rate of approximately thirty per cent in the city centre in 2006.

![Graph showing population distribution 1971-2006.](image_url)

**Fig. 26.2:** Population distribution 1971-2006.


The resurgence of population in the city centre has also been insufficient to arrest the decline of the area as the pre-eminent service centre of the urban area and the wider region. This decline has been brought about by a marked shift of retailing to the suburbs which has proceeded hand-in-hand with the suburbanisation of population. The first major retail development outside of the City, and indeed one of the earliest in the country, was the Crescent Shopping Centre in Dooradoyle, which opened in 1973. Until the late 1980s this remained the only significant shopping area outside the core. However, the buoyant economic conditions from the mid-1990s onwards brought a massive surge in the development of out-of-town shopping centres, with the major projects including the Riverside Retail Park on the Dock Road, Castletroy Shopping Centre, Newtown Shopping Centre, Jetland and Coonagh Cross on the north side of the city, and the City East Retail Park on the Ballysiman Road. Moreover, although located within the City boundary, the Childers Road Retail Park, Ennis
Road Retail Park and Parkway Retail Park are essentially suburban developments. The migration of retailing to the suburbs has depressed the price of retail space in the city centre in recent years: retail rentals in Limerick are, uniquely among the Irish cities, higher in the suburbs than in the city centre.32 It has also contributed to a high vacancy rate among retail units. Together with vacant housing this has given a dilapidated appearance to many parts of the centre, including whole blocks in the historical Georgian core, which in turn has acted as a deterrent to shoppers, to tourists, and to would-be business investors in the centre. Although it is not directly due to the migration of business to the suburbs, but rather the result of the on-going delay and postponement of the planned Opera retail development, the Rutland Street—Patrick Street area is a prominent example of egregious dereliction in the centre.

In addition to the problem of city centre vacancies in both the residential and commercial sectors of the property market, accelerating suburbanisation has raised a number of significant political, environmental and social issues for the development of the city. Politically, the most significant of these is the governance of the city. The City’s administrative boundary remained unchanged from 1950, when Michael Keyes, the Minister for Local Government, and Limerick’s first member of cabinet, granted the only extension of the twentieth century, until 2008 when an extension was granted to include the northern suburbs of Moyross, Caherdavin, Clonmacken and Coonagh. This extension was made following a recommendation in the Fitzgerald report, in order to progress the regeneration programme for the north side, and without prejudice to an application for a more extensive boundary extension by Limerick City Council in 2005.33 The failure to date to extend the boundary in a way commensurate with the growth of the city over the past sixty years is that Limerick is now severely under-bounded, with responsibility for the governance and planning of the urban area shared by three local authorities: Limerick City Council, Limerick County Council and Clare County Council. It has become increasingly apparent in recent years that the current governance arrangements are not adequate to the needs of an expanding urban area that, under the 2002 National Spatial Strategy, is designated as a national ‘gateway’, which is expected to propel the future development of the wider Mid-West Region. The divided responsibility for functions such as land use and infrastructure planning has made tackling many of the current problems of the city more difficult; indeed in the case of issues such as the over-development of car-dependant suburban shopping centres it can be argued to have been a cause of the problem, as the City and County authorities have competed against each other for the revenue streams provided by commercial rates. Environmentally, as concerns for climate change increase and carbon budgets and taxes become more prominent on the policy agenda, the large volume of commuting (including the phenomenon of cross-commuting)
and the associated problem of congestion that has arisen from the low density spread of the city are becoming more problematical. Finally, because the suburbanisation of population has been a socially selective process, drawing on certain demographic and social cohorts more than on others, it raises important issues about social inclusion and social cohesion. It is to these issues that we turn in the remainder of the chapter.

Polarisation and segregation: the contemporary social geography of Limerick

The contraction (in relative terms) and restructuring of manufacturing, and the suburbanisation of population, have together had a major influence on the social geography of contemporary Limerick. An extensive literature on the consequences of industrial decline in the cities of developed countries has pointed to its role as a factor in increasing social inequality. The American sociologist Saskia Sassen argues that the loss of jobs in manufacturing has resulted in the de-skilling of the manual labour force, and hence the reduction in the size of the intermediate social groups that consist of skilled and semi-skilled manual workers and their dependants. Concomitantly, the growth of the services sector, which is characterised by a more dualistic employment structure, has swelled the numbers of both highly skilled and remunerated workers (e.g., in sectors such as high order financial and business services) and of poorly paid unskilled workers (e.g., in personal or household services). The result of the shift in the employment base from manufacturing to services, according to Sassen, is therefore a contraction in the centre of the social class spectrum and an expansion at both the upper and lower ends. This process has been referred to as social polarisation.

There is limited evidence of increasing social polarisation in Limerick during the period of most significant industrial restructuring between 1971 and 1991 (table 26.1). The data indicate that the proportion of the population classified into the professional and managerial socio-economic groups increased, and the percentage in the skilled manual and semi-skilled manual groups decreased, both of which are supportive of the polarisation thesis. At the same time, there was also a decrease in the unskilled manual socio-economic group, which runs counter to this interpretation, and is more indicative of a general up-skilling of the population. Such a pattern of growth in the upper socio-economic groups and decline at the lower end of the scale, has been interpreted as 'professionalisation', and has been argued to be more characteristic of social change in European cities as compared to their US counterparts. However, the characterisation of social change in Limerick over this twenty year period as 'professionalisation' may not be entirely accurate. Between 1971 and 1991 there was a considerable increase (+ fifty-seven per cent) in the population that was classified as 'unknown' with regard to socio-economic group, and evidence suggests that most of these may be most appropriately classified in the unskilled socio-economic group. The
safest conclusion is probably that, given the data limitations, neither polarisation nor 'professionalisation' can be proven.

Table 26.1: Distribution of population by socio-economic group, Limerick City and Suburbs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-Economic Group</th>
<th>1971</th>
<th>1991</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional and managerial</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-manual</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled and semi-skilled manual</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled manual</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other and unknown</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data source: CSO *Census of population, small area population statistics, 1971 and 1991*.

The possibility of polarisation on the basis of social class (and associated attributes such as occupation and education) is a matter of concern for policy makers because of its adverse effects on social cohesion. These effects tend to be exacerbated when social polarisation is associated with the spatial separation or segregation of social groups on the basis of residence. Evidence from the 2006 census suggests that the degree of residential segregation across a number of social attributes is higher in Limerick than in any of the other medium sized Irish cities (Cork, Galway and Waterford). Comparatively high levels of residential segregation are found with regard to social class and housing tenure. Specifically, when Limerick is compared to the other cities there is a greater degree of spatial separation of the unskilled manual social class from all other social classes, and of local authority tenants from owner occupiers.

Spatial segregation on the basis of tenure and social class has been shaped by the filtering effect of the city's housing system, whereby those on lower incomes who cannot afford to meet their housing needs through the private housing market are channelled into areas of public housing. While this filtering process operates in all cities with mixed public/private housing systems, particular features of Limerick have increased its segregating effect. The first of these is the sheer size of the public (local authority) housing sector, a feature that can be traced back to the particularly bad housing conditions of Limerick's poor in the early decades of the twentieth century. In response to these conditions, housing construction by Limerick Corporation increased steadily from the 1930s onwards, peaking in the 1950s at almost 2,000 units, and with output of almost 1,400 units per decade in both the 1960s and 1970s. The result, according to
the Fitzgerald Report, is that Limerick is now ‘unique’ (among Irish cities) in its high proportion of social housing, which accounts for approximately 8,000 of the 18,900 housing units in the City (i.e., forty-two per cent).42 Secondly, large-scale public housing projects were concentrated in a small number of estates. Thus, over 1,160 houses were provided in the Southill scheme, which was built between 1966 and 1972, and a similar number in the Moyross development, built between 1974 and 1987. Both estates were located adjacent to older public housing estates (Janesboro in the case of Southill, and Ballynanty / Killeely in the case of Moyross) thereby increasing the spatial concentration of public housing.

If the role of the housing system, and specifically the pattern of public housing provision, helps to explain the high levels of social segregation in the city, housing provision in turn has operated within, and been profoundly shaped by, the city’s territorial governance structures. In sharp contrast with the City, the scale of public housing constructed in the suburbs has always been limited. According to the 2006 census, only 3.5 per cent of the inhabited housing stock in the suburbs was rented from the local authority.43 This means that approximately fifteen per cent of households renting from the local authorities in Limerick urban area are located in the suburbs, as compared to forty per cent of all households. While suburbanisation has proceeded apace over recent years, the population group depending on local authority housing provision has largely been confined to the City. Clearly, the City boundary has been a significant divide in terms of housing: the City has been the realm of the public, the suburbs that of the private.

The social geography that lies behind the comparatively high levels of segregation may be gleaned from an examination of the spatial pattern of social class and tenure, based on small area data from the 2006 census of population.44 Figure 26.3, showing the distribution of the unskilled manual socio-economic group as a percentage of the population, identifies the main concentrations as the St. Mary’s Park area of King’s Island and the O’Malley Park estate in Southill, with relatively high rates also in Moyross-Ballynanty-Killeely on the north side of the city, Assumpta Park-Lee Estate on King’s Island, Ballinacurra Weston, and Carew Park in Southill. The pattern closely follows that of housing tenure (fig.26.4). All of the listed areas were built as public housing estates, and levels of renting from the local authority remain high. Also evident in fig. 26.4 are the areas of the city where tenant purchase has led to the privatisation of publicly-provided housing. These include the Garryowen and Janesboro areas. In general there is a sharp divide on both variables, but especially public rented housing, as between the City and the suburbs. Thus, the level of local authority renting does not exceed five per cent of households in any of the areas located outside the 2006 boundary, with the exception of the Pineview Gardens-Delmege Park area of Moyross, which was built by the City Council in the mid-1980s. It was specifically to bring this area into the City and thereby facilitate regeneration, that the 2008 boundary extension was granted.
Fig. 26.3: Socio-Economic Group G (Unskilled Manual).

Fig. 26.4: Local Authority Rented Housing.
The relatively high degree of segregation of Limerick’s population on the basis of housing tenure and social class has had the effect of concentrating the impact of unemployment in the areas and communities identified above. By the mid- to late-1980s unemployment had emerged as severely problematical on the city’s local authority estates, in some of which over seventy per cent of the labour force was without work, giving rise to the concept of ‘unemployment blackspots’. Despite a decade and a half of rapid growth in the economy and in employment, relatively high concentrations of unemployment persisted in these areas in 2006. Thus, while the rate of unemployment for the city and suburbs as a whole was over eleven per cent, rates up to four times this average occurred in a number of areas.45 If we define unemployment blackspots in 2006 (when the national rate was 8.5 per cent) as areas with rates of joblessness in excess of twenty-five per cent of the labour force, then a number of such areas can be identified in the city. These include most of Moyross, St. Mary’s Park and Assumpta Park, almost all of Southill, and Ballinacurra Weston (fig. 26.5). In general the association of high unemployment with high levels of public rented housing is very marked. A clear divide between City and suburbs is once again evident, with all of the unemployment blackspots, other than Moyross, located within the City.

Unemployment is one of the most significant risk factors for poverty and deprivation. According to the national Survey on Incomes and Living Conditions, unemployed persons are 3.4 times more likely than the general population to experience consistent poverty, which occurs when an individual has an income below the poverty line and suffers material deprivation.46 Persons in lone parent families face an even higher risk of consistent poverty — 3.9 times that of the population at large. The rate of occurrence of such families in Limerick is significantly above the national average (twenty-three per cent as compared to eighteen per cent), but rates of more than double this prevail throughout Moyross, in part of O’Malley Park, and in Ballinacurra Weston (fig. 26.6). The geographical pattern of lone parenthood is strongly correlated with that of unemployment, suggesting the existence of a number of areas of multiple deprivation that correspond in the main to the City’s local authority estates. The problems of these areas are considered in more detail in the next section.

**Limerick’s troubled estates: residualised public sector housing**

While contemporary social problems in Limerick can be traced back to the spatially uneven impact of high unemployment in the 1980s, a number of other factors have also contributed. In particular, aspects of housing policy at the national level have, perversely, exacerbated problems of poverty and deprivation in local authority estates.47 Foremost among these is the tenancy surrender grant scheme (1985-87) which was introduced as an emergency measure to deal with a growing waiting list for public housing, at a time when (as now) severe
Fig. 26.5: Unemployment 2006.

Fig. 26.6: Lone Parent Families.
Aspects of socio-economic development in Limerick City since 1970: a geographer's perspective

Constraints on public expenditure had significantly reduced the public housing programme. In order to increase the supply of public housing available for letting, the scheme offered a grant of IR£5,000 (€6,349) to households who surrendered their tenancy and moved into the private sector. In order to make this move, households in most cases had to be able to secure mortgage finance, and so the scheme was most attractive to higher income households in employment. As these households moved out of local authority estates they were replaced by lower income families, so that the average income in the sector as a whole decreased. Anecdotal evidence from many estates in Limerick at the time suggested that the households moving out were also those most actively involved in community and voluntary activity, so that levels of social capital also decreased.

The tendency for average incomes of households in the public rented sector to decrease relative to those of households in the private sector has been interpreted in housing policy discourse as a process of 'residualisation' of the public sector. Some insights into the extent of public housing residualisation in Limerick are available from a recent (2005) profile of City Council tenant households. This found that in terms of the basic demographic attributes of sex and age, public sector renters formed a highly distinctive population, with a much higher proportion of females, children, and adolescents, than the population as a whole. In total, fifty-six per cent of the renting population was female, but this rises to sixty-two per cent for heads of household. The youthful age profile was reflected in the fact that thirty-six per cent were aged less than fifteen years of age, with fifty per cent aged under twenty-five years. The youth dependency ratio (the number of persons aged under fifteen years relative to those aged fifteen to sixty-four) was more than two and a half times greater than in Limerick as a whole. Household composition was also significantly different. The most common type of tenant household consisted of a single adult (lone parent) and children, which accounted for thirty-three per cent of all households, and for forty-six per cent of family-based households, precisely twice the rate for Limerick City and suburbs.

With regard to labour market engagement, the activity rate for City Council tenants aged fifteen years and over (thirty-four per cent) was significantly below that of the city as a whole (fifty-nine per cent), and the unemployment rate (fifty-three per cent) was almost five times higher. Given the low levels of employment, it is not surprising that persons aged fifteen years and over were primarily dependent on social welfare payments as a source of income. In total, welfare payments accounted for eighty-three per cent of all incomes. Reflecting the household composition, and in particular the high rate of lone parent families, the single most important welfare payment was the one-parent family payment, which constituted the main income source for thirty per cent of primary income recipients (i.e., those with the highest income in each household).
Social imbalances in the profile of tenant households were associated with particularly high rates of income poverty risk. The report found that eighty per cent of individuals lived in households with incomes below the poverty line, a rate of poverty risk almost four times the contemporaneous national rate. In general the rate of poverty risk was somewhat greater for females than for males, with the gender gap widest among heads of household, where the female rate was eighty-two per cent as opposed to seventy-four per cent for males. Rates of poverty risk were inversely related to age, so that the highest rate (eighty-nine per cent) was for children. There were also differences according to household composition. The highest rate of poverty risk occurred among individuals in lone parent households, ninety per cent of whom had incomes below the specified poverty line.

While the socio-economic attributes described above clearly differentiate local authority rented housing from other tenure categories, there is nevertheless significant variation within the tenure category, with differences evident among estates in respect of age-sex profiles, unemployment rates and income levels. In general the pattern that emerges is of more imbalanced age, sex and family structures on estates that are located further from the city centre. Likewise, the highest rates of poverty risk tended to be in the more peripheral estates. These include the area of Moyross, formerly known as Glenagross Park, in which ninety-four per cent of the renting population were at risk of poverty, and the Keyes Park / Carew Park area of Southill where the at-risk rate was eighty-five per cent. To some extent this geographical pattern corresponds with the age of the estate, less central estates generally having been developed later. However, the highest overall rate of poverty risk (ninety-six per cent) was for part of the Ballinacurra Weston estate built in the 1950s.

In summary, Limerick's public housing estates are characterised by a demography and pattern of household composition that is extremely imbalanced relative to that of the City as a whole and indeed greater Irish society. These demographic and social imbalances are associated with levels of household income that place the vast majority of tenants and their families at risk of income poverty. The spatial concentration of poverty and deprivation on the council estates is associated with a wide range of so-called 'area effects' whereby the disadvantages that a household suffers from its own poverty are compounded by characteristics of the neighbourhood in which it lives. Problems that have been linked to area effects include deficiencies in child development, poor school attendance and behavioural problems in children, higher rates of physical and mental ill-health, poor quality of local public and private services, and area stigmatisation. In Limerick there is evidence also of effects such as environmental degradation, anti-social behaviour, crime, especially drug-related crime, intimidation of residents, and a general decrease in social capital. Perhaps the most compelling
evidence of the extent of the problems on Limerick's local authority estates is provided by their population trends. In the period 1981 to 1991, O'Malley Park in Southill lost twenty-six per cent of its population, and analysis has shown that there was a significantly higher level of out-migration here than might be expected on the basis of the net migration rates for Limerick City. In the more recent period, 1991 to 2006, against the background of a twenty per cent increase in the population of the City, O'Malley Park lost a further forty-three per cent of its population, which now stands at approximately two-fifths of its 1981 peak level. In similar fashion the population of Moyross-Ballynanty in the north of the city, which also peaked in 1981, showed a cumulative forty per cent decrease up to 2006, having declined at each successive intervening census. More than any other indicator, arguably, the collapse of population in these local authority estates attests to the failure of housing policy since the 1970s.

Conclusion

Limerick has undergone profound changes in recent decades that have transformed the place and its people to such an extent that the city of 1970 is scarcely recognisable in that of today. There have been many improvements over the course of forty years such as the modernisation of the city's economy, service base and infrastructure. At the same time Limerick now faces significant economic, environmental, governance and social challenges that are in large part the legacy of the recent past. These include the need to secure new long-term sustainable jobs, to develop employment opportunities for all classes of its society, to address the twin problems of commercial decline in the city centre and excessive suburban development, and to tackle the deep-rooted and serious problems that are focused mainly on the public housing estates, but which continue to affect the entire city.

All of these issues are inter-linked in complex ways. For example, socially-selective suburbanisation has been both the cause and the result of increased socio-spatial differentiation within the city, the latter effect emerging as more affluent families become less likely to live in the City, with its concentrations of poorer households and social problems. In turn, the more that consumer spending power moves to the suburbs the greater the incentive for consumer services, including retailing, to follow. The fragmentation of the city's governance, itself an outcome of suburbanisation, has weakened the power of the planning system to control these development pressures.

The problems facing the city are not only complex, they are also deep-rooted as this chapter has demonstrated. The origins of the current unemployment problem, and in particular the persistence of unemployment blackspots, go back at least to the 1970s when extensive restructuring of the economic base coincided with the construction of some of the largest of Limerick's public housing estates. From the outset, therefore, these places experienced high levels of unemployment,
which in many cases became long-term unemployment, and indeed intergenerational unemployment, that has affected families to the present day. Unemployment and poverty also impeded the normal maturing or settling process of local authority estates, by reducing the capacity of households to avail of estate-stabilising tenant purchase arrangements. Even allowing for their younger age it is clear, for example, that levels of tenant purchase on the newer (1970s and later) estates have been lower than on older estates.52

Given the complexity of the problems faced by the city, and their emergence over a considerable period of time, it is clear that solutions will necessarily entail a multi-dimensional and long-term approach. Such an approach is envisaged in the €3.1 billion regeneration plan for Moyross, Southill, Ballinacurra Weston and St. Mary’s Park, which was launched in 2008. The plan proposes a radical solution involving large scale clearances and the reconstruction of housing stock. In rebuilding the estates, the importance of both land use diversification and tenure mixing are recognised. Thus the regeneration plan envisages the development of retail, commercial and other uses alongside residential development, and, within the latter, a variety of housing types, densities and tenures. In the context of the analysis presented in this chapter, the regeneration initiative would appear to be focused on the correct areas of the city, and in its emphasis on diversity in both land use and social composition it seems to have learned from the mistakes of the past. If fully delivered, it has the scale and the scope to make a serious impact on issues of social exclusion.

At the same time it should be clear that the regeneration programme is but one of the elements needed to address the current problems faced by the city. As argued here, the problems of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion on the local authority estates are linked into wider city-wide, regional and national factors and processes. That context must be recognised in the formulation of future development strategies. Limerick needs to find a whole new development paradigm based on principles of sustainability (economic and environmental) and social cohesion. It will not be easy to do this, nor should it be expected to happen quickly or without problems, but it may well be that a recessionary environment is best suited to making the necessary paradigm shift.

REFERENCES
2. Ibid., p.53.
3. Ibid., p.57.
4. Throughout the text the term City (capital ‘C’) refers to the legally bounded area administered by Limerick City Council (formerly Limerick Corporation). Limerick City (lower case ‘c’) is the built-up or morphological city of Limerick, consisting of the City plus its contiguous suburbs or environs. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, the statistics quoted in the text are for this larger and spatially more extensive unit, which is also referred to as Limerick urban area.
5. Not all of these workers were employed in the city itself, with a considerable number commuting to work in the recently established Shannon Industrial Estate. Data provided in B. Callanan, *Ireland’s Shannon story* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 98-9 suggest that in the late 1960s approximately 35 per cent of the 4,000 or so workers in Shannon Free Zone commuted from Limerick.


29. The city centre is here defined as comprising the Electoral Divisions of Custom House, Shannon A and B, and Dock A and B. Together these E Ds correspond closely to the central business district of the city.

30. The first of these was the scheme introduced under the Urban Renewal Act, 1986, with supporting measures in the Finance Act of that year.

31. Many of the jobs in question were in the construction sector, as the economic boom began to feed off itself, especially in the period after 2002.


33. The 2005 application, which in July 2009 was still awaiting decision by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, was a revised version of an application first made in 1996 and amended in 1999. An application for a boundary extension was also made in 1974.


35. Changes in the classification of occupations into socio-economic groups in the 1996 census mean that it is not possible to extend the comparison with 1971 beyond 1991.


37. This evidence comes from data on the socio-economic composition of individual Electoral Districts which show a strong statistical correlation between the percentage of population in the unskilled manual socio-economic group and the percentage of the population with unknown socio-economic group.

39. Segregation is assessed using the well-known Dissimilarity Index which measures the extent to which the distribution of two population groups (e.g., group A and group B, or group A and all others) differs across a number of spatial units. In the analysis reported here, the spatial units are Census Enumeration Areas (E As).
41. Data provided by the Housing Department, Limerick City Council.
42. J. Fitzgerald, 'Social exclusion', p. 4. The data refer to the total number of houses constructed, not the number currently being rented. According to the 2006 census, almost thirteen per cent of households rent from the local authority.
43. It is likely that a considerable proportion of this consists of private housing acquired and let by the City Council, as opposed to Limerick and Clare County Councils.
44. The small areas used for this purpose are the Census Enumeration Areas (E As) of which there are ninety-four in the City and suburbs. The E As are the smallest unit of area for which census data are available.
45. It should be noted that the census rate of unemployment, which is based on the individual's 'principal economic status', differs from the figure derived from the live register.
46. Central Statistics Office, Survey on income and living conditions 2007 (Dublin, 2008), p. 13. The poverty line is set at sixty per cent of the median 'equivalised' or per capita income. An individual is considered deprived if he/she lives in a household that is unable to afford two or more items from a list of eleven basic deprivation indicators.
47. For a comprehensive account of such policy measures see M. Norris and K. Murray, 'National, local and regional patterns of residualisation of the social rented tenure: the case of Dublin and Ireland', Housing Studies, xix, 1 (2004), pp 85-105.
52. This is based on the author's analysis of tenant purchase rates by estate based on data provided by the Housing Department, Limerick City Council.