

These arrests won't tackle the root causes of crime in Limerick

Niamh Hourigan

Nov 24th 2011

On Limerick's estates, crime is being spurred by pressing social problems – and they're not going away.

Yesterday, gardaí arrested five men over the Limerick murders of Shane Geoghegan and Roy Collins. This is good news, but it won't tackle the real causes of gang crime, writes sociologist Niamh Hourigan.

The 'Pitch for Shane', a terracotta army created by ordinary Limerick citizens this month to celebrate the life of murder victim Shane Geoghegan, serves as a stark reminder of the continuing challenges posed by gangland crime in Limerick city.

However, a number of arrests by gardaí this week in the Geoghegan and Roy Collins murder investigations show how much has been achieved since 2008. The increasing number of gardaí policing the city, the establishment of an Emergency Response Unit and the installation of CCTV systems have all impacted on crime rates.

Community policing has been particularly successful in building better relationships between gardaí and residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Limerick. In this context, the most recent crime statistics for the mid-west for the 12 months ending in September 2012 – which show a marked and continuing decline in violent crime rates – deserve more fanfare than they have received.

Perhaps this lack of acclaim is linked to a fear of complacency in a city which has been hit hard by the current economic recession. During the Celtic Tiger boom, Limerick city possessed some of the most socially excluded districts in the Republic of Ireland. Reductions in welfare payments and deep cuts to healthcare, education and juvenile justice projects are only likely to worsen this social exclusion. Limerick is also facing a growing heroin problem which has generated a raft of new concerns in relation to street crime, muggings and child protection.

‘Young children are being exploited to gain territorial control’

Apart from the crime statistics, though, there are other reasons for hope. 2012 will see the amalgamation of Limerick city and county councils, which may lead to progress on the complex housing management issues which have bedevilled local authorities in the city since the 1960s. The new Joint Authority will also be in a stronger position to develop the commercial core of Limerick city, providing the jobs which are so necessary to preventing social exclusion.

However, there are some trenchant problems in Limerick which are not visible in local crime statistics. In August of this year, Fr Pat Hogan, parish priest in Southill, highlighted the continuing problems experienced by residents in his parish in relation to intimidation and anti-social behaviour. Within my book *Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and Change*, I highlighted the specific difficulties in tackling the anti-social behaviour of children under 12 in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

During the interviews conducted for my research on fear and feuding in the city, residents repeatedly indicated that the anti-social behaviour of young children was being exploited by gangs to gain territorial control over pockets of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city.

The age of criminal responsibility in Ireland at the moment is 12, therefore gardaí are not in a position to tackle the anti-social behaviour of the under-12s. Child protection services are not in operation in the evening and during the weekends when anti-social behaviour is at its most prevalent. It is possible that much of the good work being achieved by agencies like Limerick Regeneration will be undermined if measures to tackle the anti-social behaviour of the under-12s are not developed.

Another invisible issue which contributes significantly to social exclusion in Limerick city is moneylending.

In many disadvantaged families, deep poverty and stress leads to active addictions to alcohol, drugs, or gambling. In these households, money from welfare payments which should be devoted to providing food, heat and clothing for children can end up in the pockets of the local drug dealers or bookies. These families then turn to local money-lenders who charge extortionate interest rates. In some cases, these money-lenders will ‘keep their book’ for their social welfare entitlements, go with them to claim the entitlements, keep the money and keep the book until the debt is paid.

‘Law-abiding families will be pushed into the arms of moneylenders’

During the three years I spent researching the links between crime and social exclusion in Limerick, I found that this practice of illegal money-lending played a significant role in pushing vulnerable families deeper into poverty and in some cases, into criminal activity.

As cuts to welfare loom in the next budget, it is likely that even the more advantaged law-abiding families in disadvantaged communities – who are already struggling to make ends meet – will be pushed into the arms of moneylenders.

Of the many failures of the last government, one of the most significant was the failure to tackle financial exclusion in Irish society. Many law-abiding hard-working families in disadvantaged communities still have difficulties opening bank accounts and gaining access to credit and saving schemes because of stigma linked to their address or dependence on welfare payments.

In the UK, Gordon Brown, for all his failings, made active and concerted efforts to force banks to provide services to socially excluded citizens in British society by establishing a Financial Inclusion Fund and establishing a special taskforce to tackle financial exclusion. These measures were designed to specifically to prevent vulnerable families on benefits becoming prey for parasitic money-lenders.

While Irish banks seemed happy to flood the country with cheap cash during the Celtic Tiger boom, many residents in stigmatised neighbourhoods remained excluded from their services.

Now that Irish citizens have taken on the burden of paying for the irresponsible behaviour of Irish banks, is it not time that we insist that Irish banks also take a more active role in promoting financial inclusion and make their contribution to tackling poverty-based crime in Irish society?