

A Community Drug Problem: Defining the problem – Defending the responses

Citywide National Conference

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Title: Community responses to issues of Safety & Intimidation

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Introduction

The speakers who follow me, Megan O’Leary and Tony Mc Carthaigh, will talk about the specific lived experience of drug-related intimidation. In this presentation I wish to set this experience in a broader context with a view to informing future policy responses.

I have accompanied this presentation with a number of photographs taken during the mid to late 1990’s by Ronnie Close. Many of the photos taken by Ronnie during this period covered the anti-drugs movement which emerged in many parts of Dublin at this time. This experience provides a useful background to the subject I wish to cover today.

The issue of drug-related intimidation raises a number of fundamental questions as to the way in which the drugs issue has been responded to since its emergence in the late 1980’s. It also reflects the way in which the drugs problem and drug-related crime has impacted so differently on different sections of Irish society. The experience of drug-related intimidation exposes both the contrast in lived experience of drug-related problems by Irish citizens and also the way in which the divided nature of the experience can also inform and is reflected in the dominant response to the crisis.

Community anti-drug activity in the 1990’s

‘Community’ is a contested term to which I wish to return later. However, the anti-drugs marches and vigils of the late 1980’s and mid-1990’s, although controversial on occasion, reflected a number of very positive community responses to the serious drug problems affecting many parts of Dublin at that time. They reflected:

- A strong community highlighting strength, togetherness and common purpose – the positives of community spirit
- The complexity of the drug problem – it was not just the problem of those families where a child was a user...but a shared problem
- A challenge to the stigma of drug use – by bringing the issue out on to the street where the parents of drug users marched, it showed the inter-relation between those most affected...users were someone else’s son, daughter, cousin or other relative etc. It showed that it was not an individual family issue but a shared one which affected the whole community
- The complexity of the solution needed – responses needed to amount to more than just ‘pushers out’, hence the emergence of the catch cry ‘users we care, pushers beware’.

Drug-related intimidation can bring with it the same type of isolation and stigma that is often experienced by those who must deal with the fact that their child is a drug user and responses must seek to return to the sense that this is a shared issue confronting society as a whole.

Perhaps most importantly, community anti-drug activity challenged the open and brazen manner of drug dealing at that time. They also confronted the government with regard to the perceived inadequacy of its response and they highlighted the major problems in the relationship between the residents of many parts of the city and the Garda Síochána.

Responding to the crisis

The year 1996 was somewhat of a watershed in the drugs crisis, with the murder of journalist Veronica Guerin in particular prompting the state to react. The introduction of Criminal Assets legislation, the emergence of rhetoric whereby the drugs crisis was presented as a threat to the security of the state and the ensuing range of authoritarian legal measures introduced such as seven-day detention, the use of the special juryless criminal courts, restrictions on the right to silence, mandatory minimum sentencing laws etc. On the other hand the Rabbitte report and the establishment of local drugs task forces in the areas worst affected by the drugs problem reflected the emergence of a more integrated community-based response. However, despite this initiative, it remains a matter of debate as to whether this community experience, revealed in a number of research reports at the time, was really driving the dominant response of government. Although some of the legislative initiatives such as the Criminal Assets Bureau were innovative, many of the new laws and enhanced policing powers can be understood as a symbolic response, the need to be seen to be on top of the problem. While such approaches may appear as a symbol of strength, they can also be seen as a symptom of weak authority. For example, in many of the worst affected communities, the demand was for local policing responses and systems and the improvement of community-police relations. Some senior Gardai, such as Assistant Commissioner Tom King in Store street garda station, were beginning to acknowledge the need for greater links to local communities. Despite the emergence of a few local policing fora and commitments in the previous National Drug Strategy Community Policing Fora were not developed.

A changing drug market

It is possible although difficult to prove, that many of the changes introduced since 1996 have impacted upon the nature of the Irish drug market. Over the past decade or so, we have seen many high level dealers leave the country. While law enforcement may have contributed to this it may also reflect an attempt to get closer to source countries, be they Spain or Portugal in relation to Cocaine and Cannabis or the Netherlands in relation to synthetic drugs. It may also indicate the growing violent nature of the drug trade and the desire by dealers to flee gang feuds. The changing nature of the Irish drug market has contributed to the emergence of drug-related intimidation as a serious issue. Drug markets have become more hidden, facilitated by the widespread use of mobile phones and research shows that they remain deeply penetrated in the social fabric of many communities. The emergence of drugs such as Crack cocaine have contributed to high profits and crack-related social harms. There has been an increase in the involvement of younger people which has been found to have contributed to greater levels of violence. The so-called Celtic Tiger years and the increase in spending power have seen drugs such as cocaine used more widely across classes. The drop in cocaine prices has also contributed to this. The greater willingness of dealers to give drugs on credit to other lower level dealers has also contributed to debt creation which is a significant cause of violence as dealers seek to recoup monies owed. But unlike previously, the study to be presented by Megan shows, that violence is directed not just at the person in debt but to their wider family network, siblings, parents,

grandparents etc. And people are prepared to carry out extreme acts of violence for relatively small amounts of money.

Consequences of violence and intimidation

The consequences of drug-related violence and intimidation include the following:

- Creation of no-go areas, particularly after dark
- The stigmatisation of whole communities
- The development of gangs as people seek protection from each other through gang formation
- This in turn perpetuates a cycle of violence
- Community fear of engagement with responses due to fear of reprisal from dealers
- Breakdown in community cooperation with inter-agency and community-based responses
- Failure of community regeneration efforts

Despite the seriousness of community-based intimidation and violence in certain communities, something which has been highlighted by a number of studies over the last decade, the issue has seldom appeared high on the agenda. Indeed this is the first conference where the issue has been raised specifically. I believe that this reflects the different ways in which the drug problem impacts in different communities throughout the city and country. Drug problems do not impact evenly across classes, drug-related deaths, drug dependency, drug-related crime and drug-related intimidation, despite being highlighted in the media, impact on the most marginalised and deprived sectors of society. Many have argued that the response to the drug problem reflects the priorities of those dominant in society. A case in point is the head shop phenomenon, which crossed classes. It has been suggested that the rapid and determined political response to this issue reflects that reality.

Drug markets and their host communities

The term 'community' is contested. It needs to be remembered that many living in communities worst affected by drug dealing are involved in and/or benefit from the trade in drugs. In trying to build sustainable responses to this issue we must appreciate the inter-relation between illicit drug markets and their 'host communities', as most retail drug markets emerge and develop in deprived areas, except those in centre city locations such as at train stations, drug treatment centres etc. We need to be realistic as to the pressures created by drug markets for communities. The following factors need to be considered when developing responses:

- Most people who are first introduced to illicit drugs are introduced by a friend or family member. We need to overcome the myth that the drug dealer is some sort of outsider 'preying' on our communities
- Many drug dealers live in the communities in which they deal drugs
- Drug markets are linked with both legal and illegal economies...drug money is usually earned in the legal economy or through social welfare or is a result of goods being stolen in the legal economy by users to purchase drugs and drug profits are returned to the legal economy as purchases or investment. Many of those in the legal economy, intentionally or otherwise, handle drug money
- Although drug markets are a source of concern for local people they are also a source of income and cheap goods

An Irish solution – informed by international best practice

The issue of intimidation has now been specifically mentioned in the National Drug Strategy 2009-2016. The challenge now is to develop sustainable responses. I am not aware, despite having

researched the issue over the last number of months, of specific initiatives directed at the issue of intimidation. Instead what we see are numerous initiatives directed at the general problems associated with drug-related crime and anti-social behaviour. Many of these approaches have involved collaboration across agencies and numerous other stakeholders. The following factors can be considered:

- It is important to cater solutions to the specific nature of the problem. The Family Support Study presented by Megan presents a range of behaviours under the heading intimidation – but these range from low level anti-social behaviour to serious assault and murder and responses need to be similarly specific and contextualised and proportionate
- Responses need to begin at the beginning and look at early intervention for families and young people and realistic, meaningful school-based prevention programmes. In many schools in the US for example, there are programmes geared towards discouraging gang membership
- Joint Policing Committees and Local Policing Fora, those which have already been established as a result of the Garda Síochána Act, 2005 or the previous drugs strategy and those which are due to be developed under the National Drug Strategy provide a potential infrastructure to develop long-term responses through a partnership approach. In particular, local policing fora can facilitate the development of locally-based responses catering to locally defined problems
- The national Restorative Justice Commission has recently highlighted the potential in this area. For example community-based mediation and problem solving. Recently there have been attempts to mediate in the Limerick feud. Such approaches are challenging and may require an engagement with those involved in drug dealing and intimidation but the problem warrants radical thinking
- The *Dial to Stop drug dealing and intimidation* initiative is due to be extended. This is welcome as it provides some public indication that the issue is of concern
- Pilot Family Support Group/ Garda National Drugs Unit. This is a new initiative that will be described by Megan and which also deserves to be supported. However, it is very important that such initiatives are monitored and evaluated and this is the final point to which I will now turn

Monitoring and evaluating success and failure

It is particularly important when developing responses to phenomena such as this that those responses are properly monitored and evaluated. This is particularly the case when seeking the support and participation of the community in addressing such a sensitive area. If the community is to be expected to assist there needs to be clear and apparent gains for the community. This approach was taken in relation to the North Inner City Community Policing Forum and this is a model which can be built upon. A number of other factors need also to be considered:

- Aims and objectives of any initiative need to be realistic and informed by local circumstances as to what is and is not locally feasible

- Data needs to be maintained regularly on the incidents of intimidation and the responses taken so that there is transparency while also there needs to be sensitivity to the data so all are protected. Evaluations should be used to learn from successes and failures
- Responses should be sustainable
 - Problem solving, not problem shifting. Responding to a problem in one location can simply shift it elsewhere. This is not a sustainable citywide response, however satisfactory on a local or temporary basis
 - There should be awareness of adverse consequences of actions taken...for example, evictions can produce other social problems such as homelessness. The disruption of drug markets can contribute to increased violence through turf wars etc...

Ultimately we should be attempting to return to the type of mobilisation of people witnessed in the 1990's and earlier, when drug issues came to be seen not as an individual or family problem but one which required a broader community and society-wide response.

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