

# **CITYWIDE DRUGS CRISIS CAMPAIGN**



**SUBMISSION TO THE COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE, DEFENCE AND  
EQUALITY**

**EFFECTS OF GANGLAND CRIME ON COMMUNITIES**

**17<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2014**

## **Introduction.**

Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign is a national network of community organisations that are involved in addressing the drugs issue and it represents the community sector on the National Committees of the National Drugs Strategy. The consultation process carried out during the development of our Strategic Plan in 2012 highlighted the serious issues of intimidation and violence facing our communities and in 2013 a seminar was held to look at how the issues raised could be addressed. Citywide is currently working in partnership with the Health Research Board (HRB) on an audit of drug-related intimidation in Drug Task Force areas.

Gangland crime is an issue that concerns all of Irish society but there is no doubt that the greatest impact of gangland crime and its related activities is experienced in our most disadvantaged communities. It is also the case that those who are involved in gangland crime are primarily from disadvantaged communities themselves. While not the only area of activity for gangland criminals, the drugs trade has been and continues to be a major driver of their operations and it is no coincidence that the most severe drug problems are experienced in the same disadvantaged communities that generate gangland activity.

This paper looks at the impact of gangland crime on communities under three headings, **Intimidation, Young People** and **Disadvantaged Communities**, outlining key issues involved and key actions recommended by Citywide under each heading.

### **1) Intimidation.**

#### *Low-level intimidation in the community*

In the 1990s the day-to-day activities of the drugs trade in our communities were resisted and openly opposed by the community, but twenty years on, the levels of intimidation associated with the trade have made it far more difficult for communities to organise and respond. Low-level intimidation is often implicit rather than explicit and may not be obvious to an observer, but it has a very significant negative impact on the lives of those who experience it. People do not want to take the risk of crossing or standing up to the individuals that they know to be involved in the drugs trade. “They don’t have to do anything to you...you just know what they could do if they wanted.” A local community worker described it “Keep your eyes down, don’t look around you, mind your own business, don’t get

involved.” This filters through to all aspects of life, e.g. rubbish bags being dumped on the streets “The Council wants us to tell on our neighbours who we see dumping rubbish bags on the street...do they know who these people are and what they do to people who cross them?”

Over many years there has been a very strong tradition of communities coming together to support each other and respond to local issues but this normalisation of low level intimidation is resulting in less and less engagement in the community. People report that they no longer feel safe in their own communities, and this feeling is real, regardless of whether or not the individual person has been a victim of a specific crime. Rather than confront their neighbours, people go on to the housing transfer list so that they can move away, often from the community that their family has lived in all their lives. This is leading to people living in greater isolation and to weakening of the community bonds that have been so crucial to the quality of life in our most disadvantaged communities and, in turn, is ceding more control to criminal gangs.

### Recommendations

- Recognise and resource the crucial role of local Community Development Projects in combating increasing isolation, restoring community spirit and in supporting and reinforcing positive activities in the community.
- Provide adequate resources for local Community Policing Fora that, critically, can operate close to the ground and build trust in the community.
- Strengthen and reinforce community policing by An Garda Síochána as the core approach of all police work, based on visibility on the ground and relationship-building with the local community.

### *Intimidation related to Drug-related debt.*

An even more serious disruption of community safety is direct intimidation by drug dealers and gangs, related to drug debt. This has been reported to Citywide from all Drug Task Force areas across the country. While intimidation is not a new problem, it has become more violent and lethal, largely related to the availability of firearms. Drugs users are at serious risk of violence relating to drug debt; there is no relationship between the size of the debt and the level and type of intimidation and some very serious attacks are carried out on people with debts of only a couple of hundred euro. Neither are the perpetrators specific about who they target. Families of individuals in debt, particularly mothers, are also singled out. Intimidation includes actual physical violence such as stabbings, sexual violence,

beatings, shootings and murder; threats of such violence and bullying; and attacks on property and pets. Houses are petrol bombed and burgled, windows smashed, cars smashed up, pets killed.

Local people have observed increases in suicide connected with drug debt. Debts are not written off when someone dies but are passed on to the victim's family and if a debtor happens to receive a prison sentence, the intimidation continues there. In an effort to settle debts, families are turning to money lenders who engage in their own form of threats and violence to extract repayments. Some individuals are being forced into drug dealing as a way of repaying their drug debts while others are intimidated into allowing their homes to be used to hide, store and deal drugs.

Women are particularly vulnerable to these threats and to sexual violence and exploitation. In some areas the homes and gardens of local residents are used to store drugs, often without their knowledge. If they do become aware, they are too afraid to do anything to challenge it. A major obstacle to challenging and addressing this form of intimidation is that people who either witness it or experience it directly are terrified to report it in case of reprisals from gangs. This fear is not allayed by the legal system, which requires that anyone making an accusation must go to court to testify. Where reports of intimidation are made, there is no programme of witness protection and it can be several months between a report and a court case, during which time the complainant is in fear of reprisals.

Both low-level intimidation and more serious intimidation need to be addressed at the same time. It is recognised that from time to time, special Garda operations will take place targeted at serious crime and, while this is welcomed in communities, there has been experience of day-to-day community policing being decreased or limited in order to facilitate these operations. Communities feel strongly that there should not be an either/or choice made between day-to-day policing of low-level activity and the specialist operations needed to target major criminals.

### Recommendations

- Promote the work of the Drug Related Intimidation Reporting Programme that the National Family Support Network has established in partnership with the Garda National Drugs Unit to respond to the needs of drug users and family members who are experiencing drug related intimidation.
- Examine the feasibility of developing a similar model of reporting programme that can be used by members of the wider community who experience intimidation.

- Examine the findings of HRB/Citywide audit of drug-related intimidation that will be completed by end 2014.
- In areas where intensive policing operations targeted at gangs are taking place, they should take place as part of an integrated approach that does not undermine ongoing community policing.

## **2) Impact on Young People**

A relatively new phenomenon is the engagement of young people by drug gangs and their induction into drug dealing and associated activities. Often the children who are targeted are very young and are used by gangs initially to deliver or collect drugs, money or fire arms. Gangs are calculated in who they approach, concentrating on those they see as susceptible to their approaches but who are not known to Gardai, so that they will not raise any suspicions in their couriering; and those who may have relations already involved. Either way, they are sworn to secrecy by the gang and made aware of the risks of speaking about the activity.

Young people are now growing up in communities where the activities of the drug trade have become normalised and appear to the young person to be taking place without any sanction; as a result these children do not see anything wrong in selling drugs. For some young people, drugs are such an integral part of their family life that they are encouraged in this activity by parents and siblings. Drug dealing can be seen as an attractive option, presenting a young person with an opportunity to earn money where no other opportunities are available.

Research in Blanchardstown has looked at the young people who become involved in intimidation and have identified three levels of involvement, starting with lower order activity where children damage property etc.; middle order level which usually involves early school leavers; and higher order level where there is involvement in drug gang intimidation. Young people generally start with lower order activity, but if there is no effective intervention at this level, they will then move up to middle and possibly higher order involvement in gangs. Early school leaving presents a serious risk factor in moving from middle to higher level activity.

In her research in Limerick, Niamh Hourigan also outlines three levels of criminal hierarchy in gangland; Serious Players who hold high position within gangs and usually organise rather than engage in acts of violence; Foot Soldiers aged between 15 and 22, who are

trying to make their way up the gang hierarchy by engaging in acts designed to show toughness and elicit fear in others; and Child Gang Participants. Again intervention needs to take place with the child participants to prevent them from moving up in the hierarchy.

### Recommendations

- Strengthen and resource the role of the support and diversion programmes that work with young people in the local community - youth services, NYPs, family support services, Youth Diversion programmes, social work services – and ensure all services are working in collaboration. It is crucial to intervene when young people are involved in lower level activities so that they do not move on to more serious involvement.
- Examine the experience in the Borough of Brent in London (Community Safety and Emergency Planning Dept.), where young gang members are engaged through group work responses that recognise their strong affiliation to the group.
- Apply the powers of the Criminal Assets Bureau at a localised level for criminals living in the community, so that the seizure of assets is obvious and visible to the community.

### **3) Socio-economic Disadvantage.**

It is no co-incidence that the societal problems of gangland crime and the drugs trade have taken root in our most disadvantaged communities. In these communities, the drugs trade has become imbedded in the local economy and provides a real source of income. The problem cannot be addressed in the longterm without addressing the economic underdevelopment that underlies it.

When the Irish state initiated the National Drugs Strategy in 1996 it recognised the link between the drugs crisis and socio-economic disadvantage and poverty; hence the RAPID programme was introduced a few years later to target major investment towards disadvantaged communities. Unfortunately this focus was not maintained in to the 2000s and, despite acknowledgement by the current government of the links between poverty and drugs, there is no political or policy commitment to addressing the current reality of disadvantaged communities. If we are serious about finding longterm solutions to the issues

of gangland crime and the drugs trade, then we must address the underlying issues of socio-economic disadvantage.

As a final point, representations have been made to government for many years about redirecting the money raised by the Criminal Assets Bureau back into the communities that have been devastated by drugs (Fine Gael Private Members Bill proposing this was defeated in 2003), but the Dept of Finance has consistently ruled it out, ostensibly for technical reasons. It is not just about the valuable services that could be funded in our communities through this money, it is about applying the principle of restorative justice for communities that have been so damaged by the actions of serious criminals, a symbol of hope for those communities that perhaps some day justice might prevail.

## References

**Family Support Network** [www.fsn.ie](http://www.fsn.ie)

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