Comment

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

Niamh Hourigan

The gun attacks in Drumcondra last Friday and the subsequent killing of Eddie Hutch Jr have brought the eruption of organised crime to the forefront of the current election debate. While many would agree that the Government elected in 2007 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 those gangs were based 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 gardaí. 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 Clavin and Milli Murray in a car in 2006 (aged 7 and 5 at the time) proved a watershed and prompted the important Government to launch the Limerick Regeneration project. Youth work and housing initiatives 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 responses 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 curtailed the demand for recreational 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 benefitted them. The toll that cuts to gardaí 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 have only served to exacerbate the situation by creating a new pool of marginalised youth from which criminal gangs can recruit.

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 those feuds on the public, we tend to think largely of the potential dangers to innocent bystanders. However, I would argue that the public have another important role to play in feuds. In the last number of years, participation in criminal gangland crime has somewhat glamourised 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 glamourised. This is a tool that can be used 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 glamourising gang activities to the forethought of their minds. Without this awareness, we will all 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, imprisoned with boredom which most frequently ends in tragedy.

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