

Uncertain Futures: Men on the Margins in Limerick City

Margaret Griffin and Patricia Kelleher*

Summary: The authors give a voice to young men from disadvantaged communities in Limerick city who participated in two exploratory research studies, *Uncertain Futures: An Exploratory Study of Men on the Margins* and *Hidden Fathers: Supporting Young Single Fathers at the Margins*. Consideration is given to what the men told us about different aspects of their lives; their school days and work opportunities; their experiences of everyday life in their communities; what it means to be a father.

The issues that emerge in the studies are reviewed and, using the lessons from desistance research, key messages for probation practice in particular and for social policy in general are extrapolated. The necessity of considering the social contexts of probationers when designing interventions is stressed, as is the importance of creating effective partnerships in applying solutions to social exclusion.

Keywords: Social exclusion, employment, fatherhood, masculinity, community safety, desistance, community partnerships, crime, Probation, criminal justice.

Introduction

Observe and listen to people whom you work with and they will teach you everything you need to know. (Bertolino and O'Hanlon, 1999, as cited in Parton and O'Byrne, 2000, p. 81)

Those most at risk of getting involved in crime are young men who experience social exclusion (O'Mahony, 1997). More importantly, offending is linked to geographical areas where disadvantage is strongly embedded (Bacik and O'Connell, 1998).

* Margaret Griffin is a Senior Probation Officer working in Limerick city. Patricia Kelleher is currently an adjunct Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Limerick. Email: mmgriffin@probation.ie or patrickelleher@eircom.net

The 26 young men who contributed to the studies live in some of the most disadvantaged areas in Ireland and are involved in, or are at risk of becoming involved in, crime. These young men tell us of the deep lack of respect that they experience; they portray lives blighted by exclusion and characterised by underachievement at school, inability to find work, boredom, lack of safe access to public spaces, fears for their own safety and that of their families, and exposure to trauma.

The men also articulate what is important to them: their localities and communities; their families, particularly their children; access to training and employment; opportunities to engage in sporting and other leisure activities. They voice hopes and aspirations that reflect the dominant cultural definitions of being a man, without having access to the opportunities to fulfil their expectations to achieve breadwinner status and to enact the provider role.¹

The studies on which this paper is based were conducted to elicit the views of a cohort of the population who are rarely asked about how they see the world and what's important to them. It was also recognised that they were a group who did not usually engage with services in the city unless compelled to do so by the courts. They were perceived and described by agencies across the community/statutory services as 'hard to reach'.

Ascertaining their views and needs was considered to be an important step in having their needs identified and met. In addition, the stories of these young men were considered to be a significant part of the story of the city as it embarked on a regeneration process.²

While some of the picture that is painted may be specific to Limerick city, the voices that emerge in this paper will have a strong resonance for probation practitioners who are familiar with the challenges that face young men in their efforts to desist from offending and achieve social inclusion. In presenting social marginalisation as experienced by the young men, this study represents one of the rare opportunities, in an Irish context, for these voices to be heard.

¹ While the authors appreciate that this representation of hegemonic masculinity is not unproblematic, it is beyond the scope of this article to examine it further.

² See www.limerickregeneration.ie for more information.

Background

This paper is based on two exploratory studies, *Uncertain Futures* (Kelleher Associates and O'Connor, 2007) and *Hidden Fathers* (Kelleher Associates and O'Connor, 2008). Eighteen men participated in *Uncertain Futures*; key themes explored included:

- school days
- work opportunities
- everyday life in their communities
- what it means to be a father.

The second study, *Hidden Fathers*, which interviewed 12 non-resident fathers, builds on the findings of the first and explores in a more in-depth way the experiences of young men as single fathers. Four of the men had been interviewed for the first study, thus giving an overall number of 26 young men between the two.

Men were selected for the research on the basis of age and location. All were between 18 and 33 years and they all come from, or reside in, some of the most socio-economically disadvantaged local authority housing estates in the State:

Limerick city is by far the most disadvantaged local authority area in the region and the second most disadvantaged county in Ireland as a whole. The relative deprivation of Limerick city has steadily increased over the past fifteen years from a score of -2.4 in 1991 to -7.9 in 2006. (PAUL Partnership, 2006)³

The statistics for the areas in the study tell their own story: unemployment is five times the national average (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 5); between 46.7% and 55.1% of the adult population has only primary education (the national average is 18.9%); the proportion of lone-parent families⁴ ranges from 57% to 64% compared to a national figure of 21%; social welfare dependency is high, with large numbers of households in

³ PAUL Partnership is an organisation made up of communities, state agencies, social partners, voluntary groups and elected representatives working with local communities that have benefited least from economic and social development. It aims to promote social inclusion and improve the quality of life of the people. PAUL stands for People against Unemployment in Limerick. www.paulpartnership.ie

⁴ Lone-parent families are defined as family units headed by a single parent where there is at least one dependent child under the age of 15 years.

the areas being welfare-dependent⁵ (PAUL Partnership, 2006). These areas are also the focus of the Limerick Regeneration Project, which was established to address the chronic and concentrated disadvantage identified in the Fitzgerald Report (Fitzgerald, 2007).

In addition to the above dismal picture of disadvantage and deprivation, the city has come to national attention because of the level of criminal and inter-family feuding that has taken place in recent years, resulting in a serious level of violence, intimidation and fear, particularly for the communities mentioned above.

In designing the research project care was taken to ensure that it was ethical and non-exploitative and that it did not further stigmatise or label the young men involved. Prior to engaging in semi-structured interviews the men were given a letter outlining the purpose of the research and they each signed a consent form. Interviews were conducted by two researchers and were about 45 minutes in duration. The participation of the interviewees was voluntary, no inducements were offered and the men were made aware that they could terminate the interview at any stage. The interviewees have all been given aliases to protect their identity, and all identifying information has been removed.

School days

Almost all of the men interviewed for Uncertain Futures recounted difficulties in managing the school environment. Critically, 13 of the 18 men interviewed left school without educational qualifications,⁶ thus making what O'Donnell and Sharpe (2000) refer to as 'careerless transitions', with access only to low-paid insecure employment opportunities.

The men described three broad areas where they experienced difficulty in the school environment:

- 1. Special needs not being identified:** Declan, now 20 years old, left school at 18 without passing his Junior Certificate⁷ and he feels

⁵ The exact figure for social welfare dependency is difficult to calculate as it includes numbers on the live register, lone parents in receipt of state allowances, people with disabilities, those unable to work due to illness and others.

⁶ This is in keeping with other studies which indicate that males from lower socio-economic groupings are the least successful educationally (Smyth and Hannon, 2000)

⁷ The Junior Certificate examination is held at the end of the Junior Cycle in post-primary schools. Students normally sit for it at the age of 14 or 15, after three years of post-primary education. www.examinations.ie/index.php?l=en&mc=ca&sc=sc

aggrieved that his learning disability was not detected until after he left school:

I was not diagnosed until after I left school ... I knew that I had difficulties. I got bullied and harassed at school because of my learning difficulties. There is a lack of services for a person with a learning disability. There is no centre in Limerick.

2. **Experience of childhood trauma:** Niall, who left school at 13, recounts his experience:

My father had a mental illness and committed suicide. Having no father and the environment I grew up in led me astray. I was hanging around the streets and got into trouble with the law and left school. I was too busy wanting to be one of the men.

3. **Inability to make the transition from primary to secondary school:** Vince (23 years old) makes the following observation:

Primary school was OK. Secondary school was boring. We had all different teachers. I left school at 14 and went to a special school.

Some men identified how they coped with the school environment by being rebellious and refusing to accept the teacher's authority:

We were all messers. I was thrown out of school. I had got suspended a few times. They said that they would take me back if I signed a form for good behaviour. I wouldn't sign it. (Joe)

This statement, as well as others where men described themselves as 'blaggards', is in keeping with research that indicates that 'boys are more likely to externalise their difficulties and this will impact on the classroom' (Kolvin et al., 1990, as cited in Cleary, Corbett, Galvin and Wall, 2004, p. 33).

Some of the young men, having left mainstream education prematurely, transferred to special schools or community training workshops where they fared somewhat better. They identified *small groups and individual attention* as important factors that facilitated their learning. Davy also talks about the subject choice on offer:

I went to a community training workshop for three years and did woodwork and mechanics and English, computers and life skills. It was brilliant. I learned to read and write.

While the men developed basic skills in both the special schools and the community training workshops, they did not attain the necessary educational qualifications to get an apprenticeship or a ‘decent job’.

Some of the men, particularly the younger ones, were attempting to rebuild their careers by attending community-based projects specifically designed to enable them to attain educational qualifications.⁸ The comments of the young men who attended these projects were both positive and future-focused.

Joe, who is 19, left school at 15 and he is now attending a community-based programme where he is studying for his Leaving Certificate Applied⁹ (LCA); he hopes to get a trade, preferably as a plumber. Dylan also hopes to study for the LCA. He states:

I left school at 15. I thought that I would be better off working. I soon found out that there are few well-paid jobs open to young men. For a job in security you need education and the Junior Cert. I want to do the Leaving Cert. If this project was not here I would be in trouble.

These projects foster a person-centred, relational approach to learning and adopt models that are participatory and that affirm the self-esteem of the young people. Joe makes the following observations:

The project is very different from school where you were just sitting in a classroom. Here it is relaxed. You call the teacher by the first name. They are your friends. You know that they care about you. There is a need for a lot more projects like this. A lot of people are waiting to get in.

These community-based projects were also significant in terms of building productive alliances outside of the communities, whether this involved linking with colleges or prospective employers.¹⁰ Jason’s contribution makes this point very succinctly:

⁸ A good example of this type of project is Ceim ar Cheim in Moyross, funded by the Probation Service, which places a big emphasis on identifying progression routes for its participants.

⁹ See <http://lca.slss.ie/faq.html> for more information on this qualification.

¹⁰ The ability to reach beyond your immediate sphere of influence to have your needs identified and met is referred to in the literature as ‘bridging social capital’: for a very accessible explanation see DeCleur (2003).

It is hard to get anything or to get anywhere. You need the outside contact – that is where the project is important.

Employment

The American sociologist S.M. Miller said that we live in what he called the ‘credential’ society (Miller, 1967; as cited in Miller and Savoie, 2002), where access to employment and social and economic security are strongly correlated with educational credentials.¹¹ It is argued that the opportunity to perform the ‘breadwinner’ role is key to a man’s sense of identity within his family and community, particularly for working-class men (Hearn, 1998, as cited in Cleary et al., 2004).

Labour-force participation is also a significant determinant of other life opportunities, such as setting up an independent home and committing to a long-term relationship and having children (Webster, 1997a, as cited in Cleary et al., 2004). The men who participated in this study espoused the same values as the wider culture in wanting a ‘decent job’ to support a family. The fact that they were unequivocal about the importance of paid employment is particularly poignant when one considers the obstacles they face in accessing work:

It emotionally affects a man that he cannot support a family. Men value themselves in work. Without work many feel useless. It is an emptiness feeling. (Declan)

When my kids are asked ‘what does your father do?’ I would like them to be able to say that I do something. I would not be able to work full-time due to depression but I would like to get on a CE¹² scheme. (Niall, 29 years old)

Everyone needs work. You need money coming in. You get lazy and depressed when you are stuck in the house. (Chris, 25 years old)

¹¹ Access to apprenticeships has been a traditional route for working-class men to progress from low-paid, insecure employment to skilled employment. Educational credentials are now needed to enter an apprenticeship programme, thus making this route no longer available to many working-class men.

¹² Community Employment is an employment and training programme that helps long-term unemployed people to re-enter the active workforce by breaking their experience of unemployment through a return to work routine. CE schemes operate on the basis of a 20-hour working week. See www.fas.ie/en/communities/community+employment/default.htm for further information.

In addition to the problems gaining employment because of their lack of educational qualifications, almost all of the men believed that discrimination based on where they lived was a barrier:

You will never get a job if you are from here. They don't like people from here. They find it hard to trust you. It is unfair. (Davy)

Some of the men had given up hope of getting work and spent their time 'hanging around all day' with little to do.

Everyday life in disadvantaged communities

Many of the men interviewed for the study indicated that they feel a strong sense of connection to their local area, with only two stating that they would like to move. The majority had siblings, aunts, uncles and other extended family living nearby and they were highly integrated into their communities.

Some of the men recounted happy childhood memories:

My father used to take me fishing and camping. (Philip)

I was brought up in Moyross. I enjoyed it. Moyross has an all-weather indoor soccer pitch, snooker, boxing club. I love soccer and hurling. (William)

It was a great place to grow up in. I always had something to do. I loved handball and hurling. I used to hang around at the shop. (Dave)

St Mary's was a great place to grow up. There were regattas on the river. You could hang around for hours. (Niall)

Twelve of the men interviewed expressed a keen interest in sport, particularly soccer and Gaelic games, and a number had participated in various sports at a high level.

Some men explained the importance of keeping and caring for horses:

I love horses. I love just sitting there watching them. I love watching them trotting or racing. (Jason)

But this activity was not without difficulties:¹³

Everyone loves horses. I love horses. All I wanted was horses. The Gardaí¹⁴ and the pound took them. They brought them to Cork. (Paddy)

Everyday activity for many interviewed, if they were not involved in community projects, consisted of ‘hanging around, doing nothing in particular’. Vince said:

*There is f*** all to do here now. It is a dive.*

Several of the men described staying in bed until midday and spending the afternoon watching television at a friend’s house. The weekends consist of getting a ‘few cans’ and playing the Playstation with friends.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in the context of Limerick, the predominant focus of attention for the young men interviewed in this study was the impact of the feuds on life in the communities. There is historical evidence that inter-family feuds have been a feature of Limerick for decades and they precede the emergence of illicit drugs on the streets of the city. However, the level and extent of the violence associated with the feuds has escalated since local families became involved in the drugs trade in the 1990s. The pervasiveness of the feuds and the effects of an illicit drug trade were encapsulated in Paddy’s comment:

Drugs have broken us. Drugs changed everything in our community. Through greed and power the whole town is torn apart.

High-profile events, such as murders and shootings, bring the attention of the national media, but it is the ongoing, relentless anti-social behaviour, violence and intimidation that impacts so negatively on people’s lives and creates fear and anxiety. Many studies point to the importance of the street (Whyte, 1943) and the pub (Willott and Griffin,

¹³The keeping of horses has been rendered very difficult, if not impossible, in urban areas since the introduction of the Control of Horses Act 1996. This Act gives local authorities the power to issue licences to horse owners under certain conditions in their ‘control areas’. The fact that some people have persisted in keeping horses despite not being able to meet the conditions stipulated has resulted in tensions between horse owners and the authorities.

¹⁴An Garda Síochána is the national police service, colloquially referred to as the Gardaí or Guards.

1996) for working-class and unemployed men. One of the less obvious effects of the feuds is the curtailment of access to public spaces for the men who recounted their experiences:

I do not go to the pub. I am paranoid about fights. (Niall)

You can't walk around the road without looking to see who is behind you; it got very bad two to four years ago. (Jason)

You cannot salute people. You cannot talk to people. You don't know who you are talking to. (Joe)

For many men, not having a direct involvement in the feud does not provide any protection, and it can be dangerous to visit other working-class areas of the city:

You cannot go into town. You cannot go into another community, even if you are neutral and not involved. It is too dangerous. If you are seen moving around, someone would think that you are dealing in drugs. (Dave)

A friend of mine was stabbed in the lungs, because his nephew was involved in the feud. (Niall)

The comment by Niall points to a particularly sinister aspect of the feuds in Limerick: it is not necessary to be involved oneself to become a target and the victim of violence. Criminal elements within the city, if unable to gain access to their intended target, will pick on a vulnerable associate; an uncle, brother, nephew, friend or even neighbour will suffice. The effects of the feud go out in concentric circles from those centrally involved and impact on whole communities in the city.

This is not confined to adults, as the men also identify the impact on children:

When kids come home from school, families do not let them play out on the roads. They could get caught up in an argument with a child from a feuding family. Next thing you would know is that you would have your windows blown in. (Colm)

What would help kids is to end the feuding and let them have their childhood.

The position of some women, who are in relationships with the drug dealers, is described:

Women are 'trophies'. The women cannot walk away or they would be killed. They want the women as trophies and to give them children. They own this one and that one. Most women live as single parents. They [the men] are scumbags. (Mark)

It was also acknowledged that some women are enticed into relationships with these men because of the promise of material gains:

The women are bought off by the men. They can pawn off [placate] the women with a new car and a holiday. (Niall)

For some the only chance of keeping yourself and your family safe is to relocate out of the area:

If your family is involved in the feud, the only way to protect the family is to get the family out. It is very hard to stop the feud. It has gone on for too long. Too many have been killed. You cannot protect them from guns. (Dylan)

This sense of hopelessness was shared by others:

You cannot lead an ordinary life. There are too many people looking for revenge. There is no end to the feuds. There are too many people dead. (Dave)

Fatherhood¹⁵

Although 10 of the 12 men interviewed for Hidden Fathers acknowledged that they had not planned to become a father, all of them expressed a desire to retain an involvement in the care and rearing of their children:

It is the one thing you can have that no one can take away. It is important to carry on the bloodstream.

¹⁵ This section is based almost exclusively on the study Hidden Fathers, which interviewed 12 men who were non-resident fathers. The men who contributed to Hidden Fathers were not given aliases in the final report and so no name appears beside their statements in this paper.

They acknowledged the positive impact becoming a father had on them, and the potential positive impact of becoming a father on desisting from offending:

Before, I was a crook. I have now stayed out of trouble. The child 'copped' me on. What is the point of going to prison and leaving her crying while I am banged up?

For a number of the men, their hopes for their children revolved around the children having more opportunities than they themselves had had:

I would like to see them going to college and getting a good job. I would hope that the kids make something of their life and do better than me. (Tom)

They recognised that being a good father meant 'being there for the child', 'taking responsibility for the child' and 'being a good role model for the child'. However, they also identified a number of obstacles to achieving their stated ambition of being the 'good parent'. These include some issues that were intrinsic to the men: they cited not taking responsibility, skills deficits and lack of knowledge and confidence. Other barriers were more structural and included inadequate accommodation and insufficient income.

Some of the men interviewed did not take responsibility for having sex and they displayed what McDowell (2003) refers to as 'macho lad masculinity' (with obvious implications for sexual health and for their relationships with women) when describing how they expressed their sexuality:

*Most men would not wear a condom, unless they were told they had to. When you are young, a condom is the last thing on your mind. You don't give a s**t.*

In some instances this lack of responsibility is extended to their engagement with their children:

If the father has a match at 7 o'clock they don't think about the child. They are much less likely to take responsibility if it is a one-night stand.

However, many of the men did take responsibility for contributing financially to their child(ren). While they did not have formal maintenance arrangements in place they bought food and clothes and paid for special occasions:¹⁶

I don't pay maintenance as such. I put money aside each week. If she needed money for the kids I would give it to her

Other men acknowledged significant deficits in their skills base when it came to caring for their child(ren), in performing household tasks and in relation to emotional competence:

When I am stressed out and the child is crying I cannot handle it. I give her money to stop her crying.

I would be too frightened to have the child overnight on my own when she is so young [1 year old]. I am no good at changing nappies. I would not bath her.

Women relatives, particularly mothers, were identified as important sources of support when it came to practical help:

My mother is a legend. When I have access, the children are dropped around to the house at 12 in the morning. I would be in bed and she would look after them.

Six of the 12 young men described having satisfactory access to their children, four experienced their access arrangements as unsatisfactory and two had no access. Five of the six fathers who had satisfactory access in place had good relationships with the mother of their child and they had arrived at an access agreement themselves, without recourse to the courts. In all four cases where the access arrangement is considered by the fathers to be unsatisfactory, relationships between the mother and father are 'hostile' and trust between the parties has broken down.

The fathers in this study also cited accommodation difficulties and financial constraints as obstacles to quality access:

¹⁶ These informal financial arrangements are seen as a way of circumventing the regulations relating to possible deductions from the one-parent family payment.

I would like to have my daughter overnight but I have no proper accommodation. You have nowhere to go, nowhere to bring the child. I walk by the lake feeding the ducks.

Many of the men did not know what their legal rights were in relation to access or joint custody and others lacked information on whether they have a right to have their names on the birth certificate and what the consequence of doing so might be.

Implications for probation practice and supporting desistance

The men who contributed to these studies articulate clearly what is important to them and they also give clues as to how to develop services that best suit their needs. What makes this clearly the business of probation practitioners is the strong correlation between what the men say about what is important to them and the key messages from research into when and how offenders desist from offending.

Desistance¹⁷ is defined in the literature as ceasing to offend or ‘going straight’ (Maruna, Porter and Carvalho, 2004); it is considered to be a stop–start process, characterised by ambivalence and vacillation, rather than a single event (McNeill and Whyte, 2007). Evidence is emerging in the research literature that desistance is linked with certain life events associated with maturational processes, such as family formation and becoming a parent or securing employment (Sampson and Laub, 1993, as cited in Gadd & Farrall, 2004; Farrall, 2002; Lipsey, 1995, as cited in McCulloch, 2005). However, the subjective meaning attached to these significant life events is also considered to be an important determinant of their usefulness in supporting desistance from offending (Farrall, 2002).

Farrall (2002) alerts us to the need for probation practice to target the social contexts in which probationers find themselves, and McCulloch (2005) sees the need for practitioners to make a ‘more active commitment towards altering these contexts as a means of supporting change’ (p. 17).

It is a challenge for probation practitioners to be alert to, and recognise, the opportunities presented by life events to promote and

¹⁷ Some of the literature makes interesting distinctions between primary desistance and secondary desistance but it is beyond the scope of this article to explore this further. See Farrall and Calverly (2006) and Healy and O’Donnell (2006).

support desistance. However, it is insufficient simply to wait for opportunities to present themselves; there is also a need to work actively to create opportunities.

As mentioned above, life events have subjective meaning for the individuals involved; practice must be underpinned by the viewpoint of the probationer. In order to commit more actively to working to alter the social contexts of the men, it is important to understand their frame of reference and world view and to bring into play their own informal theory of change (Duncan, Hubble and Miller, 1997).

Participatory Probation supervision

The men who contributed to these studies give clear direction about what is important to them and they give clues as to how to develop services that best suit their needs. They were able to recognise and articulate the obstacles and challenges they faced on a daily basis in their struggle for relevance, dignity and survival, and they consistently presented themselves as ‘knowledgeable human agents’ (Giddens, 1984, as cited in Rex, 1999) who can contribute to finding solutions that work for them.

Studies of effective probation practice point to the value of active and participatory supervisory experiences for probationers, where there is some effort at joint planning (Rex, 1999). This theme is also identified by McCulloch (2005), who advocates that Probation Officers adopt an active commitment to working collaboratively with probationers. It is imperative for Probation to link with the expertise of probationers, who can define both the difficulties they face and the solutions most likely to be effective for them.

Participatory Probation supervision plays an important role inspiring hope, building on the strengths of individuals and linking individuals to life-enhancing supports and services. There is also evidence that this approach is valued by probationers, particularly those that attribute changes in their behaviour to their experience of probation supervision (Rex, 1999).

Access to employment

The men were clear and unequivocal about the importance to them of attaining ‘decent jobs’. Getting stable employment assists in the

formation of 'adult social bonds' and is a significant factor in supporting desistance from offending (Rex, 1999; Farrall, 2002). The men also recognised that, without education or vocational credentials, with criminal histories and coming from certain locations, getting work was going to be a huge challenge for them. Some of the younger men, who had access to training through local community-based projects, were more optimistic than those in the over-23 age group, who had all but lost hope.

The Probation Service, by having regular and sustained contact with this older group, is ideally situated to facilitate access to appropriate training towards employment by forging strong partnerships with educational and training providers *and* with the private sector to provide locally based education projects linked to progression routes to apprenticeships, further education or meaningful employment.

In terms of designing locally based education projects, the observations of the men were again instructive. They advocated small groups with a respectful, relational approach to teaching and also a curriculum with more emphasis on practical skills. While this approach to service provision is resource-intensive and therefore expensive to deliver, the costs must be offset against the long-term costs to individuals, families and communities of not providing these services.

Use of leisure time

There is a strong relationship between unstructured use of time and the risk of reoffending. The men described boredom as a regular feature of their lives. While they identified a keen interest in sport, what became obvious in discussion with them was the uneven spread of sporting and recreational facilities in the neighbourhoods. This point was made very succinctly by the existence of a soccer academy in one area that did not have a soccer pitch.

Involvement in sport, and all that this entails, could act as a protective factor in desisting from offending. Moreover, sport represents an activity the men feel passionately about and it therefore provides an opportunity to the Probation Service and other services to engage positively with them. This may involve advocating for them to gain access to facilities but could also include, for example, a men's health programme delivered through the medium of sport.

Care of horses is another activity some of the men are very exercised about, and the significance of the relationship between the men and their

horses, and the consequent impact on their physical, emotional and mental health, is not to be underestimated. Horse projects, which would enable men living in urban areas to keep horses without the risk of being in breach of the Control of Horses Act 1996,¹⁸ need to be developed. The potential to create training and employment through well-designed and well-managed horse projects is enormous, and would provide an opportunity to engage positively with men around an issue they are passionate about.

Generativity

Generativity is described as ‘the ability to transcend the immediate self-related interests of the person in favour of a view of generations to come’ and is also thought to be linked to desistance from offending (Monte, 1995, as cited in Healy and O’Donnell, 2008, p. 27). There were clear statements in the narratives of the men of concern for their children. However, the men also identified significant skills deficits in meeting their ambition to be good parents, and particularly in their capacity to care for their children and to perform household tasks.

In the Hidden Fathers study, the Probation Service was the only organisation identified that specifically elicits and records information on whether or not young single men are fathers. This information, particularly in the light of its potential significance in supporting desistance, needs to inform how probation plans its work and interventions with this cohort of probationers in partnership with locally based services, community development projects and family resource projects. Family resource projects are ideally placed to be involved in providing information to, and skills training for, young fathers.

The birth of a child can be one of the ‘life events’ mentioned above and it may provide a window of opportunity to engage in a meaningful way with young fathers and, in doing so, support their efforts to establish quality relationships with their children, with the additional benefit of supporting their efforts towards desistance.

Interventions that support the development of these skills need to be delivered within a ‘gender-sensitive framework’ (Gadd and Farrell, 2004, p. 148), which recognises that, within a patriarchal society, power dynamics within the family may operate in a way that is not equally

¹⁸ www.irishstatutebook.ie/1996/en/act/pub/0037/index.html

beneficial to all parties. Care needs to be taken, in supporting young men's role in relation to children and women, that there is mutuality and that the women and children are equal beneficiaries of the relationship.

Community safety and the 'feud'

As mentioned above, Limerick city has come to national attention because of the level of criminal and inter-family feuding that has taken place in recent years, resulting in a serious level of violence, intimidation and fear in particular communities. The feuding has serious implications for community safety and there is a need, at a minimum, to enhance the visibility of public services and counter the perception that they are currently retreating from the communities by increasingly requiring local people to travel to the city centre for services.

Probation practice has traditionally linked with families by routinely visiting the homes of offenders, at both the assessment and the supervision stage. In addition to going some way to addressing the issue of community safety, there is evidence that this practice is valued by probationers, who identify the involvement of family members in the supervision process as helpful (McCulloch, 2005).

Home visits enable probation practitioners to know, at first hand, the reality of a probationer's life in their families and communities. This knowledge is an essential ingredient in planning effective interventions; it is strongly recommended that this aspect of probation practice continue and be developed as a frequent and core part of practice. By their continued presence with probationers and their families in their communities, Probation Officers will, in addition to enhancing their own practice, have the opportunity to make a strong general statement of support to communities under threat.

The feuding is thought to be related to conflict that arose between criminal gangs who were competitors in the drugs trade in the city. These gangs are family-based and have strong associations with geographical 'patches' within the city. Anecdotal evidence from probationers who are caught up in the feud also identifies hatred, family pride and loyalty, fear and retribution for perceived wrongs as significant contributing factors to the continued violence.

The criminality associated with the feuds needs, and is getting, a strong criminal justice response, with the activities of the Criminal Assets Bureau having particular support from the communities. However,

because of the embedded nature of the feud, and its ability to spread its tentacles into every aspect of community life, there a need to develop further strategies beyond the criminal justice sphere to combat it.

This work is beyond the scope of any one agency or sector and would need community/voluntary services, statutory services and the community working together with support from national government. It would also need to look to international models where effective strategies were developed and deployed.

While the men linked violence, and the pervading threat of violence, to the impact of the feud, it is worth looking at the figures for unlawful deaths in Limerick over a nine-and-a-half-year period.

From 1 January 2000 to 1 May 2009 there were 60 unlawful killings in Limerick; 14 of these were considered to be directly related to the ongoing feud in the city. Of the total of 60 killings, 12 were manslaughters and 48 were murders. Four of the 60 victims were women and the remaining 56 were male; of the cases where convictions have been recorded all the perpetrators have been male, with the exception of one woman who was convicted of manslaughter.¹⁹ Local Garda Síochána sources estimate that in 75% of these killings both the perpetrators and the victims were young men from disadvantaged areas.

As indicated above, young males from disadvantaged communities are disproportionately both the victims and the perpetrators of violence in the public arena. This pattern is also evident internationally and it is a serious public concern. Strategies across the educational, health and justice sectors need to be developed to address it as a matter of urgency.

Conclusion

The men who contributed to the two studies that form the basis for this paper described a multiplicity of problems and challenges that confront them on a daily basis. To intervene effectively in their lives it is essential both to understand the obstacles they face and to seek pathways towards social inclusion.

Understanding the lives of the men will only be achieved by listening to them and by being aware of what is going on in their families and communities. This requires forging partnerships with the men that

¹⁹This information was supplied by local Gardaí and relates to the figures from two city-centre Garda Síochána stations.

recognise their expertise and the unique contribution they can make to create the positive outcomes they aspire to and deserve. The best people to impart their story are the men themselves; they are the experts in their own lives.

The barriers to social inclusion facing these men are enormous, particularly for those in the older age group. They live in residualised housing estates that are socially and economically disadvantaged. They describe leaving school with no educational credentials; exclusion from public spaces; little access to recreational facilities; no opportunities to achieve breadwinner status and enact the provider role.

They also articulated the deep sense of disrespect they experience because of who they are and where they live, and they describe little engagement in the civic life of the city. Providing opportunities for the men to create lives that make sense for them will not be achieved by any one agency working alone. Strong partnerships across the community/voluntary and statutory sectors will need to be developed to enable this work to be done.

The Probation Service, through its regular contact with this group of men, occupies a strategically significant place. However, the Probation Service cannot act in isolation and needs both the expertise and the resources of others to create progressive educational, training and employment opportunities and pathways to social inclusion.

The challenges facing probationers are enormous and may appear overwhelming for them and the practitioners with whom they engage. Maruna et al. (2004) suggest that desistance from offending requires 'its own brand of cognitive distortion' (p. 225) when one considers the challenges and obstacles facing offenders.

Hope, in the face of such adversity, is hard to sustain. However, recognition of the capacity to change is central to Probation practice and is a feature of the day-to-day interaction between Probation Officers and probationers. It is also important that Probation acknowledges its potential to intervene positively in the lives of the people it works with and not to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the task.

However, in addressing offending, the authors contend, it is not sufficient to look only at individual behaviour and pathology, nor is it sufficient to look to the families and communities of offenders to provide solutions. The crimes that Probation Officers deal with are principally perpetrated by members of a single socio-economic group who live in a small number of easily defined geographical locations.

The structural factors that contribute to crime emanate from inequalities created within the social order; these require a much broader political and economic response.

The Probation Service occupies a unique space within the Criminal Justice System and is strategically placed to contribute to the public debate on crime. In the course of this contribution it is imperative that the voices articulated above be heard.

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