

## Juvenile Justice, Crime and Early Intervention: Key Challenges from the Limerick Context

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**Summary:** This paper outlines the findings of a three-year study on criminal gang participation, anti-social behaviour and systems of intimidation within disadvantaged communities in Limerick city. The research is considered in light of debates about motivations for criminality and the effectiveness of early intervention strategies in tackling juvenile justice issues. It is argued that despite the fact that much social, youth and Probation Service work focuses on convincing the individual of the irrationality of criminal acts, there are strong rational reasons to engage in criminal activity within contemporary Irish society. Participation in a gang can provide a socially excluded young man or woman with a form of fear-based political status that is very powerful in a society where they are otherwise viewed as 'scumbags'. Those associated with criminal gangs in Limerick city also had a very clear vision of the financial rewards linked to gang participation. Given this rational aspect of criminal behaviour, it is argued that those who advocate early intervention strategies as a means of tackling juvenile justice issues must give greater consideration to the reasons why a family enmeshed in criminality might not engage with these programmes and develop appropriate responses.

**Keywords:** Criminal gang, rationality, juvenile justice, early intervention strategies, familial engagement.

### Introduction

Limerick city has long held a negative image in the national and international media linked to the activities of feuding families/criminal gangs who operate out of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city. Limerick contains some of the most deprived electoral districts in the

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