

CRIME IN IRELAND

PAUL REYNOLDS

ROLE OF THE RTE CRIME CORRESPONDENT

I am the Crime Correspondent for RTE, a position I have held for the past 10 years.

RTE is the only twenty four-hour news service in the country. I work for Radio, Television, Online and Aertel and my deadline is the next news bulletin, which is usually at the top of the hour. I work for all radio news bulletins and programmes – such as Morning Ireland, the News at One and the This Week programme as well as radio current affairs programmes like The Pat Kenny Show, The Gerry Ryan Show and Drivetime with Mary Wilson. I also work for all television news and current affairs programmes – the One, Six-One, Nine and Late News on RTE 2 as well as Primetime.

I report on all aspects of crime and the criminal justice system; government and opposition policy, the work of the courts, the Gardai, the legal profession and the prison service. Due to the nature of broadcasting the television and radio reports I produce for the news bulletins are usually between forty seconds and two and a half minutes long. However the news and current affairs programmes usually allow more time for greater analysis and explanation.

I have also written two books, which have allowed me to further research and examine specific areas of Crime in Ireland today. ‘King Scum – the Life and Times of Tony Felloni’ is about the drugs trade, specifically the heroin business told through the life of one man and his family. ‘Sex in the City’ is about the prostitution industry and argues that far from it being a harmless profession rooted in freedom of choice it is a seedy, sinister and seriously damaging criminal enterprise.

The reality is that a large proportion of the incidents I report on happen late at night or in the early hours of the morning – violent attacks, shootings, Garda raids, murders. Most of my time is spent reporting on or trying to analyse, assess or explain some of the most awful, tragic and horrific events that can possibly occur in people’s lives. Tragically and all too often, it is not peoples’ lives but peoples’ deaths that I have to report on.

IMPACT OF MEDIA REPORTING/FEAR OF CRIME

Crime is an issue of major public interest. It is therefore covered extensively in the media. In the tabloid media in particular, it dominates and dictates the news agenda along with

Entertainment and Celebrity, Sport, Sex, Scandal and Health – most notably health scares or medical phenomena.

Crime is an area that both appals and fascinates because it directly or indirectly affects us all. Anybody who has not been a victim of crime knows someone who has been a victim at some level. Many of us make our living from crime, not just reporters and robbers, but also Gardai, lawyers, prison officers – even the Minister for Justice. There's no doubt that crime hits us all in our pockets because through our taxes we pay for the police service. An increase in certain types of crime will cost us more. A rise in shoplifting will mean prices in the shops will go up, a rise in burglary or car crime means an increase in the insurance premiums we pay.

Many people find the other important issues such as Politics, Economics or Religious Affairs boring. There is no doubt that who governs us, how much we have to live on and whether or not there is a God are hugely important but very often these issues are complicated, abstract, and difficult to understand. Crime however is a lot more simple and straightforward. Crime stories directly impact on people's lives in a way that people can understand very quickly. They also produce an immediate visceral reaction, - sympathy, empathy, smugness, and/or snobbery, a feeling or belief that this could never happen to me, or that the victim had it coming.

Crime stories grab people's attention and sell newspapers. Since the death of Veronica Guerin in 1996 there has been a dramatic increase in Crime reporting and reporters. It's not just RTE; every national newspaper has at least one reporter specialising in Crime. There is therefore a lot of crime news around, a lot of hype and sensation, fantasy as well as fact.

The media will argue that there is more reporting because there is a greater interest and demand from the public in crime stories. But along with this interest comes also the element of fear. With all this new and detailed knowledge of crime – particularly violent crime and the criminal underworld, there is now an element of fear of crime in the community. Is the increase in crime reporting contributing to this fear?

Ironically the fact is that those least likely to be victims of crime are those likely to be most afraid, i.e. the elderly. And those most likely to be victims are least afraid, i.e. young men in teens and twenties. So while old people remain hidden and frightened in their homes, young people don't care and are out and about on the so-called mean streets. And older people – even though they are most afraid – still can't get enough of what scares them. The fact is the elderly read more about crime and watch more crime programmes.

In spite of what the journalists and the politicians – usually the opposition politicians say - this fear of crime is not really justified by the statistics. The fact is that statistically we in Ireland still have a relatively low crime rate. There might be 50 murders a year here; there can be 50 a night in New York or Johannesburg.

So should we stop reporting serious crime such as murder here because there is a danger we are frightening people to death? Clearly I don't believe so. If we did I'd be out of a job. But I don't say that simply for selfish reasons of self-preservation. The fact is that we in Ireland still have a different attitude to serious crime, in particular murder, than the public or the media do say in Britain or the US.

Murder is the most serious crime that can be committed. It is the unlawful taking of human life. The media in other countries may not report all murders but we in RTE and most of the Irish media do. Why? For my own and RTE's part, and I suspect it's the same for other media here, it's because we believe human life is sacred. The taking of human life is inherently wrong and shocking and we as a media organisation have a responsibility to recognise, report and highlight that. The day we walk away, downgrade or fail to report these offences, no matter how common or uncommon they become is the day we lose part of our value system, part of our sense of moral outrage, part of our humanity.

REALITY OF CRIME TODAY/MORE VIOLENT

There has been an increase in the number of murders and incidents of manslaughter in the past ten years, but it has been a gradual increase. The figures for homicides show in 1995 there were 51 homicides, last year there were 58. Over the ten years the figure has varied between that high of 58 last year and in 2001 and a low of 36 in 1999.

If you take the longer-term view, say over the past thirty years, the increase is far more evident. There were 22 homicides in 1976. That had risen to 35 by 1981.

So I think you can say that violent crime has been increasing, steadily, not dramatically. It's really been a case of three steps up and one or two steps back depending on the year. However since the 1970's more and more people have been dying violently and arguably this generation is more violent than the previous one.

However what is perhaps more disturbing is not the increase in the figures but the increase in the level of violence associated with these crimes. It's not the number but the type of crimes today that should shock people. In the 1950's, the country would have been convulsed by a case where a farmer shot another farmer in a row over land. It would have dominated the newspapers for weeks. Today such a crime would make the front page for one day. Today it takes something far more tragic, unusual or violent to garner widespread media attention, such as the killing of a child, like the Robert Holohan case last year.

There is no doubt that crime is becoming more violent and that is something to worry about it. Tragically cases where people are attacked and beaten to death on the street for the money in their wallet and their mobile phone are quite common. Liam Mc Gowan was a young man from Kinlough in County Leitrim who had only recently started work in an Insurance company in Dublin. Four months ago he was attacked in Dublin city centre as he was on his way home from a night out. He subsequently died in hospital.

66-year-old Jimmy Louth died after he was beaten during a break in at the bakery he worked in at 3 o'clock in the morning. Three men broke in, tied him and another man up and beat him. What for? To rob a bakery? Why? What was going through the robbers' heads? There was no resistance from Jimmy or the other man? Why did they feel the need to beat him? To hurt him? To harm him to such an extent that very soon afterwards – he lost his life.

These are only two recent examples, but they are by no means the most shocking or extreme examples of the type of violent crime that's commonplace in Ireland today. And it's not just in the cities, it's commonplace throughout the country too. You may be familiar with the case of Edward Fitzmaurice, the poor man who was left tied to a chair by a gang who came to rob his shop in County Mayo. He later suffocated and died alone. The people who killed him have never been found.

REASONS WHY?

If we're going to at least try to deal with the increase in violent crime we have to ask ourselves why is it happening? If we can identify the reasons why, then we identify the sources of the problem and are somewhat towards finding a solution.

It's not rocket science and in many cases the reasons are obvious and have been for years. In my opinion they are so obvious they have now become clichés.

1. Population increase...There is more crime in areas where more people live, particularly in the cities and expanding towns. The opposite is also true. There has been a drop in serious crime in areas of declining population. Over the last 50 years for example in the West and North West there has been a drop in the number of killings. This is contrary to the national pattern.
2. Poverty...It's a well-documented fact that poor people are more likely to end up in trouble with the law and find themselves before the courts and locked in jail. According to a Department of Justice Study on the inmates in Mountjoy Jail (conducted by criminologist Paul O'Mahony) the vast majority of prisoners come from a background and family life of considerable socio-economic and cultural deprivation. 15% of their fathers had also been in prison. Rich people rarely end up in jail or end up in jail for long. In general white-collar criminals, if they do appear before the courts, get off with fines, community service or suspended sentences. I'm not saying that rich people should be locked up when they get caught doing something wrong because prison is not always the best form of punishment but the fact is that poverty is a major cause of crime.
3. Marginalisation/Disadvantage...Again it's not just people from particular parts of the country, such as the cities and towns, but those from particular parts of our cities and towns who are more likely to become involved in crime. Again to quote the same study, the majority of people locked up in Mountjoy jail – 56% "came from six very similarly deprived communities in Dublin." People living in disadvantaged areas with high levels of unemployment, social housing, and few

educational or recreational facilities are more likely to be involved in crime. Who built, indeed who continues to build these areas – vast tracts of concrete blocks with no schools, soccer pitches, transport links or community services? Who allows them to continue to be built? Why do we continue to build them when we all know the harm that these environments can do and how hard it is for people to fight against them? Is this a case of profit before people?

4. Education...Again a key factor. Too many children are leaving our educational system today without being able to read and write. What are they supposed to do if they haven't got the basic tools of survival? In fact for many children the schools provide a refuge for them from the difficulties they experience living in dysfunctional homes in problem areas. It's the only form of routine, security and discipline they know. For some it's the place where they are fed and cleaned, given breakfast and lunch and allowed to have a shower. But our schools close down at 3.00pm and apart from hosting homework clubs, games and a few community meetings; the facilities there are by and large idle until 9.00am the next morning. What a waste of a resource! The latest HSE/Department of Health Figures show that 495 children today are homeless because of emotional or behavioural difficulties, the inability of their parents to cope or the abuse of drink and drugs. Most are in their mid to late teens, 22 of them are under 12! Is it beyond our initiative to use at least some of our schools as night time shelters to feed, clothe and care for kids who have nowhere else to go at night and who tonight will wander the streets because there's nowhere else for them?
5. Alcohol abuse....It's something we all know about and have known about for years. A Garda report into the causes of crime found that eighty per cent of all crimes are rooted in drink. We see its effects on our streets every night of the week. The main street in many towns and cities in Ireland from midnight to 5.00am at the weekends is more akin to something out of the Michael Jackson video Thriller – without the dancing. Young (and some old) men and women shambling along drunk as monkeys, shouting, roaring, weaving out in front of cars, falling down, getting sick, urinating in doorways, squabbling and fighting amongst themselves, with others and with the Gardai, – with many sustaining serious injuries and ending up in either a hospital or a morgue. We've all seen the pictures of the A and E's around the country and the major contributor that alcohol abuse is to the blockages and the problem of patients on trolleys in Casualty departments. It's a clear illustration of one aspect of the changing nature of Irish crime. With the onset of the Celtic Tiger and the fact that people have more money to spend on drink, public order offences have in recent years dramatically increased.
6. Drugs...This is perhaps the most worrying of the major contributors to Crime in Ireland today, not just because of the damage it does to the individuals, their families and their communities and the craving addiction they need to feed which leads them to commit some horrific crimes, but also because of the associated increase in the availability of guns which has made it easier for violent criminals to get hold of them. There has been a drug problem in this country since the early 1970's and indeed heroin and the catastrophic effects it has on individuals and society became very clear in Dublin in the 1980's. But there are a number of factors today that we as a society should really be worried about;

- a. The amount of drugs that are coming into Ireland. The Health Research Board estimates it takes over E5m worth a day to supply the country's recreational users and addicts.
- b. The sheer scale of the drugs business – the fact that the seizures are now in the millions and tens of million worth; amounts in the tens and hundreds of thousands now barely register. In 1996 Tony Felloni was sent to jail for 20 years after he was caught with sixty thousand Euro worth of heroin. Today that would make him almost a recreational user – he'd probably get a suspended sentence.
- c. The amount of money that criminals can make from drug dealing is staggering. Criminal Cartels can buy fifty kilos of heroin for just over a million Euro. It's worth ten million Euro on the streets – a ten fold profit, made very quickly and all in cash
- d. There are now a greater variety of illicit drugs for sale. Once it was cannabis, then LSD and Heroin became available. Now the number one drug of choice for dealer and gangland criminal is cocaine. Cocaine once the preserve of the upper classes, the wealthy who could afford it, is now being sold across the social classes. It makes perfect business sense for the drug dealer, the drug is more marketable and it doesn't carry with it the connotations or stigma of heroin. For all intents and purposes it is a cleaner more sophisticated drug. It is however also far more difficult to treat because methadone maintenance does not work with cocaine addicts and consequently it is far more addictive. Ireland has the second highest number of cocaine addicts between the ages of 18 and 24 in the European Union.

Guns

- e. With millions to be made its not surprising that criminals, particularly those involved in the drug trade, arm themselves to the teeth to protect their empires. The drug trade has provided a conduit for the arms trade as the guns are smuggled in with the consignments. The drug trade has provided a market for the arms dealer because the drug dealers need guns. And the drug trade has not only increased the access to, the availability of and the amount of guns on the streets, it has also increased the variety and lethal capacity of these weapons. Once upon a time criminals used only sawn off shotguns. They still do, but now they also use assault rifles and military weapons, Uzi sub machine guns and pistols. It is not an exaggeration to say the criminals are better armed that the Gardai and the Army. The favoured weapon among Dublin criminals at the moment is the Glock semi-automatic pistol, a weapon which the Gardai have sought to use and is only issued to a select few units such as the Emergency Response Unit.
- f. With the increase in and increasing use of firearms, particularly by young men high on Cocaine, comes also a consequent disregard for human life. Well-armed criminals with massive drug empires to protect have no qualms about shooting and killing people who get in their way. The variety and quantity of drugs these young people use, along with perhaps the way we as a society have ultimately failed these people, has dulled their consciences and anaesthetised their emotions as well as their brains. They have become dehumanised, at least for the short time it takes them to raise a gun, point it at another person's head and blow their brains out.

Human life is cheapened and no longer sacred. We as a society are sullied and the poorer for it.

Gangland

- g. Criminal gangs don't so much invade as pervade. Individuals form loose alliances, which stick for the purpose of whatever drug deal or other criminal enterprise, such as armed robbery, they are involved in. These gangs establish territories, carve out turf and protect their markets through lethal force. Where shows of strength are needed or perceived slights arise, there was a time when criminals would resort to the fist or the knife. Now they go straight for the gun. That is the situation today in the ongoing drug feuds in Crumlin, Coolock and Limerick. There is of course however no loyalty in this business. There is no room for sentiment. Friends are just as ruthlessly, callously and quickly wiped out, as enemies.
- h. Well armed, wealthy drug dealing criminals are a focus of fear for law abiding and decent people not just in society in general but in particular in the disadvantaged and marginalised areas in which they operate. But they are also an attraction for the young, ignored, abused, uneducated person in that community who feels he has nothing else going for him. A young man sees a gangster with the gun, the drugs, the money, the jewellery, the tattoos and the girls. He's not looking at a gangster rap music video. He's not looking at Snoop Doggie Dog from Death Row Records in Los Angeles. He's looking at Joey, his neighbour or brother's friend from down the road, or someone he met in Trinity House, the juvenile detention centre, or someone he shared a cell with in St Patrick's Institution. He's thinking 'I'll have a piece of that' and he goes for it.
- i. Gangland Crime has certainly become a tangible, recognisable and identifiable criminal and societal phenomenon in Ireland. There were always gangs of armed robbers but Irish Crime in the past always had its 'Mr Bigs.' 'The General' Martin Cahill, 'Factory John' John Gilligan, 'The Coach' John Traynor, 'King Scum' Tony Felloni. But the era of the 'Mr Big' is over. Today it's all about the gang; drugs, murder, armed robbery, tiger kidnapping. The individuals involved didn't, unlike those in the past, serve their time. They have just come straight in at the top as drug users, dealers and gunmen. They are younger, more volatile and unstable because many of them also use the drugs they sell and kill or die for. They are extremely violent and more dangerous because they have easy access to firearms and have no compunction about shooting people dead.

Juvenile Crime

- j. The change is very clear to anyone who has been watching the juvenile criminal justice system. Children are now committing more serious crime and coming before the Children's Court charged with more serious offences. They no longer just mitch from school, shoplift or even joyride. Now along with stealing and crashing high-powered cars, armed robbery, theft to order, drug dealing, and violent assault are the staples of the Children's court. More children are also coming before the adult

Circuit and Central Criminal Courts because they are committing far more serious crimes such as rape and murder, crimes which are beyond the jurisdiction of the Children's Court

- k. Two of the three men who shot a uniformed Sergeant in the hand and chest at point blank range in Dublin in late September were only 16 years of age. Like something out of the film 'Boys in da Hood' or other such Hollywood gangster rap movies, they had been driving around in the early hours of the morning in a high-powered car with blacked out windows. They had a single barrelled sawn off shotgun which they had used earlier to shoot into a house. They came back to that house at six o'clock that morning and when Sgt Mark Clarke took off his hat and approached the car, they rolled down the driver's electronic window, pushed the gun out and fired at him. Luckily he turned sideways and the hat under his arm took some of the force of the blast. He's lucky to be alive. They didn't care that he was a Garda. They were high on Cocaine. One of the 16 year olds had to be taken to hospital after he was arrested because he had overdosed.
- l. Tragically it is no longer unusual to turn on the radio and hear that a man has been shot dead in a drug or gangland killing in Dublin, Waterford, Limerick, Cork or even Clare. One of the best-known and longest established criminal gangs in the country is based in West Clare. People on crutches have been murdered up the mountains; young men have been dumped in canals or buried in forests. They have been tortured, stabbed, dismembered, disposed of – never to be heard of again – missing, presumed dead. Gangland murder is now a fact of Irish life.
- m. On the international stage Irish Criminals are also playing their part. Ex pat criminals based in the UK, Holland and Spain for example have formed alliances with Turkish Heroin wholesalers in London, South American Cocaine suppliers and Moroccan cannabis dealers in Spain. They are as astute and as ruthless as the rest of their criminal counterparts. They have reaped the ill-gotten gains but many too have paid the price for their involvement with their lives. The chopped up body of 38-year-old drug dealer Michael 'Dancer' Aherne from Cork was found in a fridge in an apartment on the Algarve. The infamous and psychopathically violent Westies, Stephen Sugg and Shane Coates, West Dublin drug dealers who terrorised many people in Whitestown, Hartstown and Blanchardstown were murdered and buried under concrete in an industrial estate on the Costa Blanca.

It's all a pretty bleak and depressing picture or is it? The reality is the situation we find ourselves in today is, I believe, really one of our own making. The fact is that every gangland killing is a testament to our failure as individuals and as a society. It's a failure to care for our fellow citizens; a failure to give them the same chances that we got ourselves; a failure to give them the same reasons as we had for not ending up in their situation in life.

LIVE BY THE SWORD. DIE BY THE SWORD

There is a theory that abounds at the moment and it goes along the lines of "if you live by the sword you'll die by the sword." People might say these people are killing each other so let them at it. There will be less of them for us to worry about, they're all scumbags, drug

dealers and killers anyway so let them off to shoot, wound, mutilate, torture and kill each other. Why should we worry - you live by the sword, you die by the sword.

Wrong

Wrong for many reasons – but here's two

1. Because if you subscribe to that theory then you go on to create monsters which at some stage you will no longer be able to control. You will inculcate in these people a sense of invincibility to go along with the sense of invulnerability they already feel they have. They are young, fit, fast, strong, active and in many cases full of drugs. They are very volatile, unstable and violent. They have no problem killing each other and if you allow them to continue to do so, it won't be long before they start killing you and people like you. They won't distinguish. They will kill anyone that gets in their way. At the moment it is rival drug dealers, but next it could be the Garda who arrests them, the solicitor or barrister who prosecutes them, the judge who locks them up, the prison officer who wants to keep them locked up. One of these could be your father, mother, brother, sister, friend, lover or even you. They may even want to kill the journalist who writes about them. They already did it once before in 1996 when they shot Veronica Guerin dead. Innocent people – even children can get caught in the crossfire.

In many ways this first reason is almost a selfish reason, one of self-preservation. Stop them, get them, because if you don't they'll get you and yours. It's legitimate, perhaps not very moral or altruistic, practical, but in reality short-term thinking.

The second reason however is I believe far more valid and forward thinking

2. These gangland killers and drug dealers, they are not aliens. They didn't come down from another planet. They are people, young men and women who a few years ago before the drugs and the insanity kicked in, looked just like you and me. A few years before that they were adorable little baby boys and girls who cried and laughed and wet their nappies and drank their bottles just like you and I did. However when they fell, nobody picked them up and held them. When they laughed nobody cared. When they cut their knees no one gave them a plaster. They didn't always get a bottle when they cried, more than likely they got a wallop, that's if Daddy and Mammy were around and not out drinking, taking drugs or locked up in prison. And by and large they didn't have anyone to get them up in the morning, wash them, ensure they had clean clothes, get them to school, make sure they stayed there and learned, and check their homework when they came home. They certainly didn't have anyone to take them to Irish dancing, music or swimming classes after school and pay for an ice cream or a bar of chocolate for them on the way home

In short these people did not get the same love, care, or social and educational opportunities that all of us here did. They didn't get the same chance. They were marginalised and criminalised. They found their sense of belief, belonging, worth,

livelihood and leisure in the gang. And guns, drugs and violence are all part of that way of life.

How do you tackle that? I'm no expert but it seems to me that if you radically interfere you can make a difference. The cliché, tackle crime by tackling the causes of crime is a truism. It seems to me that if you tackle the problems of poverty, disadvantage, and marginalisation and in particular the lack of education and opportunity, you could go a long way towards putting people like me out of a job.