

DEMANDING MONEY WITH MENACE

**drug-related intimidation
and community violence
in Ireland**

Dr. Johnny Connolly and Lisa Buckley

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Disclaimer: the views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Drugs Policy Unit of the Department of Health and Children or the Health Research Board.

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Introduction

This report presents the findings of research on drug-related intimidation and community violence in a number of Local and Regional Drugs Task Force areas throughout Ireland. The research was a joint collaboration between Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign and the Health Research Board (HRB). Drug-related intimidation was identified as a key issue by local communities and Drugs Task Forces and identifying effective responses is one of Citywide's key policy objectives. The research consisted of an audit of 140 incidents of intimidation reported to projects in thirteen Drugs Task Forces areas, (eleven Local and two Regional). The audit took place between April 2014 and December 2015. Focus groups were also conducted with eight Local Drugs Task Forces and five Regional Task Forces (approximately 150 people from various local projects attended these meetings). Further focus groups were conducted with Travellers, former prisoners, Youth Workers and Family Support Workers and a Community Safety Forum in Dublin.

The objectives of the research were:

- To access the hidden experience of intimidation in a way that was sensitive and confidential;
- To highlight the situation to policy makers and the wider public
- To assist communities in developing locally-based, effective and sustainable responses.

Previous Research in Ireland

Violence and the Drug Trade

It is popularly accepted that there is a link between some forms of illicit drug use and crime. Within the research literature this link is generally described using three explanatory categories. Firstly, a psycho-pharmacological link between drugs and crime arises as a result of the effect of the drugs themselves on the consumer, for example the link between alcohol and violence is well established¹. Secondly, economic-compulsive crimes are committed by dependent drug users as they need to generate income from crimes such as robbery and burglary, low-level drug-dealing and from crimes such as prostitution to support their drug habit. Thirdly, the systemic dimension of drug-related crime results from the activities associated with the illegal drug market. Systemic types of crime surrounding drug distribution include, for example, fights over organisational and territorial issues and disputes over transactions or debt collection².

The emergence of the heroin trade in Dublin in the late 1970's and early 1980's was facilitated at the time by the diversification of professional criminals into drug dealing³. The threat of violence and the fear and intimidation that result from it have been described as, 'Probably some of the worst and least recognised effects of large-scale illicit drug use'⁴. Tony Gregory, a prominent anti-drugs activist and politician in the north-inner city at the time referred to the levels of fear during the initial stages of the heroin problem:

*'I do know that in the initial stages of the heroin thing the most prevalent reaction was one of fear. The people who were involved were known to be 'heavies'. And people were afraid they'd be burnt out of their flats. They were afraid for their kids' sake.'*⁵

¹ Ireland. Department of Health. (2012) Steering Group Report on a National substance misuse strategy. Department of Health, Dublin

² The idea of 'systemic' violence relates to an extremely influential US study about crack markets in the 1980's there: Goldstein P (1985) 'The drugs/violence nexus: a tripartite conceptual framework.' Journal of Drug Issues. 15: 493–506. See also: Connolly J (2006a) Drugs and crime in Ireland. HRB Overview Series 3. Dublin: Health Research Board.

³ Flynn S and Yeates P (1985) 'Smack': the criminal drugs racket in Ireland. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan. See also Connolly J and Percy A (2015) Illicit drugs, criminal justice and harm reduction: getting the balance right. In the Routledge Handbook of Irish Criminology. Edited by Deirdre Healy, Claire Hamilton, Yvonne Daly and Michelle Butler. London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.

⁴ Gilligan R (2011) Tony Gregory. Dublin: O'Brien Press.

⁵ (Quoted in Gilligan 2011:122)

A study on homicides in Ireland suggested that between 1992 and 1996 fifteen homicides were connected to disputes about control of the supply of illicit drugs⁶. In more recent years, there appears to have been at least this many drug-related homicides occurring on an annual basis. Campbell (2010), comparing the percentage of murders and manslaughters in Ireland, England and Wales found that, ‘Proportionally speaking, between twice and five times as many homicides involving guns occur in Ireland’⁷. The author highlighted the fact that drugs and guns were often imported together and the view of the Customs Service that the rise in the detection and seizure of illicit firearms being imported was linked to the increased level of violence involved in drug trafficking and smuggling.

Intimidation of Families and Communities

Drug-related murders, killings and their coverage in the media can have a profound effect on general feelings of public safety and they can instil in the general public a sense that the problem is out of hand⁸. The link between levels of systemic violence, between the shooting dead of a rival drug dealer and the headlines it captures as well as the impact of such drug-related violence on the local communities in which drug dealers live and operate is difficult to establish. It is under-researched and tends not to capture the headlines.

Although there is very little research on the illicit drug trade in Ireland, studies have identified increasing levels of violence directed not just at individuals involved in the drug trade, whether users or dealers, but also at their family members. Research has highlighted the corrosive impact such violence, fear and intimidation is having on the broader communities in which drug markets are typically located.

A study conducted in the north Dublin inner city was commissioned by the Local Drugs Task Force⁹. This involved a door-to-door survey of local residents’ concerns about drug dealing, policing and anti-drugs activity in the community. One of the most significant findings of this study was that it highlighted the levels of fear that existed locally about drug dealers and how this impacted on local residents’ willingness to engage with local policing structures such as the Community Policing Forum (CPF) recently established there¹⁰.

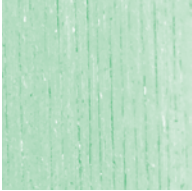
⁶ Dooley E (2001) Homicide in Ireland 1992–1996. Dublin: Stationery Office.

⁷ Campbell L (2010) Responding to gun crime in Ireland. *British Journal of Criminology*, 50(3):(p415).

⁸ O’Connell M (2002) The portrayal of crime in the media – does it matter? In O’Mahony P (ed.) *Criminal justice in Ireland*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.

⁹ Connolly J (2003) *Drugs, Crime and Community – Monitoring Quality of Life in the North Dublin Inner City*. North Inner City Local Drugs Task Force.

¹⁰ Connolly J (2002) *Community policing and drugs in Dublin: The North Inner City Community Policing Forum*. Dublin: North Inner City Drugs Task Force.



A 2006 research report by the National Advisory Committee on Drugs reported that many of the research respondents felt vulnerable in their own neighbourhoods and, in addition, that life for drug users had become more dangerous since the mid-1990's, as penalties imposed by drug dealers for perceived transgressions had become more severe¹¹. The study found that people also avoided community activities due to fear of exposure and possible suspicion of working with the institutions of the state. Many elderly people avoided the streets and shops at night, leading to an atmosphere where, in many disadvantaged communities, the authors concluded, there were, 'People...living in a barricaded society, afraid to come out at night' (p11). The study of three communities' experiences of the changes in the drug situation and responses to it between 1996 and 2004 found that, during the later phase of the study there was an increase in the number of murders associated with drug-dealing.

In 2009, the National Family Support Network produced a research report that investigated the experience of families targeted by dealers to pay the debts of their family members who are using drugs¹². The research found that demands for debt repayment placed huge pressure on the families to come up with the money as quickly as possible and family members often went to great lengths to gather the money to pay off the debt. Families would often know the dealer by reputation and become unwilling to stand up to the dealer or report the intimidation to police. The research showed that nearly all participating family support services indicated that their clients – mostly family members of drug users – had experienced debt-related intimidation ranging from verbal threats to physical violence to damage to homes or other property. Many affected families survived on very low incomes and were given short periods to repay debts by using salaries and wages, borrowing money from families, friends, banks, credit unions or other money lenders. Some families were forced to re-mortgage their homes. Drug users themselves often resorted to criminal activity to repay debts to dealers, such as drug-dealing or transporting and storing drugs, performing acts of violence on behalf of sellers and engaging in sex work.

A study carried out in Limerick in relation to the violent feuds of 2003 to 2007 describes how 'the code of the street' leads to certain people being identified in an area as people to be feared, thus ensuring that any intimidation or acts of violence by them will not be reported¹³. This important study incorporates the findings of a three-year ethnographic study of organised crime, most of it family-based, drug-related intimidation and the resulting local fear in the city.

¹¹ Loughran H and McCann ME (2006) A community drugs study: developing community indicators for problem drug use. Dublin: Stationery Office.

¹² O'Leary M (2009) Intimidation of families. Dublin: Family Support Network. Many of the questions asked in the current research follow on from this study.

¹³ Hourigan, N., Ed. (2011). Understanding Limerick: social exclusion and change. Cork: Cork University Press.

The study was conducted between 2007 and 2010 and consisted of 221 interviews with local residents, those on the fringes of criminal gangs, community leaders, Gardai and one hundred hours of participation observation (one third of which was conducted at night). The ultimate effect of community violence and intimidation was that it reduced community residents to a state of perpetual fear and anxiety. The following quote from one resident gives an indication of the subservient state community violence and intimidation can impose on local people:

'You know what they really want is for you to be down on yourself so that you don't believe you can have any other life. They want you to keep your head down and just put up with it, even if there are gunshots comin' in your window and you're lyin' on the floor with your kids...What they want is for you to keep your head down and just shut the fuck up and accept that that's your life, full stop.' (p85)

In 2013, Safer Blanchardstown produced a report *Melting the Iceberg of Fear*, based on research carried out on drug debt intimidation in the local area¹⁴. The report found that drug-related intimidation should be viewed as part of a continuum of behaviour, from mild to severe to ruthless, that develops and grows in a community and needs to be tackled in a systematic and co-ordinated way. The report identifies how even the milder levels of intimidation can have negative impacts on the community through the spreading of fear, feelings of being helpless and isolated and reduced quality of life. The report also describes how, in the absence of appropriate interventions, children can progress from a lower order of intimidatory behaviour to involvement in more serious activities, with an escalating impact on the community.

In 2014 the NACDA published the first national study of *Illicit Drug Markets in Ireland*¹⁵. This exploratory study was conducted over a 36 month period and included a cross-section of four local drug markets: two urban, one suburban and one rural drug market. The study included interviews with both former and active drug users and street sellers as well as individuals serving prison sentences of more than seven years for drug supply, interviews with experienced members of dedicated Garda Drug Units in the four study sites and with senior members of the Garda National Drugs Unit and a street survey of 816 local residents and business people.

The study found that open drug markets, in particular, have an ongoing low level impact on communities as they engender general chaos and intimidation of community members. This leads residents to restrict their movements and activities accordingly, curtailing their freedom of movement and leading to a loss of communal space which can contribute to a further deterioration in quality of

¹⁴ Jennings P (2013) *Melting the iceberg of fear*. Drug-related intimidation in Blanchardstown. Blanchardstown: Safer Blanchardstown.

¹⁵ Connolly J and Donovan A (2014) *Illicit drug markets in Ireland*. National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol.

life. All four sites reported an increase in violence associated with the drug trade – violence that was increasingly visible in public in the form of fights or damage to property. Violence in all four markets was largely related to unpaid debts, although territorial disputes did occasionally emerge in less ordered drug markets.

Drug debts were acquired through people consuming their own supply or as a result of Garda seizures. Where Gardaí seized drugs, debts remained outstanding and still had to be paid. The street survey of residents found that one of the major consequences of drug-related violence and intimidation is that it can act as a major disincentive to taking action and/or engaging with state agencies in responding to such problems. When asked whether they would report drug-related information to the Gardaí and, if not, why not, the highest number of respondents (41.4%) highlighted their fear of reprisal from those involved in the drug trade. In National Crime Victimization Surveys, such as those conducted by the Central Statistics Office, fear of reprisal is seldom ever reported as a significant reason for people not reporting crimes to the Garda Síochána¹⁶. The fear and intimidation that can be generated locally as a consequence of illicit drug dealing reveals the insidious and disproportionate impact that crime can have on specific locations where drug markets develop. The following imprisoned drug dealer felt that, although violence has always been associated with the illicit trade in drugs, the debt-related intimidation of family members of those who owed money to drug-dealers was relatively recent.

‘Violence, it was, it was always in it. It was part and parcel of like you get stigmatised, you know, drugs – with drugs comes violence and it is true. With drugs comes violence but I was never violent. I was always sympathetic to those who went off them, always. I would never go around as they do now fucking like tapping on doors, looking for the aul’ fella, looking for the fathers or mothers to pay but I was never like that. I would write it off – more times out of 10 like if I got out of pocket from doing it, but I would never use violence.’ Prison Interview

¹⁶ Central Statistics Office (2009) *Quarterly National Household Survey: Unemployment*. Available at: www.cso.ie See also Connolly J (2003) *Drugs, Crime and Community in Dublin: Monitoring Quality of Life in the North Inner City*. Dublin North Inner City Drugs Task Force.

Background to the Current Research

The issue of drug-related intimidation clearly remains a pressing issue for many communities in Ireland. It has also been highlighted as a key issue in the National Drugs Strategy 2009-2016 (NDS). Action 5 of the NDS aims, 'To develop a framework to provide an appropriate response to the issue of drug related intimidation in the community' (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs 2009).

In 2011, Citywide hosted a seminar to discuss the issue of drug related intimidation in local communities, and the issue was followed up as part of a wide ranging national consultation process that informed the 2012 Citywide Policy Document, *The Drugs Crisis in Ireland: A New Agenda for Action*. This document identified drug-related intimidation as a core issue for Citywide, but also as an issue that was largely hidden due to the fear of reporting amongst those who experience intimidation.

A further seminar to look at potential responses took place in 2013, involving a wide range of community and voluntary sector organisations, including Community Drug Projects, Drugs Task Forces, and Community Policing and Safety Forums. At this seminar, Dr Johnny Connolly proposed a research audit that would seek to capture the extent and nature of intimidation in Drug Task Force areas across the country in a way that was sensitive and confidential.

The audit was designed by the HRB and Citywide with the assistance of the North Inner City Local Drugs Task Force and implemented in partnership with the participating drugs Task Forces and the local projects linked to them during the 2014 to 2015 period. The goal of the research audit was to gather information indirectly from a hard to reach population, namely people in communities who have experienced drug-related intimidation, including drug users and their family members and to highlight the extent of the problem in communities with the ultimate objective of informing the development of effective and sustainable responses.

Research Methods

The Audit

The aim of the audit was to capture information about intimidation that was already being reported to drug and other community services but that was not being routinely recorded. Many community workers deal regularly with issues of drug-related intimidation and violence, where incidents can last for months or even years. Such issues can take up significant time, energy and resources and can sometimes be dangerous for the workers involved. This activity and these incidents often go unrecorded, and generally will not appear in official records as victims do not wish to report it due to fear of reprisal from the offender. The audit seeks to capture this information in a confidential and anonymous way and in such a way that was not too onerous for the project workers. The audit incorporated 16 questions on both sides of a page that mostly involved ticking a box from a list of options.

The questions were informed by the existing research referred to above. The questions were also based on a focus group discussion of intimidation conducted in the north Dublin inner city attended by people from local drug projects and services. The audit booklet was developed and designed by the lead author as well as staff from Citywide and Miriam Coffey from Dublin North Inner City Local Drugs Task Force and then piloted in a number of projects in the south inner city of Dublin.

The audit was presented to the participating Task Forces and various projects linked to them at meetings in Task Force areas throughout the country. Audit booklets were completed by project workers and returned to Citywide between April 2014 and December 2015. The anonymised data was then entered into a corresponding audit on Survey Monkey and the hard copies of the audit were stored securely. A number of Task Force groups were revisited and presented with the data from their area in order for them to add a qualitative dimension to the study by discussing the local findings in more depth.



Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with thirteen drugs task forces (nine Local and four Regional) between March 2014 and June 2015. At these focus groups, the audit was explained and the local experience of intimidation was discussed. Audit booklets were also distributed to projects at these meetings. Focus groups on intimidation and community violence were also conducted with key interest groups including Travellers, former prisoners, youth workers, a Community Safety Forum and family support workers.

Research Limitations

The data presented in the audit is based on reports from project workers. For reasons of confidentiality and due to the sensitive nature of the issues, it was decided that it would not be appropriate to interview those directly affected by intimidation. For many victims, reporting incidents of intimidation is challenging enough and it was felt by the research team and confirmed by the findings of the pilot that nothing should be done to discourage reporting. Consequently, it was decided to confine the audit to information already presented to projects. The audit presents second-hand information. Some audit forms might not have been completed fully due to the informal nature of the way in which intimidation can be reported. The objective however was to obtain as much basic data as possible that could provide a useful picture that could then be followed up through focus group discussions and, in the future, more in-depth qualitative research.

It is also acknowledged that many community projects have endured significant cuts in resources in recent years and it was agreed that the completion of the audit form should not be too onerous for the project worker completing it.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the research team is confident that the audit provides a unique insight into a complex and extremely serious issue affecting many families and communities in Irish society, using an original methodology and approach, one that is easy to repeat in the future.



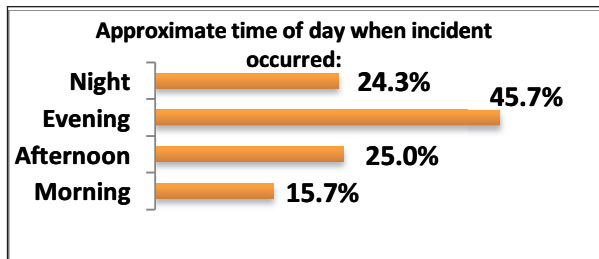
Key Findings

The key findings from the audit are presented below. The findings from the data are then contextualised with information from the various focus groups. The topics covered include the following:

1. Time of day when incidents occurred
2. Profile of victims
3. Nature of incidents
4. Profile of those who reported the incident
5. Reported reasons behind the incident
6. If involving a drug-debt, the amount of money involved
7. Gender and age of those carrying out the incident
8. Whether incident involved individual offenders or groups
9. The action taken by the victim/family in response to the incident
10. Whether they reported it and, if so, to whom
11. Reasons for not reporting incidents to An Garda Síochána
12. Consequences of the incident – Health/wellbeing; Home and family; Finance; Employment; Social consequences.

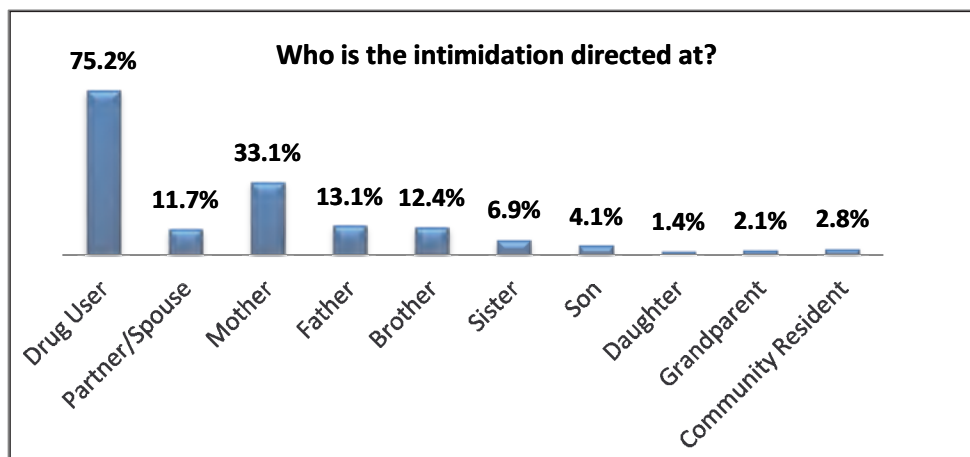
It should be noted that for many of the questions, multiple answers were permitted so percentages will exceed 100% in some cases.

Time of day when incidents occurred



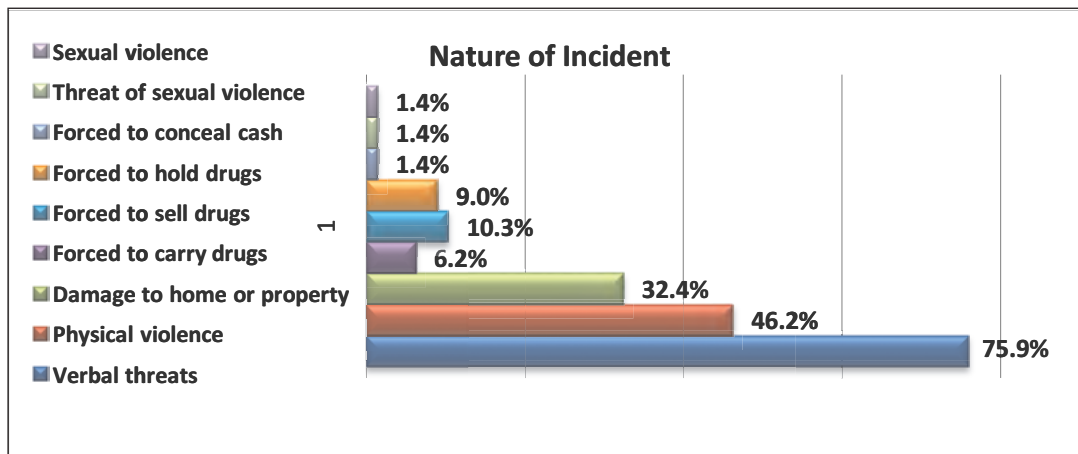
Most incidents of intimidation were reported as taking place in the evening. While for many communities traditionally most general public disorder and intimidation took place at night time after dark, intimidation now does not need a particular schedule as the use of social media makes targets more accessible. Threats and harassment can take place throughout the day and night by means of mobile phones and social media.

Profile of victims



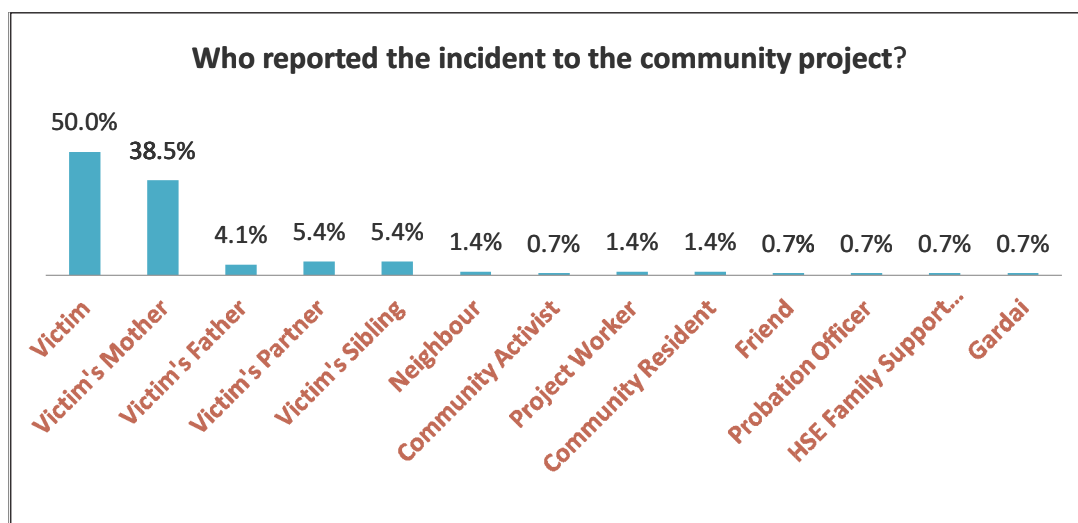
Drug users, or those in debt, are the primary targets for intimidation, threats and violence. Mothers are the second most likely target and also the most likely family member to pay the debt. Focus group discussions suggest that intimidation of family members can be a way to flush drug users out and to put pressure on them to pay the debt. In addition, victims were sometimes also perpetrators as they engaged in harassment and violence against their own family members to coerce money from them to pay drug debts.

Nature of incidents



Seventy-six percent of threats included a verbal threat but a substantial number involved physical violence (46%) and damage to the family home or property (32%). There is often an escalation of violence from verbal threats to property damage, culminating in physical attacks on drug users and/or their family members. Repeated incidents can go on for months in a campaign of escalating terror that seeks to extort payment from victims. It is likely that there is an under-reporting of sexual violence due to the nature of the audit and the way the data was gathered. Reports from focus groups suggest that females are often coerced into performing sexual acts to pay off drug debts. Also, it was widely reported in focus groups that young people are getting into huge debt over weed and then coerced into ‘working the debt off’ by engaging in illegal activities such as holding or selling drugs, money or weapons and/ or transporting drugs. This is also reflected in the data above. In one Task Force area, it was reported that dependent drug users were being intimidated into giving their prescriptions to dealers as part of their payment.

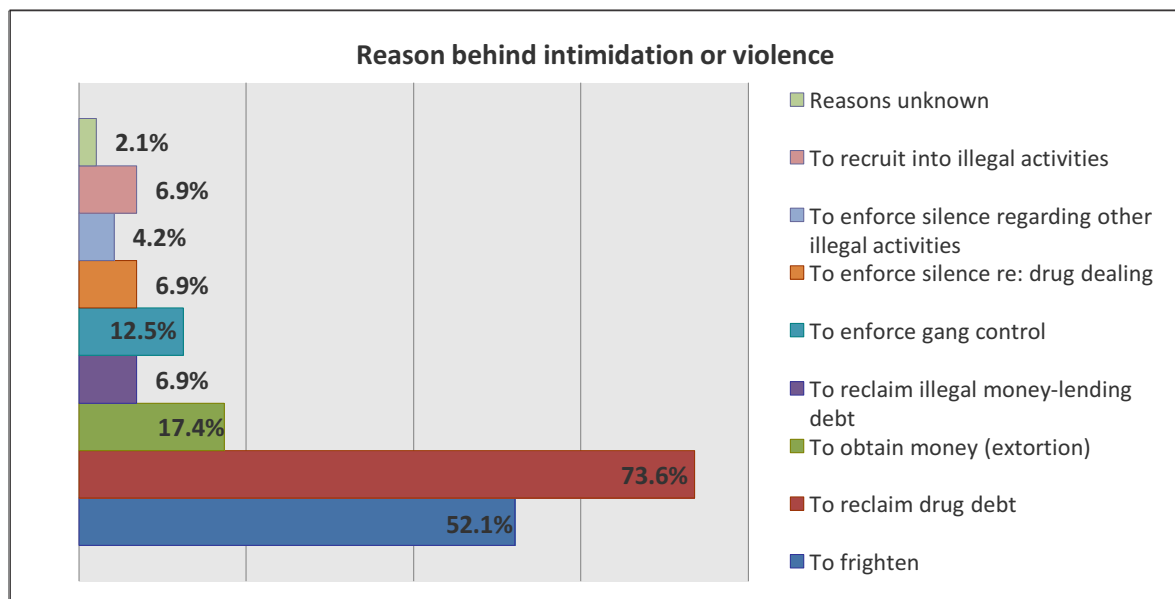
Profile of those who reported the incident



Profile of those who reported the incident

The drug user (50%), and his or her mother (38%), who are also the primary victims of intimidation and violence, are the most likely to report incidents of the threat or use of violence. Fathers and siblings are far less likely to report and seek support. It was reported that dealers would often wait at the social welfare or post office to forcibly take money from mothers and fathers whose children have drug debts. Mothers often do not tell fathers that they are paying their child's drug debt due to fear that fathers will attempt to sort out the situation through violence.

Reported reasons behind the incident



The majority of intimidation and violence directed at users, their families, and the general community, was to ensure the collection of drug related debt (74%). In addition, the use of threats and intimidation to frighten and subdue a community so as to enforce gang control (12%) and facilitate the operation of a drug market and other crime was very prevalent from the audit and focus group discussions.

The discussion with former prisoners revealed the widespread acceptance or 'ground rules' about drugs, debt repayment and violence. As one person stated: *'everyone has to pay the piper'. The dealer has drugs on credit and the user takes drugs on credit. They have to beat them to show everyone the consequences. The debt has to be paid and they have to have fear and respect or nobody will pay; they have to be cold-hearted to give a warning to others.'* This also extended to families as the intimidation of families is a way of flushing the drug user out if they are in hiding and making an example of them. As one former prisoner put it: *'It is not personal, its business.'*

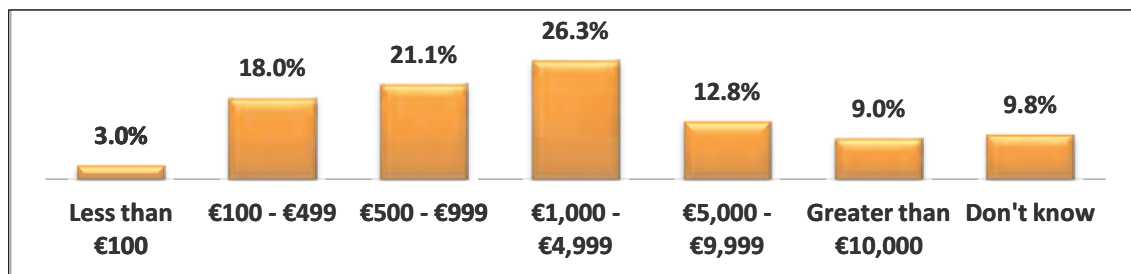
The willingness of young people from impoverished areas to engage in drug-related crime for cash was also mentioned. It was *'quick, easy money for young people. Older people have to keep a*

tough image and they can manipulate young people to do things for cash. Kids see poverty in family and aren't happy; they want to make money.' Young people are also trying to make their way up the ladder of the drug trade, as the following comment illustrates: *'There is a power struggle underneath of people trying to get to the top. 16-20 year olds involved. Some as young as 12 involved.'*

In recent years, the popularity of herbal cannabis or 'weed' has increased in many communities and among young people. This has led to young people getting into heavy debt quite quickly. As one comment in a focus group with Travellers stated: *'The age profile has changed and 14 to 15 year olds are getting into huge debt over weed from €400 to €1200. Young people are forced to sell drugs to pay it off.'* A community representative in a Task Force focus group reported that at least three parents in her support group are under threat over herbal cannabis debts.

In seventeen percent of cases reported in the audit, drug debts were being manipulated and simply becoming a way of extorting money from people. In the Traveller community, where there are extremely high levels of unemployment, it was reported that 'massive money' was being made through intimidation and fear and also that Travellers who were drug dealers were extorting money from working Travellers.

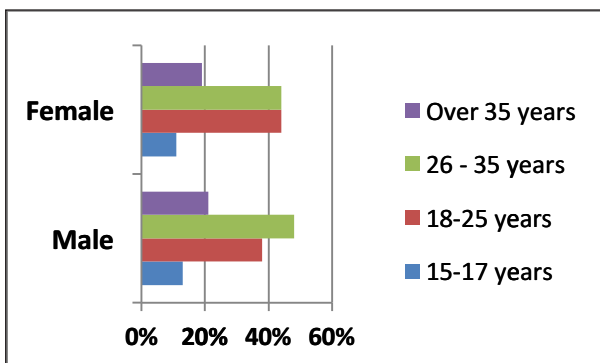
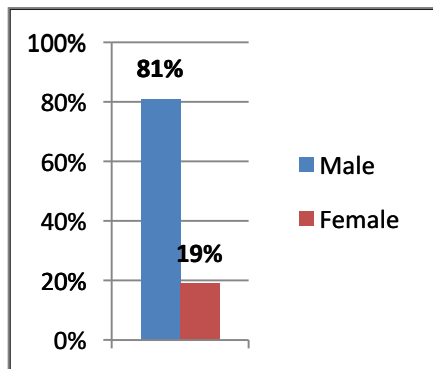
If drug-debt, the amount of money involved



This graph demonstrates that significant monetary value can be attached to the majority of debts. Most debts ranged from 500 to 5,000 Euro. However, it should be noted that debts at the smaller end of the scale still represent a huge burden for many individuals in disadvantaged communities, particularly the unwaged and young people with no regular income. Just under ten percent of debts were for more than €10,000.

Furthermore, as reported in one Task Force focus group, some dealers can cause a lot of trouble for people for relatively small debts, such as 50 Euro. As mentioned above, a debt can become a way of showing that you are tough and not to be messed with. The Family Support Network focus group revealed that most debts were in the hundreds but some are up to €5,000/€14,000.

Gender and approximate age of those carrying out incidents

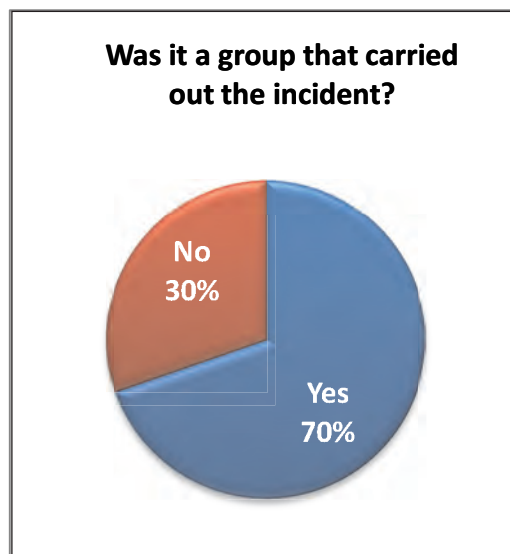


The profile of those carrying out the intimidation and threats is primarily male, aged between 18 and 35 years. Females were reported as involved in just under 20% of the threats, with a similar age profile to males. About 10% of reported incidents of intimidation were carried out by children aged 15-17.


Was the incident carried out by groups?

The identification of groups in this graph is very significant. Most of the activity is perpetrated by people acting in groups or loose networks. Focus groups reported different levels or degrees of organisation relating to local intimidation.

Drug users and young people are targeted largely by their peers, associates and friends of those to whom they owe money. They are intimidating vulnerable people to pay for their own drugs.



For young people a lot of the time it is friends intimidating each other. Much of this activity is occurring in school. In one Task Force focus group, it was reported that a fifteen year old was beaten up in school. He paid the debts and was then given skunk on tick again creating a vicious circle. It was also reported that young people in secondary schools are robbing parents to pay and debts are being sold on. In the Family Support Network focus group it was reported that young people (14-19) who are still in school have lots of small debts under €300. Some have paid them off and are still intimidated.



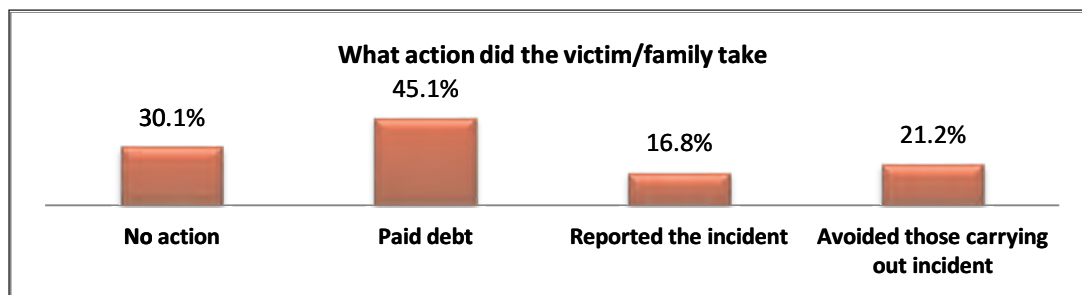
Youth workers reported that some young people say that they have been in fights and the youth workers know that they are involved in drugs but are not sure if they are being intimidated. It was also reported that some young people carry weapons to school to protect themselves.

The focus group with former prisoners raised a number of interesting issues. One was the widespread acceptance within the drug trade that debts had to be paid. Dealers who source drugs on credit are under threat from suppliers, threat is passed on to customers/users in a hierarchy of coercion. Because people have serious addictions they will continue to run up debts that must be paid off, otherwise people would get hurt. Credit keeps the system going so dealers must pay their own debts by collecting from small sellers and users. Dealers also need addicts to help store, divide and transport drugs. It is too much for dealers to do alone. Small groups of regular friends can easily get into the drug trade if they have some money and a contact in Ireland or abroad who can source drugs; these contacts are often obtained while in prison. It was suggested that Dublin was divided up between different groups of dealers who control their own areas.

There is a large middle group who maintain control. Drug users who get into debt and cannot pay were also, it was suggested, being pressured to shoot people, to do a 'hit', in order to work off their debt.

The drug trade was also having a significant impact on the Traveller community. Young people, it was reported, are selling for profit, although they are often not using the drugs that they sell. They do use recreational drugs at weekends however. Victims and perpetrators often know each other well because the community is small, and sometimes they can even be from the same extended family. A relatively new phenomenon was that Traveller gangs and settled gangs now reportedly work together for profit and that this was also having a detrimental effect on the overall community, with extended families breaking up and in conflict over drug related debts and intimidation. It was also reported that the younger generation are becoming aligned with Traveller and settled gangs early on, ensuring further problems in the future.

What action did the victim/family take?

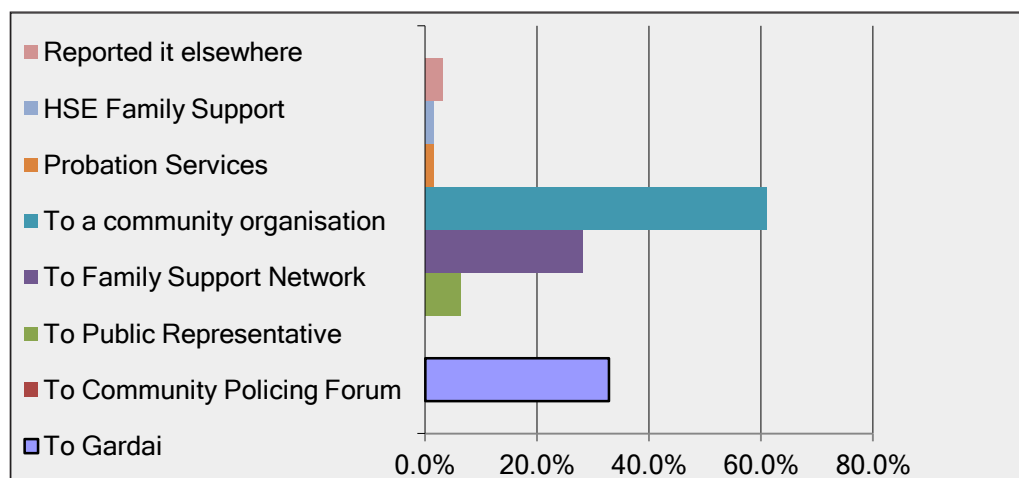


The most common response is for the victim or their family to pay the debt (45%). A strong view highlighted through the various focus groups was that debt has to be paid. Of a further 37 comments added to this section, many respondents referred to paying part of the debt. Paying the debt is also no guarantee that the intimidation will stop, there are many cases reported throughout all of the focus groups of dealers demanding money even after the debt has been paid in full. Incidents are ongoing where families pay a debt and then drugs are offered to users on credit again because they know they will pay and another debt is accrued. Parents may also pay the debt and are then told to pay more yet their children say they don't owe it.

Project workers report discussing incidents with families but do not know what to do. Borrowing money from the Credit Union used to be the norm but there is a fear that if families keep giving money, the dealers will keep supplying and they will have to keep paying. There was a case reported in one Task Force where parents paid a debt, were still intimidated and got other people to intimidate the intimidators.

Families are also reportedly paying debts but not admitting that they are being intimidated into it – there is no direct threat but they know what the consequences will be if they do not pay. Presumably some families also do not want it to be known that their children are caught up in drugs. 30% took no action, presumably either because they couldn't pay or they took a calculated risk not to pay and 21% stated that they tried to avoid those carrying out the incident. Others left the area or were looking for a transfer. It should be noted that many might seek a house transfer from the Local Authority but not mention that it was linked to a drug debt. Just less than 17% reported the incident. In one Task Force area it was stated that the situation is usually out of control by the time victims come to the family support workers there. These findings clearly indicate that there is a large amount of hidden suffering caused by drug related debt that current research or official data sources have been unable to highlight.

If the victim/family previously reported the incident, who did they report it to?



Of those people who did report incidents of intimidation and violence, they clearly felt most comfortable reporting their experiences to community organisations (62%). They also reported to Gardai (34%), the Family Support Network (28%) and Public Representatives (6%). It should be noted that focus groups reported that Community Policing and Safety Fora are also approached about incidents of intimidation but due to the involvement of local people in such fora, they are viewed and reported here as community organisations. It should also be noted that in relation to the above question, there is a degree of double counting as people might have reported incidents to a number of groups. Community and youth workers reported feeling under intense pressure as they can find it difficult to advise parents or drug users regarding reporting to Gardai or paying debts.

The National Family Support Network/Garda National Drugs Unit Intimidation Reporting Programme has been seen as useful for parents to assess the risk in paying or not paying the debt¹⁷. It has also been a useful resource for local community services as they have somewhere to refer families. It was also stated that in some communities, community Garda or other ‘approachable’ members of the Garda provide people with an opportunity to give information informally and confidentially.

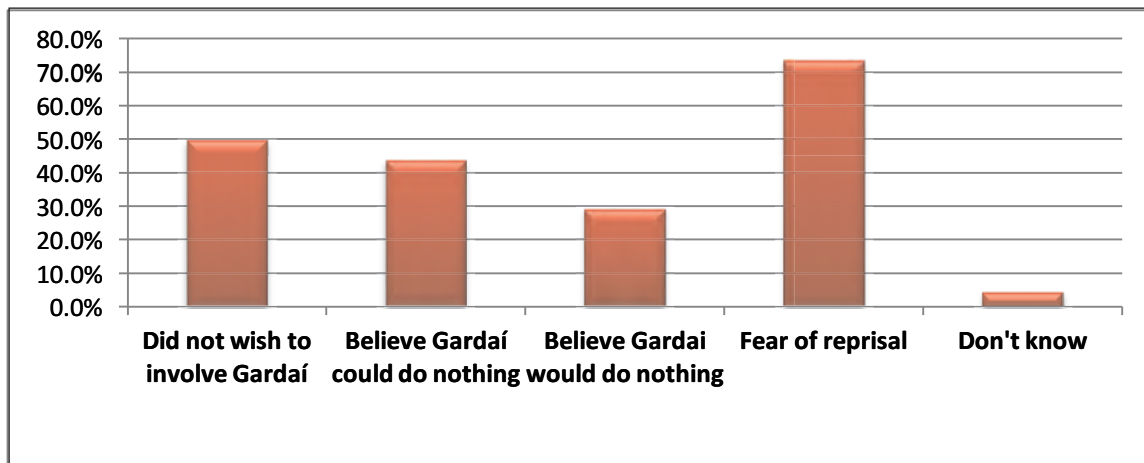
In many focus groups it was reported that Garda members often advise people to pay the debts although officially this might be denied. On the other hand, in one focus group, it was stated that the view of some Garda members is that paying debt can invite further pressure as people can be seen as a ‘soft touch’ and further extortion can occur. Either way, people are left with extremely difficult choices to make, whether to pay or not.

¹⁷ The Garda National Drugs Unit and the National Family Support Network have developed ‘*the Drug Related Intimidation Reporting Programme*’ to respond to the needs of drug users and family members experiencing drug related intimidation. For more information see <http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/20153/>

In one Task Force area, a Community Safety Forum was reportedly working well in the area for the last two years. It updated the community on issues and these were then taken forward by the Joint Policing Committee. The Forum was seen as providing the public with a Garda 'face to see' and this helped break down barriers.

Travellers reported having trouble accessing mainstream services to seek support with drug problems and debt related issues. In another focus group, it was reported that in response to school-based problems, the school contacted a local project and brought them in to the school to support the young people. The school would not make an official complaint but did support the young people.

Reasons for not reporting incidents to An Garda Siochana



Fear of reprisal from those involved in drug dealing was the number one reason for not reporting incidents of intimidation and violence to the Gardai (72%). Other significant motives for not reporting were beliefs that the Gardai were powerless to tackle the issue (42%) or a reluctance to involve law enforcement in personal problems.

A lot of people experiencing intimidation live close to the perpetrators which can be problematic. They feel that they will be at risk if they look for support. One worker reported that they had tried mediation between two families but the intimidated family did not have the courage to attend as they knew there would be repercussions. People will not report on their neighbours because they have no access to alternative accommodation and perpetrators will not be evicted, it was reported. Some parents will contact projects or groups but do not want the issue to go further.

There is also a widespread belief that nobody can do anything including the Gardai. Focus groups reported a widespread view that prosecutions were unlikely and that, even if one took place, it would not succeed as people would not cooperate with the police or criminal justice process due to fear. People felt that even if someone goes to prison they will get back out quickly or that the intimidation

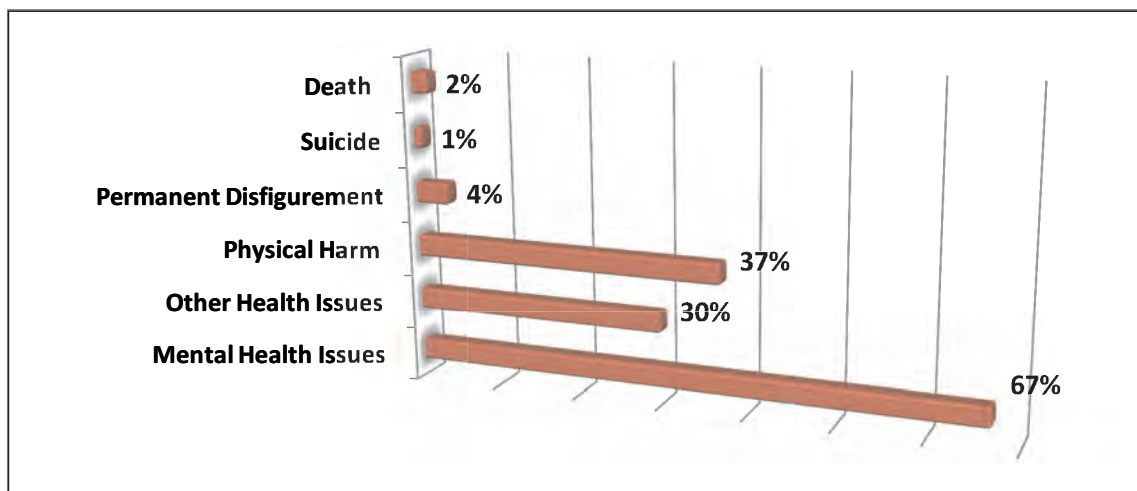
can continue from inside the prison. As stated in one Drugs Task Force focus group, ‘Unless there is a serious sentence, Gardai have no weapon against intimidators.’

It was also suggested that Gardai can make intimidation worse when they raid family homes looking for drugs or weapons. This is especially true for children who may have already suffered intimidation from dealers and are then terrified when police raid their homes.

One Drugs Task Force focus group reported that young people in the area have been forced to hold drugs. They have been caught by Gardai who know that they are not involved in the drugs trade but as they will not give names they are prosecuted. Some families also feel intimidated by the Gardai because they want information but cannot offer protection. In one Drugs Task Force area it was reported that Gardai are saying that they cannot do anything about intimidation and certain families have had to move away.

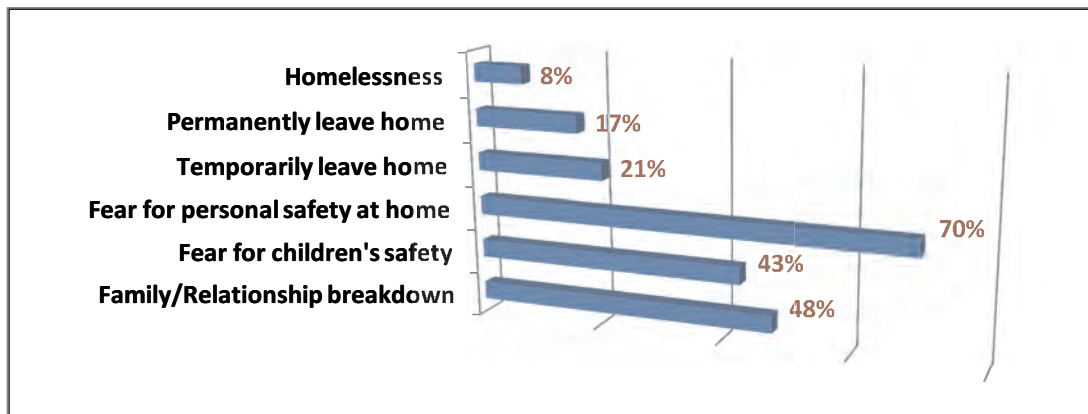
Consequences of Incidents

Health & Wellbeing



One of the main health consequences reported was mental health issues arising from the stress associated with intimidation (67%). Secondly, it is reported that people are being physically harmed as a consequence of the debt (37%). Youth and community workers notice behavioural changes in young people and reported stories about victimisation, self-harm and attempts at suicide. Intimidation can affect the whole family and some young people are anxious about family members who are taking drugs and being intimidated. Youth workers reported that although some young people are not coming forward, they are presenting with anxiety and mental health problems and youth workers hear stories from others. In one Task Force area it was reported that young people with smaller debts were in fear of others coming to their houses and attacking them.

Home and Family



With regard to the impact of drug-related intimidation on the home and family, the dominant concern was that people feared for their personal safety at home (70%). Family/relationship breakdown was also a significant consequence (48%) while parents were also fearful for their children's safety (43%).

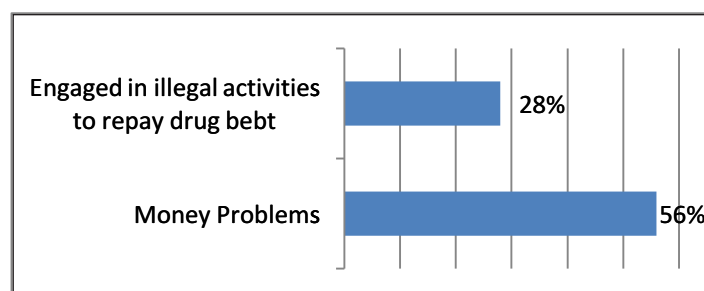
For some parents, they do not become aware that their child is involved in drugs until a drug dealer comes knocking on their door about a drug debt. Parents may also have a different view to their children. In one Drugs Task Force area it was reported that, while parents are worried that their child might take a beating for the debt, this is what the young person expects to happen. However, fear of such violent action puts stress on parents as they are anticipating consequences while trying to get money together to pay the debt.

Another consequence of intimidation is that it can undermine parental relationships, as mothers do not tell the fathers about the intimidation. Mothers, who are primarily responding to the issue, are trying to raise the money and are often concerned that the father will respond in a heavy-handed manner and make the problem worse. Some young people are not attending school because of intimidation while others have left the family home or the country.

Intimidation within the Traveller community can be distinctive and particularly challenging because of large extended families. It was reported in the Traveller focus group that strong family ties have broken down as a consequence of drug-related debt and intimidation.

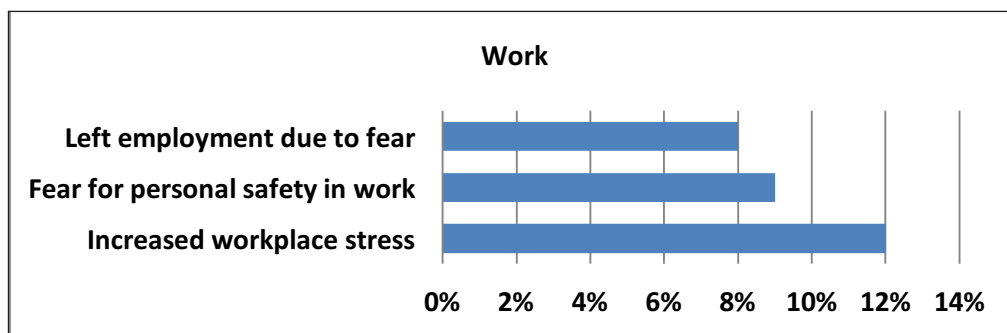
Finance

People are clearly struggling to pay drug-related debts (56%) while others have engaged in illegal activities to offset the debt (28%). Interest or 'waiting money' is widespread as



debts can be sold on to collectors so payment increases. Interest can accrue on small debts on a daily basis. Some people have resorted to loan sharks. Where young people are forced to hold drugs to offset a debt, they can be caught by Gardai, and they will then have another bill to pay as the seized drugs must be paid for. People have reportedly sold their houses to pay off drug debts. In one Task Force area it was reported that three local people have sold their houses to pay off drug debts and now cannot get on to social housing lists because the Council believe that they should have the proceeds of the sale to pay for accommodation. Young people have limited access to money, those on FAS courses have some money to pay off debts but school students only have money that their parents give them.

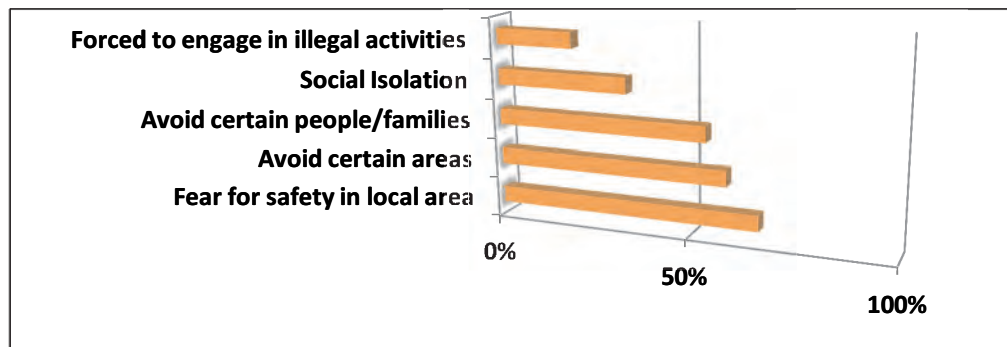
Work



Some report increased workplace stress as a consequence of local conflict (12%), others fear for their personal safety in work (9%) while some have left their job due to fear (8%). Staff can also feel threatened but will not report it. Many report feeling intimidated going to work. Another phenomenon that has been reported on is the increasing intimidation experienced by drug workers in communities. Workers also fear that violence will be directed at them and their colleagues. Many youth workers feel conflicted in their role, balancing the tension between those who need their services, those involved in the drug trade, and Gardai. Youth workers feel their hands are tied because parents tell them about intimidation and they don't know if they should tell them to go to the Gardai, pay up or face the consequences.

In one Task Force focus group, a worker spoke about how dealers stand outside the centre waiting to sell drugs. In another, two project workers spoke about a violent incident that happened in their centre, although they told Gardai, they were too fearful of the repercussions to press charges.

Social



Due to fear for their personal safety in their own area (65%), individuals and families often have to vary routines in an attempt to avoid whole families or identifiable groups of dealers (52%) who live or operate in their area. People also report avoiding specific parts of their area (55%). In one focus group, it was reported that people feel too intimidated to call the Gardai to their flats complex over other general crime issues because of fear of reprisal from drug dealers.

Fear of attack over debts is also a cause of early school leaving. In one Task Force area it was reported that some young people won't go to school because they are being targeted. They become early school leavers but it is not recorded that the reason they left school is because of the risk of assault. It is also reported that some young people carry weapons in to school and around the area for their own protection.

One of the key outcomes of this research is that it has highlighted the way in which crimes associated with the drug trade can become normalised in an area. The necessity to pay drug debt is basically a rule of the drug trade, with violent consequences for those who transgress this rule. However, the idea that such violence can also be visited on the families of those in debt is a relatively recent phenomenon. The fact that people are too fearful to report such issues to the authorities and that no one is called to account locally as a consequence, means that whole areas and communities can be silenced and controlled.

In one Drug Task Force focus group, it was suggested that because people will not go through the criminal justice system, something else needs to be put in place. In another, it was stated that both the Gardai and the local authorities are aware of what is happening and who the perpetrators are but there are no consequences. As one commentator stated: *'Someone has to make a change. Power has to shift. The dealers have the power and communities are at a loss of what to do. It is too dangerous for people to stand up. Gardai can't or won't do anything about it – this has to shift.'* In another area the following observation was made: *'The bar has moved; when it (intimidation) becomes normal it gets worse.'* The ultimate consequence is that fear leads people to become isolated, they stop participating in local activities and communities cease to function.

Discussion and Policy Implications

The findings of this study illustrate the distressing impact of drug-related intimidation and community violence on the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of victims. Stress, despair, feelings of profound vulnerability as well as actual bodily injury were common experiences amongst communities surveyed for this research. In addition, the pressure that families, drug users and particularly mothers and young people were placed under led to relationship breakdown, homelessness, loss of employment, financial difficulties and prolonged social isolation and alienation from their community networks due to fear of exposure.


The findings of this report present a significant number of policy implications. Below, we will highlight five key areas that need to be addressed in responding to drug-related intimidation.

1. Recording Information on Drug-Related Intimidation

This report represents a novel approach to gathering data on a hidden harm that is causing immense distress in many communities but that largely goes unreported and unrecorded officially. It is, in a sense, not on the general public radar but very much part of life for many.

It is clear that the issue of fear operates as a major barrier to reporting intimidation. Nevertheless, it is essential that every effort is made by all relevant stakeholders, including the Garda Síochána, local authorities, the Garda Inspectorate, the newly established Policing Authority and public representatives to consider how this hidden reality can be better recorded in the future so that policy responses are properly informed. Drug-related intimidation has a disproportionate impact on those communities in which drug markets tend to emerge and it is this local experience that needs to be brought out into the open.

The study shows that although individuals may not report to the authorities, they will discuss their experience with trusted community based groups and services, such as Community Drugs Projects, Drugs Rehab Projects, youth groups, the National Family Support Network, Task Force representatives and local Community Policing Fora where they exist. The value and importance of this support work by community groups needs to be recognised.



It is important to note however, that while community groups have a key role to play in supporting people who experience intimidation; it is not their role and should not become their role to report criminal activity to the Gardai. The responsibility for responding to intimidation cannot be left to local community organisations and has to be taken on board by the relevant stakeholders listed above.

2. Responding to the Experience of Young People

The significant impact of drug-related intimidation involving young people both as victims and perpetrators, is a key finding of this research. The young people who are victimised experience significant anxiety and mental health problems, either due to drug-related debt within the family or their own debts. Young people who are not drug dependent or involved in selling drugs can become implicated in the drug trade as a consequence of accruing, through recreational drug use, drug debts that they are unable to pay. Their inability to pay can lead them to commit crime such as holding drugs to pay debt and their families can also become implicated in the drug trade as a consequence. Intimidation is taking place both in and out of school settings, with bullying and peer conflict taking place in the school and the school becoming a place of fear for the young person. The stress involved for young people can lead to them withdrawing from school and/or becoming isolated with potentially very serious mental health consequences.

Previous research has described how young people who become involved in the drugs trade at a low level by running or holding drugs for example, can progress to more serious involvement if there is not adequate intervention at an early stage. As young people progress to more serious involvement in the drugs trade, they can go on to become perpetrators of intimidation and related acts of violence.

Measures need to be put in place in terms of prevention and early intervention to support young people in such circumstances. This will require collaboration between relevant stakeholders such as the schools, youth services, family support services, Department of Education, Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Irish Youth Justice Service.

3. Supporting Community-Based Services in Responding to Intimidation

Although people are clearly unwilling to report intimidation to the appropriate authorities in the vast majority of cases, they will report to community-based groups such as Community Drugs Projects, Drugs Rehab Projects, the National Family Support Network, local Community Safety/Policing Fora, youth groups, etc. As a consequence, such frontline services are regularly confronted with the need to provide such support to vulnerable people in extremely complex, stressful and often dangerous situations. For many victims, community groups are the only alternative to the isolation and stress such situations can create. As stated previously, responding to criminal behaviour is not within the remit of many of these services, and it is not their role, nor should it become their role, to report criminal activity to the Gardai. However, they have little option but to support people in the distressing situations that intimidation causes and this can create difficult challenges and dilemmas for such groups as they seek to navigate their way around local tensions and conflicts.

It is essential that community services are provided with adequate training and support to respond to this need. This training and support should be based on good practice to date, such as that provided by the National Family Support Services initiative.

4. Addressing Fear of Reprisal and People's Unwillingness to Engage with the Authorities

One clear outcome of this research, which is supported by earlier research reported above, is that people do not wish to report drug-related crimes of intimidation to the authorities due to fear of reprisal from those involved in the drug trade. Notwithstanding important initiatives such as the NFSN/GNDU program, or assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, there still remains a significant barrier to many people engaging with the Garda Síochána and the criminal justice system in this area. Furthermore, even where offenders might be prosecuted or even imprisoned, this does not alleviate the fear for most people. There does not appear to be any safety net that can reassure people in such circumstances. This poses a major challenge for the criminal justice system and society in general.

There is no simple solution to this problem but there is an onus on the criminal justice system and all relevant stakeholders engaged in public safety to address this crisis of confidence as a matter of urgency as it undermines the credibility of the entire criminal justice system. There is a need to shift the balance of power for such communities and to prevent such crimes from becoming normalised.

5. Further Discussion and Evidence

There are a number of key areas or questions arising from this research that require further examination in order to inform effective responses and to focus attention and resources. These include the following:

- a) Supporting mothers: Drug-related intimidation as reported in this study appears to have a strong gender dimension. Although it primarily involves young men as victims and offenders, this study highlights the reality that a great deal of the burden of responding to the problems of drug debt falls on the mothers of those caught up in debt. The mental stress involved in trying to find solutions to these problems must be extremely significant for such women yet there has been very little focus on understanding and addressing their experience. This gender dimension requires further examination so that appropriate supports can be developed.
- b) Young people and gangs: The importance of early intervention with young people is evident and there is a need to further examine as a matter of priority how best to prevent involvement and to intervene where young people become involved, in gangs and the drugs trade.
- c) Responding to local drug markets: We need to acknowledge the areas where current policy on supply control of drugs is failing and identify how to respond most effectively to the impact of illicit drug markets and drug-related crime in the communities most affected. There is a need to develop Community Impact Statements, as recommended by the Garda Inspectorate in its recent *Crime Investigation* report, so that we have the tools to gather the evidence on the nature and scale of the impact on communities. There is also a need to look at the evidence that is being considered as part of the international debate into alternative approaches to drug supply control. This debate is currently being led by the Latin American states that have experienced the worst effects of violence relating to the drugs trade and we in Ireland need to engage more actively in this debate.

About CityWide

CityWide Drugs Crisis Campaign is a national network of community activists and community organisations that are involved in responding to Ireland's drugs crisis. CityWide was set up in 1995 to bring together Dublin communities that were struggling with the heroin crisis. We now work nationally linking communities across the country dealing with a range of substance issues.

CityWide works to promote and support a community development approach to the drugs problem – this means involving the people who are most affected by the problem in dealing with the problem – drug users, their families and communities.



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