

Care and Control - Challenges for Creating Safe and Sustainable Communities

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Introduction

The title of this article 'care and control' has come from my experience and practice in responding to the very complex issues of community safety. Over the last fifteen years, myself and other community workers in the South West Inner City of Dublin have been engaged in regeneration processes in the various local authority flat complexes where community safety has been a key issue and core element of our work. This work is complex and fraught with risks for community workers and the participation of residents in community safety processes. The work by its very nature tends to be private and not public. The experiences of the past however were very public responses most notably the anti-drugs movement in the 1980s/1990s and by its very private individual nature, poses problems for collective community responses.

This article will look at how communities have responded to the continuous challenges of community safety, gang culture and anti-social behaviour and the difficulties that community workers face in responding to the many complex issues, particularly the 'fear factor' in communities. I will give an analysis of past experiences including the role that the media plays and I will argue the importance of having a care and control approach in creating safe and sustainable communities where human rights are central.

Context

The three key words in the title, care, control and safe, have an implied suggestion of power, risk and fear. This article is essentially about the powerlessness experienced in communities, it is about the fear felt within these communities and the risk that people, particularly young people are exposed to within their communities.

Today there are communities across the city of Dublin that feel abandoned by the State and feel that they are at the mercy of continuous anti-social behaviour and criminal gangs. There is a sense of powerlessness and isolation within communities. In this environment how do you empower peoples civic right to feel safe in their home and community, while also responding to the root causes of the problem i.e. poverty and inequality?

When you think about rights, you tend to think about children, disability, minority groups, housing, health, education etc. You can in some ways construct a Human Rights Base Approach {HRBA} on each of the above, but can you construct a HRBA on the complex issue of community safety and anti-social behaviour when you have competing rights e.g. victims and perpetrators who are generally young men excluded from mainstream society? There are questions that community workers need to ask themselves that may challenge values and ethics in their practice, i.e how do you work with state bodies, gardai, local authorities? Do you give information to these bodies on the actions of those engaged? How do you work with those engaged in the gang culture, while also working with the communities that are affected by their behaviour?

A clear example of this persistent conflict is in Limerick's Moyross. Research was carried out looking at these challenges, particularly the fear and powerlessness of residents living in Limerick's marginalised estates. "On seven separate occasions during this research, a resident halted a private conversation on the street for fear of being overheard. Fourteen interviewees indicated that they were very fearful of being seen talking to community Garda" (Hourigan, 2011:85). Hourigan suggests that criminal gangs that operate out of marginalised estates have sought to establish themselves as the sovereign power in the local area and while they may tolerate the comings and goings of state officials, in real terms they are in charge (Hourigan, 2011).

In the last number of months Dublin City Council (DCC) Estate Managers in a number of flat complexes have been withdrawn by DCC's senior management. This withdrawal is as a result of intimidation and threats. Elected Councillors have expressed concern about this drastic action and impact and the message that it will send to the communities (Ni Dhalaigh, 16/05/12, correspondence to Assistant City Manager). DCC's mission statement states that they will not tolerate anti-social behaviour and they are committed to the peaceful occupation of dwellings within its 16 areas of responsibility (Dublin City Council, 2010). The reality of this mission statement and the gradual withdrawal of DCC's frontline staff has further alienated agents of the state from the residents and their civil rights, which they are responsible for protecting. This is further compounded by housing budget cuts, particularly in the areas of estate management that has seen housing estates deteriorate and further decline. The above incidents demonstrate the complexities and challenges of enforcing and protecting peoples' rights i.e. the right to feel safe in your own home and community and the right to work without threat or intimidation.

Crickley suggests that community work is about analysis and action for change, empowerment and participation and it is fundamentally collective (Crickley, 2005). The participation and empowerment of communities in taking more control of the direction of their lives and their communities can be extremely challenging in such a hostile environment where criminal activity, drug dealing, vandalism, intimidation and violence, are normalised in some communities. These experiences tend to be concentrated in certain communities across the cities of Dublin, Limerick and many other communities across the country. This reality very much applies to the communities that have been abandoned as a result of the collapse of the economy, particularly communities that were to be regenerated through the public private partnership mechanism.

The Fear Factor

In a 2010 study looking at Ireland's new culture of gangland violence, a paper, 'responding to gun crime in Ireland' was published in the British Journal of Criminology in 2010 stated;

"Proportionately speaking Ireland had five times as many gun killings than in comparable countries like England, Scotland and Wales and there are legitimate concerns, particularly in relation to Limerick.' In 2008, 38.2 per cent of murders and manslaughters committed in the Republic involved firearms; in the same year, gun killings in England and Wales accounted for just 6.8 per cent of the total" (Campbell, 2010, p.386).

There are a number of prominent high profile journalists who have written about crime and gangland and the fear factor within communities. In his book, Paul Williams describes the first ten years of the decade;

“In the history of organised crime in Ireland, the first decade of the new millennium will be remembered as an era of unprecedented mayhem, bloodshed and murder. Since 2000 narcotics have been at the heart of all organised criminal activity in Ireland. At the height of the economic boom, the Irish drug trade was estimated to be worth in the region of €1 billion. It led to a proliferation of armed mobs competing for a slice of the action – and a dramatic increase in violence” (Williams, 2011, p.383).

The communities where gangland members live are often referred to as no-go areas with the net effect of entire communities being stigmatised. In Limerick the gangland reporting refers to the areas of Moyross and Southhill and these areas have now become identified with crime, antisocial behaviour, delinquency and other poverty indicators. “Our analysis of print media coverage confirmed that Moyross was frequently labelled as a ‘troubled estate’, reinforcing a stigmatised and homogenising identity”. (Devereux, Haynes and Power, 2011, p. 221).

Some communities have become associated with feuds, shootings and killings. The Crumlin and Drimnagh feud is most notable, had a book written on it and a TV3 television documentary to coincide with this. (Michael Clifford, Cocaine Wars, 2009).

In the tabloid media, very little if any consideration is given to the quality of peoples lives, the causes of poverty, social exclusion and the participation of young people within gang culture. The ‘red top tabloids’, in the main, are the papers of choice in working class areas, particularly areas that have crime and a concentration of poverty, all of which reinforce fear within the community and create ‘celebrity status’ among the various gangs. As community workers how do you respond to these challenges? I would suggest that a good starting point is understanding the past.

What has the experience of the past been like for communities and community work and what can we learn from this? *Reflection from the Past - The anti-drugs movement, the Concerned Parents Against Drugs (CPAD) – A Community Response 1980s/90s*

In 1983, RTE Current Affairs Programme, Today Tonight, filmed a special report on the drug problem in inner city Dublin. The programme, broadcast on 25th May, focused on the experience of Hardwick Street flats/community, it highlighted the community’s efforts in dealing with the drug dealers within their community. It also highlighted the involvement of Christy Burke the prominent Sinn Fein activist and implied that Sinn Fein had infiltrated the community based anti-drugs campaign in Hardwick Street. As a result of this broadcast other concerned communities began to think, sure if they can do it, why can’t we do it. In St. Theresa’s Gardens the community called a meeting and decided a number of actions.

“It was agreed that they would mount a vigil at the entrance to the complex to prevent addicts not residing there from coming in, and that a delegation would visit the known

pushers and notify them that they were to stop dealing or leave the complex. The two measures succeeded in bringing about an immediate dramatic decrease in the heroin trade in the flats” (Lyder, 2005, p 21).

The author argues that the immediate outcome and the success of the St. Teresa’s campaign, inspired other areas of the south inner city to act. (Lyder, 2005). In July 1983, thirty years ago, myself and some friends stood at the back of a public meeting that had been called by the recently established Dolphin House Concerned Parents Against Drugs (CPAD) regarding the increased drug dealing within the complex. In attendance were people from Dolphin House, a large local authority flat complex, that had become a breeding ground for heroin addiction with its ready made ingredients of high youth unemployment and poverty. Drug dealing was taking place openly in the flat complex, with increased numbers of young people becoming addicts. People, particularly parents were becoming aware of the risks to their children. Fear of drug pushers and their intimidation had now been replaced with anger.

The above meeting took a similar approach to those held in Hardwick Street and St. Theresa’s. Evidence was presented to the committee of those allegedly dealing drugs, they would be summoned to the meetings where they would be asked to account to the charges before them of drug dealing. They would be told to stop dealing or get out. The meetings would generally end with a march to other drug pushers’ homes in the community. This process would become a key element of the campaign. Lyder expands on this approach, if the pusher admitted their actions and gave a guarantee to stop they might be given a second chance or they could be given anything from twenty-four hours to a week to vacate their flat (Lyder, 2005).

As a young man growing up in the summer of 1983 in Dolphin House there was a sense of people taking their power back. Fear had now been replaced with a sense of liberation. A new confidence and determination had emerged and this was growing across the south inner city. A key strand of my article is to look at the issue of fear within communities and how communities can respond, so in 1983, why did the fear dissipate? One reason I would suggest was the broadcasting of a Today Tonight two hour special on the drugs problem in the inner city where the programme named key people involved in the CPAD as being ex-IRA prisoners and Sinn Fein members. Lyder believes that the programme sensationalised the campaign focusing again on the involvement of Sinn Fein members and it also contained allegations of intimidation and violence (Lyder, 2005). Mainstream media were fixated on the involvement of Sinn Fein, Cullen suggests that those from Sinn Fein who were involved did tend to live in those communities that had a CPAD group (Cullen, 1990).

There is no doubt that the appearance on national television of people living in Dolphin House who had been in prison for IRA activity was in actual fact a confidence booster for people who were afraid of getting involved. At the time people living in communities like Dolphin House didn’t care what people thought about them or who represented them, they felt protected and safe. As far as people were concerned those making the accusations of kangaroo courts didn’t care much about their quality of life or that of their children. Their constitutional right to feel safe was now being upheld by the potential actions of IRA against those who threatened parents trying to rear their children.

As the campaign of the CPAD went on, maintaining peoples participation was always going to be a challenge and the accusations of vigilantism didn't go away. Cullen suggests that from the outset of its formation, the CPAD was subject to vigilantism and as the movement progressed some of these allegations gathered credence (Cullen, 1990). However it was the murder of Josie Dwyer, a chronic drug addict and the subsequent charges and convictions of CPAD members that saw the effective end of the CPAD in the south inner city. In Fatima Mansions research was carried out in 1998 articulating the views of local people;

“The death of Dwyer and the subsequent charges made against local men, upset and frightened moderates in the community. Their only option was to retreat, thus, allowing the drug economy and culture to reassert itself on the estate” (Corcoran, 1998, p.39).

In assessing the work and impact of the CPAD, Lyder concludes that it was both positive and significant and that its greatest achievement was that it upheld the dignity of working class communities by refusing to allow them to sink into the depths of degradation that the Irish establishment was happy to oversee (Lyder, 2005).

Following the demise of the CPAD, in the 1990's the Coalition of Communities Against Drugs (COCAD) was established with the aim of dealing with the drug problem both within the city and its surrounding suburbs – Tallaght, Cabra, Blanchardstown, Finglas and Ballymun. The continued allegations of vigilantism were a constant feature of the workings of COCAD.

“It has been put to me that where individuals, or even communities, are prepared to act outside of the established legal structure, and where there are no strong controls, checks and balances, there is considerable scope for abuse. I would not dispute this; though pointing out that within the established legal structure considerable abuse also takes place, particularly where the poor and powerless are concerned” (Lyder, 2005, p299).

There is little doubt that the activities of COCAD were very divisive, particularly in the south inner city. As a youth worker in Rialto I would hear first hand the views, concerns and the hostility that young people had towards the activities of COCAD. Parents with teenagers caught up in the drug culture were living in fear that they could be targeted. COCAD actions were essentially about trying to control behaviour of people who were vulnerable and who were in a world of addiction. There was very little of a care response in dealing with the causes of people's addiction or analysis of the contributory factors.

In essence the fear of drug dealers may have been lessened in the early campaign, but fear remained constant among families of young people engaged in minor anti-social behaviour. There was very little regard for those involved in COCAD from young people in areas like Fatima Mansions and Dolphin House. In reality the drugs culture was endemic and touched large sections of the community both directly and indirectly, therefore building a collective approach to creating a safe and sustainable community was never going to happen. There was a general feeling among community youth workers in the south inner city that it was all about trying to control behaviour of those engaged in anti-social behaviour and very little in the way of care or analysis of the causes of their behaviour.

When there are no strong controls, checks and balances, there will be abuse, social movements require the bringing of people with you, particularly those who are vulnerable and marginalised.

Comments

In order to respond to the problems of gang culture/anti-social behaviour at community level, you need to understand it, you need to identify who participates and you need to get under the belly of it.

Research gives you the scope to dig deeper into the complexities, perceptions and the participants themselves. The intensive research carried out in Limericks regeneration areas is a case in point, where the researchers got under the belly of the challenges of community safety. They looked at how the public viewed those involved in gang culture in Limerick. "Citizens of mainstream Limerick society may continue to view these men as 'scumbags', but within their communities they are deeply feared because they embody a form of masculinity linked to the toughness and violence". (Hourigan, 2011, p. 79)

Having an understanding of the problem is a key starting point, I believe that a care and control approach is required, which needs to be agreed by all the stakeholders. The strategy would include the following elements.

The first part of responding to gang culture and communities under siege is the taking back of control. A multi agency and community response is needed for this to succeed. In a number of districts in Boston, USA, that were being overrun with gang culture, a control approach was taken and proved to be decisive in responding to the gang culture and antisocial behaviour in communities. "When community leaders, district attorneys, and law enforcement officials combine resources and work together, they can effectively reach-out and meet with gang members to relay the message that the community will no longer tolerate gang violence". (Cannata, 2009, p.275)

Getting control back is an essential first step, as it enables communities to breathe and feel safe, just like the community in Dublin's south inner city felt when drug pushers were forced out of their communities in the 1980's, only this time it would be a multi-agency collective approach that would include the communities in the process.

The taking back control from the gangs involves the two main state agencies, An Garda Siochana and the local authorities. Both state agencies have extensive powers to create the conditions for people to feel safe within their communities. Along with this we have to have a parallel approach of care and understanding of those engaged in gang culture and anti-social behaviour. Targeting the needs of those involved requires intensive social provision and resources from the state. It requires a localised integrated response particularly among service providers and resident representative organisations.

The case review of the early drug movement has demonstrated the importance of media setting. The regeneration of Fatima is a good example of this approach, a study concluded that Fatima residents became more professional and sophisticated in their claims making (Ryan, Anastari and Jeffreys, 2005).

A Framework – The Guiding Principles

The challenge and participation of community workers within the current reality of gang culture is complex, particularly the risk of intimidation and violence. For community workers employed in community based projects, it is vitally important to understand your role when working with state agencies and projects engaged with those involved in gang culture/anti-social behaviour. Your role will potentially bring you into conflict with the community and state agencies, Garda and local authorities who want action on those engaged and those who work with the various target groups i.e. youth leaders, drugs workers, etc. Getting the balance right between care and control is challenging, particularly when there are competing rights, i.e. right to live in a safe environment and the rights of those engaged in gang culture/anti-social behaviour to a fair crack at the whip.

Ledwith argues that community work is about empowerment, collective participation and social change (Ledwith, 2012). It's about responding to the challenges that community experience, including creating and maintaining safe and sustainable neighbourhoods. As community workers working in community based projects this can be a difficult task, however, we can't leave a vacuum for those who are engaged in anti-social behaviour or for those who would take a control agenda that would only exclude those most marginalised and vulnerable in communities.

In the early part of this article I referenced that when communities were left excluded with fear the dominant feeling, a vacuum was created resulting in high levels of lawlessness, leading to communities taking the law into their own hands in trying to protect their children. Having a rights framework and guiding principles in dealing with these complex issues would give us a safe guard. This analysis is well expressed by Ife,

“So much for the ways in which human rights need community development. The other side, how community development needs human rights, is probably more familiar territory. It is derived from the potential danger of community development that is undertaken in a moral vacuum, and that sees its role as helping a community to articulate where it wants to go, and then helping it to get there; even though where the community wants to go may be racist, exclusive or violent” (Ife, 2004:4).

Over the past thirty years community workers have been centrally involved in campaigning with marginalised and excluded communities. While the language and application of Human Rights Based Approaches (HRBA) may not have been explicitly named, for many of us the work for equality and justice for communities was always present. Naming HRBA as a method does give community work an added dimension and the tool for campaigning and negotiating with those responsible for the realisation of peoples rights.

Finally there is no silver bullet in applying a HRBA to the complex issues of anti-social behaviour and gang culture. What is clear is that blaming those who have been excluded from society and all the ills that go with anti-social behaviour will not create safe and sustainable communities. Community work must play its part and I believe community workers are best placed to navigate the community through these dangerous challenges in making their communities safer.

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