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How Irish crime gangs are a hidden threat to child well-being: The Brainstorm long read: the existence of criminal networks in Irish neighbourhoods is a slippery phenomenon to detect and understand

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How Irish crime gangs are a hidden threat to child well-being

The Brainstorm long read: the existence of criminal networks in Irish neighbourhoods is a slippery phenomenon to detect and understand

Sean Redmond

In the 1850s, cholera visited the residents of Golden Square, a poor urban neighbourhood in London. In addition to its cruel hold on the community, cholera had an insidious and subliminal quality and appeared to descend randomly from household to household with devastating effects.

The phenomenon is captured superbly in Steven Johnson's *The Ghost Map* (2006), which tells the story of two unlikely heroes, Dr John Snow and a cleric, Henry Whitehead. In spite of scientific consensus at the time, both accurately diagnosed the public health threat to residents so that effective preventative treatment to cholera could follow.

Prior to their intervention, the hypothesis for the occurrence, transfer and treatment of cholera was bound by a strong conviction that it existed and spread in a miasma or cloud of infection. The corollary of this expert consensus was that the available (finite) medical effort for treatment of cholera, and in particular control of infection, was deployed to relentless cleaning of bed linen within individual dwellings. Of course, such aseptic patient-focussed solutions seem obvious given the diagnostic start point.

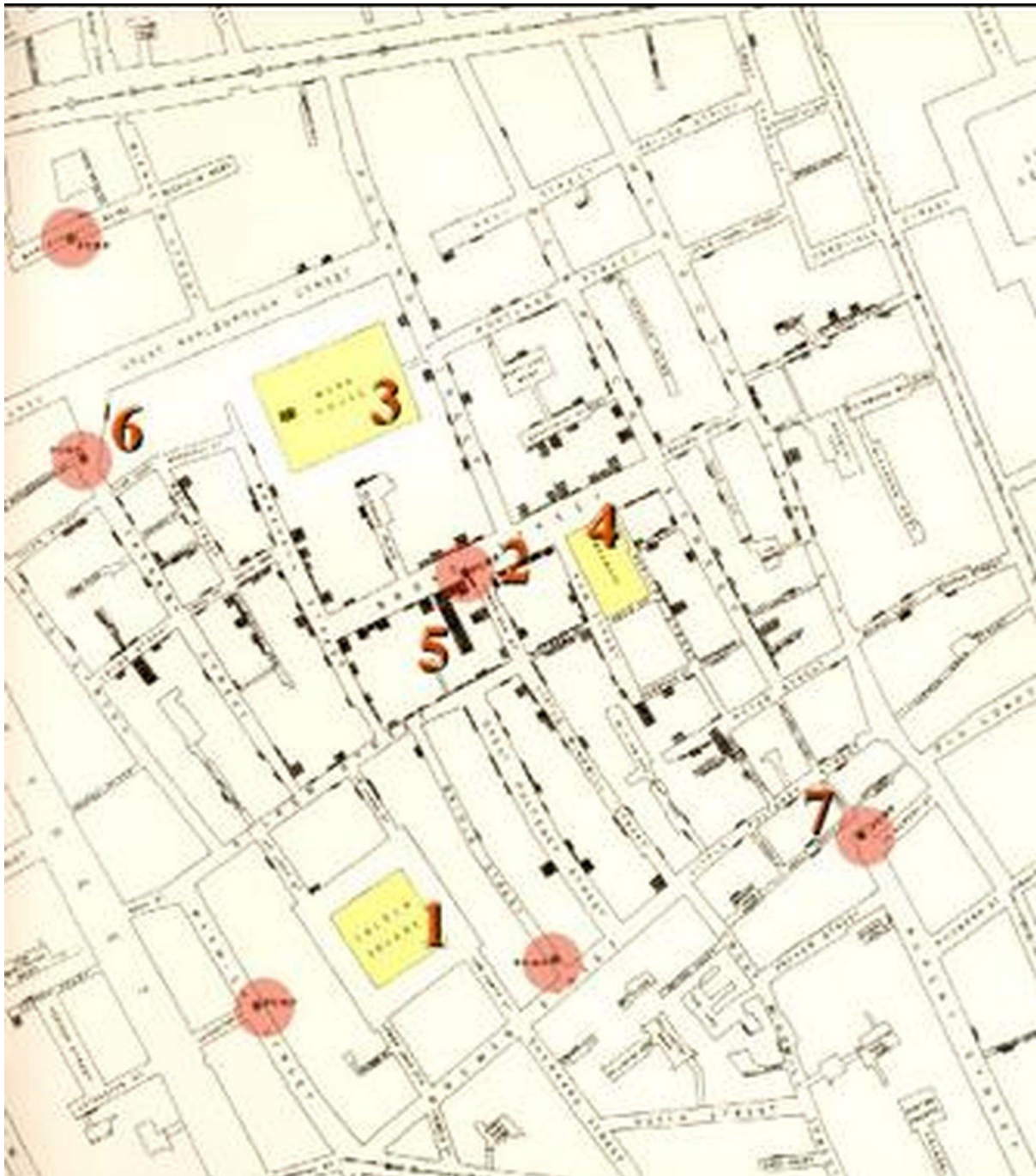
However this approach, notwithstanding its eminent expert support, was largely useless.



Going underground

Snow and Whitehead's contribution was to look beyond what was in front of their noses and determine what was really going on. Like legions of social scientists after them, they prosaically observed and documented the smallest occurrences, aggregated "like" occurrences to clusters and developed these clusters into patterns.

The patterns in Golden Square related to a network of hidden underground pipelines, fed from a number of different waterworks companies, which only manifested themselves at street level as standing water pumps. A pattern emerged. Water pumps conveying infected water were located close to cholera infection clusters. Rather than infection being transmitted person by person and dwelling by dwelling via soiled laundry or clouds, it was caused by infected water transmitted by certain pipes leading back to and implicating, certain waterworks companies.



Snow and Whitehead's pioneering endeavour did two jobs. Firstly and most importantly, it mapped a path to ridding cholera from poor communities. But secondly, it demonstrated how thinking conventionally about unconventional problems is, at best, a waste of effort and, at worst, adds considerably to the suffering.

But what does the cholera epidemic that occurred in Golden Square over 160 years ago have to do with crime in Ireland in the 21st century? Without labelling the analogy, we can view the existence of crime networks in a neighbourhood as a similar threat to public health and as a slippery phenomenon to detect.

The Irish crime networks

First the big picture. We have a well-evidenced and reasonably sanguine policy framework for youth crime in Ireland. Not diminishing the fact that there is a victim for every crime, we have very strong evidence to show that most children in Ireland who are detected for a criminal offence do so only once or twice and they will invariably grow out of crime by the time they are in their late teens and early twenties. There are a number of theories about why this occurs such as brain development, social maturation and taking on economic, social and caring responsibilities. Many adults who are now tax-paying and socio-economically active members of society committed misdemeanours when they were children, though not all were caught.

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Correspondingly, the policy approach to children involved in youthful offending is to manage them proportionately through adolescence to adulthood without drawing them in to the criminal justice system. This is because, knowing as we now know, the system itself can make matters worse for minor offenders and particularly for children. The preventative public health type approach works in these cases.



Nevertheless, a small number of children become involved in very serious offending such as drugs sales and burglary. They don't stop at one or two offences, like the vast majority of individuals who offend in their childhood. In fact recent, figures indicate that approximately three per cent of children detected for offences are responsible for over 50 percent of all youth crime in Ireland.

Many of these children come from economically poor and challenging backgrounds. Like the residents of Golden Square, they are generally hidden from public view in backwater housing estates and very little is known about their stories. This is partly because their numbers are small by comparison and the big picture is reasonably positive.

However, it is also because of the way we traditionally look at the problem of youth crime. Neither myopically looking at the young person as an individual in a clinical context or offering broad-brush commentary on underlying features such as structural inequality permits us to see what is going on for many of them in their real lives. Not dissimilar to unravelling the cholera conundrum, the Greentown study, published by the University of Limerick tried to give closer scrutiny to the contexts in which this reasonably small cohort of children play out their lives.

The Greentown Study

The front cover of the Greentown study shows a fairly typical off-the-peg housing estate image. The image is torn across the centre as one might imagine a child tearing the wallpaper at home. The tear discloses something odd occupying the space beneath the skin of the built environment of the estate. Underneath the skin is a network of individuals linked together by some form of relationship. These red and green lines are the equivalent of the Golden Mile's pipelines but, in Greentown's case, they indicate criminal relationships between individual actors and carrying flows of influence and power.

Poor and vulnerable children receive one-way flows of influence from individuals higher in the pecking order and enjoy very little power. Until the Greentown study was undertaken, such malign relationships for children had received little attention from the scientific community in Ireland and had not been the focus of policy effort.

Greentown is a real but anonymised provincial locality in Ireland. It was selected for the study because it appeared to experience higher than normal incidences of serious crime by children, in particular burglary and drugs for sale and supply.

Lifting the Lid on Greentown



Why we should be concerned about the influence criminal networks have on children's offending behaviour in Ireland

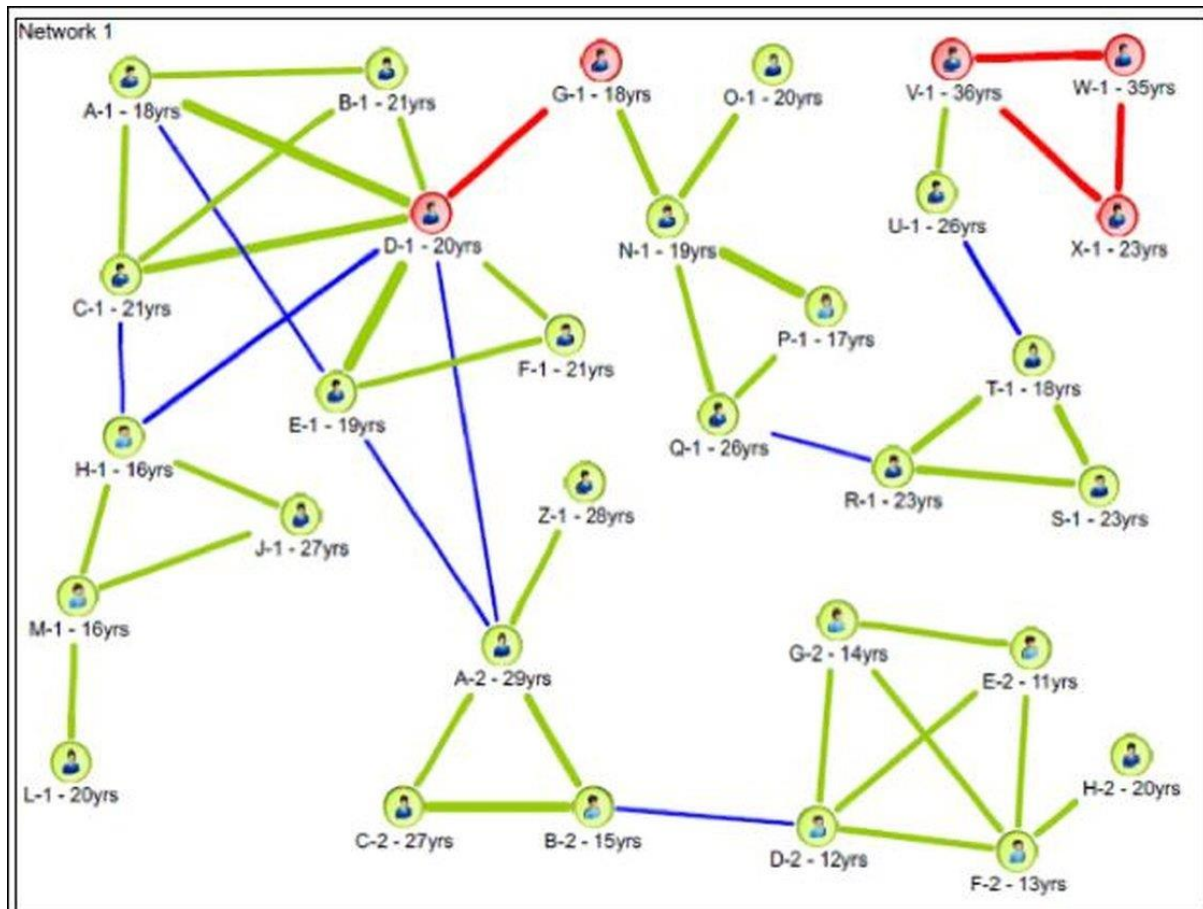
The gel that holds the Greentown network together is family and kinship. Usually we would analyse such data statistically, indicating general patterns and trends. These exercises can be very useful for activities such as resource deployment but they can be rather sterile, lack intrinsic meaning and tend to smooth over outlier data which is where we suspected the Greentown story to lie.

For the Greentown study, analysts in Garda headquarters were asked to link all persons involved in all burglary and drugs for sale and supply offences detected in Greentown from 2010 to 2011. Taking this step transformed the columns of numerical data into a patterned illustration showing constellations of individuals linked by crime episodes.

This network map became an observation frame to further examine relationships between these actors by interviewing specially selected and seasoned local Garda members from Greentown about their experiences of the incidents indicated by the links, and lives of the actors who punctuated the links. The network members, similar to Greentown itself, were anonymised to protect their identities and encourage detailed examination.

Not unlike the fruits of Snow and Whitehead's painstaking categorising and filing of observations in Golden Square, previously unseen clusters and patterns were revealed in Greentown by Garda members' accounts of events and relationships involving individuals and groups. These narratives

not only provided finer granularity to the contexts of specific criminal events, they also surfaced troublesome properties for the network itself.



A key actor in the network (A2 shown on this map) presided over a subordinate and largely compliant community which tended not to report crime to the authorities. He copper-fastened his dominant position with Greentown residents and network members alike through debt obligations from a money-lending racket.

He also enjoyed a meme-like persona, being aped by those up and coming members of the network and children in the margins who both revered and feared him. His ubiquity and power derived from stories and myths about what had happened to those who had slighted him in the past. This resulted in a general self-governance by members of the community involved and not involved in the network. Like any bully in a school or in a domestic abuse situation, A2 had to apply little or no effort to influence others' behaviour.

For children, the network acted as a draw to access alcohol, drugs, a party lifestyle, revenue, power and, most of all, possible recognition and social capital. However for those children who became significantly involved in network criminal activity, the pull associated with acquiring social capital at some point became the push associated with obligation and network expectation. One child who

was taken into the care of the state for a temporary period quickly re-joined his group of child burglars choreographed by adults. This was primarily, it seems, because middle ranking members of the network cultivated a relationship with his mother while he was in care. There was little prospect of escape from the network for such children.



“He copper-fastened his dominant position with residents and network members alike through debt obligations from a money-lending racket.”

Though not unique to Ireland, the Greentown network anatomy is distinctive. While accounts of gangs and networks in jurisdictions such as the United States and United Kingdom can be characterised by race, ethnicity, uniform (for example motorcycle gangs) and neighbourhood, the gel that holds the Greentown network together is family and kinship. This family core recruited children and adults in what were effectively "contracts" to undertake more menial work which was more susceptible to detection.

It is suggested that the fear generated by the network toward children far outweighs any deterrent effect generated by sanctions offered by the criminal justice system. This presents challenges to the state both in terms of law enforcement and protecting vulnerable children from predatory adults intent on using them for crime. Family trumps most other gang associations, governed as it is by trust rather than more usual enforced relationship of "members". With it, family enjoys resilience to

outward threat and the capacity for organic succession. The Greentown network had been part of the community's local narrative for years.



Even though the Greentown enquiry is innovative and clearly shows the flaws in traditional ways of thinking about how crime occurs, it is also limited. The accounts of network activities are secondhand, from Garda members who were skilled, experienced and motivated by the plight of children involved in the network, but they were obviously once removed.

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More fundamentally, even the network tool itself highlights our current inability to routinely detect what are very powerful forces. By way of illustration, A2 on our map does not appear to be particularly central - in fact, Garda analysts threw in a couple of blue lines (not in the original spec) just in case I missed him in the examination. On the other hand, D1 is replete with links which made us initially think he had some form of leadership role. The true position is that the links relate to detection as D1 gets caught and A2 does not. Nevertheless, A2's true role could not be concealed after mining the soft intelligence provided by local Garda members with first-hand experience of the community. While incredibly resource intensive, such mining can yield extremely valuable insight of use to policy and programme makers.

Yes, perhaps the cholera analogy is inappropriate or insensitive. However, some discomfort is required to generate dissonance around what is a largely unseen public health problem. The challenges presented by the Greentown phenomenon are myriad and do not feat neatly into our

assumptions about what works in systems and in interactions with children who offend. Consistent with the thinking relating to other so called "wicked problems" of modernity the first job, as Snow and Whitehead clearly demonstrated, is to understand it.

The Greentown study was produced by the School Of Law at the University of Limerick. The School is funded by the Department of Children & Youth Affairs to undertake research into children's involvement in crime networks and to design more effective interventions. RTÉ Brainstorm will carry more reports on the Greentown project later in 2018.

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not represent or reflect the views of RTÉ.