

# ULRR

## Men on the margins masculinities in disadvantaged areas in Limerick city

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**Men on the Margins: Masculinities in Disadvantaged Areas in Limerick City (2011)** By Patricia Kelleher and Pat O'Connor in N.Hourigan (ed.) *Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and Change*. Cork University Press pp169-184

**Introduction**

Large numbers of men benefit materially, socially and politically from patriarchy, but the advantages described as the “patriarchal dividend”, are not spread equally amongst men (Connell, 1995 and 2005a). In other words, not all men are equally privileged. In this context a key issue is how do men negotiate their identities as men within disadvantaged areas. This raises questions about the social and economic structures in which they live as well as about their cultural definitions of masculinities. Connell (2005b: 13) suggested that: ‘Masculinities are constructed, over time, in young people’s encounters with a system of gender relations’. Thus gender ‘is something people ‘do’’ (Cameron, 1998: 16) and it varies across time and place.

This chapter is an exploratory study of masculinities enacted within locally disadvantaged contexts. Drawing on in-depth interviews with young men, it suggests that they, for the most part, enact marginalised masculinities, excluded from the public space in these local communities by drug disorder and by pre-teen and teenage protest masculinities; and from the economic area by their own poor educational levels and an inability to attain breadwinner status. A minority of the men in this study had moved towards a re-envisioning of masculinity, mainly through caring; with sport being one of the few ways in which the majority enacted masculinities in an unproblematic way. Many of them had lives marked by personal trauma and difficulties. However their ability to access support was limited by a definition of masculinity that precluded confiding.

In summary, this chapter seeks to explore the extent and nature of their difficulties in ‘doing’ masculinities.<sup>1</sup> It also outlines some of the interventions which could be put in place to bring young men in such disadvantaged communities in from the margins.

**Methodology**

This study of men on the margins is set in disadvantaged areas of Limerick City. Limerick City is one of sharp contrasts in terms of the spatial distribution of relative affluence and deprivation (Limerick Regeneration 2008). DeCleir (2003) points out that economic disadvantage and social exclusion are highly concentrated in four of the sixteen housing estates built by the local authority in Limerick City. Limerick Regeneration comprises two Regeneration Agencies, and was established by the government in June 2007, following on from the Fitzgerald Report published in April 2007. It was established to address what Fitzgerald (2007) had described as “concentrated and chronic disadvantage” in Limerick City. A Draft Plan to address the needs of these areas was launched in October 2008 and Master Plans are to be published in September 2009.<sup>ii</sup>

Large numbers of households in these areas are welfare dependent, unemployed and consist of lone parents. The unemployment rate is two and a half to three and a half times the national average. At a time when lone parent family units with one dependent child under 15 years made up 21 per cent of family units in the state as a whole, they made up between 57 per cent and 64 per cent of lone parent families in these areas (PAUL Partnership 2006).<sup>iii</sup>

The criteria for the selection of the young men in this study included age and location: i.e. they were aged between eighteen and thirty three years and grew up or lived in one of the disadvantaged areas which are now the remit of Limerick Regeneration. Key practitioners agreed to refer young men to the study and eighteen young men volunteered to be interviewed. Hence, it is not a random survey, but an exploratory study whose purpose is to give voice to young men living in disadvantaged areas. The young men were interviewed during May and June 2007.

The average age of the young men interviewed was 22 years. All of the men were white and Irish born. All but two were currently unemployed. None of the men were married or had ever been married. Half (nine) of the men interviewed had children. Between them, they identified 15 children. Three of the nine who had children were living with the mother of their child (ren). Five of the men who had children were non-resident fathers and one other man was a lone parent with the main responsibility for his child.

More than half (ten) of the eighteen men interviewed were living in their parents' house (including three of the non-resident fathers). Four of the eighteen men were involved to some extent in pushing out the boundaries for the enactment of masculinities: in two cases their partner was the main earner; one was in receipt of carer's allowance and a fourth was himself a lone parent .

The interviews, which were semi structured, lasted on average one hour. The analysis consisted of thematic qualitative analysis of the interview data- initially focussing on key concepts drawn from Connell's work and later, on other themes that emerged inductively from the data in interaction with the literature. In the text, participants' identities are protected by the use of fictitious names and by removing or altering any identifying information not essential to the analysis.

The key issue underlying this study was the question of how men negotiate their masculinities within the context of economic and social marginalisation. The study presents the experiences of social marginalisation as seen by these young men in their struggle for dignity and survival under three themes:

- School days and Uncertain Futures
- Everyday Life: Lack of Access to Public Space
- Other Sites for 'Doing Masculinity': Paid Work, Fatherhood, Confiding, Sport

### **School Days and Uncertain Futures**

The right to education is outlined in the Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Good literacy and numeracy skills are important for everyday living. However 30 per cent of pupils in primary schools in disadvantaged areas in Ireland have serious literacy

difficulties (about three times the national average). This is a human rights issue (Baker et al 2004).

Educational credentials in what the American sociologist, S. M. Miller calls the “credential” society (Miller 1967; quoted in Miller 2002) affect access to employment, social mobility and pay levels. In Ireland, since the 1980s access to top jobs in skilled manual work and in professional, administrative and managerial work are based primarily on such educational credentials. Critically, the need for such credentials has extended to apprenticeships, one of the traditional ladders of working class mobility from local paid insecure jobs to skilled employment (Smyth and Hannan 2000). Lacking economic, social and cultural capital, children living in areas, which experience cumulative disadvantage face considerable difficulties managing the school environment (O’Neill 1992).

Almost all of the young men interviewed found school difficult and many “hated” school, particularly secondary school. They encountered difficulties in managing the school environment and school culture. Many left school without basic reading and writing skills.

Thirteen of the eighteen young men in the study left school at fifteen years or younger making what O’Donnell and Sharpe (2000) call “careerless transitions” where only insecure, low paid jobs are open to them and where it is difficult for them to have a stake in society. The remaining five men passed the junior certificate and left before completing the leaving certificate or qualifying for a trade. This contrasts with the fact that the majority of Irish young people complete the leaving certificate, although boys, especially those in disadvantaged areas are less likely to do this. Without educational credentials, apprenticeships, one of the traditional ladders of working class mobility from low paid insecure jobs to skilled employment, is not available to them (Smyth and Hannan 2000).

The themes emerging in these young men’s accounts of their school days were reminiscent of Willis’ “Lads” (1977) and Mac an Ghiall’s (1994) “Macho Lads”. Thus, as in these studies, some coped with the school environment by being rebellious and refusing to accept the teacher’s authority: *‘We were all messers. I was thrown out of school. I had got suspended a few times. They said that they would take me back if I signed a form for good behaviour. I wouldn’t sign it’* (Joe)

Many of the men had subsequently benefited from special educational and work training projects where learning was organised in more informal ways in smaller groups. The existence of community based projects, specifically designed to help young adults re-build their careers has enabled some young men to re-enter education. Joe who is now 19 years left school at fifteen and ended up in low paid jobs. He is currently studying for the Leaving Certificate Applied and would like to get a trade, preferably as a plumber. He is hopeful that he will succeed:

*The project is very different than school where you are just sitting in a classroom. Here it is relaxed. You call the teacher by the first name. They are your friends. You know that they care about you. There is need for a lot more projects like this. A lot of people are waiting to get in* (Joe)

Vince who is now 23 and has also returned to education: *'I am now doing the leaving cert and would like a job in computers' (Vince)*

Jason commented on the fact that teachers in the project understood the pupils, were attentive to them, helped them to learn and made learning interesting:

*It is the way they run the place. They know what is going on [meaning they understand the everyday life of people]. The project is welcoming. They ask you, how you are. They have a great sense of humour. I know a lot of people who want to get into project, but there is a waiting list (Jason)*

Although some young people are aware that education is one of the most important means of accessing a decent wage, they feel that they have left it too late to return to education: *I am sorry now that I did not stay on. I would not go back to school. It is too late to do that (Kevin)*

Because of lack of formal qualifications the jobs to which many of the young men have access are uninteresting and low paid and some cannot find work at all. Much of their day consists of *'hanging around, doing nothing in particular'*. Several mentioned that they would stay in bed until mid-day. Many spent many hours watching sport on television. A typical afternoon could involve *'watching television in a mate's house'*; while at weekends: *'I'd phone a few friends and get them over for a few cans. We would put on the play station and U Tube'*.

What came across in the interviews is that these young men experience the "emotional wounds of class inequality" what the sociologists Sennett and Cobb (1972) refer to as "the hidden injuries of class", where injurious games of self-justification elevates one group by ostracising and "othering" minority groups and groups on the margins (Bourdieu 1984; Miller and Savoie 2002; Sennett 2004).

### **Everyday life: Lack of access to Public Space**

Classic ethnographic studies such as Liebow's (1967) and Whyte's (1943) show how important the street is for unemployed men. However the young men in this study feel that they have to 'negotiate multilayered aspects of risk and danger in relation to violence in public space' (Green and Singleton 2006). Their difficulties in accessing public space arises from two sources: firstly drug related disorder in their communities and secondly from the activities of teens and pre-teenage boys, which it is suggested can be seen as indicative of protest masculinity.

### ***Feuding and Drugs Related Disorder***

Inter family feuding has long been a feature of life in Limerick and precedes the emergence of the illegal drug trade of the 1980s and 1990s (see chapter ? of this book). As the trafficking and selling of illegal drugs became a source of considerable wealth, feuding among families escalated and deepened. Inter-family feuding is now a feature of life in many of the deprived areas in Limerick City, as the families that are involved in the drugs trade seek to retain or extend control over "drug patches". Hand grenades, pipe bombs and explosives feature in different disputes. Revenge killings are common and lives are being destroyed and communities devastated.

Young men interviewed in this study talked about how families are drawn into the feuds in a variety of ways. Young men, alienated and susceptible agree to carry and to sell drugs to earn what they see as a decent wage when few other opportunities are open to them. They are the small dealers, couriers or mules, who smuggle drugs by “stuffing” or swallowing them. They are what Vince, one of the young men interviewed, calls the “penny boys” or the “runners”, the people who take the risk of being caught. Paddy echoes this viewpoint:

*Many of the small dealers tried to work [looked for work]. They were in little jobs [low paid work]. There was a stigma. People did not like that they were from here. Because of this, they started selling drugs to get a bit of money. It was normal. Now they get shot at and arrested (Paddy)*

While some people are selling drugs to feed their families, others have greater expectations and are involved in responding to the escalating needs created by a consumer society: ‘*Young men want money for show. Young fellows want cars and money. They want tackies, clothes, the best of stuff. They want the brand names*’ (Declan).

Also involved are drug addicts who sell drugs in order to support their addiction. Control over “patches” and drugs have led to gangland feuds between a select number of local families. This in turn has led to revenge attacks ordered by gang bosses. Many people who have nothing to do with the feud can get caught up in it because of who they are related to: ‘*You cannot lead an ordinary life. There are too many people looking for revenge. There is no end to the feuds. There are too many people dead*’ (Dave). Niall explained: ‘*A friend of mine was stabbed in the lungs, because his nephew was involved in the feud*’ (Niall). There are numerous accounts of serious violence:

*I knew a fellow who was smoking heroin. He did not have the money to pay for it. He got a beating. If they couldn’t get him, they’d get his brother. He turned to someone else to borrow the money. He did not know that they were part of the feud. He is caught in now and cannot get out. In fact his whole family is caught in the feud (Jason)*

Violence and destruction have caused devastation on many streets: ‘*A bomb was found in a house beside me. Two or three houses down from me have been burned down twice*’ (Owen); ‘*There are only two houses left on the block I live in. Six or seven have been burned down. The whole block at the back of us has been burned*’ (Paddy). When tensions are high, normal life is disrupted over innocuous incidences: ‘*Stupid things are happening. A fight can start over a girlfriend. It gets out of hand and cannot be stopped*’ (Dylan).

Amongst the young men in the present study, even walking around the community, going to visit relatives in other areas, going into the city centre or even going to the pub is restricted - not least because ‘*someone would think that you are dealing in drugs*’. Some of the men do frequent local pubs but many of them expressed a fear of doing so because of the prevalence of violence: ‘*It is too dangerous to go to the pub. I stay at home with my girlfriend and watch television. At weekends we get a few cans*’

(Dave). Jason also avoids pubs: *'When I have drink on, it encourages me to slag them [drug dealers] off. This is a dangerous situation to be in'* (Jason)

Many people who have nothing to do with the feud get caught up in it because of who they are related to or who they borrow money from and: *'Once you are involved, you cannot get out.... You cannot lead an ordinary life. There are too many people looking for revenge. There is no end to the feuds. There are too many people dead'* (Joe)

Many of them had very happy childhood memories of these areas: *'I was brought up in Moyross. I enjoyed it'* (William); *'My father used to take me fishing and camping'* (Philip); *'We used to go to football matches'* (Owen). However they are very aware of how drugs have now devastated the communities in which they live: *'St. Mary's was a great place to grow up. There were regattas on the river. You could hang around for hours. But this has all changed. We have not got that these days. The feuds have destroyed the city'* (Niall)

Nevertheless, the local area was and is important to the young men interviewed and there is a strong sense of place, a place which they know intimately. The majority of them have siblings and extended kin living nearby and are strongly attached to these communities. Despite the horrific violence and intimidation: *'our kids cannot leave the house..... It is not safe out there'* (Tom), only two of the eighteen men would like to move out of the area.

### ***Protest Masculinity***

The importance of the street for youth gangs has been described in many classic sociological studies (Whyte 1943; Willmott 1969) and also emerged in this study. Connell (1995) suggests that many young men use the street to make a claim to power in the absence of any real educational or occupational resources. This he calls "protest masculinity". Protest masculinity is a "tough guy" assertion. It is the assertion of a masculinity in a context where much of the traditional routes of respectability have been closed off. It is not however only the material gains that are sought after in protest masculinity. The symbolic meaning of activity is also important. Protest masculinity provides young men with recognition, an identity and a place in the world that has been denied to them.

Severe neighbourhood harassment and disruption can be caused by activities related to pre-teen and teenage protest masculinity. As they observe and emulate the older lads, many of the pre-teen and teenage boys graduate from setting fire to rubbish and drinking in fields to robbing houses, robbing cars, joy riding and prison. The older lads in turn see the crime and drug bosses as heroes and want to be like them. At a basic level participation in a young gang relieves boredom. Mark who is now eighteen years recalls his participation in gangs at a young age: *'At 12 and 13 we used to drink and smoke cannabis. Fuck all else to do. Fuck all here. We just hung around drinking and having a laugh'*.

Joy riding is overwhelmingly an activity of older teenagers who temporarily take control of the public domain, transcending their feelings of powerlessness and boredom through "displays of risk, excitement, masculinity and even carnivalesque

pleasure” (Rush *et al* 2006 quoting Hayward, 2004) in an ‘extended present’ in which they can forget the stark realities of an uncertain future (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). Such activities create a sense of excitement, enact ritualistic defiance and most importantly, are an opportunity to publicly demonstrate skills before audiences and so gain social status and “street cred” in a context where their lives are characterised by educational failure, bleak prospects and high alcohol and drug use. It is what Lyng (1990) describes as “edgework”. In edgework there is an emphasis on skill and performance which if not successful can lead to injury and death: *‘You have to keep control, make sure that you do not hit anything. People come out to watch the hand brake spin. Young fellows come out of the cracks in the walls looking at the spinning’* (Chris).

The risk involved creates a heightened sense of self and a feeling of “omnipotence”. McVerry (2003) sees joy-riding as the ultimate expression of alienation. Over time young people graduate through a series of stages from watching joy-riders to actually driving cars:

*Young fellows are hanging around saying - what will we do? Rob a car. When I was young I used to rob cars..... At first I used to watch the older lads robbing cars. It is exciting. Everyone gathers around. Girls stand at the corners looking on. Then I was a passenger in the car. Then I drove* (Paddy)

Finally many of the cars are burned out. Most of the young men interviewed, even if they had been involved in the past, would not now condone ‘joy riding’ since it adds to the total disorganisation and turmoil in disadvantaged areas: *‘Cars are speeding up and down, horses and sulkies flying up and down the road, jeeps are speeding beside the horses to see how fast the horses are going, young children are on quads. The place is mad’* (Niall).

A lack of confidence in and antagonistic relations with the gardai has long been shown to be associated with social marginalisation (*Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System*, 1985). Aggressive patrolling and indiscriminate street searches by the gardai and what are perceived as unacceptable attempts to solve crimes were experienced as harassment by some of the young men in this study. On the other hand, the invisibility of the forces of law and order (as reflected in the absence of garda stations in these areas) reinforced the perception of the gardai as not *‘making much of a difference’*; *‘The gardai have little control. They can’t do much. They can’t catch the drug dealers’* (Paddy).

Caring for animals, especially horses was one of the few non-criminal outlets for these young men (as in other working class areas). Paradoxically however, in response to publicity about ‘wandering’ horses, this outlet had effectively been eliminated by the gardai, thus further denuding their lives: *‘Everyone loves horses. I love horses. All I wanted was horses. The gardai and pound took them’* (Paddy).

Four of the men in the present study indicated that they had spent time in prison. Some had been to prison on several occasions. Three received sentences for drink and anger related crimes and one for stealing cars. All four are making a determined effort to remain crime-free. Although a prison sentence was initially seen as a “badge of honour”, generally young men found it difficult to serve the sentence. Colm who is

now 28 and has two children was 'locked-up' for being drunk and disorderly. He found prison very difficult: *'It was terrible. You had no privacy. It was crazy'*.

Tom who is 23 years old got involved in crime through drink and received an eighteen month prison sentence. He has two sons and intends to remain out of crime. Niall who is now 29 years says:

*When I was young I was very angry. I was in a gang. I thought I was the bees knees, high on cider. After a few times in jail, depression kicked in. I knew that I had to do something about my life. Prison copped me out (did his head in). Once when I was up before the courts, I asked the judge not to lock me up and the judge gave me a chance*

The access of these young men in the present study to public spaces was limited both by the activities of those involved in drug related crimes and by the protest masculinities of the teens and pre-teens in these areas. This had implications for their ability to enact masculinities since it effectively excluded them from a variety of public areas.

#### **Other sites for 'Doing Masculinity': Paid work, Fatherhood, Confiding, Sport**

In Ireland even to-day, masculinity has continued to be defined particularly in terms of paid work and the ability to be a 'breadwinner' (Ni Laoire, 2005; O'Connor et al, 2005). For Connell (2005a) potentially at least, men could transform elements of the enactment of masculinities, by their pragmatic acceptance of women as key breadwinners and by undertaking domestic and child care work. Brannen and Nilsen (2006:338) also suggested that 'new forms of masculinity constitute positive and transformative resources for young men in the context of negative structural conditions'. In this section we look at the extent to which these young men identified paid work; fathering; confiding and sport as sites for the enactment of masculinities.

These unemployed men faced considerable difficulties in 'doing masculinity' in socially acceptable ways within a societal context where having a job was still the most acceptable way to be a man, and where poverty and the lack of material resources was likely to affect their ability to do this and to establish a home or to get married. The vast majority of the young men interviewed do not have work in the traditional meaning of having a 'job'. As young adults, they see themselves as personifications of failure precisely because they share the values of the wider culture in wanting to have a "decent" job to support a family. Unemployment or low paid work damages confidence and undermines the breadwinner role: *'It emotionally affects a man that he cannot support a family. Men value themselves in work. Without work many feel useless. It is an emptiness feeling'* (Declan).

Even the two young men who are full-time carers in the home would like to be in paid work outside the home: *'I would love to have money to provide for my kids. When my kids are asked "what does your father do?". I would like them to be able to say that I do something'* (Niall). Having no paid work both profoundly affects their sense of self and makes it difficult for them to support a family financially. Kiernan (2006) draws attention specifically to the economic barriers, which unemployed men encounter in making a conscious decision to have children. Dylan, aged 22 years who has no

children would like to settle down: 'I would love to be able to support a family. I feel that this is not possible at the moment. I have not a decent job. I have no qualifications'.

Many of the young men also encounter discrimination and disrespect because of where they live: '*Your address affects your chances of employment. If I want to apply for a job I have to give my sister's address. I was advised to change address on my application form, as it would discriminate against me when applying for a job*' (Declan). Nevertheless there was a suggestion that some felt entitled to paid work '*Now we have not a fair chance of getting a job*'. Thus five of the eighteen young men, without being asked, stated that competition from migrant workers affects their chances of getting paid work and is also lowering pay levels. Their perception is that foreign workers are '*working for half nothing*' and '*messing up the whole system*' although they stressed that they '*were not blaming them*'.

None of the eighteen men interviewed for the present study have ever married. One man commented on the fact that marriage in his community is a very rare event. In Ireland there has been some shift in the amount of housework and caring work that men do. Nevertheless 70-80 per cent of Irish men do no cooking, cleaning or laundry on a weekday-and this changes little over the week-end (Mc Ginnity et al, 2007). The majority of the young men in the present study still saw women as having the main responsibility for children-and the ability to 'do a runner' was one of the few aspects of a patriarchal dividend that they saw men as having (Connell, 1995): '*The man can get up and walk. Children are more women's responsibility. Women have it hard. Men can get up and take off*' (Chris).

Nevertheless there is some evidence in the present study that traditional gender patterns are changing and that these men are taking on a greater role in doing housework, although it would appear that it is more a 'helping hand' than a decisive shift. Thus, sixteen of the eighteen men in the present study 'help out' in the house, with only two men stating that they would not do housework: '*I help out at home. Things have changed. I do the hovering upstairs and polishing. I do the shopping every Friday*' (Tom). In the present study where the woman was the sole earner in the household there was an acceptance that the men would undertake domestic and child-care work. Also, one man was a carer and carried out the main household and caring work. Thus, there was some suggestion of the emergence of what Brannen and Nilsen (2006:338) called 'new forms of masculinity' in the lives of four of the eighteen young men.

In the current study nine of the eighteen men interviewed had children, five of whom were non-resident fathers. These five non-resident fathers wished to retain an involvement with their children. One of them has an agreement with his ex partner to jointly care for their children and has the children overnight three nights a week; three have/had cases in the family law courts and there is palpable anger among some of these men against the legal system: '*Unmarried men are discriminated against. They get an unfair deal. They do not have rights, yet have to pay maintenance*' (Colm).

Many had difficulty coping with their former partners after the relationship ended. There is also a lot of distrust between women and men. Chris felt that having the

children gave women power over men: *'For the first while she let me take the kids. Now she is using the kids to control me'*.

Taking on a changing role in the family poses serious challenges to men, not only to develop the skills of housework and caring, but also to develop the capacity for relationship competence and emotional communication (Ferguson 1998). Nevertheless, all nine men who had children acknowledged the positive impact that becoming a father had on them. Having a child challenged them to have some level of stability in their lives and to take some responsibility for their children. Many mentioned their determination "stay out of trouble" because they now have children.

Although men are just as capable as women of confiding, such confiding is more likely to occur between women than between men (O'Connor, 2002/1992). Confiding between men has been shown to be related to wider structural and cultural factors including constructions of masculinity involving 'aggression, competitiveness, stoicism, rational thinking and independence' (Franklin 1992: 210) arguably legitimated by the existence of heroic, taciturn exemplary models of masculinity in American Western movies: (Connell, 2005a: 194). Cleary (2005) found that many of the young Irish men she studied who had attempted suicide were unable or unwilling to confide in anyone because of fear of rejection, guilt or simply an inability to articulate such feelings. Begley et al (2003) found that although the majority of Irish men aged 18-34 years in their study found it useful to talk to someone, more than two thirds said that they sometimes had a drink or tried not to think about a problem when they were worried or upset. Sixteen of the eighteen young men in the present study stated that they would not confide in anyone if they had an emotional difficulty. Confiding in others, especially other men, was seen as a weakness, reflecting fears about emotional vulnerability and even perceived homosexuality: *'It is pansy stuff. I am not one for shared love stuff'* (Vince); *'I would not talk about things bothering me. Men keep it all in. Fellows are frightened to talk to other fellows. They are afraid that the fellows will talk about it to someone else. I would try and sort it out myself'* (Dylan).

Thus these young men did not have a construct of masculinity that allowed them to access emotionally supportive relationships. The cost of not confiding can be high and may be associated with depression and/or violence (Miller, 1991). Such cost seemed particularly likely to occur in a context where there was a lot of unresolved anger around 'revenge' killings and other kinds of loss and trauma: *'I was holding everything on my chest. I was trapped in a hole, no light. You would let no one know. It was eating me up slowly'* (Niall); *'Men can't say how they feel. In the pub, they start roaring and shouting. They take the aggression out on someone else – what the fuck are you looking at?'* (Dylan). The only style of communication some of the men appeared to value was a didactic one. Thus their difficulties around confiding in others extended to counselling (even when mandated by the court for alcohol abuse): *'No counsellor can help me. I have been talking to her for five weeks. It is all me telling her'* (Mark).

Boys in Ireland as elsewhere are more likely than girls to be heavily involved in sport (Fahey et al, 2005; O'Connor, 2008). It has been widely suggested (Connell, 1995; Willis, 1990; Haywood and Mac an Ghiall, 2003) that sport is a site for the enactment of masculinities, not least because sport, for those who are good at it, allows for the

display of physical skills, toughness, control and detachment (Willis, 1990:115; O'Connor, 2008). Indeed Connell (2005b:15) suggested that sport- particularly physical contact competitive team sport, was almost as important as sexuality as 'a site of masculinity formation'.

For the men in the present study, sport was one of the few sites for the enactment of masculinities. Twelve of the 18 men in the present study were involved in sport- some at a very high level (including playing under age soccer for Ireland). Many trained regularly, some even taking a leadership role in getting others involved in it:

*I love sport. I train every Tuesday, Thursday and play matches on Sunday. There are about 50 involved in the soccer. I got fellows involved in the soccer that you would think would not kick a ball. I knocked at doors to get them up out of bed for a match. To keep fit is very important (Dylan)*

William "loves" sport and is proud of the local facilities: '*Moyross has an all weather in-door soccer pitch, snooker, boxing-club. I love soccer and hurling*' (William). However facilities for these activities were unevenly available in these disadvantaged areas. Thus one area had no soccer clubhouse. In another area, although there is a "soccer academy", there is no soccer pitch and young people have to be transported outside the area by coach for soccer practice.

### **Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations**

The eighteen young men in this exploratory study grew up in areas, which are characterised by socio-economic disadvantage. The majority left school early and some left school with their individual needs unmet.

Young men without educational credentials make what O'Donnell and Sharpe (2000) refer to as "careerless transitions" to insecure, low paid jobs or are unable to get paid work. An additional obstacle to getting work is the discrimination they experience because of where they live and competition for low paid work from migrant workers.

Many of them benefited/are benefiting from education projects that are person-centred, have small classes and where a relational, informal approach to learning is adopted. These models are participatory, affirm the self-esteem of the young men and also foster closer and stronger relationships with their teachers. These models contrast with that of many services, which operate along hierarchal lines, are impersonal in nature and provide for little consultation with the users of services.

Control in the communities in which they live is exercised by a small number of families who control the distribution of drugs and other criminal activity. The escalation of violence, resulting from the drugs trade has devastated such communities. The people who are suffering the most are the ordinary families. They are the neighbours of the drug barons, and are virtually imprisoned in their own communities. In the words of one man: '*Drugs have broken us. Drugs changed everything in our community. Through greed and power, the whole town is torn apart*' (Paddy).

The local area is important to the young men interviewed. There is a strong sense of place, which they know intimately, and are highly connected to through kinship. Low-level everyday violence and intimidation creates fear and anxiety. Because of the violence, men feel restricted walking around their community and frequenting local pubs. Visiting pubs and relatives in other working class areas in Limerick City is also not to be taken lightly. The public spaces that men were used to occupying are no longer available to them. Nevertheless, despite the violence and the loss of access to public space, it is interesting to note that only two of the young men would like to move out of the area in which they live

It is not surprising that teens and pre-teens are susceptible to getting involved in anti-social behaviour that is severely disruptive to the community including neighbourhood harassment and disruption by setting rubbish on fire and drinking in fields. As they grow older and emulate the older lads, they graduate to robbing cars, joy riding and prison. The older lads in turn see the crime and drug bosses as heroes. Success in this context is seen as flirting with danger and taking risks, yet steering clear of the gardai.

Alongside difficulties in getting work and with the education system, the young men in the present study struggle with a multitude of other factors. These include the traumatic death of friends and relatives and social and emotional difficulties. Many of them in their teenage years lived “for the present” (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006) but now realise that they need somehow to create a future. When they reach their early to mid twenties, they are marooned in a social and cultural environment where it is extremely difficult for them to construct a life that ‘makes sense’ in any terms. They are ‘bystanders’ of two cultures – what they see as an alien mainstream culture and a hard-core criminal sub-culture which permeates those communities. The traditional male roles of ‘breadwinner’ and ‘protector of the family’ are not open to them. Many of them are ready to engage with projects and services. However, there are few interventions for young men in their early twenties.

The need for a radical overhaul of how services have traditionally been delivered is acknowledged by the Chief Executive of the Limerick Regeneration Programme (Limerick Regeneration 2008). In delivering services he also points to the need to put in place better systems of co-ordination between different agencies. The present study indicates the need for a complex variety of interventions, which would include the following:

***Facilitating access to a safe public space:*** Ensuring that these communities are made safe needs to be a key priority of law enforcement agencies. There is also need to enhance the visibility of public services and their delivery within these communities. In addition a comprehensive protection and support programme is needed for both men and women who wish to leave the community.

***Community Policing:*** Paralleling a strategy to combat organised crime and drugs-related activity, there is need for greater links between gardai and the local community. What has been called a “relational” approach to local policing would create greater confidence in the gardai and strengthen the links between the gardai and the community. In this context community policing fora can make an important response.

***Education and Work Training:*** Finding and keeping a job is one of the most effective ways to prevent re-offending. There is a clear need for more special education projects for young adults at local level, which have a focus on staying out of crime and are linked to progression routes to apprenticeship training and employment. In delivering programmes, the methodologies developed by special education projects in the community can provide some guidelines. Most importantly, there is need for one agency to take responsibility for co-ordinating a response to the needs of young men.

***Bereavement Counselling:*** Many young men and their families experience unresolved grief resulting from the violence, injury, death and loss. Bereavement counselling and groupwork need to be accessible to young men and delivered in a way that is acceptable to them.

***Relational and emotional competencies:*** Many of the young men find it difficult to confide in others. Some also find it difficult to see relationships other than in control terms-with for example, 'doing a runner' being seen as one of the few advantages that they have in life as compared with women. This raises questions about their cultural constructions of masculinity- ones that could be usefully challenged.

***Age Related Recreational Intervention:*** There is need for a greater number of interventions which can disrupt teen and pre-teen protest masculinities. Equine projects and adventure sports facilities should be resourced as a way of building self-esteem and positive connections with others.

***Sport:*** This is one of the few areas where the young men in disadvantaged communities enact masculinities. A further development of the facilities to enable them to do this is recommended.

Based on this exploratory study, it is suggested that many of the difficulties these young men face stem from the interaction between the capitalist economic system and a cultural construction of masculinities. In this context projects that encourage structural as well as cultural transformation need to be encouraged. This requires structural changes in the educational and occupational systems as well as access to safe public spaces. But it also requires cultural transformation since masculinities which inhibit, for example, accessing supportive relationships and undertaking parental responsibility are also unhelpful. These are formidable tasks but ones which the activities of the Regeneration Agency can play a key role in facilitating.

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<sup>i</sup> The full report, *Uncertain Futures: An Exploratory Study of Men at the Margins*, on which this article is based is can be downloaded from [www.ul.ie/sociology.docstore/uncertain\\_futures](http://www.ul.ie/sociology.docstore/uncertain_futures). We would like to acknowledge the support given to the study by Margaret Griffin, Probation Service and to the young men who shared their experiences with us. Their names and some personal details have been changed to protect their identity.

<sup>ii</sup> The areas included are: Southill and Ballinacurra Weston, Moyross and St Mary's.

<sup>iii</sup> The percentage of lone parents with one dependent child less than 15 years was 63 per cent in Moyross, 63 per cent in Southill and 57 per cent in St Mary's.