

Cliona Barnes and Martin J. Power

*Internalising Discourses of Parental Blame: Voices From the Field.*

### **Introduction**

The greatest social problems seem to present either from the inability of people to parent or parents lacking the resources or skills to manage problematic children (City Council Official).

This paper documents the internalising of a particularly divisive and combative discourse of parental blame among a diverse group of research respondents. This group included local community members, representatives of state agencies, community workers and members of the police force, all of whom were convened to discuss their experiences and concerns relating to community safety. The unexpected reliance on this discourse of blame emerged as a key finding in our study, pointing towards an unsettling willingness among those living in challenging circumstances, and those charged with providing services and support to them, to locate the origin of long-standing social problems, not with entrenched economic and social inequalities, but with their own neighbours. We argue that this works to absolve the state of its responsibility to vulnerable families, legitimises cutbacks and withdrawals of social support and funding and encourages reductive, uncritical, individualised discussion of what remain complex, collective responsibilities.

To begin we introduce the location of our study, highlighting the recent history and the current key issues relating to this locale. We offer a brief insight into the contemporary Irish context of austerity and crisis, linking it to the overarching discourse of neoliberalism which dominates Irish political and economic life. Following this we introduce our methodological approach before focusing on the voices of our respondents in a discussion of our findings. This allows us to contextualise and trace the emergence of this distracting, distorting and deeply problematic discourse of blame.

### **The Location of our Study**

In the minds of the Irish public, Limerick City has acquired an intensely negative reputation over time. Limerick is a low-crime city with a serious crime problem (McCullagh 2011, p.23).<sup>1</sup> What McCullagh's analysis of victim surveys confirms is that in many respects Limerick is not

distinctively different from the national picture in terms of its 'level of victimisation', or the 'associated problems of fear and non-reporting to the Gardaí' (McCullagh 2011, p.30).<sup>2</sup> In parts of the two local authority estates (Southill and Ballinacurra Weston) that this study is concerned with, there are very strong community ties and levels of social capital, but in the parts where the 'disadvantaged of the disadvantaged' (Hourigan 2011) live, community violence and intimidation are more prevalent.<sup>3</sup>

It is necessary to examine the local economic structure and the historical process of industrial restructuring that occurred in Limerick as a starting point for understanding the process of the residualisation of the two local authority estates which we are concerned with.<sup>4</sup> Over the years the industrial base in the city greatly reduced. For example, Krups established a factory in Limerick in the 1960s which, at its peak, was providing 2500 jobs into Southill. When it closed in 1997 almost €9 million went out of the local economy (Humphries 2010). The effects of this industrial restructuring process has been 'socially and spatially uneven, imparting to the city a distinctive, and highly differentiated, social geography' with local authority estates such as Southill and Ballinacurra Weston having exceptionally high unemployment rates, and the 'highest percentages of unskilled and semi-skilled manual social classes, children under fifteen years of age and lone-parent families in the city' (McCafferty 2011, pp. 3-9; see also Humphries 2010).

The process of industrial restructuring was compounded by certain aspects of housing policy; such as the introduction of the Surrender Grant in 1984, which had the unintended consequence of further residualising these estates, because they were populated to an increasing extent by people who were becoming progressively more disadvantaged (see Considine and Dukelow 2009; McCafferty 2011; Hourigan 2011; Humphries 2010).<sup>5</sup> The design and layout of the estates (cul-de-sacs, lack of through roads) also led to problems of environmental degradation (vandalism, graffiti), anti-social behaviour and low level criminality (Limerick Regeneration Agencies 2008). In addition, the residualisation of the local authority housing estates in Limerick City is 'closely related to population trends' (McCafferty 2011, p.18). For example, O' Malley Park in Southill experienced a decline of 69% in its population between 1981 and 2006 (McCafferty 2011, pp.18-19; see also Humphries 2010). In essence these examples should be seen as illustrating the failure of local authority management of the estates, their housing strategy, and their planning of the city.

While housing policies have contributed to the creation of segregated and marginalised social spaces in Limerick City, Devereux et al. (2012; 2011b) document the manner in which media constructions also contribute to this process through the construction of stigmatised

localities. Indeed, the international research literature (Greer and Jewkes 2005; Bauder 2002; Blokland 2008; Hastings 2004; Kelleher et al. 2010) continues to demonstrate that negative reputations of such places can, in themselves, have a profound effect upon the life chances, experiences and self-image of those who live in neighbourhoods which carry a stigma (Permentier et al. 2007; 2008; 2009 cited in Devereux et al. 2011b).

### **The Response of the Irish State to Issues in the Estates**

Limerick City Council has responsibility for the management of public housing in both Southill and Ballinacurra Weston and, under powers given to the local authority by the Housing Act of 1977, tenants can be evicted for anti-social behaviour. Limerick City Council have taken numerous steps to enforce their statutory powers, however it is noteworthy that 'some residents in some estates have argued that some housing management decisions have made antisocial behaviour worse and destabilised previously settled areas' (Hourigan 2011a, p.133).

In September 2006 two young children were seriously injured in an arson attack in the city, leading to a national outcry about conditions in some of Limerick's local authority estates. In response, the Government appointed a former Dublin City Manager, John Fitzgerald, to carry out a speedy and comprehensive investigation and to make recommendations directly to the Government's Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion. He reported back in March 2007. In particular, Fitzgerald's Report recommended the increased involvement of the Criminal Assets Bureau (CAB), and a highly visible Garda presence in the estates. His recommendations were fully endorsed and approved by the Cabinet. A key element of the approved recommendations was the creation of the Limerick Regeneration Agencies (LRA) by Government Orders on 15th June 2007.

Progress on the regeneration of the estates has been extremely slow. Indeed Limerick Regeneration Agencies CEO Brendan Kenny accepted that while some progress has been made 'we know there are people out there who are in no way any better than they were three years ago and in some cases might be even worse' (Byrne 2011, p.32). Indeed, five years after the regeneration programme was launched, not a single new house has been completed (Raleigh 2012).

Hourigan (2011a, pp. 127-8) argues that community policing (and the 'visibility of the Emergency Response Unit') in Limerick is an effective policy response, which represents 'a frontline intervention' operating as 'a targeted response to specific problems'. Moreover, it has seen reductions in crime rates and 'improved relationships between the Gardaí and local

communities'. However, Kenny acknowledged that while community policing has made a significant impact on criminality in the regeneration estates in particular, 'it hasn't solved everything' (Byrne 2010, pp. 59-67). Kenny added that the additional police resources have had a more positive effect on some of the areas than others, and that Weston and Southill, for example, still 'hadn't seen the full effect of these measures' (Ibid).

'The single biggest gap in the state's response' (Hourigan 2011a, p.131) has been identified as the failure to address the anti-social/criminal behaviour of minors. The system at present sees the Gardaí having a very limited ability to tackle the behaviour of offending children. Moreover, the juvenile justice system has to date not dealt with this issue adequately (Hourigan 2011a, p.131). In such circumstances the question arises as to who exactly has responsibility for addressing the issue? Many observers would lay this responsibility at the feet of the Health Service Executive who have a 'duty of care' towards such children under the Children's Act (2001). Under Section 115 of this Act the state can compel parents to address their children's behaviour (through 'parental supervision orders, fines, and court orders to control their children') though it is significant that these powers have not been widely used (Hourigan 2011a, p.134).

Finally, the austerity agenda which successive governments have pursued since 2006 has seen social difficulties being experienced as a result of massive unemployment, consecutive welfare cuts and ever reducing household incomes, which in turn has created the very real possibility that the serious problems evident in these estates may become even more pronounced in the near future (McCafferty 2011, pp.20-21).

### **Neoliberalism, the Economic Crisis, Austerity, and the Erosion of the Welfare State**

Neoliberalism should be seen as a set of sometimes conflictual and contradictory beliefs and practices:

[a] regime of politico-economic organisation with attendant ideological and discursive justifications, with an emphasis on competitive markets as the most efficient way of managing the allocation of resources; the liberalisation and deregulation of economic activities; and the privatisation of previously publicly-owned assets (Thompson 2007).<sup>6</sup>

Yet we should not only see neoliberalism as an economic policy programme; it has been emphasised that neoliberalism should also be understood as a particular type of 'governmentality' (Larner 2000, cited in Purcell 2011, p.43), and as a form of 'public pedagogy' (Giroux 2004, cited in Purcell 2011, p.43). Building on this view Thompson (2007) notes that:

The key aspects here are the responsabilisation of autonomous agents; the production of ‘freedoms’, the encouragement of self-governance and self-reliance; and the creation of mechanisms of indirect ‘governance at a distance’ rather than direct interventionism (Thompson 2007).

We would agree with Thompson (2007) that these elements have now ‘fused into neoliberalism proper’ and ‘become more or less indistinguishable aspects of the same reality’. In essence neoliberalism remains a global hegemonic ideology because of its ability to adapt to fluctuating circumstances and it ‘is now engaged in manufacturing a new reality, using an ambitious blame-the-victim bait-and-switch strategy’ (Gutstein 2012). This ‘blame-the-victim strategy’ has encouraged a shift in how poverty and marginalisation are viewed. Tyler contends that poverty is no longer viewed as a social problem, with responsibility for resolution resting with the state, but as an individual failing on the part of the poor. Within this framework poverty can be thus constructed and understood as a choice (2011, p.21). This fits well with the popular understanding that Ireland is a classless society, with opportunities for social mobility freely available for those who seek it.

As noted above, Irish society is often self-imagined as a classless society. There is a shared acceptance of neoliberal principles and all mainstream Irish political parties practice a ‘clientelist’ politics (Gallagher and Komito 1999),<sup>7</sup> which individualises problems and ‘retard[s] the political development and consciousness of the economically dominated classes’ (Hazelkorn 1986, p.339, cited in Gallagher and Komito 1999). Ireland’s most recent social partnership agreement (Towards 2016) ‘recognises the importance of measures to build an inclusive society [...] and the social partners are committed to the achievement of a participatory society and economy with a strong commitment to social justice’ (Cousins 2007, pp.2-3).<sup>8</sup> Yet social partnership, which was supposed to be negotiated for the social good, has coincided with changes which have seen the ratio of social security to GDP spending fall considerably and a transfer of wealth upwards (Allen 2003, p.68; Lynch 2007). While there have certainly been improvements in absolute conditions over the past 20 years, there has been a simultaneous growth in relative inequality (Turner and Haynes 2006; McCashin 2004; Kirby 2002).

The onset of the current global economic crisis seemed to sound the ‘death knell of the neoliberal model’ (Allen 2011, p.171). However in Ireland (as elsewhere) the policy direction being pursued by the current (and previous) government is essentially ‘the shifting of ever more resources into the banks’ (Allen 2011, p.171) while simultaneously adopting an ‘ad hoc slash and burn approach to cutting public spending’ (Dobbins 2010, cited in Daly 2010, p.3) that

disproportionately impacts on the most vulnerable in society (a group which, rather ironically, successive Irish governments vowed explicitly to protect). Indeed, Dukelow (2012) argues that the response of the Irish state to the crisis has clearly revealed its neoliberal agenda. Yet despite the devastating impacts on living standards in Ireland, resistance to austerity has been muted. To understand this anomaly we now examine the processes which have resulted in the acceptance of a discourse which individualises blame for social ills.

### **The promotion of Neoliberal Discourse/Individualising Blame**

The attempt by governments to further retrench the welfare state in the current circumstances 'is fraught with political difficulties', and so governments have resorted to blaming those who require the assistance of the welfare state (Jones 2011, p.11), with government mantra declaring that excessive resources are exhausted by the poor through social welfare for example (Allen 2009, pp. 5-7). The ability of the state to force through austerity measures, cut back social funding and roll back on previous commitments depends, in a large part, on the willingness of the wider community to believe that responsibility for long term social and economic marginalisation and associated problems rests not with the state but with bad and undeserving citizens (Adair 2005; Edelman 1998; Lens 2002; Welsh and Parsons 2006), and increasingly with bad parents.

It is apparent that in the current era of neoliberalisation a 'coherent, large-scale responsabilisation process' is underway, that is 'led by governments and public authorities and experienced in their daily lives by citizens', and that is 'fundamentally premised on the construction of a moral agency that accepts the consequences of its actions in a self-reflexive manner' (Thompson 2007). In particular, discourses of personal responsibility have been applied to a range of social problems which are experienced by working class communities. As part of this process neoliberal individualistic ideologies inject myths that are constructed as fact into public discourse. These myths stigmatise feckless members of the working-class as 'undeserving' of the assistance they receive (Lens 2002, pp.144), completely disregard the structural causes of our economic and social difficulties, and consequently absolve the state, and the system of stratification resulting from global capitalism, of any responsibility (Edelman 1998, p.134).

As such, the widespread use of a Moral Underclass Discourse (Levitas, 2000) has resulted in the demonization of the most disadvantaged in society becoming an endemic feature of contemporary political and popular discourse, in the process reaffirming long held beliefs about the dangerous working class, who are perceived as a threat to the moral and social order (see

Tyler 2008, 2011; Wilson and Huntington 2005; Devereux et al. 2011a; Lens 2002; Golding and Middleton 1982; Skeggs, 1997; Wood and Skeggs, 2008), as non-contributors to prosperity, and as over contributors to decline (Skeggs 2004, 2005; Morris 1994; Renvall and Vehkalahti 2002; Hayward and Yar 2006; Law 2006; Levitas 2003). Social problems (such as those experienced in Southill and Ballinacurra Weston) were previously understood to result from ‘injustices that sprang from flaws within capitalism’ but now these issues are said to be a consequence of personal deficiencies, a culture of dependence and lifestyle choice (Jones 2011, p.10; Tyler 2011). This process has clearly been occurring in Ireland, with for example the Labour Party Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton, stating that unemployment was becoming a ‘lifestyle choice’ (Taylor 2011), and the Irish Prime Minister, Enda Kenny stating categorically that Ireland’s ‘spectacular’ economic crash occurred because ‘people simply went mad borrowing’ (Scally and Burke-Kennedy 2012). In essence, ‘the media, popular entertainment and the political establishment have gone out of their way to convince us that these are moral issues, an indiscipline that needs to be rectified’ (Jones 2011, p.195).

The current crisis of parenting discourse confers power and influence on some parents, while simultaneously constructing those who do not conform to the required standards as ‘the complicit or ignorant sources or perpetrators of the problem’ (Bragg 2011). State policies increasingly categorize parenting as ‘a skill which needs to be taught, particularly to parents who live in poverty’, and unequivocally see economic conditions as rather inconsequential (Clarke 2011). In the UK, David Cameron (cited in Jones 2011, p.77) espouses an ideology which ludicrously argues that ‘what matters most to a child’s life is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting’. Ian Duncan Smith went even further and claimed that poverty is not the result of a lack of economic capital, it is ‘due to problems like lack of discipline, family break-up and substance abuse’ (cited in Jones 2011, p.77). In such a warped society, cutting social welfare entitlements even further is seen as having a positive impact as it will force parents and their children to act responsibly and re-integrate into ‘normal’ society. This ideology has increasingly resulted in the abandonment of ‘economic notions of inequality’, and a ‘move towards moral interventions into the intimate conduct of family relationships’ (Jensen 2011; see also Kanieski 2011; Roberts 2011). Further to this, Jones (2011, pp. 194-5) notes that ‘in blaming the victims, the real reasons behind social problems like drugs, crime and anti-social behaviour have been intentionally obscured. Symptoms have been confused with causes’.

This confusion is part of a wider and strategic political decision to stop using the meaningful language of class. Gavron notes that:

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the rhetoric of politicians and commentators has tended to abandon the description ‘working-class’, preferring instead to use terms such as ‘hard working families’ in order to contrast the virtuous many with an underclass perceived as feckless and undeserving (Gavron 2009, p.2).

Bottero (2009) engages with this linguistic switch (see also Lens 2002, pp. 144-6), noting journalist Seamus Milne’s (2008) contention that politicians now talk only of “‘hardworking families” or child poverty, groups who cannot be reproached for their disadvantage. Such groups must be set out as the “deserving poor”” (Bottero 2009, p.11). By identifying a deserving poor – those who ‘cannot be reproached for their poverty’ – you call into legitimate existence a group who can be blamed for their own circumstances, those who have ‘squandered the opportunities gracefully given to them by the welfare state, and can therefore rightfully be left to wallow in their own poverty’ (Sveinsson 2009, p.5). The promulgation of this understanding; that our circumstances are dictated via our own personal choices, is behind the belief that some members of the community are unworthy of support from the state. This becomes even more problematic when, as we are currently seeing through austerity measures, state support and funding begins to be rolled back, leaving groups, communities and delineated sections of society (single parents, carers, children with special needs etc.) to engage in competition for the ‘table scraps’ that remain (Bottero 2009, p.7).

The pervasiveness of such understandings ultimately leads to the silencing of dissenting voices on the subject (Renvall and Vehkalahti 2002, pp. 259-260). This is highly significant, because if public attitudes are informed by inaccurate, ideological and stigmatising representations of the poor, then policies preferred by political elites (and the public) are unlikely to seek to tackle the structural causes of the difficulties that the poor experience (Clawson and Trice 2000, p.61). This ultimately results in little if any positive change.

## **Methods**

This qualitative research study sought to begin the process of auditing experiences and concerns related to community safety in and around Southill and Ballinacurra Weston.<sup>9</sup> We endeavoured to explore, identify and document the most pressing concerns related to community safety as expressed by a diverse group of community residents and stakeholders, and to examine residents’ experiences and evaluation of the existing community safety frameworks. A purposive selection strategy was deployed in order to convene and run a series of focus groups (young men aged between 19-30, young women aged between 19-30, parents and the elderly) in both Southill and



Ballinacurra Weston. Additionally, focus groups were conducted with the Gardaí, estate management personnel, community activists and local authority workers. In-depth individual interviews were also conducted with both residents and a number of key informants from various state agencies and community organizations in order to examine and expand on issues emerging from the focus groups. As a result of this sampling strategy a total of sixty five individuals participated in the research. We used grounded theory as our chosen method of qualitative data analysis. Through a process of reading through the transcripts line by line, time after time, we looked for emergent themes, codes and categories. Grounded theory provided a procedure for developing categories (open coding), interlocking these categories (axial coding), building a story that joins the categories (selective coding) and ending with a set of discursive proposals (Creswell 1998, p.150; Flick 2006, pp. 296-303).

Our research in the field was guided by an awareness of our status as outsiders, without first-hand experience of the daily lives of the residents, a situation which can make it difficult to ask the right questions. As McDowell (2003, p.111) notes, 'if we do not belong to the group we study, we may not know enough to ask the right questions'. Reflecting this understanding, we used open ended statements and questions which sought to encourage participants to bring up and prioritise issues of key importance in their immediate contexts. This, it is argued, avoids the potential danger of producing limited data through sets of questions devised by a researcher who cannot share the experiences and contexts of the participants (Packard 2008, p.65; Coakley and Healy 2007, p.30). It also allows for, as in this instance, issues to arise in conversation which had not been prefigured in our original topic guide. In this instance the focus on blame raised important questions for us about the way in which individualised discussion of bad parenting has become widely accepted as a plausible and even common-sense explanation for social problems in both the official and the community context. This willingness to position people and parents living in extremely challenging conditions as being responsible for the creation, maintenance and continuance of these conditions is now engrained and has become deeply problematic as can be seen in the excerpts discussed below.

### **Findings: Problem Families and Bad Parents**

Our fieldwork was conducted to explore narratives of community safety and as such our topic guides focused on issues around personal safety, the role of the Gardaí, the presence of CCTV cameras, and perceived local dangers. Parenting and the role of parents had been prefigured as central in our questioning, but with an emphasis on concerns such as negative peer influences

and gang culture; a lack of safe play spaces for children; and environmental risks posed to families through joyriding, vandalism, littering and dumping, street drinking and drug use. Accordingly we were struck by how quickly the issue of poor parenting was linked to local problems and how quickly it superseded other issues, such as those noted above. As a result, the focus was primarily on the group of residents that Hourigan (2011) calls the ‘disadvantaged of the disadvantaged’, and that officials and local residents refer to as ‘problem families’, ‘bad families’ and ‘scumbags’. These ‘others’ are those individuals positioned by neoliberal politics and language of self determination and choice as those who have squandered and thrown away the opportunities given to them by the welfare state (Sveinsson 2009, p.5; Tyler 2011, p.211). In the excerpt which follows they are presented by a group of elderly women in Southill as displacing the deserving and as over-contributing to the decline of the estates both through their troublesome behaviour and their excessive fertility which sees them produce generation after generation of benefit-dependant ‘scumbags’:

Respondent 2: The best of the people moved out and the scumbags moved in and that was it...

Respondent 1: It’s the same generation after generation after generation it is the same families that’s doing the trouble.

Interviewer: And these families aren’t moved out or moved on?

Respondent 1: No it’s the decent people is moving out and they’re taking over.  
(Elderly Group Southill)

While it is common for ‘right-wing commentators and politicians’ to focus in on bad parenting and so-called problem families (Garner 2009, p.45) as being the root cause of anti-social behaviour in working class areas (Jones 2011, p.213), we were surprised to hear it espoused by members of communities who see at first hand, and who experience, on a daily basis, the inherent challenges of life on the margins of society. The belief that community problems could be primarily traced to ‘bad parents’ and ‘bad parenting’ was baldly expressed by elderly, middle-aged and younger members of the communities involved as well as by representatives of state agencies and community workers. The strength of feeling among residents goes beyond the familiar and well established desire of groups and individuals to separate themselves from those they see as less respectable (Skeggs 2004), and is instead reflective of a deepening, more combative division which is, arguably, being actively cultivated by the media and by politicians. Gavron (2009, p.2) notes that the setting up of a competition discourse around housing between the white working class and migrant communities in the UK serves as a distraction. This is echoed by Dorling (2009) who shows that where the working class is losing out it is not to

migrant communities or the ‘undeserving poor’, but to the wealthy. This can be seen here in the Irish context with a growth in relative inequality and the transfer upwards of wealth (Allen 2003; Lynch 2007). The redirection of public concern away from those with the power to address inequality is strategic and serves not only to distract, but ultimately entrenches disadvantage and inequality.

The language of neoliberal politics, whether it be the politician’s hardworking families or the populist ‘chavs and asbos, slags and scrubbers’ (Bottero 2009, p.12) serves to keep inequalities in place (Edelman 1998; Lens 2002), something Skeggs (2004) also argues; powerfully asserting that where the working-class are commonly

Spoken about as an underclass, as white blockage to modernity and global prosperity, as irresponsible selves to blame for structural inequality, as passive non-market competitors, as lacking in agency and culture, [...] we see class divisions being made. The rhetorical positioning of the working-class is a powerful moral formulation, presented as literally use-less, as a group as inept as they are dysfunctional. This is rhetoric designed not to enhance mobility and opportunity, but to fix firmly in place, metaphorically and physically (Skeggs 2004, p.94).

This divisive, ‘fixing’ discourse, is particularly acute where bad parenting is increasingly seen and articulated as a personal choice on the part of the parent(s), rather than as a result of structural inequalities (Jones 2011). In conversation about parental discipline and parental awareness with key individuals, including estate managers, city council officials and community workers, the understanding that some parents are opting out of disciplining or even knowing what their children are doing out of laziness or choice is clearly stated:

They’d sooner have the kids out on the street than indoors annoying them. Basically it’s off you go like and do what ye like out there but don’t be doing it here [in the home] (Estate Managers).

You have kids under age that are engaging in anti social behaviour and getting off scot free because they are underage, their parents are disconnected from them totally so they are never held accountable (Key Individuals).

Of course, where parents are understood as opting out of parenting, disciplining or educating their children due to laziness or choice, they are also opting out of the opportunity to better themselves and to improve their lives. Thus it can be argued that they are to blame for their own circumstances and any assistance received can be legitimately questioned on behalf of those seen as more deserving. This discourse serves to both explain the poverty and social immobility of ‘bad families’ and to further fix them in place. Such parents are positioned as ‘other’ in the same

way as Garner (2009, p.47) sees immigrants and the undeserving white working class positioned in debates about housing in the UK. These groups are largely seen as being disengaged from the community, disengaged from work, and as either unable or unwilling to discipline and educate their children. They are, commonly and publicly, characterised as feckless, lazy, uncaring, spendthrift and spoiled by the state, a view bolstered by the pervasive understanding that they are getting too much.

### **Getting Too Much**

The understanding that ethnic minority groups, single parents, or ‘chavs’ are always taking and never giving back is regularly alluded to in the media and in the public sphere, to the extent that it has become normative (Garner 2009, p.49). This belief is clearly expressed by members of the two communities. Here a group of elderly women compare their own experiences growing up with what they see as the current situation:

Respondent 5: They’re getting too much

Respondent 1: They’re getting everything they want

Respondent 5: They can get too much now, too much I mean we never got nothing for ours when our children were growing up we just had...

Respondent 2: What we worked for...

Respondent 3: They’re giving them cheques, they’re giving them cheques, they’re saying that their dole didn’t come through, they’re stoned out of their head, they’re talking about out being partying all night and they’re coming out [rubbing hands together] more money (Elderly group Southill).

This is echoed by estate managers who link increases in social welfare to a rise in local problems and the decline of the estates. This stems from the growing public acceptance of the understanding that social welfare payments are bad for the poor, encouraging only dependency and fecklessness.

There were families in these estates who socially weren’t ready and the government started throwing money upping the amount of social welfare, upping the amount of money that they could claim they could get and they just and of course drugs went rampant because socially they weren’t ready for it (Estate Managers Group, Southill).

Slightly more sympathetic, but still negative, views of these parents see them as inept, unable, uneducated and in need of help. A common theme from the conversations feeds into the ongoing public discourse about reduction and rolling back of services. All residents noted the need for parenting support programmes, and for a specific focus on young, single parent families (Clarke 2011; Jensen 2011; Jones 2011; Kanieski 2011; Roberts 2011). As negative associations

remain, such 'bad parents' are depicted as needing to be forced into learning how to care for their troublesome children through a system of coercion and fines:

The only way in my view that you can get the parents to listen to what we are saying and take notice of what is going on and to engage in a parenting program and be hands on with parenting is to actually hurt the parent themselves. The answer is not to put the parent in jail because the kids aren't going to school the answer is to hurt the parent in the pocket. If she is getting money for the child there should be an issue whether that should be withheld until she engages in a parenting program (Key Individuals).

Indeed the majority of the residents we spoke to were strongly in favour of fining parents and, as a consequence of the understanding that there is not enough support and money for all, were also strongly in favour of reducing the money spent on providing services for teenagers in their communities. Again this need to fight over the allocation of support sows division and resentment and distracts from questions about why necessary resources are so limited (Bottero 2009, p.7). A key feature of neoliberalism is the privatisation of public services, shifting public considerations of health, education, welfare and housing from being essential, non-excludable and non-rival services, to seeing users excluded on the basis of cost, or competition for resources (Hearne 2009, p.8). Following this, the somewhat surprising acceptance of fines and rollbacks is understandable when placed in the larger context of strategically constructed competitive categories of deserving and undeserving parents and children. Many residents, community workers and officials now share a perception that the kids involved in youth programmes are getting something for nothing and, further to this, that such services are letting bad parents 'off the hook'. Several participants contend that such money is wasted anyway as children and young people are

gonna do what it is that their parents do so forget about your youthreach and now focus on the family and stop letting the parents off the hook (Community Worker).

From what I can see it all boils down to parenting, the parents need to be held accountable for their children and their actions. While you can pump all the services you like in for the kids, we're sending them to school, they go to an after school project they're there for another couple of hours and they go to a youth club and there's the two or three hours at home and that's where all the damage is done (Estate Managers).

### **The Answer is to Hurt the Parent in the Pocket**

If I'm being paid for my 15 year old by the state to feed him, clothe him, look after him but I actually don't see him from one end of the week to the other. He's not coming in for something to eat, he's up in Nana's. Nana's feeding him. Well I shouldn't be given that money for that child. If that child at 11 years of age is out at 2 or 3 in the morning, I shouldn't be paid for that child (Estate worker).

This linking of the resolution of social problems such as truancy or anti-social behaviour to a punitive fining or withdrawal of state support amounts to the writing off of parents and families in crisis, leaving them as Sveinsson (2009, p.5) notes, to 'wallow' in circumstances of their own making. Such representation of parents, most typically young, single mothers, as so disconnected and so lacking in even the most basic parenting skills and emotions is deeply dehumanising, suggesting that the relationship between parents and their children is cynical, opportunistic and economically driven (Tyler 2008, p.25). It is part of the process of repositioning the working-class as underclass (Skeggs 2004, p.94), wherein public and media representation of 'fecund and excessive femininities' (Skeggs 2004, p.87) are almost automatically linked now to the assumption that a growing group of women – the so-called 'chav mums' or 'pramface' girls – have children solely in order to attain housing and child benefits (Tyler 2008; 2011). This discourse has become so normative in recent years, that it is now expressed by other young single mothers, who are deeply anxious to mark a distinction between themselves and these 'chav mums'. Indeed, the majority of the women we spoke to, with the exception of the two elderly groups, are single mothers and are aware of how difficult it can be to raise children alone and on social welfare. As noted they are anxious to distance themselves from the 'chav mums', and this distance is commonly marked through reference to the work of parenting which is reflected in the behaviour of their children. One young mother explained to us:

I'm a single parent and I'm very strict you'd have to be like. So I've two teenagers and I'm doing well with them so far. [Name removed] doesn't even drink or smoke or nothing. I talk to them about drugs you see, I talk to them about everything that goes on, I talk to them about fellas demanding, they're never going to amount to nothing. So they're kind of good thank God but like that there's other parents there and all they want is drink, smoking weed, their kids are out.

These single mothers whose 'kids are out' are perceived, not just by the wider public, but by their neighbours as failing in their role as parents by not undertaking the work of parenthood.

The voices of the 'disadvantaged of the disadvantaged' are not usually heard in the media or indeed in research where they constitute a group that is particularly hard to reach. Reflecting

this, the excerpts throughout our study present the voices of those residents who are engaged in the community and who have strong family structures and ties, and, in many cases, a history of work and education. They are Hourigan's (2011) 'advantaged of the disadvantaged', those who Garner identifies as:

the working-class residents who think of themselves as decent and hard-working, especially community-minded people, [and who] are generally critical of people who behave badly and/or don't raise their children to be respectful (Garner 2009, p.49).

Concerns that a large and growing number of parents are abdicating responsibility for their own children's behaviour, failing to teach them respect, in particular, were voiced very strongly by the majority of respondents, in this instance by a member of the mixed gender youth group, herself a young, single mother:

My mother and father is married right and now loads of people like years ago there would have been more people that would have had their mother and their father but now it's a lot of single parents bringing up their kids and they can't control them, that's what's happening (Mixed Group Young People).

The members of this mixed youth group see a distinct difference in the behaviour of children from what they remember of their (very recent) childhood (they are aged between 18 and 25). They explain this difference in terms of a combination of changing attitudes, most fundamentally among parents:

You know the young children about eight or nine... their parents don't care what they do, they just leave them run wild out there.

Interviewer: So is it different from when you were that age?

Yeah, I would never have given other people cheek when I was eight or nine years old, my mother and father would have killed me like, I wouldn't have dreamed of doing something like that.

The young female parents, again all single mothers themselves, also expressed similar views:

younger kids now has [sic] no respect for the older you know the elderly or anything like that... half the kids I think are allowed to do what [they like] (Young Female Parent Group).

The understanding that young children are no longer respectful of adults is widespread with multiple references made to the changes in attitudes and demeanour among very young children. The consensus is that all ensuing local problems come from parental failure to discipline or teach children how to behave – this allows social problems borne of inequality to be presented as localised, individualised issues to be dealt with by small scale 'moral interventions' (Jensen 2011).

Solutions are thus expressed in terms of individual fault and blame, as seen in the calls to fine parents, to educate parents or to aggressively intervene in families (Kanieski 2011; Roberts 2011).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper does not wish to diminish the very real experiences of our participants. Anti-social behaviour by children and young people disproportionately affects working class communities and is a source of real distress for large numbers of people in the areas where this research was conducted. Yet the most important question to be asked is who is to blame for these experiences; the communities themselves, 'bad' parents, out-of-control children or the policies of successive Irish governments?

In seeking answers to this question, we agree with Jones' powerful assertion that 'governments have effectively socially engineered these working class communities to have the problems that they have' (Jones 2011, p.34). Further to this, and as demonstrated throughout this paper, broad dissemination, normalisation and, ultimately, internalisation of a powerfully evocative Moral Underclass discourse (Levitas 2000) focused on blame is consolidating and adding to existing social problems by absolving the state of all responsibility for the conditions in which such marginalised communities are forced to live. As a result, the apparent degree to which the discourse of parental blame has permeated into popular consciousness and has 'encouraged people to blame one another for what is going on in their communities' (Jones 2011, p.264) makes the possibilities of enabling people to focus on the impact of the larger social system itself even more difficult.<sup>10</sup> Yet, without people seeing the bigger picture, possibilities for real and permanent change in their current circumstances are unlikely to occur. The process of only looking inwards (Hall 1997) for the source of community problems and solutions sees blame for local and national problems being placed with those who are already on the margins and who thus constitute a 'weak public' (Aitken 2001, p.24), unable to access media or political platforms from which to speak in their own defence and thus to challenge public representations of their lives.

However, challenging the normalisation of this divisive discourse of blame is of essential importance. Narratives that emphasise interdependence, rather than individualism should be promoted (Lens 2002) as should alternative representations of those living in poverty and on the margins. Such interventions can begin to undermine current understandings of the causes and the problems associated with poverty, deprivation and marginalisation which can then be properly reconfigured as structural inequalities, rather than as resulting from personal choice or



individual failings. Seeking to challenge and change the terms of this discourse is perhaps the only solution. Any such shift is difficult to instigate however. As Tyler (2011) demonstrates, intervention at the level of media representation of, in this instance, young single mothers, is beginning to gather ground. Working with communities to challenge media representations and public understandings is the first step in repositioning this discourse of blame and returning a critical focus to the role of the state and its ultimate responsibility for the creation, maintenance and continuance of structural inequalities.

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<sup>1</sup>Limerick, as a city, has a relatively low crime rate but it has particular problems with certain types of (serious) crimes such as murder, largely as a result of disputes between organised crime gangs in the city.

<sup>2</sup>The police service in the Republic of Ireland.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the phrase 'disadvantaged of the disadvantaged' does not refer to the disputed and problematic concept of the 'underclass', which 'others' and scapegoats a group that allegedly voluntarily exists in a state of permanent, deliberate dislocation from mainstream society. In both Hourigan's usage, and our usage of the phrase here, we are referring to the distinction that can be made between those of the poor who, while they are classified as economically disadvantaged, are engaged with education and work, and those who are currently unable to access these 'opportunities', and who can be understood as being both economically and socially marginalised as a result.

<sup>4</sup> For a description of residualisation see Williams, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> The grant was made available to tenants who wanted to leave their local authority house and purchase a house in the private housing market. The rationale underpinning this policy was that it would be an efficient way of increasing social housing stock levels for local authorities, yet the policy resulted in the loss of the better educated and employed tenants.

<sup>6</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to employ a fuller discussion on the historical evolution of neoliberal individualising and responsabilising discourses, in order to highlight the continuities and differences in this ideological standpoint. However, for an excellent overview see for example Welshman (2002) and Mooney (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Clientalism is a process whereby elected politicians primarily spend their time looking after the needs of their constituents in the hope of gaining re-election often at the expense of the national interest.

<sup>8</sup> Social Partnership is a corporatist arrangement whereby the government, business sector, unions, and the voluntary/community organisations come together to agree national wage agreements, etc. for the 'good of the country'.

<sup>9</sup> Ethical Approval was received from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Limerick, approval reference number FAHSS\_REC278.

<sup>10</sup> It must be noted that not all of our participants, and by extension, not all of the communities, uncritically accept this discourse of parental blame. For example, groups such as the Ballinacurra Weston Residents Alliance are keenly aware that while poor parenting is *a* problem in their community it is not *the* problem. This group of residents in particular have consistently argued that the policies of the Irish State and its' agents (Limericks' Local Authorities, The Limerick Regeneration Agencies, etc.) have had a detrimental impact on their community, which in turn have created the many difficulties that residents are forced to live with on a day to day basis. (See <http://www.bwra.blogspot.ie/> and Young, 2012 for further details).

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