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Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and
Change

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In 2010, in the wake of relentlessly negative media coverage of Limerick, I visited the Moyross estate in the company of Limerick Regeneration Chairman Brendan Kenny. As part of my research, I interviewed Mr. Kenny and observed the work of the local community in cleaning and maintaining their community. I was also shown some of the darker side of that estate, the burnt out houses, and more tragically, the places where people had been shot and killed, victims of Limerick's gang wars.

My overriding memory of the Moyross estate was twofold; the sense of determination of the local community to get on with their lives, and the fact that the estate in which they live was so badly planned. The estate consists of a reasonably good stock of houses, but it sprawls on forever, and there seems to be no way out and nowhere to go, particularly at the rear of the estate where much of the trouble seemed to be occurring. According to the social geographer David Harvey, bad planning in urban areas lies at the heart of much that is wrong in contemporary urban societies. Moyross provides us with an example of the societal outcomes of poor planning practices, which are subsequently compounded by a lack of community resources, poor community policing and endemically high levels of unemployment. These factors, as the recent riots in the UK demonstrate, can provide a recipe for social breakdown and criminality on a large scale.

Understanding Limerick contains a series of studies aimed at providing a wider understanding of some of the factors which underpin the problems of social exclusion in Limerick's marginalised periphery. The contributors are primarily a mix of Limerick based academics, community workers or, as in the case of Hourigan, a Cork based academic with family roots in Limerick. This local academic flavour provides us with the essential regional authenticity demanded of Irish socio-cultural expression, while maintaining a rich theoretical discourse on issues of urban marginality.

The opening chapters locate two of the main issues required in the process of 'Understanding Limerick'. Social geographer Des McCaffery outlines the key elements which have emerged in the spatial divides of post Celtic Tiger society in the region, while sociologist and criminologist Ciaran McCullagh skilfully illustrates the manner in which pockets of serious crime in particular estates underpin the relatively low level of overall crime in the city, and the manner in which media coverage has distorted wider understandings of these issues.

In the second section of the book, Editor Niamh Hourigan takes the reader through a series of chapters on salient areas such as social exclusion and divided communities,

organised crime and policing, societal fear and gangland feuds in a comprehensive discussion where sociological understandings and localised narratives are interwoven in an articulate but accessible manner, which reveals Hourigan's growing reputation as a commentator of note in contemporary Irish society.

The book's final section combines local academic perspectives from a researcher perspective, bringing together studies on masculinity, social capital, media coverage and citizenship from a range of academics including Patricia Kelleher and Pat O'Connor, Eileen Humphries, Eoin Devereux and Amanda Hayes. One criticism of the book is its lack of engagement with criminological theory, and the absence of contributions from criminologists throughout the book. This reflects an inability for many Irish academics to broaden their horizons when examining real life topics. All too often, there is an over reliance on reports from agencies which are funded by the state, or on media coverage. However, the book's strengths are well reflected in the study's areas of focus.

Essentially, this collection of studies succeeds in the very critical task of giving voice to those at the margins in Limerick's most economically deprived neighbourhoods. Moreover, the book provides valuable social and academic insights into one of Ireland's most protracted community issues, insights which should be read by researchers, social commentators and policy makers alike. As such, it represents a notable landmark in Irish sociological inquiry, an achievement for which the book's contributors should be commended.