



From Punishment to Prevention:

Poverty, Inequality and
Pathways into the Irish
Criminal Justice System

 Irish
Penal
Reform
Trust

The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) is Ireland's principal independent non-governmental organisation working for systemic penal reform and change. Our vision is a just, humane Ireland where prison is used as a last resort. We advocate for a progressive criminal justice system that prioritises alternatives to prison, upholds human rights, and champions reintegration.

This report has been externally commissioned for publication by IPRT. The research was led by researcher Clare O'Connor working with Socially Engaged Artist, Aaron Sunderland Carey and a peer researcher Robert Cullen.

The views, findings, and conclusions expressed in the main body of the report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of IPRT. While IPRT has provided guidance and feedback at various stages of drafting, neither IPRT nor its staff authored any of the content in the report. The recommendations, however, were shaped in partnership between the author and IPRT.

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This report is presented in good faith to inform and stimulate wider debate and reform on this topic.

Some images and visual materials included in this report were created by participants during focus group exercises using widely available images and are reproduced to illustrate perspectives and insights gathered during the research.

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Introduction

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Foreword

Amid the cost-of-living, housing and mental health crises, it is no coincidence that people experiencing significant levels of poverty, deprivation and structural inequality are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Many people who engaged with this project questioned why IPRT needed to commission updated research into the overlap between poverty, deprivation and criminal justice involvement as for many of us the link is glaringly obvious. Yet the power of this report lies not only in the evidence of the drivers of poverty but in the expertise, experiences and testimonies shared by people with lived and living experience of social injustice. They tell time and time again that what others see as a choice to go down a path of criminality is often not a choice at all – but a survival tactic.

We hope that this report will serve as a reminder that neither poverty nor criminality are inevitable and the two do not need to go hand in hand. Where they do it is often due to the overreliance on the criminal justice system to make up for the shortfall where other social services fail individuals and communities. When people experience sustained underinvestment in the necessary supports, services and systems that would empower them to achieve their full potential, they lose hope and they often can't see an alternative path forward. Growing up in a community that is under-resourced, overpoliced and where negative assumptions are made about you because of where you're from stay with you for a lifetime, shaping your sense of self and your aspirations.

This report paints a stark picture of the gendered dynamics of poverty – with many women forced to engage in survival crime to make ends meet while young men are often pushed into the violent role that society appears to have assigned to them. Race and ethnicity also play a key role in social disadvantage with Irish Travellers, in particular, overrepresented both in poverty and deprivation statistics and at all stages of the criminal justice system. Beneath many of the stories told, lie significant childhood trauma or adverse experiences that shaped futures in a way that could have been prevented.

Social disadvantage impacts people at all stages of life. Pobal's most recent Social Deprivation Index tells us that almost 200,000 people live in areas classed as very or extremely disadvantaged. The upcoming Roadmap for Social Inclusion has a pivotal role to play in addressing the intersection between social exclusion and the criminal justice system, by designing measures that will recognise and address a person's basic needs in a rights-compliant, evidence-informed way.

The State's recognition of the transformative power of early intervention and prevention presents an opportunity to address many of the

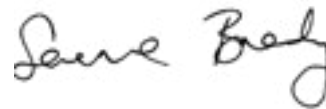
societal issues highlighted in this research. In the past, we have seen significant investment in area-based programmes to tackle childhood poverty. The more recent and welcome establishment of the Child Poverty and Well-being Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach also signals the Government's commitment to tackle these complex challenges.

Instead of continuing to pour money into an overstretched criminal justice system or expanding the prison estate, the Government should join the dots and redirect investment into diversion and non-custodial alternatives that work. Its primary focus must be on investing in people and communities. Rather than spending €100,000 to imprison an individual for a year, these resources would be far better spent addressing the reasons why that person ended up in a prison cell in the first place, especially when short sentences rarely facilitate meaningful change. People cannot continue to be punished for the failures of the State to provide for them in the first place. What is needed now is a redirection of justice investment to provide secure homes, better access to healthcare, an adequate income, alternative education supports and youth work opportunities.

Enshrining socioeconomic status as a formal ground of discrimination in the revised Equality Acts would demonstrate that the State recognises the unique challenges faced by people experiencing poverty and social deprivation, often alongside other disadvantages. It would also provide an enforceable legal remedy while helping to ensure that people are not discriminated against simply because of their class.

IPRT would like to express our gratitude and appreciation to the individuals and organisations who shared their experiences and creativity so openly and generously. We want to extend our sincere thanks to Clare O'Connor, Aaron Sunderland Carey and Robert Cullen, who undertook this important research project and handled it with sensitivity and compassion ensuring that experts by experience were at the heart of this report.

This research was funded by Community Foundation Ireland (CFI) which continues to champion causes that are not always the most visible or popular. We are deeply grateful for their commitment to improving the lives of people and communities experiencing poverty, social injustice and criminalisation to achieve the ultimate goal of a safe and thriving society.



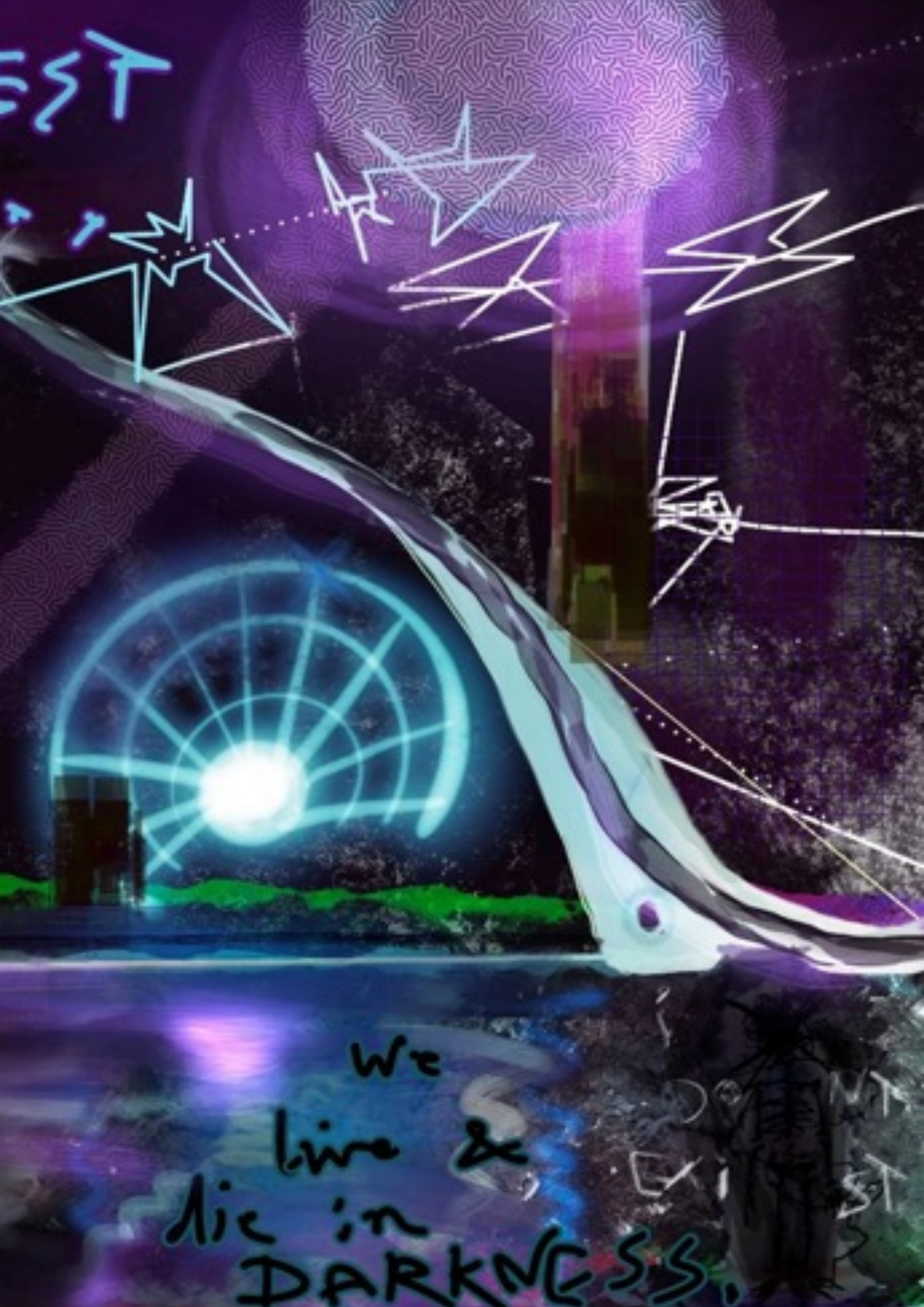
Saoirse Brady

Executive Director



IN THE BRIGHTEST
CITY LIGHTS.





EST

We
live &
die in
DARKNESS.

DO NOT
EXIST

1. Executive Summary

In 2012, IPRT published *The Vicious Circle of Social Exclusion and Crime: Ireland's Disproportionate Punishment of the Poor*¹ setting out how poverty and social exclusion shape exposure to criminalisation, and the case for early intervention and social investment as prevention. In the years since, the effects of austerity-era policies have become increasingly visible, particularly in housing, social protection and criminal justice. Ireland faces a deepening housing crisis and cost of living crisis, alongside record levels of prison overcrowding. This report provides an updated evidence base on the overlap between poverty, deprivation and criminalisation in Ireland, examines justice reinvestment approaches, outlines relevant human rights obligations, and identifies evidence-led alternatives to over-reliance on penal sanctions.

This report examines how poverty, deprivation and place shape pathways into, through and out of the criminal justice system in Ireland. It combines an evidence review, participatory qualitative research using socially engaged arts practices with people with lived and living experience and with community and sector stakeholders, and analysis of available Irish justice and socioeconomic data. The research was peer-informed and grounded in the principle that people directly affected by poverty and criminalisation hold essential expertise about how systems operate and where harm is produced.

A consistent pattern emerges across the literature and the qualitative research. Poverty does not determine criminal justice contact in any simple or automatic way, and most people experiencing poverty do not come into contact with the criminal justice system. However, poverty and deprivation can increase exposure to the conditions in which criminalisation becomes more likely, particularly where disadvantage is compounded by system failure or punitive responses. These pathways include childhood poverty, school exclusion, unmet mental health and neurodevelopmental need, trauma, housing instability, care experience, substance use, lack of youth infrastructure, and the criminalisation of survival and coping strategies. In communities experiencing long-term deprivation, these pressures are often layered, cumulative and intergenerational.

These patterns are not experienced equally. Criminalisation is also shaped by how poverty intersects with gender, race, ethnicity and place. Traveller participants described racism and systemic exclusion. Women described gendered pressures linked to care, poverty,

violence and survival. Participants from underserved communities described more punitive and more visible forms of policing, alongside weaker access to the services and supports that might otherwise reduce harm.

The report finds that Ireland's ability to quantify these dynamics is constrained by structural data gaps across justice and socioeconomic datasets. Improved data integration is required to support effective justice reinvestment and prevention.

The report concludes that Ireland needs a whole-of-government shift away from overreliance on punishment and towards prevention. This means reducing the use of remand and short custodial sentences, strengthening diversion and community-based sanctions, reforming responses to poverty-linked criminalisation, and investing in the systems that protect against justice contact in the first place: adequate income, housing, education, youth work, health, mental health, addiction and family support. It also looks at adopting a justice reinvestment approach that identifies where imprisonment is most concentrated and redirects resources into the communities most affected.

Criminal justice policy cannot be separated from social policy. If Ireland is serious about reducing imprisonment, improving safety and upholding rights, it must address poverty, deprivation and exclusion as central to prevention. Safer communities and a fairer justice system can be built through earlier intervention, stronger community supports, and sustained investment in the conditions that allow people and communities to live with dignity.

1 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *The Vicious Circle of Social Exclusion and Crime: Ireland's Disproportionate Punishment of the Poor* (IPRT, January 2012) <https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6264/position_paper_final.pdf> last accessed 6 August 2025.



IT'S HARD
to see it
when you're
in it...

???

2. Recommendations

Adopt a whole-of-government strategy to reduce criminal justice contact through prevention, shifting emphasis away from expensive, punitive responses and toward tackling the upstream drivers of justice contact.

Social inclusion, early intervention and prevention infrastructure

Ensure the steering committee for the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, due to be published in mid-2026, incorporates implementation measures that address the intersection between poverty and criminal justice experience

Rather than focusing solely on supporting people into employment, the Roadmap should take account of the range of issues that impact people who come into contact with the criminal justice system and set out cross-government, person-centred and rights-based implementation actions to tackle social exclusion through early intervention, income adequacy, housing, health, education and community-based services in areas experiencing concentrated deprivation. This should include child poverty as a core prevention issue, ensuring that actions relating to children and families are aligned across government departments (Department of Social Protection; Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht to co-lead on community implementation; The Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office in Department of the Taoiseach).

Take concrete measures to ensure income adequacy

Benchmark core social welfare payments to the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL), with a statutory commitment to progressive real increases and achieving an adequate basic income (Department of Social Protection).

Ensure affordable childcare and flexible employment supports for primary caregivers, recognising the link between caregiving pressure, poverty, and contact with the criminal justice system (Department of Social Protection; Department of Children, Disability and Equality).

Invest in youth work as prevention infrastructure in areas of concentrated deprivation

Provide sustained core funding for community-based youth work, youth services (universal and targeted), and detached street outreach aligned with education, family support and local community development, to reduce the drivers of early justice contact and support positive pathways for children and young people (Department of Education and Youth; Department of Children, Disability and Equality).

Strengthen youth and young adult diversion

Fully resource and expand Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs) under the Children Act 2001, prioritising coverage in areas of concentrated deprivation, regularly assessed against the Pobal Deprivation Index. Develop a discrete strategy for young adults aged 18–24 who offend, grounded in evidence of what works to promote and support desistance from offending behaviour among this age group. This strategy should cover areas including young adult diversion, sentencing, imprisonment and reintegration (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration).

Prevent the criminalisation of children and young people

Strengthen the interagency duty under section 39 of the Children Act 2001 by issuing statutory guidance requiring coordinated responses between Gardaí, Tusla, education and health services for children at risk of justice contact. This guidance should also acknowledge the disproportionate number of care-experienced children who enter the youth justice and adult criminal justice systems and implement measures to prevent further criminalisation of children due to unaddressed behavioural issues and undiagnosed neurodivergence or trauma (Tusla, Child and Family Agency; Department of Children, Disability and Equality; An Garda Síochána).

Publish full public evaluation of the Criminal Justice Housing First Pilot (2020–2024)

This should include analysis of tenancy sustainment, reoffending rates, cost-effectiveness (including avoided justice and emergency service costs) and service engagement. The findings of the evaluation should inform tailored measures to ensure that criminal-justice-specific needs are not diluted within mainstream homelessness services resourcing for housing options for people with criminal justice experience and be embedded in the Homelessness Prevention Framework and related delivery plans (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government; Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration).

Place a positive duty on State agencies to prevent homelessness on release from custody

Mandate housing as a core reintegration outcome in the Probation Service and Irish Prison Service strategies, with cross-departmental accountability involving the Departments of Justice and Housing. At a local level, this should involve pre-release planning regardless of sentence length, protect existing tenancies where possible and putting in place administrative safeguards requiring support on release, with inter-agency accountability and adequate resourcing to secure tenancies (Irish

Prison Service; Probation Service; Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government).

Increase housing stability

Formally recognise housing instability as a key structural risk factor for increased contact with the criminal justice system. Integrate this evidence into the implementation of *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030*, the Homelessness Prevention Framework and related housing delivery action plans. This should include cross-departmental action, and sustained investment in housing infrastructure and secure housing pathways for those at heightened risk of criminal justice contact.

Divert people with serious mental health needs away from prison and into timely, appropriate care.

Government should ensure that no one is remanded or held in prison solely because appropriate psychiatric, forensic or community-based mental health care is unavailable. This requires legislating for mental health diversion across the criminal justice process, expanding the Psychiatric In-reach and Court Liaison Service nationally, and implementing the outstanding recommendations of the High Level Task Force on Mental Health and Addiction.

Reinvestment, equality and accountability

Explore and adopt a formal Justice Reinvestment model

Identify communities with the highest concentration of imprisonment and criminal justice contact through anonymised data, including Eircodes and geographic data, collected by An Garda Síochána, the Courts Service and the Irish Prison Service, ensuring appropriate data-protection safeguards are in place. Redirect savings from reduced prison use into those areas through education, youth services, addiction supports, housing and employment initiatives (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to lead in partnership with other government departments).

Reinvest justice funding into communities experiencing deprivation

Increase the core budget of the Probation Service to facilitate the availability and supervision of community-based sanctions

and ensure people are enabled to fully complete their sentence in the community with wraparound supports provided through the Probation Service (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration).

Strengthen community policing as a trust-building public service

Conduct an evaluation of the Local Community Safety Partnerships ('Safety Partnerships') established under the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024 to assess their impact on trust between traditionally over-policed communities and An Garda Síochána. This should include participatory engagement in communities experiencing concentrated deprivation, with locally visible Garda presence focused on problem-solving, relationship-building and accountability (An Garda Síochána).

Publish an annual “Custody versus Community” expenditure report

The report should benchmark spending on prisons against spending on prevention, diversion and community sanctions and track outcomes over time to determine efficacy and inform evidence-led approaches to desistance (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration).

Implement a whole-of-government data integration strategy, aligning justice data with small-area socio-economic data (Electoral Divisions and Small Areas)

Standardise address and geographic data collection across justice agencies, including use of Eircodes (with appropriate safeguards), to enable spatial analysis. Publish anonymised, aggregated small-area justice statistics as open data, enabling independent scrutiny and evidence-led policy development. For retrospective data where an address was not collected, an authoritative lookup or crosswalk that maps administrative justice geographies such as Garda station catchments, to statistical areas should be developed and maintained (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration and its agencies).

Mandate the collection and publication of standardised ethnicity data across the criminal justice system

This should include data from arrest through probation, in line with equality and human

rights obligations to develop targeted strategies to address the over-representation of Travellers and other marginalised groups, co-designed with affected communities and linked to socioeconomic inclusion measures (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration; The Courts Service; An Garda Síochána; Irish Prison Service; Probation Service).

Amend the Equality Acts to introduce new grounds of discrimination

Implement previous recommendations of both IPRT and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) to introduce two new grounds of discrimination based on socio-economic status and criminal conviction given the intersectionality of economic deprivation, social exclusion, and people who come into contact with the criminal justice system (Department of Children, Disability and Equality).

Commence and implement spent convictions legislation without delay

Minor and time-limited convictions should become spent after a defined offending-free period, to reduce lifelong barriers to employment, housing and education that entrench poverty and increase the risk of re-contact with the justice system. The defined period should be proportionate and not prohibitively long. (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration).

Alternatives to Custody

Review and reform fine enforcement under the Fines (Payment and Recovery) Act 2014

Given the rise in imprisonment for non-payment of fines, the review and reform of the legislation should consider how to strengthen ability-to-pay assessments and put in place adequate resources to expand the use of community service as an alternative (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration).

Introduce statutory guidance on the use of public order offences

The guidance should require Gardaí, the Director of Public Prosecutions and courts to consider vulnerability, homelessness, and poverty as mitigating factors before prosecution (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration).

Expand diversion and restorative justice schemes for minor and non-violent offences

Measures under the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017 should prevent the imposition of criminal sanctions where more appropriate and alternative measures are available (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration).

Decriminalise possession of drugs for personal use, in line with the recommendations of the Citizens’ Assembly on Drug Use and the Oireachtas committee interim report

Section 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977 should be repealed as a matter of priority, orienting state-led responses toward health-led harm reduction, treatment, and social supports (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration; Department of Health).

Sentencing Reform and Custody as Last Resort

Enshrine the principle of imprisonment as a last resort in primary legislation

In line with the recommendation of the *Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024*, ‘prison as a last resort’ should be placed on a statutory footing. In practice, ensuring that prison is truly a sanction of last resort recognises the intersectionality of poverty and the criminal justice system and would represent a tangible commitment to provide and exhaust non-custodial alternatives and the community supports required to break the cycle of offending (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration).

Prioritise community-based sanctions over custody

Amend Part 10 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006 (as amended) to strengthen presumptions against imprisonment for non-violent offences and to restrict the use of custody for offences linked to poverty, including low-level public order and regulatory offences (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration).

Expand statutory restrictions on short custodial sentences

Amend sentencing provisions to prohibit sentences under six months save in exceptional circumstances, in line with recommendations made by the 2013 Joint Oireachtas Sub-Committee on Penal Reform and require judges to provide written reasons for why a community-based sanction has not been imposed (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration).

Adopt a gender-sensitive approach to women and caregivers in the criminal justice system

Adopt a statutory presumption against the imprisonment of women, particularly for non-violent offences, drawing on best practice recommendations from the Council of Europe and the UN Bangkok Rules. Where custody or remand is likely to result in loss of housing, courts should treat this as a material factor weighing against detention. Expand community-based alternatives for women, including through enhanced funding for women-specific probation programmes and trauma-informed, gender-responsive services delivered in the community. (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration; Judicial

Council Sentencing Guidelines and Information Committee; Probation Service).

Develop sentencing guidelines for courts to consider caregiving responsibilities explicitly in sentencing and bail decisions as mitigating circumstances

The guidelines should include the likely impacts of custody on children and dependants, housing security, and poverty risk (Judicial Council Sentencing Guidelines and Information Committee).

Develop a Neurodiversity Strategy for the criminal justice system

Given the prevalence of undiagnosed neurodiversity interacting with the justice system, develop a strategy to determine referral pathways for autism, ADHD, learning difficulties and neurodevelopmental needs at key justice system entry points, including Garda diversion, probation, and prison reception. The strategy should also incorporate key measures to ensure individual care plans are developed to support neurodevelopmental needs. The strategy should commit to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of early neurodevelopmental intervention, comparing assessment and treatment costs with savings from reduced imprisonment and reoffending. (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration; Department of Health; Health Service Executive; An Garda Síochána; Irish Prison Service; Probation Service).



3. Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods, participatory design, combining desk-based evidence review, participatory qualitative fieldwork including socially engaged arts methods, and quantitative analysis to examine how poverty and deprivation shape pathways into, through, and out of the criminal justice system in Ireland, and what social investment and alternatives to penal sanctions could reduce criminalisation and imprisonment. It had two linked aims: to describe the pattern of criminal justice contact in relation to deprivation using the best available Irish data, and to explain the pathways and impacts behind that pattern through the lived experience of people and communities affected.

Lived experience involvement

A Peer Advisory Board informed the design, recruitment approach, ethics, and interpretation of emerging findings. The Board comprised three men and two women, based in Dublin, Cork, and the Midlands, and included two Traveller men. The project also included a peer researcher who supported co-research activities and co-facilitated a workshop and interviews.

Desk-based evidence review

The evidence review was iterative and drew on Irish and international academic literature alongside policy and practice material from state bodies, NGOs, and advocacy organisations. It was updated as themes emerged through fieldwork and advisory input.

Quantitative strand

The quantitative analysis examined geographic overlap between deprivation and criminal justice contact, focusing on committal indicators (and probation indicators where feasible). Because justice and socioeconomic datasets are published using non-compatible geographies, and committal address data cannot be consistently mapped at Electoral Division (ED) level, a partial small-area analysis was conducted using routing-key-level committal data (IPS) and a bespoke Pobal HP Deprivation Index by routing key created for this study. Findings are interpreted cautiously and triangulated with qualitative evidence and the wider literature, and the approach also identifies data reforms needed for routine justice reinvestment analysis.

Qualitative strand

Qualitative fieldwork includes:



Public Engagement

Stats:

2 Days
38 People



One-to-One Interviews

Stats:

37 Interviews

23 participants
with experience of the CJS

18 professionals
working in the community,
justice, addiction or
youth sector.

*4 participants fall
into both categories*



Focus Groups

Stats:

5 Groups
37 Participants

Sampling was purposive, prioritising depth and including perspectives routinely excluded from policy discourse. Participants were engaged across Dublin and a range of other counties/regions, including Offaly, Tipperary, Cork, Limerick, Clare, Westmeath, and Wicklow.

Recruitment was supported through public advertising and through community, addiction and justice-focused organisations.

Public engagement in Ballymun

An early strand included two days of low-threshold public engagement in Ballymun using socially engaged arts prompts to surface local priorities and refine qualitative tools. Using a printed image of a Garda car, with the question “Are you more likely to be arrested if you are from Ballymun?”, we set up a table and chairs outside the Axis in Ballymun, a community resource centre and arts venue, and invited people to talk to us.

Focus groups

Five focus groups were held in established services, three in Dublin, one in Limerick, one in Cork. These sessions prioritised collective reflection and accessible participation, recognising that creative methods can support people to express complex experiences of poverty, stigma and criminalisation without requiring highly formalised narrative disclosure. The approach was informed by socially engaged arts practice. Creative and sensory prompts were used where appropriate (and only where participants wanted them) to support recall and meaning-making.

Interviews were semi-structured and, where agreed, audio-recorded and transcribed. Where recording was not agreed, detailed notes were taken.

Across interviews and group work, topic guides explored: early life experience; education; family; pathways into criminalisation; barriers to accessing supports; experiences of policing and sanction; impacts of criminal justice contact on income, housing, health and family life; and participant perspectives on what preventative measures, interventions and social investment might have made a difference.

Analysis and triangulation

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis supported by MAXQDA, with coding iteratively refined as themes emerged. Analysis examined both: pathways through which

poverty shapes exposure to criminal justice contact; and how criminal justice contact deepens poverty, exclusion and harm. Findings were triangulated across methods.

Ethical framework, safeguarding and confidentiality

The study operates under a trauma-informed, peer-focused ethical framework. Core safeguards include informed consent and voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, trauma-informed facilitation attentive to pace, and boundaries, support staff present during focus groups where appropriate, confidentiality and anonymisation, and secure restricted-access data storage.

Participants are referenced using anonymous identifiers OTO (number) for interview participants with lived experience and SP (number) for sector professionals. Care was taken to avoid describing individual cases in ways that could compromise anonymity.

Limitations

The report addresses methodological limitations transparently. Qualitative sampling was purposive and designed for depth rather than statistical representation. ED-level patterns describe association and concentration, not causality. Administrative data can undercount or obscure certain experiences and groups; rural/urban comparisons require careful interpretation given differences in service presence, visibility, and recording practices across regions. Most participants identified as White. While there were many Traveller participants, and some White European migrant participants, the sample does not reflect the ethnic diversity of the Irish prison population.

A person in a red suit stands with their back to the camera, looking out over a dense city skyline with many skyscrapers. The person's face is obscured by a dark, textured mask.

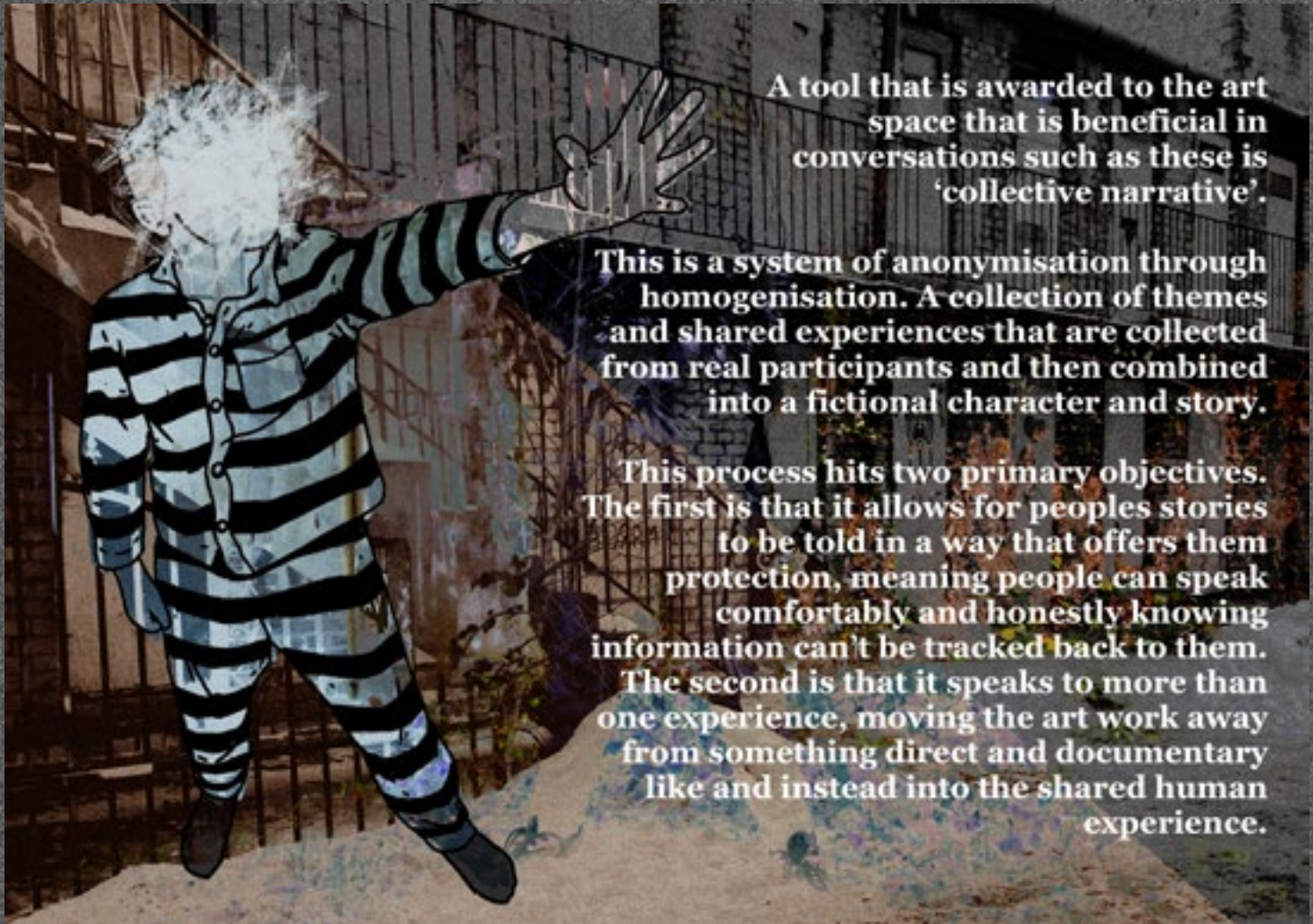
WHAT IS COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE

Why use art in something like this?

Art is given a particular leeway when speaking about complex topics such as poverty and the criminal justice system. Most people understand art needs creativity and creativity requires play. Play and research can co-exist but are not the same. Research requires evidence, it needs to be checked and confirmed at every step. Art on the other hand requires play, play is the freedom of curiosity and exploration, if you checked every step of play it would no longer be play.

Under this ideology art gives you a freedom to explore complex themes, this freedom is inherently more accessible. When exploring themes such as poverty and the criminal justice system unfortunately most of who experience these first hand have limited access to education. This can often block their access to engaging in these conversations on an academic or policy level.

Potentially art can work as an access point for people to engage in these conversations. This is not to circumvent or to avoid evidence based research, instead this would be to compliment and to add to conventional research. Potentially connecting a wider range of participants. That is what we did in this project, combining collective narrative and participatory research practices.

A person wearing a black and white striped prison uniform and a white mask stands in front of a city skyline. Their right arm is extended forward, and their hand is open. The background shows a dense urban environment with buildings and a bridge.

A tool that is awarded to the art space that is beneficial in conversations such as these is 'collective narrative'.

This is a system of anonymisation through homogenisation. A collection of themes and shared experiences that are collected from real participants and then combined into a fictional character and story.

This process hits two primary objectives. The first is that it allows for peoples stories to be told in a way that offers them protection, meaning people can speak comfortably and honestly knowing information can't be tracked back to them. The second is that it speaks to more than one experience, moving the art work away from something direct and documentary like and instead into the shared human experience.



Site of
Holy S

4. Context

4.1 Note on Language and Definitions

This research is grounded in a peer-informed, community-rooted approach that treats people affected by poverty, deprivation, and criminalisation as holding important expertise about how systems operate and how harm is produced. The approach draws on trauma-informed, participatory research practices alongside socially engaged arts practice. People with lived and living experience have informed the research through a peer advisory board and peer researcher, reflecting a commitment within IPRT's work to recognise lived experience as expertise.

The report uses plain, accessible language where possible, and avoids deficit-based or stigmatising framing. The report focuses on structural drivers, policy choices, and system design.

References to people involved in the criminal justice system prioritise people-first language, except where legal or statistical sources require otherwise. Where participants use terms that reflect lived realities, this is treated with respect and situated within its social context.

While many definitions of poverty and deprivation inform this report, we approached this research open to participants' experiences of what poverty and deprivation meant to them, and these are understood as conditions produced and shaped by economic, social, and political systems. In line with this approach:

POVERTY:

Is not having the income or support required to have what is considered a decent standard of living, leading to insecurity, reduced access to services, and reduced capacity to exercise choice and agency.

SOCIAL DEPRIVATION:

Refers to the systemic lack or denial of economic, social, and cultural resources and opportunities considered the norm in society, including participation, well-being, and belonging.

OVERLAP:

Refers to connected pathways linking poverty and exclusion to justice-system contact and then feeding back to deepen poverty over time.

That overlap operates at three levels.

1. Individual and family level poverty

Can increase exposure to risks associated with offending and victimisation: unstable housing, family stress and trauma, disrupted education, and limited access to supports.

3. State and System

Policing practices, criminalisation of survival, and barriers within the justice system can produce unequal exposure to stops, charges, remand, and conviction, particularly for marginalised groups, while substandard socioeconomic supports can compound poverty and deprivation, contributing to a vicious cycle.

2. Place-based deprivation

involves unequal access to safe housing, public services, employment opportunities, and community resources. These local conditions shape the everyday realities of safety, belonging, and informal social control, and can create conditions where informal economies become more visible and accessible. In this report, place-based deprivation refers to deprivation that is spatially concentrated in particular communities or areas and shaped by local social, economic, service, housing, and policing conditions.

4.2 Human Rights Obligations

Ireland has committed through national, European, and international instruments to protect and progressively realise socioeconomic rights. Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Ireland must take steps, using the maximum of available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of Covenant rights, including the rights to social security, an adequate standard of living, adequate housing, the highest attainable standard of health, and education.² The UN Committee that interprets the Covenant has clarified that, alongside progressive realisation, States have immediate duties, including non-discrimination in access to rights,³ and a requirement to move as quickly and effectively as possible towards full realisation.⁴ In practice, this means that policy and budget decisions should be assessed for their impact on people's ability to meet basic needs, and whether they reduce or entrench socioeconomic exclusion, particularly for groups already facing structural disadvantage.

At European level, the European Social Charter guarantees a range of social rights⁵ related to housing, health, education, social protection and protection against poverty and social exclusion, and is monitored through a supervisory system that assesses State compliance.⁶ Ireland has ratified the collective complaints mechanism linked to the Charter, strengthening accountability for compliance.

The European Child Guarantee recommends that Member States prevent and combat social exclusion by ensuring effective access for children to a set of key services, including early childhood education and care, education, at least one healthy meal each school day, healthcare, and adequate housing.⁷ This is complemented by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which includes

protections relevant to socioeconomic rights, particularly the rights of the child and rights linked to social security, social assistance and healthcare, when Member States are implementing EU law.⁸ Domestically, Ireland's Constitution sets out Directive Principles of Social Policy to guide the State in pursuing social justice and protecting the welfare of the population, however these principles are not enforceable.⁹ Public bodies also have a statutory Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty requiring them, in carrying out their functions, to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality and protect human rights.¹⁰ However, the absence of socio-economic status and criminal conviction as protected grounds limits the capacity of the current framework to address the forms of exclusion examined in this report. These instruments make poverty and deprivation and access to essential services, especially for children and other groups facing exclusion, core obligations of the State.

2 Department of Foreign Affairs, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, New York, 16 December 1966' (Irish Treaty Series No 10 of 1990).

3 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 3 January 1976) 993 UNTS 3, art 2(2); Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 'General Comment No 20: Non-Discrimination in Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Art 2, Para 2, of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)' (2 July 2009) UN Doc E/C.12/GC/20, paras 7 and 8.

4 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No 3: The Nature of States Parties' Obligations (Art 2, para 1 of the Covenant) (14 December 1990) UN Doc E/1991/23.

5 Revised European Social Charter (adopted 3 May 1996, entered into force 1 July 1999) ETS No 163, arts 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 30, 31.

6 Council of Europe, European Social Charter (revised) (adopted 3 May 1996, entered into force 1 July 1999) ETS No 163 arts 11, 13, 16, 17, 30 and 31.

7 Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee [2021] OJ L 223/14.

8 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union [2012] OJ C 326/391.

9 Bunreacht na hÉireann 1937, art 45.

10 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, s 42.

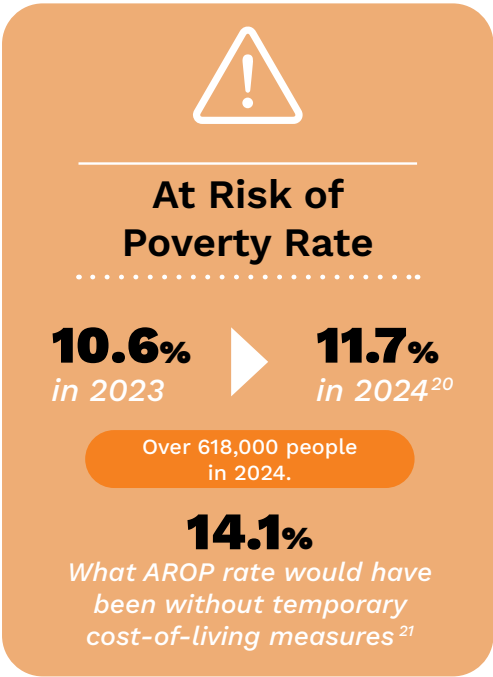
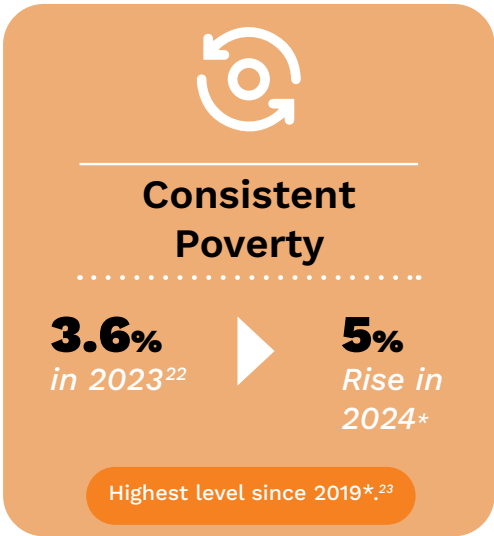
4.3 Context of Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland

Poverty and deprivation in Ireland have a persistent and often intergenerational nature.¹¹ Experiencing poverty in childhood is associated with higher risks of poverty, deprivation, poorer health, and unemployment in adulthood and the likelihood of exiting poverty decreases the longer a person has been in poverty.^{12, 13}

Housing costs are a major driver of poverty risk, particularly for renters, and contribute to deprivation and homelessness. Vulnerable groups, including children, lone-parent households, and those with disabilities, experience heightened levels of poverty and deprivation, with social welfare supports often falling short of Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) needs.¹⁴ A working-age single adult on a full Jobseeker’s payment in an urban area meets 85.1 per cent of MESL needs (a €43 weekly shortfall)¹⁵ while social welfare support for older single adults living alone in rural areas meets only 81.2 per cent of their MESL costs.¹⁶

MESL stands for the Minimum Essential Standard of Living. It is a research-based measure of the minimum income needed to afford the goods and services people need to live with dignity and take part in everyday society. It is based on a basket of essentials identified through public consensus and updated to reflect the real cost of living in Ireland. MESL is widely used as a benchmark for assessing income adequacy, social welfare rates and the adequacy of wages.

Unemployment is a strong predictor of persistent poverty.¹⁷ Lower levels of education are strongly linked to higher risks of poverty and deprivation. Nearly half (48.4 per cent) of people with primary education or below are in the lowest income quintile, and 22.2 per cent experience enforced deprivation.¹⁸ Unemployed people and those with long-standing health problems face the highest AROP rates in 2024.¹⁹



11 Sophie Curristan, Helen Russell and Bertrand Maître, *Intergenerational Poverty in Ireland* (ESRI Research Series Report No 150, October 2022). <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS150_0.pdf> accessed 20 September 2025

12 Barra Roantree and others, *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: fifth annual report*. ESRI 2025 22

13 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *The Vicious Circle of Social Exclusion and Crime: Ireland’s Disproportionate Punishment of the Poor* (IPRT, 2012).; Clare Hickey, *Crime and Homelessness* (Focus Ireland and PACE 2002) 21, 31, 44.

14 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living: MESL 2025* (Society of St Vincent De Paul 2025).

15 Ibid 38.

16 Ibid 40.

17 European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland, *Poverty Watch 2025: Eliminating Poverty-Can We Afford Not To? (EAPN Ireland 2025)*.

18 TASC, *The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2025* (TASC, June 2025).

19 European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland, *Briefing on 2024 Income and Poverty Data* (April 2025).

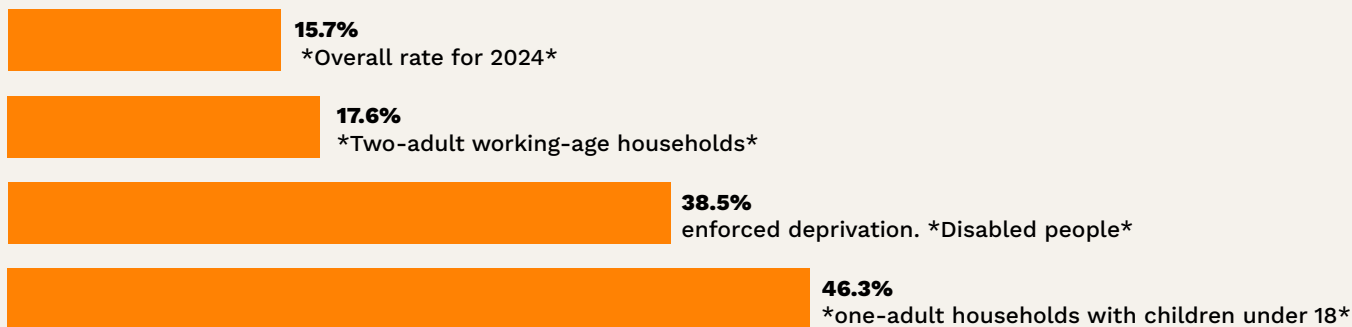
20 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (Statistical Release, 20 March 2025) ‘Poverty’ (Key Findings).

21 Ibid.

22 Consistent poverty is AROP plus enforced deprivation.

23 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (Statistical Release, 20 March 2025) ‘Poverty’ (Key Findings).

Enforced deprivation rate 2024



Over one in five children, **21.2%** *children experiencing enforced deprivation



At risk of Poverty rate when housing costs deducted 2024 ²⁶

35.5%

People in private rented accommodation without housing supports.

43.4%

People renting from a local authority.

57.3%

Renters receiving social housing assistance payments.



Homelessness snapshot and trend January 2026

17,112

In emergency accommodation, including.

5,319
children.²⁹

+11.9% & 15.5% respectively
on January 2025.³⁰
+524% homeless
children 2014-2025.³¹



Child Poverty

One in Five

Children (225,000) are below the poverty line after housing costs.²⁷

40%

Children of never-married lone parents have the highest "any poverty" rate (40%).²⁸



Difficulty Making Ends Meet

46.2%

Households reporting difficulty making ends meet in 2024.²⁵

24 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (Statistical Release, 20 March 2025) 'Poverty' (Key Findings).

25 European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland, *Briefing on 2024 Income and Poverty Data* (April 2025).

26 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (Statistical Release, 20 March 2025) 'Poverty' (At Risk of Poverty Rate after Deducting Rent and Mortgage Interest).

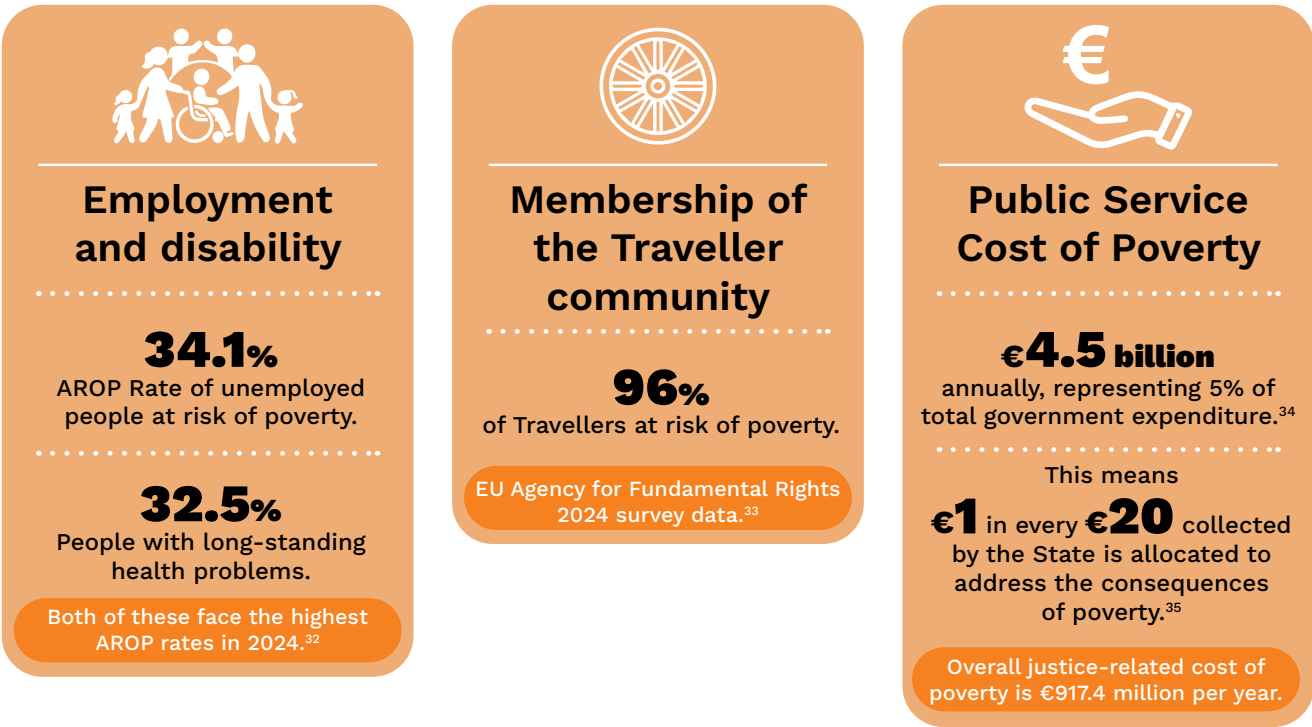
27 European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland, *Briefing on 2024 Income and Poverty Data* (April 2025).

28 Anousheh Alamir and Bertrand Maître, *Thematic Report on Persistent Income Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland: An Analysis of Persistent Income Poverty and Deprivation 2015–2023* (Department of Social Protection and Economic and Social Research Institute, July 2025).

29 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. *Monthly Homeless Report* (January 2026) 4.

30 Ibid 2.

31 TASC, *The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2025* (TASC, June 2025).



4.4 Context of criminalisation in Ireland

Ireland’s prison system is in a state of acute and worsening crisis. In January 2026, the Chief Inspector of Prisons described conditions in Irish prisons as “inhuman and degrading”, among the worst he has witnessed in over 30 years of inspecting prisons across Europe.³⁶ He stated that overcrowding at this scale undermines access to services, healthcare and mental health supports, humane detention standards, and reintegration efforts, and that “no comparable jurisdiction has ever succeeded in building its way out of overcrowding”.³⁷ The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) reported that conditions may amount to cruel and

degrading treatment,³⁸ and may violate Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment).³⁹ The Chief Inspector of Prisons reported that the Executive Secretary of the CPT expressed the view that litigation brought alleging a breach of that Article would, in his view, stand a high chance of success.⁴⁰ The figures below illustrate the scale of overcrowding, remand growth, deteriorating safety indicators, reliance on short custodial sentences, and the decrease in use of community safety orders.

32 European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland, *Briefing on 2024 Income and Poverty Data* (April 2025).

33 Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, *Travellers and Roma in Ireland: Summary and Perspectives on the Irish Findings from the Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European Countries – Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024* (Pavee Point 2026) 2.

34 Micheál Collins. *The hidden Cost of Poverty. Estimating the Public Service Cost of Poverty in Ireland* (Society of St Vincent de Paul, 2020) 9.

35 Ibid.

36 Mark Kelly, *Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration* (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 8 January 2026) 2.

37 Ibid 3.

38 European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, Report to the Irish Government (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), paras 24-27.

39 Ibid, para 42.

40 Mark Kelly, *Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration* (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 8 January 2026) 2.



Prison Population and Capacity

5,761

in custody
Record High.

7th of January 2026.⁴¹

123%

of the 4,718 bed capacity

613

people sleeping on mattresses
on the floor.⁴²

159%

capacity.

Limerick women's prison.⁴³



Remand Growth

from **584** in 2017

increase to **973** in 2024

67%

Increase.⁴⁴

919

doubled from
January 2022 - October 2024.
People requesting to be placed
on protection.⁴⁵

130%

Increase.⁴⁶



Short Sentences

77%

sentence committals under
12 months (excluding fine)
defaulters.⁴⁷

3 - 6

months
most common
sentences length.⁴⁸



Investment Imbalance

The Probation Service budget
(57 million) is

11.4% that of

the IPS (502 million).⁵¹



Falling Community Service Orders

2791

in 2019.⁴⁹

1723

in 2024.⁵⁰

41 Irish Prison Service, Prisoner Population on Wednesday 7th January 2026 (7 January 2026, Irish Prison Service); Mark Kelly, Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 8 January 2026) 2.

42 Ibid.

43 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System (PIPS): A framework for penal reform 2024* (IPRT 2025) 1.

44 Ibid 31.

45 Ibid 71.

46 Ibid 73.

47 Ibid 16.

48 Ibid (Figure 1) 17.

49 The Probation Service, Annual Report 2024. (The Probation Service, 2025) 45.

50 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System (PIPS): A framework for penal reform 2024* (IPRT 2025) 17.

51 Ibid 18.

POVERTY will
EAT
YOU
ALIVE

OUT
HERE

THEN
SCAVENGE
YOUR BONES

1 STUDY for SCARS



5. Literature Review

5.1 Purpose and Scope

This literature review synthesises evidence on the overlap between poverty, deprivation and contact with the criminal justice system to inform analysis of why people with experiences of poverty and deprivation are disproportionately represented at multiple points across the criminal justice system, and how this pattern has evolved in the context of widening social and economic inequality in Ireland. It builds on IPRT's 2012 position paper *Shifting Focus: The Vicious Circle of Social Exclusion and Crime*.⁵²

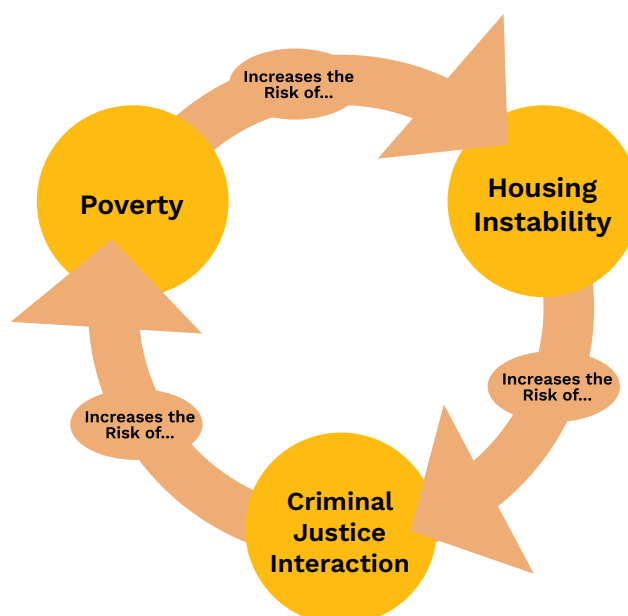
This review does not suggest that poverty “causes” criminal behaviour in a simple or deterministic way. Instead, it draws together evidence on how structural disadvantage can shape exposure to criminalisation, reduce access to protective supports, and increase the likelihood of criminal justice contact, to inform policy approaches that prioritise prevention, early intervention, and social investment over punitive responses.

This review draws on both international and Irish evidence, including meta-analyses and reviews, longitudinal studies (following people over time), and quasi-experimental research (studies that strengthen causal inference using policy changes or comparison groups), alongside Irish empirical research and policy-relevant evidence syntheses.

Using a pathways-based approach, the review considers how disadvantage can shape justice contact through early-life conditions, place-based inequalities, unequal exposure to policing and enforcement, gaps in social protection systems that might otherwise mitigate risk, and the downstream effects of imprisonment and criminalisation.

The review does not attempt to provide an account of every determinant of offending and recognises that most people experiencing poverty do not come into contact with the justice system.

Across this literature review, a consistent pattern reappears: a reinforcing feedback loop linking poverty and criminalisation. Poverty increases exposure to mediating factors such as homelessness, addiction, care experience, or ill-health; these in turn increase the risk of criminalisation; criminal justice contact then deepens cumulative exclusion, through reduced income, weakened housing security, disrupted education and employment, and intensified stigma, thereby increasing the risk of poverty again. This is the vicious circle of social exclusion and crime playing out across different pathways throughout the report.



5.2. Socioeconomic Patterning of Criminal Justice Contact

Criminal justice contact in Ireland is not evenly spread. Internationally and in Ireland, people who come before the courts and into prison are disproportionately drawn from groups experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage.⁵³ The overall pattern of class and deprivation shaping exposure to criminalisation is strong across the literature, but it is not straightforward or deterministic. Rather, it is shaped by the social determinants of health and wellbeing, including family poverty, socioeconomic status and accessible support, housing instability, trauma,

52 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *The Vicious Circle of Social Exclusion and Crime: Ireland's Disproportionate Punishment of the Poor* (IPRT, January 2012).

53 Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime Review* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation May 2014); Aaron Gottlieb, *Incarceration and Relative Poverty in Cross-National Perspective: The Moderating Roles of Female Employment and the Welfare State* (2017) 91(2) *Social Service Review* 293.

disrupted caregiving, parental ill-health, substance use or imprisonment, educational exclusion, and broader structural disadvantage. There is no single “tipping point” where any one risk factor automatically translates into criminal justice contact. The relationship is shaped by multiple, interacting pressures, which have been described as a “constellation of multisystemic factors explaining persistence in crime”.⁵⁴ This is one reason why single-factor explanations fail, and why prevention has to focus on strengthening the systems that reduce poverty, deprivation, stress, and protect people early (see Sections 2 and 3). The evidence supports two distinct claims: first, that criminal justice contact is concentrated among socioeconomically marginalised groups; and, that this concentration is especially visible in particular offence categories.

Irish administrative data, while limited, points to the same reality: imprisonment often sits alongside labour-market exclusion⁵⁵ and housing instability. On 31 December 2024, 76.1 per cent of people in custody were recorded as unemployed at committal.⁵⁶ In the same year, 748 committals recorded “no fixed abode”.⁵⁷

Offence Types Most Linked to Poverty

The overlap between poverty and criminal justice contact is not the same for every type of offence. Across the evidence, the evidence is strongest in relation to property and other acquisitive offences (including burglary and theft), alongside public order and low-level regulatory offences that are heavily policed and enforced in socioeconomically marginalised areas.⁵⁸ A further cluster concerns “survival-related” criminalisation in contexts of housing insecurity and visibility in public space, including street-level offending, informal or constrained income-generating activity, and repeated enforcement contact.

The relationship between poverty and serious

interpersonal violence and homicide is more complex and typically mediated rather than direct. While poverty is often associated with an increased risk of youth crime and violence,⁵⁹ where associations are identified more broadly, they tend to operate through structural inequality and concentrated disadvantage, alongside factors such as gendered socialisation, trauma exposure, and substance use.

Irish offence data show that many custodial committals arise from relatively low-level offences, including public order offences and are short-sentence committals,⁶⁰ which disproportionately affect people experiencing poverty and instability. This does not imply that poverty causes offending but highlights how criminalisation is patterned by socioeconomic position and offence type, particularly in relation to offences that are heavily policed and enforced in socioeconomically marginalised areas.

This pattern is also visible in youth detention. Analysis from Oberstown data indicates that detention is concentrated in a limited set of offence categories. Assault, theft-related offences (including burglary and fraud), and Road Traffic Act offences together accounted for approximately 72 per cent of headline offences leading to detention during the period examined.⁶¹ These headline offence categories are consistent with offences that are widely shown to be socially patterned: acquisitive offences such as theft, burglary, fraud,⁶² and many forms of violence are associated with socioeconomic disadvantage,⁶³ and some Road Traffic Act offences (notably uninsured, unlicensed driving and related penalties)⁶⁴ are also more prevalent in deprived contexts, suggesting detention is disproportionately linked to structural and place-based disadvantage.

54 Miguel Basto-Pereira and David P Farrington, *Developmental predictors of offending and persistence in crime: A systematic review of meta-analyses* (2022) 65 *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 101761 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2022.101761>

55 Central Statistics Office, *Offenders 2016: Employment, Education and other Outcomes, 2016–2019* (CSO, 2020) Introduction and key findings.

56 Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2024* (Irish Prison Service, 2025).

57 Minister for Justice, *Written answer to PQ No. 772*, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 5 February 2025.

58 Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime Review* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2014).

59 Youth Endowment Fund, *Evidence Review on Poverty and Youth Crime and Violence: Technical Report* Aug 2025.

60 Department of Justice (2022), *Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform* 2022/2024.

61 Oberstown Children Detention. *A profile of Young People sentenced to and remanded in the custody of Oberstown Children Detention Campus. 2025*. Data provided to IPRT by Oberstown November 2025.

62 Tim Newburn, *Social disadvantage, crime, and punishment*. London School of Economics and Political Science, 2016.

63 Youth Endowment Fund, *Evidence Review on Poverty and Youth Crime and Violence: Technical Report* Aug 2025.

64 David D. Clarke and others. *A poor way to die social deprivation and road traffic fatalities*. University of Nottingham. 2008.

Irish quantitative research also supports offence-specific relationships between socioeconomic conditions and recorded crime. County-level analysis by Brosnan finds that “relative income” (distance from the national mean) is a significant predictor for property crime, supporting the view that regional inequality and place-based economic position shape acquisitive offending patterns, rather than absolute income alone.⁶⁵ Another study examining the post-financial crisis period found that a deterioration in labour-market conditions was associated with increased theft and burglary: A 10 per cent increase in unemployment was associated with a five per cent increase in thefts and burglaries.⁶⁶

Relative income can be a stronger and clearer predictor than absolute income. Counties with incomes closer to or above the national average experience lower theft rates, indicating that regional inequality, not poverty alone, drives some crime patterns.⁶⁷

Ireland’s ability to describe this pattern comprehensively is constrained by persistent data gaps, including the incomplete recording of ethnicity in committal data,⁶⁸ and limited access to committal address information in a form that can be used for small-area spatial analysis.⁶⁹

Area-level deprivation and the concentration of justice contact

Justice contact is also geographically concentrated. International neighbourhood studies consistently show that living in socioeconomically marginalised areas increases exposure to policing, surveillance, and criminal justice intervention even when independent characteristics are considered.⁷⁰

A 2019 Comparative analysis from New York City found a statistically significant positive correlation between area poverty rates and jail incarceration, reinforcing wider evidence that criminal justice contact is spatially concentrated in underserved communities.⁷¹ These findings suggest that structural features of place, including economic inequality, limited opportunity, and concentrated disadvantage, shape who comes into contact with justice systems.

Irish evidence has long shown the same spatial concentration. A 1997 study found that 56 per cent of men in Mountjoy Prison came from just six economically deprived districts in Dublin.⁷² Research using court records from 1988 – 1994 found that over 70 per cent of defendants in Dublin’s Bridewell courts came from economically deprived areas, and defendants from deprived districts were 49 per cent more likely to receive custodial sentences than defendants from less deprived areas.⁷³ This has also been observed in youth justice, with a 2001 review of children attending the Dublin Children Court finding that almost 80 per cent lived in local authority housing.⁷⁴

Irish research published in 2007 similarly described a “geography of reintegration” where imprisonment and release are concentrated in communities already carrying high deprivation, meaning the social cost of imprisonment and the work of reintegration fall on places already facing significant structural disadvantage.⁷⁵

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- 65 Stephen Brosnan, *The socioeconomic determinants of crime in Ireland from 2003-2012* (ECD online). The Economic and Social Review, Vol. 49, No. 2, Summer 2018, pp. 127-143.
- 66 Enda Patrick Hargaden, *Crime and Unemployment in Ireland, 2003-2016* (University of Tennessee, 2016) 16-18.
- 67 Stephen Brosnan, *The Socioeconomic Determinants of Crime in Ireland from 2003-2012* (2018) 49(2) *Economic and Social Review* 127.
- 68 David M Doyle and others, “Sometimes I’m missing the words”: *The rights, needs and experiences of foreign national and minority ethnic groups in the Irish penal system* (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2022) 24.
- 69 Based on committal data received from the Irish Prison Service in December 2025.
- 70 Patrick Sharkey and Felix Elwert, The Legacy of Disadvantage: Multigenerational Neighborhood Effects on Cognitive Ability (2011) 116(6) *American Journal of Sociology*.
- 71 Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, *Ending the Poverty to Prison Pipeline* (FPWA 2019) 11-13.
- 72 Paul O’Mahony, *Mountjoy Prisoners: A sociological and criminological profile*, Dublin, Stationary Office 1997.
- 73 Ivana Bacik and others, *Crime and Poverty in Dublin: An Analysis of the Association Between Community Deprivation, District Court Appearance and Sentence Severity* in Bacik I and O’Connell M (eds), *Crime and Poverty in Ireland* (Round Hall Sweet & Maxwell 1998) 19,21.
- 74 Paul O’Mahony, (2001) *Contextualising the Children Bill as a Response to Youth Crime*, Paper delivered at the National Conference of YOUTHREACH Coordinators.
- 75 Ian O’Donnell and others, *When Prisoners Go Home: Punishment, Social Deprivation and the Geography of Reintegration* [2007] 17(4) *Irish Criminal Law Journal* 3; Kathleen Donovan, ‘The geography of prisoner reintegration’ (2008) *Drugnet Ireland* (HRB).

Disproportionate criminalisation of marginalised communities

Socioeconomic disadvantage does not operate in isolation. In Ireland, the overlap between poverty, deprivation, and criminal justice contact is sharpest where disadvantage is compounded by discrimination and unequal treatment within the justice system.

Traveller Community

Travellers are significantly over-represented in the criminal justice system,⁷⁶ reflecting intersecting inequalities linked to poverty, discrimination, educational exclusion, policing practices and harsher sentencing. While Travellers represent less than one per cent of the population,⁷⁷ as of 2024, Traveller men made up eight per cent of the male prison population, and Traveller women were 16 per cent of women in prison.⁷⁸ In 2022, Travellers were estimated to make up nine per cent of people engaged with the Probation Service.⁷⁹ Traveller women are up to 22 times more likely to be imprisoned than the general population. Traveller young people are also heavily over-represented in detention, with 23 per cent of young people in Oberstown recorded as Travellers,⁸⁰ making Traveller young people 35 times more likely to experience detention than non-Traveller young people.⁸¹ These figures are likely underestimates because ethnicity data is not consistently captured or disclosed across justice stages.⁸²

Ethnic Background	No. of Young People	%
Irish	266	65%
Irish Traveller	95	23%
African	21	5%
Other	11	3%
Romanian	8	2%
Polish	6	1%
Total	407	100%

The wider socioeconomic exclusion facing Travellers is visible in headline indicators that sit upstream of justice contact. Unemployment among Travellers was 61 per cent in 2022, compared to an overall national unemployment rate of eight per cent,⁸³ over seven times that of the general population.⁸⁴

Educational exclusion is also pronounced. 53.7 per cent of Irish Travellers aged 25–64 had primary education only or no formal education compared with 10.6 per cent of the general population in the same age group.⁸⁵ These are direct structural indicators of socioeconomic exclusion that intersect with over-representation in the justice system.

Non-Irish Nationals and Ethnic Minorities

International findings show how ethnicity, class and place combine to shape increased exposure to criminal justice systems.⁸⁶ Research on the experience of some non-Irish

- 76 Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community. *Report on Travellers Experience of the Justice System* (November 2024, 8).
- 77 Central Statistics Office, Census 2022 Summary Results – Profile 5 - Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers & Religion Part 1 (Central Statistics Office 2023).
- 78 Statistics provided to the Traveller Justice Initiative by the Irish Prison Service, 23 September 2024, referenced at the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community.
- 79 David M Doyle and others, *“Sometimes I’m missing the words: The rights, needs and experiences of foreign national and minority ethnic groups in the Irish penal system”* (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2022).
- 80 Oberstown Children Detention *A profile of Young People sentenced to and remanded in the custody of Oberstown Children Detention Campus. 2025*. Data provided to IPRT by Oberstown November 2025 4.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 David M Doyle and others, *“Sometimes I’m missing the words”: The rights, needs and experiences of foreign national and minority ethnic groups in the Irish penal system* (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2022) p. 24.
- 83 Evan Carron-Kee, Frances McGinnity and Anousheh Alamir, *Understanding Attitudes to Travellers and Roma in Ireland* Jointly-published Report 9 (Economic and Social Research Institute and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, December 2024) 14–15, 20, DOI: 10.26504/JR9. 14–15
- 84 Central Statistics Office (CSO). 2023. *Census of Population 2022 – Profiles and Key Statistics*. Dublin: CSO
- 85 Evan Carron-Kee, Frances McGinnity and Anousheh Alamir, *Understanding Attitudes to Travellers and Roma in Ireland* Jointly-published Report 9 (Economic and Social Research Institute and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, December 2024) 14–15, 20, DOI: 10.26504/JR9. 51
- 86 Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime Review* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation May 2014) 3, 17, 28.

national and minority ethnic groups found that both are significantly more likely to receive longer sentences for controlled drug offences and sexual offences than Irish nationals.⁸⁷ Research has identified low educational attainment, homelessness, unemployment and systemic racism as significant structural factors in the over-representation of some groups in the criminal justice system.⁸⁸

A 2025 policing study points to disproportionate police contact⁸⁹ for Brazilians and people of African descent, and links justice exposure to socio-economic precarity. It notes that Brazilians are over-concentrated in highly precarious, at times street-based work, Africans are disproportionately reliant on low-paid and insecure labour, and while many migrants in Ireland are skilled professionals, they are also over-represented in exploited labour sectors, homelessness and sex work,⁹⁰ which may increase exposure to police contact and reduce confidence in seeking help.

5.3. Life Course Pathways into criminalisation

Childhood poverty, family stress and early pathways

Long-running cohort studies provide some of the strongest evidence linking early-life disadvantage to later offending and criminalisation. Across major longitudinal studies, low income often clusters with overcrowded housing, poor health, family instability, neighbourhood deprivation, and weaker educational support.⁹¹ Over time, these pressures combine to increase risk.

More recent studies help clarify what is driving

this relationship. Swedish population register research using cousin and sibling comparisons suggests that the link between low childhood income and later violent conviction can reduce or disappear once shared family risks are controlled for.⁹² This indicates that poverty can operate as a marker for deeper clustered family and structural risks that co-occur with low income, including parental mental ill-health, family dissolution, and parental criminalisation.

At the same time, individual research following children over time suggests that when family socioeconomic circumstances worsen, young people's offending tends to increase in the same periods. This supports the role of economic stress as a contributing mechanism.⁹³ 2023 US research found that a one per cent increase in parental poverty was associated with an estimated 0.53 per cent increase in juvenile crime rates.⁹⁴ A 2025 UK study on youth crime and violence found that poverty is associated with a higher risk of youth crime and violence, with adolescence and early childhood identified as sensitive periods.⁹⁵

Irish research reflects similar clustering of disadvantage in the lives of children who come before the courts. Studies of children appearing before the Dublin Children Court found high levels of family poverty, substance use, and prior justice contact, including 40 per cent with another family member who had offended, and one quarter experiencing parental alcohol abuse,⁹⁶ mirroring the family-level clustering of disadvantage identified in international studies.

Moffitt's developmental taxonomy distinguishes between "adolescence-limited" offending, which is often peer-related and time-limited,

87 Lucy Michael and others. *Experiences of Policing amongst Brazilians and People of African Descent in Ireland* 23.

88 David M Doyle and others, "Sometimes I'm missing the words": *The rights, needs and experiences of foreign national and minority ethnic groups in the Irish penal system* (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2022) pp. 13-14, p 43.

89 Lucy Michael and others, *Experiences of Policing amongst Brazilians and People of African Descent in Ireland* (Policing Authority 2025) 42-43.

90 Ibid 13-14, 24.

91 Israel Kolvin and others, *Social and Parenting Factors Affecting Criminal-Offence Rates: Findings from the Newcastle Thousand Family Study* (1988); Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD), *The Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development* (University of Cambridge, Institute of Criminology 2023) Rolf Loeber, David P Farrington and Rebecca Stallings, *The Pittsburgh Youth Study* in Young Homicide Offenders and Victims (Springer 2011) 19-36. doi:10.1007/978-1-4419-9949-8_2

92 Amir Sariaslan and others, *Childhood family income, adolescent violent criminality and substance misuse: quasi-experimental total population study* (2014) 205 *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 286.

93 Roderik Rekker and others, *Moving in and out of Poverty: The Within-Individual Association between Socioeconomic Status and Juvenile Delinquency* (2015) 10(11) *PLOS ONE* e0136461.

94 Tamaraubibogha Gunuboh, *Parental Poverty and Neighborhood Conditions as Predictors of Juvenile Crime Rates*. Open Journal of Social Sciences 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2023.117021n> 288

95 Caitlin Clemmow and others, *Evidence Review on Poverty and Youth Crime and Violence* Youth Endowment Fund 3.

96 O'Mahony, P. (2001) Contextualising the Children Bill as a Response to Youth Crime, Paper delivered at the National Conference of YOUTHREACH Coordinators (referenced in Candy Murphy the *Case for Investment in Prevention and Early Intervention* (IPRT 2013) 18).



“We were known as being wild and violent before we were ever wild and violent”

from “life-course persistent” offending, which is associated with earlier onset and deeper accumulation of risk. This work argues that preventing early harm and stabilising families and communities is likely to reduce the number of people who go on to experience chronic criminal justice involvement.⁹⁷

Overall, the evidence is strongest in showing that poverty and deprivation increase risk through clustered family, social and place-based pressures, while studies differ on the extent to which low income has an independent causal effect once wider contextual risks are taken into account.

Adverse Childhood Experiences, care experience and intergenerational disadvantage

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) help explain how poverty and deprivation translate

into later justice contact. Exposure to multiple ACEs, including abuse, neglect, parental substance misuse, and parental imprisonment, is associated with higher risks of violence, substance dependence and serious and persistent offending,⁹⁸ particularly where adversity is concentrated in contexts of poverty and limited access to supportive services.

Irish evidence also shows very high levels of adversity among people facing severe exclusion. Research in Cork found that all homeless service users surveyed had experienced at least one ACE, with over three-quarters experiencing four or more.⁹⁹ Common experiences included parental addiction, domestic violence, mental health difficulties, and having a family member in prison.

Parental imprisonment is widely recognised as an ACE with significant and lasting impacts. Irish children of imprisoned parents are more

97 Terrie E Moffitt, *Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior: a developmental taxonomy* (1993) 100 *Psychological Review* 674–701.

98 Jessica M. Craig and others, *An Understanding of the Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on the Recidivism of Serious Juvenile Offenders*. *Am J Crim Just* 45, 1024–1039 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09524-6>; Felitti VJ and others, Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults (1998) *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

99 Sharon Lambert and Graham Gill-Emerson, *Moving Towards Trauma Informed Care: A Model of Research and Practice* (Cork Simon Community July 2017). <<https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/28377/1/Moving-Towards-Trauma-Informed-Care-Report.pdf>> Accessed 12th September 2025

likely to experience emotional distress, school disruption, housing instability, and financial hardship¹⁰⁰ and are at greater risk of later contact with the criminal justice system, with that risk mediated through poverty, stigma, and reduced access to support.¹⁰¹

Care experience

Care experience is another pathway where poverty, adversity and system responses can combine to increase the likelihood of criminalisation.¹⁰² International evidence shows that people who are care-experienced are over-represented in youth justice settings and adult prisons. While most care-experienced children and adults never end up in the criminal justice system, the relationship is shaped by pre-care adversity and experiences within the care system itself.¹⁰³

Socioeconomic disadvantage and low income are risk factors for entry and re-entry into out-of-home care.¹⁰⁴ Higher child poverty rates are linked to higher rates of children entering care in British population-level studies.¹⁰⁵ A 2012 British Ministry of Justice study reported that 24 per cent of adult men and 31 per cent of adult women in custody had experienced the care system as a child.¹⁰⁶ Those with care experience were first arrested at a younger age, and were more likely to be reconvicted within a year of release¹⁰⁷ (while also noting that care histories are likely undercounted in custody data.¹⁰⁸

IPRT-commissioned “*Care and Justice*” examined care experience and youth justice contact and highlighted a major national data gap that Ireland does not routinely track how many young people in care or aftercare progress through Garda diversion, the courts, detention, or later adult imprisonment.¹⁰⁹ However, 2019 data shows that 41 per cent of young people in Oberstown Detention Campus had either been in care or had significant involvement with Tusla.¹¹⁰ The 2025 Child Law Reporting Project provides strong case-based evidence that children and families experiencing homelessness, addiction, trauma, disability, weak service access, and social marginalisation are more likely to be drawn into care proceedings, exploitation risks, special care detention, and potential criminal justice contact. The report further notes cases where parents had themselves been in care, were in detention, or were dealing with addiction, homelessness, and serious trauma, pointing to a strong pattern of interlocking disadvantage and system contact across generations.¹¹¹

This is another example of the reinforcing feedback loop that deepens cumulative exclusion. Poverty increases likelihood of care experience, care experience increases risk of criminalisation, criminalisation increases risk of further poverty and social exclusion.

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- 100 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Paying the Price: The Cost and Impact of Imprisonment on Families in Ireland* (IPRT 2025).
- 101 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Paying the Price: The Cost and Impact of Imprisonment on Families in Ireland* (IPRT 2025).
- 102 Susan Baidawi and others, From Care to Corrections: A Scoping Review of Pathways from Child Protection to Adult Criminal Justice Systems. *Trauma, violence & abuse*, 2025 26(3), 403–419. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380241279861>.
- 103 Dr Katie Hunter, Professor Brian Francis, Dr Claire Fitzpatrick. *Care Experience, Ethnicity and Youth Justice Involvement: Key Trends and Policy Implications*. Administrative Data Research UK 2023 3.
- 104 Gretchen Cusick and others. *A Systematic Review of Economic and Concrete Support to Prevent Child Maltreatment. Societies* 2024, 14, 173. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14090173>.
- 105 Davara Lee Bennett and others. *Trends in inequalities in Children Looked After in England between 2004 and 2019: A local area ecological analysis* BMJ Open.
- 106 Ministry of Justice (2012) *Prisoners' Childhood and Family Backgrounds*. London: Ministry of Justice.
- 107 Ibid.
- 108 Dr Katie Hunter, Professor Brian Francis, Dr Claire Fitzpatrick. *Care Experience, Ethnicity and Youth Justice Involvement: Key Trends and Policy Implications* (Administrative Data Research UK 2023) 3.
- 109 Nicola Carr, Paula Mayock. *Care and Justice*. Children and Young People in Care and Contact with the Criminal Justice System (IPRT 2019).
- 110 Oberstown Children Detention Campus. *Key Characteristics of young people in detention: A snapshot (Q1, 2019)*.
- 111 Dr Maria Corbett and Dr Carol Coulter, *Falling Through the Cracks: An Analysis of Child Care Proceedings from 2021 to 2024* (Child Law Project 2024) 32–33, 48, 74.

Education and Exclusion

Education is one of the clearest protective factors in the evidence. Longitudinal evidence consistently links weak school attachment, low attainment and early school leaving to higher risk of later offending, particularly when poverty and family adversity are present.¹¹² Recent Irish research makes the argument that prevention should focus on social inclusion and on ensuring that young people can access the services and facilities they need in their communities.¹¹³

International evidence also links educational exclusion to poorer criminal justice outcomes after custody. Sixty-three per cent of people in British prison had experienced suspension or temporary exclusion from school, and 42 per cent had been expelled, with these people more likely to be reconvicted on release than those without.¹¹⁴ Drawing on life-history research with men who had been in prison, Dr Karen Graham argues that schools can operate as early sites of social control, where children identified as disruptive are labelled, segregated, heavily surveilled and excluded in ways that closely mirror later carceral experience.¹¹⁵ She argues that punitive school practices can actively familiarise certain children with isolation, restricted movement, institutional scrutiny and exclusion. This process is structured by race, class and gender, with poor and disproportionately Black pupils more likely to be pushed out of mainstream educational spaces and into intensified disciplinary regimes, in ways that parallel wider disproportionalities in the criminal justice system.

In Ireland, the Greentown,¹¹⁶ Redtown¹¹⁷ & Bluetown¹¹⁸ studies, which examine young people involved in atypical offending such as burglary and drug sale/supply, describe early school disengagement as part of a wider cluster of disadvantage.

In Ireland, educational disadvantage remains a defining feature of the prison population across decades of reporting.¹¹⁹ 1997 research found 80 per cent of men in Mountjoy prison reported leaving school before the age of 16.¹²⁰ 2024 data shows that over 70 per cent of people in custody are early school leavers, with an average age of leaving school 14.6 years,¹²¹ showing that educational disadvantage remains a defining characteristic of the prison population,¹²² despite changes in education policy and increased emphasis on retention.

112 Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD), *The Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development* (University of Cambridge, Institute of Criminology 2023).

113 Ursula Kilkelly and others, *Ensuring the Collaborative Reform of Youth Justice in Ireland in Line with International Research and Evidence-Based Approaches* (Final Report, updated 23 September 2021) 52, 152.

114 Ministry of Justice (2012) *Prisoners' Childhood and Family Backgrounds*. London: Ministry of Justice.

115 Karen Graham, *Does School Prepare Men for Prison?* (2014) 18(6) *City* 824; Karen Graham, 'Does school prepare men for prison?' *Centre for Crime and Justice Studies* (8 July 2015).

116 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Lifting the Lid on Greentown: Why We Should Be Concerned about the Influence Criminal Networks Have on Children's Offending Behaviour in Ireland* (Government Publications 2016) 38–39.

117 Eoin O'Meara Daly, Sean Redmond and Catherine Naughton, *Lifting the Lid on Bluetown: A Replication Case Study Examining the Influence of Criminal Networks on Children's Offending Behaviour in Ireland* (REPPP, School of Law, University of Limerick 2020) 8–9, 14.

118 Catherine Naughton, Sean Redmond and Eoin O'Meara Daly, *Lifting the Lid on Redtown: A Replication Case Study Examining the Influence of Criminal Networks on Children's Offending Behaviour in Ireland* (REPPP, School of Law, University of Limerick, nd) 10–13, 16.

119 Graham Cambridge. *Seeking Peace of Mind - Understanding Desistance as a journey into recovery and out of chaos*. University College Cork 28 – 29.

120 Paul O'Mahony, (1997) *Mountjoy Prisoners: A sociological and criminological profile*, Dublin, Stationary Office.

121 Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2024* (2025) 26.

122 Ibid.

“If you have kids ,you’re gonna go to the ends of the earth for them kids,



I've done it, I've got charges for robbing fucking Baby milk, nappies, like, a woman has to survive, like, there's too much dependent on her”

Gendered patterns of criminal justice contact

Criminal justice contact is highly gendered. Men, particularly young men from socioeconomically deprived areas, account for most recorded offending and imprisonment.¹²³ Irish research links this to the interaction of expectations around masculinity, labour market exclusion,¹²⁴ educational disadvantage and peer dynamics in deprived contexts.

Women’s pathways into justice contact are different and very closely linked to poverty,¹²⁵ trauma, caring responsibilities and coercive relationships¹²⁶ with estimates suggesting that as many as four in five have experienced domestic or sexual abuse.¹²⁷ While women make up a smaller proportion of committals, the number of women being imprisoned is

increasing. The average number of women in custody in January 2026 was 313,¹²⁸ almost triple the number of women in prison in 2006 and women are often imprisoned for short sentences.¹²⁹ Irish research on women in prison highlights high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, experiences of violence and unmet support needs, underscoring the importance of a gender-sensitive analysis of poverty and criminalisation.¹³⁰ Care responsibilities are a central part of the impact with research finding roughly 78 per cent of women in prison were mothers.¹³¹ While it is estimated that three children are affected for every mother imprisoned, this is believed to be higher for Traveller women as alongside being significantly overrepresented in the prison system, they tend to have a greater number of children, beginning at an earlier

123 Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime Review* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation May 2014) 3, 35.

124 Ibid 3, 13.

125 Ibid 3, 14, 34.

126 Beryl Ann Cowan, *Incarcerated women: Poverty, trauma and unmet need* (American Psychological Association, 2019); Penal Reform International and Women Beyond Walls, *From Poverty to Punishment: Examining Laws and Practices which Criminalise Women due to Poverty or Status Worldwide* (PRI and Women Beyond Walls 2025) 5–7,3.

127 Prison Reform Trust “*There’s a reason we’re in trouble*” *Domestic abuse as a driver to women’s offending* (Prison Reform Trust 2017).

128 Irish Prison Service Monthly Information Note – January 2026.

129 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System (PIPS): A framework for penal reform 2024* (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2025) ISBN: 978-1-8384399-3-4, 17

130 Sinead O’Malley, Carmel Devaney, Michelle Millar. Incarcerated mothers’ experience of adversity heard using participatory mixed-method research (2022) Probation Journal.

131 Ibid.

age than the average female population.¹³² With parental imprisonment associated with a fivefold increase in exposure to other ACEs¹³³ and increased risk of future criminalisation, and recent Irish research detailing the deep psychological harms to children of imprisoned mothers,¹³⁴ preventing women from being imprisoned should be a key area of focus.

The intersection between sex work, poverty and the criminal justice system is well documented. International research has found that many women engage in survival sex work out of financial need and a lack of alternative employment or adequate income supports. Similar gendered harms are documented in Irish evidence on drug-related intimidation: focus-group participants described women being coerced into sex work to “work off” drug debts and noted that stigma can prevent

families from disclosing the full nature of what is happening or seeking support.¹³⁵

For some women, criminal and administrative enforcement (including arrests, fines, harassment and displacement) can increase exposure to violence and health harm as well as exacerbate financial precarity through lost income and accumulated penalties.¹³⁶ This can push women further into poverty and lead to interaction with the criminal justice system, a theme that emerged in the consultations with people with lived and living experience. Effectively criminalising poverty for some women engaged in sex work. This demonstrates the links between poverty, the restriction of agency and engagement with the criminal justice system.



“Sex work is not just a consequence of poverty, it is as an act of resistance against being left in destitution”

132 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Maternal Imprisonment In Ireland: A Scoping Study* (IPRT 2023). SBN: 978-1-8384399-2-7

133 Kristin Turney, *Adverse childhood experiences among children of incarcerated parents* (2018) 89 Children and Youth Services Review 218.

134 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Maternal Imprisonment In Ireland: A Scoping Study* (IPRT 2023). SBN: 978-1-8384399-2-7

135 Sarahjane McCreery, Matt Bowden and Marcus Keane, *Debts, threats, distress and hope – towards understanding drug-related intimidation in Dublin's North East Inner City* (Ana Liffey Drug Project 2020) 40.

136 Lucy Platt and others, *Associations between sex work laws and sex workers' health: a systematic review and meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative studies* (2018) 15(12) *PLOS Medicine* e1002680; Penal Reform International and Women Beyond Walls, *From Poverty to Punishment: Examining Laws and Practices which Criminalise Women due to Poverty or Status Worldwide* (PRI and Women Beyond Walls 2025) 5–7, 41.

Neurodiversity, unmet need and early system contact

Neurodivergence¹³⁷ can intersect with poverty and deprivation in ways that increase vulnerability to school disengagement, early system contact, and later criminalisation, especially when needs are not identified early or supported. International longitudinal evidence links ADHD to higher rates of later justice involvement.

A Danish register-linkage cohort study found that 32.0 per cent of the ADHD cohort had at least one conviction compared with 15.6 per cent of controls,¹³⁸ with ADHD associated with a 2.4 times higher risk of conviction and a three times higher risk of incarceration.¹³⁹ Risks are higher where ADHD co-occurs with conduct problems and substance use, and where families experience socioeconomic disadvantage.¹⁴⁰ These findings have been found in other studies, with a childhood diagnosis of ADHD linked to double the risk of arrest, and around three times the likelihood of conviction and incarceration.¹⁴¹

Evidence also suggests that support can reduce risk. A large Swedish national study found a reduction of 32 per cent in criminality rate for men, and 41 per cent for women, during periods when people with ADHD were receiving medication.¹⁴² Prevalence estimates indicate that ADHD is over-represented in prison populations. While prevalence rates are

typically five to eight per cent of the general population, prevalence rates in prisons have been shown to be an average of 25.5 per cent.¹⁴³

Associations between neurodivergence and criminal justice contact are best understood as part of clustered disadvantage and unmet support needs, including how poverty shapes access to assessment, educational supports and stable care environments. Risk increases where needs are not recognised early and exclusion from protective systems escalates over time.

While more socioeconomically advantaged groups tend to have higher rates of autism diagnosis,¹⁴⁴ generally understood as relating to access to assessment, autistic people face substantially worse labour market outcomes, which increases poverty risk.¹⁴⁵ Studies on autism representation in the justice system have mixed outcomes due to different measurement tools.¹⁴⁶ Autistic people and other neurodivergent people can also be socioeconomically marginalised by criminal justice processes themselves. Differences in communication, sensory processing and stress responses may be misread as evasiveness, rudeness or non-compliance, while unfamiliar environments and rapid questioning can make it harder to understand, respond and participate effectively.¹⁴⁷

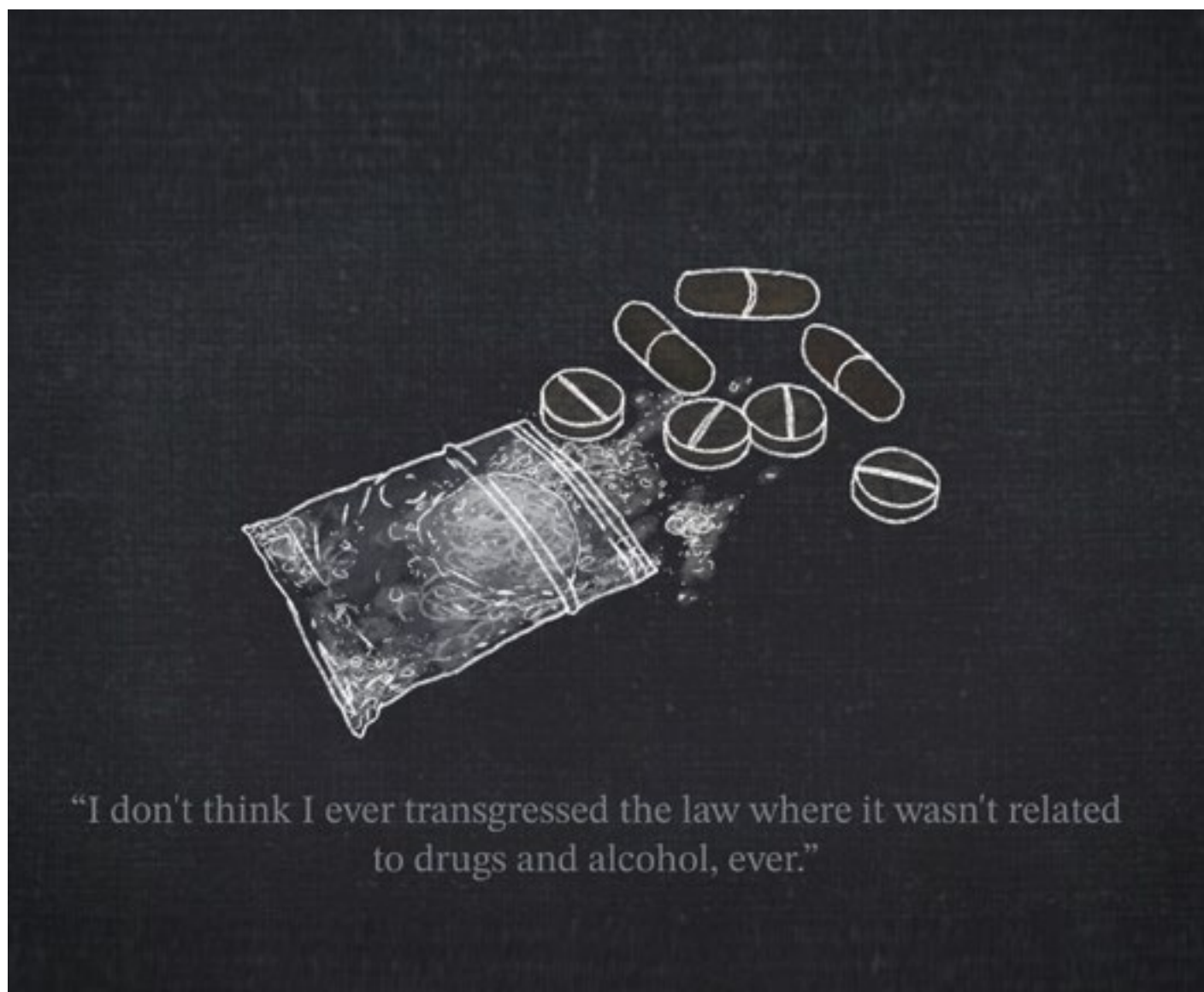
Recent Irish evidence suggests that

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- 137 Neurodivergence is an umbrella term used to describe natural differences in how people think, learn, process information, communicate and experience the world. It includes ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia and other forms of neurodevelopmental difference. ADHD and autism are neurodevelopmental differences that can shape attention, communication, sensory processing, routine and executive functioning.
- 138 C Mohr-Jensen and others, *Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Childhood and Adolescence and the Risk of Crime in Young Adulthood in a Danish Nationwide Study* (2019) 58(4) *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 443–452 doi:10.1016/j.jaac.2018.11.016.
- 139 These associations reduced but remained significant after adjustment for individual and family risk factors, including socioeconomic status and parental incarceration.
- 140 Ibid (n 138).
- 141 C Mohr-Jensen and H-C Steinhausen, 'A meta-analysis and systematic review of the risks associated with childhood attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder on long-term outcome of arrests, convictions, and incarcerations' (2016) 48 *Clinical Psychology Review* 32–42 doi: 10.1016/j.cpr.2016.05.002. Top of Form
- 142 Paul Lichtenstein and others, *Medication for Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder and Criminality* (2012) 367(21) *New England Journal of Medicine* 2006–2014. doi:10.1056/NEJMoa1203241.
- 143 Etain Quigley and Blanaid Gavin, *ADHD and the Irish Criminal Justice System: The Question of Inertia. Irish Probation Journal*. Volume 15, 2018. 84.
- 144 Shahid Khan M, Alamgir Kabir M, Mohammad Tareq S. *Socio-economic status and autism spectrum disorder: A case-control study in Bangladesh*. *Prev Med Rep*. 2024 Jan 14;38:102614. doi: 10.1016/j.pmedr.2024.102614. PMID: 38375167; PMCID: PMC10874876.
- 145 Emily J Hickey and others. *Trajectories of Competitive Employment of Autistic Adults through Late Midlife. Healthcare (Basel)* 2024 12(2) 265. doi:10.3390/healthcare12020265
- 146 Autism Spectrum Disorder and Irish Prisoners. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 00 (2019). doi:10.1017/ipm.2019.30
- 147 National Disability Authority, *Assisting People with Autism: Guidance for Justice Professionals in Communicating with People with Autism* (NDA 2018) 18, 21; Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Making Rights Real for People with Disabilities in Prison* (IPRT 2019) 31–32.

neurodivergence can deepen disadvantage at each stage of the justice process.¹⁴⁸ Neurodivergent people may be disadvantaged at arrest, in court, under community supervision, in prison and after release, including through misinterpretation of behaviour, failure to consider neurodivergence in mitigation, difficulty complying with conditions, and increased risk of breach or recall. The report also stresses that neurodivergence in custody often co-occurs with trauma, substance dependency, cognitive difficulties and limited access to specialist supports, reinforcing the need to understand justice contact in the context of clustered disadvantage rather than diagnosis alone.

Substance use as coping mechanism and mediator

Substance dependence is a key mediator in pathways from poverty into criminalisation. In communities experiencing deprivation, drug use can function as coping in the context of chronic stress, trauma, exclusion and limited access to timely mental health and addiction supports. Irish policy has begun to respond to this through the HSE's 2023 *Model of Care for Dual Diagnosis*, but recent evidence suggests dual diagnosis remains a practical barrier to support, with mental health, addiction, housing and justice services still often operating in isolation and high access thresholds continuing to exclude some of those with the most complex needs.¹⁴⁹



148 Emily J Hickey, Leann Smith DaWalt, Jinuk Hong, Julie Lounds Taylor, Marsha R Mailick, 'Trajectories of Competitive Employment of Autistic Adults through Late Midlife' (2024) 12(2) *Healthcare* (Basel), 265.

149 National Working Group for Dual Diagnosis, *Model of Care for People with Mental Disorder and Co-existing Substance Use Disorder (Dual Diagnosis)* (Health Service Executive 2023) 20, 41; Health Research Board, 'Publication of the evaluation of Ireland's national drugs strategy' *Drugnet Ireland* (Issue 92, Autumn 2025) 4.

Some people offend to fund a dependency. Intoxication can increase risk-taking, conflict or public-order contact. Involvement in drug markets can also increase exposure to violence and to policing and enforcement. These pathways are often described as economic-compulsive, psychopharmacological and systemic.¹⁵⁰

Substance use related drug debt can also function as coercion into offending. Research in Dublin's North-East Inner City described people being forced to "work off" debts by carrying items, running errands, or taking drugs from A to B, tasks that deepen exposure to criminalisation.¹⁵¹ Substance use and criminalisation also reinforce each other. People can be drawn into repeated cycles of enforcement, instability and custody that make recovery harder rather than easier.

UISCE's peer-led research found that searches, confiscation of drug-use equipment and fear around carrying naloxone within homeless accommodation could deter safer practices and deepen distrust, illustrating how punitive responses to drug use can intensify rather than reduce risk.¹⁵²

Where imprisonment is short and services are overstretched, people may not be able to access addiction supports while in custody, limiting the potential for prison to play any constructive role in stabilisation or treatment.

Cumulative and place-based pathways

Irish children and young people in deprived communities can experience overlapping disadvantages, including poor housing, limited youth and recreational facilities, and difficulties accessing services and supports, all of which shape pathways into and away from offending.¹⁵³ Where these pressures are concentrated within the same communities over time, they can interact with weaker local infrastructure, fewer safe and credible opportunities, and greater exposure to coercive peer and adult networks.¹⁵⁴ Irish administrative data on youth detention illustrates how criminal justice contact can begin early and recur. Between 2019 and 2024, 407 young people accounted for 535 admissions to Oberstown,¹⁵⁵ with one quarter experiencing repeat admissions during this period.¹⁵⁶ While 72 per cent of admissions from 2016 to 2025 were 16, 15 were 13 years old and 93 14-year-olds were detained. This aligns with international life-course research showing that early contact with the justice system is associated with a higher likelihood of further system involvement,¹⁵⁷ labelling effects, and exposure to more peers also involved in youth justice involvement.¹⁵⁸

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- 150 Graham Cambridge. Seeking Peace of Mind - Understanding Desistance as a journey into recovery and out of chaos.pdf, p. 12; Sarahjane McCreery, Matt Bowden and Marcus Keane, *Debts, threats, distress and hope – towards understanding drug-related intimidation in Dublin's North East Inner City* (Ana Liffey Drug Project 2020) 40.
- 151 Sarahjane McCreery, Matt Bowden and Marcus Keane, *Debts, threats, distress and hope – towards understanding drug-related intimidation in Dublin's North East Inner City* (Ana Liffey Drug Project 2020) 40.
- 152 UISCE, *Agency, Access and Solutions: A Living Experience Analysis of Homeless Accommodation by People Who Use Drugs through a Human Rights Framework* (UISCE 2024) 31, 34.
- 153 Ursula Kilkelly and others, *Ensuring the Collaborative Reform of Youth Justice in Ireland in Line with International Research and Evidence-Based Approaches* (University College Cork, 30 November 2020, updated 23 September 2021) 155–156, 159.
- 154 Ibid (n 150); Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Lifting the Lid on Greentown: Why We Should Be Concerned about the Influence Criminal Networks Have on Children's Offending Behaviour in Ireland* (Government Publications 2016).
- 155 Oberstown Children Detention Campus *A profile of Young People sentenced to and remanded in the custody of Oberstown Children Detention Campus (2025)*. Data provided to IPRT by Oberstown, November 2025, 4.
- 156 Ibid – the report notes this figure likely underestimates repeat contact because admissions prior to 2019 are not captured.
- 157 Oberstown Children Detention Campus *A profile of Young People sentenced to and remanded in the custody of Oberstown Children Detention Campus (2025)*. Data provided to IPRT by Oberstown, November 2025, 4.
- 158 Miguel Basto-Pereira and David P Farrington, Developmental predictors of offending and persistence in crime: A systematic review of meta-analyses (2022) 65 *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 101761.

Grooming and exploitation of young people into offending and informal economies

Internationally, there is clear evidence that drug supply chains can involve the recruitment and exploitation of children and vulnerable people into high-risk roles for high-risk tasks, with significant harms and long-term criminal justice consequences.¹⁵⁹

Irish network studies suggest that, in some deprived areas, children and young people can be drawn into serious offending, particularly into the illegal drug trade, through relationships of obligation, intimidation and control. In these contexts, the drug economy can function as an informal source of income and status, particularly for boys and young men facing constrained legitimate opportunities. The Greentown, Redtown and Bluetown studies link persistent involvement in these networks to a combination of risk factors including family ties to crime, proximity to offending peers, and the normalisation of criminal behaviour, with engagement in networks plausibly contributing to more serious and prolific offending patterns over time.¹⁶⁰ Intimidation and fear of violence, including in the context of debt retrieval, and fear of consequences for refusing to engage in crime can operate as drivers of children's behaviour.¹⁶¹ Lack of access to money, drug debts and the need for quick cash can escalate involvement in burglary and drug-related activity among vulnerable young people.¹⁶² The same studies describe how networks can become more organised through the use of "runners" for minor drug dealing/holding drugs, alongside fear and intimidation contributing to network stability and community reluctance to

report offending.¹⁶³ Irish research has reported children below 12 being targeted precisely because they are below the age of criminal responsibility and are perceived as useful for small-scale tasks and intimidation.¹⁶⁴ However, there are increasing reports of children as young as eight being used for criminal activity.¹⁶⁵

5.4 Place, class and unequal exposure to policing and criminalisation

The pathways outlined in Section 2 are shaped by where people live, how the State defines and enforces "problem behaviour", and whether supports are accessible before problems escalate. In practice, this means that poverty-linked harms are more likely to become criminal justice matters in communities facing long term concentrated deprivation, limited services and high enforcement. Place-based deprivation also shapes the social ecology of safety and crime. Over time, deprivation can reshape the social, institutional and cultural conditions of a place¹⁶⁶ in ways that intensify exposure to criminalisation. Weakened local infrastructure, reduced access to education, health and youth supports, limited opportunities for secure work and participation, greater exposure to violence and intimidation, and the normalisation of informal or illegal economies can all narrow the routes available to people before any criminal justice intervention occurs.¹⁶⁷ At the same time, reduced trust in formal systems, fear of reporting, and heavier or more intrusive policing can mean that some communities are both under-protected from serious harm and over-exposed to enforcement. In this way,

159 Home Office, *Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults*: county lines (UK Government 2023).

160 Eoin O'Meara Daly, Sean Redmond and Catherine Naughton, *Lifting the Lid on Bluetown: A Replication Case Study Examining the Influence of Criminal Networks on Children's Offending Behaviour in Ireland* (REPPP, School of Law, University of Limerick 2020) 8–9, 10–13 14, 16; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Lifting the Lid on Greentown: Why We Should Be Concerned about the Influence Criminal Networks Have on Children's Offending Behaviour in Ireland* (Government Publications 2016) 38–39.

161 Ibid.

162 Catherine Naughton, Sean Redmond and Eoin O'Meara Daly, *Lifting the Lid on Redtown: A Replication Case Study Examining the Influence of Criminal Networks on Children's Offending Behaviour in Ireland* (REPPP, School of Law, University of Limerick) 30–31, 39–40.

163 Ibid 45–46.

164 Oireachtas Library & Research Service, L&RS Note: *The recruitment of children to commit crime* (15 July 2020) 3; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Lifting the Lid on Greentown - Why we should be concerned about the influence criminal networks have on children's offending behaviour in Ireland* (Government Publications 2016) 58.

165 Garda Inspectorate, *Inspection Report on Transnational Organised Crime* (November 2024) 37.

166 Robert J Sampson, Jeffrey D Morenoff and Thomas Gannon-Rowley, *Assessing "Neighborhood Effects": Social Processes and New Directions in Research* (2002) 28 *Annual Review of Sociology* 443; David J Harding, Jeffrey D Morenoff and Jessica H Hepburn, 'Cultural Mechanisms in Neighborhood Effects Research in the United States' (2015) 41 *Annual Review of Sociology* 559

167 Sarahjane McCreery, Matt Bowden and Marcus Keane, *Debts, threats, distress and hope – towards understanding drug-related intimidation in Dublin's North East Inner City* (Ana Liffey Drug Project 2020) 40.

place-based deprivation operates as a distinct mechanism through which social harm, unmet need and survival-related behaviour are more likely to be translated into criminal justice contact.

This section focuses on the Irish policy and enforcement context. Its purpose is to explain how predictable inequalities in exposure are produced and reinforced through place-based conditions, policing and enforcement patterns, and system design, and why prevention requires investment in housing, education, health and community supports rather than escalating criminal justice responses.¹⁶⁸ International neighbourhood studies consistently show that living in disadvantaged areas increases exposure to policing, surveillance and criminal justice intervention even when individual characteristics are considered.¹⁶⁹

Concentration of criminal justice contact in deprived areas

Criminal justice contact is shaped not only by behaviour, but by visibility and enforcement. Evidence shows that place-based factors such as income inequality, labour market conditions, housing insecurity, social exclusion and weak community infrastructure contribute to both higher levels of crime, victimisation and greater justice system contact, with more frequent and more intrusive policing.¹⁷⁰ This increases the likelihood of low-level and poverty-linked behaviour coming to official attention¹⁷¹ and can result in higher levels of enforcement activity for people in deprived communities, while simultaneously experiencing limited protection from serious harm.¹⁷²

Areas with high crime levels in previous years tend to remain high-crime areas, suggesting that structural disadvantage and local conditions reproduce crime over time.¹⁷³

A key message from place-based research is that short snapshots at a specific point in time can underestimate the impact of neighbourhood poverty. Multigenerational exposure to neighbourhood poverty is associated with poorer outcomes for children, including reduced cognitive ability, impacting educational outcomes, labour market options, stress exposure, and social capital, all of which sit upstream of both harm and risk of criminalisation.¹⁷⁴ Economic shocks can also play out geographically. Areas more exposed to recession-driven job losses, especially in the construction industry, experienced larger crime increases, indicating place-based deprivation effects.¹⁷⁵

A relatively small number of communities experience repeated cycles of removal and return through the prison system. Over time this can destabilise communities, weaken informal social controls and increase further justice involvement.¹⁷⁶ This pattern is established in British, international studies¹⁷⁷ and Irish studies.¹⁷⁸

Policing, stigma and the criminalisation of marginalised communities

The intersection of place, poverty and policing is particularly evident in the criminalisation of marginalised communities. Research on the Traveller community in Ireland shows persistent over-representation at multiple stages of the criminal justice system, alongside perceptions of disproportionate surveillance, aggressive enforcement, discriminatory treatment and differential policing and limited trust in Gardaí.

Other ethnic minorities report similar issues. A 2023 Policing Authority study of Dublin's Black African and Brazilian communities records accounts of arbitrary stops and the use of force on people of colour in Ireland, often with

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- 168 Candy Murphy, *From Justice to Welfare: The Case for Investment in Prevention and Early Intervention* (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2010) 25–31.
- 169 Patrick Sharkey and Felix Elwert, *The Legacy of Disadvantage: Multigenerational Neighborhood Effects on Cognitive Ability* (2011) 116(6) *American Journal of Sociology*.
- 170 Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2014).
- 171 Ibid.
- 172 Aogan Mulcahy, 'Policing and the Traveller Community in Ireland' (2012) *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 12(3) 307.
- 173 Stephen Brosnan, *The Socioeconomic Determinants of Crime in Ireland from 2003–2012* (2018) 49(2) *Economic and Social Review* 127.
- 174 Patrick Sharkey and Felix Elwert, *The Legacy of Disadvantage: Multigenerational Neighborhood Effects on Cognitive Ability* (2011) 116(6) *American Journal of Sociology* 1934.
- 175 Enda Patrick Hargaden, *Crime and Unemployment in Ireland, 2003–2016* (University of Tennessee, 2016) 13–15.
- 176 Todd R Clear, Dina R Rose and Judith A Ryder, *Coercive Mobility and Crime* (2001) 20 *Justice Quarterly* 33.
- 177 Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014).
- 178 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *The Vicious Circle of Social Exclusion and Crime: Ireland's Disproportionate Punishment of the Poor* (IPRT, January 2012).

derogatory language. Such experiences are linked to low trust: many in these communities say they now rarely call police because “the police service is for some, but not for us”.¹⁷⁹

In Greentown, Garda respondents describe residents being unlikely to make complaints or act as witnesses against feared network actors, even where corroborating evidence exists.¹⁸⁰ In Bluetown, Garda respondents similarly describe fear and intimidation deterring residents from reporting or giving statements, with perceived reputational power and feared repercussions shaping local willingness to cooperate with formal justice processes.¹⁸¹ This pattern is mirrored in research from Dublin’s North East Inner City, with intimidation described as extending beyond a person with a drug debt to families and wider networks, while fear and proximity suppress reporting; the report cites Irish research indicating that 72 per cent of respondents would not report incidents because perpetrators lived locally.¹⁸²

Geographic variation and system discretion

The Oberstown data also identifies significant geographic variation in the use of remand and detention between courts, which cannot be explained by population size alone. This raises questions about inconsistency in decision-making and the role of court practice and local system responses in shaping youth detention outcomes.¹⁸³ During the COVID-19 period, there was a marked reduction in the use of detention when greater reliance was placed on non-custodial alternatives.¹⁸⁴ This demonstrates that levels of youth detention are responsive to policy and practice choices.

Criminalisation of poverty

Some forms of criminalisation are closely linked to poverty and visibility in public space, including public order offences, fine default, and survival-related activities. These sanctions can deepen socioeconomic disadvantage by creating debt, criminal records and in some cases imprisonment, while policy interventions that link sanctions to ability to pay or provide alternatives (e.g. restorative practice, sliding scale fines) can reduce unnecessary justice contact.

Historically, the enforcement of fines operated as a key mechanism of penalising poverty in Ireland¹⁸⁵ with those least able to pay fines most likely to experience imprisonment as a result.¹⁸⁶ Ireland’s Fines (Payment and Recovery) Act 2014¹⁸⁷ and associated procedural changes require courts to take a person’s financial circumstances into account when imposing fines and permit payment by instalments. This reform was intended to reduce imprisonment for non-payment by offering alternatives such as instalment plans and community service orders where appropriate. The Act did not abolish fines as a penalty, and while committals for non-payment of court-ordered fines declined from thousands annually in the mid-2010s to 205 by 2022,¹⁸⁸ the last two years have seen an upsurge in people imprisoned due to non-payment of fines, with 507 people committed in 2024.¹⁸⁹

179 Policing Authority *Experiences of policing among Brazilian and Black African communities* (Policing Authority 2025).

180 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Lifting the Lid on Greentown: Why We Should Be Concerned about the Influence Criminal Networks Have on Children’s Offending Behaviour in Ireland* (Government Publications 2016) 38–39.

181 Eoin O’Meara Daly, Sean Redmond and Catherine Naughton, *Lifting the Lid on Bluetown: A Replication Case Study Examining the Influence of Criminal Networks on Children’s Offending Behaviour in Ireland* (REPPP, School of Law, University of Limerick 2020) 29,46.

182 Sarahjane McCreery, Matt Bowden and Marcus Keane, *Debts, threats, distress and hope – towards understanding drug-related intimidation in Dublin’s North East Inner City* (Ana Liffey Drug Project 2020) 16,36.

183 Oberstown Children Detention Campus *A profile of Young People sentenced to and remanded in the custody of Oberstown Children Detention Campus (2025)*. Data provided to IPRT by Oberstown, November 2025.

184 Ibid.

185 Paul O’Mahony, Punishing Poverty and Personal Adversity in Bacik & O’Connell (eds), *Crime and Poverty in Ireland* (1998).

186 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *The Vicious Circle of Social Exclusion and Crime: Ireland’s Disproportionate Punishment of the Poor* (IPRT, January 2012).

187 Fines (Payment and Recovery) Act 2014.

188 Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2022* (Irish Prison Service 2023) 43.

189 Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2024* (Irish Prison Service 2025) 62.

“if you don’t have sanctuary, warmth, and safety, and security.

Everything else is white noise.”

Housing insecurity and Cost of Living and homelessness as drivers

People experiencing homelessness are significantly overrepresented in Irish prisons. In 2024, 11.6 per cent (835) of all committals had no fixed abode.¹⁹⁰ Housing exclusion can increase criminal justice contact for relatively low level offences related to survival, visibility in public spaces and also indirectly, through its impact on health, safety and survival.¹⁹¹ Imprisonment can deepen housing insecurity on release, and the Irish Prison Service has noted lack of housing as one of the reasons cited for reoffending among people returning to prison.¹⁹²

People in prison are reported to be over 20 times more likely to experience homelessness than the general population.¹⁹³ This overlap is particularly acute for people serving short sentences, who may lose accommodation

during custody and struggle to secure housing on release.¹⁹⁴ Irish evidence on prison release and reintegration indicates that difficulty securing stable accommodation can lead to accessing emergency accommodation or rough sleeping, reinforcing a cycle of homelessness, reoffending and return to custody.¹⁹⁵ An evaluation of the Women’s Outlook Programme found that women leaving prison benefited from gender-specific, trauma-informed accommodation and support exiting prison. It found that secure, supported accommodation is a critical part of preventing women from being released into further trauma, instability and repeat justice contact. Among women who completed the programme, two-thirds returned to the family home, one-third secured other accommodation, 70 per cent moved into employment, and withdrawal rates were low.¹⁹⁶

Across resettlement research, housing is consistently identified as a key factor shaping

190 Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime Review* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation May 2014) 3, 34; Paula Mayock, Sarah Parker and Andrew Murphy, *Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion* (Focus Ireland, 2014).

191 Mairéad Seymour and Liza Costello, *A Study of the Number, Profile and Progression Routes of Homeless Persons Before the Court and in Custody* (Probation and Welfare Service, 2004) .Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System (PIPS): A framework for penal reform 2024* (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2025) ISBN 978-1-8384399-6-5,86.

192 Irish Prison Service Strategy 2023-2027 (IPS 2023) 7.

193 Ahmed Y. Bashir and others. (2021), From nowhere to nowhere. Homelessness and incarceration: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Prison Health*, Vol. 17 No. 4 pp. 452–461, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPH-01-2021-0010>

194 Ian O'Donnell, Eric P Baumer and Nicola Hughes, *Recidivism in the Republic of Ireland* (2008) 8(2) *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 123.

195 Kiran Sarma. *Evaluation of the Cork Prison In-Reach Pilot Project*. Focus Ireland. 2014. 61.

196 Ann Clarke, Oonagh Clarke and Tom Martin, *An Evaluation of the Focus Ireland Women’s Outlook Programme* (Ann Clarke & Associates 2024).

reoffending outcomes because it underpins compliance with conditions, treatment engagement, and access to work, training and education.¹⁹⁷ The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality previously noting that the lack of permanent housing makes reintegration “very difficult” and highlighted prison-to-homelessness pathways as a persistent concern.¹⁹⁸

Interagency crisis responses during COVID-19 demonstrates what is possible when homelessness is treated as a public health emergency requiring coordinated, practical action.¹⁹⁹ The learning from that period should inform long-term approaches to prison release and reintegration, to achieve better outcomes for people leaving custody, for communities and for public safety.

Housing First

Housing First is widely recognised as an evidence-based approach for people experiencing long-term homelessness and complex needs, including within Irish health and homelessness policy.²⁰⁰ In Ireland, an evaluation of the Dublin Housing First demonstration found that Housing First participants spent substantially more time in stable housing over the follow-up period than a comparison group, and “by the fifth assessment, 73 per cent (16) Housing First participants reported zero legal problems in the previous three months, compared to 55 per cent (11) of comparison group participants.”²⁰¹

Ireland implemented a dedicated Housing First pilot for people leaving prison and under Probation Service supervision between 2020 and 2024, delivered by the Peter McVerry Trust in partnership with the Irish Prison Service, Probation Service, HSE, and local authorities. The project supported people at high risk of

homelessness with complex needs, creating at least 40 tenancies during its pilot phase.²⁰² In mid-2024, the standalone programme was discontinued as a distinct initiative and absorbed into the mainstream national Housing First system. No publicly available standalone evaluation of the criminal-justice-specific pilot has been published, leaving a gap in evidence on tenancy sustainment, reoffending outcomes, and cost-effectiveness for people leaving custody.

Drugs Policy and Criminalisation of People Who Use Drugs

In Ireland, possession of a controlled drug remains a criminal offence under section 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977. As a result, a significant share of drug-related justice contact arises directly from enforcement of simple possession.²⁰³ In 2024, the Central Statistics Office recorded 16,119 incidents of controlled drug offences, with 10,703 of these being Possession of Drugs for Personal Use.²⁰⁴

The State’s consultation on alternatives to simple possession highlighted the downstream harms of criminal penalties for personal use, including the long-term impact of convictions on employment and life chances.²⁰⁵ In 2022, 343 drug poisoning deaths were recorded (6.6 per 100,000 people), reinforcing the urgency of a public health response alongside community safety measures.²⁰⁶

Since 2012, Irish drug policy has increasingly moved toward a health-led framing. This shift accelerated in 2024 when the Citizens’ Assembly on Drug Use called for a comprehensive health-led approach, including a decriminalised model for possession for personal use.²⁰⁷ Building on this, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Drugs Use interim report (October 2024) recommended

197 Social Exclusion Unit, *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-Prisoners* (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2002); HM Inspectorate of Probation, *Accommodation* (Evidence Base: Probation Service, 2 February 2021); Irish Prison Service. IPS Strategy 2023–2027 (2023) 7; Paul Thompson, *The Challenge of Meeting the Housing Needs of Offenders* (2014) Irish Probation Journal 113–123.

198 Joint Committee on Justice and Equality, *Report on Penal Reform and Sentencing* (Oireachtas, 10 May 2018)

199 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System (PIPS): Assessing Progress During the Pandemic* (IPRT 2020) 26.

200 Health Service Executive, ‘Housing First and Homeless Health’ (HSE 2024).

201 Ronni Michelle Greenwood, ‘Evaluation of Dublin Housing First Demonstration Project 2015’ (Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2015) 18.

202 Parliamentary Question No 123, Dáil Éireann Debates, 24 April 2024 (Minister for Housing).

203 Misuse of Drugs Act 1977, s 3.

204 Central Statistics Office, ‘Recorded Crime Q4 2024: Detailed Offence Groups’.

205 Department of Health, *Working Group to Consider Alternative Approaches to the Possession of Drugs for Personal Use: Report of the Public Consultation* (Government of Ireland, March 2019) 4–6.

206 Cathy Kelleher, Fiona Riordan and Arya Gopalakrishnan, *Drug Poisoning Deaths in Ireland in 2022: Data from the National Drug-Related Deaths Index (NDRDI)* (Health Research Board 2025) 9.

207 Citizens Assembly *Report of the Citizens’ Assembly on Drugs use. Volume 1.* 2024 13.

decriminalising possession for personal use and specifically called for repeal of Section 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977 to give effect to a comprehensive health-led approach, an evidence-informed route to reducing stigma, preventing avoidable justice contact, and supporting progressive reform.²⁰⁸

The Treatment and Recovery Programme review finds that high levels of unmet health and addiction needs continue to be managed inside prison, with long waits for counselling, psychology and weak step-down pathways meaning progress can stall and people can fall back into a “cliff edge” after the programme.²⁰⁹ It also explicitly links addiction and associated criminal activity to wider societal inequalities and situates prison-based treatment within a broader Irish shift towards health-led drugs policy while highlighting that continuity-of-care and coordinated progression planning remain major gaps on in practice.²¹⁰

The available evidence also indicates a sharp social gradient in drug-related imprisonment. While the rate of drug use does not differ sharply across communities,²¹¹ 2007 research on people released from prison found that 57.8 prisoners per 10,000 released after serving a sentence for a drug-related crime came from deprived areas, compared to 1.8 in the least deprived areas.²¹² This points to a severe overcriminalisation of substance use within communities experiencing deprivation.

The illegal drug trade as an informal economy: place-based harm, intimidation and criminalisation

Illegal drug markets operate as economic systems that generate profit, organise labour, and shape social relations in particular places. In communities experiencing persistent deprivation, illegal drug markets can become embedded because they exploit and intensify existing social and economic vulnerability,

particularly where access to secure income, services, and credible opportunities is constrained.²¹³ The embedding of drug markets in deprived areas increases day-to-day exposure to policing and enforcement. Where drug dealing is visible, the likelihood of detection is higher. This contributes to unequal criminal justice contact, particularly for low-level roles, and for communities already subject to intensive surveillance and enforcement.

Illegal markets as an informal economy

In deprived areas, the drug trade can function as a form of informal or “shadow” economy. At street level, it offers an accessible, and risky, route to income and status, particularly for adolescents and young men who may face exclusion from education, training, and stable employment. Where deprivation is concentrated and legitimate routes to money, status, and safety are weak, illicit markets can provide alternative pathways that appear locally normalised or rational, even while they carry severe risks for individuals and communities.²¹⁴ As evidenced above, Irish evidence highlights how children and young people are groomed into these networks at a young age.

Irish research on illegal drug markets has long highlighted that drug dealing is shaped by local social conditions and enforcement environments and tends to draw heavily on local labour for lower-level roles, while higher-level profit is often insulated through distance, hierarchy, or displacement of risk onto those with the least power.²¹⁵

Intimidation and violence as systemic features of drug markets

Where markets are illegal, disputes cannot be resolved through formal mechanisms. Violence, threats, and coercion can therefore become tools of market governance, used to enforce

208 Oireachtas Joint Committee on Drugs Use, *Interim Report* (October 2024) 11 (Interim recommendations 3–4).

209 James Leonard and Patricia Prenderville, *Independent Review of Treatment and Recovery Programme within Mountjoy Prison* (Irish Prison Service/Merchants Quay Ireland, March 2025) 12.

210 Ibid.

211 Deirdre Mongan, Sean R Millar and Brian Galvin, *The 2019–20 Irish National Drug and Alcohol Survey: Main findings* (Health Research Board 2021) 51.

212 Ian O'Donnell and others, When Prisoners Go Home: Punishment, Social Deprivation and the Geography of Reintegration [2007] 17(4) *Irish Criminal Law Journal* 3; Kathleen Donovan, ‘The geography of prisoner reintegration’ (2008) *Drugnet Ireland* (HRB).

213 Johnny Connolly and Anne Marie Donovan, *Illicit Drug Markets in Ireland* (National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol and Health Research Board 2014) 28–29.

214 Johnny Connolly and Anne Marie Donovan, *Illicit Drug Markets in Ireland* (National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol and Health Research Board 2014).

215 Ibid.

debts, control territory, discipline workers, and deter informing or non-compliance.²¹⁶

This helps explain why the presence of an embedded drug market can reshape community culture and perceptions of safety even for people who do not use drugs or engage in dealing. How this economy is managed locally can spill into public and private spaces, influencing whether people feel safe to move around their neighbourhood, whether they trust institutions, and whether they report harm.

Recent Irish research emphasises the role of community-rooted safety and anti-violence approaches that treat violence and intimidation as preventable harms, and explicitly centre community leadership and “credible voices”, as part of building safety and preventing violence within communities.²¹⁷

Drug-related intimidation and fear: impacts on families and community life

Irish evidence is particularly strong on drug-related intimidation as a place-based harm. The Health Research Board’s evidence review describes drug-related intimidation as a serious community issue, including intimidation linked to drug debts and enforcement within supply hierarchies.²¹⁸ Irish qualitative research in Dublin’s North East Inner City documents how drug debt intimidation can extend beyond individuals to affect families, including coercive demands and threats that create ongoing fear and distress.²¹⁹ These dynamics align with wider evidence that intimidation suppresses reporting and cooperation with services, leaving communities simultaneously exposed to serious harm and reluctant to engage with formal systems. National responses in Ireland recognise intimidation as a distinct harm linked to drug markets. An Garda Síochána

operates a Drug Related Intimidation Reporting Programme intended to respond to the needs of people and family members experiencing intimidation.²²⁰

External demand and the centralisation of harm

Where drug economies become embedded in neighbourhoods, people from outside the area may travel in to purchase, and sometimes use, drugs. Irish evidence from Ballymun identified that open drug markets were selling not only to local residents but also to people from outside the area and described how open drug dealing was drawing people into the community to buy and use drugs.²²¹ This dynamic can intensify the unequal burden already carried by deprived communities. When purchasing and public use are concentrated in a neighbourhood, the visible impacts, public selling, discarded paraphernalia, community stigma, and heightened enforcement activity are also concentrated locally, even where much of the consumer demand originates elsewhere.²²² In practice, this means that the harm can be spatially imported into already-disadvantaged places.

Exiting the drug trade

International qualitative research on desistance from the drug trade finds that many participants want to “get out of the game”, but face layered barriers.²²³ These include the loss of income in contexts of limited legitimate work; fear of retaliation or consequences from criminal networks; criminal records limiting social mobility; social ties and identity investment in the role; and the practical difficulty of relocating away from the market without resources.²²⁴

Irish qualitative work on men, crime, addiction,

216 Paul J Goldstein, *The Drugs/Violence Nexus: A Tripartite Conceptual Framework* (1985) 15 *Journal of Drug Issues* 493.

217 Lynn Ruane, *Canal Communities Community-Based Public Safety Strategy: Moving towards a public health approach to violence* (Canal Communities Local Drugs and Alcohol Task Force 2025).

218 Laura Murphy and others, *Drug-related intimidation: The Irish situation and international responses: an evidence review* (HRB Drug and Alcohol Evidence Review, Health Research Board 2017).

219 Sarahjane McCreery, Matt Bowden and Marcus Keane, *Debts, threats, distress and hope – towards understanding drug-related intimidation in Dublin’s North East Inner City* (Ana Liffey Drug Project 2020) 40.

220 DRIVE Project National Awareness Campaign 2025 (Department of Health et al 2025) <<https://driveproject.ie/>> last accessed 8 March 2026.

221 Andrew Montague, *Ballymun - a brighter future: A plan to tackle the underlying causes of addiction and crime and to tackle open drug dealing* (Ballymun Local Drugs and Alcohol Task Force, March 2021) 11, 13.

222 MBS Zafarghandi and others, *Indicators of Drug-Related Community Impacts of Open Drug Scenes: A Scoping Review* (2022) 28(2) *European Addiction Research* 87.

223 Howard Campbell and Tobin Hansen, *Getting out of the Game: Desistance from drug trafficking* (2012) 23(6) *International Journal of Drug Policy* 481.

224 Jamie J Fader, *‘The Game Ain’t What It Used to Be’: Drug Sellers’ Perceptions of the Modern Day Underground and Legal Markets’* (2018) 48(4) *Journal of Drug Issues* 622.

and desistance similarly underlines how poverty, trauma, and masculinised pressures around money, respect and survival can shape both entry to and exit from crime, with “change” requiring not only individual motivation but credible supports and pathways.²²⁵

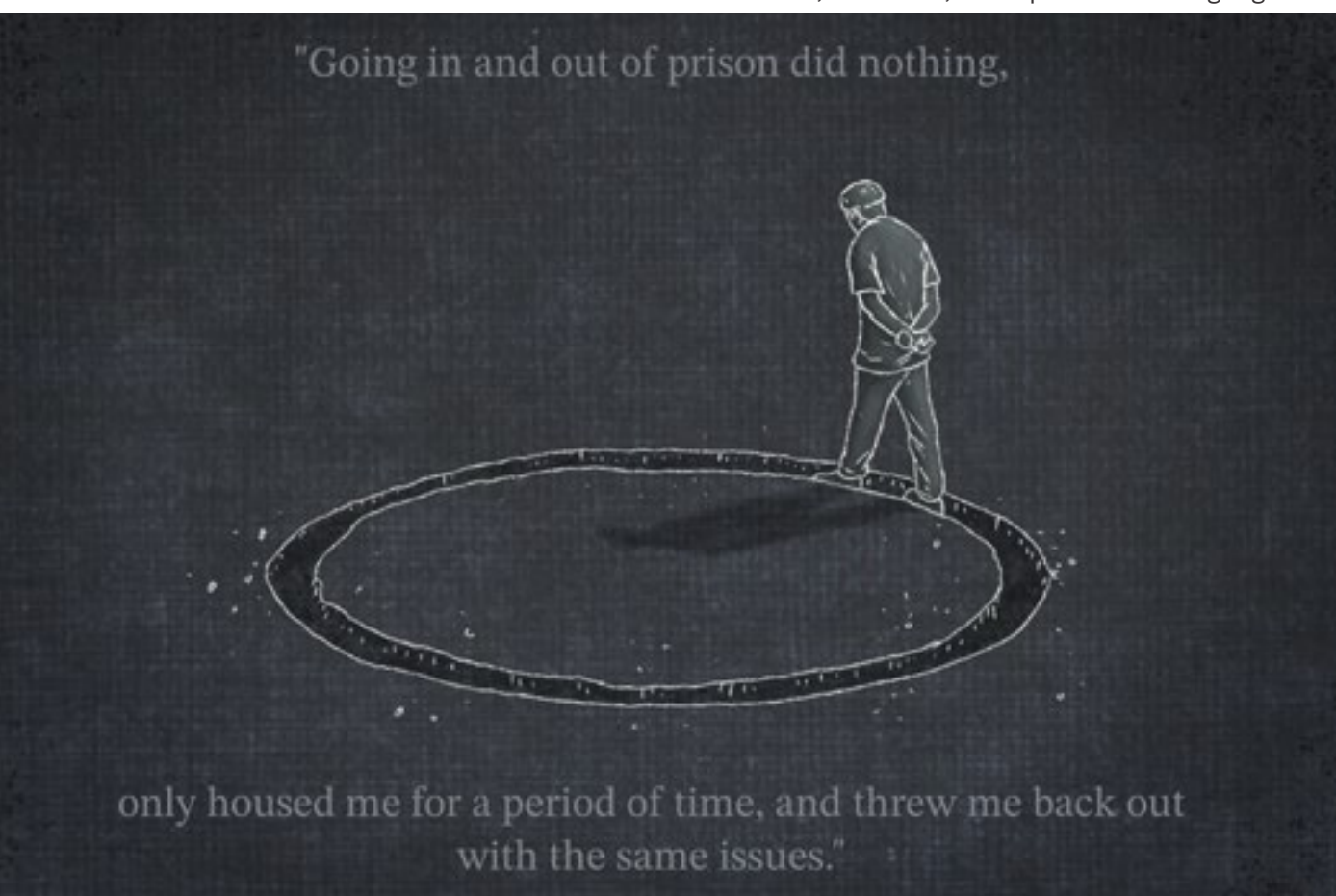
5.5 Systems that mitigate or intensify risk: education, housing, health and income supports

Poverty and deprivation shape exposure to criminal justice contact through early-life pathways and place-based inequality. Core social systems, including education, housing, health, disability and income support, can either reduce those risks or make them worse.²²⁶ This is vital to public policy as many of the factors linked to justice contact are also areas where service access is shaped by poverty. Where these systems respond early and effectively, they can reduce the

pressures that drive survival-related offending and reduce the likelihood that unmet need escalates into enforcement. Where systems are hard to access, or not meeting needs, they can accelerate justice contact and deepen disadvantage.²²⁷

Education systems

Education is a major protective factor. Staying engaged in school can reduce later justice contact, while exclusion and disengagement increase risk.²²⁸ What matters is how education systems respond to behavioural, learning and emotional needs in contexts of poverty. International evidence indicates that children from low-income backgrounds are significantly more likely to experience school exclusion, disciplinary sanctions,²²⁹ and unmet special educational needs. These patterns are particularly pronounced for children with neurodevelopmental differences, including ADHD,²³⁰ autism, and speech and language



- 225 Graham Cambridge, Orla Lynch, James Windle *The Desistance Journey: Into Recovery and out of Chaos* (Palgrave and Macmillan 2022).
- 226 Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime Review* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation May 2014) 23, 20, 34–35.
- 227 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Paying the Price: The Cost and Impact of Imprisonment on Families in Ireland* (IPRT 2025) 18–19.
- 228 Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD), *The Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development* (University of Cambridge, Institute of Criminology 2023).
- 229 *Ibid* (n 227) 31,34.
- 230 Christina Mohr-Jensen and Hans-Christoph Steinhausen *A meta-analysis and systematic review of the risks associated with childhood attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder on long-term outcome of arrests, convictions, and incarcerations* (2016) *Clinical Psychology Review* 48, 32–42.

needs, where behaviour associated with unmet need may be punished rather than supported.

The IPRT *Care and Justice* study found that educational instability and exclusion were common among children who later came into justice contact.²³¹ The *Greentown* study similarly documents how school disengagement, unmet learning needs and family stress intersect in deprived communities, creating pathways into offending that are shaped as much by system response as by individual behaviour.²³²

Education systems can function as early diversion points, but only where they are resourced and structured to recognise and respond to complexity, including poverty, trauma and neurodiversity.

Health, mental health and unmet neurodevelopmental need

Health systems, particularly mental health and disability services, are another critical mediator of justice contact. People in contact with the justice system have disproportionately high levels of mental ill-health, substance use and neurodevelopmental conditions, often alongside trauma and poverty.²³³ The Psychiatric In-reach and Court Liaison Service (PICLS) has been shown to support the diversion of people before the Courts to community facilities, where feasible, rather than potential admission to the high-cost Central Mental Hospital (CMH) following sentencing. Between 2006 and 2023, PICLS diverted 1,996 patients from Cloverhill Prison to healthcare locations outside of prison. This is both more cost effective to the state and also mitigates against the demand for limited CMH beds.

Mental health and poverty: a two-way relationship

The relationship between poverty and mental health runs in both directions. Poverty increases the risk of distress, including depression and anxiety, while mental ill health can deepen poverty. International evidence points to a strong social gradient, with people on the lowest incomes being 1.5 to 3 times more likely to experience depression and anxiety than those on higher incomes,²³⁴ and increases in income are associated with better mental health and wellbeing.²³⁵ In a nationally representative UK birth cohort study, a first transition into income poverty²³⁶ was associated with higher odds of child socioemotional behavioural problems.²³⁷

Mental ill-health and prison: high levels of need, and harms linked to custody

People with mental health challenges are overrepresented in the prison population,²³⁸ and prison can create mental distress and worsen existing symptoms.²³⁹ Global estimates suggest that around 3.7 per cent of people in prison have a psychotic illness, and 11.4 per cent have major depression and a 2020 systematic review and meta-analysis found that psychotic conditions were associated with higher risk of any criminal offending, in both men and women.²⁴⁰ In Ireland, service access remains a significant concern.²⁴¹ In January 2025, over 46 per cent of people in prison were waiting to be seen by a psychologist,²⁴² and in February 2026, 38 people were awaiting transfer from prison to the Central Mental Hospital,²⁴³ waiting an average time of 29.3

231 Nicola Carr, Paula Mayock, *Care and Justice. Children and Young People in Care and Contact with the Criminal Justice System* (IPRT 2019).

232 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Lifting the Lid on Greentown: Why We Should Be Concerned about the Influence Criminal Networks Have on Children's Offending Behaviour in Ireland* (Government Publications 2016) 38–39.

233 Dr Susan Finnerty, Inspector of Mental Health Services, *Access to Mental Health Services for People in the Criminal Justice System* (Mental Health Commission 2021) 4, 14.

234 Matthew Ridley and others, *Poverty, Depression, and Anxiety: Causal Evidence and Mechanisms* (2020) 370 *Science AAAS* 214.

235 Rachel M Thomson and others, *How do income changes impact on mental health and wellbeing for working-age adults? A systematic review and meta-analysis* (2022) 7(6) *The Lancet Public Health* e515–e528.

236 Among families not in already in poverty, and without mental health issues at baseline.

237 Sophie Wickham and others, *The effect of a transition into poverty on child and maternal mental health: a longitudinal analysis of the UK Millennium Cohort Study* (2017) 2(3) *The Lancet Public Health* e141–e148.

238 Mental Health Commission (Dr Susan Finnerty, Inspector of Mental Health Services), *Access to Mental Health Services for People in the Criminal Justice System* (Mental Health Commission 2021) 4, 14.

239 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System (PIPS): A framework for penal reform 2024* (IPRT 2025)

240 N Yee and others, *A meta-analysis of the relationship between psychosis and any type of criminal offending, in both men and women* (2020) 220 *Schizophrenia Research* 16.

241 UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Ireland (CCPR/C/IRL/CO/5, 2023), 9; European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, Report to the Irish Government (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 230.

242 Minister for Justice. Written answer to PO no 954. Dáil Éireann. 22 January 2025

243 Parliamentary Question response to Deputy Padraig Rice February 3rd, 2026, PQ NO 4720/26.

weeks, with a maximum wait of 98 weeks for acute care.²⁴⁴

Unmet neurodevelopmental needs intersect with these gaps. As set out earlier, studies demonstrate that childhood ADHD is associated with significantly increased risks of later arrest, conviction and incarceration, particularly where needs are unmet and compounded by socioeconomic disadvantage.²⁴⁵ Importantly, risk is shaped by system response, with appropriate assessment, and treatment associated with reduced offending.²⁴⁶

One of the ways neurodevelopmental risks is mediated is through substance use. Research commissioned by CityWide and conducted by Trinity College Dublin found extremely high rates of ADHD diagnosis and probable ADHD among people accessing substance use services, alongside qualitative evidence of fragmented assessment pathways and limited access to specialist supports.²⁴⁷

Recent Irish peer-led research with people who use drugs in homeless accommodation found that 78 per cent of participants did not have a support plan, reinforcing concerns that people facing overlapping homelessness, drug use and trauma are often left without the coordinated, person-centred support needed to prevent further harm and exclusion.²⁴⁸

As evidenced earlier in this report, where needs are not met early, substance use can become both a coping strategy and a further route into criminalisation. It has been estimated that between half²⁴⁹ to over 70 per cent²⁵⁰ of people in prison engage in substance use with over 800 people waiting to access addiction services consistently throughout 2024.²⁵¹ Considering that most people are sentenced to between three and six months,

many people will never access this support while imprisoned. Repeated imprisonment is also a risk factor in relapse, creating a cycle of substance use and criminalisation.²⁵²

Income supports, sanctions and material insecurity

Income insecurity and reliance on social protection also shape exposure to criminalisation. International evidence links financial stress, debt and economic shocks to increased offending risk, particularly for acquisitive and survival-related offences.²⁵³ At the same time, punitive approaches to welfare conditionality and sanctions have been linked to increased hardship without corresponding reductions in offending. While social protection policy sits outside the Department of Justice, the evidence suggests that its design has downstream effects on justice contact, particularly where income inadequacy contributes to homelessness, debt or engagement in informal economies.

CSO data show that in 2024 the at-risk-of-poverty rate (11.77 per cent) would have been 2.33 per cent higher without temporary cost-of-living measures, while consistent poverty rose to five per cent, a warning sign that core supports are not reliably preventing enforced deprivation.²⁵⁴ ESRI analysis highlights that once temporary measures are withdrawn, as they were in 2025, poverty risks will worsen unless headline welfare rates keep pace with wages and living costs.²⁵⁵ Adequacy research from the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice shows that the real value of core working-age payments fell by roughly 6–12 percentage points between 2020 and 2023, amounting to a real-terms cut against

244 Ibid.

245 Christina Mohr-Jensen, Anne Mette Lange, Per Hove Thomen, David Daley Danish register-linkage ADHD study (2019). Published in: Nordic Journal of Psychiatry DOI .1080/08039488.2020.1740781.

246 Paul Lichtenstein and others, *ADHD medication and criminality study (2012)*. 10.1056/NEJMoa1203241.

247 Dr David McDonagh and others *The Prevalence, risk and protective factors and service needs in relation to the co-morbidity of substance use and neurodiversity* (CityWide Drugs Crisis Campaign, 2024).

248 UISCE, *Agency, Access and Solutions: A Living Experience Analysis of Homeless Accommodation by People Who Use Drugs through a Human Rights Framework* (UISCE 2024) 29.

249 European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, Report to the Irish Government (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025) para 19.

250 Crowe Ireland, *Health Needs Assessment for the Irish Prison Service Final Report*: March 2022 (2023) 44.

251 Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 291, Dáil Éireann Debate, Thursday 25 January 2024.; see also Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 510, Dáil Éireann, Tuesday 9 July 2024.; and Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 954, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 22 January 2025.

252 Graham Cambridge. *Seeking Peace of Mind – Understanding Desistance as a journey into recovery and out of chaos.pdf*, 12.

253 Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime Review* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation May 2014).

254 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO, 2024).

255 Karina Doorley and others, *Distribution impact of tax and welfare policies*: Budget 2025.

minimum living costs.²⁵⁶ And even where overall poverty rates fall, ESRI longitudinal work commissioned by the Department of Social Protection shows poverty and deprivation remain persistently concentrated among lone-parent households and households affected by disability, evidence of a system that systematically leaves structurally exposed groups short of an adequate standard of living.²⁵⁷

5.6 Criminal justice contact as a driver of poverty & repeat contact

Irish and international evidence is clear that criminal justice both reflects existing disadvantage and can actively deepen it. We know that most people released from prison return to deprived communities, recidivism is concentrated among people with cumulative social disadvantage and repeat contact with the criminal justice system is not randomly distributed.²⁵⁸ People who have served multiple prison sentences tend to have earlier onset of criminal justice contact, longer cumulative exposure to penal sanctions, and fewer opportunities to build social capital outside the system.²⁵⁹ Prisons can institutionalise individuals, which can have a disempowering effect, resulting in deskilling²⁶⁰ and a compounding of some of the mediating factors that drive offending.

This shows how penal policy can become part of the infrastructure of deprivation. People are removed from already under-resourced communities, experience disruption and stigma through system contact, and then return to the same places with fewer resources, fewer options, and higher barriers to reintegrating into society. Over time, this can deepen community-level harm and reproduce the same conditions associated with further

justice contact. If people entering prison have reduced literacy and educational attainment, undiagnosed neurodevelopmental disorders, learning disabilities and mental illness, meeting all of these needs is essential to help increase the likelihood of desistance on release

2024 Central Statistics Office data on reoffending by detected incidents highlight the scale of repeat justice contact. 84 per cent of theft, fraud, robbery, and deception incidents, 83 per cent of public order incidents, and 80 per cent of drug incidents were all linked to suspected offenders with prior detections.²⁶¹ These are categories of crime that have been shown to be influenced by poverty.²⁶² These figures should be interpreted as indicators of repeat detected system contact which may be shaped by unequal exposure to policing, surveillance, reporting and detection practices, and therefore may overstate repeat offending among groups and communities already more visible to the criminal justice system.

In prison, education has been cited as vital for people who want to engage in desistance. Considering roughly 70 per cent of people in prison are early school leavers, access to education is vital. Overcrowding in prison can reduce access to education²⁶³ and rehabilitation options, and there is no routinely available data on the frequency of school or work training, despite repeated calls for this to be published.²⁶⁴

People leaving prison are more likely than others to experience socioeconomic disadvantage, including higher unemployment and poverty, alongside other complex needs that can undermine reintegration.²⁶⁵ Difficulties in accessing housing and employment on release from prison remain significant challenges in terms of social reintegration²⁶⁶ and desistance.

256 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, *MESL Impact Briefing: Budget 2024* (October 2023) 1.

257 Anousheh Alamir and Bertrand Maître, Thematic Report on Persistent Income Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland: An Analysis of the Longitudinal CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), 2015–2023 (Department of Social Protection Social Inclusion Thematic Report No 12, 31 July 2025).

258 Ian O'Donnell, Colm Teljeur, Nicola Hughes, Eric P Baumer and Alan Kelly, When Prisoners Go Home: Punishment, Social Deprivation and the Geography of Reintegration [2007] 17(4) *Irish Criminal Law Journal* 3; Kathleen Donovan, The geography of prisoner reintegration (2008) *Drugnet Ireland* (HRB).

259 Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime Review* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation May 2014) 3, 15, 34.

260 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System (PIPS): A framework for penal reform 2024* (IPRT 2025).

261 Central Statistics Office, 'Re-offending by Detected Incidents 2024: Incident Characteristics' (CSO, 25 November 2025).

262 Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014).

263 Department of Justice, Prison Overcrowding Response Group Report (2024), 13.

264 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System (PIPS): A framework for penal reform 2024* (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2025) 53.

265 Kiran Sarma, Evaluation of the Cork Prison In-Reach Pilot Project (Focus Ireland, August 2014) 1.

266 Ibid (n 266).

Healy's work on desistance among Irish men under probation supervision shows that moving away from reoffending depends not only on changed circumstances, but on people's capacity to imagine a credible non-offending future and actively cope with barriers to change, highlighting the central role of agency alongside structural factors.²⁶⁷ Irish research on recidivism further suggests that repeat justice contact is patterned by prior disadvantage, reinforcing the importance of targeted social supports if criminal justice interventions are not to deepen long-term exclusion.²⁶⁸

Income loss, debt, and the financial penalties of contact with the criminal justice system

Even short periods of custody can destabilise fragile finances. Imprisonment disrupts paid work and training, weakens employment histories and can attach a criminal record that affects future job prospects.²⁶⁹ International evidence links imprisonment to reduced earnings, weaker job stability and higher unemployment after release, with effects that can compound over time, for individuals, households and children.²⁷⁰ Profile data from the IPS shows that most people in custody on 31 December 2024 reported being unemployed on committal (76.1 per cent overall; 89.2 per cent of women, 75.2 per cent of men).²⁷¹

Housing loss and release into instability

Irish evidence has long documented the two-way relationship between prison and homelessness: homelessness can increase exposure to criminalisation, and prison can directly precipitate homelessness on release. Accommodation is a gateway requirement for services, people leaving custody without stable housing can be locked out of the very supports associated with desistance.

Family impacts and intergenerational transmission of disadvantage

Justice contact can also transmit disadvantage across generations. Children who experience parental imprisonment face significantly higher risks of poverty, housing instability, educational disruption and later contact with the criminal justice system and it is considered an adverse childhood experience.²⁷²

Maternal imprisonment increases risks for children's mental health, behaviour and education, alongside heightened housing instability and poverty pressures that can contribute to intergenerational patterns of justice contact.²⁷³ Many women who are imprisoned are mothers and primary caregivers. Imprisonment can lead to the loss of a family home and losing custody of children who may end up in the care system. Where deprivation and justice contact cluster within families, responses that focus narrowly on individual offending risk entrenching intergenerational disadvantage and creating a complex web of problems for whole families rather than addressing the conditions shaping repeat contact.

267 Deirdre Healy, 'Becoming a desister: Exploring the role of agency, coping and imagination in the construction of a new self' (2014) 54 *British Journal of Criminology* 873.

268 Ian O'Donnell, Eric P Baumer and Nicola Hughes, 'Recidivism in the Republic of Ireland' (2008) 8(2) *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 123.

269 Sara Wakefield and Christopher Uggen, 'Incarceration and Stratification' (2010) 36 *Annual Review of Sociology* 387.

270 Bruce Western, 'Incarceration and Social Inequality' (2010) 139(3) *Daedalus* 8.

271 Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2024* (Irish Prison Service, 2025) 27; (Table 4: Employment Status of Prisoners in Custody on 31 December 2024) 26.

272 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Paying the Price: The Cost and Impact of Imprisonment on Families in Ireland* (IPRT 2025).

273 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Maternal Imprisonment in Ireland: A Scoping Study* (IPRT, 2023).

"I wasn't bitter, I worked on myself in there, and then one day they just dropped me like a bag of rubbish.



You just got bagged and tagged and dropped out the gate, you know, that way.

Stigma, criminal records, and exclusion from work

A central mechanism by which criminal justice contact deepens deprivation is “secondary punishment,” which occurs when individuals are excluded from employment, housing, and social participation after a sentence is served. Irish evidence shows that employer concerns about perceived “risk” (including safeguarding and reputational concerns) can translate into inconsistent and exclusionary hiring practices for people with convictions, narrowing job opportunities and undermining a key protective factor against reoffending.²⁷⁴

Where certain communities are already more heavily policed or criminalised, the downstream stigma and labour-market exclusion will concentrate harm in those same places and groups reinforcing area-level deprivation and intergenerational inequality.

A longitudinal employment quality study found that job quality influences future criminal justice contact, consistent with the idea that

low-wage, precarious work post-release is insufficient to break cycles of deprivation and system contact.²⁷⁵ Long-term earnings losses have been linked to criminal conviction and incarceration, reducing lifetime income and contributing to economic inequality,²⁷⁶ another example of the reinforcing feedback loop central to the relationship between poverty, deprivation and criminal justice contact.

When criminal justice contact reduces income, destabilises housing, intensifies stigma, and strains families, it reproduces the same deprivation-related risk factors that the wider literature associates with offending and repeat contact. International work has gone further and argued, using macro-level analyses, that high incarceration can increase poverty rates through these kinds of mechanisms.²⁷⁷ Issues accessing services are particularly concerning as we know that support in areas like accommodation, welfare, and addiction counselling can all support more positive reintegration on release.²⁷⁸

274 Dr Joe Garrihy and Dr Ciara Bracken-Roche, *The Secondary Punishment: A Scoping Study on Employer Attitudes to Hiring People with Criminal Convictions* (IPRT 2024).

275 Joe Labriola, Post Prison Employment Quality and Future Criminal Justice Contact (2020) 6(1)The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences 154.

276 Terry-Ann Craigie, Ames Grawert, Cameron Kimble, *Conviction, Imprisonment, and Lost Earnings. How Involvement with the Criminal Justice Systems Deepens Inequality* (Brennan Centre For Justice and NYU School of Law 2020) 23.

277 Robert H DeFina and Lance *Mass Incarceration on Poverty* (2009).

278 Agnieszka Martynowicz, Martin Quigley. *It's like stepping on a landmine... – Reintegration of Prisoners in Ireland*. (IPRT 2010).



① • BMW •
Present



6. Findings

6.1 Quantitative Findings

6.1.1 Available Irish Criminal Justice and Socioeconomic Data

Ireland publishes a wide range of official statistics across the criminal justice system. Key sources include the CSO, the IPS, the Probation Service, and the Courts Service. These statistics are presented largely in aggregate and disaggregated by administrative geographies such as Garda Regions or Divisions, courthouse catchments, and prisons.

In contrast, much socioeconomic reporting in Ireland, including the Pobal Deprivation Index and key CSO outputs, is produced at small statistical geographies, particularly Electoral Divisions (EDs) and Small Areas (SAs). As a result, the justice and socioeconomic datasets are not readily compatible in their current published forms because they use different geographic bases. This means that it is currently not possible to produce direct, reproducible ED-based statistical linkages between socioeconomic and justice system outcomes using publicly available data alone.

6.1.2 Geographical Mapping

A key aim of this study was to map the address of people committed to prison, against the Pobal HP Deprivation Index,²⁷⁹ and other socioeconomic indicators to describe the deprivation profile of areas with the highest concentration of people committed to prison

As Electoral Division and Eircode fields are not routinely captured at committal, the IPS provided national manual *ad hoc* pooled committal data for 2022–2024,²⁸⁰ with Eircode routing keys derived as a proxy from prisoners' self-reported town and county details. This data was matched with a bespoke Pobal HP Deprivation Index dataset for Eircode routing key boundaries which was created specifically for this research by Pobal. This report therefore uses the best available data to demonstrate what can be shown now, while also identifying the changes needed to enable routine, national-level analysis in the future.

For each routing key area that could be matched, a population-standardised three-year pooled committal rate per 1,000 residents was calculated by dividing the total number of committals for that routing key area by the population of that routing key and multiplying by 1,000.

279 The Pobal HP Deprivation Index is a tool used to show how relatively disadvantaged or affluent small geographical areas are. It uses Census data on indicators such as employment, education, housing and family circumstances to build a picture of relative deprivation at area level. See <https://www.pobal.ie/pobal-hp-deprivation-index/>

280 Data provided to IPRT from the IPS for the purpose of this research. Includes pooled committal data 2022–2024, broken down by routing key. Of the records in the IPS address dataset 10.6 per cent were recorded as No Fixed Abode and 15.4 per cent had unknown or insufficient address information and therefore could not be assigned to a routing key.

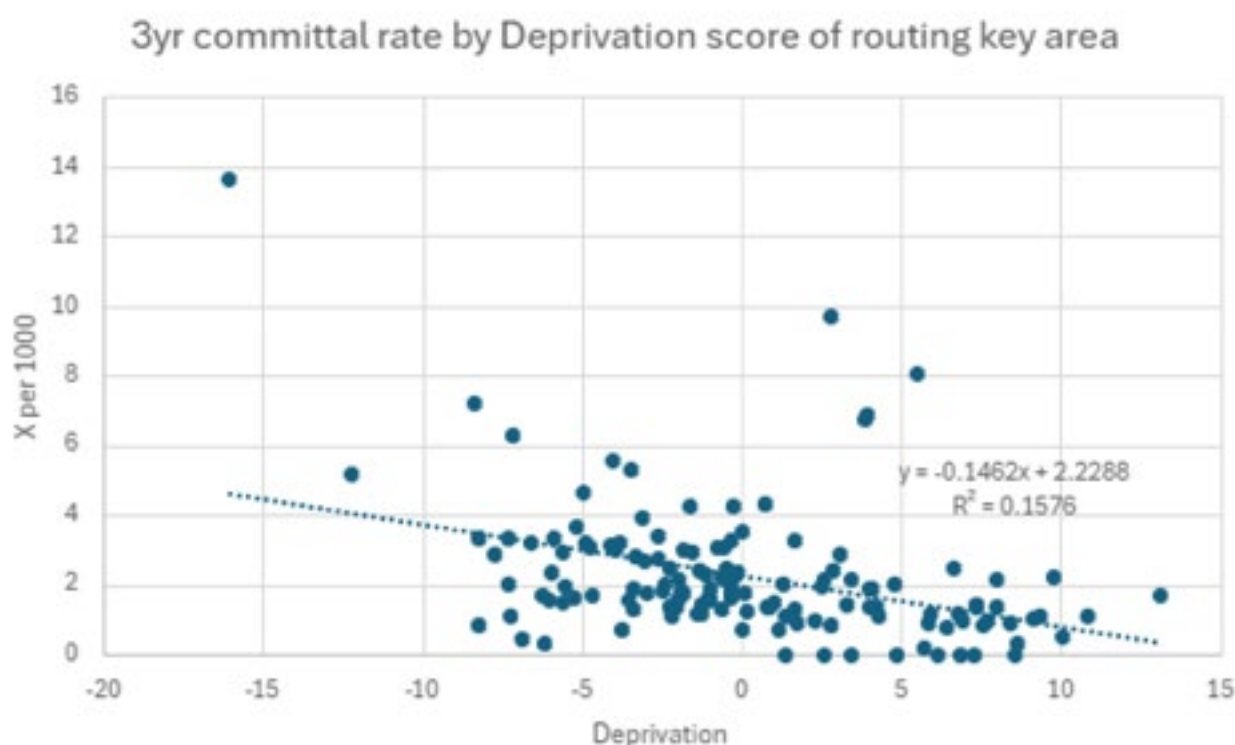


Figure 1

Using committals that could be assigned to standard routing keys and matched to population denominators, a simple national check of the relationship between area deprivation and imprisonment was conducted.²⁸¹ Figure 1 plots each routing-key area's HP deprivation score against its pooled 2022–2024 committal rate per 1,000 residents. The trend line shows a moderate association: the deprivation score explains around 16 per cent of the variation in committal rates across routing-key areas ($R^2 \approx 0.16$; $r \approx -0.40$). This means that committal rates tend to be higher in more deprived areas, but deprivation alone does not explain most of the differences between areas. This is an area-level pattern and should not be read as causal at individual level. Further statistical analysis is required to assess statistical significance and model validity.

Of the records in the IPS address dataset, 10.6 per cent were recorded as No Fixed Abode and 15.4 per cent had unknown or insufficient address information and therefore could not be assigned to a routing key. This means the area-based analysis reflects only the share of committals that could be geographically assigned. This is likely to limit the visibility of some of the most disadvantaged groups,

particularly as people without a fixed address tend to experience high levels of deprivation and homelessness. Routing keys can also mask smaller pockets of deprivation by combining deprived and more affluent areas. Against that national backdrop, we use D17 as an illustrative case study because it sits at the extreme end of the deprivation distribution in the bespoke Pobal routing-key calculations and has a very high committal rate within the assignable dataset.

Although routing-key geography can dilute deprivation in some larger areas by combining underserved communities with more affluent ones, D17's prominence is unlikely to be explained solely by its smaller population size of 14,396. It stands out as an area of exceptionally concentrated deprivation in its own right across routing keys.

281 This analysis was provided for this research by Pobal.

6.1.3 Dublin 17 Case Study

On the northside of Dublin, D17 includes the areas of Darndale, Priorswood, Moatview, Belcamp, Riverside, Balgriffin and parts of Coolock. Using the Nolan report on Darndale in Dublin 17 we have area level information on Darndale, Belcamp and Moatview (DBM) which covers roughly 43 per cent of Dublin 17.²⁸² DBM is an area made up of concentrated, place-based deprivation, characterised by the spatial clustering of low educational attainment, high unemployment and long-term reliance on social welfare, placing it among the most socioeconomically marginalised areas in the State,²⁸³ characterised as between Very and Extremely disadvantaged on the 2022 Pobal HP Deprivation Index.²⁸⁴ The Nolan report links this concentration of disadvantage to heightened exposure to crime and offending behaviour, noting that social problems, including crime, have persisted locally despite wider economic growth in other parts of Dublin. Early school leaving rates are significantly higher than national averages, and the report directly links educational disengagement to increased vulnerability among young people, particularly young men, to involvement in anti-social and criminal activity. Labour market exclusion is identified as a structural feature of the area, contributing to the emergence of localised criminal and drug economies as alternative income sources in the context of limited legitimate employment opportunities. The area is disproportionately affected by drug-related harms and drug-related crime, which the report situates within this wider context of poverty, unemployment and inadequate social investment. Overall, the report interprets crime in the area as shaped by enduring structural disadvantage, rather than individual pathology, underscoring the need for sustained, place-based social investment to disrupt intergenerational cycles of deprivation and offending.

Using pooled committals data for 2022–2024, D17 recorded 196 prison committals (13.6 per 1,000 residents), around 5.5 times the population-weighted average across routing keys with matched population denominators in the assignable dataset (2.48 per 1,000).²⁸⁵ D17's HP score is approximately –16, placing it in the extreme deprivation category. It accounted for around 0.3 per cent of the State's population but about 1.6 per cent of committals assigned to standard routing keys.

This pattern suggests a concentration of disadvantage and criminal justice contact in D17. High unemployment, low educational attainment and overcrowded housing, factors captured by the HP index, are consistent with and may help explain this over-representation. However, the extreme committal rate also points to other influences, such as local policing practices, or cycles of homelessness and drug use, which align with the findings of the Nolan report.²⁸⁶ When interpreting these figures, it is essential to remember that a significant share of committals nationwide involve people with no fixed abode or untraceable addresses.

Data collection

While the IPS collects daily prison population data,²⁸⁷ and releases monthly, quarterly snapshots and yearly statistics, there are significant gaps in data collection that currently prevent a comprehensive analysis on the overlap between poverty, deprivation and the criminal justice system. The IPS has stated that it is working towards being a data driven organisation, including increasing internal capacity for data analysis, and investigating what data can be made available publicly in line with the Open Data Directive²⁸⁸ to make the data more accessible for stakeholders.²⁸⁹

282 Jack Nolan, *Darndale: A Long View at an Enduring Challenge – A Socio Economic & Community Plan* (Northside Partnership 2020).

283 Ibid 18–20, 24–26.

284 Haase and Pratschke (Pobal Deprivation Index Map 2022).

285 The population-weighted comparator was calculated as total committals assigned to standard three-character routing keys (12,555; pooled 2022–2024) divided by the summed 2022 population across those routing keys (5,061,461), multiplied by 1,000. No Fixed Abode, Unknown/Insufficient Address Info, and routing keys suppressed for disclosure control were excluded from area rate calculations because they cannot be assigned a routing-key population denominator.

286 Jack Nolan. *Darndale: A Long View at an Enduring Challenge - A Socio Economic & Community Plan*. (Northside Partnership 2020).

287 See Irish Prison Service, 'Daily Prisoner Population' < <https://www.irishprisons.ie/2025-prison-population/> >.

288 Irish Prison Service, Annual Report 2023 (2024), 64.

289 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System (PIPS): A framework for penal reform 2024* (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2025) 11.

6.2. Collective Narratives and Visual Language



COLLECTIVE NARRATIVES AND VISUAL LANGUAGE

ENGAGEMENT

How do we engage people?

If we're looking for people who've been to prison, have had family in prison, who are connected to criminality in some way, people who've experienced poverty, people who can give us data that supports or disproves the link between poverty and criminality. Well then we're looking to talk to people generally try and say nothing.

"Whatever you say, say nothing." + "Don't be a rat." = culture of silence.

So how do you gain access to these people?

How do you develop trust?

How do you develop trust in an instant?

It's usually, in my experience, being able to show you are of the culture in some way. The fella smoking a joint is not gonna rat you out for sparking one.

So how do we get attention of people with these experiences in a way that demonstrates we are of the culture and not a copper.

So I need to have a think about the visual language I'm using.

How do we remain honest and playful within the confines of a professional piece of work? My access to this world is through a series of signals that are inherently working class, and sometimes the people without access don't need to know what these signals are.



WHY THE GARDA?

The Garda are the physical state apparatus, they are the embodiment of the ideological power structure that shapes our present society.

Meaning if you don't fit the bill, if You don't say how high when the People in charge say jump, then the Garda come and take you away. You must follow the model that is set for you, if you can not conform, Then you go to prison.

If the current system needs Workers at the bottom, needs Them to be desperate so they Work long hours on low wages, In order for those at the top to Profit - and those at the top Make the rules. Then the System will be designed to Keep you at the bottom.



The Horse is an interesting motif. They are a symbol of power. Like an army general leading his fleet into battle.

They are apart of Irishness, they are intertwined in the cultural identity. They are a working class symbol of culture. But they can just as easily be a symbol of oppression.

Who's horse is bigger?
The youngfellas or
The coppers?

The horses seem
like A ghost where
I'm From. They were
All rounded up And
taken away. Criminalised.

There's something interesting
About that, the spirit of a horse.



ENGAGEMENT
PUBLIC



This was the question given as a prompt to grab people's attention. The car image was attached to a pole in the centre of Ballymun and as people enquired about what it is we were doing we explained the point of the research. The idea here being that something provocative, something out of the ordinary, would entice people to engage with us. The conversations had here over the two days helped to inform what the sessions with the focus groups would like. Using a very public starting point like this was intended to give us an insight as to where everyday people were at. Many of the people we spoke to in the public engagement were shocked to find out that we even needed to evidence and prove the link between poverty and criminality because to them it was "a no brainer".

Person 1

You never see them around the area (Garda), they're never in the station.

D1, Ballymun, Coolock and these types of places are more likely to be arrested.

Lads in hoodies and tracksuits get pulled. There's too many young fellas and not enough guards.

All the coppers are in town, in one spot, to protect the tourists and they're not spread out.

*All the coppers are in town,
in one spot,*

To protect the tourists!

Visual language for me is the tool that develops from creative play. A system of language with no exact rules, things are right when they feel right. For example a participant here speaks to the importance placed on tourists by the state. The person feels as tho the state cares more about the tourists then their own people.

From here you can pull images related to Irish tourism, such as Molly Malone.

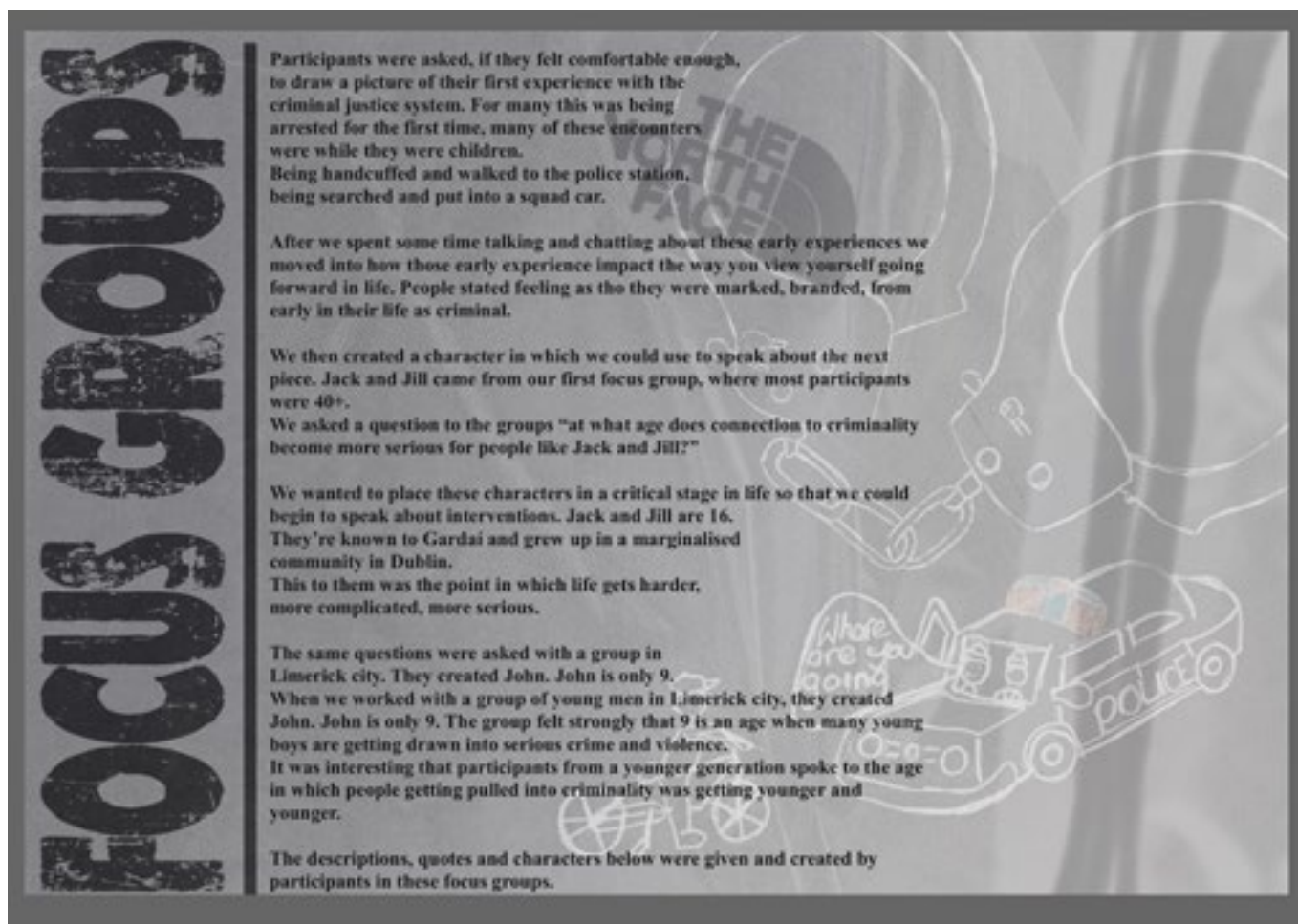
A working class woman who sold shellfish and maybe even worked as a sex worker. She is a symbol of tourism, a misappropriation of her

Image, it feels sadly Ironic. Come to Dublin and take pictures with the poor paddy statue but don't engage with the poor paddy's who are alive today.

"To protect the tourists"
To keep them away from the real experience of being Irish.

STORIES DON'T NEED TO BE LINEAR WHEN THE ISSUES ARE CYCLICAL





6.3 Interviews

Widespread agreement that poverty and deprivation shape criminal justice contact

Across interviews and focus, there was strong agreement that poverty and deprivation are deeply intertwined with criminal justice contact. When asked if there is a connection, many reacted with surprise that the question even needed to be posed, while also cautioning against simplistic or stigmatising narratives that blame individuals or communities for structural conditions. To counter this, accurate data recording is essential to highlight the patterns evident across the criminal justice system and to identify the factors increasing people's risk of criminal justice contact.

Poverty was multifaceted across interviews. For some, it is immediate material scarcity. For others, it is about feeling excluded or inferior when comparing themselves with peers. As one participant put it, poverty is about "your position relative to other people you can see," not just whether there is food on the table.

Most participants with lived experience came from backgrounds marked by material hardship, economic insecurity, or area-based deprivation. Even among the very small number who did not identify as having personally experienced poverty, there was agreement that poverty significantly shapes pathways into criminalisation. Professional stakeholders echoed this observation, describing the court cases they encountered as involving predominantly working-class defendants.

"The crimes that people are being accused of are crimes of poverty. And until we end poverty? We're gonna have people who are gonna steal bread". SP7

This broad agreement formed the starting point for the more detailed pathways described across the interviews.



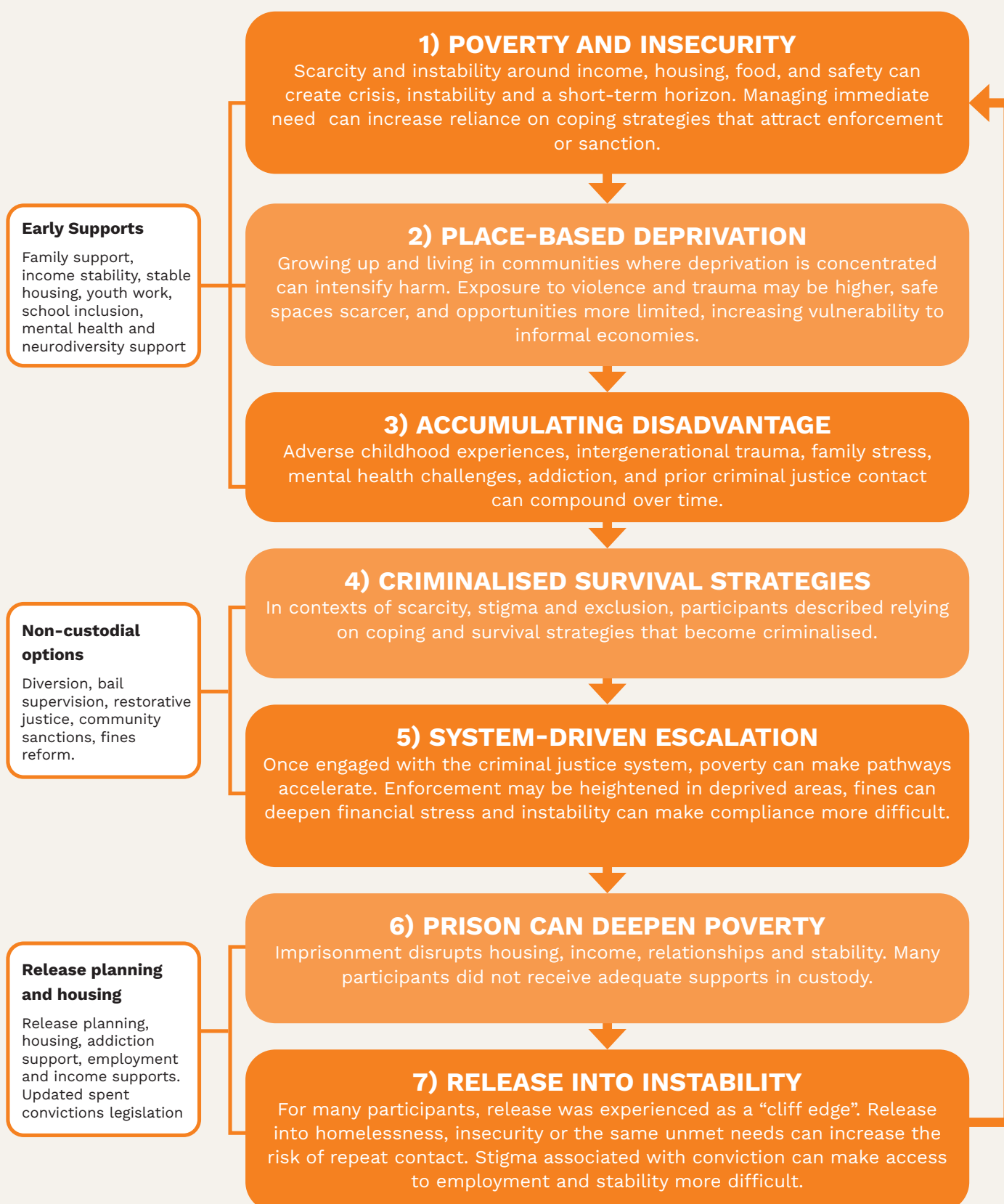
There's a theme of labelling and judgments present in the conversations. This idea that you are marked from your birth. There is an unfortunate feeling present that destiny is chosen for you, that your area and your class maps out the progression of your life. This reminds me of catholic guilt that your inherently sinful. At the same time I feel a call back to the depiction of the Irish ape, the paddy that is naturally weaker minded. This speaks to an older outdated idea of criminality, that some people are naturally inclined to crime. It's a conversation of nature and nurture where the outside world assumes peoples nature and as a result people begin to internalise this.

All participants echoed this sentiment of a multi-generational approach. There was a stigma and a branding put onto people from a young age due to the socioeconomic status they were born into. An assumption made about them that they were inherently criminal, inherently sinful. This labelling was, they felt, glued onto them. The notorious identities attached to specific areas, class, races, identities etc. combined with the lived realities of poverty and addiction creates a cycle. A cycle of young people conditioned into believing they are inherently criminal and being treated as such.

All felt this was not something easily fixed, yet it can. Just because something is difficult doesn't mean we don't do it. There's this idea of creating fertile soil, taking care of the land, watering nurturing it. This in turn creates nutrient soil to plant our seeds. Seeds with enough light and water that they can grow into beautiful flowers and big strong trees. The soil is the community, the seed is the child. The child needs a healthy environment, food, love, time, stability and a chance to grow.

The pathway map:

Participants described a recurring pathway through which poverty and deprivation can increase exposure to criminal justice contact. This map is a synthesis of recurring patterns identified across interviews. It is not intended to suggest a simple causal relationship, a fixed linear sequence, or inevitable outcomes. Most people living in poverty will never experience criminal justice sanctions or imprisonment. Rather, the map reflects recurring accounts from participants describing how poverty and deprivation interacted with place, trauma, unmet need and systems in ways that increased vulnerability to criminal justice contact.



Upstream Drivers: How Deprivation Narrows Options Before Justice Contact

Basic needs, instability and the limits of “rehabilitation”

A recurring theme across interviews was that basic needs and stability form the foundation for any effort to avoid or move away from criminal justice contact. Participants vividly described the psychological and practical strain of constantly managing crisis when housing, food and safety are insecure. In those circumstances, the language of “rehabilitation” was often experienced as unrealistic or hollow;

“If you don’t have your basic needs met, if you don’t know where you’re going to be sleeping, the game plan goes out the window.” OT01

This was echoed by a community worker. Without a stable base, expecting people to “rehabilitate” is described as fundamentally unrealistic.

“if we can just start with getting the basic needs met, then we can start working on personal development... but when we don’t have that base and then expect people to be rehabilitated and stay out of prison, it’s so unrealistic...” SP21

This was not only described in large urban centres. Participants and workers in rural areas stressed that where homelessness or crisis arises, the absence of local services can leave people with very few places to turn.

“don’t know at the moment, there’s probably 7 or 8 people in the town who are homeless... In this town, there are absolutely no resources, no centre that they can call into. In Limerick and Dublin, you have those resources. we don’t have anything like that”. SP7

When asked what rehabilitation meant, many participants responded cynically, describing it as a term that is frequently invoked in courts and prisons but rarely matched by structural support in practice. For some, the language

of rehabilitation individualised what they experienced as a deeply structural problem, shifting attention away from poverty, housing insecurity and exclusion.

“I think rehabilitation is like a catchphrase. You know, we use it in the prisons, we use it in the courts, rehabilitation, and I think it makes polite society feel less inclined to want to question anything”. SP7

Cost-of-Living Pressure and Housing Insecurity

Cost-of-living pressures and housing insecurity were described as daily stressors that erode coping capacity and deepen deprivation. Participants spoke about constantly worrying about bills, fuel and food and the impact this has in a home: “poverty is stress,” causing anxiety, irritability and conflict.

Housing instability, including overcrowded households and rising family homelessness, was singled out as the single biggest factor. Without a stable home, families cannot provide a safe environment for children, and individuals cannot meaningfully engage with treatment or training.

“You have 3-4 generations living under the one council house roof, with no hope... the hopelessness, it just... People just kind of retreat.” (OT01)

Long waits, high thresholds, fragmented provision and inconsistent follow-up can mean that problems are often addressed only once they have escalated, at which point the justice system can become the intervening system.

Place-based deprivation and community-level harm

Participants emphasised that deprivation is not only experienced within households but is embedded in communities where poverty is concentrated. Living in communities with fewer resources was associated with greater exposure to violence and trauma, fewer safe spaces, and inadequate social supports and a narrower set of credible options for security, belonging and status. In this context, informal economies could come to appear normal, familiar or necessary rather than exceptional.



They're bullied kids and it's horrible to think that they're the authority.
They automatically assume no one knows their rights but there is more educated people now,
They don't want to stand up to the right people, they're just bullies.
They can say what they want about you in court and the judge will believe them because of your address.
If the judge sees ballymun on your address they're already thinking lock them up.
We're out of the way of the tourists,
we're the forgotten people out here in these areas
and they always have us to pick on.

Participants emphasised that the overlap between poverty and justice contact cannot be understood only through offending. Many described multi-layered victimisation as part of the same pathway: structural victimisation (poverty, homelessness and exclusion), higher exposure to community violence where these pressures are concentrated, and then further harm produced through system contact itself. One participant reflected that people in prison are often “spoken about simply as perpetrators, but they are also victims,” describing a chain of victimisation that can include community violence, systemic violence, and then silencing when people try to discuss this experience.

Feelings of belonging and identity were intimately tied to these community contexts. With reduced options for positive social participation, adolescents often look up to older peers, who may be involved in crime. The visibility of “status uniforms” such as designer clothes, was cited as a recruitment cue that can be visible in communities, whereas the absence of sports clubs, GAA, or youth-project logos was portrayed as symbolising a lack of alternative activities and role modelling. As one participant put it, what all young people want is “money, status and power,” but deprived contexts shape the routes through which those needs can be met. When the path to social status appears to be through illegal activity, criminality can become normalised.

A central theme across accounts was that where legitimate opportunities and routes to stability are limited, particularly for young people, crime can emerge as normalised, pressured, or perceived as the only viable option for meeting needs or gaining status. A sector worker described this as a “poverty of aspirations” (SP1): where structural and intergenerational disadvantage narrows the ability to imagine alternatives. These accounts describe place-based deprivation as an upstream mechanism, concentrating exposure to harm while shrinking credible routes into education, training, fulfilling work and belonging.

These accounts suggest that place-based deprivation operates as an upstream mechanism, concentrating exposure to harm while narrowing access to safety, support and legitimate opportunity.

This aligns with evidence that neighbourhood conditions and social processes shape both harm and state responses over time, creating a pattern in which poverty increases exposure to risk and criminal justice contact can then deepen that disadvantage. Together these findings strengthen the case for prevention that rebuilds local opportunity structures, including youth infrastructure, community development and accessible supports, rather than relying on enforcement to manage the fallout.²⁹⁰

Lack of local infrastructure leaves gaps that other “systems” fill

Participants and sector workers described a vacuum created by the absence of youth infrastructure, community development and wraparound support. In that context, other systems filled the gap: informal drug economies, criminal hierarchies, coercive recruitment and heavy policing. Sector workers traced this directly to disinvestment, describing cutbacks in community development programmes, leaving youth projects overstretched and unable to engage those most at risk. Participants argued that prevention funding was scarce with projects underfunded and overstretched, whereas resources for punishment were always available:

“There’s no money for prevention, but if three kids commit a serious crime tomorrow, the money is there to lock them up.” OT06

As public services withdraw, and there are fewer pathways to legitimate income in a community, illegal economies such as the illegal drug trade provide income, status and a sense of belonging. Several young men recalled being drawn into the drug trade because it offered recognition and status that conventional work could not. This dynamic was experienced as a rational response to a structural exclusion. Frontline workers described trying to prevent young people from being pulled into criminal networks while operating with limited resources, short-term capacity, and high thresholds for support.

290 Robert J Sampson, Jeffrey D Morenoff and Thomas Gannon-Rowley, *Assessing Neighborhood Effects: Social Processes and New Directions in Research* (2002) 28 Annual Review of Sociology 443; Colin Webster and Sarah Kingston, *Poverty and Crime Review* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2014).

“The people offering these kids money can do anything that they want because they don’t play by rules, while I’m trying to help these kids with my hands tied behind me back.” SP10

There is a sense that the work is not meeting the local need because the State’s investment does not match the scale, intensity, and reach of the harms it expects under-resourced services to counter. This can lead to a normalisation of criminality with young people encountering role models who are involved in crime and perceiving illegal activities as common or even expected.

“I had a fascination with prisons and crime... because of my dad, because of my friends’ dads and their older brothers, because of the people in my community that had the status and the respect. When I first went to prison, it felt like a rite of passage. It felt like I know this was coming, and here it is.” (OTO1)

Disinvestment and the loss of community infrastructure

Sector workers detailed the longterm effects of withdrawing community development funding, noting that programmes vital to local cohesion were dismantled during austerity. Participants perceived a profound imbalance: funding flows readily into policing and prisons while prevention services struggle. This withdrawal compounds the stigma attached to certain postcodes. Residents, particularly Travellers and people who use drugs, spoke of being labelled and discriminated against

because of where they come from or their past. Stigma shapes policing practices deeply and some participants recounted being stopped repeatedly while carrying groceries, and affects employment and insurance access, reinforcing exclusion. Multiple participants felt very strongly about a perceived imbalance between funding for punishment versus prevention:

The money’s there. They don’t want to do all the preventive measures. Why don’t we just put the million euro it takes to lock three kids up and put it into a super youth centre in the areas we know these kids are mostly coming from? ...Ask the young people what do they need?” (OTO6)

Many participants felt strongly that criminalisation extends beyond individuals to entire communities. OTO2 believes that certain communities are “scapegoats” for societal problems

“I don’t think people understand how embedded, criminalising us is, because it’s not just criminalising people for being caught with drugs, it’s whole communities. I think it’s embedded into a capitalistic system that we need whole communities to blame. for what’s wrong in society. the criminal justice system allows us to have these scapegoats.” OTO9



John

Little John running around Limerick city in his dirty Nike trackuit that's getting too small for him. He loves robbing, he's bored and he's hungry. He can't show his softer side when he's out, he'll be picked on. There's a lot of addiction in his family. He's out of the house morning, noon and night, "he's like nobody's child" they say.

John needs the world to see him as an individual not a number.

Jack needs his community to wrap around him.

Jill needs guidance and support.

They need basic life skills.

Jack needs role models.

John needs a father, not just one that's physically present but emotionally present too.

They need youth clubs not prisons. They're kids, they need treatment not imprisonment. Jack needs to learn to cook. Jill needs to learn about cars. They need investment in their communities. John needs a playground to play in. They need someone to listen to them. They need nature walks. They need nurture. Jack needs a good relationship with guards. John needs social inclusion. Jill needs spaces for art and creativity. Jack and Jill need contraception. They need to be shown there's a better life out there for them. They need a chance at life. They need opportunities to make money legitimately. They need training courses. They need jobs. They need fun. They need play. They need hope. They need outreach and afterschools. They need a home. They need stability. They need family. They need inter-generational commitment. They need to not be left behind

Childhood/adolescence: early exclusion, unmet needs, and shrinking worlds

Childhood and adolescence emerged as critical points where poverty and deprivation can become pathways into criminal justice contact. Participants shared experiences of reduced protective supports, and heightened exposure to criminalisation. Across interviews, participants and sector workers described a pattern of early adversity often intensified by the social and service environments in which children and young people grow up. Growing up in areas experiencing concentrated disadvantage can compound individual and family-level disadvantage and shape daily exposure to stress, violence, crime, heightened surveillance, and fewer credible routes into education, training, and employment.²⁹¹



School exclusion and educational disadvantage

Participants described school as a critical juncture where the state's response to need can become punitive. Many interviewees recounted being suspended or expelled for behavioural issues that were symptoms of unmet needs or neurodevelopmental differences. Suspension cut them off from prosocial activities such as football and was experienced as severing "all my career options... [my] hope just left," as one person put it. Professional stakeholders echoed this. When schools exclude young people instead of addressing underlying learning difficulties, mental health issues or family stress, legitimate routes to stability disappear.

Participants spoke of school as a place they experienced trauma, were made to feel stupid, had the idea that they were "bold" or "trouble" reinforced, with many saying they hold deep memories of feeling like they were less than because of their background, or a now understood unmet need. Once young people are pushed out of education, their worlds shrink. People described less structure, fewer supports, and a greater pull towards street economies and risky peer environments. Professionals linked exclusion to long-term literacy impacts:

"He got expelled from school; he's in the bottom 5 per cent of literacy in this country. the bottom 5 per cent, this young lad. How

²⁹¹ Patrick Sharkey and Felix Elwert, The Legacy of Disadvantage: Multigenerational Neighborhood Effects on Cognitive Ability (2011) 116(6) American Journal of Sociology.

much harder are things going to be for him if he doesn't get an education" (SW5)

Survival and coping under constraint.

Participants shared how feelings of shame and exclusion as young people, along with pressure to "keep up" socially, led some to adopt survival strategies that became criminalised. One interviewee described stealing from shops because they felt left out when they couldn't afford what their peers had.

"When I was younger, I used to never have money to get stuff in the shops... it made me end up, I end up having to take out the shops myself... because I felt like I was left out and the only alternative I had was to go and actually take it myself without having the money to take it. I carried that into my adulthood. It was like a thing I had then, I couldn't get rid of it". OT06

When basic needs can't be met, people do what they can to get by. Participants emphasised that much of what is labelled "offending" is tied directly to survival and constrained choice. Low level thefts, fare evasion and similar minor offences are often rational responses to unmet basic needs. In the context of rising living costs,²⁹² several interviewees described committing offences "just to survive."

"you're gonna go to the ends of the earth for them kids, do you know what I mean? I've done it, I've got charges for robbing fucking baby milk, nappies, like, and the thing about a woman is she has to survive, there's too much dependent on her". OT010

Participants stressed that poverty for them is not only about physical deprivation but also the inability to achieve a dignified quality of life. When people's needs are not met, repeatedly over time, they find ways to survive outside of formal structures.

"Obviously, people have to commit crimes just to survive in poverty, particularly communities like this, as far back as I remember there's always been that element of having to step outside the boundaries just to survive." it's that sort of always having to hustle and make sure that you had something to survive. So, you don't see it as taking big risks..." SP21

Cost-of-living pressures are pushing even those who "don't fit the profile" of someone who typically offends towards informal or illegal work to make ends meet. Survival strategies are thus embedded in structural economic conditions, with illegal economies, in some communities, masking the gap between earnings and the cost of living.

"I'll see people I knew growing up, and they don't fit the profile of someone you think might go to prison, but they're just trying to make a few quid, they have a job, an electrician or working in a factory, but they're just supplementing their income with selling drugs, because they want to be able to have kids, they want to be able to have a family, afford a home." OT02

Participants' accounts echo the literature on the criminalisation of poverty where some of the behaviour most likely to attract criminal justice sanctions would be better viewed through the lens of survival or coping under conditions of material insecurity and engagement in criminalised survival strategies.

Identity, masculinity, status and belonging

Adolescent identity formation was described as deeply entwined with the material and social realities of deprivation. Interviewees explained that stigma and reduced access to protective supports and credible routes to stability and gendered routes to recognition and belonging, intensify the pull of gangs and illegal economies, especially for young men. In communities where violence is present, many

292 Diarmaid Ó Ceallaigh and others, *The Response of Low-Income Households to the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Ireland* (ESRI Research Series No 206, Economic and Social Research Institute 2025) 1, 11–12.



Jack

Jill



Getting pulled by the guards everyday, their Ma wants them to look well in a nice tracksuits and stuff. But now he fits the profile. A kid on a scooter “fits the profile”.

Jack and Jill are from the same estate. They grew up together. They’re 16 now, that’s that age where everything starts to change. When you grow up in a community in Dublin that’s on the margins, 16 is that age where everything starts to get serious.

These characters were developed by focus group participants.

people described what they felt was a binary choice: become part of a gang or risk being targeted. As one participant noted,

“What all young people want is money, status, and power, but how you acquire that from one community to the next is vastly different. Plus, what does it mean to be a man from a working-class area, which was embedded in us by the social structure.” SP1

Masculinity and status were raised by many participants as social dynamics shaped by deprivation where there are barriers to legitimate routes to recognition and belonging. Men shared experiences of violence within the home, and in the community as a young person, and realising that retaliating with violence could not only create safety, but it could bring a sense of identity that could be of material value in the drug trade. Maintaining this façade of violence causes deep emotional stress, which led to increased drug use for multiple participants. Supporting men away from violence and illegal activity must take a holistic approach that supports emotional wellbeing alongside practical and economic supports.

“It’s inextricably linked to who you are as a man. No man, no person wants to be able to say I’m a failed person. I can’t achieve all the successes that other people have, and I can’t... get to a place where I’m able to provide a future for kids, or a partner, or a wife.” OT02

OT014 spoke of how he felt forced into performing an aggressive form of masculinity and how he feels that in communities like his, young men are often forced to perform violence and hyper-aggression as a means of protection. This was reiterated by another participant:

“And particularly when it comes to the young lads dealing and all, if any issues come up. They’re getting more and more violent. It’s like they’re having to prove themselves that they can actually live this life and they’re getting more and more violent and that’s going to have an impact. It’s a symptom of distress, of the fucking anger, of violence being so normalised. Within our communities, you start to wonder, how anyone cannot be violent after growing up, in it?” SP21

Several participants spoke of the belonging and status they gained from selling drugs: it provided recognition, responsibility and income that legitimate avenues did not. This highlights how deprived contexts structure the choices that appear available to adolescents.

“When I sold drugs, it wasn’t just the money, I felt important, because I used to have a few people that got drugs off me. I had a few people selling for me. I was actually part of something. And not just the belonging of being part of a crew, but people relied on me. I was important. So, there was almost a key role I had within this kind of infrastructure, so I was able to fulfil my role in being a credible member of the community, even though people think I was anti-community, to me, I’m still able to, like, provide for this, and I’m able to be part of that.” OT02

Across these accounts, status, masculinity and belonging were central to how young men navigated deprivation, risk and recognition. Where legitimate routes to respect and income were weak or blocked, criminalised routes could come to appear more available, more valued or more necessary.

Across these topics, childhood and adolescence emerge as the point at which structural inequality becomes more embedded in daily life. School exclusion, unmet neurodevelopmental need, stigma, trauma,

community violence, and pressure around status and survival accumulate, narrowing a young person's world and making criminalised routes appear more available and rational. What later appears in the justice system as "offending behaviour" is often the endpoint of a much longer chain of unmet need, institutional exclusion and limited choice.

Neurodivergence

Interviews show how late or no diagnosis of autism/ADHD/dyslexia can contribute to school disruption and justice contact especially where families are under pressure and access to assessment or support is limited. Professionals described neurodivergence as a significant factor in youth justice spaces, which are routinely going unsupported with serious consequences. Both participants and workers highlight that systems fail to recognise and meet needs early, then criminalise the behaviours that emerge from that failure.

"The vast majority are coming to youth diversion because they have autism, they have dyslexia, they have ADHD and they don't have the skills yet to manage it."

"What we're starting to see... is a lot more young people come to the criminal justice system because their mental health and the cognitive development needs are not being met." (SW5)

A recurring theme is that young people can be labelled as "bad" or "non-compliant" long before their needs are identified or met. This is made worse when services respond to distress as a moral failing or reduce it to one issue for example, addiction, which people spoke of as the coping response to the issue, rather than responding to complexity. One participant described repeatedly seeking mental-health support and being told:

"That there was nothing wrong with me. It's just addiction." OT04

A public engagement participant spoke of having received an ADHD diagnosis in his 50s, and how he still finds it difficult to shake the shame and feeling of being treated as "stupid" and "bold" as a young child in school. This shame and the punitive factors surrounding

neurodivergence have an impact on the social development of a child and their vulnerability to coming into contact with the criminal justice system. This was an experience echoed by many participants who had been excluded in education, the care system, health, and accommodation services. Where schools and institutions operate as sites of exclusion, protective pathways narrow. This sense of shame was internalised, with many people using drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism, feeding into a reinforcing loop of negative consequences and self-blame.

Mental health

Interviewees linked deprivation to trauma and mental distress. They emphasised that mental health support cannot be separated from material conditions and that without heat, electricity and safety, therapeutic interventions can only do so much.

"You can't just expect people to go to counselling to fix their problems when they don't have any money for electricity or for food" (SP10)

Community violence and chronic insecurity were said to create trauma responses in young people, leading to hypervigilance and PTSD-like symptoms. Without access to traumainformed services, people described selfmedicating with alcohol or drugs to cope with the constant stress.

Substance use as a coping mechanism

Substance use was frequently described as both a coping mechanism and a dependency arising from trauma, stress and limited supports. Several spoke about using drugs or alcohol to cope with anxiety, grief, mental health difficulties or the pressures of poverty and unsafe environments. For some, substance use functioned as a form of self-medication where formal supports were inaccessible, delayed or experienced as unresponsive. As one participant described:

"We are a traumatised community... how do you actually escape that when every day you live in it? nine times out of ten people... self medicate." (OT014)

Many participants described encountering significant barriers when attempting to access help for substance use. Long waiting lists for residential treatment, fragmented services and high thresholds for entry, with support often only available once problems had escalated to crisis point. This was particularly the case where people were in employment and attempting to address an escalating issue with substance use. A barrier described by many participants was being refused mental health support until they addressed their substance use.

“I was using the drugs in the first place because I needed mental health help, it’s absolute madness” OT03

These experiences contributed to a sense of being trapped within overlapping needs that services were not structured to address and for some participants deepened frustration and reduced trust in services.

Participants also spoke about the stigma attached to drug use, which they felt followed them across multiple areas of life. Being known as someone who uses drugs could affect interactions with health services, state services and employment supports. For some, this stigma reinforced a sense of exclusion and further embedded the sense of being outside legitimate systems. Where support systems are difficult to access or experienced as stigmatising, opportunities to intervene early may be missed, increasing the likelihood that issues escalate and may eventually intersect with the criminal justice system.

The drug economy, recruitment and constrained labour markets

The drug trade was also portrayed as a significant economic factor in deprived communities. For young men in particular, selling drugs offers money, status and belonging where legitimate work may not feel like an option due to stigmatisation or low earning prospects. Sector workers noted a recurring pattern of society recognising the harms of grooming children into crime yet displays little empathy for those same children once they reach adulthood. Participants challenged narratives that demonise people engaged in the drug trade, emphasising that the drug economy functions as an alternative labour market when mainstream opportunities are closed off.

“So often people who sell drugs are looked at like they are just animals and they’re bad. No, this is an economy. People are clever, and they’re smart, and they’re using the opportunities and the skills they have, and that’s the unfortunate thing, violence becomes prevalent because it’s a way of managing and regulating a system that has no regulation.” OT02

These accounts align with evidence that illegal drug markets operate as local economies that concentrate harm and enforcement in places already experiencing deprivation, particularly for people in lower-level roles who carry risk without holding profit or power. Participants’ emphasis on coercion, intimidation and ‘lack of alternatives’ also supports a prevention approach that treats the conditions driving recruitment—poverty, exclusion, unmet need and lack of safe options, as part of the community safety response, rather than relying primarily on punitive measures. This indicates a need for the drug trade to be analysed as a market system that produces layered harms often concentrated in communities already carrying the greatest burden of deprivation.

A critical issue raised by participants, youth and community workers was the increasingly younger age at which young boys are becoming involved in the drug trade. This shift was most evident when comparing the contributions of two focus groups. While developing their character, the first group, which was mostly over 40, decided that 16 years old was the age when a serious escalation in offending happened. When we met a group of younger men outside of Dublin, they collectively agreed that the character was nine years old, as they believed that that was the point at which many young boys were engaging in serious crime and violence today, which aligns with recent evidence on very young children being groomed into crime.

“We’ve been working with some young people. linking in with youth projects and these are young people are flat out, they’re, selling crack, involved in all sorts” SP1

One participant argues that there is an “endless supply of children” for criminal activity, particularly in the drug trade, and when the system fails to meet their needs, they are more easily led into criminality, creating a vicious circle.

“It also might be the dominant behaviour in the area where, well, if a lot of families are involved in that crime, it might be the drug gangs but so there’s young kids growing up saying criminality is starting at 6 and 7 now. You don’t see a 6-year-old on a street corner selling drugs, but he’s cycling up to the corner to see if the guards are coming so he could nod down the road.” OT019

Some felt that unrealistic pathways are offered by the State, which often involve lengthy educational routes that don’t resonate with young people seeking immediate solutions to their needs. Youth clubs and projects need to be attractive to young people, and there is a need for more detached outreach work meeting the most at-risk people where they are. A youth worker spoke of how they successfully engaged young people in the CJS already, by building trust through outreach, creating activities they were interested in and distancing themselves from the perception they worked with Gardai. This group of 10- to 13-year-olds, who had been involved in the drug trade and at risk of serious sanctions, increasingly engaged with the youth project and ended up engaging in pro-social activities with Gardai. Services require flexibility to meet the needs of the young people that are least likely to engage in centre-based youth work, as these are most likely to become involved in serious offending.

Gendered Survival Pressures: Women, Motherhood and Sex Work

Women’s accounts highlighted how poverty interacts with caring responsibilities, trauma, coercion and stigma to shape gendered pathways into criminalisation. Across interviews, “survival” was described as a chain of pressures in which women were trying to keep households going under scarcity while managing the risk of debt, homelessness, violence, and losing their children. Participants described engaging in low-level offences, and

at times sex work, as ways of meeting basic needs when income was unstable or supports were inaccessible. One woman explained that her social welfare payments stopped when she was imprisoned, leaving her without money to maintain her housing or care for her children; this led to homelessness on release and further contact with services. Others described how shoplifting charges escalated to riskier behaviours like sex work during periods like during COVID-19 pandemic when shops were closed. One interviewee linked this to the erosion of practical options for women as social protections narrowed, arguing that earlier schemes created alternative routes to survival outside criminalisation:

“We have to go back to before austerity cuts. They created programs like Community Employment; the woman could be on a lone parent’s payment. That payment was matched within community employment service, so they had more options for survival without crime.” OT021

A key mechanism in women’s pathways was the role of stigma and fear in blocking access to support early, when intervention might prevent escalation. Participants described women attending services while hiding the severity of hardship, such as having no electricity or food, because they were afraid their children might be taken into care.

“A lot of her women are living without electricity, without gas. They’re afraid to come and say it because they don’t want to be judged, and particularly if they have children living with them. So, they’re not getting the supports that they require because they are terrified. It does come back to the stigma, the shame, the, ‘you should be able to do this as a mother.’” OT021

Participants also described how justice contact can deepen poverty in ways that are gendered through motherhood and caring. Several accounts highlighted the immediate consequences of imprisonment for women’s income and housing stability, including loss of social welfare payments while in custody and

the resulting knock-on effects for children's care arrangements. One interviewee described how the conditions for reunification are then tied to secure housing, creating a high bar on release.

“Because their social welfare stopped, their children are probably with the grandmother, and the trajectory plan for that child to go back with the mother, she needs to have a stable home. If she has no home, she cannot take them kids back to live in homeless accommodation with her.” OT021

Women's poverty was directly linked to sex work in participants' testimonies. A woman engaged in sex work described poverty as “the core” driver of sex work, arguing that public debate often misattributes causality to men's demand rather than women's economic desperation. She noted that most women engaged in sex work are single mothers “choosing from very few options” and that cost-of-living pressures have increased competition and the number of women entering sex work. The current legal framework leaves sex workers operating in what she called a “criminalised environment,” limiting their ability to leave.

“And I think when COVID happened, like, for any of the women who would have been shoplifting, you know. Then the shop's closing down. That led them to more risky behaviour, such as sex work and so on, do you know?” SP21

She also named distinct patterns within sex work, differentiating street-based work where “addiction is a very big problem addiction, homelessness “from indoor work, where these drivers may be present but in practice, she suggests policing continues to fall on visible street-based poverty, with harassment displaced onto other powers and emphasises that criminalisation compounds poverty by trapping people in sex work, particularly those who want to exit:

“Criminalisation in any form also traps people in sex work. If you

have a conviction, your choices for doing something else are going to be very, very limited.” OT012

and positions sex work as a consequence of poverty, but also as a strategy of survival under economic abandonment

“For a lot of women, sex work is a refusal of poverty. It's refusing to be left to destitution” OT012

Families do the sentence too: children, care, and intergenerational harm

Interviewees repeatedly emphasised that imprisonment punishes families. It disrupts caregiving, increases stress and poverty, and shapes children's lives and expectations, deepening intergenerational harm.

“When people go to prison, it's not just them that does a sentence, it's the whole family. And there needs to be support there for the children.” (OT01)

Participants also noted the gendered stigma around women's imprisonment and the lack of women-specific supports in prison and on release. Mothers spoke of the trauma of being separated from their children and the inadequate support in meeting basic needs, such as leaving prison without baby supplies. Interviewees argued that any credible approach to prevention and desistance must recognise women's specific needs, including housing, childcare, trauma supports and income security.

“Yeah, I came out with not even a baby grow, not even a pram, not even nothing for the baby” (OT016)

Traveller experience

Six participants across interviews and focus groups are Travellers, who shared a consistent experience of “accepted racism.” Discrimination in car insurance led young Traveller men to risk driving uninsured, resulting in early convictions.

Like car insurance goes up double. For certain Eircodes, and if you're living on a Traveller site, you can definitely expect your insurance quote to go up.” (OT017)

They reported routine overpolicing and aggressive stops, describing a sense that they could “never win.” Employment discrimination extended beyond criminal records to identity itself:

“It’s not a criminal conviction that’s always the barrier; it’s just being a Traveller sometimes.”
OTO18

Participants shared a feeling of being “quarantined off and living on the edge of society” and treated as “second class citizens”, feeling unwelcome in public spaces.

Educational exclusion was another common experience. Many Traveller participants felt that they were neglected in schools from a young age, and made to feel like education was not for them. Many gained literacy and educational qualifications in prison. They emphasised that unmet educational needs were a key factor in their criminalisation and called for meaningful education and employment opportunities to be available much earlier in life.

“I couldn’t read and write, so I started doing education in prison...” (OTO17)

Men described taking on low-wage delivery jobs, as they do not ask about convictions, but are often not long-lasting, poorly paid, and offer no job security but are one of the few options available for work. This systemic exclusion, combined with literacy problems within the community, leads to a perception of few legitimate options, increasing the likelihood of individuals engaging in crime. Men shared being offered quick money for simple tasks like dropping off packages, which can seem more appealing than low-paying, work which can be classed as “embarrassing,” highlighting the psychological pressure and temptation faced by those struggling financially, and the perception of how a man should be able to provide for his family.

“I think it depends on what kind of work, like, so your delivery jobs and things like that, no one’s asking for what your conviction is. But then, as I said, they’re not gonna be... they’re not long-lasting, they’re very... they’re not paying well, they don’t give... if you take a day off, you can be sacked in them”.

The system as an escalator

Policing, visibility, and everyday enforcement

Participants described frequent, routine contact with Gardaí as part of everyday life in deprived areas. Being “known” locally meant being stopped repeatedly by Gardaí while going about ordinary activities, even when no offence had been committed. Sector workers attest to witnessing individuals living in poverty disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system. Some participants believe that the criminal justice system can function as a mechanism of social control, disproportionately enforcing laws in deprived areas with socially isolated communities. Repeated low-level contact with the Gardaí can produce records and patterns of surveillance that shape later decisions elsewhere in the system.

“I had a bag of toys for my daughter going up the road and they pulled up and asked what I was doing there. Brought me to the station, no phone call... didn’t let me ring my solicitor, they didn’t ask me did I want a glass of water, they didn’t ask me anything, and the cell was freezing...I was left out the next day, no charge, no nothing...” (OTO4)

While some residents want more policing to address high victimisation rates, most interviewees felt that current policing practices perpetuate harm.

“As much as many people are screaming out for more policing on the streets, I think it’s the last thing that’s needed. Because there’s part of the reason why we have so many people in prisons from communities like this is because of the over-policing.”
SP21

Stigma attached to drug use influenced officers’ behaviour: people in recovery felt they were still treated “like a scumbag,” undermining trust and reinforcing exclusion. Participants argued that policing in its present form often intensifies criminalisation rather than providing safety.

“...despite being years in recovery, once they know you, they still tarnish you as a drug user... Like, you’re still treated like a scumbag.” OTO10

classed justice process, where legal outcomes can be influenced by a person’s capacity to navigate the system and perform “credibility” in court. Where someone cannot secure consistent representation, cannot advocate confidently, or cannot produce the kinds of proof the court expects (address stability,



Class-based experience in court settings

The courts were widely described as intimidating, inaccessible spaces, shaped by formal language, unfamiliar procedures and minimal time with legal aid. Interviewees noted that people with resources could navigate the system more effectively and “comply” by hiring solicitors and barristers and meeting conditions, whereas those in poverty struggled with transportation, childcare, literacy and understanding legal jargon, and were exposed to barriers that can be interpreted as non-compliance. There was a perception that court decisions were disconnected from the lived reality of those living in poverty. Participants emphasised that class-based outcomes were evident in the courts system: workingclass defendants received harsher penalties for similar offences because they lacked means and representation. This reinforces a cycle of disadvantage within the justice process itself. It produces what participants experienced as a

employment records, treatment engagement, character references), they are more likely to be read through a lens of risk and non-compliance, even when the underlying issue is poverty-related constraint.

Fines and Punishment:

Fines and minor offences emerged as a major churn mechanism. Small penalties accumulate over time and reappear years later as warrants or reasons for denial of services and triggering repeated court appearances. Participants gave examples where poverty and lack of service access directly drove finerelated criminalisation. One person needed methadone but couldn't access a local clinic; they travelled to Dublin and were prosecuted for fare evasion because they couldn't afford the train. Another participant in recovery recalled that their fines totalled €2,800; with no disposable income, paying them off seemed impossible. Interviewees described fines as a conveyor

belt: missing one payment or court date leads to immediate sanction, often a custodial sentence. A participant in recovery recounted being taken to the cells for a day because she couldn't produce the money to pay the fine, despite explaining her circumstances to the judge.

“...I gave all the letters... ...And he just took one look at them and threw them away. Like, literally threw them away.... they threw me down the cells for the day till I got the money over... ...they didn't read out the letters. He said, “I'm sick seeing letters from all these services.”

Prison and release as poverty multipliers

Prison was consistently described as deepening trauma and poverty. People reported that incarceration removes them from their communities, disrupts relationships and employment, and leaves them worse off on release. Although some accessed education for the first time in prison, most insisted they should not have had to be imprisoned to get education or support. Many felt that prison served merely as containment:

“Going in and out of prison did nothing, only housed me for a period of time, and threw me back out with the same issues.” (OT01)

Release was depicted as a cliff-edge rather than a supported transition and participants descriptions are consistent with the report's wider finding that prison can operate as a poverty multiplier, returning people to the community with fewer resources and higher barriers than before custody. Interviewees spoke about being discharged into homelessness or precarious accommodation without coordinated help. Participants recounted being dropped at the gate with no plan, told simply to go to a hostel, and returning to prison within days. Even where individuals completed courses or treatment, the absence of housing and income meant relapse was likely: “If you went to the hostel, it's game over”. Professionals reported paying for clients' electricity or basic needs from discretionary funds to prevent crisis, illustrating

structural gaps in support. Interviewees argued that with no through-the-gate planning, the state effectively manufactures recidivism.

“After doing a three-year sentence. They told me I was getting out that day, 10 weeks early, but they dropped me out like a bag of rubbish. Like, there was no support, there was no help, It was just really, you're gone, pack your bags.” OT05

Participants' accounts suggest that prison often functions less as a site of resolution than as a poverty multiplier. Even where some support is available inside, imprisonment disrupts the social and material conditions that make stability possible outside: housing is lost, income stops, relationships strain, children are affected, and contact with work or community weakens. Release then does not mark a fresh start, but a return to the community with fewer resources, greater stigma, and often more urgent need than before custody. Participants strongly argued that if we truly wanted to increase public safety, reduce the numbers in prison, and treat all people in the country equally, the state needs to do everything possible to avoid sending people to prison in the first place

Stigma after prison: blocked employment and blocked futures

Participants consistently reported that the stigma associated with a criminal record is one of the most significant barriers to reintegration. Even when individuals have completed their sentences, engaged in treatment and stabilised their lives, employers often exclude them, and they experience a secondary punishment through stigma and exclusion. Interviewees described how job applications are rejected once past convictions are disclosed, regardless of the role. This exclusion is compounded for groups already facing discrimination, such as Travellers; as one person noted, “It's not a criminal conviction that's always the barrier, it's just being a Traveller sometimes.”

The inability to access stable employment forces many into unstable, low wage delivery jobs that do not ask about convictions. These jobs offer little security or income and do not provide a pathway out of poverty. Several participants recounted being offered quick money for simple tasks, like dropping off

packages, which can pull them back into illegal economies. Without meaningful work opportunities, people with convictions face blocked futures and a higher risk of recidivism.

This stigma extends beyond employment. Participants noted that criminal records affect access to housing, insurance and community acceptance. The combined effect of these barriers reinforces the poverty imprisonment cycle. Interviewees argued that any genuine attempt at rehabilitation must include policy measures to reduce employer discrimination, reform spent conviction rules and create

highlights a deep contradiction in the system. People are told to desist, comply and rebuild, while being discharged into homelessness, hostels, debt, stigma and service fragmentation. In those circumstances, relapse, breach or return to illegal income feel like foreseeable and sometimes inevitable outcomes of a system that withdraws support at the point of greatest vulnerability. Several interviewees described the State as manufacturing recidivism through policy.



You had to beg, borrow or steal to feed your family at times. It's set up against you. You can't afford a good solicitor, you don't know any barristers when your from somewhere like here. You wouldn't have the opportunities that other people would have. Housing inequities, financial/wealth inequality, employment inequality.. I mean we had to lie and put different addresses on our cv, because if your from here you can't get a job with that address.

pathways into stable employment for people with convictions. One initiative raised was the Spéire Nua positive strengths-based disclosure model, where participants can engage in a programme that results in a certificate of a commitment to change that can accompany a garda vetting form.²⁹³ Alongside this, participants want to see comprehensive spent convictions legislation enacted.

The problem identified by participants

What helps, and what needs to change

Lived Experience Leadership and Integrated Services

Interviewees were emphatic that people closest to the issues should be central to designing solutions. They criticised fragmented responses in which individuals are bounced between services, repeatedly

293 Spéire Nua is a social enterprise that supports people with criminal convictions through practical supports linked to education, training and employment.

asked to prove vulnerability and expected to comply with complex conditions without adequate support. Participants called for integrated, personcentred services that recognise the cumulative impact of poverty and criminalisation. They argued that policy makers must directly involve those with lived experience in planning and evaluating interventions.

For participants, a prevention approach requires more than diversion at the point of arrest. It means investment upstream in housing, accessible mental health and addiction support, disability and neurodiversity support, income security and youth, education and family supports that prevent early exclusion, alongside coordinated local responses in the communities carrying the highest levels of justice contact.

Eliminate prison sentences under 12 months

Participants repeatedly argued that reducing reliance on short custodial sentences would be one of the quickest ways to reduce the harms described throughout the study.

“We have a history of abolition in this country. In our living memory, there are people alive who were institutionalised in systems we recognised were harmful and traumatising. So, we stopped and closed them. We can do the same thing with prisons if the will is there”. OT015

Address Poverty

Many participants repeated a similar core argument, that until people have enough money to live on, then survival and acquisitive crimes will continue. There was widespread agreement that investment and policies are needed to bring everyone in the country out of poverty.

Housing as the Foundation

Stable housing was described as the essential foundation for any prevention or desistance strategy. Participants viewed release into homelessness or hostels as undermining all other interventions: “If you went to the hostel, it’s game over”. Without a secure place to live, efforts such as treatment, training or probation supervision are unlikely to succeed.

Interviewees advocated for throughthegate housing support so that people exiting custody are not immediately returned to crisis. Professionals echoed this, noting that they often pay for essentials like electricity to keep families safe a workaround that highlights gaps in the formal safety net.

Rethinking Responses to Drug Use

Participants felt they were criminalised for drug use even when it served as a coping mechanism for trauma and poverty. Many participants named a desire to see drug possession for personal use decriminalised, in line with the health led model advocated for by the Citizens Assembly. Several argued for regulation of drugs as a mechanism to reduce the harms of the illegal drug trade. Overall, they called for responses to substance use that prioritise public health over punishment.

Investing in Youth Work and Safe Spaces

Investment in youth work and safe community spaces was consistently framed as upstream prevention. Participants linked deprivation to status pressures and risky peer dynamics; they argued that youth infrastructure including recreational services, youth projects, addiction services and wraparound supports provides alternatives to street economies and criminal networks. Professionals highlighted that current youth services, including Garda Youth Diversion Projects, are often overstretched and not reaching those on the margins and they are specifically for young people already at risk within the justice system. They called for expanding youth services so that all young people can engage including street-based outreach work to engage with young people considered “hard to reach”.

And if we’re serious about diverting people away from prison, well, then we’ll have to meet people’s needs. But failure to meet the needs leads to people getting what they need through other ways and means. Which often means criminality. So, it’s a bit of a catch-22.” OT019

“We can look around the garda youth diversion projects which are doing amazing work. But they’re not reaching the lads who are standing out in the corners so we need to actually find out what will reach them. Do you know, and we’ll have to include them in them conversations, because a lot of times, they’ll put out these hard-to-reach programs. But they’re not even trying to focus on those kids.” OTO13

Release Planning

Through-the-gate planning is described as essential, yet often absent. The interviews describe release as a point where the state withdraws support at the moment it is most needed. A credible approach would treat release as a process of stabilisation and ensure that people’s immediate needs are met.

“The only reason that I was able to succeed this time is that when I got out, I had somewhere to go. The Simon community had a recovery house, and I’d... accommodation, and my basic needs was looked after.” OTO1

These findings show that criminal justice contact cannot be understood in isolation from the wider social and economic conditions in which it occurs. Participants described repeated patterns in which poverty, deprivation, unstable housing, service gaps and system design combined to deepen rather than resolve harm. This points to the need for policy responses that do more than manage crisis after contact has occurred. Justice reinvestment provides one framework for doing that.



7. Justice Reinvestment and Policy Implications

From Evidence to Prevention

The findings of this study highlight how poverty, deprivation and criminal justice contact intersect through cumulative and structural mechanisms. Participants described pathways in which material insecurity, place-based deprivation, exposure to harm, and limited access to services can increase vulnerability to criminal justice contact. Once individuals enter the system, criminal justice processes can further intensify disadvantage through the loss of income, housing instability, stigma, and disrupted family relationships.

These findings align with a substantial body of international research which demonstrates that criminal justice systems often respond to the consequences of poverty rather than its underlying causes. When systems intervene primarily through punishment rather than prevention, they risk reinforcing the same structural conditions that contribute to justice contact in the first place.

Addressing this dynamic requires policy responses that move beyond reactive enforcement toward earlier and more preventative forms of intervention. One framework increasingly used internationally to guide this shift is justice reinvestment.

Justice Reinvestment

Justice reinvestment is a data-driven, place-sensitive approach to reducing reliance on imprisonment by shifting resources away from custody and into community-based responses that prevent harm and reduce reoffending.²⁹⁴ In practice, justice reinvestment starts by analysing what is driving prison growth and system churn, for example, short sentences, pre-trial/remand pressures, or probation and parole revocations. Targeted reforms are then implemented to reduce unnecessary imprisonment. A core principle of justice

reinvestment is that where prison use falls and costs are averted, a portion of those resources should be reinvested in services and supports that strengthen community safety, particularly in communities that experience disproportionate criminal justice contact.

The success of justice reinvestment depends on several interconnected factors. Initiatives must be genuinely community-led and built on local consensus, recognising that communities have unique understanding of what they need to thrive.²⁹⁵ Robust data infrastructure is equally critical, enabling transparent measurement to ensure that reductions in custody are not achieved by simply shifting burden onto homelessness, untreated health needs, or unsafe release.

Effective implementation also requires structured collaboration between government and community organisations, with clear communication channels established early and maintained throughout.²⁹⁶ Programmes must remain faithful to the original theory of justice reinvestment: reinvesting savings in community development and services, rather than allowing funds to be absorbed elsewhere within the justice system itself.²⁹⁷

Finally, justice reinvestment requires sustained political commitment. Evidence suggests that meaningful reductions in imprisonment and improvements in community safety from the justice system may not emerge until after the third year of implementation,²⁹⁸ reflecting the time needed to rebuild prevention infrastructure and begin to address long-standing structural disadvantage. These are key learnings that must be considered in any justice reinvestment implementation in Ireland to commit to investing in the long term and accurately measuring success.

294 Urban Institute's Justice Reinvestment Initiative Team, *New Programs for and Approaches to Justice System Challenges: Case Studies of the Justice Reinvestment Initiative in Arkansas, Louisiana, Oregon, and Pennsylvania* (Urban Institute July 2022); Leah Sakal and others, *Strengthening Community-Based Service Capacity through the Justice Reinvestment Initiative* (Urban Institute May 2022).

295 Paul Ramsay Foundation, 'Seven insights from our justice reinvestment grants' (13 August 2025).

296 Ibid.

297 Urban Institute, *'Strengthening Community-Based Service Capacity through the Justice Reinvestment Initiative'* (Justice Reinvestment Initiative, 2021).

298 Urban Institute, *'Strengthening Community-Based Service Capacity through the Justice Reinvestment Initiative'* (Justice Reinvestment Initiative, 2021).

Justice Reinvestment Initiative

The Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI), a partnership between the Bureau of Justice Assistance and The Pew Charitable Trusts in the United States (U.S.), is one of the most prominent operational models of justice reinvestment. It supports states to use criminal justice data to identify correctional cost drivers, develop legislative and practice reforms, and reinvest in strategies intended to improve public safety.

Published programme reporting describes substantial reinvestment activity across participating states. An Urban Institute snapshot reports that through the 2017 fiscal year, 22 states reported total investments of \$557 million (including \$193 million up-front and \$364 million in subsequent years), directed to strategies such as community-based treatment and services, community supervision, pretrial reform, victims' services.²⁹⁹ The same report states that "The 36 states that have participated in JRI have saved or averted more than \$1 billion, reinvesting half of that in solutions to justice system challenges".

Evidence from various states in the U.S. indicate that this approach can lead to significant reductions in prison populations, lower recidivism rates, and improved public safety outcomes. However, challenges remain in consistent implementation, data collection, and addressing deeper structural inequalities that shape justice system involvement. The effectiveness of initiatives is often tied to strong partnerships, clear communication, and sustained investment in community capacity building. Between 2010 and 2018, over half of U.S. states participated, examining correctional cost drivers, legislating policy reforms, and implementing strategies designed to improve return on public investment.³⁰⁰

Justice reinvestment initiatives frequently identify points in the system where people are returned to prison without this making communities safer, for example, after probation

or parole is revoked, or through other forms of repeated system contact. These areas often provide opportunities for reform that can quickly reduce prison populations, by cutting unnecessary prison "bed days" (the number of days a person is in prison).³⁰¹ Considering Ireland's current context of record prison overcrowding and ongoing discussions about building more prisons to meet demand, justice reinvestment offers a pragmatic alternative approach focused on reducing demand for prison rather than expanding supply.

Prevention-Oriented Policy Approaches

Some recent policy initiatives internationally reflect a broader prevention-oriented logic aligned with justice reinvestment principles, particularly where they strengthen income stability and reduce exposure to poverty-related harms that can escalate into criminal justice contact.

In Wales, the Basic Income for Care Leavers pilot launched in 2022, provided a monthly payment to eligible care leavers aged 18 and over for two years, alongside access to budgeting and advisory support.³⁰² The pilot targeted a cohort recognised as experiencing high levels of social disadvantage and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, with evidence indicating that "over 25 per cent of the adult prison population" had previously been in care.³⁰³

In San Francisco, the community-led Guaranteed Care Income San Francisco pilot provided unconditional cash transfers \$2,000 per month to 10 low-income single mothers at risk of criminalisation, poverty related harms and child welfare involvement.³⁰⁴ The qualitative evaluation reported improvements in economic stability, the ability to meet basic needs and manage emergencies, reduced stress and anxiety, and increased feelings of safety and control. Some participants reported reducing or stopping sex work during the pilot,

299 Ibid 7.

300 Jeremy Welsh-Loveman and Samantha Harvell, *Justice Reinvestment Initiative Data Snapshot: Unpacking Reinvestment* (Urban Institute May 2018) p5-6; Jeremy Welsh-Loveman and Samantha Harvell, *Justice Reinvestment Initiative Data Snapshot: Unpacking Reinvestment* (Urban Institute May 2018) 8-17.

301 Nancy G La Vigne and others, *Justice Reinvestment Initiative State Assessment Report* (Urban Institute, 27 January 2014).

302 Vibhor Mathur and others, *Basic Income for Care Leavers in Wales Pilot Evaluation: Second Annual Report 2024 to 2025* (Welsh Government, Social Research No 20/2025, 5 March 2025) 12-18.

303 Ibid, Annex 1: Short description of the Basic Income for Care Leavers in Wales pilot.

304 Sergio Martinez, Mahika Rangnekar and Madeleine Levin, *San Francisco Guaranteed Care Income Evaluation: Final Report* (Social Policy Research Associates, July 2025) 19.

lowering exposure to criminalisation.³⁰⁵ Nearly all participants reported no child welfare services involvement during the programme, compared to prior experiences.

Existing Irish Examples of Prevention in Practice

Ireland already has several policy mechanisms that share features with justice reinvestment approaches, insofar as they reduce reliance on custody while supporting reintegration community safety.

The Community Return Programme provides structured temporary release combining supervised unpaid community work with resettlement support. The first programme evaluation (covering 761 participants, 2011–2013) reported high completion and continuation rates, low breach levels, and very low rates of return to custody on a new sentence for the first-year cohort, alongside substantial community work delivered.³⁰⁶

Similarly, the Bail Supervision Scheme (BSS) provides intensive support and supervision for children on bail as an alternative to detention. During prelegislative scrutiny of the Children (Amendment) Bill 2024, evaluation of the pilot found a 72 per cent reduction in reoffending among participants, with 85 per cent of young people in the scheme subsequently received a noncustodial outcome.³⁰⁷

In 2024, Oberstown's financial allocation was €27.876 million in funding, with an average daily population of 39 and an average cost per detained child of approximately €714,769 per year, or €1,956.93 per day.³⁰⁸ In the same year, the Bail Supervision Scheme received €2.12 million in funding and worked with 74 young people and families across the Dublin, Limerick and Cork Children Courts. While these are not like-for-like measures, the figures indicate that intensive bail supervision can support children in the community at a fraction of the cost of detention, reinforcing the case for prevention-focused investment

Implications for Ireland

The findings of this report demonstrate that criminal justice contact in Ireland is closely intertwined with broader patterns of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion. Participants consistently described how structural conditions, including housing instability, lack of youth infrastructure, exposure to community violence, and barriers to services, shape pathways into criminalisation.

Justice reinvestment provides a framework through which policy responses can move beyond managing the consequences of deprivation toward addressing its underlying drivers.

This approach recognises that community safety is more effectively achieved when systems intervene earlier, strengthen social supports, and reduce reliance on imprisonment for issues rooted in social and economic disadvantage.

In practical terms, this means prioritising investment in prevention infrastructure, including youth work, community development, housing stability, mental health and addiction services, and income security, particularly in communities that have experienced generations of concentrated disadvantage.

By shifting resources toward prevention and reintegration, justice reinvestment offers a pathway to reduce prison demand, improve public safety outcomes and address the structural conditions that increase the risk of criminal justice contact.

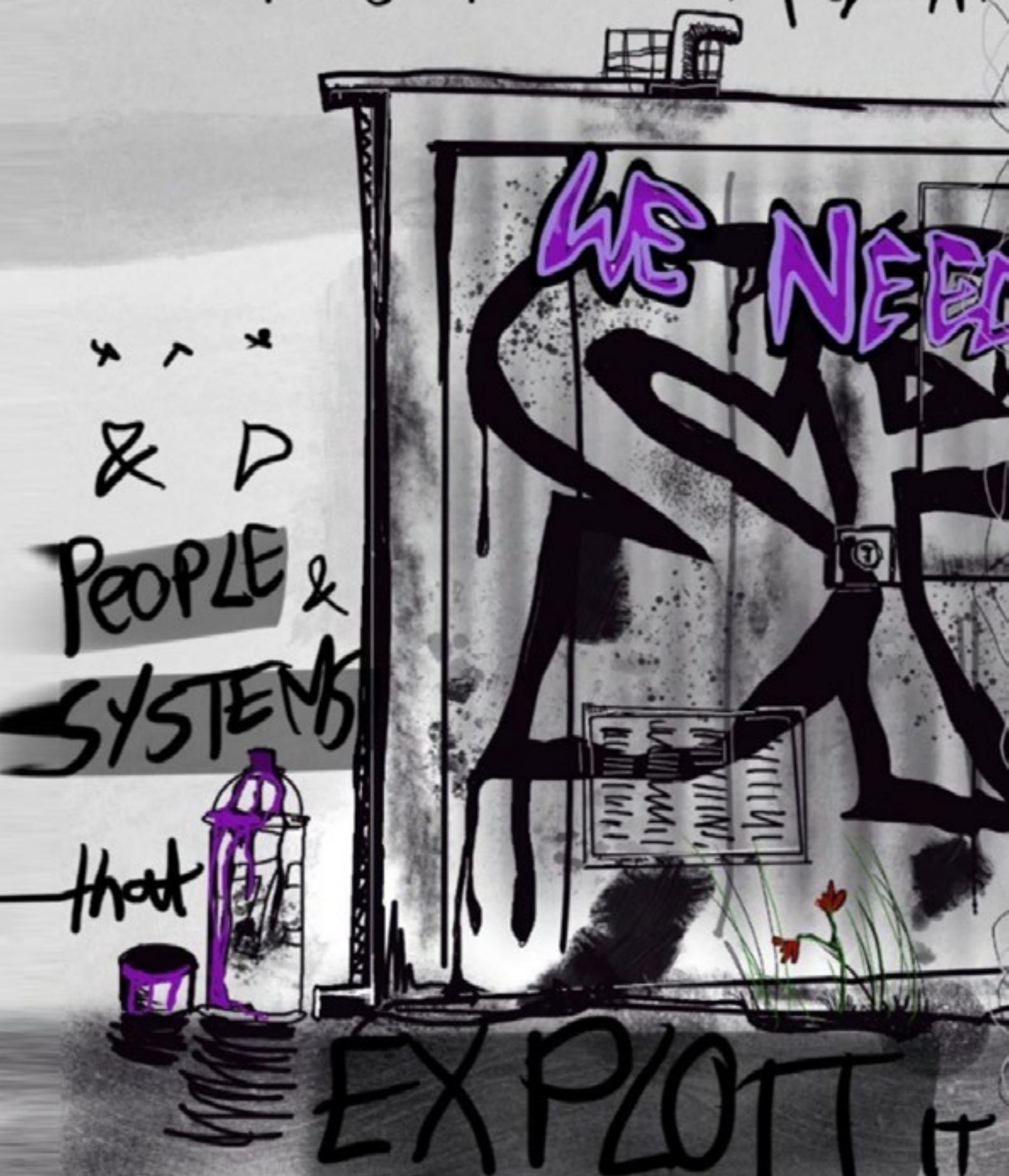
305 Ibid.

306 Irish Prison Service and Probation Service, *Community Return: A Unique Opportunity: A Descriptive Evaluation of the First Twenty Six Months (2011–2013)* (Department of Justice and Equality 2014).

307 Catherine Naughton, Sean Redmond and Barry Coonan, *Evaluation of the Bail Supervision Scheme for Children (Pilot Scheme)* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2019) 8, 12.

308 Mark Ward TD, Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Justice, Written Answers, Dáil Éireann, PQ 21056/25 and PQ 21057/25 (29 April 2025).

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8. Conclusion

This report examined how poverty and community deprivation shape contact with the criminal justice system in Ireland, and what a shift from imprisonment toward prevention and social investment would require in practice. Using a literature review, participatory qualitative research and the best available quantitative mapping, it found consistent evidence that criminal justice contact is socially and spatially patterned, and that poverty and deprivation increase exposure to the kinds of pressures and system responses that can make justice contact more likely.

A consistent thread throughout the research is that poverty and deprivation are structuring forces that narrow options over time. Participants' accounts revealed a chain of pressures: scarcity and insecurity, concentrated deprivation, accumulating disadvantage, criminalised survival strategies, system-driven escalation, the poverty-deepening effects of custody, and blocked re-entry. Participants described this as a pattern that increased the likelihood of justice contact in the absence of preventative supports, and one that is also reflected in the literature reviewed. This pathway is not deterministic: many people living in poverty never engage with the justice system, though they may face higher exposure to victimisation. However, when structural deprivation intersects with punitive policy responses, the risk of criminal justice contact increases.

Crucially, participants located responsibility for criminalisation in the design of systems. School exclusion can narrow young people's options, reduce access to protective supports, and, in some cases, contribute to insecurity and survival-driven activity. The absence of youth infrastructure and wrap-around supports can leave space that informal drug economies can fill, while also increasing young people's exposure to punitive forms of policing. Courts and fines can operate as churn mechanisms, pulling people back into the system for non-compliance driven by poverty. Imprisonment disrupts housing, employment and relationships, while release into homelessness or hostels, often without through-the-gate planning, can negatively impact progress and increase the risk of further criminal justice contact.

The study provides evidence that criminalisation is patterned by race, gender

and place. Traveller participants described "accepted racism" and systemic exclusion, highlighting how ethnicity and class combine to increase justice contact. Women described gendered survival pressures including caring responsibilities, domestic violence, and poverty, pushing some into low-level theft or sex work.

Addressing structural barriers in re-entry, particularly housing, was raised consistently. Participants repeatedly described housing as the foundation for stabilisation, and without it, people struggle to obtain employment, rebuild family ties, access treatment, and comply with supervision. Employment is another key lever for desistance. Ireland's *Building Pathways Together: Criminal Justice Reintegration Through Employment Strategy 2025–2027* recognises that supporting people with convictions into work enhances public safety because "individuals in employment have the stability to support long-term desistance". The strategy emphasises a whole-of-government approach and the role of lived experience in policy design. Our participants' experiences of stigma and blocked employment reinforce the need for proactive action on discrimination in recruitment and retention.

These findings have clear human rights implications as outlined in the earlier legal framework. Ireland's obligations regarding socioeconomic rights require the State to use the maximum of available resources to progressively realise rights central to people's basic security, including social security, adequate housing, health and education, and to do so without discrimination. Where participants describe being pushed into crisis by unmet need, and then escalated through policing, courts, fines, short sentences and repeat contact, the findings point to a policy pattern that risks reproducing socioeconomic

exclusion.³⁰⁹ Given the report's evidence on early-life disadvantage and cumulative pathways, the European Child Guarantee and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights frameworks strengthen the case for early intervention and family supports as core justice prevention measures.

The findings also engage Ireland's domestic equality and human rights governance duties. Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 requires public bodies to have regard to eliminating discrimination, promoting equality, and protecting human rights in the performance of their functions.³¹⁰ The qualitative data illustrates how one-size-fits-all justice processes can assume stability and then frame predictable difficulty as non-compliance, escalating harm. A rights-consistent approach therefore requires systems that are accessible in practice to people experiencing deprivation, not only in principle.

These findings also sit within a wider debate on equality protections including calls from both IHREC and IPRT for the expansion of Ireland's equality legislation to include socio-economic status and criminal conviction as protected grounds. IHREC has formally recommended that socio-economic status be added as a ground, arguing that its introduction is a matter of justice that would "constitute a crucial shift in the equality landscape in Ireland," while also advocating for a broad prohibition on discrimination based on criminal conviction that extends beyond spent convictions.³¹¹ Complementing this, the IPRT has long documented how socio-economic disadvantage fuels cycles of criminalisation and has conducted research revealing the significant barriers people with convictions face in accessing employment and education.³¹²

Finally, prison overcrowding and prison conditions in Ireland raise serious concerns under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly where oversight bodies warn that conditions may approach that threshold. In this context, we must reduce reliance on short sentences, expand community sanctions, and prevent imprisonment for poverty-linked issues to comply with human rights obligations.

The report's findings therefore point toward a suite of policy implications:

- Shift from punitive to preventative policy approaches.
- Invest in early intervention, housing, education and health.
- Address labour-market discrimination and support employment for people in the CJS.
- Centre lived experience in policy making.
- Improve data transparency and research.

Limitations should be noted. The qualitative strand used purposive sampling and was designed to generate depth of insight rather than statistical representativeness, though the consistency of accounts provides important evidence on recurring mechanisms and system effects. The quantitative strand was constrained by data access and data linkage barriers, limiting the extent of national analysis. The relationship between poverty, deprivation and criminal justice contact is complex, and causal claims should be made with care. However, the findings align with a wider body of research showing that socioeconomic disadvantage shapes exposure to many of the conditions and system interactions associated with justice involvement.

In conclusion, the research shows that criminal justice contact in Ireland is socially and spatially patterned, and that poverty, deprivation, place, and policy all shape exposure to criminalisation. Justice contact is more likely where material hardship, instability, and unmet need interact with punitive or inaccessible systems. To shift the focus from imprisonment to prevention and social investment, policy must address upstream drivers of harm, inequality, inadequate services, and discriminatory practice, while resourcing the supports that enable people to live with dignity and security. Investment in communities, housing, education, health, income adequacy, and employment, alongside the meaningful inclusion of those most affected, is central to a more just and effective response.

309 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 3 January 1976) 993 UNTS 3 (ICESCR) art 2(1); Government of Ireland, 'International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, New York, 16 December 1966' (Irish Treaty Series).

310 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, s 42.

311 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 'Submission on the Review of the Equality Acts' (19 July 2023) 50, 67.

312 Irish Penal Reform Trust, *The vicious circle of social exclusion and crime: Ireland's disproportionate punishment of the poor* (IPRT 2012).







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