

DERRY'S DRUG VIGILANTES



Ray Coyle was gunned down as he chatted to customers at his city centre shop in Derry. His crime? Selling legal highs. **Max Daly** reports on how dissident Republican groups are using the region's historical distrust of drug dealers to drum up support in Northern Ireland's still-fractured working class communities.

IT WAS afternoon rush hour in the centre of Derry, Northern Ireland's second city. Office workers hurried home through the bitter January cold. Inside Red Star, a 'head shop' selling cannabis paraphernalia, hippy trinkets and exotically named legal highs, shopkeeper Ray Coyle was chatting to customers when a man wearing a motorcycle helmet barged through the door.

"Are you Raymond Coyle?" he demanded through his visor. Scared, Coyle blurted out a false name, but within a second the man had placed a handgun into his right thigh and fired. Then he pumped a bullet into Coyle's left leg. As the gunman opened the door to leave, Coyle, lying bleeding on the floor of his shop, swore at him. The man came back in and fired a third shot into his legs.

Coyle was rushed to hospital and underwent emergency surgery. Within days, a burnt out motorbike was found on the outskirts of Derry and Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD), a Derry-based group which has vowed to "remove the scourge of drug dealing

from within the local community", had claimed responsibility for the attack.

The Red Star shooting, on January 27 this year, marked an escalation in an already rising wave of attacks by dissident Republican paramilitary groups on drug dealers in Derry.

But the attack on Coyle, which came in the wake of a dramatic rise in reports of Derry teenagers being harmed by the now banned legal high mephedrone, was the first time someone had been targeted for selling legal highs rather than heroin and cocaine.

The incident sparked a protest, organised by left wing groups, outside Red Star. A Facebook page, RAAD – Not In Our Name, said the group were "fascists", "sickos" and "self-appointed heroes of the community" who should not be allowed to claim any moral authority. Outgoing Foyle MP Mark Durkan described the shooting as "barbaric" and said RAAD had "no support" in the city.

"What are they going to do next?" Coyle said in an interview for the BBC current affairs programme, *Spotlight* after leaving hospital in a wheelchair. "You

can buy legal highs over the internet, so are they going to start shooting postmen for delivering it?"

RAAD responded by saying Coyle and other legal high sellers in the city had been warned, through leaflets handed out in pubs and personal visits to shops, to desist in "the hope moral thinking would prevail". Coyle denied he had been warned by anyone. What is for certain is that RAAD published a statement in the *Derry Journal* in December ordering head shop owners to remove all legal highs and drugs paraphernalia by Christmas.

Coyle is one of at least 15 victims of paramilitary style shootings carried out by RAAD in the space of 20 months. In addition to the shootings, RAAD has also claimed responsibility for a wave of threats, banishments, beatings, pipe bomb attacks and arson attacks against alleged drug dealers and their families since it began its campaign of violence last April.

The attacks have led police to ask judges to withhold the names of all drug suspects who appear in Derry's courts – because the gunmen were

finding potential targets by sifting through court reports in the press. In one example, three men were charged with possessing cocaine on a Monday and on the following Friday night, two of them were shot.

RAAD's activity comes alongside a resurgence of anti-drug dealer shootings by a number of dissident Republican groups in both Northern Ireland and across the border in the Republic. The Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) claimed responsibility for the murder of alleged Derry cocaine dealer Jim McConnell at his home in the Waterside area of the city in February last year.

The Real IRA admitted executing Gerard 'Topper' Staunton in Cork in January, as well as one of its own members, 31-year-old Kieran Doherty in February.

Doherty was abducted, stripped, shot in the head and dumped in a field after a Real IRA 'court martial' decided he was linked to a large cannabis factory uncovered by police in County Donegal. Hundreds of people attended a trade union-organised rally in protest against the killing.

In its latest report last November, the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC), the body responsible for monitoring paramilitary activity, warned of the "growth of vigilante organisations which claim to want to clean-up anti-social behaviour". The report said these groups – which also included Belfast's Concerned Families Against Drugs (CFAD), were "a factor behind the increase in the number of attacks in some nationalist areas".

"Our objectives are very simple," revealed the leadership of RAAD in an interview last August in the *Derry Journal*. "We are determined to rid the local community of these individuals. We view them as career criminals whose activities have ruined the lives of so many young people in the past and we're not prepared to tolerate that any longer.

"We have been involved in several operations, with active service units punishing those we know are involved in dealing drugs to vulnerable members of the community in Derry. Other dealers have been told to leave the city and never return – or suffer the consequences."

In March the paper featured on its front page an Al-Qaeda style image of a blindfolded father and son being paraded by masked RAAD members. The father and son, caught during what RAAD called "a major intelligence gathering exercise", had admitted being involved in a cocaine dealing operation but were

spared because they came forward to admit their guilt.

The targeting of drug dealers by paramilitaries in Northern Ireland is nothing new. Although dealers in Northern Ireland had for several years, up until last year, been able to operate with little fear of getting shot, RAAD is seen as a copycat of a group that terrorised drug dealers in Northern Ireland over a decade ago.

Barely a year after the IRA announced a ceasefire in 1994, a group calling itself Direct Action Against Drugs (DAAD) now widely known to be a front for the Provisional IRA – assassinated its first victim, drug dealer Mickey "Moneybags" Mooney in a Belfast pub in 1995. Then followed a rash of drug dealer beatings, banishments and 15 killings culminating in the killing of Paul 'King Coke' Daly in front of his wife and 11-year-old daughter in 2002.

Now, it appears, the ghost of DAAD has returned. Indeed, it is widely known on the streets of Derry that RAAD, which has around a dozen active members, is headed-up by two former Provisional IRA figures. However the group says it has no political agenda.

IF THEY ARE MOVED ON WITH A BASEBALL BAT, THEN I'M NOT GOING TO SHED ANY CROCODILE TEARS ABOUT IT, AND THAT IS THE SAME FOR MOST PEOPLE IN THIS COMMUNITY

Despite the widespread distrust towards drug dealers in towns and cities across the UK – fuelled by a wealth of made-up scare stories about them courtesy of the media and politicians – it is hard for outsiders to understand why, in Northern Ireland, they are chased down and maimed like foxes during hunting season.

While drug dealers in Manchester and Nottingham are gunned down by their



rivals, in Derry and Belfast – cities with significantly lower rates of recreational and problem drug use than most parts of the UK – they are more likely to be killed, kneecapped or bombed by vigilantes on a moral crusade.

What is it that makes drug dealers suitable targets for dissident Republican groups looking to garner support from the community? And how much backing do they have within the predominantly working class communities in which this unofficial war against dealers is played out?

"In general no-one, be they dissident or any other group, will lose any support for shooting drug dealers," says Eamonn MacDermott, a Derry-based journalist and former Republican prisoner. "After a shooting you will get the usual politicians trotting out the usual condemnations, but little real condemnation from ordinary people. Within communities here drug dealers would be seen as pretty low on the grand scheme of things."

One Derry-based drug worker, who did not want to be identified because dealers who have been threatened by the paramilitaries sometimes come to him for help, told *Druglink* that Northern Ireland's attitude to drugs and drug dealers is influenced by a healthy dose of Catholic and Presbyterian fundamentalism.

"RAAD is vying with other groups to kneecap dealers. Even across religious borders, the fact that drugs are immoral

UPSURGE IN VIOLENCE

AT least 15 people have been shot and wounded by the dissident group Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD) in Derry in the past 20 months. Below are some of the incidents that police are investigating and which have been either claimed by or attributed to RAAD:

April 19, 2010: A pipe bomb explodes outside the home of a family of seven in the middle class Spruce Meadows area of Derry. The front of the house is badly damaged and no one is injured but RAAD promise to execute their target

February 23, 2010: A 29-year-old man is shot in both legs after being summoned to Central Drive in Creggan.

January 27, 2010: Local businessman Ray Coyle is shot three times in the legs after a gunman entered his Waterloo Place store Red

Star where he was selling so-called 'legal highs'.

November 24, 2009: A pipe bomb detonated at the front of a terraced house in Glengallaigh Park, blowing out the living room windows and damaging a car. The male occupant was not at home and no-one was injured.

November 3, 2009: Alleged dealer Tony Dalzell, 23, was shot in the legs five times as his 14-year-old sister and her friends were held at gunpoint at their home in the Creggan area of Derry.

October 7, 2009: A 27-year-old is shot in the foot at Meenan Square after being abducted from his home at Bluebell Hill Gardens in front of his nine-year-old son.

September 25, 2009: Three masked men burst into a house at Auglish Court and order a 18-year-old to lie on

the ground before shooting him in the left leg.

September 9, 2009: A man is shot five times, sustaining wounds to both legs when he is shot at a house at Drumard Park.

August 2009: Three masked men enter a house at Melmore Gardens in the Creggan area and start shooting a man as he watches the Big Brother programme. Around the same time a second man in Creggan Heights is shot three times in the left leg when a group of men break into his home.

April 2009: A man in his 40s is shot in the legs in Tyrconnell Street in the Bogside.

April 2009: Four men enter a house in Creggan Heights and open fire on a 26-year-old man He sustained wounds to his left ankle, knee and thigh.

October 2008: A man is shot outside a shop at Meenan Square.

is a thing they would agree on. Drug dealers are on a par with paedophiles here," he says.

"This attitude stems from the religious make up of the area and the fact that many communities in Northern Ireland are still very parochial – there is a big community feeling and people know everyone.

"But sometimes it is difficult to get across to people that there is a difference between drug dealers and drug users. With user-dealers it's a fine line."

MacDermott points out that drug users and dealers have traditionally been viewed as the soft underbelly of Republican communities. "This is not in the main a moralistic attitude, more a hardened pragmatic one born out of experience. Drug dealers have always been seen as a cause for concern because they are potential informers who are vulnerable to blackmail by the police."

The brutal nature of life during the Troubles are a key factor in Northern Ireland's treatment of drug dealers. And it is the historic distrust of Northern Ireland's police force – formerly known as the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) – that has paved the way for vigilantism in the region.

"We are living in a society which for the last 30 to 40 years has rejected the state – and policing is part of that," says Thomas McCourt, manager of the Rosemount Resource Centre, a

community project in Creggan.

"As a result, the community evolved its own method of policing in conjunction with paramilitary groups. In many ways it's brutal, but it's also effective. There is a stance that if people come into our community and sell drugs like heroin then we will sort them out. If they are moved on with a baseball bat, then I'm not going to shed any crocodile tears about it, and that is the same for most people in this community."

Unlike many other communities where the only choice is to wait for the police to do something, communities here can, due to their experience of the Troubles, turn to others to deal with this problem.

"Republicans know there is hostility and little sympathy for drug dealers in their areas and attacking them is a good and simple way of demonstrating their power. People who would not normally approve of punishment shootings say 'that guy was a drug dealer, I've got no sympathy for him'."

The resurgence in attacks comes at a time when the Republican communities in Northern Ireland are divided between support for Sinn Fein and for dissident groups such as the Real IRA and the INLA, who view the anti-drugs violence as a means of driving up support and for sticking two fingers up to one of Derry's most famous sons, Martin McGuinness, the former IRA leader and

now deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. And despite the fact the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is making inroads into communities that have for decades shut them out, it is thought a feeling of powerlessness among communities has left room for the vigilantes.

It is the feeling of powerlessness, says McCourt, and the fact that communities are driven into a corner by what he sees as woefully inadequate financial assistance from the state, that has given the vigilantes' methods both urgency and validity.

"On the one hand, violence isn't the way to deal with social problems. And as a human being, you would say, 'morally I am opposed to violence'. But on the other hand, if you have no resources targeted at social issues like drugs, such as proper policing, sentencing, educational programmes, social services and health services, you leave a vacuum, and RAAD have come into that vacuum."

Resentment that they are being neglected by the authorities has led to a breaching of traditional religious divides. In March, representatives from the Rosemount Resource Centre, including McCourt, travelled over Derry's physical and mental barrier, the River Foyle, from the largely Republican Derryside area to attend a community group meeting in the city's Loyalist-dominated Waterside area.

"We are different communities but we have the same problems," says McCourt. "It's taken on a bit of momentum. Both communities are vociferous about the need to tackle the lack of resources and anti-social behaviour, drugs and all issues that effect working class families in Derry."

McCourt says the meeting, in April, was attended by individuals associated with the loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). A week later, representatives of loyalist community groups, reciprocated the visit, to sit alongside Rosemount affiliates.

The running of the Rosemount Resource Centre, which holds support projects for groups such as young people, parents and the elderly, is part-funded by Northern Ireland's Department for Social Development (DSD).

But McCourt says that although deprived zones such as Creggan have been designated neighbourhood renewal areas by the DSD, little money has been made available by other departments, such as housing and social services, to

turn plans into action.

McCourt says it is telling that the only support that a new group for parents of children with drug problems could muster was from the Irish Republican Socialist Party.

"So we have action plans, but no programmes. At the same time we hear that Northern Ireland's police service is getting an £800m budget for this coming year. What about us?"

Chief Superintendent Stephen Martin, who commands Northern Ireland's north west district, told *Druglink* that to date three people have been charged with offences connected to vigilante related violence in Derry.

He said: "The people who carry out these vicious and cowardly attacks call themselves RAAD. They are gangsters and common criminals who claim they are acting on behalf of the community. Their actions show complete disregard for the community they claim to protect. They act as judge and jury and then callously hand out their form of barbaric justice

"We provide the only legitimate policing service to the people of Northern Ireland. Any right thinking person accepts that and will co-operate with the police. To pursue any other agenda, using violence and intimidation, has nothing to do with justice. The misuse of illegal drugs is a major priority for the police just as it is for the community. We will continue to pursue drug dealers with the co-operation of local people and seek to bring them before the courts. There is no alternative in a civilized society."

But as a new batch of legal highs follow in mephedrone's example, offering an alternative to traditional street dealing, McCourt says it will not change the attitude of working class people in Derry. "Whether drugs are legal or not legal, or who is selling them, it doesn't change people's attitude: they are drugs. It is a poison that shouldn't be sold. Some ask, 'how can we stop these drugs being sold over the internet?' You can't, but what you can do is police your own streets."

'ERADICATING THE DRUG SCOURGE'

The Republican Action Against Drugs leadership outlines its violent manifesto in an exclusive interview with the *Derry Journal* in March

"We will continue to take action against dealers and, as it stands at the moment, two members of the community [names supplied] have been told that, should they return to Derry, they will be shot on sight.

"We have learned over the past year that the drug problem in this community has reached an all-time high. You can get anything you require including crystal meth and heroin which concerns us greatly.

"We have intelligence units in position throughout the Derry area and we now believe we are involved in a battle against ruthless individuals who have no respect or loyalty to the very community in which they have been reared.

"Our only aim is to eliminate drug dealers from our society and put an end to them destroying our community. Our only concern is to end the threat posed by the supply of both illegal and prescription drugs, a threat which has already claimed the lives of a number of young people, ruined other lives and torn many families apart.

"It's been made abundantly clear to us that the various organisations charged with dealing with this problem have consistently failed in their efforts to bring the scourge of drug dealing under control."

"You can get any type of drug in almost any public bar or nightclub in Derry – make no mistake about that," added another of the RAAD spokesmen. "This community is under threat. Working class areas in Derry are in turmoil due to drug abuse among our young people and, yet, no one seems to be tackling a problem that is so obviously getting out of control.

"We have interviewed so many people whose heads 'are fried' due to drugs. Their minds are so 'messed up' it is unbelievable and it all comes down to those career criminals who enter the community to sell their wares for which they receive vast sums of money. Derry has two, possibly more, 20-year-old millionaires due to their involvement in selling drugs.

"There are also houses in a number of areas in Derry operating as unlicensed pharmacies – actually dispensing prescription drugs to those who are prepared to come and pay for

them. Those hooked on drugs have now no shortage of outlets to turn to when seeking a fix.

"The drug situation has got totally out of control and unless action is taken – as we have done and will continue to do – then there's no hope for the next generation," RAAD claimed.

"We would never act unless we hold undeniable evidence that the person punished has been dealing in drugs. We regularly compile information on certain individuals – including CCTV footage, statements from those who have received drugs from these people etc – and then take action, not before.

"Members of the Creggan community have approached us appealing for us to take action. Information has been supplied, our units have witnessed dealing taking place and we've acted accordingly.

"We do not have any issues with drug abusers. They are in a very sorry state and, in more cases than not, are members of the working class. It's pitiful to witness them destroy their own lives and the lives of their families.

"Therefore, the only way to alleviate this problem is to remove the dealers, those who peddle death within the community."