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Historically in Ireland, poverty was a visible, tangible thing that undeniably existed and could be easily identified in our midst. However as Ireland has prospered over the past two decades, the widespread signs of economic strain and hardship have been replaced by the outwards signs of an affluent society.

Standards of living have improved across the board and for many what were previously rare luxuries have become the norm. In this better off society, being able to afford a certain lifestyle is a key indicator of success and belonging. Those that haven’t kept pace are in a minority, and people are increasingly judged by what they have or haven’t got.

Thankfully, as the economy has grown, poverty levels have fallen. Today, unemployment is no longer the biggest cause of poverty as it was in the early 1990’s, and economic growth has presented many people with the chance to escape from poverty and social exclusion.

However, that doesn’t make it easier for the 290,000 people (7 per cent of the population) who struggle to make ends meet on a daily basis, and who still live in conditions that were barely acceptable a quarter of a century ago. For them, poverty not only means the absence of basic necessities, it also means being stigmatised and condemned for being poor. Society rarely acknowledges the structural inequalities that hold people back and prevent them from improving their lot. It’s much easier to assume that those who are poor in this new Ireland are in some way themselves to blame.

Despite the statistics, the existence of poverty is constantly questioned. This is not surprising when our understanding of poverty is drawn from starving children in the developing world or the experiences of our ancestors in the early 19th century.

Yet this misses the point. In any society, people who are unable to achieve the standards considered the norm by the majority will be alienated and discriminated against. This can have long term consequences for people’s health, educational outcomes and employment prospects. It also affects their ability to participate fully in society. Unless poverty is understood in relation to prevailing living standards and appropriate action is taken, people will continue to
be marginalised and prevented from reaching their full potential, which in turn will undermine Ireland’s long-term social and economic development.

The stories in this book provide a rare and valuable insight into the day to day lives of people across the country who, despite the boom, have not prospered in modern Ireland. Their experiences are by no means unique — each story can be directly linked to a number of structural issues that pre-dispose large groups of people to poverty — educational disadvantage, discrimination, rural isolation, health inequalities. What is unique about these people is their willingness to share their stories. In doing so, they help us to understand the poverty challenge in 21st century Ireland and mobilise actors towards the necessary policy changes. We are grateful to them for their contribution to this book.

We also thank Susan McKay and Derek Speirs who have effectively captured the human side of poverty in Ireland today through their narrative and photographs.

**Combat Poverty Agency**

Combat Poverty is a state agency which advises the Government on policies to tackle poverty in Ireland. One of its statutory duties is to raise public awareness of the nature, causes and extent of poverty in Ireland, and solutions to poverty.
In today’s brash and wealthy Ireland, many people harbour the view that those who are poor have only themselves to blame. They point to low unemployment and the fact that there is plenty of work for immigrants, without whom our shops and restaurants and hotels would, it appears, have to close. There are signs up all over the place: “Staff wanted.” Sometimes “good English” is all that is asked for, and sometimes, obviously, employers settle for less.

Working people who struggle with long daily commutes from distant suburbs, and who juggle huge childcare bills and a mortgage that threatens to overwhelm them next time interest rates go up, may resent those who are supported by the state. Workers on low pay who just about manage to keep their heads above water may have little patience with those who don’t. They may see them as chancers who have no right to expect society to look after them. Some people are particularly resentful of the poor who have come to Ireland from other countries.

Irish society is highly segregated, and becoming more so. The very rich are in their mansions, or living a good part of the year abroad, avoiding the taxes that might pay for better social services back home. “Exclusive housing developments” stand well back from the estates where those at risk of poverty live. In gated middle class estates, burglar alarms drive people demented day and night. The building of “social housing” is resisted.

In the countryside, small, unviable farms disappear behind forestry and even the postman has little occasion to visit the old man who still lives in the small house where he was born. Meanwhile villages and small towns fill up with “townhouses” owned by urban investors. Everywhere, houses get cheaper the closer they are to the local “rough” estate.
People who work and cope have little contact then, with those for whom ends just won’t meet. If they are dismissive of their plight, it does not mean that Irish people have become hard-hearted - though some of those most driven by the need to succeed and to be seen to succeed, certainly have. It is more that we don’t know enough about why individuals in an affluent society fail to prosper, and we do not seem to have the time to care.

Poverty is not a lifestyle choice. Nor is it just about how much money a person has or can get – it is about that person’s relationship to the rest of society. While fewer people live in consistent poverty in Ireland today than ten or twenty or fifty years ago, some groups are still likely to be marginalised. They include the homeless, people with disabilities, the elderly, small farmers and lone parents.

Poverty is relative. Access to wealth for a majority of people can leave the minority more acutely excluded. If nine out of ten people living in a village have a car, there will be no pressure on the authorities to provide a public transport service and local shops may close as people drive to town to buy their supplies. The one in ten people with no car are left stranded. If most children in a class at school have access to a computer at home, the child whose family doesn’t have one is left out and likely to fall behind.

Poverty is a condition in which people get trapped, often because of a combination of factors, particular to their own lives, and over which they have little control. Each person living with disadvantage has their own story. That is why we have compiled this book. The people you will read about and see here will give you an uncomfortable insight into the situations of some of our fellow citizens who could, like the homeless Michael, honestly declare, “Celtic Tiger, my backside.”

It wasn’t easy to find people who were willing to be photographed and to talk frankly about what it is like to be poor in Ireland today. When there is an overarching phenomenon like high unemployment, there may be a sense of solidarity and communal anger. Campaigns flourish. Today some who have not prospered feel a stigma about their situation, others have just got weary struggling and have given up in despair.
The middle aged men who left as emigrants when hard times were endemic here may return to find they haven’t the means or the skills to make a new start and that few people seem to care. As one man put it, “the men at the top don’t believe there are disadvantaged men” and don’t feel any need to provide for them. Such men become “literally a silent people”.

There is apathy too. For many Travellers, for example, things have been so bad for so long that an attitude of hopelessness and dependency has descended, expressing itself in a shrug of the shoulders and a “what can you do?” A lack of investment in hostels, social housing and social services means that homeless people are thrown into conflict with one another, and, dangerously, with homeless people who have come into Ireland from other countries.

Lone parents get caught in poverty traps. It is hard to get by without work, but if you try to get training or to take up a job, you risk losing some of the elements that make up the slender means you already have. Sorting it out is complicated. Highly skilled people with a disability are left unemployed because, as Michelle told us, too many employers “only see the wheelchair” and not the person.

There are whole places which have been left behind, where traditional industries have declined and nothing has been done to replace them or to retrain local workers for new jobs. Donegal has four times the national average rate of unemployment and the highest rate of poverty in the country. “We might as well be in Iceland, for all the government cares,” according to Gerry, who used to work in the fishing industry before its disastrous decline.

There are places which have got such a “bad name” for criminality and lawlessness that the people who live there become tainted by association. No good is expected of them. “They shouldn’t make out everyone is the same,” said one of the young people we spoke to us in Moyross in Limerick. There are also places like O’Devaney Gardens in Dublin which are afflicted by the hangover from decades of poverty, where addiction to alcohol and heroin has passed from generation to generation, and the only variation today is that cocaine has come along. Crime and violence inevitably accompany drugs. Everyone living in such places suffers.
The gombeen man and the rack-renting landlord are alive and well in prosperous Ireland, as some of those who have come into Ireland as immigrant workers have found. Piotr and Bernadette’s story is shameful. They were exploited and bullied by a local ‘pillar of society’ who tried to bribe them into leaving the country once Piotr had tackled him with the help of a trade union.

Things would be a lot worse but for the many excellent self help and community groups which now exist around Ireland. Many of them were set up in far worse times, their continued existence a measure of continuing need. Some of them struggle with tiny budgets, others get substantial state support. We met some of the people we interviewed and photographed through organisations like Trust and Prosper Fingal and Parents Alone. There are fine initiatives like the Department of Justice’s Céim ar Chéim in Limerick. Much is being done to help people gain the confidence and sense of self worth they need to change their situation.

Still. As some of the stories in this book show, it can take exceptional courage for individuals who are disadvantaged to keep on fighting for a good life in Ireland today. As one of the wealthiest nations around, we could afford to do so much more.

Combat Poverty and other agencies have already identified persistent problems. They have also made well researched proposals which, if implemented, could make a real difference. There are still too many people in this self congratulatory little country of ours who have to talk, like Michelle, about fighting yet another battle to get things as fundamental as a job and a place to live. And too many people like Sharon, who says of her dream for a better life: “All I would want is just not to constantly worry, worry, worry.”

The Government has given a commitment to end poverty in the next two decades. If we are to achieve this goal, it will require not only a series of initiatives and technical schemes. It will also require us to understand the lives and misfortunes of those who suffer poverty. If we no longer think of an amorphous ‘poor’ and begin to consider individual stories, it becomes possible to react in a more meaningful and human way. This book stands in the belief that if we listen to voices like these, things may begin to change. That will be better for all of us.

Susan McKay
Tina

“The Corporation admits the place isn’t fit to live in,” says Tina, as she runs her hand over a new bloom of mould on the bedroom wall her partner, David, only painted a couple of months ago. “We all sleep in this room but in the winter we have to sleep in the living room. The whole place is due to be demolished, so they won’t come out and fix anything, but I’m here 10 years and it could still be six years before I get moved.”

Tina and David live with their four children in a two bedroom flat in one of the big grey blocks at O’Devaney Gardens off Dublin’s North Circular Road. Plenty of houses in the surrounding streets sell to young professionals, but they get cheaper the closer they are to the flats. As we park, someone shouts from a balcony, “Don’t leave your car unlocked.”

Tina’s baby, Calum is 6 months old, Joshua is 3, Katie is 9 and David is 10. While we talk, Katie plays with Calum on the concrete walkway outside the flat. Both Calum and Joshua had to be weaned off methadone – Tina is a former heroin addict and she is on a methadone maintenance programme “for life.”

“I started smoking hash when I was 12, heroin when I was 17,” she says. She left school at 15. “Half the flats round here the people are alcoholics or on drugs. My ma was an alcoholic and so was her ma, and my stepdad died of alcoholism as well when I was 12. I never knew my real Da. He was a drinker, too. I can’t stand drink.”

“You take drugs to forget all the shit that goes on. I’ve lost between 10 and
15 friends to heroin. If Dave had been on drugs, the kids would have been fucked.

I know people whose kids are in care because of drugs. A friend of mine died and she had four children and now they are in care and the youngest is only a baby.

“I’m on anti-depressants and so is Dave. He had to give up his job because of depression. I was on a FÁS scheme for a while, packing bags in a supermarket, working in a fish factory, working with kids in the flats. But then they pulled that programme out of here. I’d like to go back to school.”

“When I was growing up a load of the local kids had the virus (HIV). I got clean when I was 21 and we moved to a bedsit for 2 years. Then we came back and I got strung out again. I started hanging round with my old friends. They used to be saying, ‘You think you are better than us.’”

Tina is 28 now and has been off heroin since she was 21. “I still get urges. It never really goes away. Cocaine is the worst thing round here now,” she says. “Some of them snort it and some of them bang it up. Those fellas that watched you coming in, they’re angry because there was a big bust here a couple of days ago. They’ll be wanting to know who you are and what we’re talking about. I could go out there now and be back in five minutes with cocaine, guaranteed. It is a more aggressive drug. They look down on heroin users. You can sense it off them.”

“I’ve had letters from doctors advising that the children shouldn’t live here, but I think my letters just got lost in the system. Joe Costello and Tony Gregory are the two politicians that help the people round here.”

“The doctors say we won’t get over the depression til we get out of here. The Corporation offered us a place in St Michael’s House in Inchicore – I said, ‘You must be joking. Would you bring up your kids there? I used to go there to score!’ I want to live somewhere with less drugs and that you aren’t afraid to let your children out to play.”

Every second day, Tina goes down to the Corporation offices in the city centre. “All the homeless people just sit there every day with prams and kids. There’s 6,000 on the waiting list. You get a number. It could be 203, and then you go up to the hatch and they say, “No.”
Helen and Biddie

“Our names are down ten years for a house. Imagine that. I’ve 12 children reared in two caravans and now I’m sick. I’ve arthritis and high blood pressure. I feel I need a house. I’d sooner a house than a caravan. There is more comfort. You have a bathroom. I’ve to go outside to go to the toilet and the shower hasn’t worked for years, so I’ve to go down to my daughter’s for a bath.”

Helen

Helen Stokes lives with her husband, Martin, on the St. Margaret’s Halting Site near Ballymun in Dublin.

Many of her large family live nearby, some of them in recently built houses on the site. She is lonely though. She says Martin is out a lot. “He’s gone from 3 in the afternoon til midnight,” she says.

She grew up in Leitrim. “It was hard in those days. You lived in tents and all. We don’t go anywhere now. There’s nowhere to go.” Her caravan is small and draughty and old. She says she has been told she hasn’t got enough points to be allocated a house. “This is a good site but there is nothing to beat a house,” she says. “But what can you do? Only wait.”

Biddie McDonagh lives on the same site, in a much larger caravan, with her husband and 7 children. “I was on an unofficial site across the road, but the land was being taken over so I moved in here 7 months ago,” she says. “I was five weeks with no electricity. The place was a mess. They said they’d fix everything but they didn’t. We only got the hot water today after 4 months. You have to complain all the time to get anything done. But what can you do?” She shrugs.
It is a big improvement, though, on the site she was on before, which had no electricity and no hot water. “I’m from down the country but I was mostly reared in Dublin,” says Biddie. “I never went to school. We were always travelling. I got married when I was 16 and had my first child when I was 17.”

She is 32 now. Her own children will all go to school. The family doesn’t travel. She says she doesn’t know if she’d like to live in a house. “I’ve always lived in caravans.” Her daughters Bridget (11) and Winnie (12) are busy cleaning the caravan, mopping floors and polishing china. Bridget says she’ll stay at school until she is 17.

“Then I’ll get married and have children,” she says. Winnie says she doesn’t know what she will do when she is older. “I wouldn’t mind going to England,” she says.

Their mother says she is “happy enough” with life in St Margaret’s. “I’ve no more choice, anyways,” she says. “I’ve nowhere else to go. My husband is on the dole. None of us works. What can you do?”

Biddie McDonagh with her children and niece:
St. Margarets Travellers Site, Ballymun.
“This is meant to be one of Europe’s premier fishing ports,” says Gerry. “And look at it.” It is a fine, spring day and the sea is calm, but at the harbour at Killybegs in Co Donegal the fishing boats are moored and idle. “The mackerel season is just over. It used to last from September until April. This town boomed through the winter. You could make enough money on the mackerel to last you through the summer. This year I got just 13 days work out of it,” says Gerry.

He was born in 1970 in London, his parents Donegal people who had emigrated in the sixties. “We came back here in the seventies because it was picking up,” he says. “My father made a good living in the fish factories and then in transport. He was laid off a couple of months ago and signed on for the first time since 1973.”

The company Gerry worked for collapsed a couple of years ago and Gerry has been on and off the dole since. This year he has secured a few months work on the Corrib gas pipeline for the summer. After that, he’ll have to see if anything comes up. He has moved back in with his parents as he can’t afford to rent his own place, and getting a mortgage is out of the question.

“I left school at 16 with no qualifications,” he says. “A brave lot left before me. There was plenty of work, plenty of money to be made. You could just walk into a job. There was a vibrant fishing fleet – it was the life blood of the town, the only industry.” He worked in the fish factories, then in a cannery, and then with a transport company as a forklift driver. “I was very happy – I loved work,”
he says. "I worked as many hours as were going, and that was plenty".

Gerry blames "greed and bad management" for the collapse of the fishing industry. In the absence of regulations, fortunes were made by a few but there was over-fishing and a lack of investment in re-stocking. When Ireland joined the EU, the fishing industry was bartered to get a better deal for farmers. Local factory owners claim that a heavy handed implementation of EU regulations has compounded the problems.

“I don’t know much about the politics,” says Gerry. “I only know the boats are landing in Spain and Scotland and Norway and not here. People are left here with skills that are no good outside a fishing port, like netmaking and hand filleting. We might as well be in Iceland for all the government cares.

If the government had looked after the industry it wouldn’t have gone wrong, but it is too late now. I don’t think this town will ever recover. It is too far gone. There was no second industry here. It isn’t just the people in Killybegs that are affected. There used to come buses from Dungloe and the Rosses. Those men have all lost out too.” Plenty of people have left Killybegs, taking the old emigrant routes to England and America. Buses depart from the pier for Dublin on Sunday nights. One local councillor says Dublin has become the new Kilburn. A lot of local men are now working on the building sites in the city.

“If you look in the Donegal Democrat you see half the local football team is going off to Australia or America. You don’t realise how empty the town has got til Christmas when people come home,” Gerry says. “One man I know, a fitter, has gone back to London. He’s getting work doing maintenance on offices. He’s nearly 60, a bit long in the tooth for that life.”

Gerry doesn’t know yet what he’ll do in the longer term. He got a job as a night watchman at a local hotel, but hated it. "I just got depressed and the pay was minimum wage,” he says. “I couldn’t stick it. I lasted four months. By then, I was suicidal.”

Many of the jobs in the tourism industry are now taken by East Europeans. A lot of tourists in Donegal
are Northerners with holiday homes in any case. "They bring their food and drink in the boot of the car," Gerry says. Several pubs and restaurants in the town have closed, and there are plenty of "for sale" signs around.

Last year, Combat Poverty research revealed that Donegal has the highest rate of consistent poverty in the country, twice as high as the national average. At 17%, its rate of unemployment is four times the national average. Since 1998, 6,000 jobs have been lost in the county, including many in the textiles industry. Last year’s closure of a pharmaceutical company in Donegal town was another blow.

Gerry has his own regrets. "When things were good here in the 80’s and 90’s we just squandered it," he says. "We tried to live the George Best lifestyle. We never thought it would run out. It gets you down but you train yourself not to think of it. There’s not a lot you can do about it. There was maybe a thousand people in the same boat as me at the end of the mackerel season there. I get bits and pieces. I just work from day to day. Who knows what is around the corner?"
“All I would want is just not to constantly worry, worry, worry,” says Sharon. “Everything that comes up – where are you going to get the money? Financially, my situation is just desperate. I pay my bills, I can’t buy my messages. If I buy my messages, I can’t pay my bills. I save in the Credit Union. Only for it, I’d have nothing. And I have a good family. They help me out if I’m in trouble. My ma lent me money for the TV.” She nods at the big plasma screen in the corner.

“I know plenty of girls don’t have that support.” Sharon is the mother of three boys, Robert (16), Sean (13) and Jamie (4).

The family lives in a local authority house in a vast estate in Coolock. Sharon has just started college – she is training to be an interpreter for the deaf at Trinity College, Dublin, the first of her family to go to university. “Robert and Sean are both deaf. I’ve always had the goal of getting a career.

“I was only 16 when I left school. My mother let me. She was never educated herself. I remember crying in school because I was the only one with no books. She couldn’t afford them. My father was a drinker. I worked in Pizzaland. I met my first partner and I was pregnant when I was 17.” She split up with her partner when Sean was one year old. “I was 21 and I had two deaf children. I’ve supported them all these years on my own.”

She is able to detail every euro of her income and her outgoings. She has had major battles with social workers and social welfare officers and school authorities over small but crucial sums of money. Her carer’s allowance for looking
after the older boys was more than the lone parent’s allowance – a critical issue when she took a job which meant the loss of the former.

“It took them a year to decide – that was a terrible time, very depressing. I was in a trap I couldn’t get out of. I did a community employment scheme but I couldn’t save a penny. I decided I needed to get a career. Four years ago I wanted to go to college but then I found out I was pregnant.”

She has since split up with Jamie’s father, her partner for 8 years, and has a barring order against him. “I waited til Jamie was old enough to go to school, and when I applied to Trinity I said, if I got in, I’d stick it out.”

She got in, but faced a new set of hurdles when she set about finding an after-school. “Eventually I found one but it was €120 a week – I couldn’t do it.” She went to social welfare for help. They referred her to a social worker, and then turned her down. She appealed, and eventually got the decision reversed. She also got a grant for returning to third level education from Dublin Corporation.

“You want to see what you have to do, the forms you have to fill out, the documents you have to produce – your P45, your P60, your ESB bill, your P22,” she says. “The slightest little piece of misinformation and they keep sending it all back to you.”

She says she would never have known about any of the grants and schemes she has availed of over the years if, around 10 years ago, her doctor hadn’t referred her to Parents Alone. “We were living in the maisonettes. One of the boys was sick and I hadn’t been out for three weeks. The doctor gave me a leaflet. They have been great. I did a self development course and they paid my childcare. They take you away on weekends. They tell you what you are entitled to and they help you to fight for it.”

After she pays her bills, she has €100 a week to spend. “You just can’t have any kind of a life. A pizza for the kids costs €22. It is €10 for scouts, and €10 for me to go to Weightwatchers. I’ve to pay back
€12 a month to the Corporation for my Weatherglaze windows. Getting the boys runners is a big deal. I borrow and I pay back when I get my children’s allowance. I have to watch every penny – I can’t afford to be stupid with my money.”

She is finding college hard. “I’m writing 2,000 word assessments after 19 years out of education. It is so hard it isn’t really enjoyable but I love the sign language part of it, and I will get a good job at the end of it.” Jamie passionately kisses his Manchester United Easter egg, then drapes himself round Sharon’s neck. Sean comes in reluctantly to be photographed, wanting to be off to football practice instead. But she signs to him that she’d like him to do it and he shrugs and agrees.

“It is hard to be a mother and father in one, and I think it would be good for the boys to have a father, but I suppose it is better to have one good parent. I do think fathers should be obliged by law to support their children, and the government should do more.

“My older boys are teenagers – I am constantly giving out to them. They say, ‘Ma, you never stop moaning.’ I worry about them, and I worry about Jamie. There is a lot of drugs around here. There is a lot of violence. There are ones come out of the nightclubs and they are killing each other. I got this house on medical grounds because the boys are deaf,” she says. “I was in the shopping centre one day and this woman passed a remark that lone parents get everything.”

Sharon shakes her head.
Philip Cullen

Phillip Cullen is in his fifties. He has no job and he lives alone in a rural house that has no indoor toilet. But he’s not complaining. “I suppose you can’t really expect much,” he says. “This was always a quiet sort of a place. He is one of the men taking part in the North Leitrim Men’s Group, a FÁS scheme run in the border village of Kiltyclogher in Leitrim. When his time on the scheme finishes, he says he will, “just footer about.”

Pat Love, the co-ordinator of the group and one of its founders, ten years ago, says apathy is the biggest problem he faces in his work with the men. “A lot of single men are living in remote houses with no modern facilities and they don’t even know they are entitled to a medical card, let alone grants for essential repairs,” he says.

Pat persuaded Phillip out of his solitude a couple of years ago, and now he works on the scheme two and a half days a week. It was Pat who encouraged Phillip to apply for a grant to replace the rotten windows and doors on his old family home. It took months for the grant to be approved and the same amount of time again to find a builder willing to do the work, even after Phillip added in a big chunk of his own savings. “They make it hard for you. If I had known all about the hassle that would have been involved, I wouldn’t have bothered,” he says.

Phillip was born in Scotland to parents who had emigrated from Leitrim to Glasgow. His older sisters went to America as domestic workers. He came back with his parents to Kiltyclogher when he was 13 and went to school for a couple of years. “After that I went back
to Scotland. There was nothing about here at that time for young fellows, unless you were really well educated like a guard or a teacher,” he says.

He did an apprenticeship in mechanical engineering and worked in factories in Scotland and England. He couldn’t settle. “There was a lot of places closing. I had no job. I was getting a bit restless,” he says. “I had a notion to come back here.” He came back and cared for his elderly mother until she died several years ago.

If it wasn’t for the Men’s Group, he says he would probably sit up half the night and sleep all day. Pat says a lot of the men who come on the scheme live lonely lives. “There is a lot of depression, and a lot of heavy drinking. Some of the men, when you meet them first, don’t even speak. They are literally, a silent people. They have no confidence, no self esteem. You’ll get men who spend most of their small income on drink and cigarettes and they don’t eat proper food. If they do go to a doctor, they’ll get pills. “The scheme offers training, and encourages the men to develop life skills like cooking and taking care of yourself. Some of the men have small amounts of land, but Pat says the bureaucracy involved in farming is too much for many of them.

**Gerald Slevin** did the Men’s Group Course and at the end of it, when Pat suggested he apply for a job, he did. “I got an awful surprise when I was the one picked out of 9 or even 10 that went for it,” he says, proudly. He is now a maintenance worker with the Leitrim Partnership.

The Men’s Group was “a massive help,” he says. “It was the best of craic along with the bit of work.” Through making friends with other men on the course, he took to going to dances in Bundoran, and there he met Marie Murphy, with whom he now has a happy relationship.

Phillip did literacy and numeracy courses and did well. He says he feels better in himself when he is out at work, but he has no expectations of getting a
full time job. Nor has he the confidence to go looking elsewhere. "Going away is for a younger crowd. I’m getting on a bit. I’ll hardly move now," he says.

Pat says men like Phillip need special work programmes to build on the skills developed on the short term schemes. “Otherwise we are just raising expectations and then dashing them,” he says. You can only do three FÁS schemes before you are fifty, and three after. “A big part of the problem is that the men at the top don’t accept that there is such a thing as a vulnerable, disadvantaged man,” says Pat.
Moyross

“I don’t think Moyross is bad,” says 19 year old Lesley Gardiner. “It’s just some of the people living in it. I’d prefer to live here than anywhere else. If I get a good job I’ll move out, though. I’ve tried to go for jobs and people have said, no, and I think it’s when they hear you are from Moyross. I was angry, but I got over it. I don’t know what I’d like to do. I used to always play with Barbies so maybe a hairdresser.

“I didn’t like school one bit. I was always getting into fights with the teachers if I was late or I didn’t have my work done. Down here is different,” she says. Down here is the Céim ar Chéim project run by the Department of Justice and supported by FÁS and the VEC, in a small industrial estate on the edge of the large Moyross estate in Limerick.

It is an education centre for around 50 young people aged between 12 and 25. About 70% of them are referred by the probation board after they have got into trouble, mainly for what manager, Elaine Slattery calls, “minor anti-social activities.” Most are early school leavers. “I know a good few people left school early and half of them are on drugs or have babies,” says Lesley. “It is a pity they can’t take more in here.”

Moyross has a bad name, mainly because of brutal feuding which has led to shootings, including murders, the burning down of houses, and, in 2006, the serious injuries inflicted on two young
children after their mother’s car was set alight on the street. Before that, it had a bad name for mass unemployment. It has a drugs problem.

“I was in a school outside the area and some of the teachers didn’t like people from here,” says 19 year old William Meehan. “They say to you, ‘You’re not in Moyross now so shut up.’ Or they won’t say it in front of your face but they say it behind your back. In Limerick that happens all over. They think you are going to rob them. There are a lot of people from here that have been in jail.

“But everyone is different. They shouldn’t make out everyone is the same. Some people are easily led or they are friends with people that are involved in gangs and that. I’ve had friends got caught up that way - next thing someone gets shot and they want to kill the person that killed him. They think they are big men. I think it’s a load of shit. Innocent people have died because of that.

“Some parts of Moyross I wouldn’t live in. There’s all burnt out houses and rubbish and you’d be worried your kids would get dragged in and start fighting in feuds they didn’t even understand. I’d say there are worse estates in Dublin. I’ve lived here all my life and it was a good place to live and grow up in - there’s all weather pitches and a boxing club and soccer clubs and bands.”

William left school early but wants to do Leaving Cert at Céim ar Chéim. “I want to learn a trade, like plumbing. It is easier to work down here because the classes are smaller and the teachers are more like our friends. They don’t put you down.”

Sam Daly, who is 18, agrees with William that the gang culture attracts some of the local boys. “We were slagging someone one day and he turned round and said he was going to blow our heads off,” she says. “The lads love all that. They want to be seen to be big guys. They say they are involved in feuds and they don’t even need to have anything to do with it.”

Lesley Gardiner: Céim ar Chéim, Moyross.
For now, she goes to college five nights a week for five hours as a cleaner. She defends Moyross but says when it comes to setting up her own home, she’d never choose the area. “Too much drugs and then that leads to violence because people are robbing for money for drugs.” She blames Limerick bouncers for the street drinking scene in Moyross. “They turn us away because of where we’re from.”

Pamela Maher is 23. “People do things just to fit in,” she says. “There is a scene here of young people robbing cars and drinking from when they are about 13. There is a lot of drugs. People sell their mother’s tranquillisers, too. I never went to secondary school. I just didn’t bother. I’m after quieting down a lot since I came here. I’m getting counselling and I hope to get back happiness and the respect of my family.”

The parts of Moyross where the feuds have been at their most intense look like the parts of Belfast that had the worst of the Troubles. Burned out houses, bricked up windows, ugly, threatening graffiti. There are horses on the green in front of one such street. Elaine points at a wall. “Houses on the other side of that wall cost four or five times more than houses on this side,” she says.

Cars full of boys drive around, staring at us strangers. A tough looking young boy rides up on a horse. He looks like he is either 8 or 80. He tells us he is 17. He says he got thrown out of school two years before. He wants to get into Céim ar Chéim. He rides off down the street.

Six months after we met the young people, Elaine tells us they are doing well. Lesley is a full time trainee at a hairdressing academy. William has a full time job in industry. Sam is at Limerick Senior College training to be a special needs teaching assistant. Pamela is doing her Leaving Certificate. The boy on the horse is at Céim ar Chéim full time studying 14 subjects. Elaine says she could fill her quota of places many times over.
John Kearns

John was a small child when his family moved from St Michael’s estate in Inchicore to Tallaght. “We were in a big new estate with nothing in it for kids, no community centre or discos or sports or anything. The only shops were in vans. We all got into gangs. I started joyriding and sniffing solvents and shoplifting and all. I got locked up when I was 16.”

He spent four years in jail “learning more stuff” and came out to move rapidly through the gamut of drugs. “From hash to heroin, from heroin to cocaine, from cocaine to crack,” he says. “My family gave me loads of chances but I was stealing from them and everything and eventually they couldn’t brook me any more. They got rid of me. It got that my mother wouldn’t let me in when she’d see me at the door.”

He moved to England, ended up a crack addict in jail, but also discovered education. “I got a load of certificates and qualifications,” he said. But when he came back to Ireland he was homeless. “There’s nothing here for the homeless but drugs, drugs, drugs.” He lived on the streets and in squats. “You’d go into some filthy old place full of rats and you’d have to use your lighter to see, but you wouldn’t care. Junkies don’t care.”

Eventually, he decided to get off drugs. “I did it with the help of Amiens Street Treatment Centre, but mostly myself. You have to say ‘no’, and that is hard, but I did it,” he says. He is registered as homeless with Dublin Corporation this past 4 years but has been advised that the normal wait for a single man is up to 13 years. “What
is the Celtic Tiger? We never saw it. They aren’t building any new places for the homeless and now there are homeless people coming in as refugees and you have to queue for things and there is a lot of conflict building up – it is the Irish against everyone else.

“There is a lot of pressure. Meanwhile the landlords are taking it all through the B and B’s.” He is about to go back to college as a mature student, and to do social studies with a view to working as a counsellor with troubled young people.

“There’s a whole new generation of young homeless in this country now, boys, and girls as well. People get caught in a trap. I have all sorts of things now I never had before – like a passport and a credit union account. I used to feel so embarrassed and worthless. Now I try to keep myself decent. It is amazing to look back and see the years I’ve wasted. I’ve had a lot of hardship because of drug addiction. If only I had listened to my mother and father.”

He believes that if crack takes off in Ireland, we are all in for trouble. “Crack makes you feel invincible. You’ll do anything to get it. Everything in Ireland will have to be bolted down. It’ll wreck the place. It’ll go berserk.”

He likes Trust, and particularly values the fact that it is drugs free. As we leave, he is going for the bus to Tallaght. “My sister is in hospital and me and my Ma sit with her,” he says. He is reconciled with his family now, and determined not to blow it. “They are really glad for me that I have turned everything around. It is great,” he says.
Michelle

“They just see the chair – they don’t see the person,” says Michelle Gaynor, speaking of all the employers who have turned her down for jobs. “I went to the Central Remedial Clinic ‘til I was 18 and then I went to Killester College to do the NCVA in business studies. I wanted to get out and get qualifications. Now I have them, and no one will give me a chance.”

Michelle has cerebral palsy and is quadriplegic. As well as her qualifications, she has a car, a personal assistant, and a track record as a good worker on Community Employment Schemes.

“I am ready, able and willing to work,” she says. “But employers just won’t give us a chance. There’s hundreds, thousands of us out there. I’d say 99.9% of my close friends who have a disability are in the same boat.”

Her desire to work and be independent has so constantly been frustrated that she has been tempted to give up. “I was so determined to get out of the special education system and I did, but it seems no matter what you do, disabled people just can’t get jobs,” she says. “There are only so many courses you can do.”

“I’m involved in the Centre for Independent Living and it is a good organisation, but you feel you are banging your head on a wall. It is very hard to feel strong and positive all the time when you keep getting knocked back. You work your arse off and then you can’t get work. Sometimes you say, ‘What’s the point?’”

Michelle Gaynor: FADE, Balbriggan, Dublin.
Michelle would like to work in administration or some other sort of office work. “I can work independently on a computer,” she says.

She was a receptionist at Fingal Awareness of Disability and Equality in Balbriggan for 3 and a half years on a community employment scheme, and loved it. The rules on CE schemes mean she can’t reapply. She is still involved and is vice chair of the organisation now. “But it is voluntary, not paid,” she says.

She got an interview in one place, did well, and got a trial for a day. “It seemed to go well, but then I never heard from them again,” she says. “I don’t think that is fair. I don’t think they’d do that to an able bodied person.” Awareness is the big issue, she thinks. “People need to be more aware that a disability doesn’t stop someone from being good at things. We are just the same as everybody else.”

Getting by on €185 a week is hard going, and Michelle is paying off a car loan. “It was my choice to get a car, but I don’t regard it as a luxury,” she says. “I need it.”

Michelle has had a personal assistant for 10 years. Many other people are on long waiting lists for the service. “In Dublin alone there is a waiting list of 300,” she says. “Last year, only one person in Dublin got a PA. There just hasn’t been enough funding made available.”

Sometimes, Michelle says, you only have to look at a place of work to know there is no point in applying for a job. “Access is a real problem for people,” she says. “Ireland isn’t wheelchair or powerchair friendly.”

She lives with her parents in Donabate and they have always been supportive, but at 27, she would love her own place.

She has been granted extra personal assistant hours to make this possible – but there is no place available. “I have been on the housing list for 7 years,” she says. “They scoured me for letters and reports and I got them in to them and still they are dragging their feet. That is another battle.”
The night before we met Michael he’d slept outside Connolly Station. He doesn’t know where he’ll sleep tonight. It is a matter of phoning the night bus and waiting to see which hostel it will take you to, and if you miss it, sleeping rough. He shows us the way his jacket zips up to the neck, and the pockets inside in which he keeps his bus pass, his disability certificate and his money.
Michael

The night before we met Michael he’d slept outside Connolly Station. He doesn’t know where he’ll sleep tonight. It is a matter of phoning the night bus and waiting to see which hostel it will take you to, and if you miss it, sleeping rough. He shows us the way his jacket zips up to the neck, and the pockets inside in which he keeps his bus pass, his disability certificate and his money.

He says the night bus didn’t come, but when he complained they said it did.

“I was disgusted and absolutely raging,” he says. “It is dangerous to sleep on the streets. You can get kicked by young scumbags coming out of nightclubs or you can get robbed by some of our own homeless people. You have to be careful. It is better not to sleep, just to sit there. A garda kicked me one day I was sitting on Grafton Street.”

Michael dates the start of his troubles back to the day he found out the woman he’d lived with for 20 years in England had been “playing away” and no longer loved him. He packed a few clothes in a bag and left. “I went mad on the drink,” he says. He had been making plenty of money working on the building of the Channel Tunnel. He abandoned the job.

After a bit, he got himself together again and started working on building sites around London. “After that I lost Daddy and I lost my mother,” he says. There was a big argument among the brothers and sisters about the inheritance. “I just said, ‘Feck it’,
keep the lot,” he says. Then he got the boat back to Ireland. He says he had “a right few quid”, but whatever happened, things didn’t work out and he ended up homeless and jobless. That was 12 years ago.

He spends his mornings at Trust, the centre set up by Alice Leahy in Bride Street in Dublin’s city centre. The old basement rooms are spotlessly clean, the laundry is stacked high with clean, ironed clothes all labelled according to size, and there are big boxes of fresh oranges. Men sit around drinking tea, waiting to use the showers or to speak to someone on the staff.

“This place is great,” says Michael. “They treat you like a human being here. We can come in here til noon but then you are on the streets til 9 at night. Yesterday I walked to Dunlaoghaire and back just to pass the time.” He drinks, too. “I’m a pub man though. I wouldn’t drink cans in the street.”

He is angry with the government for failing to deal with a housing shortage which leaves single men like him waiting years for a basic flat. “I am 61 years of age have all these ailments and letters from doctors to say I have them,” he says. “But all they say is, can you not go back to Dundalk?”

His family emigrated from Dundalk in the late 1950’s when he was 10 and he has never lived there since. He is angry that the government hasn’t built enough hostels. He is angry too with Dublin Corporation for paying out handsome subsidies to landlords for sub-standard bed and breakfast accommodation. And he is angry with the Polish homeless people who are now competing with the Irish for already scarce hostel spaces.

He is angry at the people who walk around him in the street as if he is invisible. “They should be thinking, ‘there but for the grace of God go I,’” he says.

“People haven’t got a clue what’s going to happen to them. Celtic Tiger my backside. They did nothing for us.”
Mary

“I had a hard life rearing the children alone but I did a good job,” says Mary. “I had seven to rear, and three of them were handicapped. My daughter died at the age of 12 four years ago so I am still trying to get over that.”

She shows a photo of a lovely smiling girl with blonde hair. Two of the children are in residential care some of the time. Mary lives with her sister. Both women have intellectual disabilities.

“We look after each other,” she says, flashing a big smile.

“My kids couldn’t do things for themselves,” she says. “I had to do a lot for them. Two of them get fits and you have to watch them. One day one of them fell down in a fit and hit his head and it was cut badly. He had to go to hospital for stitches.”

She has no car, so she relies on the minibus the special school sends for her disabled children, while the others can walk to the local national school. Mary can’t read or write herself. “I never learned,” she says. Her husband was violent and she had to get a barring order against him. He didn’t help with the children and never paid any maintenance.

“I had to go to the welfare officer to get money for clothes and uniforms and all for the kids,” she says. She has other friends who are lone parents of disabled children, too. “It is hard for them, especially if a child is in a wheelchair and you have other small children.”

She walks a lot and gets the bus if she needs to go further afield. Walking helps to stop her getting depressed. “I used to get very depressed. One time I ended up in St Ita’s mental hospital I was that depressed. Too many things got on top of me and I
couldn’t cope. Two of the children had to go into care until I got out again. I used to feel an awful lot of pressure. Now I am determined I will not go back down that road. I have got this far.

“I keep myself busy. Me and some other women are going to set up a self defence class because someone got attacked in the park a while ago. I go to a club for families of disabled children and they bring us away to the North for a night and on trips. I help out at their summer camps. If there is no club on, I don’t know what to do. Last week I tidied my wardrobe and then I messed it all up and tidied it again. I have to be busy.” She laughs.

She is proud of the fact that when her doctor told her she was overweight and had high cholesterol, she took it in hand immediately. Now she is the envy of the other women at her Weightwatchers class, and she has the cholesterol under control. Money is a worry, but she tries not to let it get her down. Her adult daughter helps out when she is stuck. The day we meet, her washing machine has broken and she has been told it will cost nearly €200 to fix it.

“I don’t think the politicians care about people like us,” she says. “I met one of them once and I told him we didn’t have enough money to live on and he said he would do something about it if they got in. They got in and he did nothing, so I will never vote for him again.”

Mary lives in Swords in North County Dublin, and has the support of Prosper Fingal, which provides day and respite care for people with learning disabilities. “There is a girl comes round and she helps me in the house and things,” she says. “We cook meals from the Weightwatchers book together. They help me to read letters and forms that come and to get things when I need them. They help when I need to get the council to do repairs on the house. “I don’t know where I would be without them.”
Piotr and Bernadette

The front garden is an ugly wilderness of weeds and inside, in a basic flat, Piotr and Bernadette, are waiting with their baby, David, to escape from a nightmare. The story of their life in Ireland started out well. They arrived from Poland just over a year ago with €100 to their name. Within two weeks, Piotr had got work on a building site in Dublin, and, when that job finished, his boss said that a builder he knew in Longford would employ him.

“This man in Longford said he’d give us work and accommodation,” says Bernadette, whose English is good. That was in late 2006. He offered them the flat, the upper half of a small former local authority house, for €600 a month, and he offered Piotr a job. What he did not offer was a contract for either, though he was asked for both.

Four months later, Bernadette gave birth to David. She needed proof of her address to get a medical card, but when the couple asked their landlord, he told them to get out of his flat. He told Piotr he had no work for him. Then he cut off the electricity. “We went to the Gardaí and they told us we had 28 days to leave,” says Bernadette.

“The 28 days is over now. The house has been sold – we don’t know what is going on.” Luckily for them, they contacted local SIPTU organiser, Anton McCabe. He got the landlord to switch the electricity on again, and has put the couple down for a local authority flat. Anton also investigated Piotr’s terms of employment. He found that whereas Irish workers were getting just under €14 an
hour, Piotr was getting around €10, for the same work.

Piotr told him that the boss would send him a letter saying there was no more work for him with the company, but would then call him in to work. The boss was not paying his full tax and PRSI. Some weeks Piotr got a payslip, others he didn’t.

He was expected to work long hours. “He even worked Christmas Day,” says Bernadette. “It is not fair.” Anton also established that Piotr had not been paid the overtime to which he was entitled.

“There is another Polish man who also has no contract and too small money,” says Bernadette. “But he is scared to say anything. He has a big family and he can’t afford to lose his job.” Bernadette and Piotr felt scared, too. Someone drove up and down the narrow street outside the house in a big jeep. Pellets were fired at the front window. They hardly know anyone in Longford, and the landlord told them he was an important person in the town.

“The landlord came to us and said, ‘why are you doing this to me? I gave you a job. I gave you a flat. I am a good man. I have been good to you,’” says Bernadette. “He offered us €300 to leave the country.” They refused. They are determined to make a life for themselves in Ireland. “In Poland we had no money, no work and no house,” Bernadette says. “We will not go back.”

At the time we met Piotr and Bernadette, Anton has just negotiated a settlement with the employer/landlord, who was due to compensate the couple for the money he owed them – a substantial sum. In the meantime, they were living on small loans and depending on the help of the local society of St Vincent de Paul. “Piotr has no work and the agency needs references from your last employer. We have no money. We have nothing,” says Bernadette, rocking David in her arms. “It is not easy for us.”
"There is no living any more for the small farmer. They are all leaving it. You end up working seven days a week for next to nothing. They say the subsidies we have now will be going in 2013. That will polish off the farmers. We depend on the subsidies. No way in the world could we manage without them."

"West Clare is gone," says Jimmy Griffin. "You just keep going on from one day to the next one. I can manage because I’ve only myself to keep going and I keep things tight. At my time of life it doesn’t matter. I’ll just hang in there. I’ve no skills to do anything else anyway. I’ll live here til I die, but I won’t die a millionaire, that’s for sure."

Jimmy has 35 cattle on his rushy acres in the hills at Kilmihil, Co Clare. He lives in the small cottage in which his parents raised him and his five younger brothers and sisters. "I was the eldest. The rest of them are all gone away," he says.

"There is no living any more for the small farmer. They are all leaving it. You end up working seven days a week for next to nothing. They say the subsidies we have now will be going in 2013. That will polish off the farmers. We depend on the subsidies. No way in the world could we manage without them."

His cattle will be sold for beef. "I used to do dairy but they cut out the small supplier this past 4 or 5 years,"
says Jimmy, “Before that with the EEC you had no way of living but to go to the creamery and so we all were producing too much and the quotas came in. That polished the small dairy farmer off.”

Michael Gleeson from the Clare Partnership offers support to isolated small farmers like Jimmy. “The market has been so distorted now that the cost of producing bears no relation to what you get paid,” he says.

Jimmy says that there are so many forms and tests now that it is hard to keep up with what is required. “A single cow goes down with TB and you could be finished,” he says. “There is no mercy in the collar and tie - you don’t like to see the professionals coming up the lane!”

He is annoyed that new rules on conservation mean there is to be a ban on cutting turf on the bog. “It is grand turf and I keep a fire of it going here all the year around,” he says. “I throw a drop of diesel on it in the morning and it is in all day. The house would come falling down around me if I didn’t. There is no word on how we are meant to heat our houses after this. They’ll have a fair hard job stopping the farmers cutting the turf, I would say. A fire is nice to look into on a cold winter’s night.”

Jimmy’s father was a farmer, “and his father before him.” The land has always been bad, of course. “It is awful boggy, poor land. Wet land. It is hard to do silage, hard to do hay. We are very open to the Atlantic here.” He says that as the locals leave, people from Scotland, England, Germany and elsewhere are coming in to live. “Living off your taxes,” he says. “The cheque in the post.”

Life was always hard on such farms. “We went to school barefoot,” he says. And the children from these poor hills didn’t stay long. “Education beyond the basics was for the wealthy.” However, Jimmy says there used to be a lot more life about the place, with dances in local halls and the fair in Kilmihil and a crowd visiting round the houses to play cards or just for the “coord”, the social visit.

“That is an old tradition that has gone now,” says Jimmy. “And you wouldn’t drive out for a drink - the guards have got very strict.” The fair is in Ennis now, a half hour drive away. “Most of the neighbours
are old like myself. I spend a lot of time watching the television."

There are more opportunities in Ireland now for the younger generation of Jimmy’s family. His nephews and nieces are well educated and are working in professional jobs. His own hope for his future is that a proposed wind farm will go ahead, allowing him to lease his land out for the turbines, while still being able to farm. “There’s plenty of wind up here anyway,” he says. “That is for sure.”