

A tale of two cities where knifemen still write the headlines in blood

Eugene Hogan

LIMERICK was yesterday fighting what appears to be a losing battle against an unwanted reputation as the country's most dangerous city. While advocates of the Treaty City continue to argue the point, the statistics are largely undeniable and reveal that serious crime has exploded in Limerick in recent months.

Garda authorities, politicians and business leaders in the area have repeatedly pointed to the city's cultural, physical and economic advancement of the last two decades, a process that has turned the Mid-West capital into a vibrant and proud centre, but unfortunately one of extremes and deep social divisions.

Following yesterday's murder and follow-up assault that has left another man fighting for his life, their arguments were last night sounding decidedly weak.

Yesterday's murder brings to six the number who have died in the city as a result of serious assaults this year, four of which have taken place in the last three weeks.

And while many are random and spontaneous - as gardai stressed yesterday - a comparison with the other main urban centres provides sober reading for even the most ardent advocates of the Treaty City.

Limerick's six deaths as a result of serious crime compares to nine in Dublin, yet the population of the capital is nearly 20 times that of the Shannonside city. Galway has a zero recording for deaths arising out of assaults during the same period, while Cork has just three.

True, in recent years Limerick had reached a comfort zone compared to the sordid "stab city" era of the late 1970s and early 1980s, as official crime figures published for 1999 revealed that the number of indictable offences committed in the city per 1,000 population was at 18.35, compared to 38.6 for Dublin, 26.2 for Cork and 15.4 for Galway.

Yet, for all that good work, the last eight months has turned the clock back on the city's reputation as stabbings, shootings and other assaults have revealed a frightening lawlessness amongst the criminal fraternity.

While inter-gang feuds on both the North and South sides of the city have done much to accelerate the malaise, the deaths and serious assaults are more down to spontaneous attacks than organised hits, albeit many involving members of those same gangs.

And again, the knife has emerged as the preferred weapon of assailants, ripping shreds into the emerging proud fabric of the city. Of the four murders perpetrated on the streets of Limerick in just over two weeks, three have been as a result of stabbings.



The scene at St Mary's Park, Limerick, where the latest assault took place. For all the good work in the city, the last eight months has turned the clock back its reputation for lawlessness and violence.

Sitting District Court Judge Tom O'Donnell was widely criticised recently when he questioned if Limerick did, indeed, deserve its reputation for stabbings following yet another case involving a knife assault.

But after the high profile incidents of the last three weeks, Judge O'Donnell's comments stand up to the most severe scrutiny.

As gardai yesterday began what will be another exhaustive investigation,

they too attempted to defend the city's, and their own, record, claiming that serious crime is not out of control.

But reading between the lines of even their brave public relations spin, there was an implicit acceptance that they are largely outnumbered when it comes to dealing with street thuggery and organised crime.

Speaking at an evening press conference, Chief Superintendent Gerry Kelly said it was "no secret" that a very

strong case has been made by Limerick garda authorities over the years for additional resources.

And last week's graduation at the Garda Training College showed that those claims continue to fall on deaf ears as just six graduates out of 133 were posted to the city; 77 at the same time going to duties in the capital.

Limerick East Deputy Willie O'Dee has repeatedly banged the drum for his home city and yesterday he was

still standing by his claims of "unfair slant". "Unfortunately there has been a coincidence of high profile incidents in the city but this caricature being brought up of the city is a lazy approach," he said.

"It is all too easy to dust down an epitaph of stab city when anything happens in the area of John's Castle."

Perhaps it is a case of there are no so blind as those who would not see and not just Mr O'Dee alone.