

# Skinheads and crime

part two

## A phenomenon of modern urban life

### Concluding his series, John Feeney looks at skinhead gang warfare in Dublin

THE attraction of skinheadery is difficult to pin down. Obviously, alienated young people like the company of their fellows, but the strange hairstyle and clothes have a peculiar attraction of their own. It is impossible to say what makes a boy go to a barber and ask for a "Number One," as the hairstyle is called. The skinhead, once he joins a gang, will rapidly become crime-orientated. A gang will accept a newcomer as easily as the gardai.

As one skinhead explains, "the chiefs are never caught. When the fuzz or the gotcher (watchman) arrives they've always scarpered, leaving the others hanging round the street."

The Gardai arrive well after a skinhead crime has been committed and will "lift" anyone in sight with a skinhead hairstyle for questioning. In fact, the leaders of the group will have all disappeared and the peripheral skinhead will be questioned in the station, often, according to themselves, not too gently. This experience will initiate him in the prevalent skinhead hatred of the Gardai and he will become a full gang member. He will engage in crime, particularly minor assaults and robbery on other youths and breaking and entering, especially into parked cars, although he will rarely steal the car itself.

The character of the skinhead gang leader will very often be

crucial for the success of his gang. One particular gang, which has gained nearly one hundred followers since Easter, has a leader who comes from a well-established family in a north side housing estate. His gang has been successful in evading the law and of late he has resorted to using techniques learnt, it is said, from the I.R.A. in Belfast to enforce discipline. There is little that can be done about such a gang. No one over twenty knows what goes on among youths in a council estate (including priests and counsellors), and the ordinary youths are afraid to say a word in case their club or their meeting place is attacked.

Skinhead gangs show all the prejudices of their elders, but bring them more to the surface. In Dublin (possibly analogous to the Belfast situation?) there is a great deal of ill-feeling between large housing estates. Finglas East dislikes Finglas West and some residents there claim that all youthful crime is perpetrated by youths from the half they do not live in. Finglas dislikes Cabra West and vice versa, while all the North side estates have little regard for the new areas, Edenmore and Ballymun. At an adult level such feelings constitute merely a half-conscious undercurrent in ordinary life, but in skinheads the antagonism comes to the top. Skinhead gangs fight other skinheads from different areas.

There is a vendetta between a Cabra West and a Finglas West gang and all skinhead gangs on the North side share an antagonism to skinheads who have recently come out of the city centre to Edenmore and Ballymun. The gangs fight with each other and, again, often use the city centre for their contests. If rival gangs meet in a dance hall or outside a dancehall or in the city centre after dark a vicious fight will ensue. It is a tragic fact that the most deprived people in the city feel more antagonistic towards other deprived persons rather than towards the people who are responsible for their underprivileged position.

Also, when a housing ghetto is broken up new antagonisms are created. For instance, a former skinhead gang which was centred on Sheriff Street in the mid-1960s (then they did not dress as skinheads) was broken up by re-housing in Finglas. So a new gang hived off, which became bitterly antagonistic to its old colleagues still in Sheriff Street.

This internal row, with its roots in broken loyalties and group taboos (similar hiving-off hatreds can be engendered in student ultra-left groups) hardened into a row between Sheriff Street and Finglas youths. And until very recently, from time to time the skinheads in Sheriff Street would take the bus

to Finglas to attack the skinhead gangs there.

It is difficult to estimate how many skinheads there are today in Dublin city. In Finglas a teacher estimated that there must be several hundred, many of these, though, would not be attached to a gang and would just identify with the cult. In Edenmore the number of skinheads has more than doubled in the last six months, possibly due to the glamour attached to publicity accorded skinhead crimes. All in all, there must be several thousand skinheads in Dublin.

**But, again, it must be stressed that the numbers involved in violent crime are nothing like what they were fifteen years ago.**

The decrease in violent teenage gangs can be illustrated by the drop in no-go areas for the Gardai in Dublin. In the 1950s Gardai were not allowed into any part of the city centre flats, and there were parts of Dolphin's Barn, the Coombe, Crumlin and Cabra where they only entered at their risk, where they would receive no co-operation from the population. Now there are few no-go areas. The main no go area, Corporation Place, has been demolished and the only area where Gardai venture occasionally is Dolphin's Barn Flats, and here there is a history of civilian complaints about Garda behaviour.

Other areas where the Gardai are not safe are all the flats where

the Corporation lump tenants who have a record of poor rent-paying.

One question remains, will there be a massive increase in juvenile crime? Will Dublin reach the stage "where citizens will not be able to walk the streets after night-fall in safety before long", as a Garda Inspector put it recently. It would appear that this situation is very unlikely to arise. The increase in skinhead crime is a phenomenon of urban displacement, and of unemployment among youths — an increasingly important factor in the last year — and it is unlikely to go beyond the present peak. The violent gang crimes associated with skinheads will hardly make the streets of Dublin dangerous and in fact the area where youthful crime will grow explosively is in the upper youth stratum — the drug scene. Gardai generally agree that the pattern of earlier years will persist for skinheads, eighty per cent will marry, settle down and live law-abiding lives. The rest, the unlucky ones, the ones who were caught, will become hardened, professional, small-time criminals.

But on the drug scene a new attitude to crime is forming among youths who in earlier decades would have stayed clear of the law. The motivations which steer most people away from crime disappear and they turn to certain crimes for kicks to supplement the drugs they take.

They will steal cars for joy rides,

shop-lift and take anything if the opportunity arises. It is this area where there has been a huge expansion in crime, particularly in theft of cars. The ameliorating process which eventually rehabilitates the skinhead does not work so easily here. And there are few who are optimistic about the increase in drug taking in Dublin.

Even in a relatively privileged institution, U.C.D., students report a huge increase in drug taking since last October and an easy supply of drugs, particularly L.S.D. Some public houses which students used formerly as social meeting places have become known to Gardai of late as well established drug scenes. A U.C.D. graduate involved in this problem has estimated that upwards of 500 students now take drugs and that the number increases drastically around this time of the year when examination strains become difficult to bear.

A fair forecast for the future of Dublin in this regard would be: a great increase in certain crimes which make life irritating but not unbearable for the citizen. Dublin will have more cases of drug pushing, stolen cars, junky deaths and so on. But the level of violent crime is unlikely to increase dramatically. It will probably increase somewhat but will not make O'Connell Street as dangerous as the main street of the capital city of most "civilised countries". If it is the intention of the Gardai to concentrate on skinhead crime it would be a mistake. It would ignore an area of most serious concern which conservative estimates say embraces at least 10,000 youths in Dublin at one time or another.