

# The Irish Criminology Conference

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*The fifth Irish Criminology Conference* was held at University College Dublin in June under the auspices of the UCD Institute of Criminology. More than 100 delegates assembled on campus to take part in the proceedings. The interest generated by the event was such that even the concluding sessions were packed; the attrition that characterises most conferences after lunch on the final day was not in evidence.

There is no Irish Society of Criminology as such, merely a group of like-minded individuals who believe that it is important to come together on a regular basis to exchange ideas and keep abreast of research. The conference has grown in popularity each year, assisted no doubt by the absence of any registration fee. Even in these straitened times it proved possible for the host institution to raise sufficient funds to cover the costs of the event (including a wine reception!) and to provide a limited number of bursaries for students who wished to present papers but lacked the wherewithal to travel.

The variety of content on offer this year showed that criminology and criminal justice are well on the way to becoming established areas of scholarly inquiry in Ireland. The programme included papers on prisoners' children, Irish convicts in Australian penal colonies, piracy on the high seas, media portrayals of paedophilia, the reintegration of ex-offenders and the representation of crime and punishment in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Most of the universities on the island were represented on the conference programme. In addition delegates travelled from England, Scotland, Wales, Australia and the USA.

Those who attend the Irish Criminology Conference are a disparate bunch; more varied in background perhaps than found at similar meetings elsewhere. They are drawn from academia, the voluntary sector, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the legal profession and An Garda Síochána. Some are experts of long-standing, others have an interest that is more peripheral, but all are curious about the potential of criminology to address important social questions. One of the key aims of the gathering is to create a meaningful dialogue between researchers and policy makers as well as enhancing mutual understanding.

The conference was of particular importance this year in the context of the government's decision to publish a White Paper on crime. This could be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to produce a set of guiding principles for a fair, humane and minimalist justice system. Against this background a prominent conference theme was the extent to which criminology might contribute to this process in any of the following ways:

1. Providing the raw materials for sound policy, legislation and public debate.
2. Stimulating a culture of innovation and reducing the traditional reliance on models imported from other jurisdictions.
3. Making available the baseline information that allows difficult decisions to be taken with confidence during a crisis.
4. Enhancing democratic accountability by opening up areas that have previously been closed to independent inquiry.

Debates about crime and punishment in Ireland tend to have a staccato quality. There are moments of intense concern, often after a particularly heinous killing, and then long periods of stasis. Sometimes fundamentally new ways of doing justice are promised. But they are not always introduced, their impact is seldom assessed, and the focus can waver. The background is of a criminal justice system where reform is slow and piecemeal. It took sixty years for revised prison rules to appear; the Probation Service is still guided by a piece of legislation more than a century old; and it remains impossible to link the information systems of the various criminal justice agencies.

One of the advantages of an underdeveloped criminal justice infrastructure is that the country has been insulated from the punitive chill that has so affected England and the USA. Another is that research opportunities are many and varied and the scope for international collaboration is vast. The major disadvantage of such a state of affairs is that funding opportunities are few and far between and positions for the growing number of early career academics are virtually non-existent. The challenge for the coming decade is for the country to retain its talent, rather than losing it to emigration, the fate of so many previous generations during periods of economic decline.

The conference programme and book of abstracts are available at [www.ucd.ie/criminol](http://www.ucd.ie/criminol).

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