Young people's tales of Garda harassment in new exhibition

Dublin youths recount stories of discrimination

by Juno McElrroe

THE stories of young people's experiences of discrimination, harassment or suspicion of gardaí are at the heart of an exciting new exhibition.

Gardai hoping to improve relations with youths. Dublin's inner-city youths took part in the arts initiative, even revealing their own complaints and stories of harassment against members of the force in a short film as part of the project.

Up to 60% said from people from Rialto, aged 16 to 21, in the Dublin Theatre project. They recount their feelings of powerlessness during Garda attacks, also no homes, strip search in cells as threats by gardai. Leading on from the project Fiona Whelan explained: The stories express a common experience of being judged or a sense of indignity or disrespect from gardaí. The young men and women talk about how they are approached or assumed guilty before even being asked to speak or questioned.

The exhibition of stories includes a stark film in which gardaí themselves reveal part of the young people's testimonies about the actions of some of their colleagues.

Some 13 members of the force who were fresh out of the corps who came to a part took part in the readings. Dublin South Central District chief superintendent Michael O'Sullivan said feedback from inner city families involved in the arts project would help to improve community relations in the long run.

"One of the gardaí mentioned that the working-class area itself could relate to stories because he was stopped and searched himself before he was a garda."

"There are lessons to be learned from this in how we deal with young people from the south inner city," Michael Byrne, 25, from Crumlin, who contributed to the project explained how his anger with gardai had changed to an empathy towards work with the exhibition.

"I felt hurt going into the exhibition, I thought gardaí wouldn't take the stories seriously. But as they were read out I was surprised. I felt some of the gardaí were nervous and then they described after how they felt.

For me, that changed in a way. I felt about gardaí. I hope the exhibition gives young people a voice about their experiences with gardaí."

Other areas of power or the abuse of it discussed by youths in their stories include in education, families as well as in families.

See www.children.ie for more information.

Extracts: 'They wouldn't let me Ma get her tablets'

WHEN I was in the cell with Ma and she was in gardaí in the cell with me. One of them took mug shots of me because obviously they had to put on file who they arrested. Ma was quite a bit thin then that gardaí actually left. He left me with one garda and he wasn't the nicest of garda, not someone you would actually want to talk to.

He started saying. "You have to take this off for the strip search" and actually going through it. I was doing nothing, I was asking because that is what I had to do. Well, it was what I thought I had to do and I wasn't able to question him on it in case actually and really controlling it more, so I did what she said.

But when I felt most powerless was when he turned to me and said: "You need to squat for me" and I felt it was really dirty. I didn't know what was going on. I was never in trouble before in my life and I was really scared. I turned around and I said: "Do you actually like doing this?" and he goes: "It doesn't matter, you just have to do it."

THE first raid was the worst. I was actually woken up by the gardaí and I get out of me bed. I didn't know what was going on. I was asleep.

I felt like I was about to get sick or something and I walked out to the sitting room and me Ma was in tears and the whole gaff was just being walked all over by gardaí with a sniper dog and everything.

I was told to sit down. I couldn't do anything. Our mobile phones and all were taken off us. I couldn't text me sister or anybody.

Ma wasn't there. He was on holidays and me Ma was in bits and they would be somebody there for her and they wouldn't let us get somebody. They wouldn't let me get in to get my hair cut. She needed her tablets coz she was in Bits. They don't give a shit. They are just there to get what they want.

I was walking up to the door. I was with a younger brother and yet they pulled in to see who was inside. I don't know what was going. Any time I walk anywhere, I always get stopped. I just find my self walking somewhere and they just stop me and question me.

Twice in me life I've been brought down for drugs searches. One was with me cousin and one was with me brother. The first time was because me cousin had a joint in me trouser pocket. The second time was for left over. They arrested me for having possession of the drug.

They arrested me with him, for a joint. And then they strip searched me then in the Garda station. The words didn't even come up for me. Some people would say that the power of the gardaí is obvious and that they are doing it on the wrong people. Some gardaí do their job. They do what they want to do but there are other guards need to get in someone's face and decide, 'You're this person and that's how we're going to treat you from now on'.