

Young people's tales of Garda harassment in new exhibition

■ Dublin youths recount stories of discrimination

by Juno McEnroe

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

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

Up to 60 stories from people from Rialto, aged 16 to 21, feature in the Policing Dialogues project. They recount their feelings of powerlessness during Garda raids on family homes, strip searches in cells as well as threats by gardaí.

Leading artist in the project Fiona Whelan explained: "The stories explore a common experience of being judged or a sense of indignity or disrespect

from certain 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 read out some 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 Garda training college 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 garda and community relations in the long run.

"One of the [garda] members who came from a working-class area himself could relate to the 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, 23, from Crumlin, who contributed to the project, explained how his anger with gardaí had changed to an empathy during his work with the exhibition.

"I felt hurt going into the exhibition, I thought gardaí wouldn't take the stories seriously. But as they were reading out our stories, I felt some of the gardaí were nervous and then they described after how they felt. For me, that changed in a way how 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.thelab.ie for more information.

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

" WHEN I was in the cell, there were two 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 so that was alright but then that garda 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 really going through it. I was doing what he 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 he actually started really controlling it more, so I did what he said.

But when I felt most powerless was when he turned around and said: "You need to squat for me" and I felt it was really disgusting. 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 garda and told to get out of my bed. I didn't know what was going on. I was still half 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 sniffer 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 my sister or anybody.

Me Da wasn't there. He was on holidays and me Ma was in bits and she needed somebody there for her and they wouldn't let us get somebody for her. They wouldn't let me Ma get in to get her tablets. She needed her tablets coz she was in bits. They don't give a shite. They are just there to get what they want.

" I WAS walking up to Xtra Vision with me younger brother and yet they pulled in to see who I was and where I was going. Any time I walk anywhere, I always get stopped and I'd be just walking somewhere and they just stop me and question me.

Twice in my 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 his mouth and he threw it away. They arrested me for having possession of cannabis.

They arrested me with him, for a joint. And then they strip searched me then in the Garda station. The second time they strip searched me as well.

Some people would say they are doing their job but obviously the job that they are doing is on the wrong people.

Some gardaí do their job. They do what they have 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".