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Authors	van Lanen, Sander
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Urban Pulse – Living austerity urbanism: Time-space expansion and deepening socio-spatial inequalities for disadvantaged urban youth in Ireland

Sander van Lanen

Department of Geography, University College Cork, Cork City, Ireland, s.vanlanen@umail.ucc.ie

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Abstract

After the 2008 financial crisis, Ireland implemented a severe austerity programme, which drastically reshaped the opportunities and constraints experienced by youth living in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. Rising unemployment, reduced social welfare, and funding cuts for support organisations limited the opportunities of urban life for disadvantaged urban youth. This article uses the experience of austerity urbanism of young adults from Ballymun (Dublin) and Knocknaheeny (Cork), both among the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods of their cities, to argue that austerity, through time-space expansion, removes services, facilities and opportunities from deprived urban neighbourhoods, thus reinforcing and intensifying socio-spatial inequalities. In an effort to bring State finances under control and to revitalise the economy the whole urban fabric, and the urban population, is managed for the purpose of economic recovery. Urban life becomes restricted as disadvantaged urban youth becomes socially and spatially excluded from vital urban opportunities and amenities.

Austerity urbanism, Ireland, austerity, youth, recession, urban life

The 2008 financial crisis dragged most of the ‘Western world’ and parts of the ‘developing world’ into recession. To prevent collapse of the financial system, governments injected money into failing banks to keep credit flowing, ultimately transforming the banking crisis into a sovereign debt crisis (Agnew, 2014; Harvey, 2010). Governments implemented austerity to restore State finances, which included spending reductions and revenue increases. As places of neoliberal experimentation (Brenner & Theodore, 2002), cities are vulnerable to austerity. Furthermore, they house those most dependent on social services: the undeserving poor, minorities, and marginalised populations (Peck, 2012). Unsurprisingly for such a transformative event, the urban consequences of crisis, recession, and austerity are widely addressed by urban geographers, including their urban roots (Aalbers, 2012; Donald, Glasmeier, Gray, & Lobao, 2014; D. Harvey, 2012) and their impacts on urban policy (Oosterlynck & González, 2013; Peck, 2012). Peck (2012) identified ‘austerity urbanism’ as a set of specific post-crisis urban conditions, which included a further dismantling of the social state by a new round of neoliberalisation on already neoliberalised terrain; enhanced private control over public assets, infrastructure development and social services; and the implementation of hierarchical and entrepreneurial management to externalise public risk through fee-based services and private sector involvement. Moving forward from studies on urban management under austerity, this essay expands the growing debate on lived experiences in austerity cities (eg Hall, 2015; Hitchen, 2016; Horton, 2016) through the experiences of disadvantaged urban youth in contemporary Ireland.

Ireland was among the European Union members requiring outside assistance to deal with their national debt after the bail-out of over-indebted banks. The burst of a home-grown property bubble reduced revenue income that had become overly reliant on property taxes, while simultaneously State spending increased as unemployment soared and banks were saved (Drudy & Collins, 2011). In December 2010, a €85bn assistance package was agreed with the troika – the tripartite commission of the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Commission – to secure the State’s financial responsibilities weakened by this conjuncture. Fierce austerity and labour market reforms were part of this agreement. However, Irish austerity did not solely originate from troika intervention; in 2009 the so-called ‘McCarthy Report’ advised on €5.3bn expenditure reduction, and in 2010 the ‘National Recovery Plan 2011-2014’ identified €15bn of fiscal corrections, of which €10bn through spending reductions (Government of Ireland, 2010; Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes, 2009). The Irish austerity programme was among the fiercest

worldwide (Whelan, 2009), and Ireland and its citizens paid the highest price for the European banking crisis both per capita and as GDP percentage (Taft, 2013).

When the Celtic Tiger period ended abruptly, social welfare rates fell for the first time since independence, unemployment returned to pre-Tiger levels, and public funding drastically reduced. End 2014 then Minister of Finance Michael Noonan announced the end of austerity, although fiscal prudence was to be maintained then and into the future. Although harsh austerity is over, six years of fiscal consolidation have fundamentally reshaped Irish society. Now that the storm is clearing, it is time to take stock and inspect the landscape left behind by the great recession. Although the economy is recovering and unemployment falling, growing numbers of people live at risk of poverty or in deprivation (CSO, 2014), work involuntary part-time (Murphy & Loftus, 2015; O'Sullivan et al., 2015), while the fruits of recovery vary socially and spatially. Examining lived experience of austerity by disadvantaged urban youth in Ireland, I argue that austerity removes services, facilities and opportunities from deprived neighbourhoods, thus reinforcing and intensifying socio-spatial inequalities. This reduces the possibilities and opportunities of urban life for such youth. Such restrictions do not follow concrete regulations but are imposed by the structural context of austerity urbanism.

Disadvantaged urban youth

Austerity and neoliberalisation, their consequences and socio-spatial distribution received considerable attention in Ireland and internationally (e.g. Kitson, Martin, & Tyler, 2011; O'Callaghan, Kelly, Boyle, & Kitchin, 2015). In Ireland, austerity intensified inequality and spatial injustice (Kearns, 2014). However, most investigations focus on changes in income and wealth, the influence of financialisation on urban development, or the impact of the country's specific history of neoliberalism on the unfolding of the crisis (Fraser, Murphy, & Kelly, 2013; Kitchin, O'Callaghan, Boyle, Gleeson, & Keaveney, 2012; MacLaran & Kelly, 2014). More subjective experiences of living with austerity has, until recently, received less attention (Hall, 2015; Hitchen, 2016). In Ireland, Murphy and Scott (2014) studied the impact of recession on rural life satisfaction, but an investigation into the everyday experiences of austerity and recession is absent for urban Ireland.

Young people are extremely vulnerable to the adverse effects of recession and austerity as they lack skills, experience, job search abilities and financial resources to fall back on (Bobek & Wickham, 2015; Murphy, 2014; Verick, 2009). Irish austerity targeted youth

directly, most evidently by the age-specific reductions of unemployment benefit¹. Indirectly, a discourse of ‘future generations’ legitimised the implementation of austerity. Finally, contemporary youth is the first thoroughly neoliberalised generation coming of age in recessionary circumstances (Fisher, 2009; McGuigan, 2016). Such vulnerabilities are aggravated for youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and backgrounds. Following Sassen (2014), such youth thus present ‘extreme cases’ exposing ‘subterranean trends’ which remain more subtle elsewhere.

Research was carried out in Ballymun in Dublin and Knocknaheeny in Cork, both among the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Ireland according to the Pobal HP Deprivation Index² (Haase & Pratschke, 2012). Therefore, youth from these neighbourhoods illuminate ‘subterranean trends’ due to their double vulnerability of young age and socio-spatial deprivation. With 2011 unemployment levels of 43.3% and 44.0%, Knocknaheeny and Ballymun B³ are so-called unemployment blackspots (Taft, 2012). Ballymun is located on the northern edge of Dublin and was once home to Ireland’s only high-rise housing scheme providing roughly 3000 social housing units. Wealthier inhabitants started to leave the estates in the 1970s, and a developing negative stigma induced a spiral of economic, social and physical decline (Power, 1997). A wave of community activism among deteriorating conditions eventually triggered plans full-scale development (Boyle, 2005). In 1997, private company Ballymun Regeneration Limited (BRL) was tasked with the social, economic and physical redevelopment of Ballymun. Reflecting neoliberalising trends, tenancy was privatised and housing constructed to replace the demolished flats was predominantly in the private rental sector; the share of social housing fell from over 50% to 35% (Haase & Pratschke, 2012). Following the 2008 crash, private investors abandoned the public-private partnerships funding

¹ While reduced to €188/week for those over 25, further reductions in Jobseeker’s Allowance to €100/week for age 18 to 24, and €144/week for age 25 were implemented.

² This index measures relative affluence and disadvantage based on population change, age dependency ratio, lone parent ratio, percentage of population with primary education only and third level education, male and female unemployment rates and the proportion of the population living in Local Authority (Social) Housing.

³ In the CSO Census Small Area Statistics, Ballymun is subdivided into six parts labelled A to F.

the regeneration, halting the realisation of a new shopping centre and some plots of housing which now remain as vacant lots. From 2006 to 2011 unemployment in the neighbourhood more than doubled to 28.8%. Extensive physical upgrades of housing have succeeded but failed to simultaneously improve the social and economic situation in Ballymun, which further declined after the recession.

Knocknaheeny, located in the north-west of Cork City consists of primarily social housing. Constructed in relief of an astute housing crisis in the 1970s, providing replacement housing was more important than countering concentrated deprivation. In contrast to Ballymun, terraced housing dominates in Knocknaheeny. Among a developing negative stigma a strong sense of place developed among the neighbourhood's youth (Ó Tuama & O'Sullivan, 2016). At the end of the 1990s, a modest regeneration plan was implemented and further regeneration was initiated in 2014. Although several services, including a new library and revitalised housing, have been delivered, deprived conditions prevail (Kelly & Hayes, 2014). In Knocknaheeny, newly delivered housing remains primarily social housing, stagnant around 61%, although it remains uncertain whether physical renewal enables social and economic regeneration, as unemployment rose from 25.1% in 2006 to 42.9% in 2011 (Haase & Pratschke, 2012).

In what follows I argue that austerity, through time-space expansion, the increased travel time necessary for daily needs often affecting poorer populations (Jung & Anderson, 2016; Katz, 2004), reinforced and intensified existing socio-economic inequalities. This is specifically applied to income, housing and available support services, as these occupied significant themes in the responses of participants and reveal interactions of spatial and socio-economic inequalities. The expulsion of services, facilities and opportunities from Ballymun and Knocknaheeny spatially excludes young people from these neighbourhoods from adequate income provision, affordable housing and personal and professional support.

Declining income

High (youth) unemployment is no novelty in deprived urban neighbourhoods, and is often part of what classifies them as disadvantaged. Several developments under Irish austerity did, however, aggravate unemployment for youth in Ballymun and Knocknaheeny. First, unemployment, especially for youth, rose tremendously in the aftermath of the financial crisis (CSO, 2016b). Although falling, youth unemployment, at 16.0% in July 2016, is still above pre-crisis levels. This contrasts strongly with low pre-crisis unemployment when Ireland's booming construction sector absorbed low and unskilled young labour (Bobek & Wickham,

2015; O’Riain, 2014). The bursting of the property bubble led to an explosion in particularly male unemployment. Most participants in Ballymun and Knocknaheeny were indeed unemployed, while a few had irregular employment. But even in employment youth was not shielded from precarisation, as Liam⁴, who worked for a courier service, heavily depended on overtime for an adequate income, and Sophie’s previous retail job guaranteed 8 hours with complementing overtime, which eventually decreased to an amount that made her accept voluntary redundancy when offered⁵. Unemployment and precarisation limited opportunities to earn an adequate income through work. Precarisation was facilitated by labour market reforms encouraging wage reductions and increased flexibilisation in both private and public sector, restructured collective wage setting mechanisms, and lower sector-specific minimum wages. The break with Celtic Tiger conditions exposed itself when participants compared their situation to older siblings’ relative independence at their ages. Collective memories of work and income during the boom tainted contemporary experiences of inadequate earnings and unemployment.

Financial consequences of unemployment increased as Irish austerity specifically targeted young adults through above-mentioned social welfare reductions. Although many participants attended courses providing slight upgrades of weekly payments, most reported insufficient income, sometimes for basic necessities and almost always for social activities. Changing criteria for part-time income supplement reduced eligibility among part-time working youth. This affected youth who are more likely part-time and precariously employed, and is another barrier to sufficient income through work and social welfare. Ian said, “I had no money to give me that clothes or anything”. Callum from Ballymun expressed his desperation for satisfactory income; “I’d be looking for, just survive pretty much, like, just enough to get me through the week and then just keep going, the standard living, minimum wage would be okay for me”. Murphy and Loftus (2015) found that labour market and social welfare reforms made it increasingly difficult to earn an adequate income through employment, social welfare, or both. Low income excluded youth from visiting friends, partaking in social activities, and maintaining hobbies and sport, activities many forfeited since 2008. Transformations of labour and welfare thus contributed to time-space expansion, as social activities are placed out of socio-spatial reach for youth from Ballymun and Knocknaheeny through the erection of spatial

⁴ Participants’ names are changed to guarantee their privacy.

⁵ Before the 2008 financial crisis her job was practically full-time.

and financial barriers to participation. Austerity thus directly and indirectly narrows the lifeworld of disadvantaged urban youth. Initial financial consequences of recession ripple through in the everyday spatial possibilities available to disadvantaged urban youth, forcing a conceptualisation of austerity beyond its financial and monetary impacts.

Diminished spending power through unemployment and lower social welfare rates, not only among youth, had a knock-on effect in Ballymun as the main supermarket closed in response to falling customer numbers. Without this anchor tenant, more shops started closing while Dublin City Council ordered further closures to prepare for the shopping centre's redevelopment. In the words of Michael, 'you have to go out of Ballymun now to even buy a pair of socks, like, to buy anything', while other participants mentioned the disappearance of barbers and basic clothes shops. The cumulative effects of reduced accessibility of essential services in the neighbourhood and less available finance for mobility led to further time-space expansion, erecting multiple barriers which reinforce exclusion of services and amenities to youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Housing and independence

Moving out of the parental house is an important cultural marker of adulthood and step towards independence (Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2000). Irish neoliberalism intimately relates to property (Kitchin et al., 2012), and property values plummeted in the wake of the financial crisis (Fraser et al., 2013). Rent prices followed initially, but returned to pre-crisis levels at the end of 2015, surpassing them in Dublin (Morgenroth, 2016; PRTB, 2015). Ballymun and Knocknaheeny are among the cheapest areas in their cities, but urban accommodation pressure drove prices up in these neighbourhoods. To privately rent an affordable⁶ single bedroom apartment in Ballymun, double the minimum wage is required (Kapila, 2016). Disadvantaged urban youth is extremely unlikely to earn twice the minimum wage, and if they do, a precarious situation denies the stability or the hours necessary to access affordable private rent. Rent Supplement for social welfare recipients is ineffective, as the maximum rent threshold remained stagnant as rents surpassed it. Furthermore, Ballymun is excluded from Rent Supplement to counter concentrated deprivation. Youth from Ballymun and Knocknaheeny

⁶ Here affordable is defined as not more than 30% of pre-tax income, and the figures based on 35.7 hour/week employment.

became excluded from private rental accommodation in their city and neighbourhoods, barring their move to urban independence.

Traditionally both neighbourhoods had high ratios of social housing, but the Celtic Tiger primacy of construction led to its disinvestment. Furthermore, rising unemployment and falling wages increased demand and the public housing waiting list increased nationally by 60% from 2008 to 2013 (O'Connor & Staunton, 2015). This rise is partly responsible for pressures on the private rental market. Their age, and thus inability to gather time on the housing list, excludes young adults from social housing, reinforced by a social housing stock largely unsuitable for singles and young adults (Threshold, 2010). Laura's sister spent fourteen years waiting for social housing in Ballymun, while her child provided priority status. A lack of provision is guaranteed by further funding reductions under the austerity regime. As the housing situation worsened, a new plan of privatised social housing was introduced, including off-balance sheet funding mechanisms and public-private partnerships (Department of Environment Community and Local Government, 2014), a strategy which failed to deliver sustainable and affordable social housing abroad (Hearne, 2011). The financial and spatial exclusion from affordable and accessible housing drove disadvantaged urban youth into the extreme marginality of homelessness. Such conditions of deprivation became normalised as youth regularly considered, or enacted, homelessness as a housing strategy. Colm from Knocknaheeny, for example, stated: "I can't get the fucking money, [...] so I have to go into the fucking homeless hostel and work the fucking system to get myself a flat...". Such conditions are imposed by conversion of social housing into private rental, and a simultaneous privatisation of housing support services.

Socially and spatially, inaccessible and unaffordable accommodation traps young adults in their parental house, thus denying essential steps into independence and adulthood. Living at home, 24-year-old Brendan from Knocknaheeny experienced his life as 'stuck'. Some were caught in low-quality houses or overcrowded situations as offspring is unable to move and extended family moves in when they can no longer afford to live independently. John, for example, slept in the kitchen and shares the house with 6 people. When friends and family unable to afford urban accommodation leave the city for more affordable areas, displacement upsets social relations. Aware of lower housing costs elsewhere, several participants considered abandoning the city but were reluctant as it would spatially separate them from employment opportunities. Time-space expansion increases the spatial divide between affordable housing and work and services, thus intensifying socio-economic inequalities in and beyond the city.

The lifeworld of disadvantaged urban youth becomes anchored on the sometimes overcrowded and poor-quality parental house as they are unable to move out. Youth became spatially removed from independent urban living as housing access within the city became increasingly exclusionary, creating a socio-economic divide towards the opportunities and qualities of urban life, including personal development and the possibility to start a family. Concentration in the parental house transforms dwelling into shelter, as the home no longer reflects self-identity, privacy and rest, exacerbated by the financial strain on household relations imposed by austerity. The spatial separation of affordable housing and necessary amenities excludes disadvantaged youth from quality urban life, and restricted residential opportunities thus exacerbated social and spatial inequalities in Ireland.

Reduced support

Access to a certain quality of urban life, where this could not be provided by State or private sector, was traditionally offered by the community and voluntary sector (Crowley, 2012). Indeed, many participants used or had used such support services offering affordable leisure activities and assistance in personal and professional development. Such services grew in importance during the Celtic Tiger, when the State externalised part of its social tasks through funding for the community and voluntary sector. However, from 2008 to 2012, State funding for these sectors was cut by 35%, compared to an overall reduction of 2.8% of State spending (B. Harvey, 2012). As a result, many organisations had to reduce or cancel their services, start charging fees or became forced to reform their practices in line with increasingly competitive funding conditionality (Forde, O’Byrne, & Ó’hAdhmaill, 2015).

Disadvantaged populations, traditionally more dependent on such services, felt the consequences of these funding cuts. Youth from Ballymun and Knocknaheeny told there was increasingly nothing to do for them in their neighbourhoods, as they were either financially or spatially excluded from previously available leisurely activities. Indeed, many participants felt a need for increased services rather than a decline. The lifeworld, or the spaces of everyday life, of disadvantaged urban youth in Ireland, is cleared from professional, personal and leisurely services and possibilities, and funding reductions, and this group, thus, is both financially and spatially excluded from invaluable support to navigate existing and intensifying social, spatial and economic barriers to participation in urban life. The removal of such support services able to expand the horizon of marginalised populations created spatialities barren from any sustenance without access to paid employment, thus reinforcing and strengthening urban socio-economic divisions.

Conclusion

Austerity emerged after the crisis to bring order to the State's deficit and was presented as necessary to revitalise the economy. After a smooth exit from the troika bailout programme, Ireland currently experiences a vulnerable recovery. If austerity is purely judged on reducing State deficit, then it was an obvious success, as it consistently reduced the debt to GDP ratio (CSO, 2016a). But when social and spatial justice become of the judgement this clarity quickly disappears (Kearns, Meredith, & Morrissey, 2014). Labour market regulations were reformed, conditions became more precarious, public spending was reduced and social welfare eligibility tightened to generate economic growth. Privatisation affected State functions including social housing and unemployment services.

Austerity in Ireland severely affected everyday lived experiences of youth in Ballymun and Knocknaheeny, two deprived neighbourhoods in Ireland's major cities. Vulnerable to unemployment and age-specific social welfare reductions, an increasing share had to live with inadequate income. Simultaneously, falling disposable income in the neighbourhood resulted in private facilities leaving the area. Consequently, time-space expansion intensified youth exclusion from privately offered services and amenities, while public and voluntary services reduced as their funding was slashed. Disinvestment in social housing and privatisation of housing support reduced the availability and accessibility of urban accommodation, separating affordable housing from services and employment opportunities. Working through such processes, austerity intensified the social and spatial exclusion of vital urban possibilities for youth in deprived neighbourhoods, where time-space expansion transforms such areas into economically barren neighbourhoods devoid of hope and support, while simultaneously limiting financial possibilities for mobility to reach opportunities. Such possibilities are not directly threatened by rules and regulation themselves, but by an increasingly restrictive modality of urban governance imposed through austerity.

As the urban fabric becomes managed to assist economic recovery, so does the urban population. For those whose lives partially align with the interests of capital, those who create value through production and consumption, these changes might not seem so drastic. But for those whose income, in efforts to increase profit maximisation, falls to a level no longer suitable for consumption, whose lives out of work are no longer aligned with finance capital, the lifeworld is truly transformed as the spaces they inhabit become desolate of private, public and voluntary services alike. Nonetheless, the situation of youth from Ballymun and Knocknaheeny reveals urban processes operating at a larger scale than the neighbourhood. Maybe less

pronounced, similar developments apply to larger parts of the Irish urban population and their exposure in deprived neighbourhoods illuminates the changing urban condition. Understanding this transforming condition under austerity urbanism is critical to understand the reshaping of contemporary urban lives in post-crisis Ireland. Centring urban austerity investigations on the individual, the varied and multiple instances in which austerity affects urban life can be revealed, and how this transforms everyday urban living. Understanding urban life in the city-after-austerity is vital, as Louis Wirth (1938, p. 24) claimed; the “direction of the ongoing changes in urbanism will for good or ill transform not only the city but the world.”

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