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Towards Historical Victimology: Revisiting Joyriding in 1980s Ireland

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In 1980s, Ireland a perceived social crisis surrounded joyriding. Based on original archival research, this paper examines the antecedents and legacies of this episode. A combination of rising car ownership, media panic and victim mobilization pressurised a political response. Legislative and institutional measures proved disproportionate and panicked. Cultural artefacts including a play *Joyriders* (1987, written by Christina Reid) and eponymous film (1988, directed by Aisling Walsh) highlighted the impact of the Troubles and gender politics on representations of joyriding and victimhood. By revisiting this episode, this paper develops a foundation for historical victimology; namely, the adoption of a victim-centred approach, situated within wider historical, political, and cultural contexts, when examining the multidimensionality of time.

KEY WORDS: historical victimology, historical criminology, joyriding, creativity of crime, victimhood

Historical criminology has flourished in recent years, with networks and working groups established across the British Society of Criminology, Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology, European Society of Criminology, American Society of Criminology and Scandinavian Research Council for Criminology (Dooley and Rocque 2023). The forthcoming launch of the first issue of *The Journal of Historical Criminology* in 2025 further indicates the growth of this area. Its distinguishing feature is its engagement with historical time, which is envisaged as changeable, eventful, flowing, tensed and embodied (Churchill 2017; Churchill *et al.* 2022). While historical criminologists have examined a variety of fascinating topics ranging from female imprisonment in Malta (Knepper and Scicluna 2010) to illicit alcohol markets (Yeomans 2024), a sustained victim-centred approach within historical criminology has not yet emerged. The purpose of this paper is to draw on a past episode—namely a perceived social crisis which surrounded joyriding in 1980s Ireland—to scope out a potential future direction for historical criminology.

This future direction, which is termed 'historical victimology' throughout the paper, differs from studies of the historical development of victimology as a discipline (Fattah 2000), the history of the victims' rights movement (Manikis 2019), or historical analysis of the role of the victim in the criminal justice system (Cox *et al.* 2023). Rather, this paper defines historical victimology as the adoption of a victim-centred approach, situated within wider historical, political

and cultural contexts, when examining the multidimensionality of time. It is not a subsection of historical criminology—as Churchill *et al.* (2022) have cautioned, criminology is already characterised by excessive disciplinary fragmentation—but rather is a complementary stream which consciously repositions victims as active agents in historical narratives.

Analysis of the interplay of victimhood with historical time raises pertinent research questions. To what extent does victim mobilisation influence historical constructions of and responses to recurrent social problems? How can cultural artefacts facilitate historical reimagination of what victimhood entails? What does the forgetting of victimhood tell us about the dynamics of historical time? Adopting a victim-centred approach not only means drawing attention to details of victims impacted by joyriding and the formation of victims' rights groups in Ireland. It also means highlighting the historical contingency of victimhood, the complex representations of joyriding on both sides of the Irish border, and the forgetting (or reimagining) of victimhood to serve contemporary needs. In doing so, this paper offers a useful template for researchers who wish to further a historical victimology approach.

This paper's analysis addresses important cultural, historical and victimological gaps in existing research. Joyriding has attracted a rich and vast international literature (Dawes 2002; Tremblay and Sauvêtre 2014), with studies of this phenomenon usually positioned under the broader auspices of auto-theft or car culture (Corbett [2011] 2003; Groombridge 1997). Much of this scholarship has been penned from the related perspectives of crime prevention (e.g. Clarke and Harris 1992; Jacobs and Cherbonneau 2014) and the characteristics and motivations of joyriders (e.g. Light *et al.* 1993; Anderson and Linden 2014).

While the literature on joyriding in an Irish context is less extensive, existing studies have similarly adopted largely policy- and offender-centric approaches. McVerry (1985) offered an early critique of the opening of Fort Mitchel prison (located on Spike Island, Co. Cork, and which officially opened in April 1985 to ostensibly deal with joyriders). Farrelly (1989) examined the phenomenon of joyriding as part of a wider report on juvenile justice and crime in north inner-city Dublin. Ó Cadhla (2001) analysed joyriding in Cork as an 'urban vernacular culture', while Caffrey (2002) provided a photographic account of cars that had been abandoned by joyriders in the Wicklow Mountains. Farrington (2001) conducted an early evaluation of the Priorswood Task Force on Joyriding (formed in 1998 to develop strategies to reduce joyriding in the Priorswood area of North Dublin), and five years later, Rush *et al.* (2006) provided a comprehensive follow-up study. More recently, Golden (2022) examined the impact of social disadvantage, risk-taking and masculinity on the involvement of young people in car crime.

This article makes a number of important contributions to the extant literature. First, to the best of the author's knowledge, this paper represents the first time that cultural responses to joyriding in an Irish context have been analysed from a criminological perspective. Second, to date, historical perspectives on joyriding in Ireland have been relatively rare. The aforementioned Rush *et al.* (2006) report valuably situated joyriding in its historical context, while Crotty (2024) also briefly addressed joyriding as part of his history of Spike Island. A more sustained engagement with the history of joyriding has emerged in a Northern Ireland context through the pioneering work of O'Connell (1998; 2006; 2023), and this paper derives significant inspiration from his approach (for further discussions of joyriding in Northern Ireland, see McCullough and Schmidt 1990; Kilpatrick 1994). Third, a victim-centred perspective is largely absent from existing studies of joyriding. By expounding a historical victimology approach, this paper fills this gap.

The paper draws on original archival research gathered from physical (National Archives of Ireland, National Library of Ireland) and digital repositories (Irish Newspaper Archives, Oireachtas [parliamentary] Debates, Raidió Teilifís Éireann [RTÉ] Archives). Primary source material included newspaper articles, televised extracts from current affairs and news

programmes, parliamentary debates, memoirs, cultural artefacts, magazines, official reports, legislation, government correspondence and political party records. This incorporation of diverse material helped to ensure findings were corroborated by other sources and allowed for multiple voices and perspectives on joyriding to emerge (thereby generating a more comprehensive understanding of the 1980s joyriding episode). The dataset comprised detailed notes and direct quotations which were carefully extracted from each source. Reflexive thematic analysis using both semantic and latent coding was then employed. This involved a six-stage recursive process including familiarization with the data; initial coding; generating themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and writing up (Braun and Clarke 2021). Coding was predominantly inductive to allow codes and themes to emerge organically, though the author's research interests in historical and cultural criminology meant that deductive coding premised on the fluidity of time and cultural responses to joyriding was also availed of.

There are significant ethical dilemmas raised by historical victimology. For instance, the naming of victims of joyriding poses an ethical challenge. While reinsertion of forgotten victims into the historical narrative may be regarded as empowering, the 1980s is in living memory and many individuals may suffer undue hurt by being reminded of the deaths and/or injuries of loved ones. Likewise naming those prosecuted for joyriding activities (or those injured or killed while joyriding) raises concern over inadvertent re-stigmatisation. An uneasy resolution to this dilemma has been reached throughout this paper whereby only the names of victims and joyriders who were prominently discussed in newspaper articles or parliamentary debates have been included.

The article first considers the origins of joyriding from the 1920s, highlighting it as an embodied concept which is subject to considerable terminological oscillation. It outlines the social background of joyriding in the 1980s, arguing that a mixture of increased levels of car ownership, media panic and victim mobilisation catalyzed a political response. The Panic Policymaking section examines the legislative and institutional responses to joyriding with particular focus on the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act 1984 and the opening of Fort Mitchel prison. While the former can be seen as a disproportionate measure (especially when compared with penalties for drunk driving), the latter may be viewed as an example of panic policymaking.

The Creativity of Crime section analyses cultural responses to joyriding through the lenses of a play (*Joyriders*, 1987, written by Christina Reid) and film (*Joyriders*, 1988, directed by Aisling Walsh). It introduces the concept of the 'creativity of crime' to illustrate the potential for cultural artefacts to inspire a recursive engagement with data that sheds new light on overlooked dimensions of historical episodes. The final section expounds the wider significance of this episode for historical victimology. While this paper is rooted in an Irish case study, its theoretical significance is not situationally bound. Rather, its positioning of historical time at the epicentre of the episode expands understandings of how past, present and (expectations of the) future coalesce in relation to joyriding and its victims, and its analysis holds potential applicability for jurisdictions beyond Ireland.

DOING THE 'ROAD-HOG': HISTORICAL CONTEXT

At various points, over time 'joyriding' has been associated with pleasure, selfishness and criminality which demonstrates its considerable terminological fluidity. Regarding its pleasurable connotations, as Light *et al.* (1993: 30) noted the original meaning of the term 'joyriding' was 'a pleasure trip in a car or plane'. In similar fashion, the *Drogheda Independent* of 5 April 1924 contained an advertisement for a Raleigh All-Steel Bicycle (prices starting from £8 or 11/6 per month) which 'makes every ride a joyride' (p. 18). This notion of joyriding as a pleasurable activity resurfaced in subsequent decades. In 1967, the Irish Aviation Services organised

'Helicopter Joy Rides' in Co. Cork (*Cork Examiner* 10 June 1967: 21), while in 1983, spectators at an air display event in Co. Kerry had the 'unique opportunity of taking a joyride in an historic Dakota DC3 [aircraft]' (*Kerryman* 29 July 1983: 16). The original meaning of joyriding as a pleasurable activity therefore persisted over time, signifying its protean nature.

In terms of selfishness, joyriding in 1940s Ireland was embodied by the historical context of the Emergency (Second World War). Independent TD for Laois-Offaly Oliver Flanagan expressed outrage that despite wartime rationing of key supplies such as petrol, 'there were people joyriding all over the country' with some even managing to secure 'upwards of 50 and 60 gallons a month' (Dáil debate, 28 May 1946, Vol.101 No.8).[1] In Galway, ambulances were reportedly 'immobilised for lack of petrol while the country is full of "joy riders" who appear to be able to procure all the petrol they require for their idle moments' (*Connacht Tribune* 14 June 1941: 11). Such a breach of rationing measures was depicted as a form of non-altruistic citizenry during the challenging socio-economic circumstances of the Emergency, which highlights the historical specificity of joyriding.

From a criminal perspective, the term joyriding was first used in the USA in 1909 and in the UK in 1912 (Rush *et al.* 2006: 7). In 1920s, Ireland joyriders were prosecuted for offences such as theft of petrol, criminal damage and reckless driving. In July 1927 in Ennis District Court, for instance, a motorist was 'fined £5 for the reckless and negligent driving of a motor car through the streets of Ennis' with District Justice Gleeson describing the driver as doing the 'road-hog' (*Evening Echo* 1 July 1927: 4). By 1930, a perceived 'epidemic of joy-riding' had emerged with two to three cars being stolen in Dublin on a daily basis (*Irish Times* 26 November 1930: 7; McGrath 2013).[2] As a result, the offence of taking a mechanically propelled vehicle without the consent of the owner or lawful authority was first introduced under s.165(1) of the Road Traffic Act, 1933. While bearing in mind the terminological oscillation which surrounded joyriding during the twentieth century, this paper adopts the criminal definition of joyriding as unauthorised taking of a mechanically propelled vehicle [M.P.V.] which is 'primarily motivated by expressive factors' such as thrill and excitement (O'Connell 2006: 455).

Given that 'joyriding' is not a specific offence under Irish law (Rush *et al.* 2006), this activity was usually captured in the Garda [police] Commissioner's (1980-89) *Annual Reports on Crime* under the offence of 'taking of M.P.V. without authority'. The number of persons convicted (or against whom charge was held proved or order made without conviction) for this offence increased by 4% from 1,909 in 1980 to 1,987 in 1982. Between 1983 and 1987, the number of persons convicted decreased by 32% from 1,513 to 1,028, before increasing again in 1988 (see Table 1). These figures are a proxy for joyriding, as it was often difficult to distinguish between the taking of a M.P.V. for purely expressive purposes compared with instrumental ones (such as stealing a car to facilitate a burglary). Furthermore, these figures only capture incidents where a perpetrator was identified, prosecuted and convicted, thus underestimating the true extent of joyriding (O'Mahony 1993).

Echoing the approach adopted by O'Connell (2006), as part of this research the author compiled a database of newspaper reports of joyriding cases which came before the Irish criminal courts. Only cases which took place in the Irish Republic during 1980–89 involved reference to the taking of a M.P.V. without authority and resulted in a conviction were included. Cases involving offenders convicted in Northern Irish courts were excluded. Using Boolean search terms such as 'joyrid*' AND 'court' in the digitised Irish Newspaper Archive, 192 cases involving 302 offenders were identified.

1 The Dáil is Ireland's lower house of parliament.

2 This alignment of motor vehicles and criminality was not unique to Ireland during the 1920s and 1930s; as Brown (2020) has outlined, fear of the so-called 'motor bandit' also pervaded the United Kingdom at this time.

Table 1. Number of persons convicted or against whom charge was held proved or order made without conviction for taking of M.P.V. without authority, 1980–1989

Year	Number of persons	Percentage increase/decrease
1980	1,909	–
1981	1,895	(0.7)
1982	1,987	4.9
1983	1,513	(23.9)
1984	1,572	3.9
1985	1,376	(12.5)
1986	1,079	(21.6)
1987	1,028	(4.7)
1988	1,200	16.7
1989	1,141	(4.9)

Alt text for Table 1: 'Table demonstrating number of persons convicted or against whom charge was held proved or order made without conviction for taking of of a mechanically propelled vehicle without authority in Ireland between 1980 and 1989, showing percentage increases in 1982, 1984, and 1988'.

Information on age, gender, location of offence, etc., was not consistently provided across newspaper sources. As a result, the figures below reflect the percentage of overall cases in which this relevant information was provided. Newspapers did not report on every joyriding case and the small sample size inhibits generalisability. Nevertheless, this database sheds light on the backgrounds of offenders convicted before the courts (as reported by the press), and the areas in which car theft was most prevalent.

The vast majority of defendants were male; female defendants surfaced in just two cases. The ages of defendants ranged from 14 to 50, with a median age of 18. Joyriding was usually a group rather than an individual activity; the offender acted alone in just 24% of cases.[3] The location where the M.P.V. was stolen was reported in 110 cases. As Figure 1 demonstrates, 64% of car thefts occurred in the four counties of Dublin, Cork, Waterford and Galway. In Dublin in particular, while car thefts often occurred in areas perceived as working-class such as Sheriff Street, Ballyfermot and Finglas, thefts also took place in affluent areas such as Castleknock and Malahide (e.g. *Meath Chronicle* 7 November 1981: 16). These findings largely conform with existing studies which position joyriding as a male-dominated, youthful, group activity which is predominantly (though not exclusively) associated with working-class areas (Rush *et al.* 2006).

Three key factors explain why a perceived social crisis surrounding joyriding emerged in the 1980s. The first relates to levels of car ownership. Between 1964 and 1985, the number of private cars under licence increased by 179% from 254,494 to 709,546 (Central Statistics Office 1965, 1986). Rising levels of car ownership meant more opportunities for car theft and joyriding to occur. Moreover, given that motor vehicles symbolize social status, affluence and mobility, for working-class youths, car theft and joyriding may have comprised alternative means to gain socially approved goals (Farrelly 1989).

The second reason was due to a media panic cultivated in newspapers such as the *Evening Herald* (Black 2016). In the 1980s, Managing Director at Independent Newspapers Joe Hayes

3 Data regarding age were provided in 157 cases for 238 defendants, while information about whether the defendant acted alone was provided in 167 cases.

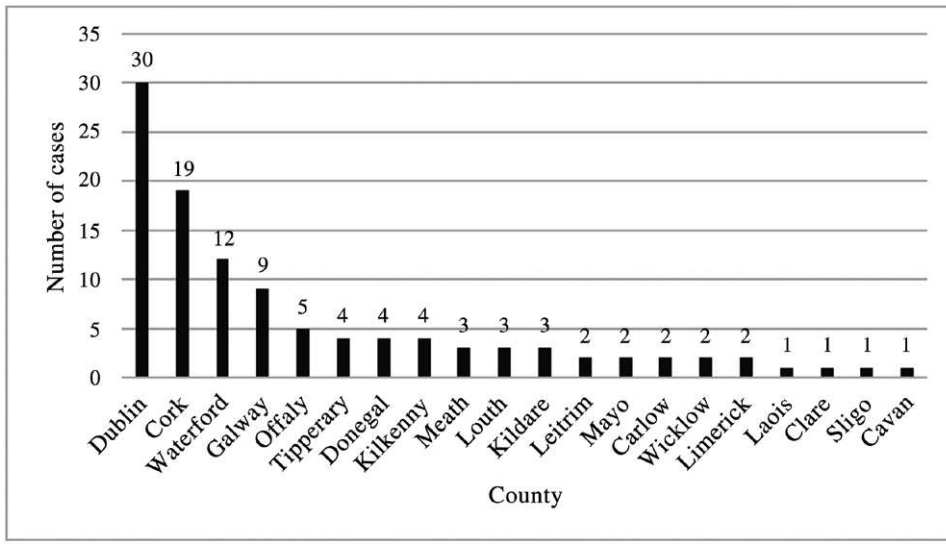

Fig. 1 Counties in which car thefts occurred based on $n = 110$ cases

sought to make the *Herald* a 'livelier, more sensational paper' that would appeal to young middle-class readers, and crime became a particular topic of focus (Kerrigan and Shaw 1985: 18). Newspaper headlines from the *Herald* and other Independent Group newspapers pertaining to joyriding during this period included 'Dublin's Motor Mania' (*Evening Herald* 21 September 1982: 6) and 'Dodgems of Death Syndrome' (*Irish Independent* 13 March 1985: 8). While provincial papers also engaged in this sensationalist rhetoric (e.g. *The Western Journal* 24 September 1982: 5), this widespread media panic did not accurately reflect prevailing crime trends. As Table 1 has demonstrated, apart from percentage increases in 1982, 1984 and 1988, the number of persons convicted for joyriding largely declined during the 1980s.

A third reason for the perceived crisis surrounding joyriding in the 1980s which has often been overlooked is the role of victim mobilisation. In March 1983, Peter Collins, a factory manager, was killed in a collision with a stolen car. Six weeks later, the victim's brother-in-law, Noel Kennelly, submitted a petition to the Department of Justice signed by ~4,000 people calling on the government to strengthen laws on joyriding (Department of the Taoiseach 1983a). In February 1985, the death of schoolteacher Dermot Lea in Swords following a collision with joyriders 'galvanised public opinion' even further against car thieves (*Irish Independent* 7 December 1985: 5). Alongside others such as Philip Eccles, Tony Lea, Gertrude Shields, Angela Mulkere and Chris Moran, Kennelly formed a group in March 1985 known as the Concerned People for Law and Order [CPLO] (*Sunday Press* 31 March 1985: 13; *Evening Herald* 22 March 1985: 30).

One of the first activities of the CPLO was to organize a candle-lit procession from the Garden of Remembrance to Leinster House in Dublin on 27 March 1985 in which around 4,000 people participated (*Irish Press* 28 March 1985: 4). A follow-up protest march was organized in May 1985, but just 300 people took part (*Irish Independent* 7 December 1985: 5; *Evening Herald* 29 May 1985: 6). CPLO Chairman Tony Lea claimed that the organisation intended to form a new political party to compete in the next election on a 'crime ticket', but this did not materialise (*Evening Herald* 29 May 1985: 6).

Apart from this March 1985 procession, the CPLO failed to mobilize large numbers of citizens to its cause. One of the main reasons for this was that the CPLO expanded to become a

catch-all organisation. Among the marchers to Government Buildings during the May 1985 protest march were the parents of Declan Flynn, a young man who was killed in Fairview Park, Dublin in 1983 in a homophobic attack (*Evening Herald* 29 May 1985: 6). While this expanded remit had the potential to widen the group's appeal to a broader range of citizens, a generic stance in favour of law and order was perhaps less potent than a concentrated effort to address the specific issue of joyriding. Although attempts were made to reinvigorate CPLO in September 1987 following the deaths of two ten-year-old boys caused by joyriders in Ballyfermot, by the end of the 1980s the organisation had largely fizzled out (*Irish Press* 2 September 1987: 1).

The CPLO emerged to the historical backdrop of the victims' movement which was gaining traction in 1980s Ireland (Kilcommins *et al.* 2018). Its emergence may also have been inspired by a grassroots organisation known as the Concerned Parents Against Drugs [CPAD] which had mobilised in Dublin two years earlier. CPAD similarly engaged in public demonstrations and expressed concern over the perceived ineffectiveness of the state in upholding law and order (Lyder 2005). While the CPLO therefore emerged in an opportune historical context which was receptive to the voices of victims, the circumstances of its mobilization hindered its sustainability.

PANIC POLICYMAKING

The principal legislative and institutional responses to the 1980s joyriding episode were the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act 1984 and the opening of Fort Mitchel prison. Regarding the former, Noel Kennelly's earlier campaign in 1983 partially contributed to legislative change surrounding joyriding. In his submission to the Department of Justice in May 1983, Kennelly made a number of suggestions including allowing for offenders to be prosecuted if they interfered with a mechanically propelled vehicle in a private as well as a public place, and for a mandatory sentence of five years' imprisonment to be introduced for car theft (*Irish Independent* 21 April 1983: 3; Department of the Taoiseach 1983a). The Department of Justice initially mislaid Kennelly's petition, and it was only on 9 June 1983 that the Secretary for the Minister of Justice responded to Kennelly assuring him that the joyriding situation was 'of particular concern' and that his suggestions would be taken into consideration (Department of the Taoiseach 1983b). While this bureaucratic delay was unfortunate, the measures eventually outlined in the 1984 Act reflected a number of Kennelly's recommendations.

The Road Traffic (Amendment) Act, 1984 significantly increased the penalty for taking a mechanically propelled vehicle without consent. Under s.165(1) of the Road Traffic Act 1933 and later s.112 of the Road Traffic Act, 1961 (as amended by s.65 of the Road Traffic Act, 1968), taking a vehicle without authority rendered the offender subject to a maximum fine of £50 and maximum sentence of six months' imprisonment on summary conviction. The 1984 Act, however, increased the maximum fine to £1,000 and the maximum sentence to 12 months' imprisonment for summary conviction. A maximum fine of £2,000 and a maximum sentence of five years' imprisonment was introduced for conviction on indictment, and vehicles no longer had to be in a 'public place' for a charge of unauthorised interference with the mechanism of a vehicle to be laid. These changes largely mirrored Kennelly's suggestions (though the five-year sentence introduced under s.3(7) was not mandatory). This highlighted the impact of victim mobilisation on the development of seemingly 'new' solutions to the recurrent social problem of joyriding. Given wider pressures on the government to tackle joyriding from the media, however, Kennelly's campaign may be deemed a contributing though not an exclusive cause of the new legislation.

These increased penalties for taking a vehicle without consent were relatively disproportionate compared with drunk driving. The maximum fine for drunk driving under s.10(4)(a) of

the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act, 1978 was £500 and the maximum sentence was merely six months. An episode of the television programme *Slants* broadcast on 18 June 1985 outlined that while no more than three people had been killed by joyriders in the previous twelve months, 600 people had died in car crashes and 40% of drivers killed in these crashes had blood alcohol levels over the legal limit (RTÉ Archives 1985a). Class differences seemingly lay at the heart of this disproportionality. Whereas the joyrider was 'poor [...] a barbarian and an invader who will wreak havoc on our suburban streets', ordinary drunken drivers 'are not sinister or alien. They're familiar figures and you could meet them in your local pub any night of the week' (*Irish Independent* 21 May 1987: 8). This binary distinction between the socially deprived joyrider and middle-class drunk driver, however, is perhaps overly reductionist given that some joyriders who came before the criminal courts were described by judges as having a 'respectable' (presumably middle-class) background (*Cork Examiner* 20 February 1987: 5).

While the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act, 1984 constituted the main legislative response to the joyriding episode, the opening of Fort Mitchel prison was the key institutional response. Located on the 104-acre Spike Island and situated near the mainland of Cobh town, the prison was designated by the media as the 'Alcatraz of Cork Harbour' (RTÉ Archives 1985b; McCullagh 1992). Named after Irish nationalist writer John Mitchel who was detained there in 1848 before being transported to Van Diemen's Land (Quinn 2012 [2009]), the opening of Fort Mitchel served as an example of panic policymaking, namely a reactive and myopic response to a social problem. There were various features of this panic policymaking, including confusion over the prison's purpose and a poor prisoner selection process.

In terms of the prison's purpose, on 15 March 1985, a Department of Justice official claimed that detainees would mainly comprise those who had committed joyriding offences and were sentenced to a year's imprisonment and under (RTÉ Archives 1985c). A fortnight later, a Government Information Service spokesman contacted by the *Irish Press* newspaper clarified that while 'some joyriders' would be sent to Fort Mitchel, 'it was never the Government's intention to use the island 'exclusively' to imprison 'joyriders'' (*Irish Press* 28 March 1985: 8). By mid-April 1985 of 28 prisoners on the island, just 50% had been convicted of car theft (*Evening Herald* 18 April 1985: 1). Fort Mitchel opened in the context of accommodation pressures on the penal system, with the daily average prison population increasing by 51% from 1,236 in 1982 to 1,863 in 1985 (O'Donnell *et al.* 2005: 152–3). While it was therefore used for a broad range of prisoners, perceptions aligning Fort Mitchel exclusively with joyriders persisted over time (Farrelly 1989; RTÉ Radio 1 2022).

Even if the prison was not intended to exclusively hold joyriders, the selection process of prisoners deemed suitable for Fort Mitchel proved problematic. In May 1985, Minister for Justice Michael Noonan told the Dáil that only offenders serving short sentences, or 'a large portion of longer sentences' who would soon be released into the community, would be deemed suitable for the island (Dáil debate 30 May 1985, Vol.359 No.1). This selection process was called into question by a riot which occurred in September 1985. At around 12.15 am on the morning of 1 September, prisoners escaped from Dormitory 5 of the prison's 'A' Block and within an hour there was a 'full-scale riot in progress' (Select Committee 1986: 3.4–3.6). The dormitory accommodation in 'A' Block was set on fire, prison records were destroyed, the reception area and main gate were set alight, and a hut located on the island's pier was decimated. Prisoners climbed onto the roof of the officers' quarters and remained there until 6.40 pm that evening (Department of Justice 1985; Select Committee 1986: 3.12–3.13). The riot reportedly came to an end when a prisoner's mother was brought by boat to Spike Island. She yelled at her son to get off the roof; he complied; other prisoners followed; and order was finally restored (Cuffe 2017: 115). The episode highlighted that prisoners convicted of serious crimes including armed robbery, manslaughter and kidnapping were being held on the island (Select Committee 1986: Appendix J).

As PJ McEvoy of the Prison Officers' Association noted, while the Minister claimed a selection process was in place for prisoners, the prisoners selected had tried to burn the prison to the ground (RTÉ Archives 1985d). This undermined Fort Mitchel's (aspirational) reputation as a secure island prison, and it overall proved a panicked and poorly planned response to the joyriding episode.

THE CREATIVITY OF CRIME

While cultural responses to joyriding in 1980s Ireland were manifold and variegated, this paper focuses primarily on a play (*Joyriders*, written by Christina Reid) and film (*Joyriders*, directed by Aisling Walsh). These cultural artefacts were chosen because they received widespread press coverage during the 1980s and comprised two of the earliest pop cultural works to address the joyriding episode in an Irish context.[4] Published and released, respectively, in 1987 and 1988, these works offer valuable insights into how historical context shaped representations of joyriding and victimhood.

Reid's play centres around the lives of four youths involved in a Youth Training Programme (YTP) based in Belfast's Lagan Linen Mill, namely Sandra, Maureen, Tommy and Arthur, and their interactions with the hard-working (if disillusioned) YTP leader Kate. These youths hold convictions for petty crime and joyriding and live in the Divis Flats complex, which in the 1980s was described as 'the worst housing development in Western Europe' (Reid 1997 [1987]: 102). During the period 1968 to 1998, a violent sectarian conflict known as the Troubles took place in Northern Ireland which resulted in the deaths of at least 3,500 people. The Troubles form a powerful backdrop to Reid's play; Tommy suffers a punishment beating inflicted by members of the Irish Republican Army [IRA], Arthur receives £70,000 in compensation having been injured when members of the British Army opened fire on a joyrider, while at the end of the play Maureen is tragically killed when the Army opens fire on her brother, Johnnie, who is joyriding in a stolen car (Reid 1997 [1987]). Reid's emphasis on the socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds of these youths invokes sympathy and blurs any perceived binary between victim and offender. In 1988, the Yew Theatre Company toured the west and south-west of Ireland with Reid's play, performing to acclaim in venues such as the Nun's Island Arts Centre in Galway, Belltable Arts Centre in Limerick, Granary Theatre in Cork, and Garter Lane Theatre in Waterford (*City Tribune* 29 April 1988: 11; *Limerick Leader* 30 April 1988: 42; *Cork Examiner* 14 September 1988: 11; *Munster Express* 16 September 1988: 13).

In contrast to Reid's play, Walsh's film was a romance rather than a tragedy. The plot centres around Mary Flynn who leaves her abusive husband and travels to the west of Ireland with a joyrider named Perky Rice. Gender politics feature strongly throughout the film—Mary's two children Finbar and Dolores are taken into an orphanage because she lacks financial resources to care for them, two sailors in a café solicit Mary for some 'specialised entertainment', and she is sexually harassed by the manager of a hotel where she works as a hostess (Walsh 1988). Kuhn and Radstone (1990: 417) described the film as 'distinctly rooted in the post-abortion referendum' which occurred in 1983 and whereby a right to life amendment was inserted into the constitution. The defeated divorce referendum of 1986, which had sought to remove a constitutional prohibition on divorce, also formed a backdrop to the film (RTÉ Archives 1988). By the end of the film Perky and Mary have fallen in love and Perky finds that he has lost his ability to steal cars; 'Me nerve's gone, I can't do it anymore. For the first time in my life I've got

4 The film *Accelerator*, directed by Vinny Murphy, addressed the phenomenon of joyriding on both sides of the Irish border. While the film's release date of 1999 is outside the periodisation of this paper, see Miller (2010) for discussion of this cultural artefact.

something to lose' (Walsh 1988). The victims of Perky and Mary's joyriding exploits are problematically ignored by the film. While the film was largely praised as an excellent 'directorial debut' by Walsh, some commentators criticized it for having 'more to do with the romantic connotations of the word joyrider rather than the joyriders that get reported in the news' (*Evening Herald* 27 April 1988: 11; *Irish Farmers Journal* 19 November 1988: 61).

The study of cultural representations of crime enjoys a vibrant literature (Ferrell and Sanders 1995). One of the earliest cultural representations of joyriding was Kenneth Grahame's children's book *The Wind in the Willows* (McBride 2000), while joyriding also functioned as a key case study for early cultural criminologists interested in the edgework which underpins this activity (Presdee 2000). Previous academic references to 'creative criminals' (Cropley and Cropley 2013) or the 'experiential creativity' of crime (Katz 1988: 8), respectively, alluded to the innovative measures used by offenders to achieve their goals and the phenomenology of lawbreaking. In contrast, the concept of the creativity of crime as used in this paper moves beyond the study of cultural representations and offender perspectives to consider the potential for cultural artefacts to inspire a recursive engagement with data that sheds light on overlooked dimensions of historical episodes.

Reid's play and Walsh's film offer an excellent illustration of the creativity of crime in operation. The two most prominent themes which emerged from these works were the Troubles and gender politics, respectively. These themes were not immediately identified in the study's initial process of data analysis, which necessitates caution; given that the themes were not broadly or explicitly reflected throughout the dataset, they may be regarded as exceptions rather than norms. Nevertheless, upon analysing Reid's play and Walsh's film, reflecting on their main themes, and returning to the dataset to purposefully search for any traces of these ideas, relevant (and hitherto overlooked) empirical findings emerged. These findings contribute valuable knowledge to our understanding of historical representations of joyriding and victimhood in an Irish context.

In terms of the impact of the Troubles, the press reported on various joyriding incidents which took place in Northern Ireland. In April 1980 for instance, the *Irish Independent* (2 April 1980: 13) reported on how British soldiers in West Belfast killed a fifteen-year-old joyrider who drove a stolen Ford Escort through an army checkpoint. In February 1985 following the killing of a 19-year-old joyrider in Belfast by members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, Minister for Foreign Affairs Peter Barry complained to the British government that 'there must be effective ways of stopping joyriders without resorting to killing them' (*Irish Independent* 9 February 1985: 1). The Troubles were also invoked as a tool of delegitimisation to undermine the efforts of political parties such as Sinn Féin in tackling joyriding. In July 1987, Minister Barry criticised Sinn Féin's 'joyriding kills' campaign in Cork and other areas as 'cynical', claiming that 'the Provisional IRA [perceived as Sinn Féin's militant wing] were the real killers in this island, and had taken far more lives, both Protestant and Catholic, than an army of joyriders' (*Irish Independent* 14 July 1987: 3). The Troubles therefore shaped perceptions of joyriding in Ireland in myriad ways through press content, Ministerial statements and political point scoring.

The Troubles also influenced social constructions of victimhood. In Belfast in 1990, 18-year-old Karen Reilly and 17-year-old Martin Peake were shot dead when they drove through an army checkpoint. Nationalist political parties in Northern Ireland criticized the soldiers' actions, with Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) Councillor Dr Joe Hendron telling RTÉ news that 'no joyrider ever has been a member of a paramilitary organisation' (RTÉ Archives 1990). Relative to the paramilitaries, Reilly and Peake were innocent victims of excessive force, which further illustrates the impact of the Troubles on representations of joyriding and victimhood. This case received widespread and sympathetic coverage in the Republic, with Taoiseach [prime minister] Charles Haughey expressing his distress over the deaths of these young people (*Irish*

Press 2 October 1990: 1). In the context of the Troubles and in comparison with paramilitaries, joyriders could therefore acquire the status of deserving victims.

Victimhood manifested in complex ways on both sides of the Irish border. Joyriders who were beaten or killed by paramilitary groups such as the IRA did not achieve victim status in many communities in Northern Ireland. With regard to the aforementioned case, 17-year-old Martin Peake had reportedly received a punishment beating from the IRA in January 1990 for his joyriding activities. He was beaten with iron bars, resulting in his arm and leg being broken (*Belfast News-Letter* 2 October 1990: 9). In 1985, a 19-year old joyrider died after being shot in the back and legs by the IRA (*Belfast Telegraph* 19 December 1985: 7). In 1987 alone, it was estimated that 124 punishment shootings and 60 beatings were 'carried out on car thieves by loyalist and republican paramilitary groups' (*Belfast News-Letter* 19 November 1988: 7). There were often high levels of community support for these paramilitary punishments. In his ethnographic study of Divis Flats (the setting of Reid's play), Jeffrey Sluka (2009 [1989]:120) found that 76.9% of residents felt paramilitaries were needed 'to help control antisocial behaviour'. In these communities, joyriders who suffered at the hands of paramilitaries were not regarded as deserving victims, which indicates the historical contingency and complexity of victimhood. Overall, while the impact of the Troubles on representations of joyriding and victimhood in the Republic of Ireland has been neglected to date, recursive engagement with cultural artefacts such as Reid's play enables these important dimensions to be incorporated into the historical narrative.

In terms of gender politics, gendered language relating to abortion and sexual violence surfaced in newspaper articles on joyriding. A letter to the editor of the *Irish Press* (5 March 1984: 24) outlined that: 'The term "joy-riding" obscures the meaning of the crime [...] As with replacing abortion with "termination", one removes the plausibility of the offence. The public should be wary of brainwashing and dangerous jargon being applied to crimes'. This letter reflected the contentious debates which had waged between pro-life and pro-choice factions in the context of the 1983 abortion referendum (Barry 1988). It further highlights how the male letter-writer's personal, pro-life views influenced his interpretation of the (misnamed) joyriding phenomenon. While it must be stressed that this example was an exception in the dataset, it nevertheless signals the diverse and context-specific representations of joyriding which surfaced during this era.

Moreover, from a historical victimology perspective, a *Drogheda Independent* article entitled 'Joyriders Beware' described a male victim whose car had been stolen by joyriders in the following terms:

> He is a man who has just been raped - or to be more exact he has just experienced what psychologists believe is the nearest a man can get to being raped - his car has been stolen and vandalised by a joyrider out for a bit of fun (*Drogheda Independent* 20 February 1981: 18).

This statement by the newspaper is highly problematic given that it undermines the extensive trauma suffered by victims of sexual violence and denies that men can be victims of rape (Burgess and Carretta 2016; Weare 2018). Yet in the historical context of 1980s Ireland, the statement was not entirely inaccurate. Rape crime first entered the statute books in 1275 as a property crime which depreciated the market value of a potential (virginal) bride. The perception of rape as a violation of individual bodily integrity was only cemented from a judicial perspective by a Supreme Court decision in the *DPP v Tiernan* case in 1988 (Molloy 2018). While offensive and discomfiting by today's standards, this alignment of car theft with rape crime by the *Drogheda Independent* demonstrates how prevailing gender politics permeated representations of victimhood during this era.

Overall, the concept of the creativity of crime contributes valuable empirical insights and reaffirms the need to pay due regard to historical context given its power to shape representations of joyriding and victimhood in 1980s Ireland. It also imparts methodological benefits. As Christie (1997: 19) has argued, over-reliance on official sources which have already been 'processed by authorities' can inhibit insightful findings. In comparison, drawing on unexpected or unintended data sources such as cultural artefacts can function as a form of member-checking to ensure the analysis incorporates alternative interpretations of social phenomena.

HISTORICAL VICTIMOLOGY

Placing temporality at the heart of the analytical lens not only enhances understanding of the mercurial representations of joyriding in 1980s Ireland but also holds wider theoretical significance for historical victimology. Victimhood is not an absolute status but rather is contingent, contextual and often contested (Hall 2011). Peter Collins, whose brother-in-law Noel Kennelly initiated a campaign for legislative change (see Doing the 'Road-Hog': Historical Context section), was described by a Department of the Taoiseach civil servant as 'the first innocent person to be killed by a car being driven by joy-riders' (Department of the Taoiseach 1983c). Joyriders themselves, however, were rarely considered as victims. Given the 'deprived backgrounds' that many of these youths came from (Dáil debate 11 June 1985, Vol.359 No.6), from a broader zemiological perspective, they may be regarded as victims of socio-economic inequalities fostered by state structural violence. This vantage point, however, gained little support during the period. The concept of victimhood is inherently exclusionary and the perspectives it omits are often as telling as those that it includes.

The timing of victimhood matters. In June 1985, 62-year-old Bridget Fitzpatrick was killed by joyriders, two of whom were later charged with her manslaughter. Bridget Fitzpatrick in many ways constituted an 'ideal victim' (Christie 1986). She was female, engaging in respectable activity (cycling home from work) and could not be regarded as blameworthy (working as a voluntary nurse) (RTÉ Archives 1985e). She also held political capital in the sense that she was the widow of a Garda and her son was a serving member of the force. In spite of this, her death was framed by policymakers as an isolated incident. The Minister for Justice said that while the incident was a tragic one, 'the problem of so-called joyriding was being effectively tackled' which meant no political response was required (*Evening Herald* 19 June 1985: 1). Fort Mitchel had opened two months previously, and the September 1985 riot which undermined any perceived efficacy surrounding the prison was still over two months away. Had the death of Bridget Fitzpatrick occurred two months earlier or later, her victimhood would likely have been catapulted from an isolated tragedy to a collective rallying point in the debate over joyriding.

The significance of the 1980s episode for historical victimology further extends to understandings of social amnesia, namely 'society's repression of remembrance' (Jacoby 2017 [1975]: 5). This form of collective forgetting, which disavows history and regards the present as unprecedented, aligns with 'presentism', namely the elevation of 'contemporary phenomena above any historical antecedent' (Yeomans 2019: 457). Jacoby (2017 [1975]: xi) identified two forms of social amnesia, namely 'a forgetting of the past and a pseudo-historical consciousness'. Both forms are visible in the renewed media and political attention which surrounded joyriding in Ireland in the early 2000s.

By April 2001, the *Evening Herald* claimed that the 'Joyriding menace [was] back with a bang', though as journalist Michael Mulqueen noted, 'the statistics which show joyriding at a 15-year high made nothing like the headlines of 1985' (*Evening Herald* 12 April 2001: 32). This seeming lack of extensive media attention, however, changed in April 2002 when Gardaí Anthony Tighe and Michael Padden were killed by two youths driving a stolen vehicle on Dublin's Stillorgan

Road. There was understandably a huge outpouring of grief and sympathy following the deaths of the two Gardaí. Taoiseach Bertie Ahern paid tribute to the officers as making 'the ultimate sacrifice, dying in the service of their country' (*Evening Herald* 18 April 2002: 3). Yet, a tacit forgetting of the past was evident in the sense that Tighe and Padden were not the first Garda victims to be killed by joyriders. In April 1983, Detective Garda Thomas Lawn was killed on Griffith Avenue in north Dublin when pursuing a stolen Ford Cortina driven by three youths (*Evening Herald* 27 April 1983: 1). Lawn's death, however, received nowhere near the same level of media or political attention.

The proximity of the May 2002 general election may explain the disparate levels of attention given to these similar incidents. A Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats coalition had come to power in 1997 promising a 'zero tolerance' approach to crime (RTÉ Archives 1997). Yet, the continuation of joyriding lent the impression that Minister for Justice John O'Donoghue was 'presiding over a growing wave of youth lawlessness and criminal misbehaviour' (Dáil debate 4 April 2000, Vol.517 No.3). This impression was further exacerbated when 17-year-old Tanya Nunan was killed by joyriders in early May 2002 (*Irish Independent* 7 May 2002: 8). In the context of the 2002 election, the deaths of Tighe, Padden and Nunan necessitated a visible and immediate political response to reassure the electorate that the coalition was committed to its promised law and order agenda. This episode highlights the value of historical victimology in shedding light on the contingent dynamics which underpin the social recognition of victimhood (see Strobl 2010).

A pseudo-historical consciousness was also evident in comments made by then leader of Fine Gael Michael Noonan. According to Noonan, 'When I was Minister for Justice I challenged a mindset which had failed to deal with an epidemic of car stealing. Spike Island was opened as a juvenile detention centre and the problem stopped within two months' (*Limerick Leader* 8 May 2002: 5). While the opening of Fort Mitchel was factually accurate, the notion that it proved a panacea for joyriding was not. Noonan's comment, made approximately ten days before a general election, demonstrated an expedient and myopic attempt to reimagine the past for political gain.

Similar to the 1980s episode, both legislative and institutional change was proposed in response to this incident. In terms of legislative change, Labour Party TD Tommy Broughan introduced the Road Traffic (Joyriding) Bill 2002. This Bill sought to make joyriding a specific criminal offence with a maximum sentence of seven years for conviction on indictment. It also sought to criminalise the sale of company cars (namely 'clapped out old bangers and older vehicles') to young people (Dáil debate, 4 April 2000, Vol.517 No.3; Road Traffic (Joyriding) Bill, 2002, No.27). A previous version of this Bill had been introduced by Broughan following the deaths of Labour Party activist Richard Greene and his daughter Christine in 1999 by joyriders (Labour Party 2000). This Bill, however, as well as its 2002 iteration, were defeated in the Dáil. Labour's political status as an opposition party meant its espousal of victim-inspired legislation failed to gain traction.

In terms of institutional change, Minister O'Donoghue proposed the establishment of a detention centre to hold 20 young offenders under the age of 16 involved in joyriding and burglaries. St Patrick's Institution in Dublin was suggested as the optimal location for this centre (*Irish Independent* 18 April 2002: 12), and €10 million (~£12.6 million in today's currency) was reportedly spent on converting part of St Patrick's Institution into a place of detention for joyriders. The centre was scheduled to open in September 2002, but by 2005, it remained empty; opposition from the Irish Penal Reform Trust, a non-governmental organisation, may have contributed to the shelving of this plan (*Irish Independent* 7 May 2005: 1; *Irish Examiner* 1 November 2003: 7). While the failure to open a prison for joyriders in 2002 was a welcome move, O'Donoghue's ill-fated proposal, coming less than two decades after the opening of Fort

Mitchel, demonstrated an amnesiac tendency towards ahistoricity. Fort Mitchel had done little to dispel joyriding or prevent further victimisation; any belief that a 'new' place of detention for young offenders would achieve these aims was misguided at best.

CONCLUSION

The study of joyriding offers a promising avenue by which the complexities of historical time and nuances of historical victimology can be assayed. As Jackson (2019: 111) has commented, 'the lurch into motion [of the automobile] provides both a (dangerously) obvious metaphor for the analytical shift from the synchronic to the diachronic' and serves as a reminder that 'temporal experience is plural'. Accordingly, throughout this paper, the fluid and multidimensional nature of historical time has been foregrounded. Given this episode's wide-ranging antecedents and reverberations—from the oscillating meanings associated with joyriding over the course of the twentieth century, to the disavowal of history that surfaced in a similar episode almost two decades later—it has proven impossible to contain this analysis exclusively to the 1980s. While periodization provides an essential 'skeletal system' for historical analysis, a move beyond reliance on neat epochal divisions is necessitated to unearth the multiple and shifting meanings of joyriding over time (Green 1992: 53).

Loader (2025) has called for the automobile to adopt a more central role in criminological analysis, and likewise analysis of joyriding holds considerable potential for historical victimology. A historical victimology approach restores the victim as an active agent in constructions of joyriding; positions victim mobilization as a catalyst of seemingly 'new' solutions to recurrent problems; underscores how the creativity of crime facilitates reinterpretation of victimhood as a relative and historically contingent construct; and emphasizes how the forgetting of victims sheds light on tendencies towards social amnesia. Historical victimology therefore offers a parallel and complementary means by which to expand and diversify historical criminology's analysis of fluid temporalities.

Many of the victims of this episode in 1980s Ireland still remain invisible, which highlights the crucial need for more sustained victim-centred perspectives of joyriding to be written. Incorporating the voices of victims' family members could provide new perspectives on the impact and legacies of joyriding (O'Connell 2023), in addition to addressing some of the ethical concerns raised by the naming of victims. Study of the memorialisation of joyriding could also prove beneficial. For instance, in West Belfast in 2002, a monument dedicated to victims of car crime was unveiled (BBC News 2002); while in Bristol in 2017, an 'impromptu pavement memorial' for an 18-year-old youth killed on a stolen motorbike was established (BBC News 2018).[5] The memorialization of joyriding in Ireland has been overlooked in existing literature, and future studies could further a historical victimology approach through this lens.

While this paper has focused on a case study of joyriding in 1980s Ireland, its insights bear relevance across time and space. Joyriding has not disappeared in Ireland, and new forms of this behaviour have emerged over time. By 2008 for instance, boy racers, namely youths who 'invest significant amounts of money and time into reconditioning second-hand cars', were described as 'the new joyriders' (Rush *et al.* 2006: 19; *Sunday Independent* 18 May 2008: 10). As recently as January 2022, the *Irish Independent* (13 January 2022: 6) reported on the emergence of a 'joyriding epidemic' in west Dublin, indicating that insights gleaned from the 1980s episode continue to bear relevance for the present.

Moreover, joyriding was not unique to Ireland during this period. During the latter decades of the twentieth century, various jurisdictions grappled with perceived social crises

5 The author is grateful to an anonymous peer reviewer for these suggestions.

surrounding this activity. In Newark, New Jersey joyriding increased from the late 1980s and by 1992 the city had the highest rate of car theft in the USA at 5,094 thefts per 100,000 people (Greene 1994; O'Connell 2023). In Oxford, car thefts increased by 10% between January and July 1991 and joyriding episodes and riots which took place in Blackbird Leys housing estate received extensive media attention (Campbell 1993; Groombridge 1997). In Saudi Arabia, joyriding became a 'nationwide phenomenon' in the 1970s, and by 1998, the police issued one ticket every 11 minutes for joyriding (Menoret 2019: 138). The analysis contained within this paper therefore holds potential applicability to other jurisdictions, and a cross-national study, which adopts a historical victimology approach to joyriding, would yield significant profit.

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