

I'm too scared to show my face, they might come back and kill me

Locals living in terror... but when will their Garda station reopen?

WRECKED LIFE: Pensioner John Byrne thought he was going to die

By **Debbie McCann**

CRIME CORRESPONDENT

PENSIONER John Byrne tentatively agrees to a silhouette picture. The frail and nervous 68-year-old had his life turned upside down when three men burst into his home as he was getting ready for bed. The event is on his mind 'constantly' and he 'shakes' with fear when he recalls their threats to come back and 'kill him' if he lied about having no money.

The retired council worker had been quietly enjoying his retirement in rural Co. Carlow, after over 40 years working in a meat factory and later in the county council.

That was until eight months ago when the men burst into his isolated home by prising open his back window with a screwdriver. They shoved him into his bathroom and locked the door. There he

'I was too afraid to live in my house any more'

stayed for more than nine and a half hours, 'sure' they would carry out their threat to kill him.

Soon after, Mr Byrne fled his home and sought refuge in a care home. He now has a panic button strapped to his wrist. 'They destroyed my life. I think about it every minute of every day,' he told the Irish Mail on Sunday.

'I lived in that house for 40 years but I couldn't live there any more.

'The robbers are back down the M9 before you get a response. It's a joke'



SINCE their garda station shut its door four years ago the people of Leighlinbridge have been forced to rely on a part-time station in Bagenalstown, 5km in the opposite direction to the motorway locals fear is being used by travelling criminals; Carlow Garda Station, more than 12km away cross county, and Tullow, over 20km away.

The closest station is six minutes away by car. Carlow and Tullow are 15 minutes and 20 minutes away respectively.

One man who works in a shop said he rings Bagenalstown first and, if that fails, is transferred to either Carlow or Tullow. 'Sure the lads who did the robbing are down the motorway before you get a response. It's a joke,' he said.

Another man told how Bagenalstown covers an area that extends as far as Myshall – 20km from Leighlinbridge.

'Even when you do get through there, the one car they have could be covering

an incident in Myshall, but you need them in Leighlinbridge.

'If our station does open, we need gardaí to police it.'

He added: 'Carlow is further down the motorway but, if an incident happens here, they respond here. If they were to cut someone off on the motorway, you'd have to be able to supply them with the details they need, like car type and registration number.'

A retired garda told how he remembers a time when there was a sergeant and three gardaí stationed in Leighlinbridge.

'I was stationed in it. It is a real shame it is closed. We are supposed to work in the community.' Another local added that the only garda they see in Leighlinbridge is a young garda who lives in the town but is stationed elsewhere.

'The only time we see a garda round here is when she is dropping her children to school.'

They told me they would be back – that frightened me worse. I am a nervous sort of a lad anyway, so this really knocked me. I had a dog but I had to give him away. This place wouldn't have suited him. I was very sorry to say goodbye.'

Mr Byrne decided to tell his story in the hope it will put pressure on the Government to reopen his local Garda station at Leighlinbridge.

Another man who wants the station reopened is Art O'Connor, who runs the local post office. He was robbed three times in two months last year and, in one horrifying

incident, was struck on the head with either a hammer or an imitation firearm. He told the MoS he was 'lucky to be alive' after two raiders burst in with a hammer and a gun. Agreeing that the motorway has resulted in some of the crime in the area, he said he is 'lucky to be alive' after his ordeals.

'The first guy sentenced for raiding my shop got a total of seven years,' he added, 'but the sentences were to run concurrently and he was out in a year. It's a joke.'

Leighlinbridge Garda Station – which is among more than 130 sta-

tions closed around the country – has been named in an interim Garda report recommending its reopening because of an increase in population, its proximity to the M9 and vulnerability to mobile criminals.

Also named in the report was Stepside in south Dublin – the constituency of Transport Minister Shane Ross – which the Government reopened head of the other stations named in the report. These include Leighlinbridge, Donard in Co. Wicklow and Rush in north Dublin.

John Byrne knows little about the

politics involved in reopening Garda stations but feels strongly about Leighlinbridge. He told the MoS he has not seen a Garda in the town since the station closed in 2013 and that seeing it reopened would give him 'peace of mind'.

'We'd all love to see it open,' agreed Mr O'Connor.

Other locals, while hopeful, couldn't help being sceptical.

'Will the station ever open?' asked one man, who didn't want to be named. 'I'm not so sure – we don't have a TD in the town.'

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Bankrupt Seán Dunne living with wife Gayle, argues official

THE official handling bust developer Seán Dunne's bankruptcy in Ireland believes that the father of seven and his 'estranged' second wife, Gayle Dunne, are living in the same £5m exclusive mansion in the UK.

When the case comes before the court tomorrow, Official Assignee Christopher Lehane will apply to have the 63-year-old's bankruptcy extended by the maximum time

By **Valerie Hanley**

possible because he believes that Mr Dunne has 'knowingly given an incorrect address' and failed to co-operate with him.

These claims are in an affidavit sworn by Mr Lehane on September 18 and are publicly available on the bankruptcy file.

If the bid to have Dunne's bankruptcy extended by the maximum amount of time possible succeeds, it will mean that the Carlow-born developer will be 67 before he is able to make a fresh financial start.

In his affidavit, Mr Lehane states: 'I believe that his current address is in the UK, despite the fact that his affidavit claims he still lives in New York.'

He swore that Gayle Dunne's solicitors provided him with a handwritten note, indicating her address. Mr Lehane added: 'The note purported to include the address of the bankrupt' (Seán Dunne).

In May, the Irish Mail on Sunday revealed that she was living in a mansion set in more than three acres of wooded gardens in the English stockbroker belt of Surrey.

the mother of his grandchildren attacked and his beside him. In the war against rural crime, he says...

OR BE KILLED

sergeant and five gardaí in the Ferbane Garda Station. There was a sergeant and garda in Ballinahown. There was a sergeant and five gardaí in Banagher. There was a sergeant and two gardaí in Cloghan, and Shannonbridge had a sergeant and a garda. Now Shannonbridge is closed. Ballinahown is closed and there is a sergeant and one garda operating in Ferbane. Banagher has

'Over 300 people turned up with stories to tell'

a sergeant and two gardaí. We came through a recession in the 1980s and I cannot understand why gardaí are being scapegoated.'

Mr Ryan described how his brother's home was raided and that he saw the burglars leave.

'My brother left his house one morning at 10.53. I drove by his house 27 minutes later and there were three lads walking out of his

house. When I realised it wasn't my brother's grandson, I turned around and they boys were gone. They had ransacked the house.

'They were never caught but the gardaí have an idea who they are. They supposedly live in Clondalkin. They were driving a grey Mazda with a false number plate.

'The same car appeared up around Ferbane days later with a different number plate.

'It happens when people are gone to Mass or a funeral. There has to be a local information centre for these guys.'

'Charlie Flanagan will tell you there are 800 new gardaí but what he doesn't appear to know is that every garda over 50 can go tomorrow. And they are so fed up with the rules and regulations that they are going. They are nearly being pushed out. Gardai are majorly p***ed off. Morale is low.

'We were to meet with [Justice Minister] Charlie Flanagan this week but he postponed the meeting. We are still looking to meet him.'

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Our closest garda station is an hour's drive away in Cavan town

By **Debbie McCann**

THE decision to close a west Cavan garda station at night has caused outrage.

Locals in Blacklion, Co. Cavan – where Neven Maguire's MacNean House & Restaurant is situated – say their nearest station is now an hour's drive away in Cavan town.

Ballyconnell Garda Station would have been closer by at least 20 minutes, but a decision was made to close it between the hours of 9pm and 9am. Gardai will instead be

on mobile patrol in west Cavan during night time hours, but some locals do not feel this is enough.

Garry McKiernan, of the West Cavan Concerned Residents' Group, told the Irish Mail on Sunday that Garda response times are further hindered by the fact gardai cannot cross the border and instead have to travel on this side of the border.

'The closest one [station] at night to

Blacklion is Cavan town and they can't go north. Some of the mountainous areas on the way is totally inaccessible during winter.'

Another local said the decision to close his garda station was political. 'To know that there was a garda there at all times was a great peace of mind,' he said.

Mr McKiernan said if a crime is committed in his area, criminals can be over the border in two minutes. 'It's mad to leave it wide open,' he added.



NEVEN: His restaurant in Blacklion is affected



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Karl Bond's life was threatened, his wife assaulted, two dogs poisoned. He watches TV with two knives



TARGET: Karl Bond with the hurley he keeps beside his front door

IT'S KILL

SPECIAL REPORT

By **DEBBIE McCANN**

CRIME CORRESPONDENT

WHEN Karl Bond moved to Banagher, Co. Offaly, in the mid-1970s, nobody locked their doors. Today he carries a pick axe handle in the boot of his car and leaves a hurley by his front door for protection.

In recent times, Mr Bond – who runs the Banagher United football club and is retired from the ESB – has been subjected to a reign of terror in his community.

His life has been threatened, his wife has been assaulted, the mother of his grandchildren attacked and his two dogs poisoned.

'It all began in the early hours of Halloween morning. I awoke to discover five or six people on my property. I ran at them but was threatened. My wife and her sister told them they would call the gardaí but another youth ran at me and told me he would kill me.'

The threat, he said, comes not just from burglary gangs using the motorway to make good their escape but also from people who moved into areas from bigger towns and cites in recent times. He believes these people are causing havoc in rural communities and are also helping motorway gangs by feeding them local information.

Relatives of the notorious Dundon family are living in a townland in the middle of the county, while associates of other Limerick and Dublin criminal gangs have also moved into the area. Mr Bond feels they have turned what was once a peaceful community into one that is sleeping with one eye open.

Speaking to the Irish Mail on Sunday this week, Mr Bond told how he called a meeting to discuss the effects of burglaries and anti-social behaviour in his town. 'Over 300 people turned up, all with stories to tell. I was astounded.'

The meeting was held the same night as one in nearby Coolderry, attended by 200 people, to discuss the impact of crime following the horrific burglary and beating of

farmer Richie McKelvey. The week before the McKelvey incident, some 300 people also gathered in Cloghan, following a spike in burglaries.

'The volume of people says it all. I couldn't get over the stories I was hearing. My family is certainly not alone in this. The stories that came out that night were shocking.'

Mr Bond explained his own situation, which has escalated over the last three weeks.

'The first incident happened in the early hours of Halloween morning.

'Five or six youths armed with knives and chains'

I awoke to find five or six people on my property. I let out a roar and told them to get out. There were 15 or 20 more people outside my gate. Most were from outside the town; others were from the area.

'Somebody came running at me and I stood my ground, protecting my home. Somebody grabbed him before he got to me. He started shouting that he was going to kill me.'

The night after Halloween, Mr Bond's wife and his son's girlfriend were attacked as they made their way home.

'They were shoved. My wife has a mark on her arm where she fell into the wall; my son's girlfriend was grabbed by the hair.'

On the Thursday after Halloween, a gang of five or six youths gath-

ered in the town. They were armed with knives and swinging chains.

Mr Bond said the situation had rapidly escalated and he was concerned that the gang was after his family.

'We rang the gardaí. People were arrested for public disorder that night but they had disposed of their weapons.'

'We had five matches in the field on the Saturday morning after Halloween and when I came home we decided to go down for a meal with my youngest son, who was home from university in Galway.'

'I don't know what came into my head but I turned back and saw the two dogs dead in the yard, poisoned. In hindsight, I remember the dogs' food hadn't been eaten and they had been drinking a lot of water.'

'One of the dogs survived because he had a kidney infection and was indoors at the time. He was lucky but he is obviously missing the other two.'

Mr Bond told the MoS he now travels around his local community with a pick-axe handle in the boot of my car.

'The gardaí need more resources. Technically, there are four gardaí in Banagher but they spend most of their time in Birr.'

'We had an incident where an old man banged on the wall of his house to tell his neighbours – a family not from the area – to quieten down. Two men burst in on him and he drew a hot poker stick on them.'

'You can see what is going on in the midlands. At the moment if we are not going to be protected it is either kill or be killed.'

'I asked one of the gardaí what was on the table beside my armchair and she said, "two knives". That's how I am sitting watching my television. I then pointed at the door to where the hurl is left.'

'Not long ago in Banagher, people didn't lock up. You just arrived and walked in the back door. That's how this town was.'

Ger Ryan, from nearby Cloghan, also called a local meeting because of the fear in his community. 'I am 50 now. When I was 15 there was a

Facebook checkpoint updates tip off gangs

BURGLARY gangs are using popular Facebook pages that upload checkpoint locations around the country before setting out to raid rural homes along the motorway network, the Irish Mail on Sunday has learned.

The pages, liked by hundreds of thousands of people, give live updates of checkpoint locations, allowing criminal gangs to avoid these areas with ease.

Ger Ryan, who organised a recent rural crime

By **Debbie McCann**

meeting in Cloghan, Co Offaly, told the MoS:

'The young people don't realise they are tipping off these gangs.'

Fine Gael TD Marcella Corcoran Kennedy shared similar concerns.

'People think they are being helpful pointing out Garda checkpoints on Facebook,' she said, 'but burglars are seeing it, which is of huge concern.'

Crisis as more homes hit

TWO homes within a two-mile radius of where a farmer was burgled and savagely beaten earlier this month, were broken into on the night his community gathered to discuss the damaging effect of rural crime, the Irish Mail on Sunday has learned.

One of the of the attempted burglaries happened in Sharavogue and the other in Fortal, both within a short distance of where Richie McKelvey was attacked in Coolderry, Co. Offaly.

The burglars were forced to flee before they had a chance

By **Debbie McCann**

to take anything in both instances. Commenting on the recent crimes, Sinn Féin TD Carol Nolan called for 'extra gardaí in Offaly where the whole situation has reached crisis point'.

She added: 'We cannot have a situation where someone is murdered. There are reports that farmers are bringing loaded shotguns into their bedrooms at night. There is the concern that this is going to escalate.'

Keep an eye on friends with new Cairde app

A NEW app to help rural communities combat fear and isolation by staying constantly connected was launched last month.

Cairde is a service launched by Muintir na Tíre and allows people to communicate and keep an eye on friends and neighbours through the use of technology.

Niall Garvey, CEO of Muintir na Tíre, said: 'Cairde is a service that enables communities and individuals within the communities to

By **Debbie McCann**

communicate effectively. It can link with other smart devices such as doorbell monitors and smart plugs. A very practical use could be analysing the usage of a kettle on a smart plug – if the kettle is not used at the normal time on a day, an alert can be issued to the person's Cairde.'

The app will be rolled out in communities over the coming months.

targets. Nothing happened, now armed robberies are the norm



RAM RAID

Ann Martyn's store was ram raided and a woman was held at gunpoint in the post office



FEARFUL

Ellen O'Connor and shop owner Sinéad Kinsella whose grocery and post office has been held up



GUNPOINT

Dermot Mulhall whose petrol station was held up at gunpoint in recent weeks

quent to that, somebody held a customer with two small children at gunpoint. It was a botched job and they were caught. But it was traumatising for the girl and the woman working here.

'The gardaí were very active in pursuing what I call the ram raid too, but nobody was ever charged.' She says shops in the town are also heavily impacted by shoplifters but the response from gardaí is not as fast. 'For us, where we are impacted in the everyday is by local shoplifters, all the things that make trying to make a living here difficult that are not followed up.

'Mountrath has two gardaí and a sergeant. I rang last Saturday looking for the gardaí and I was told the sergeant was in Portlaoise. I was told somebody would be

out to see me on Wednesday. This was Saturday. I said that is not good enough and eventually they sent someone from Abbeyleix.

'We are depending on gardaí coming from Abbeyleix. They

'Dangerous times now in a local shop'

could be down in Ballylinan or Rathdowney and they are all rural country roads. I am not blaming the gardaí, it is the system.

'You ring the gardaí, but sometimes it feels like there is no support. To go up to the bank with money, you don't know who is look-

ing over your shoulder.

'I grew up in the town and there was a garda who walked the street and we were all terrified of him... But we don't see gardaí anymore and I am here a lot.'

On the far side of town Dermot Mulhall's petrol station was held up at gunpoint in September. he says: 'The shop was held up with a gun and when he [the thief] went to get away he crashed the car. He opened the till and just took it. It was an in and out. Andrew, who was on that evening, is doing okay. He took it in his stride. It happened so quickly.

'It is not nice. It was the first time in a while we have been done here. It goes with the territory unfortunately.'

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Direct link between fewer gardaí and higher crime rates

CRIME has increased significantly in one in six Garda divisions where Garda numbers have been reduced, the Irish Mail on Sunday can reveal. In a week in which the Garda overtime budget ran dry, our analysis of official crime statistics and Garda numbers reveals a direct correlation between staff cuts and crime levels across the country.

The period from 2011 to 2016 shows the towns of Ennis, Fermoy, Gorey and Roscommon have been worst affected, with crime increasing in eight of the 11 categories examined on the back of cuts to Garda numbers.

The categories include; assaults, robbery and extortion, dangerous acts, burglary, theft, fraud, drugs, weapons, damage to property/environment, public order and organised crime offences.

At 100 stations, where staff were reduced, crime increased in four or more categories.

Burglary increased in 29 districts – two thirds of which serve rural areas – where staff numbers were cut. Burglaries rose in a further 34 areas where staff numbers remained stagnant, all of those stations serve rural communities.

Our analysis confirms that areas in close proximity to the M7 motorway – such as Newbridge, Abbeyleix and Portarlington – are being targeted for robberies.

At 189 stations where Garda numbers were cut robbery, extortion and hijacking offences increased.

More than half of all Garda stations (359) have endured staff cuts. In total there were 951 fewer officers in stations across the country in 2016 than in 2011.

Many Garda stations were closed but of those that remained open the hardest hit by staff cuts were: Blanchardstown in Dublin, which lost 43 gardaí; Kevin Street, Dublin (-36); Roxboro Road, Limerick (-23), Terenure, Dublin (-20) and Kells, Co. Meath (-18).

Assistant Garda Commissioner Pat Leahy recently told the Public Accounts Committee that the reopening of Stepside Garda station in south Dublin – where in 2012 prior to its closure 35 gardaí were stationed – is not a priority and that if he had the resources, he would allocate them to areas like Ronanstown and Ballyfermot, in Dublin, where the number of gardaí has been reduced by six



By **CRAIG HUGHES**

and 11 respectively.

In the Laois division, Abbeyleix suffered the greatest loss with its gardaí reduced by five. At the same time it experienced an increase in six different types of crime including robberies, assaults, drugs and weapons offences.

In all, 12 stations in the division saw their Garda numbers reduced, 10 stayed the same. A number of these areas saw increases in burglaries and robberies. However, three stations in the county saw their staff numbers increase. The most significant change was at Justice Minister Charlie Flanagan's local station in Portlaoise which gained 13 officers. The other two stations in the Laois division to gain staff were Edenderry and Tullamore which got one extra garda each.

Labour Party Justice spokesman, Seán Sherlock TD, said: 'It's clear from this evidence that there's a direct correlation between Garda numbers and crime levels and it's an inverse relationship – the higher the number of gardaí the fewer crimes are committed. We are going to have to talk about the Garda Reserve and the job that it does. I believe we are now at a point where the only deterrent to crime is a Garda presence, even if that is a reserve presence.

THERE is traction now for deputising local volunteers within the Reserve to actually have a presence on the ground because where you have a visible presence it acts as a clear deterrent. There will be resistance to that concept within the force itself. However, as policing becomes concentrated in larger urban areas, rural outposts are being forgotten and we need to look at the idea that rural people could be inculcated within the Reserve, people who live in their own areas acting in an additional capacity but wearing the uniform of the Gardaí in a reservist manner.'

An Garda Síochána did not respond to a request for comment this week.

In 2015 victims of rural crime warned the nearby M7 made them

Terror of the motorway marauders



SPECIAL REPORT

DEBBIE MCCANN

IN COUNTY LAOIS

TWO years ago Dick Donoher told the Irish Mail on Sunday how he had lost count of the number of burglaries at his family-run service station in Ballybrittas, Co. Laois.

This week we returned to Laois to meet Mr Donoher, who confirmed his business has been hit 'six or seven' times in the past two years.

'NOTHING has changed,' he said. 'We've had maybe six or seven since you were here last. Life should not be like this in rural Ireland.'

Less than a hundred metres down the road staff at the local shop and post office are recovering from an armed raid with a hammer. The young woman who was working in Murphy's Food Store on the evening two masked men came in brandishing a lump hammer and knife has since left her job at the shop.

Further along the M7 motorway in Mountrath and Abbeyleix, the stories are similar. Shopkeepers, petrol station owners and businesses talk of thieves, sometimes armed, threatening staff, ramming shop doors and even holding customers at gunpoint. Emboldened by the knowledge that garda stations in

'We've had three break-ins this year'

these towns have been reduced to part-time hours, they know they have time to snatch the money and speed away on the motorway. Some raids have happened in broad daylight, others in the dead of night.

In one terrifying incident a woman and her two small children were held at gunpoint as they queued in the post office. In another, across town, a service station worker was held at gunpoint last September.

Back in Ballybrittas Dick Donoher, with a sigh of resignation, says: 'It really hasn't changed at all. We've had three break-ins so far this year. One in February, one in May and one two weeks ago.'

'We have checkpoints here at five or six in the evening for people coming out of the local pub, but we don't have any checkpoints for the burglars coming off the motorway in the middle of the night. That's what is needed in rural Ireland.'

Describing one of the latest incidents, he says burglars raided his petrol station in the middle of the night then ran back into the shop to swipe a box of Cadbury Cream Eggs before making their getaway.

'They were fools and they were caught,' he says. 'But we have six or seven hundred euro of cigarettes in evidence which we can't take back yet. Cigarettes are after being rebranded and so they are now worthless to us.'

A little closer to the motorway is Murphy's Food Store and post office. It sits next to a double-fronted building with a nameplate over the door reading The Old

FEWER STAFF, MORE CRIME

OUR analysis cross-referenced the crime statistics in 11 categories between 2011 and 2016 with changes in Garda staffing numbers in that period. It demonstrates a direct correlation between the two.

Here in descending order we reveal the number of stations (of 673) that showed increases in each of the 11 categories and saw a reduction in staff numbers.

- Robbery, extortion and hijacking offences: 189
- Offences against government, justice procedures and organisation of crime: 118
- Controlled drug offences: 85
- Attempts/threats to murder, assaults, harassments and related offences: 104
- Dangerous or negligent acts: 67
- Fraud deception and related offences: 60
- Damage to property and to the environment: 41
- Weapons and explosives offences: 40
- Theft and related offences: 37
- Public order and other social offences: 31
- Burglary and related offences: 29

GARDA STAFF CUTS

Number cut 2011-2016: (*DMR: Dublin Metropolitan)

1. Blanchardstown, DMR* Western Division: 43
2. Kevin Street, DMR South Central Division: 36
3. Roxboro Road, Limerick Division: 23
4. Terenure, DMR Southern Division: 18
5. Kells Ceanannus Mór, Meath Division: 18
6. Templemore, Tipperary Division: 17
7. Mayorstone Park, Limerick Division: 16
8. Donnybrook, DMR South Central Division: 15
9. Tallaght, DMR Southern Division: 15
10. Cabra, DMR Western Division: 14

THE WORST 100 STATIONS

These stations, where staff decreased and crime rose in at least four of 11 crime categories, were the worst affected.

8 CATEGORIES UP: Ennis, Fermoy, Roscommon, Gorey (4)

7 CATEGORIES UP: Ramelton, Glin, Ballinrobe (3)

6 CATEGORIES UP: Kingscourt, Middleton, Mitchelstown, Rathcoole, Milford, Gort, Ardrahan, Tralee, Abbeyleix, Castleconnell, Clonark, Littleton, Kinnegad (13)

5 CATEGORIES UP: Carrickmacross, Blackrock, Carrigtwohill, Bantry, Store St, Dublin Airport, Sundrive Road, Tallaght, Kerrykeel, Carraig Airt, Ard an Raitha, Craughwell, Dingle, Durrow, Mountmellick, Clonbologue, Drogheda, Cashel, Emly, Blackwater, Roundwood (21)

4 CATEGORIES UP: Ballyconnell, Kilnaleck, Monaghan, Ballinagh, Shannon, Crosshaven, Mayfield, Bishopstown, Ballynoe, Youghal, Cobh, Coachford, Macroom, Rosscarbery, Cabinteely, Bridewell, Skerries, Kevin Street, Donnybrook, Rathfarnham, Clondalkin, Ballyshannon, An Charrraig, Ailt an Chorrain, Kilmacrennan, Ballintra, Loughrea, Tuam, Ballyheigue, Killarney, Monasterivein, Newbridge, Robertstown, Freshford, Clara, Portarlinton, Abbeyleix, Ballingarry, Croom, Henry St, Roxboro Road, Carlingford, Kiltimagh, Enfield, Rosses Point, Moynes, An Rinn, Dunganvaran, Kilmeaden, Ardmore, Kill, Leamybrien, Tallow, Delvin, Rosslare Strand, Oylegate, Ballycullane, Avoca, Newtonmountkennedy(59)



Barracks. 'That was our closest Garda station in years gone by,' says shop assistant Ellen O'Connor. 'But now the gardaí have to come from Portlaoise most of the time.'

Sinéad Kinsella, the shop's owner, says: 'Since the motorway came we are more fearful. What needs to be done in the rural areas is bring the local garda back... now we are on

our own. Opening the shop here in the morning or closing at night - those are dangerous times now in a local shop.'

Ms O'Connor recalls how the shop was 'done' a few months back. 'It happened in August and there was

HOW MoS EXPOSED THE M7 ISSUE TWO YEARS AGO

a young girl working here.' She points to a number of scuff marks on the counter. 'That's where the hammer slammed down on the counter that evening. The girl was terrified, but thankfully nobody was hurt.'

Ms Kinsella said the girl has since left the shop. 'She is a 21-year-old girl and she was terrified. But these

guys go to court and the judge lets them off. There's no justice really.'

Ms O'Connor says she once used a sweeping brush to run a thug from the shop. 'My sweeping brush is always behind me and I did clatter one lad with it. I'd say he was high on drugs and he came in saying, "hand over the money," and I drew the sweeping brush on him and he went running out the door.'

'It does take an affect on you, having to do something like that.'

Down the motorway in Mountrath shop owners are not surprised to learn burglary levels in the county are up 60% in the past year.

Businesswoman Ann Martyn of Centra says there have been a 'spate' of burglaries in the town and she is worried about response times of gardaí who, more often than not, have to travel from Abbeyleix.

'This year we have had a really horrible year,' she says. 'We had a raid on the store in the middle of the night. They rammed the door at the back with a car and then, subse-