



Irish Council for Civil Liberties

Monitoring rights during the pandemic
26 September-2 October

COVID-19-RELATED ADVOCACY WORK

Data on armed Gardaí published

A review carried out last year has revealed that over a quarter of gardaí carry arms, many of whom are not frontline officers. Our Senior Research & Policy Officer Doireann Ansbro was interviewed by [The Irish Examiner](#) and by The Irish Times (for a [long-read article](#) on armed gardaí and a [podcast](#) on the origins of An Garda Síochána), as well as live on KFM radio and Today FM The last Word with Matt Cooper. Doireann outlined our concerns in relation to the stationing of armed gardaí at COVID-19 checkpoints and reiterated our position that, while the use of firearms may be necessary in certain, limited police operations, there is a need for greater transparency about those circumstances and for further clarity about the extent to which firearms are currently used across Irish policing, the protocols and rules around their use and carriage, and how this has changed over time. It is only since the outbreak of the pandemic that An Garda Síochána started publishing limited data on the use of force in its monthly reports to the Policing Authority, which we at the ICCL have been calling for for a long time. Doireann also underlined the need for greater public debate on the issue of armed gardaí.

Public Debate on Additional Policing Powers

Reports of young people congregating, particularly in university towns, have been the subject of much public and media criticism, and have also given rise to calls for additional garda powers to enforce public health measures. Our Executive Director Liam Herrick was interviewed on NewsTalk's [The Pat Kenny show](#) on Thursday on this issue. Liam questioned the necessity and appropriateness of using the criminal justice system to enforce public health measures. He also stressed how vitally important it is that trust and respectful relations between our community police force and the general public are maintained. Liam reiterated that An Garda Síochána have sufficient powers, e.g. under the Public Order Acts, to respond to such occurrences and that additional powers are therefore unnecessary. Liam emphasised ICCL's support for the public health effort and the individual responsibility of students to adhere to public health measures.

Policing authority meeting with An Garda Síochána

We followed this meeting closely on Wednesday. Garda Commissioner Drew Harris spoke of the Gardaí sparing use of powers, the principle of engagement over enforcement, and against fines (on the spot fines would constitute a “more draconian” approach). He also cautioned strongly against enforcement in private homes. We noted Commissioner Drew Harris' recognition that people have “constitutional rights” to the protection of their homes,

stating that affording gardaí the power to disperse parties in private homes would constitute a “serious escalation” in garda powers.

However, we are concerned that the Commissioner has refuted that spit hoods are hoods, on the basis that they do not cause sensory deprivation. This detracts from the serious dangers and adverse impact that spit hoods have on individuals. Even if spit hoods do not fully deprive the senses, their use has resulted in suffocation in other jurisdictions, and cause anxiety and panic, which is often heightened for those with mental health or other issues.

We at the ICCL have [continued to highlight](#) the evidence base that undermines the safety and effectiveness of spit hoods in protecting against the spread of the virus.

Webinar on COVID-tracker apps in Ireland & the UK

Our Policy Officer Olga Cronin took part in a [Webinar](#), “COVID apps: Success or failure in UK & Ireland”, on Friday afternoon with Open Rights Group, Amnesty Northern Ireland and other experts regarding contact-tracing apps. Olga discussed Ireland’s COVID tracker app alongside a panel of experts from across these islands.