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# Garda commissioner expects criminal gangs will seek to exploit crisis

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New recruits and redeployed Templemore staff bring Garda numbers to record level

**CONOR LALLY**  
Security and Crime Editor

Garda Commissioner Drew Harris has said it will only be a matter of time before organised crime gangs attempt to exploit the coronavirus crisis.

Mr Harris insisted the force would be ready to respond to such a development and denied it was a risk to fast-track 319 recruits through their training at the Garda College in Templemore, Co Tipperary in order to bolster the numbers available during the pandemic.

The new officers now have full policing powers, despite some of them having only started their training weeks ago.

"They are gardai," the commissioner said of the recruits, who were sworn in at a ceremony in the college yesterday at which social distancing measures

*Conor Lally*  
"When they go out into the stations... they'll be supported by experienced gardai in terms of tutors and supervisors... In effect, they are getting their practical training and they'll be brought back here to finish off their academic [training]... We've prepared them as best we can."

**Committed**  
Mr Harris said he did not envisage the swift progress of the recruits through the college posing difficulties.

"I see people who are keen and very committed to serving their country; who want to be policing their country in this time of need. They are not going to be on their own and they are not going to be unsupervised."

Mr Harris said units combating organised crime were still working in their specialist

"We are very mindful of that the threat from organised crime carries on and indeed it's only a matter of time before they try to exploit the situation, particularly people's fears," he said. *com*

"We want to be able to combat that. You see from the work we have done through the week - we've seized drugs, we've seized firearms. So that work carries on."

Following the attesting of the student gardai yesterday the Garda College will close for

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a period and the members who work there as tutors will return to frontline policing. Overall, 443 Garda members are being

proper has seen the total strength of the Garda rise to 14,758, a record number.

The Garda College, which has a large accommodation block, is being made available for use as a healthcare facility in the response to Covid-19, if required.

The force is now mounting a special operation, based on officers working 12-hour shifts, to maintain law and order and reach out to vulnerable and isolated people.

Garda members could also be called upon to enforce measures in the emergency legislation passed by the Dáil on Thursday. The Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Bill gives the force powers to make businesses close, break up public gatherings and send people into isolation.

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, who joined Mr Harris and Minister for Justice Charlie Flanagan at the ceremony in Templemore, said he was very hopeful the new powers would

**A drone picture of the 319 new gardai during an attestation ceremony at the Garda Training College in Templemore.** PHOTOGRAPH: MARK CONDREN/PA WIRE

ways been by consent, never coercion," he said. "And I hope that is never going to change as a consequence of this crisis."

Asked if he envisaged a very strict lock down measure being enforced in some continental European countries would be repeated in Ireland, he said he did not believe that would be the case.

"I think the culture in continental countries, like France and in Asian countries is different to Ireland," he said. "In Ireland we tend to pull together times of difficulty. And in the emergency I have seen enormous community spirit and good hygiene and social distancing. I'm hoping we aren't going to need the kind of authoritarian response that has been the case in other countries. But