



The Impact of Gang Violence on Children

'Gangsterism is more complex than just shooting and drugs'

1. Introduction

The last few months, particularly in the Western Cape, have seen an alarming increase in gang related violence. This has impacted on children both as victims and as perpetrators of such violence.¹ In terms of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, a child is anyone below the age of eighteen.

2. Definition

The word 'gang' in common parlance is a slang term for an informal group of friends or members of a social group who spend time together for a common purpose. Children come together to play with their friends and may refer to themselves as a 'gang'; it gives them a sense of belonging. Enid Blyton and J. K. Rowling both use this construct in their books. However, as children grow older, and given a certain psycho-social and socio-economic context, the term gang can take on a whole new meaning and become a terrifying manifestation of a dysfunctional society.

The US Department of Justice definition is useful:

- a gang is an association of three or more individuals;
- whose members collectively identify themselves by adopting a group identity by using a common name, slogan, identifying sign such as a tattoo or other physical marking, clothing and graffiti;
- the association's purpose, in part, is to engage in criminal activity; occupy and

protect territory they regard as their turf;

- the association uses violence or intimidation to assert its dominance and further its criminal objectives and dominance;²
- gangs have a hierarchical structure.³

3. Where Do Gangs Operate?

Research indicates that it "is estimated that 150 000 people belong to 100 gangs on the Cape Flats. Some gangs date back to the 1940s."⁴ In his book on the gangs of Cape Town, 'Gang Town', investigative journalist and criminologist Don Pinnock writes that,

"in one year, between April 2014 and March 2015, there were six murders and seven attempted murders a day, [and] 30 637 reported assaults (84 a day)... In the absence of recreational amenities, sound schooling or... stable family structures, young people have nothing to do but hang out in the streets, form friendship groups and fight or engage in sexual activity with each other. They do this in the knowledge that... death before the age of 30 is a strong possibility".⁵

Such communities are the product of apartheid spatial planning and racial exclusion. They are characterized by structural neglect and poor service delivery; a high rate of unemployment; overcrowding; substance abuse; domestic violence; and violent crime. While the latest crime

statistics indicate a decline in the level of violent crime, “drilling down to precinct level murder data for the high crime areas makes disquieting reading. In many areas traditionally affected by gang violence in the Western Cape the murder levels increased by more than 20% compared to 2015/16 reporting year”.⁶ Brigadier Joseph, station commander at Manenberg police station, says that youth in the area were severely traumatised. “Shootings, murders and attempted murders often happen in the presence of community members, but no one reports the perpetrators ... Our gangs have become a life source which includes financial benefit and an opportunity for instant gratification.”⁷

4. Introduction to the Life of the Gang

Involvement with gangs may take place from a very early age. Research from different sources concurs that Grade 4, when children are on average nine years of age, is pivotal to the child’s further development. “Within schools, and particularly in the Grade 4 year, the following behaviours become more and more prevalent: poor academic performance, learning difficulties, truancy, and antisocial behaviour due to low self-esteem.”⁸ In early December the results of an international study of child literacy were published. “Of the 50 countries surveyed for reading ability among school kids, South Africa came stone last. More alarmingly, however, the study also found that eight out of 10 South African Grade 4s cannot read for meaning.”⁹ This means that they have a limited ‘feelings’ vocabulary and are unable to express themselves verbally; consequently, negative feelings find expression in anti-social and, as they grow older, increasingly violent behaviour. Youth are in awe of gang leaders and aspire to become like them.¹⁰

Children are desperate for affirmation and a sense of belonging – of ‘being part of the gang’. Lucille Meyer emphasises that young people

“yearn for connection and experience an ‘invisibility’ when they are not connected to parents, particularly fathers; when youth are not engaged and connected to self, family, to social, cultural and economic activities there is a greater propensity to join gangs and be involved in antisocial behaviour. Gangs come to represent belonging, challenge and safety.”¹¹

The affirmation that home, school and community have failed to provide is found in the gang. There is little motivation to work in what are frequently over-crowded classrooms where individual attention for struggling learners is not possible. There are few sports facilities and little opportunity for other extra-mural activities. Furthermore, the facilities available are often not properly maintained, rendering them almost useless.¹² As a result, these children experience extreme alienation and are vulnerable to exploitation by older gang members involved in criminal activity. As one activist has noted,

“children being used in such a way is detrimental to their well-being and development and condemns them to a life of crime that will be almost impossible to leave, not only physically but also emotionally and mentally. In addition to that, it perpetuates the continuation of the cycle of poverty in their lives and reduces any chances they might have at a better life”.¹³

It has been argued that such cynical “exploitation and hindrance to realising a positive and holistic development are the exact things that make this child labour”.¹⁴ Furthermore, the national Child Labour Programme of Action (CLPA) defines child labour as: “...work by children under 18 which is exploitative, hazardous or otherwise inappropriate for their age, detrimental to their schooling, or their social, physical, mental, spiritual or moral development.”¹⁵

5. Caught in the Crossfire

Exposure to violence at home, at school, in the streets and in the community causes immense psychological distress to communities as a whole and particularly to children.¹⁶ Increasingly, children are caught in the crossfire when conflict between rival gangs plays out between the blocks of flats and in the streets while people go about their daily tasks and children walk to and from school. The Manenberg area on the Cape Flats has become so violently contested that the Plea for Peace organization has withdrawn its programmes from the area. Participants at the CPLD roundtable spoke of children who are witness to such violence are afraid to leave home, and are tormented by nightmares. There is no really safe place to be or to go to. Children have even been injured and killed at home by random bullets. During February 2016, 10-year-old Jayden Smith was shot in the back during gang related

violence as he returned home from buying bread. He died in his mother's arms on the way to hospital.¹⁷ At least 21 children have been killed in gang violence in the Western Cape during 2017.¹⁸

There are no safe places of refuge. Violent and criminal gang activities infringe on the rights of the people as enshrined in the Bill of Rights. The Organized Crime Act 121 of 1988 "stipulates clearly that it is the right of every person to be protected from fear, intimidation and physical harm caused by the criminal activities of violent gangs and individuals".¹⁹

Recently, after yet another gang related killing, the anger of the community was such that the police had to protect a man suspected of the killing. The escalation of gang related violence and the failure of law enforcement agencies to contain it tends to encourage the establishment of vigilante groups. The death of little Christelle Abrahams of Ocean View, who died at the age of seven during a shootout between People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) and gangsters in the November of 1998, well illustrates the dangers of such groups.²⁰

6. Gender

There is a tendency in our society, where domestic violence and sexual abuse is rampant, to see women and girls as only as victims of gang violence; that is, they are seen as objects rather than subjects. While girls and women often do occupy a vulnerable position in the structure of gangs, having little agency of their own, this is not always the case. As Daniellie Hoffmeester, researcher at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation points out, "scant research has been conducted on the role of women within gangs and as leaders of gangs".²¹ Hoffmeester continues that "the marginalisation of female gangsters is part of the more general invisibility in South Africa of women engaged in violence or illegal activities. Women are often relegated to the periphery of gang activity, and are perceived as the primary support systems to male gang members, rather than cunning and violent gangsters in their own right".²² In recent years, however, it has become apparent that more and more women are becoming hardened gangsters themselves.²³

7. Towards a New Narrative

Any successful intervention to lessen the impact of gang violence on children must identify variables that moderate and mediate the relationship between exposure to community violence and psychological distress.²⁴ It involves exploring ways of reclaiming the community from the dominance of the gangs. Lucille Mayer calls it "disrupting the status quo".²⁵

One such imitative is the 'Walking Bus' project, which was piloted in May 2016 at four schools on the Cape Flats, where gang violence and crime are prevalent. The project, funded by the Western Cape Department of Community Safety, has since expanded to include more than 50 walking buses at 180 schools mostly on the Cape Flats.²⁶ Children are escorted to and from school in groups by volunteers from the community.

Another crucial focus is the roll-out of Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes, which Don Pinnock calls, "the obvious and critical place to begin." He writes that "it will be the most important step the country has ever taken to protect and support parents and young children....it would ensure and secure resilience in children and youngsters and lead to a reduction in gang activity."²⁷ The issue of building family resilience features strongly in both the White Paper on the Family and the Children's Act.²⁸ Parental involvement and positive discipline programmes are also key. As Brigadier Joseph comments, "a community cannot be policed to be saved from the outside. Parenting also needs to play a vital role."²⁹

8. Conclusion

The need to address the devastation and anarchy wrought by gang violence is urgent. As Nobel Laureate Gabriela Mistral writes,

"We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made, and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer 'Tomorrow,' his name is today."³⁰

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¹ On 29th November 2017 the CPLO hosted a Roundtable Discussion on ‘The Impact of Gang Violence on Children’. The Roundtable was addressed by Lucille Meyer of the Chrysalis Academy; Robin Coxson of Plea for Peace, and Leonie Adonis, Manenberg mother and class assistant. The discussion sought to understand the causes and consequences of gang violence, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable- children.

² <https://www.justice.gov/criminal-ocgs/about-violent-gangs>

³ <https://www.iol.co.za/news/opinion/youth-in-awe-of-gang-leaders-1669479>

⁴ <https://www.mobieg.co.za/articles/gangsterism/>

⁵ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-03-28-book-review-do>

⁶ <https://www.news24.com/Analysis/crime-stats-the-devil-is-in-the-detail-20171102>

⁷ <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/all-school-excursions-cancelled-manenberg/>

⁸ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-03-28-book-review-do>

⁹ www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-12-06-education-shocker

¹⁰ <https://www.iol.co.za/news/opinion/youth-in-awe-of-gang-leaders-1669479>

¹¹ Presentation at the CPLO Roundtable on the ‘Impact of Gang Violence on Children’

¹² Robin Coxson from Plea for Peace, which uses tennis, cricket and music programmes as an alternative to gang participation, reports that the cricket pitches are often covered in broken grass which makes them dangerous, especially if children are not wearing shoes.

¹³ <http://www.ngopulse.org/article/gangs-making-killers-out-our-children>

¹⁴ <http://www.ngopulse.org/article/gangs-making-killers-out-our-children>

¹⁵ www.labour.gov.za/.../child-labour-programme-of-action-for-south-africa-2008-20

¹⁶ <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213408000550>

¹⁷ <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/gang-violence-victim->

¹⁸ <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/.../parkwood-still-tense-volatile-after-7-year-old-boys>

¹⁹ https://www.westerncape.gov.za/text/2006/4/a_preliminary_report_on_child_killings_05-03-04.pd

²⁰ https://www.westerncape.gov.za/.../a_preliminary_report_on_child_killings_05-03-0

²¹ <https://www.voices360.com/femme-fatale/>

²² <https://www.voices360.com/femme-fatale/>

²³ https://www.news24.com/Columnists/Anneke_Scheepers/gangsterism-grabs-hold-of-girls-20170714

²⁴ <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213408000550>

²⁵ Presentation at the CPLO Roundtable on the ‘Impact of Gang Violence on Children’

²⁶ <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/cape-flats-community-keeps-ch>

²⁷ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-03-28-book-review-do>

²⁸ The failure to adequately provide the necessary resources to fund ECD centres has devastating consequences in terms of child development, parental support and advice, as well as early intervention and child protection services.

²⁹ <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/all-school-excursions-cancelled-manenberg/>

³⁰ http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGlpI4E/b.8922127/k.A223/My_Name_is_Today.htm

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