

FACTORS THAT COULD CONTRIBUTE TO SUBSTANCE MISUSE AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITY AMONGST ADOLESCENTS: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**KEYWORDS:** substance misuse, criminal activity, adolescents, ecological perspective, social service providers, contributing factors

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The increase of criminal behaviour and substance misuse amongst adolescents is of great concern for social service providers. According to the ecological perspective, several factors could contribute to substance misuse and criminal activity amongst adolescents, impacting negatively on their lives. A qualitative study was done to explore and describe the perceptions of social service providers of the factors that could contribute to substance misuse and criminal activity amongst adolescents. Twenty participants took part in this study and certain criteria for inclusion applied. The data were categorised into three themes, namely micro, meso and macro level. Relevant conclusions and recommendations were made.

## FACTORS THAT COULD CONTRIBUTE TO SUBSTANCE MISUSE AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITY AMONGST ADOLESCENTS: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Several scholars (Groenewald & Bhana, 2016; Korff, 2010; Mudavanhu & Schenck, 2014; Pillay & Willows, 2015) concur that there is a strong correlation between substance misuse and criminality in adolescents. A possible reason is that adolescents often engage in risky behaviour that could hamper their wellbeing without consideration of the long-term effects. A statistical look at substance misuse in juvenile offenders over the past twenty years reveals that the habit has been growing at a consistent rate in South Africa (Groenewald & Bhana, 2016). Juvenile offenders who are using substances or who have used substances previously display a higher chance of recidivism, prolonged time within the juvenile justice system and prospective correctional services in the adult correctional system (De Matteo & Marcyk, 2005; Tripodi & Bender, 2011). A study conducted in California (Denney & Connor, 2016) found that approximately 80% of adolescents who come into conflict with the juvenile justice system are either using substances, or their delinquent behaviours have led to them misusing substances. This study also found that recidivism and being involved in the adult correctional system as an adolescent with a substance use disorder problem is very common within the juvenile justice system. Other studies (Korff, 2010; Leslie, 2008; Winters, & Arria, 2011) have also indicated that imprisoned youths or juvenile offenders worldwide represent the highest number of adolescents infected with or at a high risk of contracting HIV and/or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). This is exacerbated by regular use of illegal and harmful substances, as well as sex with multiple partners. Adolescents who are involved in substance misuse within the juvenile justice system are also at a high risk of health problems. These health problems include: distortion of senses, appetite stimulation, hyperthermia, hypertension, chest pain, dissociation, nausea and vomiting, seizures, as well as psychotic symptoms.

It is clear from the discussion above that a significant number of adolescents engage in substance misuse and criminal activity. Although several international studies (De Matteo & Marcyk, 2005; Leslie, 2008; Nalin, 2017) have been done on factors that could lead to substance misuse and criminal activity amongst adolescents, limited research specifically focusing on social service providers' perceptions of this matter has been done within the South African framework. For the purpose of this study, social service providers are practitioners who are rendering services to adolescents who misuse substances and engage in criminal activity. Social service providers usually struggle to render effective services to adolescents who misuse substances and engage in criminal activities because of a number of factors such as dysfunctional families, peer pressure and gang-related activities that have an influence on adolescent behaviour. The goal of this study was to explore factors that could contribute to

adolescents misusing substances and displaying criminal behaviour as perceived by social service providers. From this goal, the following research question was derived: What factors could contribute to adolescents misusing substances and displaying criminal activity as perceived by social service providers?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was chosen as a theoretical framework, as factors that could play a role in the negative behaviours by adolescents manifest on different levels. Although some authors (McCallen, 2016; Gilstrap & Ziertan, 2018) also include exo and chrono levels, for this study only the micro, meso and macro levels were utilised to analyse the data. On a micro level, adolescents' genetic and biological make-up needs to be taken into consideration, as some people are more prone to forming an addiction than others (Fisher & Harris, 2013; Winters & Arria, 2011). The use of illegal substances also has the ability to affect one's mental and emotional wellbeing, increasing the likelihood of anxiety disorders, mood disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. There is a significant link between the excessive usage of substances and mental disorders. With the onset age of substance misuse getting lower, youths and adolescents are putting their mental wellbeing at risk by opening the window to being diagnosed with a psychological or psychiatric disorder (Basson & Mawson, 2011; Saban, Flisher, Grimsrud, Morojele, London, Williams & Stein, 2014).

On the micro level, the family structure also plays a vital role in the development and progression of the child or adolescent. If the familial system or family members within the system have a history of substance misuse and dependency, this increases the adolescent's probability of being involved in using illegal substances as well (Mudavanhu & Schenck, 2014); they are modelling the behaviour of their parents or family members. According to Burton and Leoschut (2013), roughly 90% of juvenile offenders in South Africa have a history of ill-treatment in their family. Adolescents without parents or without parental supervision presented the highest risk for violent and criminal behaviour. These households are also likely to face financial difficulties and to be exposed to the misuse of alcohol and illegal substances.

Peer pressure is another factor that plays a role in adolescent's lives on the micro level. Research (Ward, Van der Merwe & Dawes, 2012) has shown that there is a strong possibility of adolescents joining a gang if they have anti-social beliefs and if they struggle to resist peer pressure towards delinquency. Deviant peer friendships and associations put adolescents at high risk of deviant behaviour that could lead to indulging in unlawful behaviour.

On a meso level, the socio-economic circumstances of adolescents play a significant role in their wellbeing. Socio-economic circumstances could also be seen as a macro-level influence. However, it is especially in a South African context where several communities struggle with poverty that socio-economic circumstances fit well on a meso level. South Africa, as a developing country, has many low socio-economic communities as well as many low-income, urbanised households. The financial stressors which many South Africans experience allow individuals to face collective forms of regular stressors, increasing feelings of negativity, substance use and delinquency (Mosavel, Ahmed, Ports & Simon, 2015).

Otwombe, Dietrich, Sikkema, Coetzee, Hopkins, Laher and Gray (2015) conducted a study on the experiences of violence among adolescents in lower socio-economic groups in Johannesburg. Through this study, it was found that violence amongst adolescents is enabled and endorsed through the misuse of substances. These substances, namely alcohol and drugs, are mainly consumed by adolescents at first because they are curious and want to experience the feeling or taste. The alarming statistics reveal that the age group for the highest illegal substance consumption rate is below 15 years. Age 17 to 20 years indicated the most murders committed related to alcohol use or being intoxicated, and most cases of violent and aggressive behaviour occur between the ages 20-21 years. It is also important to note that

there is a strong correlation between poverty-stricken or low socio-economic communities and high levels of substance misuse.

The school system could also lead to various forms of violence. This includes corporal punishment, physical assault, sexual or verbal abuse, threats, bullying, theft, gender-based violence and gang-related activities. This violent behaviour at school is associated with violence perpetrated within the community (Ward *et al.*, 2012). When studying substance misuse amongst adolescents in South African high schools, the frequency of use of illegal substances is higher for older adolescents in comparison to younger adolescents. Bullying is also a form of violence which takes place within the school setting. This can be categorised as problematic, aggressive behaviour which involves victimisation and perpetration of violence. It is common amongst adolescents and prevalent within schools. It is interesting to note that parallels can be drawn between school bullying and the use of illegal substances or drugs, and these are often accompanied by criminal activity (Maria & Eisner, 2015).

As discussed earlier, peer pressure could lead to gang-related activities. Gang activity and drug-dealing encourage the involvement of youths, also enabling violent and criminal behaviour. The inclusion of young people in gangs has increased in South Africa, and the average age of members is decreasing to include even pre-adolescent children. Involvement also pressures the individual to act defiantly and to disregard behaviour that is deemed socially acceptable (Edberg, Shaikh, Thurman & Rimal, 2015). The increase in homicides, sexual offences, assaults and violence among adolescents is strongly associated with gang activity and involvement (Basson & Mawson, 2011).

On a macro level, the implementation of legislation and policies that address the effect of substance misuse on adolescents involved with criminal activity could play a role. Groenewald and Bhana (2016) have stated that the South African policies which address the effect of substance abuse do not effectively address the needs of family members affected by substance misuse in terms of rendering supportive services. This is an important factor, as the implementation and practicality of these policies will have an influence on all the levels of the ecosystem of the substance-dependent adolescent. Service rendering to adolescents who misuse substances and display criminal behaviour aims to provide emotional, psychological, informational and interpersonal assistance. As explored in a recent research study conducted by Humm, Kaminer and Hardy (2018) in South Africa, various factors – including a lack of social support and service rendering – have been identified that impact on violence and criminal behaviour, specifically in adolescents.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To achieve the goal of the study and to answer the research question, a qualitative research approach was adopted in order to gain a more comprehensive and inclusive perspective on the topic (Fouché & Shurinck, 2011). An exploratory and descriptive research design was utilised in order to explore the views of different service providers and to describe their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to obtain the sample of twenty participants, when data saturation was reached (Maree, 2016). Criteria for inclusion were that participants had to be practicing social service providers rendering services to juvenile offenders who misuse substances within the geographical area of Cape Town and surrounding areas. The participants were social workers, social auxiliary workers, youth probation officers, magistrates and prosecutors.

A semi-structured interview with interview guide was used to collect the data. Participants were interviewed by the researcher, and the interviews were transcribed utilising a denaturalised method (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2006). A denaturalised method allows the transcriber to remove unnecessary elements of speech such as pauses and interjections, thus focusing more on the main content of the interview. Data analysis was done by utilising Tesch's eight steps to categorise the data into three themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Guba's model in Krefting (1991) was used to test the trustworthiness of the data. Data verification was done to ensure that the study was verifiable and

reliable. The researcher made use of member checking and reflexivity as data verification methods. Ethical clearance was obtained for this study. The NGOs approached to conduct the interviews provided written permission to interview the participants (Maree, 2016).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study will be presented next. Ten of the participants are social workers, two social auxiliary workers, four youth probation officers, two magistrates and two prosecutors.

Three themes were identified with relevant sub-themes as indicated in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**THEMES AND SUB-THEMES**

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
1 Micro level	1.1 Wellbeing of adolescents 1.2 Family 1.3 Peer pressure
2 Meso level	2.1 Socio-economic circumstances 2.2 School 2.3 Gang-related activities
3 Macro level	3.1 Service rendering

### THEME 1: MICRO LEVEL

Three sub-themes were identified under the micro level theme, namely wellbeing, family and peer pressure.

#### *Sub-theme 1.1: Wellbeing of adolescents*

The most serious long-term effect of misusing substances is the detrimental effect this has on the wellbeing of a person. Substance misuse in South Africa has had a damaging and negative effect on the vigour, wellbeing and conditions of the country and has led to a multitude of high-risk behaviours among adolescents, including illegal and offensive behaviour, violence, unprotected sex, health complications, as well as psychological and physical difficulties (Department of Basic Education, 2013). This is echoed by the following participants' comments:

*"A juvenile offender, for me and from personal experience in working in this field, 80% are linked to substance abuse, which affects them psychologically, physically, financially, or emotionally because they want that sense of belonging at the end of the day."* (Social worker)

*"When you use the drugs it affects your personality, and you become aggressive and agitated. When you don't have the drug in you, you go through withdrawals, so you become agitated, aggressive and violent."* (Social worker)

*"Emotionally, youth suffer more. Substance abuse stunts their emotional growth and affects them for years to come, even after they no longer abuse drugs or alcohol"*. (Magistrate)

Substance misuse among adolescents has a damaging and detrimental effect on their emotional, psychological and mental wellbeing. Excessive and extensive use can also stunt emotional growth and development, and, most significantly, stunt brain development (Winters & Arria, 2011). Again, the use of illegal substances and involvement in juvenile-offending behaviour can be related to the desire and need for a sense of belonging. This misuse, consequently, affects one's personality and decision-making capabilities.

#### *Sub-theme 1.2: Family*

Research in South Africa (Burton & Leoschut, 2013) has shown that an estimated 90% of juvenile offenders have had a history of ill-treatment, often in their families. The family context and environment are important to shape adolescents' behaviour and emotions (Institute of Medicine and

National Research Council Committee on the Science of Adolescence, 2011). Often adolescents do not have a supportive family context. Research has shown that children who have grown up in functional and stable families have a low probability of having physical and mental health problems as an adolescent or adult (Hsiao, Fry, Ward, Ganz, Casey, Zheng & Fang, 2018). One of the participants said the following:

*“I think it mainly stems from dysfunctional families. You don’t have that sense of belonging in a family. You don’t receive that love from your parent. That attachment between you and mom is not there, so now you go out and try to seek that attachment in the wrong place; and that is where you find yourself in a jail or a secure facility. So I feel it starts at home, where the children don’t have that sense of belonging. They don’t have that attachment and that bond is not formed between the mother, the child and the father.”* (Social worker)

As seen from this account, the parental bond and relationship usually lay the foundation for the child’s perception of himself or herself, as well as healthy or unhealthy behaviours and relationships. The family structure plays a vital role in the development and progression of the child. It is important to note that research (Mudavanhu & Schenck, 2014) has also shown an increase in an adolescent’s probability of being involved in illegal substances if his or her family has a past of engaging in such behaviour.

The involvement of parents in the lives of their children is essential to their growth and development. A lack of involvement and interest can result in a dysfunctional relationship between the child and parent (Bukakto & Daehler, 2011). The dysfunctionality within the family system could result in the child facing or experiencing low or no self-esteem, socialisation problems, a susceptibility to pressure by peers, a lack of self-control, and a likelihood to experiment with illegal substances (Mudavanhu & Schenck, 2014). Single-parents raising children or families with absent fathers could also negatively affect the emotional, psychological and mental development of an individual. Masemola (2017) writes that children who are raised without a father figure are more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour, indulge in substance misuse or criminal behaviour, and form unhealthy relationships with the opposite sex. She also identifies that approximately half of South African children are being raised without their fathers or a father figure.

In the following account the participants clearly demonstrate the importance of family in the upbringing of a child:

*“When I went out to schools here in the area to do my practice, I discovered that 80-90% of the children come from broken homes. So that is how it is when it comes to behaviour and the drug use of youth – it’s because of broken homes.”* (Social worker)

*“More often than not, there is family discord, there’s divorced families, there’s single-parent families, there’s blended families, there’s slip families, and that fabric within the family has become loose, it’s broken”.* (Social Worker)

*“The home environment impact on how the young person perceives the world, as his family members play a big part in shaping the young person’s character, values and belief systems. Single-parenting is difficult without a support system, and at times the single parent him or herself lack basic parenting skills, which impacts the healthy development and guidance of the young person. In most cases the father figure is absent, and as a result young people turn to others as role-models.”* (Social auxiliary worker)

These comments are in line with the literature (Bukakto & Daehler, 2011; Mudavanhu & Schenck, 2014) and draw attention to the strong epidemic of social issues caused in part by the absence of parental figures and by dysfunctional families. These affect the optimal development of adolescents, especially the tendency to be exposed to or become involved in substance misuse and criminal behaviour.

### ***Sub-theme 1.3: Peer pressure***

Adolescents spend proportionally more time with their peers and less time with their family during this developmental stage. Consequently, the greater amount of time spent with their friends allows for their bonds and relationships to grow. These peer relationships and connections play a fundamental role in the development of interpersonal and communication skills (McElhaney, Antonishak, & Allen, 2008). They also allow adolescents to experience optimal social interactions and functioning. However, a desire for social acceptance and popularity amongst peers may emerge at the adolescent stage and can easily result in negative consequences. The desire for approval and acceptance by peers and friends can easily influence an individual to be pressured into doing something that he or she would not normally do. This need for acceptance from peers is related to finding a sense of commonality or common ground in order to gain the approval of peers (Costello & Hope, 2016).

The participants were asked to elaborate on their perceptions on how the need for acceptance and a sense of commonality are related to peer pressure and deviant peer affiliations. The following comments were noted:

*“...it is also influenced with the peer groups with who they associated with. The influence of peers plays a significant role in offending behaviour of youth because of the need of acceptance.”* (Youth probation officer)

*“If friends are bad influences, they could encourage on pressuring you to use substances to look cool.”* (Magistrate)

*“Youth that do not have sound parental guidance and values often fall victim of the lure of acceptance and popularity from deceptive peers”.* (Youth Probation Officer)

*“I think it creates a feeling of normality, that it’s okay, that everyone is doing it. And it does create a sense of commonality and a sense of belonging. So I think it plays a huge role; the influence of peers.”* (Social worker)

It emerged from the participants’ comments that peer pressure has a substantial influence on the decisions made by individuals and the actions or behaviours executed by them. This creates a feeling of normality and a sense of commonality-generating socially acceptable behaviour, from the perspective of the adolescent. Furthermore, the individuals who lack parental relationships and guidance fill this void by finding acceptance, love and belonging with one another (McElhaney *et al.*, 2008).

Through the accounts of the participants, it can be deduced that friends and peers can influence one another in a negative manner – directly or indirectly. Being affiliated and associated with a certain group of people in order to be accepted and feel a sense of belonging can put an individual at risk of indulging in certain negative behaviours merely to fit in with the crowd (Costello & Hope, 2016).

## **THEME 2: MESO LEVEL**

In this theme three sub-themes were identified, namely socio-economic circumstances, school and gang-related activities.

### ***Sub-theme 2.1: Socio-economic circumstance***

The cultural and social environment shapes a person’s growth and, specifically, the growth and development of adolescents. This environment has the ability to influence the behaviours and emotions of an adolescent (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council Committee on the Science of Adolescence, 2011). It is important to note that the social and economic status of a person’s environment can also impact on growth in terms of family functioning, available opportunities offered, service delivery and social context. This may affect the functioning of family, as discussed under subtheme 1.2. Research has also shown that adolescents who are raised in poverty-stricken communities are at a greater risk of displaying aggression, misconduct and challenging behaviour. The environmental pressures were an evident factor throughout the interview process as indicated by the following accounts:

*“Substance abuse plays a very big role in what our teens do. And they are so pressured by their circumstances or by their surroundings that they tend to just leap into that – into substances.”* (Social worker)

*“Community background – like the place you are raised. The more the crime in an area, the higher the chances of starting early in crime.”* (Prosecutor)

*“I think in the areas I mentioned, it is poverty. They are living in dire circumstances, where it’s 10 people in a one-bedroom house. So poverty is a main concern.”* (Social worker)

Through the comments of the participants, it is clear that many environmental stressors and pressures may influence adolescents to indulge in substance misuse or criminal activity. A community with high levels of substance misuse, poverty and crime rates also puts the individual at risk of indulging in similar behaviours. This can be seen as a means of exerting societal pressure or as a coping strategy for the individual. The findings correlate directly with the literature and research of the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council Committee on the Science of Adolescence (2011), where the importance of one’s social and environmental elements for emotional wellbeing is indicated.

Individuals in South Africa are faced with many stressors, particularly those of low socio-economic circumstances, given the developing and low-income status of our country. These financial stressors can result in increasing feelings of negativity, substance use and even delinquency (Mosavel, *et al.*, 2015). Moodley, Matjila and Moosa (2012) also drew attention to the strong correlation between low socio-economic communities and substance misuse combined with criminal activity.

### ***Sub-theme 2.2: School***

There is a connection between school and peer pressure (sub-theme 1.3). The school structure is a fundamental construction in the adolescent’s life. It can either be a safe haven and support system, or a place of escape to fill unmet needs. Within the school setting there are also various forms of violence and abuse. These include, but are not limited to, corporal punishment, physical assault, sexual or verbal abuse, threats, bullying, theft, gender-based violence and gang-related activities (Ward *et al.*, 2012). Bullying is also regarded as a form of violence and it is experienced by many school-going adolescents. It includes problematic, aggressive and victimising behaviours. Research has shown that there is a strong relationship between school bullying and the use of illegal substances or drugs (Maria & Eisner, 2015).

Peer pressure, as discussed under sub-theme 1.3, is also prevalent in the school system. Bullying in schools also has an immensely negative effect on the development and growth of adolescents. They are also more exposed and more at risk due to the influence and advancement of technology, allowing pictures, videos and information to be distributed instantaneously. Additionally, there is an association, both in the case of victims and perpetrators, of bullying with substance dependence. This again has a negative effect on wellbeing, as was discussed under sub-theme 1.1. This is not only echoed in the literature (Hsiao *et al.*, 2018; Nalin, 2017), but also through the comments of the participants:

*“I think that if there is conflict at school – this is the period of high school so there is that search for identity and role confusion – so at school, it is where they really experiment in developing those skills in relationships and communication. And if you are struggling to form relationships or at least a couple of good friends, it leaves you lonely and vulnerable and an easy target. And if you come across different, then you become the target for being bullied. Once again, all these tiny variables adding up to it.”* (Social worker)

*“I’ve spoken to one of my workers this morning actually about bullying and that is a thing happening in schools, with one of our clients, but also happening outside of school; and that is also gang related. And a big part of it is also substance use and misuse by the children.”* (Social worker)



*“Bullying is a big problem in schools and plays a significant role in youth involvement in offending behaviour. Often young people join themselves to a gang to find protection from bullies. They, unfortunately, enter a world of crime and offending behaviour through their gang involvement which does end up unfortunately with prison sentences and a destroyed future.”* (Youth probation officer)

Through these participant accounts, it is clear that pressure and bullying are experienced by a significant number of adolescents within the school environment. Pressure and bullying can also be carried out by gangsters on school grounds, or outside of the school environment, as will be discussed under sub-theme 2.3. The instantaneous distribution of information also allows for bullying to carry on outside of the school, allowing individuals to have consistent contact with each other, even though they are not physically in the same place. There is also pressure to sell and distribute illegal substances through the schooling environment and structure, and this is perpetuated by creating a sense of belonging out of fear of being bullied. This is echoed in the literature and research, as seen in the work by Nalin (2017). One of the reasons for substance misuse and dependence is the fact that those who express bullying and negative pressuring behaviour often suffer from emotional, psychological or behavioural difficulties, thus placing them at risk of developing a dependence on substances (Nalin, 2017).

### ***Sub-theme 2.3: Gang related activities***

This sub-theme closely relates to the previous one. Research has shown that the involvement in gangsterism and drugs enables violent and criminal behaviour. This involvement is especially encouraged and directed at adolescents. Research (Basson & Mawson, 2011; Costello & Hope, 2016; Edberg *et al.*, 2015) has also revealed that the average age of gang members is getting lower. This means that youths are creating affiliations with gang members at a young age (as young as the pre-adolescent stage) as can be seen in the following comments:

*“They [the gang leaders] drive nice cars, they have all the access to resources, women. And you know, impressionable young people see that. They see that they have authority in the community. They have a say. They create fear. So I think it’s a huge factor in terms of predisposing young people. It’s certainly not fertile ground and then you place that in the context of broken families, absent moms or dads, poor role models, media- and you have a young person very bombarded.”* (Social worker)

*“Gangsters have a big impact on our youth. Especially in the impoverished communities, where you come from nothing and you want to move on to something.”* (Social worker)

*“Gangster lifestyle is martyred by our youth as it offers, especially our poorer poverty-stricken youth, an easy way or access to material and financial gain.”* (Magistrate)

*“Sometimes they will stay out of school, because the gangsterism will try and incorporate them to do their illegal activities and with that, they give them money or drugs and that’s how they get [drugs].”* (Social worker)

In South Africa there has also been an increase in homicides, sexual offences, assaults and violence among adolescents. This has been related to gang involvement and association (Basson & Mawson, 2011). Research in South Africa has also shown that drug dealers are targeting youths as young as 12 years of age to be involved in this illegal drug industry (Dias, 2017). This puts the youth at risk and introduces them to a lifestyle of danger, criminal activity and immorality.

Gangsterism, gang involvement and drug-dealing are all interlinked and form part of a broader and more complex gang-related system. The pressures from gang involvement encourage individuals to behave defiantly. These actions and behaviours are rewarded and deemed socially acceptable through the gang-related systems (Edberg *et al.*, 2015). The lifestyle of gangsters is glamorised by wealth, status, power and material items. These elements are particularly lacking in the average low socio-economic and poverty-stricken household as indicated under sub-theme 2.1. Thus, by the gang culture

being publicised and advertised, these so-called *benefits* of gangsterism become an attractive lure to vulnerable youths.

This view has also been demonstrated by various participants, as seen below:

*“They tend to look up to others and they admire those people that is involved in gangsterism and involved in substance abuse. So they basically look up to those people as a role model. I think the environment plays a big role in terms of the influences or the factors influencing the adolescents or substance users.”* (Social worker)

*“It is how they present their gang culture to the youth to attract them and how they bribe them to come in ... so they make it lucrative for the youth to join; and I have heard that people are threatened to join but I don't know if the youth has the strength to stand up against them.”* (Social worker)

Through the narratives of the participants, one can deduce that some adolescents admire and respect the gangsters and the culture that accompanies gangsterism. These gangsters are seen as community leaders and role models who influence the youth and broader environment. The glamorised gang culture is displayed to the youth so that they are aware of the so-called benefits and powers (Edberg *et al.*, 2015).

### **THEME 3: MACRO LEVEL**

In this last theme the challenges of service rendering will be discussed.

#### ***Sub-theme 3.1: Services rendering***

The importance of having good, readily-available social supportive services for adolescents who misuse substances and engage in criminal activities are paramount (Humm, Kaminer & Hardy, 2018). However, the lack of sufficient services is noted by several participants:

*“To the school, they are not really open for counselling in that regard because there is a lack of social workers to do the counselling and so forth. Referrals to Safe Schools – two to three months before they come out in this area ... So I feel schools is also a departmental problem lacking in that sense.”* (Social worker)

*“And I think the schools, they are so over-burdened – the teachers, with the same issue of substance abuse and other issues as well ... You have one social worker doing ten to twelve schools in a district. It's not possible. And if you look at areas like [...], those are highly problematic areas, where I would say one social worker per school might not even be enough.”* (Social worker)

*“Having some support for learners is important. I don't think all schools are fortunate enough to have a counsellor at school or someone to talk to. But we should have that support structure – someone to talk to, a grade head – some peer support or an integrated peer support around something like that.”* (Social worker)

These narratives indicate that there is a lack of supportive structures within the school environment. These support structures can be accessed through school counsellors, school social workers, more supportive services and resources from the Department of Basic Education and Safe Schools, support for teachers who are facing challenging behaviour from adolescents with substance misuse problems, as well as individual learner support. Safe Schools is a division of the Western Cape Education Department. However, the field workers at Safe Schools are spread out to render services to 10 to 12 schools, just like the school social workers at the Department of Social Development. The researcher can relate directly to this, as she is a social worker at a school. Due to the lack of services rendered, the adolescents and teachers face an imbalance in the support available within the school structure and environment. This is clearly demonstrated in the comments and expressions of the participants, who have practical experience at this level. This is also echoed in the research presented by Nel, Tlale,

Engelbrecht and Nel (2016) as well as Donohue and Bornman (2014), and Amsterdam (2010), where the lack of service rendered and inadequate support available to teachers, learners and parents are underlined.

The participants further expressed the need for supportive services within communities, not only for the adolescents, but for the whole family. Their accounts emphasise the importance of working with families holistically in order to create a steady and positive influence on the development of the individual within his or her surroundings. The lack of these services opens up the prospect of involvement in crime, illegal substances or negative behaviour:

*“I feel, the families – they are the ones that are being overseen and they are the ones that are not getting the support that they would need”.* (Social Worker)

*“What we are actually doing now with working with the clients – first we are only working with offenders and for the last two or three years we’ve got money from DSD to work with the client but also the families also. And we need to reflect our targets also on families. So it is not only working with the offender but working with the whole system: home system, schools, the bigger picture – not only the child.”* (Social worker)

Groenewald and Bhana (2016) have said that the South African policies which address the effect of substance abuse do not effectively address the needs of family members affected by substance abuse in terms of supportive services being rendered. This is an important factor, as the implementation and practicality of these policies will influence the different systems of adolescents who misuse substances and display criminal behaviour.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study explored some of the factors that could play a role in adolescents misusing substances and engaging in criminal activity. Social service providers who render services to vulnerable adolescents formed part of this study. According to the ecological perspective, several systems form part of adolescents’ lives. On a micro level, several factors could influence an adolescent’s wellbeing, for instance, genetic make-up and mental health. The role that family plays in adolescents’ lives could also be a determining factor regarding substance misuse and criminal behaviour. Peer pressure is another factor that could lead to substance misuse and criminal behaviour.

On a meso level, the socio-economic factors such as poverty and vulnerable communities often lead to an increase in substance misuse and criminal activity. Adolescents also often attend schools in these communities where they are exposed to violence and bullying. Inevitably, gangsterism is another factor on the meso level influencing adolescents’ lives, as it could be perceived by them as an escape from poverty and financial constraints.

On the macro level, there are several challenges experienced regarding service rendering. The lack of sufficient services to vulnerable adolescents and their families were of particular concern.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Social work practice

The following recommendations are offered for:

- Much more effort should be put into preventative services such as awareness campaigns in order to limit factors that could lead to substance misuse and criminal activity.
- The role of social workers rendering services to adolescents at risk at schools are paramount and every effort should be made in order to employ more social workers in this area.
- A multidisciplinary team approach should be adopted in order to address the psychological, social and physical harm associated with substance misuse. (Social service providers such as social workers, psychologists and occupational therapists could be part of this team).

## Research

- More research is needed to gain insight into the challenges faced by adolescents on a micro (for instance, lack of parental guidance), meso (for instance, peer pressure) and macro level (for instance, insufficient resources).
- Quantitative research on criminal activity and substance misuse amongst adolescents could equip social service providers with more insight into this matter.
- Gang-related activities amongst adolescents are an immense challenge in the social work profession, and more research is needed in order to reduce gang-related activities.

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