YOUTHS IN GANGS ON THE CAPE FLATS, SOUTH AFRICA: PARENTS TALK BUT WHO LISTENS?

Glynnis Dykes[1.1], Ronel Davids[1.2] and Uwarren September[1.3]

[1.1] *University of the Western Cape, Department of Social Work, Cape Town, South Africa.*
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9668-1597 gdykes@uwc.ac.za

[1.2] *University of the Western Cape, Department of Social Work, Cape Town, South Africa.*
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7505-3017 rsdavids@uwc.ac.za

[1.3] *University of the Western Cape, Department of Social Work, Cape Town, South Africa.*
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6844-4634 useptember@uwc.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The appeal of gang membership to young people is an ongoing concern, especially for social workers serving affected communities. This article is part of a larger research study (2016-2018) by social work students. These are the findings of the 2017 study on the perceptions of parents or caregivers about the allure of gang membership to young people. A qualitative approach, utilising an exploratory research design, was employed. The necessary ethics approval from the institution was obtained for data collection. Individual interviews were conducted with 325 parents on the Cape Flats in the Western Cape. Six themes emerged from a thematic data analysis, such as socio-political causes and effects, the role of parents and family, as well as interventions and role players. Key findings show that parents do reflect on what happens in communities, but their opinions do not always count for interventions and policies. Policy and justice issues require considerable thought as they frame the world in which people live and are intended to ensure that the voices of those most affected are heard. Community participation and professional intervention should be a reflection of the role of marginalisation and powerlessness.

Keywords: family; gang; interventions; parents; school; youth

INTRODUCTION

The study aimed to explore the perceptions of parents or caregivers about the allure of gang membership to young people, especially during adolescence. The origins of gang formation and membership in Cape Town are an interesting phenomenon, albeit ironic, since the establishment of the first gang, called the Globe Gang, during the 1940s in District Six was initially intended to combat crime in the area (Jensen, 2010; Wegner et al., 2016). District Six is a well-known area on the slopes of Table Mountain, traditionally inhabited by people of colour. In District Six, the mix of cultures became its trademark with people from various rural and urban areas, including Indigenous people and freed slaves (from Malaysia and Indonesia), merging into one vibrant neighbourhood (Mellet, 2020). The area became characterised by overcrowding and increasing joblessness, and the resultant poverty meant that households were without resources and means to make a decent living (Pinnock, 2016). The term 'skollie' – derived from the Dutch word 'schoelje', meaning crook or scavenger –became synonymous with idle youths on street corners in District Six (Petrus, 2013; Pinnock, 2016). The Globe Gang arose from these circumstances and consisted of family members of the shop owners and small businesses in the area around the Globe furniture store, who took it upon themselves to 'police' the area around their businesses and properties (Pinnock, 2016). However, the implementation of the 1950 Group Areas Act (Union of South Africa, 19950) led to the forced removal of millions of coloured people from their ancestral living spaces (Cochrane & Chellan, 2017). This resulted in the Globe Gang dispersing into multiple township areas on the Cape Flats (a flat inhospitable terrain about 30 kilometres in diameter), forming splinter gang groups (Jensen, 2010; Van Wyk & Theron, 2005).

Salo (2006) argued that the gang membership of coloured (and black) men and their gendered identities are inextricably linked to the history of forced removals and the consequent socio-economic deprivation of people on the Cape Flats, and that such gang formation reflects, and struggles against, the prevailing political and economic systems. Gangs seem to fill the socio-emotional gaps and needs of individuals, groups and communities (Bacchini et al., 2020). Similarly, Dong and Krohn (2016) stated that gangs could be viewed as mutated social groupings in the face of significant social difficulties that met the needs of youths that their families were unable to satisfy. Eagle's (2015) concern was the spiralling violence, crime and aggressive behaviour of these youth and the significant impact of this on the long-term projections for social cohesion in South Africa, amongst other things. In addition, Wegner et al. (2016) also reported the worrying trend of gangs recruiting young children as members. Though there are many reasons for children to join gangs, these authors cite poverty, school difficulties, family troubles, substance abuse and structural obstacles as key reasons. They argued that these barriers act as springboards for children to join gangs. The aforementioned South African study by Wegner et al. (2016) confirmed the allure of gangs for vulnerable youths in other communities and countries beset with similarly deprived social circumstances, with concomitant youth gang statistics. Social work interventions in poverty-stricken and disadvantaged communities in general are needed, because it is in these communities that many parents, caregivers and families struggle to offer sound parenting to their increasingly marginalised and troubled children. This is perhaps not an issue that we in South Africa would be able to address on our own, but this is certainly possible collaboratively across all contexts.

The study context and methodology are first presented below, followed by the qualitative findings and discussion. Specific recommendations are made on which to base future research and conversations.

STUDY CONTEXT

This study formed part of a fourth-year research module for social work students. The topic for the module was selected because of the escalating problem of gang membership and gang violence on the Cape Flats, where the university is located. The topic was a concern for social work practitioners and educators as gangsterism was deemed endemic to the Cape Flats.

The 1950 Group Areas Act disrupted the social order of the time and dispersed families and communities to the inhospitable and isolated areas on the Cape Flats; and with this disruption began the flourishing of the current gang activities and criminal behaviour that is now widespread in these areas (Bowers du Toit, 2014; Salo, 2006). In Cape Town, Coloured and Black people were removed, often forcibly, from their ancestral land to make way for housing for white people. Bowers du Toit (2014) argued that gang membership and activities are a significant 'social cost' of the forced removals of established communities. Compelling reasons for the continued existence and indeed proliferation of gangs on the Cape Flats are, according to Pinnock (2017), local and international economics, high levels of corruption and maladministration, poor education and appropriate skills training, and the socio-political neglect of specific communities. These are the conditions that pushed more than 100,000 people to become members of about 130 gangs on the Cape Flats (Dziewanski, 2020).

Gang members account for most crimes in the given area in which they operate (Augustyn et al., 2014). Dolley (2018) called gangsterism on the Cape Flats 'a serial killer' because of the daily and nightly shootings, instilling fear and trapping people in their communities. Crime statistics bear out this analogy. According to the Western Cape Government (2019a), in 2017/2018 most (83%) gang-related murders in South Africa took place in the Western Cape. In the 2018/2019 crime reporting period, the Cape Flats recorded the highest levels of gang violence (Western Cape Government, 2019b).

These statistics, in turn, explain the further social isolation and the risks to families, schools and communities. The literature review will further attest to the impact of these risks.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Several studies have been done to understand the role of parents in youth gang involvement. Shute (2008) did a systematic review of this topic and found that one component entailed understanding the family environment and parenting practices as indicators for youth gang involvement and offending behaviour. In the United Kingdom, Aldridge et al. (2009) did an ethnographic study over 26 months that involved parents of youth gang members. It was found that parents who denied their children's involvement in a gang often did so out of a desire to avoid being held responsible for their child's gang affiliation and the associated social stigma. This reluctance stemmed from feelings of shame and humiliation.

 Young et al. (2014) also undertook a literature review, together with conducting qualitative interviews and focus groups in the UK that focused on the relationship between gang members

and their families. The authors contend that gang formation and criminal behaviour cannot be attributed solely to impoverished home environments or dysfunctional families. In a mixed methods study in the USA, Curry-Stevens and Reyes (2014) found that key mediating factors for gang involvement were also the quality of the parent-child relationship as well as parental supervision and time spent with children (cf. Vuk, 2017). These studies show the invaluable role of parents in preventing youths from becoming involved with gangs, but conversely they can also be complicit in enabling gang involvement. There have not been many studies undertaken on parents of gang members in the South African context. However, the substantial research by Pinnock (2016) over 30 years represents the most comprehensive study and documentation of studies on gangs in SA. It is necessary to obtain the participation of parents and to ascertain their views and opinions. Thus, this study focused on eliciting parents'/caregivers' views on youth gang involvement to explore their opinions and what they felt needed to be done.

LITERATURE REVIEW: YOUTHS AND GANGS

Conceptualising youths in gangs

Gangs are defined in different ways depending on the context or the reasons for their creation and development. For example, Egley et al. (2006) defined gangs as groups of two or more individuals who come together for a common purpose, claiming territory in the community and being involved in criminal and violent activities.

In Britain, The Centre for Social Justice (2009) described gangs as an enduring band of young people, associating for the most part in out-of-family contexts, in terms of five elements namely: viewing themselves as a specific group; participating in criminal activities; presiding over a geographic area of operation (territory); have an organisational order; and clashing with other gangs. There are key elements that these definitions share and are vital for this discussion, such as groups of young people, identity, common purpose, out-of-family context, territory, conflict and criminal behaviour.

Youths start associating with gang members at an early age (early adolescence) and make a transition to join the gang before the age of 15 years (De Wet, 2016). Howell (2013) clarifies that the process from socialising to joining a gang can take 6 months to a year or two. This period is the time when youths are most susceptible and hence the effects of gang membership may be far-reaching. Howell (2010) contends that adolescence is a time when youths form relationships outside of family contexts. He notes that youths form starter groups to introduce themselves to the wider youth culture; in some cases, established gangs themselves form groups called 'wannabes, juniors, or peewees', all meaning small or lower than the adult or senior level. He argued that aggression and other risk-taking behaviours act like magnets, prompting youths to associate with and eventually join a gang.

According to Howell (2010, 2013), the notion that youths are forced into joining gangs is deceptive as most of them want to join, albeit for various reasons, notably for protection, respect, money and following a friend. But even these factors are underscored by other underlying reasons, such as indicated in the discussion below.

Parenting and at-risk youths

Howell (2010) states that parents are primarily responsible for nurturing their children's socio-emotional growth and development. On the other hand, Lorence et al. (2019) explain that the most powerful reason for adolescent behavioural problems is parenting behaviour and poor parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and neglectful). The forms in which these behaviours are manifested are connected and most often co-exist. Holt (2011) also confirms that inadequate parenting practices are constantly viewed through a classist lens with middle-class and nuclear family formations being perceived as normal and other family forms as aberrant. In the UK, the study by Young et al. (2014) focused on exploring the role of the family in gang formation and gang offending. However, these authors also caution against indiscriminately linking gang membership to poor family life and a deprived environment, because gang membership is far more complex than this, as it is specifically aligned with socio-political and resource-constrained circumstances.

Howell (2010) argued that compelling risks are associated with changes in the family and parenting structure, for example, single parenting, different family types, and caretaker changes. Thomas et al. (2017) point out that family members are connected in a myriad of different ways and these connections are vital means of mutual bonding and guidance throughout the person's life. In addition, social relationships are a significant foundation for wellbeing, giving a value to and a reason for a person's life. Thomas et al. (2017) contend that positive family relationships can impact on wellbeing in terms of emotional, social and physical functioning. Poverty, family and financial stressors unsettle family life and interfere with the development of cohesive family relationships. Being in a gang fills the gap between an unhappy family life and the need for belonging and care (Howell, 2010).

Thus far, we have discussed the important linkages between the individual and significant others in terms of social relationships, especially parents and family, as well as environmental stressors. The ecosystems theory was therefore purposively selected as the theoretical framework because the theory would enable several systems to be linked and analysed. Interventions for youths in gangs and preventing gang involvement can be effective by including all the different systems in youths' lives (Van der Merwe et al., 2013). These systems include contexts such as 1) individual context, 2) everyday contexts of interaction with family and peers, 3) community contexts, and 4) cultural, economic, social and political contexts.

KEY METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

This was a qualitative research study because the focus was on exploring and describing the perceptions and experiences of parents and caregivers of the youths, and ascertaining the points of view of people who experience the phenomenon under study every day.

Intervention mapping (IM) is an evidence-based framework describing the process of health promotion programme development tools for the planning and development of health promotion interventions (Bartholomew et al., 2011). Intervention mapping has six phases: a needs assessment, identifying performance objectives, methods and strategies, programme development, adoption and implementation, and evaluation (Bartholomew et al., 2011). For this study, the design is focused on the first step, which is to assess needs. Thus, the first step

spanned over three years of data collection for baseline information. The 2017 design thus formed the basis for a trajectory from awareness of the gaps to the basis for intervention.

The research population consisted of parents/caregivers on the Cape Flats who had adolescent school-going children. Van Rijnsoever (2017) explained population as being the complete set of data sources deemed to be germane to the study objectives and questions.

Sampling involved parents and caregivers in the areas around eight schools on the Cape Flats, mirroring the 2016 study with learners in these specific schools (Dykes et al., 2021). Qualitative studies usually adopt non-probability sampling (Denscombe, 2014). The study necessitated the use and application of two sampling methods. *Purposive sampling* was used to ensure that participants possessed specific characteristics specific characteristics or elements as described by Denscombe (2014) and Strydom (2022a). In this study, the main criterion for inclusion was that parents and caregivers had children in high schools in the selected areas. *Convenience sampling* means the recruitment of participants based on the convenience of the researcher and who is nearby (Denscombe, 2014). For this study, the convenience was recruiting participants near the student researchers' fieldwork placements. Students approached organisations (gatekeepers) in their fieldwork areas to discuss the possibility of recruiting participants willing to take part in the study and who met the inclusion criteria.

The sample size was five participants per student researcher and an additional one participant for the pilot study. The total sampling size for the 2017 cohort of student researchers was 325 (65 student researchers x 5 participants). Pseudonyms were used for participants.

The problem tree (a visual representation of a tree with roots to represent individual perspectives of causes and effects of a problem or issue) and individual interviews were used to collect the data. Findings were thus focused on causal factors (problem tree) and in-depth experiences (individual interviews). These methods are appropriate for qualitative studies (Snowdon et al., 2008; Strydom, 2022b).

Thematic analysis, as outlined in Tesch's eight steps (Harding, 2019), was used to code and structure the commonalities, patterns and divergences emerging from the data; this is discussed as follows:

- The researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading the transcripts of each interview they conducted to gain a sense of the main ideas that emerged;

- The researchers made notes in the margins of each case transcript, highlighting the themes that emerged from the text;

- A list of the themes was identified, and similar themes were clustered together, followed by the process of assigning abbreviated codes to the themes;

- The researchers applied the list of themes to the data by labelling segments within the data with the abbreviated codes;

- The researchers allocate the most descriptive wording for the themes and categories;

- A final decision on the abbreviation for each category and alphabetised codes was taken;

- The data material belonging to each category was assembled and a preliminary analysis was performed;

- The researchers recorded the final information collected and drafted into themes and subthemes/and categories and the dissemination of the findings.

To ensure validity, the researchers used the following methods to ensure trustworthiness (Denscombe, 2014): researcher triangulation (multiple researchers) and Tesch's 8 steps for credibility; using rich, thick descriptions and verbatim quotes and context information for transferability; a detailed description of the methodology for dependability; and researcher reflexivity for confirmability.

ETHICAL CLEARANCE

This study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (reference 15/7/106) and the Western Cape Government Education Department: Directorate Research (reference 20151214-6191). Adherence to the ethical requirements included informed consent and voluntary participation as well as consent for audio recording, ensuring confidentiality and privacy regarding the anonymity of participants and their narratives (Denscombe, 2014; Strydom & Roestenburg 2022), and minimising the risk of harm to the participants.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The researchers acknowledge the following limitations:

- This research study focused only on households on the Cape Flats in the Western Cape, and hence the findings can be transferred or used only in similar social contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Six main themes are discussed on the basis of the substantial amount of data obtained. What follows are selected narratives that underscore the main themes in terms of the ecological framework for understanding the youths in their specific context as described above.

Theme 1: Marginalisation and powerlessness

Theme 1 centred on socio-historical issues that had given rise to gang activities such as what we know currently. Participants related how social issues such as apartheid, poverty and unemployment as well as the specific gang culture (such as recruitment practices) promoted gang involvement. The following narratives support these opinions.

Well, I think apartheid took its toll on our communities and our people, you know. People who had to move to the Cape Flats at that time all came from a tight-knit community, and they lived in nicer homes than they do now…. And it was a place where people cared for each other…

In areas where there is poverty, people will do anything to get an income, children drop out of school to find jobs to support themselves and their families … gangs can offer you money and things if you become part of them and that would seem like an easy thing to do instead of finishing school and then getting a job.

The two comments highlight the possible factors contributing to the proliferation of gangs in communities and how gangs recruit young people; these factors are also directly linked to the socio-economic consequences of apartheid and poverty. One Participant made it clear that apartheid had severe ramifications for people, especially in terms of the kinds of relationships and connections they had enjoyed in their previous communities (before the forced removals legitimised by the Group Areas Act of 1950). Another point raised by the same participant refers to the settlements and housing they were then given, which caused further psycho-social problems for communities. Another participant explained gang recruitment methods, but importantly also contextualised these in terms of the vulnerabilities of poverty-stricken communities.

Covey (2010) argues that the concept of marginalisation provides a crucial lens for understanding gangs. In this sense, marginalisation is defined as the separation of specific groups of people from mainstream social and economic resources and institutions. Covey (2010) further states that marginalisation is a consequence of colonisation and that many studies have confirmed the role of marginalisation in gang formation and gang membership. Petrus (2013) argued that the political dispensation regarding coloured people (pre- and post-apartheid) led insidiously to the establishment and continuance of street gangs. Thus, Bowers du Toit (2014, p. 1) calls the widespread joining of gangs a "pandemic that is closely tied to a deprivation trap of poverty, marginalisation, isolation, unemployment and, ultimately, powerlessness", thereby recognising the deep-seated nature of the issue in South Africa and the significance of enduring structural disadvantage. Importantly, Petrus (2013) states that gang formation and the proliferation of gangs are direct outcomes of socio-economic marginalisation: first, marginalisation as an aspect of apartheid, and secondly, marginalisation through being rejected by their communities for what they represent.

Theme 2: Role of family

In theme 2, the focus is on the role of family, with the specific roles of parenting and caregiving. The two selected comments reflect views on domestic violence, such as conflict and abuse, and poor parenting styles when it comes to matters such as discipline and general attitude. Hence, the gang becomes the substitute pseudo-family, where some of the parental roles are fulfilled, albeit in a negative manner, i.e. developing a sense of belonging, finding acceptance, a need for a stable identity, and so forth. The following comments are pertinent.

A lot of kids feel that there isn't understanding at home; that when they get home from school all their parents want to do is argue with them. So, they find people outside that do understand them. That is where they find 'family'.

Some parents are just not interested in their children. It is a sad reality but true. Children look for love, attention and affection from their parents … and without it they struggle to build relationships at a later stage and … joining a gang means becoming part of a family

and when you aren't getting that at home the gang can look like the best thing to become part of.

A Participant highlighted a common refrain: that children are reared in highly conflictual homes where relationships are fraught with violence and hurt. Within these circumstances, children find their sense of belonging outside of the home. Another Participant confirmed the lamentable parenting practices, which also led to youths finding solace elsewhere. These comments underscore the sense of desperation that drives youths to seek acceptance in gang membership.

A significant theme that emerged from a qualitative study in South Africa was the role of absent fathers and the prevalence of non-nuclear family units (Wijnberg & Green, 2014). In the study by Maringira and Masiya (2018) on youth gang violence in Gugulethu and Nyanga East in Cape Town, they contended that a considerable number of families experience extreme difficulties, as men do not provide positive role modelling, and many families are female-headed households characterised by absent fathers.

In a study on adolescent participants' views on youth gang involvement in Khayelitsha (a township in Cape Town), Breen et al. (2019) found that supportive family relationships serve as protective factors against violence and troubling behaviours. Additionally, non-familial supportive relationships were also seen as protective, because youths who do not enjoy these supportive and nurturing relationships are more at risk for manifesting negative, often violent behaviours. Importantly, these authors point out that the domestic context is important because parents must often leave home early and return quite late from their places of employment, leaving their children alone and vulnerable to outside negative influences and experimental behaviour. A study by Hesselink and Bougard (2020) in Gauteng province in South Africa on youth gang members also found negative role models to be a key causal factor in youth gang involvement, together with strained parent-child relationships, poor family involvement and lack of supervision. Hesselink and Bougard (2020) also found that families with a history of gang involvement were a significant risk factor for their children also joining gangs.

Theme 3: Adolescence and role models

The third theme focused on the developmental stage of youth in gangs. Adolescence represents the most complex phase in our lives, and the comments of participants reflected the challenges inherent in the phase, as well as the difficulties when coupled with living in impoverished communities. Adolescents are quite easily influenced by their peers and are very impressionable. Therefore, operating in groups/gangs provides a feeling of power through operating in numbers and elevates the self-esteem of some youths who lack a sense of self-confidence.

Since they do not have people to look up to as their role models, they end up getting pressure from bad friends … once they are with these friends, it is difficult to convince them to stop whatever they are doing.

How are we as mothers supposed to educate our boys about things that have to do with men? For example, my son has to go to the mountain, how must I know what happens there?

The person who is supposed to be discussing that with him is nowhere to be found. This can also make children look for father figures in the wrong places.

Role models and peer pressure are synonymous with adolescence. Both participants pointed out the significance of role models. One Participant emphasised the lack of constructive role models for teens and the resultant gap being filled by reprehensible others whose influence seemed to be both irresistible and overpowering. Another Participant noted another gap, namely the lack of role models in the absence of fathers, and used cultural practices as a case in point.

According to Augustyn et al. (2014), studies have underscored the considerable impact of gang membership on adolescents' lives during and after gang membership, and especially the impact on their socio-emotional development. These authors contend that gang membership disrupts the order of things, usually beginning with dropping out of school. Senthivel et al. (2024) confirm the link between school dropout and adverse behaviours paving the way for criminal involvement. These authors argue that leaving the relative safety of the school environment puts youths at further risk of the negative influences of peers (or even older gang members).

School dropout can signal the beginning of their involvement in the underworld of gang membership and gang activities. The 'rush into adulthood' illustrates the disorder in the life course of youths in gangs, characterised by increasing rebellious and offending behaviour, and is directly related to their disrupted developmental process (Augustyn et al., 2014).

Salo (2006) provided a compelling argument on gang identity in terms of the multi-layered identities that we all have, particularly gang members. This author contended that the intersectionality of their different identities is often in contrast to their being gang members. So sometimes gang members can be positive and negative role models. Another key factor in precipitating the troubled behaviour of children and youth, says Burton (2008), is the lack of positive and affirming role models, particularly in the family. In this instance, the phenomenon of absent fathers is a key factor (hence the gap filled by dubious role models such as gang members) as well as siblings as role models (this is especially relevant for child-headed households led by older siblings).

Theme 4: Effects of gangsterism

The fourth theme represents the effects of gangsterism from the viewpoint of participants in a parenting role. These perceptions reflect the violence and the concomitant terror and distress felt by the parents, as well as the consequences for young people of their gang involvement.

There is so much violence in our communities. You can walk around with money or phones, they will rob you and still kill you. We must be at home early. It is not safe to walk in the community at night because people get killed for no reason by the gangsters.

School drop-out is a definite reason why some young people join gangs. The kids sit on that corner every day, waiting for the school to come out and start trouble. They start little gangs and then join the bigger gangs, doing and selling things for them.

From the participants' point of view, increased violence featured strongly, with petty crime, precipitating more heinous crimes such as murder or grievous assault. Consequently, violence and crime create unsafe environments for people who live under self-imposed curfews and self-restrictive safety measures. One Participant described school drop-out, idleness and the beginnings of intimidation of other vulnerable children, pressuring others to join their informal groups as an entrée for joining more substantial, organised gangs.

Seminal work done by Kynoch (1999), argued that gangs engaged in violent behaviour and actions that significantly exacerbated an already stressed social environment. Winton (2006) confirmed that violence and conflict render community spaces threatening and perilous. It was equally traumatising when people were frequently exposed to hearing about or experiencing violence (secondary traumatisation) and this led to desensitisation (emotional numbing or blunting), resulting in non-responsiveness or inaction (Ward et al., 2012; Winton, 2006). Ward et al. (2012) argue that post-traumatic stress, substance abuse and antagonistic behaviour are key socio-emotional consequences of gangsterism (also see Rahtz, 2017).

Ndhlovu and Tanga (2021) reveal that their studies found that school drop-out produces disengaged and idle youths ready to do anything to relieve boredom and subsequent frustration. Breen et al. 2019 also state that when children and youths exit school, their employment options are severely curtailed and their likelihood of earning enough to fulfil their needs and those of their family is limited.

Theme 5: Police involvement and responsibilities

The role of the police is an important theme that emerged from the interviews. Participants' perceptions were of being inadequately protected by law enforcement, primarily through not feeling or seeing their presence in their communities.

> *We cannot do anything about this because even the police are afraid to come to the community. Not mentioning our families not wanting to visit us because they are afraid for their lives because of these gangs.*

> *The government needs to send more police and not just police but people who are committed in doing their job. I see people dying every day in the presence of police so the government should deploy more police to patrol day and night, especially here in Khayelitsha* [large sprawling township in Cape Town], *because a lot of crime is most definitely happening here almost every single minute.*

The role of the police services represented another key issue for participants. One participant confirmed the perception that police are reluctant to provide a service in known gang areas because they are afraid. There was also a demand not only for increased police presence but also for officials who were committed to the service in specific high-crime areas.

Ward et al. (2012) contend that healing and recovery from adversity and trauma require a person to feel physically and emotionally secure. But as Mora (2017) argues, gangs and gang activities in communities engender feelings of anxiety, panic and dread, compromising levels of individual, family and community wellbeing. In the fight against gangsterism, police officials are on the frontline. Kynoch (2016) stated that the government has provided

inadequate policing services in poor communities, specifically in informal settlements and rural areas, triggering regular protests, complaints and criticism (also see Petrus, 2016). Kinnes (2017, p. 258) argued that ultimately "the relationship between the police and gangs is one of mutual co-existence", suggesting that there is an uneasy acceptance of each other's ongoing presence in affected communities.

Theme 6: Dissatisfaction with the provision of services

Interventions and support are directly linked to the role of social work and government institutions. Participants also specifically mentioned gaps in the services at the government level and the provision of social workers at the school level.

> *Government can't do anything because they don't know anything what is happening on the ground, in the communities. They are sitting in their offices and making decisions about these types of things without actually knowing what it means to live in a community where gangsterism is taking over.*

> *There are no social workers in our schools. Would you believe it if I tell you that the social worker does not even come check up on me or my foster daughter regularly, I could be doing anything to this child and no one will even be aware of it.*

Theme 6 reflected on what participants perceived as required to combat gangsterism and crime. They singled out the role of government (and their general ignorance of local goings-on) and school services (stressing their perception of the lack of social work services in schools, and in particular the lack of attention to the care of foster children and the potential of abuse).

The quality of life of the majority of people in South Africa is severely compromised on a routine basis (Ward et al., 2012), and it is therefore vital to explore other options for healing and recovery. Aldridge et al. (2009) argue that interventions that were parent-focused had the potential to be effective in lowering gang membership. They did warn, however, that there were significant difficulties in rendering these services, because of the context of gang membership, gang offending and victimisation. Pinnock (2016) offered many worthy interventions and solutions, focused on facilitating personal and community resilience, from when a child enters pre-school, to schooling and after-school programmes, to enable and nurture positive development and decision-making pathways into adulthood. Howell (2010) also proposed comprehensive solutions, especially the involvement of communities in programmes to combat youth gang involvement. Other solutions were, for example, the use of multifaceted interventions to combat joining gangs, parent training to deal with troubled youths, and after-school supervision by adults or other parents; and in the school context, additional training for teachers on managing unruly learners, gang awareness programmes and tutoring for learners who are falling behind.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The significance of the study lies in the knowledge that these were the opinions and experiences of parents and carers by eliciting their views on youth gang involvement by exploring their opinions and what they felt needed to be done. The main themes reflected participants' perception of what they considered the causal factors to be, especially Theme 1,

marginalisation and powerlessness, exposing once again the enduring legacy of apartheid in gang involvement. This theme suggests that this aspect should not be underestimated since it is a significant factor in the lives of people on the Cape Flats, and indeed any other place in the world where youths feel marginalised and disconnected from the broader society. As social work researchers, we understand that family socio-economic backgrounds and structural disadvantages will assist social workers in delving into the complex family dynamics that lead youths to join gangs. This understanding is crucial as it sheds light on the psycho-social problems that arise within families and communities as a result of youth gang involvement. Understanding the complex relationship between family dynamics, loss of identity and gang involvement can help social workers effectively tackle the many challenges faced by families and young people, as well as the broader community. These challenges often include poverty, isolation, marginalisation, unemployment and powerlessness, which can result from the disconnection caused by apartheid policies.

Theme 2 (role of family) and Theme 3 (adolescence and role models) continued to address causal factors and highlighted the interactions of family, adolescents and role models. These two themes underscore previous studies that have underlined the considerable influence of parents, positive or harmful parenting practices, and the volatility of adolescence, especially the search for identity and belonging. These factors represent the roots of strife and conflict, or they can be the basis for nurturance and growth facilitated by kind and caring parents. The adolescent's search for identity, belonging and respect continues into adulthood. The perception of 'others' about who and what coloured or black people are, and the lower status accorded to them in society, all perpetuate gang membership. One potential implication for social work could involve developing and implementing targeted programmes and interventions aimed at providing support and resources to families and youths. These programmes would focus on facilitating family preservation, including parenting skills to mitigate the risk of increased gang membership within the community and perpetuate ongoing maladaptive parent behaviour. This could include a range of interventions, such as family counselling, educational initiatives, mentorship programmes and community outreach initiatives.

Theme 4 (effects of gangsterism) reflected the impact of gang involvement on the individual, family and community. Increased violence and idle youths and/or school drop-out were common refrains and acutely felt by participants. Idle youths evince a school system failing to captivate the interest and hence the presence of youths, with the resultant school drop-out, but it is also a consequence of the pressures discussed in Themes 1 to 3. Violence and fear were constant reminders of people's intolerable and degrading home environments. A significant implication for social work would be to address the challenges of low self-esteem and a lack of empathy among young people. This could involve implementing targeted interventions and support programmes aimed at building self-confidence and fostering empathy skills.

Theme 5 (police involvement and responsibilities) was thus in line with these contexts, reflecting parents' opinions that the police were wholly inadequate and uninterested law enforcers. As researchers, this theme also raised considerable concerns for us, as the uneasy truce between gangs and police represented a source of anxiety for family and community,

especially in light of the low levels of trust and confidence participants had in the police services. Theme 6 (dissatisfaction with the provision of services) served to reflect that there have been several viable interventions put forward, but not sufficient take-up from the professions or government or in terms of policy. This is the gap that ought to be addressed. The participation of parents and family is the sine qua non of any intervention undertaken.

These findings showed that parents/caregivers do reflect on what happens in their communities, but that their opinions may not always be taken into account in interventions and policies, and that they therefore feel ignored and that nobody is listening. These findings echo some of the narratives in the extensive study by Pinnock (2016**)** on the pivotal period of adolescence, conflictual families and hostile communities.

Talking, researching or writing about gangs is often perceived to be an uncomfortable endeavour because of the multifaceted socio-political nature of their existence. Thus, gangs are ever-present in the greater Cape Town area, specifically on the Cape Flats, a flat inhospitable terrain about 30 kilometres in diameter. Van Wyk and Theron (2005) confirmed that gangsterism plays a significant role in the crime statistics in the Cape Metropole Regions of the Western Cape province. Social workers and other helping professions, policymakers, government departments, community members and parents are concerned about the continuous surge and uptake of youths into gangs (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019) and for effective implementation of policies or programmes it is necessary to listen to the voices of those most affected, in this case specifically, the parents.

These findings contextualised the world of the ordinary inhabitants of District Six and the world where social workers too are found. Interventions should therefore focus on this world, but macro solutions should also have equal consideration. It is of little benefit to work within the micro and meso worlds of families and communities when the wider socio-economic conditions remain largely unchanged. Policy and justice issues require considerable thought as they underpin or frame the world that ordinary people inhabit and ensure that the voices of those most affected are heard. Participation of all role players and stakeholders is key. But intrinsic to any participation and intervention in addressing gangsterism should be a keen understanding of and insight into the role of marginalisation and power/disempowerment.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Glynnis Dykes is an Associate Professor at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Her specialisation is in qualitative research methodology and social work education. She was the lead researcher and supervised the project on which this article is based from 2016 to 2018. She wrote the initial draft of the article.

Ronel Davids is a senior lecturer at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Her fields of specialisation are disability and social work education. She co-supervised this project from 2016 to 2018 and assisted with the final writing and editing of the article.

Uwarren September is a lecturer at the University of the Western Cape. His field of specialisation is mental health and social work education. He co-supervised this research project from 2016 to 2018 and contributed to the final editing of the article.