

## Persistence of Youth Gang Violence in South Africa

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### **Abstract**

*In South Africa, gang violence continues unabated particularly in black and coloured townships. The question addressed in this paper is why youth continue to be involved in gang violence despite South Africa being deemed the most developed African country. The response to this question goes just beyond economic reasons and includes young men and the expression of their masculine power. In this paper we reveal the ways in which young men continue to be involved in gang violence and their consequences. The paper is based on an ethnographic study from 2017 to 2018. It draws on two black townships of Gugulethu and Nyanga East in Cape Town South Africa.*

**Keywords:** South Africa, Gang, Youth, Violence, Masculinity

### **Introduction**

Gang violence is not a new phenomenon. The United States is considered to be home to an estimated 33,000 violent street gangs, with a presence in all 50 states (Klein, et al, 2010). Further the author notes that in the last decade, the number of violent gang members has grown by over 40 percent and is 25 times higher than in 1975. What is particularly striking however is that in the United States, though gang members make up less than half a percent of the population, they commit 16 percent of the total homicides and a quarter of homicides in cities of more than 100,000 people. The World Bank's statistics not only shows that youths between the ages of 15 and 34 account for the overwhelming majority of homicide victims but also they comprise the membership of youth gangs (see also Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). Even in more prosperous Europe, many of its nations face youth gang problems although researchers and policy makers have often hesitated to call them this because they compare their own groups to American stereotypes (Decker and Pyrooz, 2010). Most gang members, especially in the groups studied are juveniles or very young adults.

In the African context, in particular in South Africa, gang violence continues unabated and the government and other stakeholders are grappling with mechanisms to deal with it. This paper examines the ways in which gangsters in South African black townships do violence in communities in which they live. The paper argues that gang violence is not only about young men who are poor, but it has to do with an aspiration of status, identity, belonging and in particular recognition in marginalised communities. Thus, while existing studies reveal that youth gang violence is escalating in South Africa (Pinnock 2016; Magidi, 2014), there has been limited focus on why these young men continue to be involved in such gang criminal activities. This paper reveals that gang groupings are in themselves 'homes' for young men who often feel neglected. It is therefore important to understand gang violence as spaces in which young men do not only do violence but spaces of showing their masculine power within the communities in which they live. The study draws on ethnography of two South African black townships of Gugulethu and Nyanga East between 2017 and 2018.

### **Conceptualising gang violence in South Africa**

Defining and understanding gang and gang violence is complex. According to Magidi (2014) gangs are organisations of two or more individuals who come together for a common purpose of doing criminal violence. Gangs often identify with and claim spaces in the community. For Standing (2005) gangs assume different forms such as informal groups of young people who would ordinarily "hang out" on street corners and commit petty acts of crime. It can also develop formal structures that have links to organised crime (Pinnock 2016, Magidi, 2014). For Pinnock (2016) a gang is an organised group of people with a defined territorially and creates fear and intimidation in the community.

Pinnock (2016) however argues that gangs can take many forms and that the interconnections between different kinds can be complex and confusing. He uses a broad definition to elaborate on a gang as a group of people who have shared interests and who come together over a period of time for a common purpose, whether criminal or social. The author thus refers also to proto gangs or gang-like formations where youth become members or participate as part of the formation of group identity, to protect them, to defend turf, because they are bored and/or because they might receive some financial gain, drugs or even status from it. The gangs on which this paper focuses are in some or other way involved in criminal activities.

While scholars such as Kynock (1999) contends that gang violence in South Africa largely emanates from poverty and the massive social divide and economic inequity stemming from apartheid and its aftermath, it is not enough to think of these young men in gang violence as poor but as men in transition who seek practical recognition and status in the communities in which they live.

Youth join such groups *inter alia* because of “poverty, problems at schools, dysfunctional societal structures, family problems and drug addiction” (Wegner 2016:53). Herrenkohl et al (2000) point out that antisocial forms of behaviour (such as youth gang violence) operate and interact at different levels including individual, family and community levels. Settings such as peer groups, schools and other ‘everyday’ gatherings where children and young people interact frequently tend to contribute to youth gang violence.

This renders the youth vulnerable to participation in gang and other forms of criminal activities, as the townships where they live are historically among the most affected by apartheid policies. Cooper and Ward (2012) observe that despite the demise of apartheid, young people in marginalised areas, especially townships, continue to resort to gang violence in order to survive. Thus experiences of impoverishment, relative deprivation and socio-cultural disjuncture continue to frame the lives of many young people in these communities. This trend is confirmed by the Affordable Housing Data Centre (AHDC, 2017) which shows that, in greater Nyanga, an area which includes Gugulethu, 72.3% of the residents live below the Household Subsistence Level (HSL).

While the main source of youth gang violence is linked to poverty, there is a need to understand how youth gang violence emerges and sustains itself. One way to do this is to comprehend the networks of youth violence, which will help guide interventions by policy makers, the police and those concerned with curbing social crime. Social networks can be viewed as social connections and links that exist between individuals and groups, enabling them to identify with each other and influence decisions to participate in gang violence. Krinsky and Crossley (2013) define social networks as the ties, links, attachments and connections that exist between individuals. An individual’s decision is frequently shaped by interactions with others, and therefore networks shape both the stable aspects including values and identities and more volatile aspects, such as perceptions and preferences (Pinnock, 2016).

For Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya (2014), there is little attention on gangs in black areas. The limited attention to black areas can be ascribed to the argument that gangs in these areas are considered less structured and less sophisticated than in coloured areas. Gangsterism in the coloured areas has some marked differences from that in black areas such as Gugulethu. In areas such as Manenberg and Hanover Park, violent gang wielding gangs clash on the streets in scenes that appear as if there is a full-scale war, of which often children, youth and even the elderly are the victims (Du Toit, 2014). For Mncube and Steinmann (2014) gang members control communities, firing guns and sometimes residents are put on a ‘lockdown’.

Although gangsterism is a national phenomenon, gangs in Cape Town's coloured areas appear much more sophisticated and are believed to account for most of the crime in the Western Cape (Kinnes 2000). Well-known gangs on the Cape Flats include the Hard Livings, the Americans, Sexy Boys, Yuru Cats, Junky Funky Kids, Corner Boys and Naughty Boys. Execution-style murders are driven by shootings over turf, sour deals, leadership and funds (Pinnock, 2016). Gang violence in the coloured communities is so intense that in 2012, Helen Zille, the Western Cape provincial premier called for the army to be sent in.

In the coloured communities, gangsterism is considered a culture, a committed ideology, with hierarchies of power and strength internal and external, implicit or evident, often impressed on their own skin, and imperative codes of honour. In this regard, other than the push factors of poverty, if you have not killed or committed serious crime and have not gone to prison, you are not a man for many young men in the coloured community.

However the coloured definition of being a man, somewhat varies from those in black communities who still have emphasised on certain cultural practices. For example, among the Xhosa, a man is defined by having gone through a cultural initiation ceremony that marks a transition from boyhood to manhood. Many cherish the opportunity to attend these ceremonies. Therefore, the concomitant factors that push young people into gansterism in black communities somewhat differ in some instances when compared to those of coloured young men. In addition, the nature of gansterism strategies and weaponry, as well as when and where these are deployed also seem to differ between the two communities. Further to this, the need to have a better understanding of understudied areas such as Gugulethu is the fact that studies have shown that the majority of gang violence in South Africa is interracial (between people of the same race) and are often committed by someone known to the victim and living within their community.

Youth who band together in proto gangs or who became part of already existing gangs were observed during the course of this study in Gugulethu and interviewees confirmed that they were gang members. This paper argues that social networks play an important role in sustaining youth gang violence in Gugulethu, a township in the Cape Town Metropolitan area of South Africa. The paper first focuses on the wider background and context of gang violence and deals specifically with Gugulethu. The research methodology is explained and then the study discusses the existing social networks influencing youth gang violence in Gugulethu.

A historical overview of the issues which impacted the formation of networks and of gangs – in the wider South Africa, Western Cape and Gugulethu is first discussed. The

research methods are then elaborated. The paper draws on an ecological model to explicate the complex levels and interaction between the immediate local environment, larger socio-cultural setting, economic, political and other exo- and macro-level issues which affect the youth - and within which they manoeuvre and which can enhance networks of violence.

### **Methodology**

The paper is based on a qualitative study in which we employed ethnographic tools such as in-depth-interviews, group discussions and observations in the townships on which this study is based. We did the research between 2017 and early 2018. We focused on those youth above the age of 18, and those who have been involved in gang violence. In interviewing these youth, we approached the people who are respected in these communities such as community leaders. We realised that it was quite difficult to just walk-in these communities which are characterised by rampant gang violence. In one of our visit, we were easily detected by the gangsters who often stand strategically on street corners in groups of six to eight members. When we approached the streets where one of the gang groups was standing, we greeted him and instead of him responding, he asked us where we were coming from and going. We told him that we were going to see one of the community leaders; we told him the name of the community leader. He smiled and told us that if we were going to see the community leader then we were safe. He poignantly told us that, he was the leader of the gang group in that street. It was on that reason that he wanted to know about us because we had stepped into his territory. We later asked him if we could talk to him sometime when he had time. He stated that, the community leader knows him, so just tell the community leader that you want to talk to me and my gang group. When we left him, he emphatically said, "tell the community leader that you met the big boy in the street", we laughed and he laughed back. We were interested in getting access to the field through the community leader. So on getting to the community leader we told him that we met big boy in the street; he also laughed. This revealed to us that, youth like big boy in the street were known in the community streets. We asked the community leader if we can talk to big boy in the street, and he gave us a go ahead. The community leader told us that there were a lot of gangs around the community and each of the streets has a different gang with a different gang leader. We moved around with the community leader introducing us to the gangs and their leaders in the streets. We made appointments, and we interviewed the gangsters in their territories.

The stories which came out were characterised by hope and despair. It was about how these youth became gangs and what they do in their everyday gang life. Importantly, being a gangster was also a way of becoming a man in the community, expression of masculine power centred in and within the community.

### **Gugulethu Township: marginal communities**

Gugulethu (our Pride – is iXhosa) is a black Township in the city of Cape Town, located some 18km from the city centre. The 2011 census showed that Gugulethu comprised of the following neighbourhoods: Europe, Barcelona, Kanana, Lusaka, New Rest, Gugulethu SP, Phola Park, Vukuzenzele and Zondi. The majority of the people who live in the township are Xhosa-speaking. Gugulethu assumes the pattern of the greater Nyanga area where it is located, with over 70% of households living below the poverty datum line (AHDC, 2017). The 2011 census revealed that large parts of Gugulethu are made up of informal settlements. Few of the families lived in formal dwellings and are headed by women.

Gugulethu was established as a result of overcrowding in the first black residential area of Langa in 1960. Initially barrack-like homes/ hostels were built in Gugulethu - intended as single quarters for male workers. The latter left their families in the rural areas due to the apartheid era's influx control and migrant labour system - which only allowed the actual work force to come to the towns.

In the post-apartheid era, Gugulethu is often associated with the 'Gugulethu seven', a group of seven young *uMkhonto weSizwe* (Spear of the Nation or generally called MK) fighters (the armed wing of the African National Congress) who were ambushed and killed by the South African security forces on 3 March 1986.

According to Magidi (2014) violence between young men in Gugulethu can be closely linked to structural violence- both historical and present. The author defines such violence as institutionalised inequalities of power, which in turn restricts life opportunities for individual youth. The life stories of young male participants in Gugulethu also show that both members of informal neighbourhood gangs and young men who have never joined a gang are exposed to violence every day - especially beatings, stabbings and robbery. The young men in this study talked about participation in violence as almost unavoidable and linked it to their sense of self, to being socially visible in the neighbourhood and to rites of passage associated with becoming an adult man.

Many of the people who live in Gugulethu migrated there from elsewhere –most often the Eastern Cape. Pinnock (2016) stresses the dilemma for young men (and women) who had been dislocated from their former (often rural, semi-rural or peri-urban) lives and who struggle to endure while their parents try to find opportunities in this urban setting. Many young men experience involvement in gangs as a way to survive in the city, to be perceived as a man and thus not to be bullied and threatened. Coupled with

lack of employment, youth in the area also tend to coalesce due to what they perceive as economic injustice. In trying to earn a living, youth gangs seek to 'redress' this problem through violence. An interviewee with a long history of gangsterism stated that:

if you bought a washing machine from Morkels, or a fridge or a TV - but during that time there were never plasmas- the biggest ones were 74 inch screen TVs. If a company is delivering and by luck they ask for direction, we will direct their vehicle to a small and isolated place where we will then attack and take everything. Just imagine how big a fridge is but then if we are robbing the people who are delivering the fridge, it became lighter (Interview, 21.10.2017).

One of the main reasons given by study participants as to why they became involved with a youth gang in Gugulethu was financial. In this regard Bowers du Toit (2014) refers to the role of structural violence in South Africa, which manifests through poverty, inequality and uneven distribution of power where some people have easy access to what they need, while others lack means to procure anything. This, the author argues, contributes to the country's high levels of youth gang violence.

In the greater Nyanga area, in which Gugulethu is located, only 55 percent of the residents of working age (16- 64 years) are employed while as high as 74 percent of households have a monthly income of R3 200 or less (Pinnock, 1997). Through the gang network, members intimidate other people, undertake robberies and deal in drugs to secure access to finance for the material things they need to acquire status symbols, cell phones, clothes, alcohol, drugs, a car, a place to stay, contributing towards the support of a family and such. Factors at macro-level thus interact with issues at exo and micro level to contribute to youth participation in gang and proto gangs. A gang member interviewed during this research stated that:

we want to see ourselves driving cars and having lots of money. We robbed drug dealers because we knew that it was illegal, and they had no weapons, and considering that we were also drug addicts (Interview, 26.10.2017).

The quest for a good life and or a luxurious life style also seems to be influenced by the disparities between neighbourhoods, the poor townships, sitting alongside affluent mainly white suburbs. In particular, informal settlements and urban townships such as Gugulethu in affluent metros are surrounded by leafy suburbs, shopping centres, luxury cars and other forms of ostentatious wealth. Therefore youths, anxious with improving their lives develop a feeling of a sense of relative deprivation which makes them resort to gangsterism as a means of rapidly making it in life.

### **Neighbourhoods of violence**

Gugulethu is an area where nearly half the households live in informal housing and where those in formal housing mostly reside in small two to four room houses. In a historical perspective, a high level of segregation and deep impoverishment caused by apartheid (and similar subsequent post-apartheid policies) probably drive those living in such an environment to seek violent ways to collectively and individually protect themselves (Pinnock, 2016). For Magidi (2014) youth gangs tend to be concentrated in locations where poverty rates are high, as in Gugulethu. Conditions in impoverished areas make it easier for gangs to steal and commit crimes – also because policing is inadequate. An interviewee stated that,

In this place there are no jobs, our brothers are not working, our parents are not working, but we need to eat, we need to buy electricity, water and other things. So many people join gangs in order to survive, in order to put food on the table (Interview, 13.11.2017).

As noted by Foster(2012), poor, marginalised and economically powerless youths tend to be denied any legitimate wealth creating capacity resulting in them formulating alternative survival mechanisms mainly criminal youth gangs. For Legget (2005) poverty and inequality are forms of structural violence. Therefore its prevalence in Gugulethu helps to explain the high levels of direct gang violence. In the same light Legget (ibid) concludes that poverty, unemployment and other socio-economic issues form a 'backdrop' to youth violence.

Pinnock (2016) reveals that the nature of neighbourhoods, such as economic disadvantage or social processes (e.g. community's ability to control the behaviour of individuals), or spatial processes between neighbourhoods (e.g., spread of cultural practices from one neighbourhood to the other) affect behaviour of locals. Thus, gangs are seen as both arising from social conditions in neighbourhoods and as important manifestations of neighbourhood social organisation (Cooper and Ward, 2012). Gugulethu is characterised by an environment that gives little opportunity for the youth to learn about alternative ways to earn a living.

Further to this, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) argue that neighbourhood attachment is a significant source of group youth identity and of gang violence. Some gangs rarely move out of their defined territories and tend to attack any gang that intrudes their territory. This is also the case for proto gangs. While not fully developed as gangs, they do have a sense of coherence, identity and structure. These groups consist mostly of young men who often have violent clashes against each other (Daniels and Adams, 2010).



Gugulethu is divided into sections which tend to be used as boundaries by rival gangs. Territoriality is emphasised in many areas including when going to school. A study participant noted that if a person does not belong to the territory where the school is located, they often need to belong to a gang that provides protection for easy passage and easy access to school. Despite that gangs use the municipal identified sections and streets to define their territory, they tend to inscribe their gang names on the walls of cement fences around properties such as halls, schools, homes and shops to emphasise their territorial control.

### **Masculine ideals**

Being masculine can be understood broadly as being invincible. Thus, gang membership or participation cannot only be viewed as formations of resistance and/or of economic survival. Instead it is important to understand that gangs provide alternative ways and possibilities for men to maintain their gendered heterosexual identities – among others through the rituals and practices of particular gangs. In other words, traditionally, a man is seen by what he possesses and his career. Because these young men are devoid of any possessions, they define their status as men; by using physical violence as an alternative means to assert their heterosexual masculinity and their personhood in the local context.

Although some of the study participants linked gang membership to control over girls, they did not describe the kind of reproduction of their communities through e.g. fatherhood that Salo refers to. Instead, Pinnock (2016:285) argues that many young Xhosa-speaking men in suburbs such as Gugulethu are “cut adrift from the rural moral bearings and shorn of the consequences of their violent urban actions” and “are left to chart the limits of their own behaviour compasses oriented to the opinions of teenage peers with similar moral confusions”. One socio-culturally accepted way to become a man in this overwhelmingly Xhosa-speaking society is through initiation (Mfecane, 2016). According to Mfecane (2016:204), a traditionally circumcised individual is regarded as *indoda*, a real man, irrespective of his sexual orientation or class, and this affords him certain rights and privileges.

An initiated man is supposed to eschew the kind of violence associated with gangs and initiation is also viewed as one way for young men to disentangle themselves from such formations and their activities. He is seen as grown up, mature and ready to become a father head in the family. His behaviour is expected to be exemplary to the community. A study participant explained that,

Joining gangs commonly happens when people are younger and school going. But in the Xhosa tradition, youth at some point attend a cultural initiation ceremony and here they are taught to be responsible and are reminded that

they are now adults and should practice good leadership at home and in the community (19.11.2017).

Yet gangs increasingly influence the construction of masculinities in Gugulethu (Agnemo 2007). In this regard Pinnock (2016) emphasises the masculine ideology of violence and control which infuse youth gangs. Unlike gangs in 'coloured' townships, youths in Gugulethu prefer sticks, pangas, knives and fists rather than guns - using the latter is perceived as less manly.

Gangsterism in communities such as Gugulethu attracts new members and continues to provide for older ones. An interviewee in Gugulethu stated that one can be 50 years old, but will have to remain part of the gang, or even 60 but still be recruiting. He pointed out that "leaving gangsterism is hard because you would have created many enemies for you and you don't take note of the person you are doing bad".

Another gang member said, fellow gang members worry if a member attempts to leave because they assume that he will sell them out to authorities. He said. "it's easy to join but hard to quit. Friends will say you can't just leave us like that, because you were killing people with us". As such they vehemently dissuade any member trying to leave, sometimes making serious threats against the person's life. Another gang member who- had been to prison- also posited that "I stayed in prison for 15 years because of gangsterism. I am a 28 gang, I can't leave it, if I leave I will die."

We argue that it is actually easy to join a gang than to leave it. As indicated above, being a member of a gang has its own history and social practices. Men become involved in such formations because family members, friend, others in the neighbourhood are part of it. This was evident when one study respondent stated,

Sir, I think gang is something that people inherit. That influence depends on how the history is told. The way we tell the story because as you have heard some of the gangs have been there for over 40 years (11.11.2017).

A youth who grows up in an environment associated with gangsterism, is likely to also make sense of it as a potential form of livelihood, status and access to resources, as well as protection.

### **Becoming a Gang**

During this study, it emerged that a violent environment such as Gugulethu provides limited opportunity for those youth who do not want to be in gangs. Different strategies are used to force individuals or initiate them into joining gangs. A youth gang member confirmed the tough Gugulethu environment by explaining that,

“There’re two options, either you join willingly or you are forced to join” (Interview, 16.11.2017).

A youth gang member explicated a number of ways in which a young man gets entangled. Firstly, he noted that a new member can be identified by the kind of life that he leads and if he is living a life that is considered decent as compared to other youths who are in gangs, they may become jealous of him and devise ways to make a thug of him. He noted:

Let’s take for instance, me as a boss of this area, and you are just new in this area, I will ask myself why is he living a decent life and I am living a thug life, he goes to school and so on. With my gang we will tell him - that either you join us or you are against us, if you are against us it’s done, you are a permanent target. If you don’t want to be a permanent target the only choice you have is to join us. If you refuse to join us, when you go to the shops, you will be targeted and when your mother comes back from work with groceries, she will of course be robbed. Your father comes back from *shebeen* (a place where alcohol is sold) he will be beaten up, you are the only son in that house, it is compulsory that you join (Interview, 14.12.2017).

In addition, the interviewee argued that where parents are strict with their children and try to prevent them from joining gangs, they (parents and youths) are harassed by gangs. Thus the violent environment creates a conundrum where many youths join gangs in order to protect themselves and their loved ones.

Being associated with a gang could also be enough to make a young man a target for others. This, for example, happens when a gang member deliberately walks an unsuspecting youth through a rival gang’s territory. One interviewee stated that:

If I am in a gang and you are not, my gang can make me take you to another gang territory so when we get there we are chased and we run away back to our territory and the person I went with to that gang will now be associated with our gang (Interview, 19.12.2017).

In this way the interviewee (above) was co-opted over time and eventually became a recruit. Every time members of the other gang saw him, they threatened him. Therefore, for his own safety, he sticks to the area of the gang where he has protection.

Thirdly, according to interviewees, when a recruit is forced to join a gang, the “General”, who is in charge, will initiate the new member into the group. This is done

in a number of ways. The recruit can be beaten up to test his genuineness. The recruit can also be asked to perform house breaking, or be given a gun to shoot a target. The interviewee stated that “we do this to increase trust, since the recruit now knows the gang; he needs to prove he can be trusted.” Once the recruit has committed a crime, he has to evade the police and will rather stay part of the gang network for security.

According to interviewees a fourth way to become part of a gang network is voluntarily. A gang member stated that: The other way is to give a platform to other youths to smoke drugs and space to stay. If they get stuff to smoke they will tell other youths and introduce them to you as someone who shares stuff (11.12.2017).

*Tik* (crystal meth manufactured locally and sold fairly cheaply in small quantities) has become one of the preferred drugs for youth in the Western Cape. Lured by the availability of drugs they eventually become integrated into the gang system. Some of the youth become gangsters because they have parents who are gangsters or have seen a parent killed by gangsters. In such instances, their historical experience with gangsterism tends to drive them into joining gangs.

### **Celebration of gangs**

Gangs provide social spaces for youth. For Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya (2014) peer groups provides a key socialising influence especially in adolescence. It is easier for the youth to join gangs in an environment where there are delinquent peers or siblings who are gang members. An interviewee stated that in Gugulethu, youths tend to revere their peers who are gang members. In particular they see some of the youth gang leaders as role models for them and people to emulate. He said: They like that I survive police shootings and I successfully commit robberies. They come to my house they sit around me and we smoke (Interview, 16.12.2017).

Some youths are attracted to such gang members and congregate around them. They, in turn, introduce the potential recruits to drugs and mentor them into other gang activities. The youth quickly take these up as they seek to get accepted into a gang. This view is supported by the work of Pinnock (2016) which concludes that the use of drugs tends to introduce youths to social environments characterised by gangsterism and is one of the key routes through which youths become gang members.

In addition the study confirms the fact that when young people imitate more seasoned gangsters they become experienced themselves. One of the gang leaders interviewed in Gugulethu confirmed that they make an effort to recruit their peers and especially those who are much younger by deliberately supplying drugs, hiding places where they smoke and, at times, giving the youngsters cash. This makes the targeted recruits return, until they also become confirmed gangsters. Another gang member noted that,

If you want to become a leader of your own gang which you have control over, you bring together young people and teach them drugs and stealing. They easily become loyal to you because they believe you have the experience that they need to also become successful gang members (Interview, 21.12.2017).

Indeed an environment of poverty and economic vulnerability characteristic of Gugulethu also makes it easy for youths to admire peer group gangsters who can display their power through violence and their affluence through access to *tik*, cocaine, *dagga* (cannabis), cell phones and the presence of girls. For Kynoch (1999) gangs target youths whose circumstances include poverty in the family and potentially provide an alternative social support system. For Pinnock (2016) such groups represent families, spaces of entertainment and sources of gang and other forms of criminal violence.

An interviewee posited that in an environment like Gugulethu, one can easily be attacked by gangs or older youths. As a result of this potential powerlessness in the face of an attack, younger youths in particular, seek protection from gangs. This powerlessness was also alluded to by female study participants who posited that women are likely to be mugged, sexually abused or raped by males if there is no one to protect them. Sometimes if they reject advances from male gang members they will be accused of belonging to rival gang groups. As a result they rather would join gangs in order to be protected. Some female gang members are protected by boyfriends who are also a gang member. Protection is enhanced by the fact that female gang groups collaborate or are affiliated to their male counterpart gang groups thereby blurring the difference between the groups.

In addition to merely providing sexual favours in return for security, study participants stated that females are also sent on important errands by their male counterparts. A female respondent stated that in the case of women “The police do not always suspect women so we carry and sell drugs, we hide and sell stolen items and hide guns too. We provide hideouts for our men. Sometimes we sleep with police so that friends are released”.

Further, some female gang members merely like being protected by man who displays masculine superiority through physical violence. A respondent stated that a good boyfriend is a man that can fight and win fights and she likes that. It is a mark of heroism in the community for her and she likes being associated with such a “big man”. Further some females were said to be joining gangs only because their boyfriends were also gangsters. However upon further analysis, it emerged that women gang members, are still subject to abuse in these gangs. Male gang members do not always seek sexual consent. In fact a male respondent for example stated that

“the general (meaning gang leader) gets any woman he wants in the gang or in the community. If he no longer wants the woman he releases her to another gang member and she is not supposed to refuse”. According to Cooper and Ward (2012), young female gang members “face emotional and psychological traumas because they get raped; they watch people being murdered; they are often victims of emotional and physical abuse”.

### **Home life**

As indicated above, the reasons for the youth joining gangs include poverty, problems at schools, dysfunctional societal structures, family problems and drug addiction (Ncontsa and Shumba, 2013; Bowers Du Toit, 2014). Many families in township areas are in crisis, available male models oftentimes have a history of incarceration, neighbourhoods are unsafe and even harmful, unemployment is high, the education system is failing and drugs are readily available. All of these issues contribute to the rise in youth involvement in different kinds of gang structures (Pinnock, 2016). In addition, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) note that lack of familial support, difficult living conditions, emotional and physical abuse at home, neglect by care-givers – who are themselves often alcoholics and/or drug users – are issues that affect youths and exacerbate their involvement in proto or fully fledged gangs.

Youth join such groups because of “poverty, problems at schools, dysfunctional societal structures, family problems and drug addiction” (Wegner 2016:53). In addition, parenting problems, particularly fatherless households, have made it easier for young people to decide to join gangs. Many young people grow up in abusive relationships and/or are abused themselves (Magidi, 2014).

Pinnock (2016) also refers to the context of family life in the shaping of young men who become involved in gang activities. As indicated above, a large percentage of households are headed by females, with fathers being largely absent. Women take the burden of caring for and raising the children. While environmental pressures are severe and social inequalities brutal, the author (ibid) also argues that malnutrition, stress and even substance use by pregnant mothers-to-be, harmfully affects their unborn and/or growing children. The accumulation of a range of factors thus contributes to the increased propensity of especially young men to gravitate towards social networks such as gangs.

Young women are equally influenced to join gangs due to poverty in Gugulethu. An interviewee said that many that turn to gangsterism have no family or have single parents who do not have enough money for food to look after us. The respondent thus implied that being in a gang helps to raise some much needed income which would subsidise family needs.

However, asked if family circumstances were the only cause of women joining gangs, she noted that some of them would have come from Eastern Cape, without family and find life difficult in Gugulethu. They then resort to gang activities. This view is supported by Altbeker (2007) who posits that girls who join gangs are often loners and in search of a sense of identity, group support and cohesiveness which is found in gangs.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has revealed the ways in which young men become gang members and how in a way the gang relationship is sustained overtime. It is important to note that gang and gang violence should not only be understood as young men who are poor, but gangs in black townships should also be understood as young men who seek recognition in impoverished communities. One of the ways in which we can begin to interrogate gangs in marginalised communities is to begin to understand the community, the mothers, fathers and the physical structures which are also the constituents of the community. In what way do these social and physical structures interact with these young men? This is one of the questions which can help us to begin to theorise not only gang violence but also the communities in which these young men are a part.

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