

**Men, masculinities, and
gangs:** Investigating the
persistence of male gangs
in selected provinces of
South Africa

2024



Commission for Gender Equality
A society free from gender oppression and inequality

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Foreword and acknowledgements

The history of gang formation in South Africa shows that it began before the country became a democracy. The Group Areas Act of the apartheid regime played a significant role in the rise of gangs in the country. This Act forcibly removed non-white South Africans from their homes and relocated them to underdeveloped townships and rural areas. These evictions caused a lot of distress and disruption to families and communities. As a result, gangs became a way for young men and boys to cope with their new realities.

30 years into democracy, gangs still have a strong presence and continue to grow, especially in townships and in correctional facilities/prisons. There is evidence suggesting that gangs have infiltrated school environments and that schools may act as breeding grounds for recruiting young men and boys into street gangs. Our study confirms previous research findings that indicate poverty, poor service delivery, high drug use, inadequate housing, limited employment opportunities, and insufficient educational and recreational facilities contribute to the emergence of new gangs and perpetuate the challenge in communities.

This research further explains that aspects connected to manhood or the masculine identity drive this issue by meeting men's desires for acknowledgment, influence, prestige, and money as methods to demonstrate their manhood. The pressure on men to financially support themselves, their families, and loved ones in environments with high unemployment and economic isolation also significantly contributes to men and boys getting involved in gangs. The absence of fathers, disruptions in the family structure, and the need to fit in were additional factors that influenced men and boys to join gangs. Within correctional facilities, gang affiliation primarily served as a means of survival and protection.

The Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) deemed it crucial to conduct this study due to the significant role of gangs in worsening the issue of violence against women and girls, as well as the less recognised problem of violence between men. The CGE aims to provide valuable input for policy and programme development through the recommendations outlined in this report.

The study would not have been possible without the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) through the Area Commissioners and Area Managers, who gave the CGE team of researchers access to the DCS facilities. The following correctional centres were visited as part of the study:

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- Gauteng – Boksburg and Zonderwater Correctional Facilities
 - Western Cape – Goodwood and Belville Correctional Facilities
 - KwaZulu-Natal – Westville Correctional Facility and a Community Correctional Centre in Pietermaritzburg.

The CGE is also grateful to the participants of the study who shared their experiences, views and insights, thereby making this report possible. Immense contributions from subject experts and key informants from the entities below are also appreciated:

- Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV)
- University of the Witwatersrand
- Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Gauteng – Izwi Labanthu
- Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in the Western Cape – Ceasefire
- Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in KwaZulu-Natal province – Mthembu House
- The Western Cape SAPS anti-gang unit (AGU)

Finally, the CGE is grateful to its team of researchers, which comprises Thabani Mdlongwa (project leader), Mpelo Princess Malebye, and Thandiwe Lorraine Matshazi, who worked on the project. The report was finalised by the Acting Head of research, Naledi Selebano.

Summary

This report is based on the study that was undertaken by the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) in the 2023/24 financial year to investigate factors that contribute to the sustained perceived value of men and boys in joining gangs in the selected provinces of South Africa. The study was conducted in three provinces: namely, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and Western Cape. The study involved participation by 38 male former gang members and 27 key informants. A qualitative research approach and a case study design were adopted, with a combination of focus group discussions and individual interviews utilised as methods of data collection. Data emanating from the study was transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AGU	Anti-Gang Unit
CGE	Commission for Gender Equality
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DCS	Department of Correctional Services
GBVF	Gender-based violence and femicide
NAGS	National Anti-Gang Strategy
POCA	Prevention of Organised Crime Act
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
SADC	Southern African Development Cooperation
SAPS	South African Police Services
UNTOC	UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime

1. Introduction

Definitions of gangs, including the nature of individuals involved in gangs, continue to spark debates among academics, police and justice clusters, schools, broader communities, and other societal role players across the globe. Some questions at the centre of these contentions are “(1) whether gangs consist of members of certain ages, (2) if gangs are always involved in crime, (3) whether gangs vary in composition and organisation from community to community, and (4) whether they all have some common elements in their organisation, activities, and cultures?”¹

From a legislative point of view in South Africa, the Prevention of Organised Crime Act (POCA) No. 121 of 1998 defines gangs in a unitary fashion as it links gangs solely to criminal activity. The Act defines gangs as “any formal or informal ongoing organisation, association, or group of three or more persons, which has one of its activities the commission of one or more criminal offences, which has an identifiable name or identifying sign or symbol, and whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity”. The National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy (NAGS) that was approved by Cabinet in 2016, on the other hand, has yet to be released to the public, making it difficult to unpack aspects covered by the definition contained in the document. In the Western Cape Anti-Gang Strategy, nonetheless, which reportedly stems from the National Strategy as the NAGS identifies the need for each province to develop its strategy, “gangsterism is categorised as a ‘wicked problem’ [...] said to manifest in several key areas: policing and justice, peer groups, families, place making and community cohesion, health and youth wellbeing, education, and safe spaces. The spectrum which binds these societal spheres together is violence. NAGS in the Western Cape (NAGSWC) thus purposely broadens the definition of a gang from the intersection of crime and violence to a spectrum, which allows for intervention areas to address gangsterism at different societal levels”.²

Male gang activities and gang violence in South Africa take place, to varying degrees, in specific parts of the country. They appear to be more prevalent in certain areas of the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng.³

1 CRC Report for Congress (2008). Youth Gangs: Background, Legislation, and Issues. Celinda Franco Specialist in Social Legislation Domestic Social Policy Division.

2 Viltott, C. D. (2022). Deconstructing Gangsterism in South Africa: Uncovering the Need for Gender-Sensitive Policies, *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 14(3): 6.

3 Lloyd Vogelman & Sharon Lewis, (1993). *Gang Rape and the Culture of Violence in South Africa*. Retrieved from <https://www.csvr.org.za/wp-content/uploads/1993/02/Gang-Rape-and-the-Culture-of-Violence-in-South-Africa-1.pdf>

In 2017, the South African Police Services (SAPS) noted that the number of identified gangs in the respective provinces was as follows: 15 in the Eastern Cape (mainly found in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth, particularly in Bethelsdorp and Gelvandale); six in KwaZulu-Natal (mainly found in the northern and southern areas of Durban, specifically in Wentworth, Chatsworth and Phoenix), and 73 in the Western Cape (mainly found between the Cape Flats, Northern Suburbs, and Southern Suburbs, and other outlying and coastal areas). SAPS further notes that gangs and gangsterism in the North West, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, Free State, Gauteng, and Northern Cape provinces are informal and less structured.⁴ Gangsterism tends to be rampant in certain neighbourhoods while also infiltrating correctional centres and schools, thereby directly affecting families, mostly men and boys and women, in varying ways.

Some effects of gang violence include psychological violence, which includes isolation or confinement, withholding information, disinformation, threatening behaviour, substance abuse, and abnormal levels of crime and gun battles.⁵ Gang violence, due to its nature, inadvertently also involves gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF), which is a national crisis and a pandemic, with research repeatedly showing that GBVF is linked to toxic masculinities (view about masculinity, what it means to be a man that is harmful to the man himself and the people around him) and the exercise of power by men over women and other men they consider weak.⁶ Given this background and the continued persistence of male gangs in South Africa, the CGE sought to explore this issue in more depth to contribute to current debates and literature on the subject, as well as to provide policy recommendations to relevant sector role players.

The study was also fundamentally undertaken to fulfil the Constitutional mandate of the CGE to promote respect for gender equality and the protection, development, and attainment of gender equality in South Africa. The CGE is also required, as per the CGE Act No. 39 of 1996, to “monitor, investigate, research, educate, lobby, advise, and report on issues concerning gender equality”.

1.1 Problem statement

According to the literature, factors that influence gang membership have their historical roots in poverty, lack of opportunities, the political, economic and social marginalisation and exclusion of young people, as well as the absence of effective State presence and services in marginalised communities.⁷

4 South African Police Services. (2017). *Portfolio Committee on Police Briefing by the Management of SAPS on the Anti-Gang Strategy: Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape*.

5 Council of Europe, (2023). *Psychological Violence*. Retrieved from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/psychological-violence>

6 Davies, A. 1998. Youth Gangs, Masculinity and Violence in Late Victorian Manchester and Salford. *Journal of Social History*, 32(2): 349-369. Published by: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3789665>.

7 Knox, V. (2019). *Gang violence, GBV and hate crime in Central America: State response versus State responsibility*. Retrieved from <https://www.fmreview.org/return/knox>

Poverty and lack of opportunities are commonly cited as factors increasing individual vulnerability to criminality for survival and economic reasons.⁸

In relation to the context of masculinity where gang involvement is concerned, scholars point out that, in essence, individuals are seen to involve themselves in gendered activity informed at each specific moment across time and space through both their particular contextual positioning as well as their location in the broader cultural and ideological structure.⁹ Furthermore, although understanding of gender may vary across socio-historical contexts in which a diverse range of normative behaviours may be adopted as a prerequisite to its accomplishment, it consistently points to how gender is essentially how particular structured relations of social power are constructed:¹⁰ “In this regard the male gender practice is largely determined through its relationship to the cultural ideal of masculinity, varying over context as a consequence of changing structural features, and re-negotiated in order to maintain existing relations of domination”.¹¹ Research on gang activity points to how masculine values and behaviours of men tend to be embedded within broader structural relations of power.

The persistence of gangs and their close-knit association with violence threaten the fundamental constitutional rights of individuals and communities. Neighbourhoods that are infiltrated by gangs tend to be disproportionately affected by heinous crimes such as theft and robbery, vandalism, illegal drug trade, assault, gun violence, and murder. In South Africa, the most violent cities were also found in provinces with a known gang presence. For example, in 2022, in terms of murder rates, Cape Town (found in the Western Cape province) ranked the country's most violent city, recording 3,165 murders, followed by eThekweni (found in KwaZulu-Natal province) with 2,815 murders, and Johannesburg (found in Gauteng province) with 2,121 murders.¹²

Research on male gang involvement spans decades, yet the phenomenon remains uncurbed. This study, therefore, seeks to unravel factors that lead to the persistence of male gangs despite preventative interventions and other measures implemented over the years in selected provinces of South Africa.

8 Ibid.

9 Luyt, R and Foster, D. (2001). *Hegemonic masculine conceptualisation in gang culture*. Retrieved from https://gola.gre.ac.uk/id/eprint/15762/3/15762%20LUYT_Hegemonic_Masculine_Conceptualisation_2001.pdf

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 South African Cities Network. (2022). *The state of crime and safety in South African cities*. Report.

1.2 Aim of the study

The study aims to investigate factors that contribute to the sustained perceived value of men and boys in joining gangs in the selected provinces of South Africa. The study further aims to unravel current interventions to address gangsterism, as well as to assess the efficacy of existing interventions in curtailing gang involvement by men.

1.3 Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To explore factors that lead to the persistence of male gangs
2. To assess the role of masculine identity in promoting participation in gangs
3. To evaluate the efficacy of State policies and interventions in preventing men's involvement in gangs.

1.4 Research questions

The study seeks to answer the following question:

What are the factors that contribute to the persistence of male gang membership despite existing State interventions to curb gangsterism in South Africa?

2. Research methodology and approach

This section of the report identifies methodological procedures and processes employed to carry out the research study.

2.1 Research approach and research design

The research study employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is defined as a process of naturalistic inquiry that seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting.¹³ The qualitative research approach allows researchers to gain deep insights and understanding about individuals' perceptions of events and circumstances.¹⁴ The approach focuses on the 'why' rather than the 'what' of social phenomena and relies on the direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents in their everyday lives.

13 Sauro, J. 2015. *5 reasons to perform a qualitative study*. Accessed 12 January 2024. <https://measuringu.com/qualmethods/#:-:text=Similar%20to%20the%20way%20you,grounded%20theory%2C%20and%20case%20study>

14 Donalek, J. G. (2004). Demystifying nursing research: Phenomenology as a qualitative research method. *Urologic Nursing*, 24: 516–517. Accessed 7 February 2024. https://yulielearning.com/pluginfile.php/4833/mod_resource/content/1/2.%20qualitative%20research%20design.pdf

Rather than using logical and statistical procedures, qualitative researchers use multiple systems of inquiry for the study of human phenomena, including biography, case study, historical analysis, discourse analysis, ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology.¹⁵

The advantage of utilising the qualitative research approach is that it provides researchers with the opportunity to examine complex issues and generate a deeper understanding of the themes explored. The qualitative research approach also enables the researcher to go beyond what is physically observed to gain an understanding of the meanings that individuals and groups assign to a social phenomenon.¹⁶

The qualitative approach was therefore appropriate for this study as it sought to explore the perceptions, views, and personal experiences of former male gang members on the factors that drew them into gangs. The study's focus was on exploring the participants' reality from their individual narratives of their experiences and feelings to produce in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon.

In terms of the research design, the study adopted a case study research design. According to Yin,¹⁷ a case study is an empirical inquiry concerned with studying a phenomenon in its real-life context. Creswell¹⁸ further elaborates that case studies are a qualitative design that enables researchers to embark on a detailed exploration of a programme, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. The case study design was relevant for this study as it is qualitative and seeks to delve deeper into unravelling the insights and views of former gangs regarding factors that drew them into joining gangs.

2.2 Population and sampling

Research population refers to the group of individuals that possess the characteristics of interest to the researcher. A sample, on the other hand, is a subset of the population. In other words, sampling enables researchers to collect and analyse data for a smaller portion of the population.¹⁹ This study had a sample size of 38 participants who were former gang members, even though some said gang membership was a lifetime commitment that none of the members could escape. Participants also had to be male and identify as men in light of the aim and objectives of the study. The study also had participation by nine key informants.

15 University of Utah College of Nursing. (n.d.). What is qualitative research? Accessed 13 February 2024. https://libguides.uta.edu/quantitative_and_qualitative_research/qual

16 Creswell, J.W. 2012. *Qualitative Inquiry and research Design: Choosing among five approaches*. 3rd Edition. London: Sage

17 Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

18 Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

19 <https://explorable.com/population-sampling>

The participants in the study included former gang members of various gangs. They are subcategorised below:

Gauteng
Numbers Gang 26
Numbers Gang 28
Airforce 3 & 4
Western Cape
Americans
Numbers Gang 27
Reformatory
Ghettos
Scorpions
KwaZulu-Natal
Numbers Gang 26
Numbers Gang 28
Airforce

The number(s) description is explained in the table below:

The gang name or number	Description
26	They are responsible for gambling, smuggling, and accruing wealth in prison. They usually participate in smuggling items like money, drugs, cigarettes, cell phones, and other contraband. They usually work as cleaners in the facility and try to avoid violence. They are involved in theft and fraud. ²⁰
27	They are the guardians of gang law, peacekeepers known as the legal department, and enforcers of the law within the gang. They are popularly known as the men of blood and the most violent in the numbers ranking. They are also very secretive and play the role of being mediators between the 28s and 26s. ²¹
28	They are well known to engage in sex with other men and may be raped in prison. Mostly prefer working in the prison kitchens. Their symbol is a tattoo of the sun setting in between their buttocks. This symbolises that they do most of their work after the sun has set. They are sometimes referred to as the warriors. ²²

20 Velen, H. 2022. *The numbers gang in South African correctional facilities: reflections on structure, functions and culture*. Faculty of Law: University of Cape Town.

21 Evans, J. 2022. Number gangs and ranks: What do they mean. <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/numbers-gangs-and-ranks-what-do-they-mean-20220429>

22 Evans, J. 2022. Number gangs and ranks: What do they mean <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/numbers-gangs-and-ranks-what-do-they-mean-20220429>.

The gang name or number	Description
Airforce	Credited with being the masterminds behind the prison escapes, they constantly try to escape.
Americans	Large street gang of organised crime based in Cape Town (Cape Flats). Known for pioneering the local meth trade, drug trading, extortion, abalone poaching, and prostitution. They usually do not have front teeth. They are aligned to the 26 and 27 gangs inside the prisons. ²³
Reformatory	The gangs exist in Cape Town (street gangs). However, there is no available literature to describe who they are and what they do.
Ghettos or Ghetto Kids	Comprises children (below 12 years) and is prevalent in Cape Town. Ghetto Kids are understood to operate in Hanover Park, where territorial disputes over the illegal sale of drugs turn to violence. ²⁴
Scorpions	One of the many street gangs of the Cape Flats. They align themselves with the 26s. ²⁵

The study adopted the purposive sampling technique. In purposive sampling, participants are selected based on the researcher's knowledge in line with the desired characteristics of the sample. The researchers' knowledge is instrumental in creating the samples to increase the chances of obtaining highly accurate answers with a minimum margin of error. Purposive sampling is also known as judgmental sampling or authoritative sampling.²⁶ Former male gang members were selected for the study to give their reflections and insights on the subject matter. In order to source rich data, the study included participants between the ages of 21 and 65 years, meaning that the study had a focus on men between their early, mid, and late adulthood. The rationale for this selection was also to focus on a group of men that is often overlooked in research, as much of the existing research on male gangs focuses on youths or children.

23 Kgosana, R. 2023. TimesLive 28 April 2023. How secret communication and codes run prisons Number gang. <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2023-04-28-how-secret-communication-and-codes-run-prisons-numbers-gang/>

24 Evans, J. 2023. News24 24 February 2023. Ghetto Kids. Accessed 2 April 2024. <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/alleged-ghetto-kids-members-get-trial-date-in-connection-with-3-murders-in-cape-town-20230224>

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

26 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4012002/>

The table below illustrates information regarding sampling in this study:

Province	Number of participants	Number of subject experts and key informants
Western Cape	12 participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two senior officials from SAPS Anti-Gang Unit • 19 senior officials from DCS • Two subject experts from CSV and the University of the Witwatersrand • Four NGO leaders from Izwi Labanthu, Ceasefire and Mthembu House
Gauteng	8 participants	
KwaZulu-Natal	18 participants	
Total	38	27

The study was conducted in three of the four provinces where gangsterism is most common, i.e., Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng. The CGE could not cover the full scope of the four provinces due to limited resources, so the Eastern Cape was excluded. Participants from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds and locations, as well as different racial and ethnic groups, formed part of the study.

Participation by subject experts from the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (DOJ&CD), the South African Police Services (SAPS), the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), National Institute for Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NICRO), Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), and Mthembu House were also interviewed in the study.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were as follows:

- Former gang members may have been part of either a community, prison gang or both for at least 12 months to offer deep insights that enrich the study.
- Participants may be convicted ex-offenders, parolees, and probationers.

2.3 Recruitment strategy

In terms of recruitment for participation in the study, former male gang members were recruited with the assistance of various organisations: Mthembu House, CSV, NICRO, and the DCS. The CGE KwaZulu-Natal provincial office also assisted with the recruitment of participants.

2.4 Methods of data collection and research instrumentation

This study used focus group discussions with former gang members as the main method of data collection. A focus group is a group interview of approximately six to 12 people who share similar characteristics or common interests. It is also referred to as a moderated group discussion on a pre-defined topic for research purposes.²⁷ A facilitator guides the group based on a predetermined set of topics. The facilitator creates an environment that encourages participants to share their perceptions and points of view. Focus groups are a qualitative data collection method, meaning that the data is descriptive and cannot be measured numerically.²⁸ Focus groups are mainly administered to gather subjective perspectives from the key participants.

The CGE team of researchers opted for focus groups given that they are quick and relatively easy to set up, presenting group dynamics that provide useful information that individual data collection does not provide.²⁹ The use of focus groups resulted in lively discussions that aided in the collection of rich and meaningful data.

Individual face-to-face interviews were carried out with the subject experts and key informants. Interviews involve a one-on-one conversation between the researcher and the participant. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer asks open-ended questions to gain detailed information about the participants' thoughts, feelings, experiences, and behaviours.³⁰ The interviews were approximately one hour long.

Interviews are advantageous as they allow for an in-depth understanding of the topic at hand. The researcher can adapt the questioning in real time based on the participant's responses, allowing for more flexibility.³¹ The participants were allowed the use of tape recorders as the benefits thereof were fully explained, and consent was obtained.

In terms of research instrumentation, interview guides and a focus group guide were developed and used during data collection.

27 Gil, P. & Baillie, J. 2018 Interviews and focus groups in a qualitative research: An update for the digital age. *British Dental Journal*, 225(7): 668-672.

28 Evaluation brief. Issue No 13. August 2018. <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/index.htm>.

29 Barnett, J. *Focus group tips for beginners*. Texas centre for the advancement of literacy and learning.

30 <https://www.leadquizzes.com/blog/data-collection-methods/>

31 <https://www.surveyccto.com/resources/guides/data-collection-methods-guide/>

2.5 Method of data analysis

Thematic analysis was used as the method of data analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that researchers use to systematically organise and analyse complex data sets. It is a search for themes that can capture the narratives available in the account of data sets. It involves the identification of themes through careful reading and re-reading of the transcribed data.³² This method involves the analysis of qualitative data by identifying themes and patterns in data. The method requires the organisation and description of data sets with the aim of answering the research question.³³ Thematic analysis is theoretically flexible for identifying, describing, and interpreting patterns (themes) in detail within a data set. It fits well with any qualitative study which attempts to explore complex research issues.³⁴

The interviews were conducted in Sesotho, Setswana, and IsiZulu and were later transcribed and translated into English.

The following steps are followed in thematic analysis:

1. Familiarising yourself with data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing and reporting³⁵

3. Constraints/limitations of the study

- The study was confined to male gangs, given their proliferation in communities despite decades of research and interventions introduced to curb the phenomenon. It is, however, acknowledged that women, girls, and queer persons also get involved in gangs.
- The scope of the study was limited to the inclusion of only three provinces, namely Western Cape, Gauteng, and KwaZulu-Natal. These provinces were sampled based on widespread reports of male gang activities and gang violence. A limited scope was adopted due to the CGE's limited capacity and resources.

32 <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED612353.pdf>

33 <https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC100823>

34 Chamberlain, L. (2015). Exploring the out-of-school writing practices of three children aged 9-10 years old and how these practices travel across and within the domains of home and school. An unpublished PhD thesis, The Open University, England.

35 <https://paperpile.com/g/thematic-analysis/>

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- As a safety precaution, the study involved the participation of former gang members and individuals not actively involved in gangs at the time of data collection. While active gang members would have offered more current and insightful perspectives, the safety and security of the researchers became of paramount importance in this study, which focused on a subject that involves individuals and groups that may potentially be involved in violent and criminal activities.

4. Statement of research ethics

The statement of research ethics below covers four crucial areas, which include informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and beneficence.

- **Informed consent:** Informed consent involves potential participants being provided with full information about what it means for them to take part in the study before it commences.³⁶ Before the commencement of interviews, participants were informed about the study rationale, its goals and objectives, and the research methodology.³⁷ With regard to the key informants, a letter was written with all the above information provided. A participant information sheet was developed and handed out to the participants (former male gang members). Participants (including key informants) were also afforded the opportunity to ask questions or seek clarification on any aspect of the study that may be unclear.
- **Voluntary participation:** Voluntary participation follows the process of getting informed consent from the participants.³⁸ In this research study, none of the participants were coerced to participate and were not promised any incentives.³⁹ Cooperation was sought from the key informants (in and outside of State institutions) through clearly written articulation of the research aim, objectives, and CGE mandate and powers.
- **Confidentiality and anonymity:** Confidentiality and anonymity are ethical principles designed to protect the privacy of Human subjects while collecting, analysing, and reporting data.⁴⁰ Confidentiality refers to separating or modifying any personal, identifying information provided by participants from the data whilst, on the other hand, anonymity refers to collecting data without obtaining any personal, identifying information.⁴¹ Participants were informed that the study would culminate in a research report and that their names would not be mentioned in any documentation or presentations regarding the research.

36 University of Oxford, 2023. *Informed Consent*. Retrieved from <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/consent>

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Allen, M. 2017. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. Retrieved from <https://methods.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-communication-research-methods>

41 Ibid.

The interviews were held in locations that could guarantee the confidentiality of the participants, and the tape recordings were kept on password-protected devices. The transcripts that emanate from the research interviews will be kept in a lock-and-key cupboard that is only accessible to the researchers involved in this project.

- **Beneficence:** The right of participants to be free from harm, uneasiness, and mistreatment is termed beneficence in research ethics principles and was respected.⁴² This study sought to contribute positively to the human condition; studies that do not aspire to do this run the risk of being unethical.

5. Legislative frameworks

Very few legislative frameworks are in place, either internationally, regionally, or domestically, to address gangs and their activities. Furthermore, both international and domestic issues of gangs and their associated activities are covered under what is generally termed 'organised crime'. In other words, existing legislation adopts a narrow focus that amplifies the criminal aspects of gangs while negating the socio-economic and political contexts in which gangs emerge, exist, and sustain their lifelines.

Internationally, between 1998 and 2000, the United Nations (UN) member states worked on creating the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) (also known as the Palermo Convention).⁴³ The UNTOC convention required signatories to pass legislation specifically focused on addressing organised crime. The convention was ratified by 52 of the 54 African countries, and South Africa ratified it in November 2004.

The UNTOC was enacted to promote cooperation and prevent and combat transnational organised crime more effectively.⁴⁴ A key provision of the UNTOC is the criminalisation of participation in or contribution to a criminal group through Article 5.⁴⁵ The Legislative Guide 17 to the Convention relates to the criminal liability of persons who intentionally participate in or contribute to the criminal activities of organised criminal groups.⁴⁶ This clause in the UNTOC is aimed at tackling organised crime by criminalising acts that involve participation in or contributions to an organised criminal group.

42 Ibid.

43 Thomas, K. (2022). *Prosecuting with the Prevention of Organised Crime Act A review of South Africa's anti-gang provisions*, Retrieved at <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/paper34.pdf>

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

At the regional level, one of the legislative frameworks that can be referenced in relation to crimes in which gangs are involved is the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Regional Guidelines on Crime and Violence Prevention, which were approved on 22 June 2018 in Luanda, Angola, by the SADC Ministerial Committee of the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation. The guidelines are accompanied by a manual to facilitate the operationalisation of the SADC Guidelines on Crime and Violence Prevention.⁴⁷

According to SADC, the guidelines adopt a holistic approach to crime and violence prevention through framing the document within a socio-economic context. The document states, “It is aimed at all stakeholders within Member States who are involved in the prevention of crime and violence on a local, district, national and regional level, which includes the following:

- Policymakers, including those that often fall outside the traditional, security-focused role-players, such as those from the social cluster of government: Social Welfare, Education, Housing, Health, and Infrastructure, including housing and planning commissions
- National and metropolitan/municipal police services and forces
- Local governments are often responsible for the devolved or delegated delivery of safety outcomes, for local safety planning, and for the facilitation of community safety
- Civil society
- Community practitioners
- Academic and knowledge partners”.⁴⁸

“Furthermore, the Guidelines are underpinned by the following SADC protocols, which include the following:⁴⁹

The Protocol on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation (1996); The Protocol on Combating Illicit Drug Trafficking (1996); the Protocol on Gender and Development (2008) as amended; the Protocol on the Control of Firearms, Ammunition and Other Related Materials (2001) as amended; the Protocol against Corruption (2001) as amended; the Protocol on Extradition (2002) as amended; the Protocol on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters (2002) and the Revised Strategic Plan of Action on Combating Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (2016)”.

47 Southern African Development Community (SADC), (2018). *Manual to Facilitate the Operationalisation of the SADC Guidelines on Crime and Violence Prevention 'Together for Safety and Security'*, Retrieved from https://www.sadc.int/sites/default/files/2021-07/Manual_to_Facilitate_the_Operationalisation_of_SADC_Guidelines_on_Crime_and_Violence_Prevention.pdf

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

Domestically, by the time the UNTOC came into effect, South Africa had already developed its own Act related to organised crime, which is the Prevention of Organised Crime Act (POCA) 121 of 1998. In fact, scholars in international crime argue that the UNTOC borrowed some aspects of the South African POCA.⁵⁰ The POCA, in summary, intends to do the following in relation to organised crime prevention:

- To introduce measures to combat organised crime, money laundering and criminal gang activities
- To prohibit certain activities relating to racketeering activities
- To provide for the prohibition of money laundering and for an obligation to report certain information
- To criminalise certain activities associated with gangs
- To provide for the recovery of the proceeds of unlawful activity
- For the civil forfeiture of criminal assets that have been used to commit an offence or assets that are the proceeds of unlawful activity
- To provide for the establishment of a Criminal Assets Recovery Account
- To amend the Drugs and Drug Trafficking Act, 1992
- To amend the International Co-operation in Criminal Matters Act, 1996
- To repeal the Proceeds of Crime Act, 1996
- To incorporate the provisions continued in the Proceeds of Crime Act, 1996
- To provide for matters connected therewith.

Despite the adoption of POCA more than 25 years ago, critics argue that the Act has not measured up to what they hoped it would be because it fails to address the ongoing problem of gangsterism, particularly in the Western Cape, but also in Gauteng and the Eastern Cape. The law, unfortunately, has not had the desired impact in curbing the issue of gangs and violence in South Africa.⁵¹

Other critics argue that the POCA has been underused in prosecutions around organised crime. For example, firstly, in a review of reported cases in the country since 2010, only 8% of cases in which the judgment referred to gang activity included charges under Section 9.⁵² Secondly, previous research findings on the POCA note that there were no Section 9 convictions before 2010.

50 Thomas, K. (2022). *Prosecuting with the Prevention of Organised Crime Act A review of South Africa's anti-gang provisions*, Retrieved at <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/paper34.pdf>

51 Ibid.

52 Section 9(1) or (2) (a) shall be liable to a fine, or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding six years; Section 9(2)(b) or (c), shall be liable to a fine, or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding three years; Section 9(1) or (2)(a) and if the offence was committed under circumstances referred to in Subsection (2) shall be liable to a fine, or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding eight years; Section 9(2)(b) or (c), and if the offence was committed under circumstances referred to in Subsection (2) shall be liable to a fine or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years.

Although not all cases are reported, these gaps indicate an underuse of the legislation.⁵³

5.1 State interventions to address gangsterism

The South African Police Services (SAPS) have, in the democratic dispensation, undergone a transformative process to shed itself from the past apartheid-era system of policing that was characterised by gross human rights violations. Present-day policing is subjected to a Constitutional legal framework that upholds, among others, the rights to freedom and human dignity. Even so, the transition between the two systems of policing appears to have not fully manifested, given the forceful tactics that are from time to time employed by the SAPS in response to gang violence. The country has also witnessed the periodic deployment of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), as well as the establishment of the Anti-Gang Unit that, at times, adopts approaches that do not seamlessly mirror the objectives of the Constitution of South Africa, particularly in the Western Cape.⁵⁴

A study by Van Wyk and Theron found as early as 2005 that strategies that existed in curbing the proliferation of gangs in the Western Cape needed to be holistic in their approach with regard to drawing youth out of gangs and integrating them into society.⁵⁵ Central to this, the study found that interventions were required to address the unmet socio-economic developmental needs of youth, as opposed to focusing only on the eradication of the effects of gangs in communities.⁵⁶

In 2016, the country adopted the NAGS as the national strategy to address the issue of gangs.⁵⁷ While the details of the NAGS are still to be made public, what is currently known about it is that it aligns with the National Development Plan (NDP) to ensure that all South Africans feel safe and that their communities live free of fear.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the NAGS seeks to address the issue of gangs from the perspectives of human development, social partnerships, spatial design, and the criminal justice process.⁵⁹ Available information further suggests that the NAGS calls for a holistic approach to address issues that feed gangsterism at the community level and, additionally, a national interdepartmental anti-gang strategy that addresses both the current impacts of gangsterism and prevention efforts.⁶⁰

53 Thomas, K. (2022). Prosecuting with the Prevention of Organised Crime Act A review of South Africa's anti-gang provisions, Retrieved at <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/paper34.pdf>.

54 Viltott, C. D. (2022). Deconstructing Gangsterism in South Africa: Uncovering the Need for Gender-Sensitive Policies, *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 14(3).

55 Van Wyk, B. E., & Theron, W. H. (2005). *Fighting gangsterism in South Africa: A contextual review of gang and anti-gang movements in the Western Cape*. *Acta Criminologica: African Journal of Criminology & Victimology*, 18(3), 51-60.

56 Ibid.

57 Pinnock, D. & Pinnock, R. (2019). *Strategic Roadmap Towards Implementation of The National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy In The Western Cape: Provincial Response To The National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy (NAGS) 2019*. South African Drug Policy Initiative. Retrieved from <https://www.sadpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Roadmap-for-Safety-Report-.pdf>

58 Viltott, C. D. (2022). *Deconstructing Gangsterism in South Africa: Uncovering the Need for Gender-Sensitive Policies*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v14.i3.7985>

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

According to SAPS, the NAGS is a shared responsibility that involves State departments employing various legal instruments and policies that guide their work in relation to addressing gangsterism and its criminal and social impacts or effects.⁶¹ The key departments involved in the implementation of the national anti-gangsterism strategy include the Department of Social Development (DSD), the Department of Basic Education (DBE), the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (DOJ&CD), the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), and the Department of Correctional Services (DCS).⁶²

The NAGS is based on four pillars, which include the following:

- Pillar 1: Human development
- Pillar 2: Social partnerships
- Pillar 3: Spatial design
- Pillar 4: Criminal justice process.

The strategy is centred on these four pillars. It emphasises the role of law enforcement, social crime prevention, and environmental design programmes and projects that address all factors involved in gang-related crime. The strategy reportedly calls for the development of provincial strategies to address the dynamic contexts of each province, and the Western Cape is among the provinces with a known strategy in place.

In 2022, Social Development Minister Lindiwe Zulu outlined that collaborative efforts were still required to address gangs and deter youth from joining gangs.⁶³ In May 2023, the DSD Chief Director for Families and Social Crime Prevention suggested in a report to Parliament that the anti-gangsterism strategy is an expected deliverable by various departments but should not overshadow the responsibility of SAPS.⁶⁴ She further pointed out that the DSD strategy was to focus on schools that are struggling with gangsterism, as well as underperforming schools which have shown a high prevalence of gangsterism.⁶⁵ In this regard, she outlined that the DSD and the DBE were working together to pinpoint schools which have not been performing due to gangsterism and substance abuse.⁶⁶ With regard to rehabilitation treatment centres for substance and drug abuse, the Chief Director alluded to the 13 treatment centres that the DSD had established, with each province having at least one, and these were alongside the centres handled by NGOs while being subsidised

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 SANews (2022). *Plans to scale up collaborative anti-gangsterism interventions*. Retrieved from <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/plans-scale-collaborative-anti-gangsterism-interventions>

64 Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG), (2023). *Department of Social Development 2022/23 Quarter 4 performance; with Minister*. Retrieved from <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/37114/>

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

by the government.⁶⁷ The report further noted that the treatment centres were capacitated with a standardised treatment programme, social workers providing treatment programmes that have been proven to work based on evidence-based studies, and the introduction of programmes which reduce relapse.

Despite the existence of the NAGS, it appears not much has come from it as State interventions in addressing gangsterism are continuously reactive, uncoordinated and lack effectiveness. Even though the Western Cape province developed an implementation plan in an effort to implement the NAGS in 2019, no evidence in terms of the effectiveness of the plan has been noted.⁶⁸

In November 2018, the Anti-Gang Unit was established by the SAPS and launched in Hanover Park, Western Cape. The rollout would extend to Eastern Cape and Gauteng when the need arose (based on remarks by the State President of South Africa). Part of the aims of the unit is “to disorganise and fundamentally disable the criminal economy linked to gangsterism, including drug and firearm supply lines or other identified commodities”.⁶⁹ The Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) has, however, raised concerns about the structure, functioning, formation, and appointment of personnel.⁷⁰ According to the article in the Daily Maverick newspaper, IPID had concerns with regard to the underfunding or resourcing of the Anti-Gang Unit, and the personnel pointed out that there should be detectives in the AGUs.⁷¹

In terms of legislation, the provisions of the 1998 POCA on gang-related crimes have not been utilised fully to address gangs and the crimes committed by these organisations. According to Thomas, this is due to the scarcity of human resources, skills, and training across the SAPS, NPA, and Crime Intelligence, as well as the lack of meaningful cooperation among them. Further shortfalls of the Act include a lack of provision for targeting gang leaders and weak sentencing.⁷²

As such, while there are some State interventions in place to deal with the problem of gangs, existing interventions lack proactivity, coordination, and a multi-pronged approach with clear monitoring and evaluation systems in place to measure the effectiveness of existing mechanisms.

67 Ibid.

68 Viltott, C. D. (2022). *Deconstructing Gangsterism in South Africa: Uncovering the Need for Gender-Sensitive Policies*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v14.i3.7985>

69 Presidency (2018). *The Presidency Statement. President Ramaphosa to formally launch Anti-Gang Unit*. Retrieved from <https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/press-statements/president-ramaphosa-formally-launch-anti-gang-unit>

70 Dolley, C. (2021). Anti-Gang Unit was not properly formed, had no adequate resources, failed to protect Charl Kinnear – SAPS watchdog. *Daily Maverick*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-11-12-anti-gang-unit-was-not-properly-formed-had-no-adequate-resources-failed-to-protect-charl-kinnear-saps-watchdog/>

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

6. Literature review

6.1 Gangs and masculinity

Masculinity consists of behaviours, languages, and practices that exist in specific cultural and organisational locations. These behaviours are commonly associated with males and are culturally defined as not feminine.⁷³ Masculinity and male behaviours are, however, not simply products of genetic coding or biological predispositions⁷⁴ but result from a social construction. In Western countries such as the United States, Australia, and Turkey, masculinity is often stereotyped, and men exhibit characteristics such as independence, physical strength, aggressiveness, competitiveness, objectivity, rationality, and showing less emotion than their female counterparts.⁷⁵ Arguably, masculinity is stereotyped in the same manner in South Africa. By comparison, women are traditionally expected to be co-operative, physically weak, affectionate, attractive, emotional, neat, dependent, gentle, religious, quiet, irrational, passive, and more communicative than men.⁷⁶

Sensitivity is needed, as “a number of masculinities” exist, and that generalisation and blanket stereotyping should be avoided.⁷⁷ There are many ways in which masculinity can be demonstrated, and the potential for fluidity is undeniable, as seen in the quote below:

*“Masculinities are fluid and should not be considered as belonging in a fixed way to any group of men. They are socially and historically constructed in a process which involves contestation between rival understandings of what being a man should involve [...] Masculinities are constantly protected and defended, and they are constantly breaking down and being recreated. For gender activists, this conceptualisation provides space for optimism because it acknowledges the possibility of intervening in the politics of masculinity to promote masculinities that are more peaceful and harmonious”.*⁷⁸

73 Africa Watch Committee and Prison project (Human Rights Watch). 1994. *Prison conditions in South Africa*, 3169(119). Human Right Watch.

74 Ibid.

75 Bozkurt, V., Tartanoglu, S., & Dawes, G. 2015. Masculinity and violence: sex roles and violence endorsements among university students. *Social and behavioural sciences*, 205:254-260

76 Ibid.

77 MacMaster, L.L., M 2007. Social and Economic Emasculation as contributing factors to gangsterism on the Cape Flats. *Scriptura* (95): 278-289

78 Pinnock, D. 1982. *The Brotherhoods: Street Gangs and State Control in Cape Town*. Cape Town: David Phillip; Kinnes, Irvin. 2000. From Urban Gangs to Criminal Empires: The Changing Face of Gangs in the Western Cape. ISS Monograph Series No. 48. Halfway House: Institute for Security Studies. <http://www.issafrica.org/Pubs/Monographs/No48/Contents.html>.

There is a multifaceted relationship between gangs, violence, and masculinity. A study found that in the absence of socio-economic opportunities – recreational and cultural facilities, jobs, other economic opportunities, and social networks – gangs would use violence to dominate and subordinate rival gangs to maintain their place as the “superior” men in their communities.⁷⁹ Also, high levels of violence are used to “prove” gang members’ masculinity. Furthermore, the way young gang members think about and understand masculinity ultimately translated into exacerbated societal violence and, more relevant to the CGE, gender-based violence.⁸⁰

Correspondingly, Salo⁸¹ explains that gang membership is not only about resistance and economic survival. Gang membership is also about asserting gendered identities as heterosexual men who do not possess “dominant material and symbolic capital” that affirms their heterosexual masculinity, such as a professional education, a permanent job, or the economic ability to support a wife and other dependents.

While many authors recognise the role of gender construction in gang violence, there is still a need for researchers to target masculinity as a rubric for in-depth research and empirically based work.⁸² At an international level, in the United Kingdom, to be specific, Muncie⁸³ noted that men were responsible for 92% of violent crime, where young men in economically deprived areas abandoned by the State unleashed “maverick” and extreme forms of masculinity. Pitts⁸⁴ refers to masculinity and menace, where the “glittering prizes” of the drug gang lifestyle and respect are “indissoluble” from masculinity and gender identity for disadvantaged young men in the United Kingdom. Baird⁸⁵ acknowledges that in South Africa, a notable body of research into masculinities, exclusion, and gangs in Cape Town has been conducted. However, he⁸⁶ critiques that while the literature on urban violence, particularly in Latin America, increasingly links socio-economic exclusion to violence, it also needs to conceptually link violence more rigorously to masculinities to develop an in-depth understanding of urban violence. Baird⁸⁷ presents two questions that need to be answered by research: (1) What is it about “becoming a man” in contexts of exclusion that leads some youths, but not others, into violence? (2) What processes lead new generations of young men to replenish the ranks of gangs?

79 <https://theconversation.com/study-paints-a-grim-picture-of-what-young-gangsters-think-about-violence-and-manhood>.

80 Ibid.

81 Salo, E. 2005. “‘Mans is Ma Soe’: Ganging Practices in Manenberg, South Africa and the ideologies of masculinity, gender and generational relations.” Paper delivered at the Criminal Justice: A New Decade, Consolidating Transformation Conference held 7-8 February 2005, Johannesburg. <http://www.wits.ac.za/csvr/confpaps/salo.htm>.

82 Baird, A. 2012. “The violent gang and the construction of masculinity amongst socially excluded young men”, *Safer Communities*, 11(4): 179-190.

83 Muncie, J. 2009, *Youth and Crime*, 3rd ed., Sage, London.

84 Pitts, J. 2008, *Reluctant Gangsters: The Changing Face of Youth Crime*, Willan Publishing, London.

85 Baird, A. 2012. “The violent gang and the construction of masculinity amongst socially excluded young men”, *Safer Communities*, 11(4): 179-190.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

It is plausible to then argue that answering such questions may put countries in a better position to budget and plan programmes and intervention strategies directed towards the fight against gangsterism and inevitably curb the levels of crime and violence currently rampant in communities. As mentioned, there is an obvious link between violence and masculinity. Aggression and violence are perceived as the negative side of conventional masculine identities.⁸⁸ Violence has been analysed from several perspectives, such as psychoanalytical theory and biological theories. The theories identify the hormone testosterone as the catalyst for aggression in males and homosocial behaviours and suggest that the hormone partly explains the competitiveness among men).⁸⁹ Also, there is a body of research literature focused on the role that an individual's environment plays in fostering forms of violent behaviour.⁹⁰

For example, some research implies that boys living in a violent culture learn that violence is a way to resolve conflicts and assert power over others.⁹¹ Connell's⁹² theory of hegemonic masculinity explains that this dominant form of masculinity asserts control over women and males viewed as less powerful. Connell⁹³ asserts that boys learn how to be violent and aggressive by copying the behaviours of their fathers/father figures and other men in their neighbourhoods who are viewed as role models in terms of "how to act like a man". This role modelling has also been identified as one of the factors for joining gangs, answering the search for a 'sense of belonging' and a 'father figure' to look up to.

Young people in the Black African townships develop their own means of survival by, amongst other things, the practice of ukutabalaza. Mokwena⁹⁴ quotes a young Soweto man saying: "it is when you do all that is in your power to get money. You see, the world is a bad place because it is built on money[...] when you don't have money, you are just a dog". Ukutabalaza may refer to honest ways of making money, but in the townships, it generally refers to illegal and criminal methods. These include theft, muggings, and housebreaking. Ukutabalaza may also include more serious crimes like vehicle theft, hijackings, and bank and transit robberies where more sophisticated crime syndicates are involved. Notorious criminals are often viewed as heroes and role models.⁹⁵ Not only are these economic factors part of the root causes of gangsterism, but they also play a major role in sustaining gangs. Gangs operate within communities affected by poverty, where they become providers of the basic needs of many people in the form of food, payment of rent

88 Bozkurt, V., Tartanoglu, S., & Dawes, G. 2015. Masculinity and Violence: Sex Roles and Violence Endorsement among University Students. *Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 205: 254-260.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Bozkurt, V., Tartanoglu, S., & Dawes, G. 2015. Masculinity and Violence: Sex Roles and Violence Endorsement among University Students. *Social and Behavioural Sciences* 205: 254-260.

92 Connell, R.W., 1995. *Masculinities*, Second Edition, University of California Press.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 This hero worshipping is also described by Gayton McKenzie, a reformed former leader of a gang of robbers. Cf. McKenzie, Gayton 2006. *The Choice: The Gayton McKenzie Story*. Cape Town: X-Concepts Books.

and school fees. Colin Stansfield reports that it was therefore not surprising when a woman from Valhalla Park in Gauteng shouted on television, with the arrest of the well-known leader of the Firm gang, “Wie gaan nou vir ons kinders sorg?” (Who will take care of our children now?)⁹⁶. Gang membership, thus, in some respects, points to the role of a man in society: a provider.

6.2 Causal factors associated with male gang membership or gang involvement

Psychologists, criminologists, anthropologists, and sociologists have identified various causal factors associated with gang involvement. Factors range from individual, familial, community, and societal facets.⁹⁷ The literature identifies some of the main causal factors as poverty and lower socio-economic status, broken homes, single-headed homes, father absence, use of substances, low self-esteem, poor education, poor policing, and peer pressure. There are, therefore, classifications to reasons men and boys join gangs, and these are varied and sometimes distinct.

Various factors have been identified to lure or push men and boys into joining or becoming members of gangs. Societal and family issues are usually deemed contributing factors.⁹⁸ Below are some of the push factors identified in the literature:

- Unstable/broken home
- Economic instability
- Low education attainment and expectations
- Family members in a gang
- Neglect by one or both parents
- Violence in the home or in the community directed at the child
- Alcoholism and or drug abuse by one or both parents.

One of the most mentioned reasons for youths and males to become involved in gang activity, both historically and in more recent research, is poverty or economic class. Along the lines of poverty and economic class, unemployment follows naturally. Throughout the history of gangs, gangsterism has a tendency to be the most prevalent where unemployment levels are high, especially among young people.⁹⁹

96 Stanfield, C., 2024. Daily Maverick. The firm grip of the 28s from Colin Stanford to fresh suspicions shaping Sas drug scene. Available at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-03-17-firm-grip-of-28s-colin-stanford-and-fresh-suspicions-shaping-drug-scene/>

97 https://www.academia.edu/40706720/Gangs_in_South_Africa_the_Root_THE_ROOT_CAUSE_FOR_GANGSTERISM_IN_SOUTH_AFRICAN_A_BRIEF_ESSAY

98 https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/ejc-carsa_v24_n1_a4

99 https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3052&context=isp_collection

Notably, other school-related factors correlated with gang involvement for boys are low academic performance or academic failure, low educational aspirations, lack of academic motivation, school demotivating due to family dynamics like being chased away from school because fees are not paid or incomplete school uniform, frequently getting into trouble at school, and negative classification. These factors may be more significant predictors of involvement.

In addition, Individual risk factors are the early use of alcohol and marijuana, prior delinquency, hyperactivity, externalising behaviours (hostility, aggression, and rule breaking), poor skills in refusing offers to engage in antisocial behaviour, and early sexual activity. It can also be noted that over-reliance on anti-social peers, poor parental supervision, alcohol and drug abuse, and poor educational or employment potential are some of the push factors for joining a gang.¹⁰⁰

Poverty is a prominent contributory factor in pushing juveniles and youths into gang involvement and crime.¹⁰¹ Most parts of South African communities suffer high levels of poverty, and this has a negative impact on the younger generations and is thus a push factor for men and boys as they try to make ends meet against all odds to provide for their household. Younger generations experiencing poverty unwittingly opt for gangs to fend for themselves or take care of their guardians or siblings in the absence of a breadwinner or father/mother figure. The Cape Flats, for example, is characterised by poverty and unemployment, leaving the residents with a sense of powerlessness.¹⁰² This poverty and unemployment emphasises the impact of the societal status or state of the community. If the community has high levels of crime, youths resort to crime as they see it as a norm of survival. Crime becomes something normal.¹⁰³

The City of Cape Town also acknowledges that to provide young people with alternatives to gang affiliation, economic opportunities need to be created.¹⁰⁴ Gangs tend to portray themselves as successful, hence their attractiveness to the youth. Similarly, childhood abuse and neglect serve as important triggers for youths' involvement in crime, substance abuse, and gangs.¹⁰⁵ Van der Westhuizen and Gawulayo¹⁰⁶ confirm the impact of abuse and neglect in a study conducted on exposure to violence at home.

100 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344871816_Risk_factors_associated_with_youth_gang_involvement_An_exploratory_criminological_case_study_analysis

101 Maphanga, C. 2019. *25 years of democracy: Poverty on the rise, Black Africans worst hit by inequality*. Retrieved from <https://www.fin24.com/Economy/25-years-of-democracy-poverty-on-the-rise-black-africans-worst-hit-by-inequality-20190724-2>.

102 Western Cape Department of Community Safety. 2018. Provincial policing needs and priorities (PNP) Report for the Western Cape 2018/19 on the policing of drugs. Cape Town: Directorate: Policy and Research; Western Cape Department of Community Safety.

103 <https://pmg.org.za/page/Gangsterism#:~:text=Gangsterism%20in%20South%20African%20townships,a%20serious%20threat%20to%20society>

104 Kesson, C., Morgan, G. & Green, C. 2019. *Resilient Cape Town: Preliminary resilience assessment*. Cape Town: Committee on Sustainability and Resilience, City of Cape Town.

105 Bougard, N D. & Hesselink, A. 2019. The male victim of child rape: An explorative needs, risks, and intervention analysis for serial rape *Child Abuse Research: A Southern African Journal*, 20(9): 1-13 <https://journals.co.za/content/journal/10520/EJC-199907ad7d>

106 Van der Westhuizen, M. & Gawulayo, S.S. 2021. Youths in gangs on the cape flats: if not in gangs, then what? *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 57(1): 118-132. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351021582>.

Abuse and neglect played a role in young people joining gangs in a quest for 'family'.

Bougard and Hesselink¹⁰⁷ discovered in their research that some participants had negative relationships and poor bonds with their mothers, and some grew up in dysfunctional homes characterised by uninvolved or absent parents. Similarly, Van der Westhuizen and Gawulayo¹⁰⁸ found during their study that young people in the Cape Flats experienced a deficient sense of belonging, lack of love, acceptance and support, child-headed households, and dysfunctional and absent parental/guardian supervision. Unfortunately, children from dysfunctional families are easily pushed to substance abuse, crime, antisocial associations, and gangs.¹⁰⁹ Boys who have close relationships with their parents, on the other hand, tend to possess or develop a strong sense of self-respect and self-confidence, perform better in school, develop healthy social relationships, and display a high level of independence and emotional maturation.¹¹⁰

Among other things, gangs serve to fulfil the needs of safety, acknowledgement, attention, love, support, sense of belonging, cohesion, camaraderie, power, protection, recognition, and status.¹¹¹ Some men and boys thus join gangs for protection, safety, and a sense of belonging. Some do not know what a family structure is or do not know what respect and abiding by rules is until they are part of gangs. Bougard and Hesselink¹¹² engaged with participants who described gang leaders and senior gang members as "their parents". Randhawa-Horne, Horan, and Sutcliffe¹¹³ state that gang members socialise with each other as if they were family in terms of the group's norms, values, and behaviour. Perceiving the gang as one's family is likely in high-crime neighbourhoods, in which youth gang members would reintegrate ex-offenders back into the gang family when released from prison.¹¹⁴ There is a link between community gangs and gangs in South African correctional centres. In their study, Bougard and Hesselink¹¹⁵ found that community gang members found recognition and status from prison gang members once they were incarcerated, and this automatically earned them prison gang membership.

107 Bougard, N.B. & Hesselink, A. E. 2020. Risk factors associated with youth gang involvement: An exploratory criminological case study analysis. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 30(5): 459-465.

108 Van der Westhuizen, M. & Gawulayo, S.S. 2021. Youths in gangs on the cape flats: if not in gangs, then what? *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 57(1): 118-132. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351021582>.

109 Geldenhuys, K. 2019. The satanic gangster of the Free State Servamus: *Community-based Safety and Security Magazine*, 112(3): 10-17 <https://journals.co.za/content/journal/10520/EJC-144384c373>.

110 Blažević, I. 2016. Family, peer and school influence on children's social development. *World Journal of Education*, 6(2): 42-49.

111 Bougard, N.B. & Hesselink, A. E. 2020. Risk factors associated with youth gang involvement: An exploratory criminological case study analysis. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 30(5): 459-465.

112 Bougard, N.B. & Hesselink, A. E. 2020. Risk factors associated with youth gang involvement: An exploratory criminological case study analysis. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 30(5): 459-465.

113 Randhawa-Horne, K, Horan, R, & Sutcliffe, P. 2019. Identity Matters intervention for group and gang related offenders in custody and community: findings from a small-scale process study Ministry of Justice: Ministry of Justice Analytical Series, Crown Publisher.

114 Pinnock, D. 2019. Gang Wars: How the prison network and global players keep Cape Gang Flats alive. Retrieved from: <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/gang-warshow-the-prison-network-and-global-players-keep-cape-flatsgangs-alive-20190722>.

115 Bougard, N.B. & Hesselink, A. E. 2020. Risk factors associated with youth gang involvement: An exploratory criminological case study analysis. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 30(5): 459-465.

Seemingly, gangs are a family in and out of prison as they tend to take care of their own even when imprisoned.

Furthermore, regarding prison gangs, one reason for gang membership in correctional facilities is the need for security and protection from other inmates or rival prison gangs.¹¹⁶ Globally, correctional centres have been synonymous with overcrowding, violence, and sexual violence. Nel¹¹⁷ explains that violence in the form of assault is part of gang life in correctional centres and occurs in many ways. Gang leaders even assault gang members as punishment when they transgress the gang rules.¹¹⁸ Gangsters also assault members and other offenders to earn their position or rank in the gang.¹¹⁹ Nel¹²⁰ shares that during a visit to Barberton Maximum Correctional Centre in Mpumalanga, offenders expressed their desire not to be part of the gang system and to be removed from all the problems inherent to sharing overcrowded quarters with violent gang activities. In terms of sexual abuse, inmates may join gangs by being homosexually raped and turned into “wives” or because they wish to avoid this fate.¹²¹ Although correctional centres are supposed to have systems in place to prevent any offender-offender abuse of any kind, incidents of sexual assault seem to persist regardless.

7. Case study findings of the study

Three case studies are presented in this study: Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and Western Cape

7.1 Gauteng province

Gauteng is the smallest province by land area in South Africa, yet it is home to over a quarter of the country's population. Gauteng is also an economic hub and has one of the largest cities in the world, Johannesburg. The province is mainly urbanised, characterised by glamorous activities for the young and elite. One of the lucrative forms of entrepreneurship in the province is the taxi business, which is predominantly owned and run by men from KwaZulu-Natal, some of whom belong to or are associated with gangs and izinkabi (hitmen).¹²²

116 Bougard, N.B. & Hesselink, A. E. 2020. Risk factors associated with youth gang involvement: An exploratory criminological case study analysis. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 30(5): 459-465.

117 Nel, S.L. 2017. A Critical Analysis of Gangsterism in South African Correctional Centres: The Case of Barberton Management Area, South Africa. Masters, UNISA.

118 Ibid.

119 Ibid.

120 Nel, S.L. 2017. A Critical Analysis of Gangsterism in South African Correctional Centres: The Case of Barberton Management Area, South Africa. Masters, UNISA.

121 Ibid.

122 SAHO 2024. Accessed 20 February 2024. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/place/gauteng-province>.

Gangsterism has also permeated schools in Gauteng, with the City Press newspaper covering a story about gang-related violence forcing teachers out of Gauteng schools. Based on the article, teachers are scared to go to school and prefer to resign as gangsterism and violence have become a threat to their lives in their work environments.¹²³

The Numbers gang also exists in the province and is particularly prevalent within the South African correctional system. The gang consists of three components or rungs, i.e., the 26s, 27s, and 28s. The 26s are the lowest rung and specialise in robbery and smuggling goods into correctional centres. The number of 27s has reportedly diminished in Gauteng. They are also referred to the Sanguinis, and to join them, the potential candidate must stab a correctional centre guard. Instead of the 27s, Airforce 3 and 4 are reportedly in place, and they are well known as runners or escapers and cleaners, also referred to as impimpi (sellouts). The 28s are the top rung, characterised by violent sexual offenders who are “made in bed” and are expected to earn their position by sexually assaulting another male inmate. Literature shows that the chances of survival in the South African male prison system are slim unless inmates are a part of the Numbers gang. Membership is for life in the Numbers gang and loyalty to the gang is demanded.¹²⁴

Reports of street gangs in the province are mainly covered by the media and less so by literature. Areas such as Eldorado Park, Westbury, and Diepkloof have received high media profiling in terms of the heightened levels of gang activity and gang violence in recent years.¹²⁵

7.1.1 Causal factors associated with male gang membership or gang involvement

Family structure, lack of support, and father absence

Child-headed households are those homes where biological parents, a legal guardian, or a primary caregiver have a terminal illness or have passed away, and there are no family members who are available to provide suitable care for the children. Based on research, this results in the child having to take on caregiving roles and to support siblings.¹²⁶

123 <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/gauteng-education-to-investigate-gang-violence-in-ekurhuleni-schools-where-teachers-live-in-fear-20240219>

124 https://www.academia.edu/40706720/Gangs_in_South_Africa_the_Root_THE_ROOT_CAUSE_FOR_GANGSTERISM_IN_SOUTH_AFRICAN_A_BRIEF_ESSAY

125 Buhr, S. (2023). Eldorado Park fast becoming a version of notorious Cape Flats. Sunday World, 23rd January 2023.

SABC News. Eldorado Park and Westbury residents speak about rampant crime and gangsterism. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TL2X8heaulw>. Date accessed: 14 February 2024.

126 Pillay, J. 2016. Problematizing child-headed households: The need for children's participation in early childhood interventions. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 6(1): 1-10. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v6i1.359>

Poor parenting styles, as well as poor bonds, supervision, involvement, socialisation, and monitoring, also facilitate children's antisocial and deviant attitudes, leading to time spent in criminogenic settings.¹²⁷

A participant explained that a youth/teenager with low self-esteem caused by family circumstances can become susceptible to joining a gang. The participant explained that:

"From personal experiences, my mother and father never used to focus on me as I expected them to, no tap on the shoulder when I do good, no sign of love or affection, I never got a hug or cuddle from any of my parents [...] like when I used to come home with good results, my mother or father would just say oh okay [...] then shift the focus to something else. No praise came towards me [...], and this made me feel isolated, unloved, unappreciated, undeserving. Now, what about weaker people than me? I think this lack of love drives people to turn to gangs".¹²⁸

This statement is supported by Rodrigo, Byrne, and Rodríguez,¹²⁹ who explain that uninvolved parenting is a form of neglect that could cause youths to seek acceptance and recognition elsewhere, in this case, from gang membership. Similarly, acceptance and recognition are key social needs among vulnerable youths. Without acceptance and recognition from parents, youths will turn to groups where they can satisfy this social need.¹³⁰

Some participants were separated from their biological fathers because of separation, divorce, broken relations between parents, being born in circumstances of extra-marital affairs, and being born out of wedlock. Participants expressed feeling broken to the extent that they felt no sense of belonging and that they could not reciprocate respect as they had no one to instil discipline in them due to growing up without a father. Some participants thought that without a father, they did not have anyone to advocate for them, thereby becoming unruly at an early age due to the dynamics of the family. Due to the lack of sense of belonging, most of the participants had thus fallen into substance abuse, crime, and gangsterism to feel a sense of belonging.

Coakley notes that without a father figure, boy children grow up without the teachings and guidelines from a father figure.¹³¹

127 Clayton, N. 2019. An exploration of the psychosocial risk factors that lead to antisocial behaviour and delinquent group (gang) membership amongst a cohort of youth living in Wentworth, Durban, South Africa. Masters, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

128 Interview with former gang member, Boksburg, 22 November 2023

129 Rodrigo, M.J., Byrne, S. & Rodríguez, B. 2013. Handbook of child well-being: Theories, methods and policies in global perspective. Dordrecht: Springer Science and Business Media.

130 Van Der Westhuizen, M. 2015. Relapse prevention for chemically addicted adolescents in recovery: so which model works? *Journal of Evidence Informed Social Work*, 12(4):1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15433714.2013.858089>

131 Coakley, J 2006. e good father: Parental expectations and youth sports. *Leisure Studies*, 25(2):153-163.

With little or no mentorship from a father figure, boys may thus choose mentors from people they consider successful or, with swag, inadvertently looking up to gang members.¹³²

Poverty and the male provider role

Poverty plays a crucial role in determining high rates of crime.¹³³ South African communities experience unequal distribution of services. Several homes are not decent, with many families on waiting lists for RDP houses from the government. Service delivery challenges include inadequate access to housing, water and sanitation, food, employment, and other basic services.

With regard to the study, participants, particularly those who were inmates, explained that they resorted to crime and gangs due to poverty.

It was gathered from the focus group in Boksburg that many of the inmates struggled with stigmatisation from being associated with poverty and being judged negatively in their communities. As a result, they resorted to crime and gangsterism to change the status quo in the community.

One of the participants said the following:

*“You cannot go to bed on an empty stomach for more than two days when a friend told you that you can join their group and be able to have food”.*¹³⁴

Another one added that:

*“Who will date you when you have no proper shoes or jeans or a car? If you want that girl, join us, and we will help you get her. Once you are in, there is no going back, as most gangs pass through an initiation where they make vows of not exiting the gang crew”.*¹³⁵

The extracts above from interviews with participants illuminate that they were driven into gangs because of coming from poor backgrounds and thus attempting to escape poverty. Another participant explained that he had become a laughingstock in the school because he did not have school shoes. His classmates and schoolteachers would mock him until gang members, who were school dropouts, noticed him crying in the streets during school hours and consoled him. This is what he said:

¹³² Freeks, 2011. The role of the father as mentor in the transmission of values: A pastoral theological study

¹³³ <https://www.nrf.ac.za/youth-gang-involvement-risk-and-protective-factors/>

¹³⁴ Interview with gang member, Boksburg, 22 November 2023

¹³⁵ Interview with gang member, Boksburg, 22 November 2023

"I explained I was chased away because I don't have a complete school uniform, they told me not to cry, it's time for me to be a man, the boys took me to the shopping centre nearby, bought me a new pair of shoes, new uniform, new school bag and even gave me some cash to get food when I got home [...] to cut the long story short, that was the beginning of the doom, I gained confidence, which even became excessive, I would talk back at teachers, I would talk back at my neighbours, because every day, these good Samaritans would wait for me while I walk to school, give me cash and goodies [...] a week later, I became a drug trafficker, a month later, I became a girls trafficker to people I didn't know, then I dropped out and concentrated on making money which led me to crimes and me being incarcerated and sentenced to 129 years in prison, by then I was not even 21 years of age".¹³⁶

Another participant had the following to say:

"In townships, there are must-haves and must-have-nots. These determine who you are and what you can do. If you live in the shacks, you are characterised as poor, and no one takes you seriously, so the best is to try other avenues to leave the shacks and have a home. Thus, the most convenient route will be to be a member of a gang that will help you alleviate poverty in your household".

As such, participants had joined gangs because of their circumstances of deprivation and poverty. In addition to this, they alluded to having observed their same-age peers already in gangs and thriving, driving fancy cars, dating beautiful women, and drinking alcohol every day while they, on the other hand, had only one basic meal to eat a day.

Escaping poverty was as much for self-preservation as it was for helping families escape from poverty. Participants expressed a sense of duty to fend for their families, especially in circumstances where they came from a fatherless home and were the only male child or the eldest male sibling. A participant said:

"As a man, you cannot sit back and relax while you see that your family has needs and you can't provide. Hence, you have to phanda (hustle), make a plan".

Participants mentioned that one of the major reasons for the heightened incarceration of men was the desire for men to provide for their families and female romantic partners.

¹³⁶ Interview with gang member, Boksburg, 22 November 2023.

They expressed the belief that it was the role of the man to provide financially for their families and loved ones and that in cases where fathers were absent, male children had the obligation to step in. While participants struggled to pinpoint reasons for perceiving financial provision as an inherently masculine trait, they attributed this perception or view to dominant cultural beliefs, upbringing, and public opinion. The pressure to provide for the family was also linked to early delinquency and school dropouts.

Participants noted that in the communities they came from, young men and boys were the sole providers, and they resided with grandparents and rarely with their mothers and fathers. Many of the families were in deep poverty, relying on the older-person grant. Participants explained that such circumstances had negative results on young men and boys who resorted to joining gangs for quick money by engaging in crimes such as car hijackings, drug trafficking, house break-ins, fraudulent activities, money heists or cash-in-transit robberies, and many other crimes.¹³⁷

Low self-esteem, peer pressure and substance abuse

The literature documents that gangs provide members with a sense of belonging. Furthermore, gangs also make individuals feel important due to the culture of respect that is inculcated in gangs. This sense of belonging and respect, in the case of this study, served to boost self-worth and self-confidence. Participants mentioned during the focus group discussion that they had witnessed the material possessions of existing gang members, as well as their bravery and sense of invincibility, and wanted to partake. Furthermore, because fellow gang members were perceived as their own family, this deepened their feeling of worth and importance.¹³⁸

The findings of the study further revealed that substance abuse was another factor that had lured participants into gangs. Many of the participants had started using drugs and alcohol at secondary school, given that the use was perceived as “cool” and fashionable. Participants revealed that they felt left out or excluded if they were not part of it. One of the participants explained as follows:

*“Peer pressure might make you feel obligated to take drugs to feel like you’re part of the group and not labelled as ‘weak’ or ‘boring’. You might feel you have to agree with what your friends say to be accepted or have social value. One can find himself/herself being in a gang through loving alcohol, drugs, and perhaps not having money to pay for such products”.*¹³⁹

137 <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/stj/v3n1/07.pdf>

138 <https://www.mcmsa.org.za/why-people-get-involved-in-gangsterism/#:~:text=Gangs%20provide%20people%20with%20a,loyalty%20towards%20the%20gang%20members.>

139 Interview with former gang member, Boksburg, 22 November 2024”

The focus group revealed that it was common practice to be given free drugs at first by peers and that after a few encounters, they would lure you into a gang as a result of the dependency created for drug supplies.

Literature shows that peer pressure can involve encouraging people to participate in exploitative activities or behaviours. The power of the peer group can make people reluctant to tell others that they are being abused or exploited, especially if doing so could make them targets of humiliation, violence, or rejection.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, individuals with poor confidence levels are often targeted because they are vulnerable. They cannot stand up for themselves, given that, at that point in time, they are already down and, to some extent, powerless.¹⁴¹

With regard to participants who had joined gangs inside correctional facilities, they expressed that they felt pressure to join a gang for protection and security purposes, as well as to gain access to basic supplies of food, cigarettes, blankets, and clothes.

Glamorisation and the role of the media

The media reports that children may become involved with gangs because that is where they believe they will find protection and material satisfaction.¹⁴² The internet and social media are transforming social relations and the way in which people interact.¹⁴³ Furthermore, social media platforms are seen as tools to promote gangsterism through the glamour portrayed by gang members in terms of the cars they drive, the alcohol they drink, the clothes they wear, the cash they spend on material things, and their girlfriends on the various platforms. As a result, school-going children feel the need to be as cool as them and thus end up joining gangs. Participants explained that they viewed social media as a lucrative platform to lure young boys into gangs as they perceived young boys as gullible and wanting to fit in. Participants suggested that the perception is that every boy in the township, due to social media influences, wanted to be seen carrying an iPhone, dressed in expensive clothing labels, and driving a car at an early age.

Participants also alluded to the issue of media playing a negative role through shows or movies, particularly American movies that portray gangsterism positively when it is, in fact, the opposite.¹⁴⁴ Inside the correctional facilities, however, there was barely any glam or media, and thus, reasons provided for gang membership differed in this regard.

140 https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3052&context=isp_collection

141 <https://ojdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/jbulletin/9808/why.html>

142 <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/1573/>

143 Irwin-Rogers, K. and Pinkney, C. (2016) *Social media as a catalyst and trigger of youth violence*. London: Catch22.

144 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1461444821994490#bibr6-1461444821994490>

Protection

Participants mentioned that gangs provided them with a sense of identity, security, companionship, and belonging they never knew at home. Some participants had joined gangs after being bullied at school or in their communities so that their respective gangs could fight for them. Gangs were also joined for survival or protection from other gangs, as well as against rivals or any other person who wished to injure, kill, or cause them harm.

*“Gangs normally project an arrogant and defiant attitude in an attempt to intimidate others, especially in a public place and while in the presence of other gang members. Attitude is displayed when an impression can be made to create fear and intimidate others. This then gives a sense of protection to gang members, knowing and feeling untouchable, as the gangs portray ‘Hawks Security’, meaning you are matchless”.*¹⁴⁵

Participants explained that as a form of payment for protection and a sign of loyalty, gang members were, in some instances, expected to commit murder or assault on someone whom gang leaders assigned. In other instances, members and associates of gangs experienced sexual violence or sexual exploitation from other gang members.¹⁴⁶ Young women and girls were particularly vulnerable as they were often viewed as objects of status and power and were pressured into sexual activity with male gang members. Sexual activity was sometimes used to exercise power and control over gang members and to repay drug debts, and rape and sexual assault were used as a weapon against rival gangs.¹⁴⁷

The need to join a gang for protection was salient in correctional facilities where participants mentioned how difficult prison life could be without anyone watching your back, looking out for you, and ensuring your safety. Gangs provided inmates with a sense of shelter, shield, protection, and to some extent, comfort. While gang membership was presented to be a voluntary process, some participants pointed to prison circumstances as compelling reasons for them to join gangs, such as rampant stabbings and assaults, inadequate supply of food, toiletries, and restricted access to drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. Gangs were also rampant and domineering in the correctional centres, and participants felt they were left with no option but to join a gang.

Literature notes that leaving a gang may be difficult as gangs tend to threaten violence if someone suggests that they would like to leave. The fear of violence thereby creates cycles of coercion where the strength of the group threat keeps members trapped in gangs.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Interview with DCS official, Zondewater, 21 November 2023.

¹⁴⁶ <https://www.preventingexploitationtoolkit.org.uk/home/what-is-exploitation/what-is-vulnerability/gangs/>

¹⁴⁷ <https://safeguardinghub.co.uk/young-people-risk-gang-involvement-just-statistic/>

¹⁴⁸ https://northumberlandscb.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_ch_affected_gang_act.html

To this point, one of the participants said:

*“In prison, you have to belong to a family, that’s the gang, either 26 or 28 or rather belong to Airforce 3 and 4”.*¹⁴⁹

Another participant said:

*“For the same protection you seek, you need to pay some protection fee. The fee can be paid in cash or kind. Some pay through cigarettes, some through money, food, clothes, or sexual favours”.*¹⁵⁰

Loyalty and trust were another form of payment, to such an extent that members of gangs were expected to refer to gangs as their family. The idea was that if “you are part of us, we have to protect you, thus protecting brotherhood”.¹⁵¹ Disloyalty was shunned and punishable.

Power and status

The findings of the study revealed that gangs used violence to gain recognition, status, and power over their rivals and other gangs. Furthermore, in line with the literature, many gang members took pride in their association with gangs. They viewed it as an opportunity to validate their masculinity by gaining belonging, power, and status. Gang members may, however, not recognise their vulnerability to exploitation by other gang members or the exploitative nature of the gang activities in which they participate.¹⁵²

7.1.2 State interventions and support services

Government Initiatives and Programmes

Operation Kgutla Molao in Gauteng province

The findings of the study reveal that the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) in July 2023 launched the Operation Kgutla Molao School Safety Programme to curb violence and gangsterism in schools in the province.¹⁵³ The programme aims to address challenges of violence, sexual harassment, bullying, and the carrying of weapons and illegal substances by learners in school.

The programme incorporates an integrated approach, with emphasis on support from various law enforcement and community safety structures. Based on the

¹⁴⁹ Interview with gang member Boksburg. 22 November 2023.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with gang members Boksburg. 22 November 2023.

¹⁵¹ <https://www.mcmsa.org.za/winolveingangsterism/#:-:text=Gangs%20provide%20people%20with%20a,loyalty%20towards%20the%20gang%20members>

¹⁵² <https://safeguardinghub.co.uk/gang-involvement-spotting-those-the-signs/>

¹⁵³ <https://www.gauteng.gov.za/News/NewsDetails/%7B61c82b5a-66a1-44af-b7ab-9bda1c87e212%7D>

information available at the time of writing this report, this programme appeared to be reactive to the challenges of crime and violence in schools and in no way sought to address the socio-economic and political contexts that laid fertile ground for crime to permeate schools and communities at large. The programme (like most worldwide interventions) adopts a narrow approach that reduces gangsterism to the sole act of the commission of crime.¹⁵⁴

Furthermore, while it is a common assertion that the NAGS calls for the development of provincial strategies to address gangs, it was unclear whether a strategy was in place in Gauteng.

Department of Correctional Services (DCS)

Since 1994, South Africa has introduced reforms to transform its penitentiary system from a punitive approach to a rehabilitative system that is aimed at correcting delinquency and reintegrating offenders back into society. As part of their sentence plans, inmates are thus taken through several activities and programmes for rehabilitation. A programme on anti-gangsterism forms part of these initiatives, as well as many others on life skills, psychosocial support, and other areas.¹⁵⁵

Furthermore, findings revealed that correctional centres were guided by a manual to mitigate the challenge of gangsterism. The manual addresses several areas, including the prevention and management of gangs by DCS officials. Gangs, however, continue to thrive in the DCS, running highly organised and profitable economies. Various reasons were provided regarding factors that sustained gangs in correctional centres, some of which have already been discussed in other sections of the report, such as the need for protection and sustenance, as well as coercion and weak DCS systems. In some cases, corrupt DCS officials were reportedly working in partnership with gangs, as well as under the authority of gang leaders, as though they were subordinate members of gangs. The roles of these officials included, among others, the role of smugglers of cell phones, drugs, money, and other contraband. In some instances, officials were entrusted to run gang affairs outside of the DCS correctional centre.

Non-profit organisations (NGOs)

The findings of the study revealed that NGOs played a crucial role in assisting ex-offenders, parolees, and probationers to navigate the stigma of being ex-convicts and ex-gang members, as well as to find their feet upon release from correctional facilities. Interventions by such organisations were mainly targeted at mitigating recidivism by providing psychosocial support to beneficiaries.

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.gauteng.gov.za/News/NewsDetails/%7B61c82b5a-66a1-44af-b7ab-9bda1c87e212%7D>

¹⁵⁵ RSA, Correctional Services. <https://www.gov.za/about-government/government-system/justice-system/correctional-services>. Accessed 23 March 2024.

Several programmes were implemented to reintegrate ex-offenders into their communities and to cope with the realities of being outside correctional centres and outside the protection and operations of prison gangs.

Izwi Labantu, which was based in Johannesburg, is an example of such an organisation. The NGO went as far as assisting beneficiaries to find work and volunteering opportunities, even though it was highlighted that a criminal record made finding a job particularly difficult. The findings further revealed that the NGO ran awareness-raising programmes on the dangers of gangs and substance abuse.

Religious institutions such as churches were also cited as crucial sources of support, even though some participants were of the view that some congregants would display prejudiced attitudes against them. Churches, nonetheless, played an instrumental role in providing emotional support to ex-offenders, especially in circumstances where families had turned their backs on them.

Initiatives and programmes aimed at addressing gangsterism are not well documented and monitored. As a result, evidence regarding the effectiveness of these programmes is sparse.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, while the CGE team of researchers could not determine the precise number of initiatives by NGOs, religious institutions, and other community-based interventions in this area of work, it could be observed that attention was mainly directed to supporting ex-offenders who had been members of gangs in correctional centres. Interventions aimed at identifying and supporting men and boys at risk, on the other hand, could not be accounted for.

7.2 KwaZulu-Natal province

According to the South African Census of 2022, KwaZulu-Natal has a population of 12,423,907,¹⁵⁷ and of this figure, 5,919,217 are men.¹⁵⁸ The number of persons (five to 24 years old) attending school is 3,055,052.¹⁵⁹ There are 4,391,251 people between the ages of 15 and 34.¹⁶⁰ There are 2,853,741 households, where 2,477,155 are formal dwellings, 226,879 are traditional dwellings, and 141,674 are informal dwellings.¹⁶¹ Stats SA outlines 8,033 as “other” dwellings.¹⁶² According to the census, only 1,679,677 households have flush toilets and 52,842 have no toilets,¹⁶³ 2,053,020 use electricity for cooking, 586,602 use gas, and 208,158 use other methods.¹⁶⁴

156 Viltoft, C. D. (2022). Deconstructing Gangsterism in South Africa: Uncovering the Need for Gender-Sensitive Policies, *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 14(3).

157 Statistics South Africa, Census 2022.

158 Statistics South Africa, *Provinces at a Glance*, Census 2022. https://census.statssa.gov.za/assets/documents/2022/Provinces_at_a_Glance.pdf

159 Ibid.

160 Ibid.

161 Ibid.

162 Ibid.

163 Statistics South Africa, Census 2022.

164 Ibid.

The province is the third smallest by land size and yet is the second largest contributor to the GDP, and finance, real estate and business services are the largest sectoral contributors to the economy. According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey Quarter 4 of 2023, South Africa has an unemployment rate of 32,1%, while KwaZulu-Natal has an unemployment rate of 29.5%.¹⁶⁵ The country's expanded unemployment rate is 41,1%, while KwaZulu-Natal's rate is 43.4%.¹⁶⁶

Between 1990 and 1994, close to 14,000 people were killed during the country's transition to democracy, and much of the violence took place in KwaZulu-Natal. Illicit firearms continue to circulate even after the onset of democracy, and this has contributed greatly to particularly violent crime events. Between 2021/2022 and 2022/2023, KwaZulu-Natal saw an increase of 13.2% in illegal possession of firearms and ammunition.¹⁶⁷ According to SAPS, KwaZulu-Natal ranks third in the country regarding contact crimes (highest ranking of assault with the intent to inflict grievous bodily harm) and sexual offences (second highest ranking of rape) and second in TRIO crimes (carjacking, robbery at residential premises, robbery at non-residential premises).¹⁶⁸ KwaZulu-Natal has seen a consistent increase in the murder rate from 2013 to 2023 and an overall increase over the same period in the rate of sexual offences, attempted murder, common assault, common robbery, and robbery with aggravating circumstances.¹⁶⁹

While the level of gangsterism is not to the same degree in KwaZulu-Natal as it is in the Western Cape, it is clear that the levels of crime over a long period are anchored by a history that cannot be divorced from current realities. Further to this, the historical significance of hostels, prison gangs, and sectoral organisations such as taxis, contribute to the organised and systematised violence within the province. One of the participants of this study aptly underscores the marriage between prison, physical strength, bodily bruteness and inner, social, and politicised influence and power. He said the following:

"You see, when it comes to prison, it does not work with power. It does not operate by how tall you are [...] Whether you are built tough and have big muscles. I will slap you [...] So what works here is guts [...] See what works in prison, it's guts. If you have guts [...] You're done, because in jail, you need guts and not just guts to talk. You see, if you are not one with guts and not into gangsterism, you die".¹⁷⁰

165 Statistics South Africa, Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Q4 2023. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02112ndQuarter2023.pdf>

166 Ibid.

167 South African Police Services, Annual Crime Statistics 2023.

168 Ibid.

169 Ibid.

170 Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 14 November 2023.

7.2.1 Causal factors associated with male gang membership or gang involvement

Family structure and father absence

Participants in the study varied in their experiences of family life and structure in relation to criminal activity and participation in gang activity in particular. One former gang member highlighted that he came from a good family that assisted him through his schooling.¹⁷¹ It was his own doing that led him to behave poorly, which resulted in his involvement in criminal activity. He mentioned that while he was not part of a gang outside the correctional environment prior to incarceration, it was the correctional environment that led to his involvement in gang activity.

Another participant highlighted that it was the anger issues he developed due to his home situation that fuelled his criminal activity.¹⁷² When he was born, he outlined, his father denied paternity and that made him hate men. He recalled a traumatic event that took place during his childhood, which brought about his anger and fuelled his hatred for men. The participant said:

*“This thing made me hate men. What has driven me to crime is this very anger that I have”.*¹⁷³

For some participants, the father’s absence also marked the absence of positive role models, particularly in relation to male figures who would guide them on the path to manhood. Father involvement was often deemed a necessary component in producing ‘good men’ in society. Intertwined with this was the subject of the glamourisation of gangs and the integral role of the media in reproducing this phenomenon. Below is what one of the participants said:

*“Subtly, the bling bling becomes “I also want bling bling” as young as I am”.*¹⁷⁴

The glamourisation of criminal activity, luxury goods, and the accompanying lifestyle is evident in the statement above. Young people in communities see their older counterparts heralded as the heroes of their communities and the champions in their environment, which also feeds into their ambitions. The role models in the communities, being gang members, illustrate a positive relationship between crime or gang activity and access to resources and power. This relationship is echoed in the below statement by a DCS official referring to the influence and power that the media has on realities for young men and boys in South Africa:

171 Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 15 November 2023.

172 Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 15 November 2023.

173 Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 15 November 2023.

174 Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 13 November 2023.

*“Your TV programmes, your hijack programs, your Western movies – that is a subtle seed that has been planted – “I also want to be like him”. If drugs and gangsterism bring the joy of material things, then I also want to join”.*¹⁷⁵

Low socio-economic status and poverty

The role of finances cannot be understated as a reason why men and boys join gangs, remain in gangs, and return to gangs. One participant highlighted this reason from his childhood:

“I was having a background that was so poor. They were not even able to buy me shoes. If I can tell you, my first school shoes, I bought it myself – the first school shoes. Before that, I had just been walking barefoot to school. By then, I got them another way which was not crime [...] I was working in the gardens”.¹⁷⁶

South Africa is one of the countries with high levels of poverty and inequality. This utterance by the participant underscores the difficult start to life that is experienced by millions of people in the country. The above participant went on to discuss how working in the gardens exposed him to a different socioeconomic reality where he began stealing from his employer. It expanded to neighbours and ultimately led to his arrest after committing murder and armed robbery, amongst other crimes. Over time, he gained experience and expertise in criminality and did this with his friends until it escalated. What started as working to earn an income became stealing out of necessity and violent crime, highlighting the influence that poverty can have on involvement with gangs.

Former gang members also highlighted the consistency of meals, water, availability of shelter, schooling, and healthcare as drivers that contributed to reoffending to regain access to those resources. The DCS is compelled by legislation to ensure that offenders are housed under humane conditions with the requisite access to resources and their rights. One former gang member highlighted the socioeconomic challenges that he faced upon his release from the correctional centre, which bridges the burden between himself and his support system:

“Since I came out, no one is employed at home – even my father, my sister, nieces, and nephews – no one can help them. Only the social grant is helping the kids – now including me. I am coming out to put the pressure on them. How can I get the money? They were dividing the bread amongst themselves, and there were four of them. Now, including me, they must divide again. It's difficult but I must tell yourself, if I don't want to come back to square one in prison, I must make a plan”.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 13 November 2023.

¹⁷⁶ Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 14 November 2023.

¹⁷⁷ Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 14 November 2023.

The extract above illustrates the cycle of poverty in which the participant felt entrapped. With a criminal record, the situation for the participant worsened as prospects of finding work were miniscule. One of the factors that a former gang member who did his degree in the correctional centre highlighted was the poor educational outcomes before incarceration and the lack of relevant skills after release.¹⁷⁸ He highlighted that he was over 35 years old when he was released, did not have a skill he could use for employment or entrepreneurship, and had a criminal record. While he indicated that he had not participated in gang-related activities since his release, he did articulate that it was challenging not to go back to a familiar environment where he could guarantee income for his family.

Community violence

KwaZulu-Natal has a specific history around political violence and taxi violence that continues to find relevance and ongoing prominence in the country. Associated with this is the use of izinkabi (hitmen). Participants in the study highlighted formations of associates working together for political gain or taxi relations as gang related. It was noted that izinkabi are highly skilled individuals who had been trained by the State and never recruited for government work. The skill had been utilised elsewhere through a hired grouping used to execute their duties.

The existence of izinkabi speaks to the challenge of uncontrolled and uncontained illegal firearms in the country that are accessible and untraceable, further enhancing the precariousness of the activities in which the participants are involved.

Belonging and the provider role

The notion of men as providers is deeply rooted in the culture of the men who participated in this study. During discussions, it often went without saying or was assumed throughout the focus group discussion that the inevitable role of a man is to provide. It was instilled during childhood through ideas and was lived too. A former gang member reflected on the issue of providing during his childhood:

*“At the age of between five to ten years – if I didn’t come with anything at that age, I won’t eat. Its either I would steal or ask so that I can eat. That thing was not for me, it was for everyone, and I would get the least”.*¹⁷⁹

The above statement underscores the consciousness of a boy’s responsibility to provide. Whether he is a child as young as five to ten years old or an adult who had been imprisoned and gang affiliated at 50, provision transcended age and circumstances. Furthermore, the provision did not necessarily only centre on the self as it was important that it extended to the collective.

¹⁷⁸ Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 15 November 2023.

¹⁷⁹ Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 14 November 2023.

What was gotten was done through any means, which contributed to the pressures that made him participate in criminality and later in gang activity. The participant also underscores a family situation that reflects isolation and the possible lack of supervision.

Another participant reflected on isolation and belonging. He outlined that reoffending and returning to the correctional centre sometimes feels inevitable.¹⁸⁰ The challenges faced on the outside upon release seemed to serve as an encouragement for one to go back to a familiar place where crime was the only way out. In other words, life after release was so challenging, compounded by isolation, that reoffending meant going back to a community where they felt like they belonged, with a sense of brotherhood, order, and access to social relationships.

Protection

The prison gang system is well established and entrenched in various centres across the country, including those in KwaZulu-Natal. It is important to keep this in mind when understanding the need for protection within the correctional centres. A correctional centre can be described as a society with unique norms and standards that are not necessarily governed by the rules of the official authorities of the centre. As one of the most violent countries in the world, South African correctional centres house hardcore criminals who have committed heinous crimes, forming their own societies within the centre. Offenders were governed by the system of gangs even though they were under the custody of the DCS. One participant had the following to say:

*“Some of them join just for their own safety because, you see, you have got nowhere to go. You see, when you are here, when we have locked the cells, you see to finish there. Once we locked the cells and you are left inside, you must see how you survive as an offender, as a male offender inside. So, they join the gang”.*¹⁸¹

One participant gave an example that as a child, you live under your parent’s roof, and in the correctional centres’ physical structure, you call it a home. When others leave for the day’s activities, such as work, you stay home to cook, clean, and wash, among other things. Those are your activities. The dwelling is the parents’, but the doing is your own. The analogy is to say that it is the structure of the DCS, and the officials are the custodians of the physical structure – the social life is that of offenders, and they run the prison in line with their social world within the centre. It is their doing that makes the centre what it is, rather than the officials.

¹⁸⁰ Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 15 November 2023.

¹⁸¹ Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 13 November 2023.

The participant also underscores and illustrates that it is through the gang system that order is maintained. He went as far as calling it discipline. The harmony or lack thereof was thus due to the authorities within the gang system rather than the State system through DCS.

Gang involvement was also attributed to the need for protection from other gangs, the need to belong, and access to food, alcohol, and drugs, but mainly for survival. Abstinence from gangs usually meant being susceptible to abuse, food deprivation, sexual exploitation (although some of the exploitation occurred within the gang ranks), and lack of access to contraband such as weapons, drugs, and alcohol.

Power and status

The persistence of prison gangs can be attributed to various factors, such as the protection provided. Another pertinent factor is the power that one yields within the group and the community within the correctional centre at large. One official puts it aptly by indicating that:

*“But initially, he had joined for his own protection. Then some of them are there to join the gangs in order to harass others and to demand things from others – they must phone their families to send money or vouchers, etc., intimidate them”.*¹⁸²

The reality, echoed by other participants, is that for many offenders, support through financial input and visitation dwindled after sentencing. The limited legal or illegal resources that were needed within the correctional centre were scarce. The resources included toiletries, drugs, cell phones, groceries, and other items. These are commodities, and having access to them is a powerful tool that yields power and control. Through affiliation with a gang within the system, access to such resources is available or limited, regardless of whether the goods belonged to you or not.

In the prison gang, some initiation processes include violent behaviour such as stabbing officials or other offenders. Unofficially, DCS officials are said to brutally beat offenders, and the offender should not display pain. This hiding of pain is key to the process as it indicates a level of power, endurance, and commitment through one’s manhood. In other words, offenders should endure beating as a sign of strength, courage, and dedication to the cause (becoming worthy of and being worthy of being seen as a man and forming part of a gang). Participants said the following:

¹⁸² Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 13 November 2023.

*“They must stab an offender, or official, or offender in front of the official so that you can hit him, and he doesn’t cry to show that he’s a man, masculine”.*¹⁸³

*“The reason we stab another inmate in front of the official is so that he can beat us and that we don’t cry or complain so that we may show that we are real men”.*¹⁸⁴

Both officials and offenders confirmed this during data collection. These horrendous acts must be done in front of officials so as to receive a beating and confirmation of their membership to a gang or increase their rank through the gang. The reward, a participant said, is that uphethenaye (he is in charge too). The participant further outlines that:

*“After he has done that, he is safe now. No one can trouble him in jail after”.*¹⁸⁵

Furthermore, one participant explained that each centre had people from various parts of the country who claimed notoriety from wherever they came. The display of masculinity through violence was often a strategy employed by the men within the correctional centre to ascertain who indeed yields the power and consequently has the control over resources. One offender put it this way:

*“You see, I’m from Kwamashu, someone is from Umlazi, someone is from Lamont. He says he is a hero in Lamont, someone is saying I’m a hero in Kwamashu, someone says I’m a hero from Umlazi, so if there’s heroes coming together, there will nothing that will happen that is going to be right, So it needs someone to do something to be a hero for someone. You see that in order for everything [...] So everything is going to be in another disciplinary way. So someone is being a commander of someone and someone is a commander of someone like”.*¹⁸⁶

The above statement underscores the use of violence as a flex of masculinity to garner power. In the correctional centre, another participant indicated that violence was also used to curb boredom.

183 Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 13 November 2023.

184 Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 14 November 2023.

185 Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 13 November 2023.

186 Participant, Focus Group Discussion, 14 November 2023.

7.2.2 Interventions and support services

Government initiatives and programmes

One former gang member mentioned that, in his view, there was no strategy to combat gangs. He highlighted that the government's strategy of mass incarceration was not working. The bringing together of idle men who had committed heinous crimes to spend long periods together did not assist in addressing the issues of gangsterism. He further highlighted that the programmes that were available to the offenders did not have the appropriate teaching and learning strategies targeted at the offenders within the centre. Another former gang member highlighted that participation in prison gangs did not afford them the opportunity to make changes while still in the correctional centre, particularly during long sentences. Participation resulted in despondency and frustration with the correctional facility and limited the scope of imagining a different future.

The DCS's Gang Combatting Strategy of 2021 has the following objectives:

1. To maintain a secure and safe environment that is conducive to the rehabilitation of inmates and the attendance of remand detainees in court processes
2. To prevent and reduce the impact of disruptive groups (e.g. gangs) on the management of correctional centres
3. To enable inter-sectoral co-operation (i.e. government and civil society) to promote correctional centre and community safety
4. To develop and build knowledge about gangs and effective responses to combatting gangsterism and to inform, review and monitor/improve these strategies
5. To develop programmes aimed at preventing and combatting gangsterism
6. To combat gangs/gang activities of parolees and probationers in the community correction system.

The strategy also outlines some causes of gang formations, which include high levels of inequality and unemployment, socio-economic challenges, family dis-functionalism, need for a sense of belonging, and safety and frustration with rehabilitation efforts. The strategy acknowledges the problem of gangsterism within correctional centres that contributes to gang formation outside the centres. Participants echoed this point by highlighting the exchange of information, resources, and personnel between the traditional prison gangs and the outside street gangs. This exchange system compounded the problem and worsened the success of efforts towards combating gangsterism.

Despite the existence of this strategy, a concerted approach to tackling men's participation in gangs that thoroughly engages the push and pull factors of gang involvement was still necessary, as gangs were persistently able to grow their membership and maintain their existence.

Non-governmental organisations

Support groups such as non-governmental organisations assisted through psychosocial support or access to employment opportunities. In one focus group discussion, it was revealed that members of the NGO provided a community to a former gang member who had recently exited the correctional facility. The participant expressed confusion, fear, and stress as emotions he was going through since his release and reported his emotions in his parole report. The other men within the focus group discussion highlighted that they were there to assist him and give him the necessary support to transition from the correctional centre and gang activity to a life he envisioned for himself upon release. The support and understanding of a new brotherhood on the same journey is essential for assisting with turning over a new leaf. The importance of this brotherhood cannot be understated.

Social groups

After exiting the correctional centre on parole, participants (both gang members and officials) highlight the importance of a solid support system to ensure that the transition back into the outside community is as smooth as possible. The support system forms the anchor of the transition and contributes greatly to one's success in the new environment in which one finds themselves. Research on gang disengagement in South Africa also highlights meaningful support as a key contributing factor to successful disengagement.¹⁸⁷

Several participants who had been in the correctional centres for over ten years indicated the difficulty that came with coming out of the centre to the reality that the bulk of their family members had passed away. One participant who had just recently been released on parole a few weeks prior to the focus group discussion indicated that he had lost his entire family apart from his sister. She was the only person he could be released to, and the role of the carer was upon her. He highlighted that it had been challenging due to the limited movement on parole, which made it difficult to find work – over and above that, he had not acquired an education or skill and now had a criminal record. He noted that the psychological and emotional difficulty of being outside without adequate and appropriate support made him consider going back into criminality.

¹⁸⁷ Kelly, J. F., & Ward, C. L. (2020). Narratives of gang disengagement among former gang members in South Africa. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 47(11), 1509-1528.

Participants across the focus group discussions highlighted that when one is released on parole, they are brought to the community corrections office, booked, given their parole reporting paperwork, and sent on their way. There is no further support, neither social nor psychological, to assist in the transition back to the broader society. One participant who was visibly distressed and emotional highlighted the grief, trauma, confusion, and lack of support that came with being outside and feared that would be a contributing factor to returning to criminality. These feelings were compounded by unemployment and persistent poverty.

Participants also mentioned the importance of a religious grounding that assisted in their transitions from correctional centres and gangs. Many attributed their success after life in a gang to higher powers that made it possible for them to move through that period in their lives. Moreover, the community that was available to them through religious groupings assisted greatly in their transition. Sometimes, people in these groups assisted with employment opportunities or had connections with others who had the opportunities.

Interestingly, one participant highlighted that the ward councillor in his area had been an advocate for his transition and provided the necessary support or connections to assist him in moving out of criminality and gang activities. It was the support that he received through the political clout of his councillor in his community that assisted in reducing the stigma he faced after his release from the correctional centre and reintegration back into his community.

7.3 Western Cape province

According to Stats SA,¹⁸⁸ as of 2023, the Western Cape province officially became the third largest province in South Africa with a population of 7,4 million, moving from fifth spot in 1996. Furthermore, the population of the Western Cape province comprises 49.4% men and 50.6% women.¹⁸⁹ From the age group 50 years and older, the proportion of women is significantly higher than men.¹⁹⁰ The Western Cape has an age dependency of 45.2%. In addition, 57% of the population is under 35 years of age.¹⁹¹ About two-thirds of the population of the Western Cape province live in the metropolitan area of Cape Town, which is also the provincial capital.¹⁹² The Western Cape province racial demographics show that Coloured people make up the majority (42%), Black people (39%), White people (16%), and Indian or Asian people (1%).¹⁹³

188 Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2023. Mbalo brief. Retrieved from <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=16738#:~:text=White%20Western%20Cape%20officially%20became.population%20at%208%2C2%25>

189 Western Cape Government Provincial Data Office, 2023. *Measuring Results using Key indicators*. Retrieved at https://www.westerncape.gov.za/sites/www.westerncape.gov.za/files/measuring_results_using_key_outcome_indicators_2023.pdf

190 Ibid.

191 Ibid.

192 Ibid.

193 Ibid.

The most common languages spoken in the Western Cape province are Afrikaans (41%), IsiXhosa (31%), and English (22%).¹⁹⁴

According to the Western Cape provincial economic review, unemployment in the Western Cape remains a significant challenge despite the province faring better, with a relatively lower unemployment rate at 25,2% than the national average in South Africa at 34.5%.¹⁹⁵ Unemployment is a growing crisis which contributes towards the long-term trend of rising income inequality and crime.

Existing literature points out that, historically, the roots of gang activity in the Western Cape and, in particular, in the vast urban ghetto that is the Cape Flats is due to the forced removals which occurred during the apartheid era.¹⁹⁶ The forced removals meant that areas that were previously occupied by the majority Coloured population were now occupied by White people. The Coloured population was forcefully removed from areas such as Lower Claremont, Windermere, Newlands, Plumstead, Simon's Town, Tramway Road, and District Six, resulting in the fragmentation of extended families and family networks and dissolving the social glue which existed amongst the communities before the removals.¹⁹⁷

Scholars¹⁹⁸ who have studied gangsterism in South Africa, and in particular trends under gangsterism in the Western Cape, point to four key factors about gangs and gangsterism in the Western Cape province.

Firstly, the scholars point out "that while not necessarily particularly organised at street level, gangs are inherently affiliated with organised crime in the country and beyond the country's borders and are highly dependent on the illicit drug trade".²⁰⁸ Street gangs operate mostly outside of prison, while there are prison gangs (that include the prison number gangs 26s, 27s, 28s) that simultaneously operate inside and outside prisons.¹⁹⁹

Secondly, the scholars point out that gangs in the Western Cape are largely structured around ethnic heritage due to demographic segregation during apartheid. These spatial inequalities make some areas, like the Cape Flats areas, more prone to gangsterism.²⁰⁰

194 Ibid.

195 Western Cape Government Provincial Treasury Provincial Economic Review and Outlook 2022/2023. Retrieved at <https://www.westerncape.gov.za/provincial-treasury/sites/provincial-treasury.westerncape.gov.za/files/atoms/files/2022%20PERO%20Final%20for%20WEB.pdf>

196 Bowers Du Toit, N.F., 2014, 'Gangsterism on the Cape Flats: A challenge to "engage the powers"', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70(3), Art. #2727, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.41>

197 Ibid.

198 Vilttoft, C. D. (2022), *Deconstructing Gangsterism in South Africa: Uncovering the Need for Gender-Sensitive Policies*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v14.i3.7985>. p. 8.

199 Ibid.

200 Ibid.

Factors which include social disorganisation provide optimal conditions for informal (or vigilante) justice and service provision controlled by gangs because many lack basic needs.²⁰¹ So essentially, because of a lack of proper service delivery provision, gangs are able to take up this space and operate in it, providing some service delivery on their own terms in these neglected communities.

Thirdly, gangs provide a form of unregulated security in certain areas, even though this security often relates to organised violence and insecurities for others.²⁰²

Fourthly, gangs become an intrinsic part of the communities they live in through the enactment of their various roles as children, parents, siblings, or friends. By doing so, they become key components of the social fabric of the community.²⁰³ Without realising it, the community sees the gang members as role models. However, the gangs' nefarious activities have a negative effect, mainly on the youth, as they see these gangs as their role models when they should not be seen this way.²⁰⁴ The Western Cape province seems to carry the tag 'Gang Capital of South Africa', with most studies around gangsterism in South Africa focusing on the Western Cape. The media also reports regularly on gang activities in the Western Cape in comparison to other provinces in South Africa.

7.3.1 Causal factors associated with male gang membership or gang involvement

Family structure and father absence

From the findings in the Western Cape province, it was clear from the first focus group discussion conducted with former gang members that the issue of the father absence was one of the main factors that contributed to gang involvement. Participants alluded to a void that they felt from not being raised by their fathers and indicated that they did not get the necessary love and support from home while growing up. They believed love and supported existed in a gang. One of the participants in the focus group discussion pointed to the following about family structure and father absence:

“So ja, I grew up also without a dad or with a mom, and a granny that only took me to church, but they never explained why I'm going to church. So I just was in church, but I didn't have a [relationship?] with what God says, which is the first thing. The second thing, dad was never involved. Then I went to the Ghettos eventually and I went to the boss I told him, listen, I want to be part of your gang, but I take you as my dad, man, because I don't have a dad [...] I will do the work that is required of me.”

201 Ibid.

202 Ibid.

203 Ibid.

204 Ibid.

And he said, okay fine, that is cool as long as you're going to be here and do what you need to do. So I kept around about more than 5,000 mandrax tablets by me. I had more than 40 to 50 guns by my house. And that was my work. And after that, I got promoted and promoted until the time I actually sold the drugs on a big scale. And I was part of the street gang for 12 years of my life".²⁰⁵

Scholars²⁰⁶ argue that theories from the field of criminology, such as the 'theory of cultural transmission', point to 'socially disorganised neighbourhoods' in poor inner-city areas like the Cape Flats, whereby gangs penetrate these areas and provide a social support system to these communities. The issue of socially disorganised communities also laid fertile ground for the formation of gangs, as social institutions besides the family, such as schools and churches, failed to provide adequate support for young people.²⁰⁷

Glamorisation

A participant of the study who was raised by his grandmother shared that for him, his entrance into gang activities was at school.²⁰⁸ He felt pressured to look like the 'cool kids' in his school and also pointed to being inspired to join a gang by a famous gang kingpin in his community. Specifically regarding this, the participant said the following:

"Obviously, when you come in high school, is where you can make decisions. And I then made the decision I want to impress my gang friends that have money, that come with guns to school. So I just hang out with the cool guys. But there is where I got this imagination of becoming a very famous high risk – there was a famous high-risk guy who was shot dead. His name was Glen Khan, he was the first they shot dead of PAGAD. And I actually went to Mitchells Plain. My name is Glen. So there was breaking news, there was like, PAGAD shot Glen Khan dead, the first. And I actually went to Mitchells Plain just to be there, for about a day or two when that I realised, hey, this is fun. And then I came home, and then because of that experience there, I thought, okay, let's see which gang I can join in Hanover Park. I went to the Americans first. I thought nah, I live in the ghettos. I thought, nah, I'm not going to work if I go to the Americans, I will die easily. Then I went to the ghettos eventually and I went to the boss I told him, listen, I want to be part of your gang".²⁰⁹

205 Focus group discussion with former gang member Western Cape, 8 November 2023.

206 Ibid.

207 Ibid.

208 Focus group discussion former gang member Western Cape, 8 November 2023.

209 Ibid.

Another participant interviewed pointed out the following with regard to glamorisation as an attraction to join a gang:

*“Now you see the gang members wearing their Buffalos, there are cars and VR6s, and they are attractive things. You see, they eat at night, every night, 30 guys sitting like this, 30 to 40 guys having a massive plate of food. I’m like you, I must be here, I must be here, you know, and that was really this attraction”.*²¹⁰

The issue of gang glamorisation is often covered in literature in relation to the role played by the media, particularly through Hollywood films and television dramas.²¹¹ However, in the case of this study, glamorisation occurred mainly through the glorification of gangs in their own communities. In such instances, young men and boys were attracted to gangs by the power and status which was accorded to the gang leaders and other gang members in general.²¹² Identity, status, and power were thus factors identified that influence gang membership.

Poor service delivery, low socio-economic status, and poverty

The themes of poor service delivery, low socio-economic status, and poverty were raised too often by the participants and subject experts interviewed for the study. In the focus group discussions, participants referenced the lack of recreational activities in their communities and schools, coupled with inadequate employment opportunities, as factors that led young men and boys to gangs. Gang membership was seen as an opportunity to provide for families and self-preservation. One of the participants said:

*“Ja, most definitely. We take a lot of young people. We take older people. We take people that is unemployed, people that don’t have direction. However, like I said poverty plays a huge role. So people don’t even have taxi fare to go to a place. People doesn’t have even money to buy them a chocolate, a packet of chips just to go explore. So what I do? I have people that is part of an organisation, then we make it as cheap as possible. Then I go to the City of Cape Town, I tell them, I’m going to take 50 kids and I’m taking them on an excursion. Then they will give me Energades or give them chips, they will give me a nice packet, then I can distribute that”.*²¹³

With regard to the subject experts, one of them mentioned that poverty was a major factor influencing young men and boys to join gangs. He said the following:

210 Focus group discussion with former gang member, Western Cape, 8 November 2023.

211 Vittori, J. (2007). The gang’s all here: The globalization of gang activity. *Journal of Gang Research*, 14(3): 1-34.

212 Ibid.

213 Focus group discussion with former Gang Member, Western Cape, 8 November 2023.

*“Poverty is also quite a striking and a dominating feature as well. You know, gangsters or gangs are also some sort of form of economic income [...] You know, they resort to crime because in that way they can make a living. They can sell drugs. They can rob somebody or, you know, formulate a way that they can bring in income for themselves because of, you know, lack of employment, which is an overwhelming issue”.*²¹⁴

Authors on this subject argue that the economics of poverty and power are at the heart of the development of organised criminal gangs in the Western Cape, as Coloured communities remain socio-economically vulnerable and often powerless in the post-apartheid era.²¹⁵ Furthermore, the same authors argue that “the ‘high levels of unemployment and poverty amongst township families have created the opportunity for gangs to exploit the vulnerable and unemployed”.²¹⁶

As such, poverty and lack of opportunities create pathways for gang membership among men and boys.

Race, identity, and belonging

Gangs in the Western Cape are often linked to the Coloured communities, even though they do affect men and boys from other racial and ethnic groups both in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. Some participants felt that in the specific case of the Western Cape, Coloured people were mainly affected by gangsterism due to their communities being marginalised.

One of the subject experts had the following to say:

“On race, basically, there is a sustained theorisation of Black and Coloured men being violent and unruly and that’s a sustained narrative [...] through colonialism and apartheid [...] What do you think the impact of or how do you think that that shows up, rights currently in democracy? How are those narratives being sustained in the face of the so-called something new post-democracy era? How are those narratives being sustained all broken down?”.

The subject expert continued to say:

“I’m not saying that’s not wrong [...] but I’m saying that we also just need to somewhere contextualise Black men and masculinities to say that there is a deep, long history of Black men [...] Black men being victims of colonialism and apartheid, and as a result, that way of being

214 Subject Expert, personal communication, 25 October 2023.

215 Bowers Du Toit, N.F., 2014, ‘Gangsterism on the Cape Flats: A challenge to “engage the powers”’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70(3), Art. #2727, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2727>

216 Ibid. p. 3.

*gendered during colonialism and an appetite has been passed on intergenerationally as a way of being men [...] as a way of being a man [...] for me, that contextualisation is really important”.*²¹⁷

These sentiments are supported by literature. In one case study, it was uncovered that young men talked about the wide-ranging social and cultural marginalisation they had experienced during their formative years which, in addition to the legacy of racial oppression and economic exploitation in the marginalised communities, led them towards gangsterism.²¹⁸ Furthermore, gang membership was also seen as a means of gaining a sense of status and identity.²¹⁹

On the same subject, a DCS official alluded to issues of identity and the subculture created by gangs to formulate an identity. He pointed out the following:

*“Gangs hang on the belief of their role models, which make them difficult to change behaviour. Prison gangs are different from other gangs, in the sense that they are an organisation that operates within the prison system, consisting of a restricted group of inmates who have established a code of conduct [...]As explained earlier, the prison sub-culture is developed primarily to adapt to the circumstances within the facilities. Inmates within the prison environment create value systems and engage in behaviours designed to cope with their constrained existence”.*²²⁰

The sentiments outlined by the DCS official here have resonance in literature, which reveals that newcomers typically feel more pressure to assimilate into the group and its culture and to alter their behaviours and communication patterns so as to conform to those of the group.²²¹ In other words, they must prove their loyalty to the group and align with its code of honour and adapt to the subculture, as alluded to by the DCS official interviewed.²²²

With regard to the sense of belonging created by gangs in general, gangs also fill a void by offering, particularly to adolescents, a much-needed sense of belonging, and because of their vulnerable age, youth are especially vulnerable to the appeal of what gangs have to offer which includes a peer group of which they can be a part, a clear personal and social identity, increased autonomy from parents or guardians, a “path to manhood”, and the means by which to improve their social status.²²³ “For at-risk young boys, friendship and brotherhood

217 Subject Expert, personal communication, 25 October 2023.

218 Ross Deuchar & Robert D. Weide (2019) Journeys in Gang Masculinity: Insights from International Case Studies of Interventions, *Deviant Behavior*, 40: 7, 851-865. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2018.1443761>

219 Ibid.

220 DCS official, written communication, 17 November 2023.

221 Ibid.

222 Ibid.

223 Ibid.

can be far more important than others and their own safety”.²²⁴ Additionally, “even if people recognise and understand the risks and dangers associated with joining a gang, the rewards they earn from getting involved in the family-like culture and protection, as well as acquisition of status and power, outweigh the claimed harmful effects”.²²⁵ Furthermore, by referring to each other as “brothers” and other familial roles, this signals a commitment to protecting each other, with their gang identity being reinforced through gang apparel, gang logos, gang signs, and the activities in which they participate.²²⁶ It was the need for this sense of belonging, as revealed by the findings of this study that young men and boys joined gangs.

Provider role

One of the subject experts explained that gender dynamics and the societal pressure exerted on young Black and Coloured boys pulled them into joining gangs. This point was expressed in the following way:

*“For me, what I realised is that as you mentioned, you know, as a young boy, as a young man, particularly as a Black boy or even a Coloured young man, there is an unsaid expectation that when you turn a certain age, you have to provide. This is just the communal expectation. This is just a societal expectation, right? That a young boy of a particular race, when they turn a certain age, they have to take certain steps within the family economically[...] And so these are these pressures that we pose on young men without even realising. For example, look at the custom that men are expected to go to the bush at the age of 18. How are we expecting a young 18-year-old boy to be a man? Taking on the responsibilities of a young man, is that a communal expectation? There’s a societal expectation which is unrealistic. Do you know what job an 18-year-old can take on? You know, in order for them to provide [...] And so I think what we also don’t realise as society is that these definitions of masculinities, these definitions of what a young man is, are unrealistic, they pose a certain pressure on young Black men [...] We set up these terms and masculinity as men and these definitions that a man is a person who provides, a man is the head of the household, but how can an 18-year-old do that? And so for me, one of the things that we really need to look at or deconstruct or revisit and revise is the definitions of masculinities, the definitions of manhood, the definitions of being a man”.*²²⁷

224 Ibid. p.149

225 Ibid. p.149.

226 Ibid.

227 Subject Expert, personal communication, October 25, 2023.

The subject expert captures some of the complexities of society and gendered roles, which may lead to unintended consequences such as gangsterism. Former gang members similarly alluded to the entrenchment of the male provider role as a key driving factor towards gang involvement, particularly in contexts of poverty, unemployment, substance abuse in the family, child-headed households, and inadequate schooling facilities/education.

Also, with regard to the provider role, one of the former gang members in the focus group discussion pointed out the following:

*“So once that parental guidance isn't there, for example, there is a high-risk gangster who knows my family. Knows what's happening in my household. Knows that my father is the protector. My father is the provider. My father is the guideline. My father is the preacher. And the father is taken away, now that's a high risk, that's vulnerable, that has no vision, that has no dream in his life. He comes in and he fills and plays that father figure role for me. Who am I as a child that's powerless over the situation? I fall into that trap, but then if my father had to be there, my father could have played his protector role”.*²²⁸

The former gang member points to how gangs take advantage of the void sometimes left by broken-down families for whatever reason, and they come in and fill this void. The earlier literature also found that gangs become an integral part of the social fabric in their communities and are seen as role models.²²⁹

Protection, power, and status

The findings show that elements of protection, power, and status feed into the persistent challenge of gangsterism and work to further attract more men and boys to join gangs. One of the key informants of the study revealed that gangs compete for resources, as well as the tiers of power and status that gangs command. The following was said in this regard:

“While gangsterism continues gaining momentum in correctional facilities, they become a formidable force over the years [...] Different prison gangs in our facilities are the well-known numbers gang, the 26s, 27s and 28s. In the Northern Cape, Gauteng, Limpopo, you find the Big Five, Royal Airforce 3 and the Royal Airforce 4 gangs [...] In the context of South African correctional facilities, these gangs compete for scarce resources, including the continuous recruitment of other inmates.

²²⁸ Focus group discussion with Former Gang Member Western Cape, 8 November 2023.

²²⁹ Viltoft, C. D. (2022). Deconstructing Gangsterism in South Africa: Uncovering the Need for Gender-Sensitive Policies. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v14.i3.7985>, p. 8.

*The gang leaders use a combination of persuasion and force to enforce their dominance over gang members and to exert control over the prison environment [...] My personal opinion is that gangs expand and evolve in a worrisome pace, while DCS is dragging their feet to combat or manage gangs in correctional facilities”.*²³⁰

In relation to the issues of protection, power, and status, one of the participants said the following:

*“In reformatory, I get there, I belong to a reformatory gang, Cape Town Scorpions. So in my whole mind, I must be in a prison gang to push my power out, you understand? That was my vision. I must be in a prison gang to push my power out. And in that time then I'm mos, that prison number I got also I can say something because I'm mos, Captain of the Scorpions”.*²³¹

The former gang member was referring to the power and status he received from being a gang member and how this stroked his ego.²³² This status speaks to some of the sentiments pointed out by various scholars that people are lured into gangsterism because of the power and status they perceive they will have.²³³

Literature suggests that “identity, status, and power can all influence gang membership, especially through intergroup social comparison processes”.²³⁴ Furthermore, “gangs aspire to enhance or reinforce their status in comparison to other gangs in terms of the criteria or systems that are arbitrarily set by gangs in the same area, through competing for a higher number of criminal activities or illegal resources such as bragging rights, members, turf, market share, and profits, and ultimately desire to be recognised as the hardest”.

230 DCS official, written communication, 17 November 2023.

231 Focus group discussion with former gang member Western Cape, 8 November 2023.

232 Ibid.

233 Ross Deuchar & Robert D. Weide (2019) *Journeys in Gang Masculinity: Insights from International Case Studies of Interventions*, *Deviant Behavior*, 40:7, 851-865. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2018.1443761>

234 Woo, DaJung; Giles, Howard; Hogg, Michael A.; Goldman (2014). *Social Psychology of Gangs: An Intergroup Communication Perspective*. Retrieved at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305355348_Social_Psychology_of_Gangs_An_Intergroup_Communication_Perspective

Ibid., p147.

7.3 State interventions and support services

Government initiatives and programmes

The Western Cape is among the provinces with a Provincial Anti-Gang Strategy. However, the strategy is not properly coordinated and implemented across the various State departments. The DCS implements several programmes as a form of rehabilitation for its prison population, including those who form part of gangs. One of the officials interviewed for the study, however, lamented that even though the DCS had programmes in place to address gangsterism, the initiatives had not been rigorously evaluated.²³⁵ The official explained the following about interventions and support services to curb gangsterism in the DCS:

“DCS announced its plan to develop a gang management strategy (the ‘anti-gang strategy’) several years ago, but active work on the plan has been slow [...] The DCS should take up the challenges which the JICS outlined in their reports, coupled with the DCS’s reported gang activities.

“We need to ask questions such as: What is the size and shape of gangs inside SA correctional facilities at present, and how can more precise estimates be made? What is the status of the national gang combat strategy that the DCS released in 2020? What are the prospects of implementation of such a strategy in a context where the criminal justice system widely, and the DCS more specifically, confronts a variety of challenges? This led us to ask: What could a realistic national gang combat strategy look like?

*“Rehabilitation is central to any initiative that wishes to reduce the appeal of gangs in our facilities. Rehabilitation puts a substantial responsibility on the shoulders of the DCS and is widely criticised for its failure. And yet, the DCS needs effective treatment programmes designed to create hope and alternative pathways”.*²³⁶

With regard to the NAGS, some of the criticism levelled against it is that there is a discrepancy between what is articulated in the NAGS and what is carried out in practice.²³⁷ Furthermore, it has been suggested that a lack of public engagement with NAGS and a lack of political commitment to utilising the strategy aids the discourse and practice of reactive, militarised, short-term responses.²³⁸

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Viltoft, C. D. (2022). *Deconstructing Gangsterism in South African Legislation and Policy: Reframing Anti-Gang Strategies by Utilising At-Risk Definitions*. Retrieved from <https://dpublication.com/journal/JARSS/article/download/649/542>

²³⁸ Ibid.

Furthermore, officials interviewed from the SAPS Anti-Gang Unit in the Western Cape indicated that there were no preventative measures towards curbing gangsterism apart from reactive interventions that involved tip-offs by members of the public, mainly as a result of gang turf wars.²³⁹ At the time of data collection the unit comprised 206 members from various areas who were seconded to the Western Cape.²⁴⁰ The main hot spot areas in which they operate in the province include Mitchells Plain, Manenberg, and Hannover Park.²⁴¹ According to officials interviewed from the unit, as indicated, approaches were mainly reactive, failing to actively address the root causes or challenges of gangsterism. Existing empirical research on gangs, on the other hand, amplifies the relevance of holistic approaches to addressing gang involvement, which includes tackling the diverse issues rooted in communities that feed into the gang problem, as well as the cooperation and amalgamation of the various national, departmental anti-gang strategies to not only address the phenomenon and impact of gangsterism but also to prevent the gangsterism.²⁴²

Non-governmental organisations

NGOs play a role in providing interventions for the reintegration of former gang members. The CGE engaged with officials from Ceasefire, an NGO in the Hannover Park area that has been in operation for 14 years since 2010.²⁴³ The organisation adopts a multilayered approach to addressing gangs in communities, which includes street-level interventions, community mobilisation, involvement by faith leaders and law enforcement, public education, and a monitoring and evaluation system.²⁴⁴

The interview further revealed that interventions adopted by the NGO were informed by academic research, as well as technological innovation by using an app to track data in real time.²⁴⁵ A number of the interventions were based on research studies that show that offering employment, rehabilitation, and educational programmes were effective strategies to assist former gang members to accumulate job skills, job tenure, qualifications, and a vision for specific positive destinations (cultural capital), new social networks and routines (social capital), and an ability to earn money (economic capital).²⁴⁶ It was also evident from the personal narratives of former gang members who participated in this study that their progressive journeys and positive turning points were viewed as assets to be shared with others as a stimulus for social integration, mutual support, and healing, which would ultimately encourage others to quit gangsterism.²⁴⁷

239 Interview SAPS anti-Gang Unit, 9 November 2023.

240 Ibid.

241 Ibid.

242 Ibid.

243 Ceasefire, 2023. *About Ceasefire*. Retrieved from <https://ceasefire.co.za/about/>

244 Ceasefire official, personal communication, 9 November 2023.

245 Ibid.

246 Ross Deuchar & Robert D. Weide (2019). *Journeys in Gang Masculinity: Insights from International Case Studies of Interventions*, *Deviant Behavior*, 40:7, 851-865. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2018.1443761>

247 Ibid.

8. Overview and discussion of key issues from the findings

The study findings cover several important emerging issues discussed in the report. These findings reflect results from previous studies, indicating a combination of ecological factors that contribute to the involvement of men and boys in gangs. These factors, which have been studied for decades, include family structure, lack of support, poor service delivery, low socioeconomic status, poverty, low self-esteem, peer pressure, substance abuse, glamorization of gangs, the need for protection, issues related to racial identity, and the need for a sense of belonging.

The study also identifies specific risks related to male identity, such as father absence, the role of male provider, and the desire for power, money, and status. It's important to note that the overlapping identities of age, gender, and race, coupled with systemic issues, create a complex picture. In short, the prevalence of gangs among young Black and Coloured men and boys is influenced by a wide range of socioeconomic conditions, psychosocial issues, and the political and cultural environments of their communities.

The provinces of Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Western Cape exhibit significant inequalities, with individuals and families from opposite ends of the income spectrum. The impact of the apartheid-era Group Areas Act is still evident, as most impoverished urban areas and informal settlements are primarily inhabited by Black and Coloured communities, while the White minority predominantly resides in more developed areas.

It was unsurprising that the study's participants hailed from impoverished backgrounds, residing in slums, informal settlements, and the Cape Flats in the Western Cape. They faced challenges such as unemployment, lack of income security, and heavy reliance on social grants as their primary or only source of income. Inadequate housing, limited access to water and sanitation, as well as scarce opportunities were additional issues related to poor service delivery that the participants bemoaned. These shortcomings in social and economic services led to insurmountable challenges for them.

The study identified impoverished backgrounds as a significant factor driving men and boys toward involvement in gangsterism. They perceived the proceeds of crime as a means to provide for themselves, their families, and romantic partners, as well as to satisfy their desires for alcohol and drugs.

In the report, it is evident from the three provincial case studies that the men involved identified strongly with the societal expectation of being the primary provider for their families. Being able to earn money was seen as a crucial part of their sense of purpose and drive. Some men felt compelled to resort to dropping out of school

or engaging in criminal activities in order to meet these expectations. Given the challenging circumstances of poverty and high unemployment, gangsterism, which was already prevalent, became an option for men to support themselves and their families as providers.

The pressure to provide was significant in situations where individuals had grown up without a father in the home. Many believed that growing up without a father was a symbol of being rejected and abandoned, which could lead to behavioral problems and emotional struggles. In modern Western society, the idea of a nuclear family with a father playing a respected role in providing structure, discipline, moral guidance, security, safety, and material support for the family was seen as ideal. Consequently, the absence of a father was viewed negatively and was associated with male gang involvement.

The participants experienced powerlessness due to poverty, joblessness, inadequate opportunities, and poor service delivery. In response, gangs were seen as a way to reclaim power and status. Being part of gangs gave these men significance and status within their communities and among the gang members. Additionally, the age-old idea of power as a symbol of manhood was evident, with men associating status and money with masculinity. This pursuit of power was seen in both street gangs and prison gangs. The study also found that young boys were recruited into gangs because they sought recognition.

The research findings showed that violence and gangs were closely connected, leading communities, including men and boys, to protect themselves. The participants experienced daily life in gang-dominated areas and violent South African prisons, forcing them to seek shelter, often by joining gangs for protection. Gangs had a strong influence in prison facilities and certain communities, especially in the Western Cape, where they controlled these areas through fear, disorder, intimidation, and marginalization of men who didn't adhere to gang rules, alongside formal power structures. In essence, gangs held such power that not being part of one meant being vulnerable.

Participants in the study acknowledged both the positive and negative aspects of gang involvement. They highlighted the negative impact of gangs on communities and individuals, as well as on the lives of gang members themselves. The study's sampling criteria involved reformed ex-gang members, allowing them to provide insight into both the positive and negative experiences related to gang involvement. Gangs were found to contribute to the perpetuation of violence in communities, targeting men, women, and children, and also played a role in the distribution of guns and drugs. The long-term effects of gang involvement on the individual included imprisonment, insecurity for the future, drug addiction and substance abuse, persistent poverty, and recidivism. Despite these negative consequences,

gang involvement continued to pose a challenge in many communities, as reported by the study participants.

When assessing the effectiveness of government actions to combat gangsterism, it was evident that the current efforts were insufficient. The National Anti-Gang Strategy (NAGS), managed by the South African Police Service (SAPS), does not have a public document. As a result, departments such as the Department of Social Development (DSD), Department of Basic Education (DBE), and Department of Correctional Services (DCS) were carrying out uncoordinated and fragmented initiatives and lacked clear monitoring and evaluation systems. While NGOs and religious institutions were reportedly active in three provinces, their efforts were not well-documented and adequately evaluated.

9. Conclusions and recommendations

9.1. Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn:

- Firstly, the risks for men and boys in gang involvement are complex and multifaceted, including individual, family, cultural, economic, social, and political factors. The study found that individual factors such as low self-esteem resulting from feelings of abandonment, lack of support and a sense of not fitting in within families, particularly in situations of father absence, poverty, unemployment, and threats of violence, led men and boys to join gangs. Although gangs provided a sense of family and belonging, it was achieved through male camaraderie that was founded on substance abuse, violence, and the misuse of the concept of masculinity.
- Secondly, while gang involvement is not unique to men and boys, the strong association of the provider role with male identity leads men to join gangs, particularly when job opportunities are limited and social and economic services are inadequate. Men's desire for power, money, and status further demonstrates the interconnectedness of gendered male identity as a potential influence on men joining gangs.
- Finally, despite the country's efforts to establish the NAGS, initiatives on the ground to combat gangsterism have been incomplete and implemented in isolation. There is a lack of coordination between state and non-governmental stakeholders. This fragmented approach lacks the necessary national and provincial consolidation to ensure coordination, consistency, and standards for service quality control. State initiatives also lack appropriate monitoring and evaluation systems to measure stakeholder progress and effectiveness.

9.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

- We recommend that the government, through SAPS, creates a plan to involve the public in discussing the NAGS. The government should also make the document accessible to everyone. Currently, the NAGS seems to exist only in name, and its contents are not known to the public. This is especially important for key government departments like the Justice and Crime Prevention Cluster, which are the relevant departments to address the challenges with gangs.
- Related to the above, the reported multisectoral holistic approach of the NAGS must be appropriately coordinated at both national and provincial levels, incorporating government and non-governmental stakeholders to ensure that relevant services and programmes are implemented equitably.
- In the case of correctional services/prison gangs, current strategies must be assessed and reviewed to determine their relevance and effectiveness in addressing the persistent culture of gangs in correctional centres. Attention must be given to both preventative and rehabilitation measures in the DCS system.
- We recommend that socio-economic challenges that lay a fertile ground for the emergence and sustenance of gangs, such as poverty, unemployment, crime, violence, poor service delivery, and drug abuse, receive the necessary attention from political leaders, government, and non-governmental entities, with emphasis on sound and effective policies and programmes. In addition to this, interventions to address the normalisation of violence and drug abuse in communities must be put in place, with rehabilitation and recreation services and facilities availed in communities, particularly those with the problem of gangs and those susceptible to poverty-related challenges.
- At the individual and family level, we recommend that family systems be strengthened and enabled to provide support and a sense of belonging to young men and boys to mitigate against the pursuit of this validation from peer groups and gangs. Healing and therapy are also necessary at this level owing to the effects of gangs on families, such as the use and abuse of drugs and other substances, long-term exposure to violence, psycho-social and economic impacts of father absence, and other forms of breakdowns in the family. Parenting programmes are also key to providing the necessary knowledge and effective ways of raising young men and boys at risk of joining gangs. The DSD must spearhead the process of bringing such programmes to fruition.
- Finally, we recommend that well-researched and evidence-based life skills and mentorship programmes, as well as other similar initiatives, be put into place to expose men and boys to alternative forms of manhood and masculinity, different from the notion of toxic masculinities that manifest through violence and aggression, drug and substance abuse, lack of emotion, and destructive

pathways to attaining and executing power. Such programmes must be expanded to cover society in its entirety, as the notion of masculine identity is a social construct that is reproduced through societal norms and beliefs. The programmes must also seek to demystify the male provider role. The CGE recommends that DSD coordinates these programmes.

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