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GANG VIOLENCE IN THE WESTERN CAPE

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a summary on the extent of gang violence in the Western Cape. The objective of the paper is to provide a brief historical overview of gangs in the Province and also to highlight some serious gang violence related incidents reported by media in the period between 2009 and 2012.

2. BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF GANG VIOLENCE IN WESTERN CAPE

Various authors identify different time periods regarding the start of gangs and serious gang violence in the Western Cape. Van Wyk and Theron (2005)¹ state that it started before 1994 and MacMaster (2007)² argue that gangs in the Western Cape can be traced back to 1937. Gangs in this context mean an organised group of criminals that are involved in violence. There are more than 100 000 gang members (gangsters) in about 137 gangs in Cape Peninsula. The age of gang members ranges between 11 and 40 years. The reason for recruiting children as gang members is because if they commit crimes, they are unlikely to go to jail (The Sozo Foundation)³.

There are many reasons why people join gangs but most gang members in the Western Cape are drug-dealers or drug-pushers. Being part of a gang brings a sense of belonging, power and material goods. According to one self-confessed gangster from Lavender Hill gangsterism is a sub-culture, it is the way of life. In Lavender Hill there is a shooting once or twice a week. Gangsters get used to that type of life. This gangster has spent two decades in prison as the result of the act of gangsterism (The Sozo Foundation).

¹ Van Wyk, B.E & Theron W, H. (2005). Fighting gangsterism in South Africa: A contextual review of gang and anti-gang movement in the Western Cape.

² MacMaster, L.M. (2007). Social and economic emasculation as contributing factors to gangsterism on the Cape Flats.

³ The Sozo Foundation.



MacMaster (2007:280) identified the following characteristics of the gangsters:

- The nature and activities of gangs are mainly determined by their social context.
- Membership of gangs may include persons both inside and outside jails.
- Gang members may be anything from street-level operations to sophisticated syndicate bosses.
- They may belong to a category regarded by the government and its agencies as being at risk of becoming involved in criminal activities, or may make a choice to become involved, fully cognisant of the risk.
- Gangs may be involved in criminal activities for the sake of survival, or may be high-level, structured criminal organisations.

There has been an upsurge of gang-related violence in the Cape Flats since the beginning of 2005. This upsurge is attributed to either a battle over turf involving the illicit drug market, or revenge killings associated with gang leaders released from prison. The upsurge in gangsterism underscores a very important point that gangsterism is a systemic phenomenon that is deeply rooted in certain communities. 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 and school fees.

2.1 State and community reaction to gangsterism in the past

Community reaction to counter gangsterism in Western Cape in the past includes the establishment of neighbourhood watches, anti crime forums and community policing forums.

The police established Anti-gang units. These units according to Kinnes (2009)⁴ commanded the respect of gangs because they were stronger and better equipped than the gangs. The downside of their approach was that gangs simply regarded them as another gang. The communities did not support them. This therefore reduced their effectiveness.

⁴ Kinnes, I. (2009). Uniforms, plastic cops and the madness of 'Superman': An exploration of the dynamics shaping the policing of gangs in Cape Town.



According to Van Wyk and Theron, there are two ways that seems to be effective when countering gangsterism and gang violence. The first one is community participation and the second one is youth involvement in the fight against gangsterism.

2.1.1 Community participation

When dealing with community participation these authors made a reference to Peacemakers.⁵ Three characteristics of Peacemakers can be identified that could explain their 'success':

- They operated under no organisational affiliation. Unlike the anti-crime committees drew their existing community leaders in the process of fighting gangsterism. Utilising existing leaders to community members being suspicious of their intentions and they did not actively support them.
- Peacemakers took ownership of their neighbourhood. Unlike Anti-crime committees and community policing forums which tried to take organisational ownership of the community. The impetus and expertise behind their activities came from outsiders (to the community).
- Peacemakers demonstrated power of execution to force gang members to stop their anti-social activities. The anti-crime committees and community policing forums on the other hand depended heavily on police intervention to fulfil their promises of handling the gang problems in the neighbourhood.

2.1.2 Youth involvement

Strategies for gang prevention, intervention and suppression involve programmes directed to youth but most of them do not involve youth in the implementation or even in design. The youth need to be drawn out of gangs and integrated to the society. Interventions should be

⁵ Peacemakers is a vigilante groups that were formed in certain communities with purpose of driving out their neighbourhoods and establishing peace through excessive force.



aimed at meeting the unmet developmental needs of youth instead of only seeking to eradicate the crime problem associated with gangs.

The most important strategy that should be used in dealing with gang violence as with any other crime is a collective intervention between the police and the community. The evidence to this was of the Imbizo initiative in Lavender Hill which was held at the United Reformed Church on the 12th of April 2012 (People's Post, 12 June 2012, pp.5). The role-players established a stakeholder forum. It includes the sector policing forum, the CPF, the neighbourhood watches, the SAPS, the Department of Community Safety, the community and NGOs. This stakeholder forum came up with the following initiatives to fight gangsterism in the area:

- Decrease gang recruitment by looking at social issues plaguing the community.
- Have recruitment drives to increase the number of Neighbourhood Watches.
- Close down all alleyways because gangsters often use these spots for criminal activities.
- Find an alternative to gang controlled sports through community-based recreational and other activities.

In Lavender Hill there was also the signing of the peace agreement between gangs. A peace treaty was signed between Junky Funky Kids, Mongrels and Corner Boys (People's Post, 31 July 2012, pp.1).

3. EXTENT OF GANG VIOLENCE IN THE WESTERN CAPE IN THE PERIOD OF 2009-2012

This section deals with some gang violence related incidents that were reported by the media in the period mentioned above.

- Metro police discovered 533 rounds of ammunition hidden in a corridor ceiling of Block 26, Kew-town, a known 'Americans' gang stronghold. Authorities indicated that tensions were high in the area as newer, young gangs appeared to be challenging older gangs, including Americans. At the weekend the escalating gang violence



claimed the life of Ismail Gasant, 26 who was shot outside a block of flats in Kewtown (Cape Argus, 26-10-2009).

- At least nine people have been killed and sixteen injured in gang-related attacks in less than two months. Over the past four days, four people were killed and three others injured in gang shootouts. In the latest suspected gang-related killing in Athlone, 26 year-old Safwaan Lippert was shot eight times while driving. He died while relatives were rushing him to hospital (Cape Times, 05 November 2009).
- A notorious gang-occupied complex of several blocks of flats in Atlantis has become a no-go zone for police to conducting raids. The situation is so bad that even primary school children in the West Coast community have become embroiled in gangsterism and are smuggling drugs. In the last month two men were murdered in a gang shoot-out (Cape Times, 31 May 2010).
- Residents blame continuing violence between two neighbouring gangs for the death of a Bishop Lavis man shot in an alleged drug den. Marcelino Dirks, 22, died in a hail of bullets while sitting in front of a house in River Road (Cape Argus, 13 April 2011).
- Police are investigating the attempted murder of a Manenberg police officer after claims that police were lured into a trap by gangsters upset about the operation they conducted in the area (Cape Argus, 21 February 2011).
- More than 500 residents met at the St Marks Church in Lavender Hill on Monday where they called for the army to be deployed in the area to counter gang violence which has claim the lives of two 15 year-old and one adult person (Cape Times, 15 March 2011).
- Her 8 year-old brother could still be alive if a popular South African soapie had been aired on Wednesday. Zunaid was shot in the head and a woman who was walking across the field sustained a bullet wound in the back in Steenberg. The police have confirmed that the shooting was gang-related (People's Post, 3 July 2012).



- Three children were shot and wounded in gang cross-fire in 2 suburbs in Cape Town. A 3 year old boy was shot in his right hand in Thames Avenue in Manenberg. Two 12 year-old girls were shot outside their homes in Hanover Park (News24, 17 July 2012).
- The most recent reported figures show that gang violence claimed the lives of at least 23 people including seven children in the city in five months (Cape Argus, 24 July 2012).

4. THE FINDINGS OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON SECURITY AND CONSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- The SC met with the CPFs of both stations, as well as volunteers in Mitchells Plain who had devised a feeding scheme for children as a means to address the drug and crime problems in their area.
- The CPFs and volunteers were apprehensive of what they perceived as "empty promises" made by politicians and organisations that had visited the areas in the past but had not done anything to solve their problems.
- The CPF in Bishop Lavis that met with the SC had elected a new chairperson and had only been operating for a short period at the time.
- The CPF in Mitchells Plain was more stable and members were determined to patrol the area visibly despite threats to their safety and the recent murder of one of the CPF's members.
- The sense of CPFs and community initiative and co-operation with the local police was stronger in Mitchells Plain compared to Bishop Lavis which contributed to greater success in the police's ability to gather intelligence about gang and drug-related activities and also greater success during operations to curb these scourges.
- The success of Mitchells Plain Police Station's strategy in fighting gang related violence and drugs was attributed to greater co-operation with the CPF, community, schools and religious organisations.
- Community mobilisation involved Street Committee and Block Committee activities, including petitioning, protest action and reclaiming public spaces used by drug dealers.



- Foot patrols by the police in conjunction with CPF members and reservists also contributed to this success.
- Police members went to the homes of residents to take statements which had increased the reporting of gang related incidences.
- The homes of known drug dealers were targeted by CPF and other community members lighting bonfires outside their gates at night in order to discourage potential buyers in an attempt to put these dealers out of business.
- As a strategy to address gangsterism among school children (at one primary school 50% of the children was believed to be gang members), the Mitchells Plain police launched the cadet programmes at certain school which assisted with instilling discipline in children, which had a positive impact on their school performance and also kept them off the streets.
- However, some school principals that were in denial that their pupils were gang members, did not allow the police to implement the cadet programme at their schools.
- The CPF, community and the police also asked the municipality to enforce its bylaws to evict tenants who used municipal premises for illegal activities. In one instance a homeowner agreed to sell a house that had been used for illegal activities to the municipality which in turn was going to use it for the community's good.
- The police in Mitchells Plain also worked closely with other government departments like Social Development and Education, to assist with social crime prevention and community awareness programmes; and promoting sport as an alternative to drugs.
- The Bishop Lavis police station had a new station commander that was appointed shortly before the SC's visit.
- To address the problem of alleged police complicity with gangs and drug dealers, information about planned operations were kept as secret as possible until they were ready for execution.
- To address the problem of missing or lost dockets, duplicates of all dockets were stored in a safe in the commander's office.
- The level of trust and co-operation between the Bishop Lavis community and the police was low compared to what was observed in Mitchells Plain and it was obvious that the police in Bishop Lavis had less success in apprehending known gang suspects in the area.
- The community members were also less inclined to testify against suspects due to intimidation and threats.



5. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE

- It was pointed out that the population of Mitchells Plain was estimated to be about 1.5 million. Thus was therefore a need to increase resources like police vehicles and build more police stations in the area.
- There was a need for more rehabilitation facilities in the area to provide the necessary support for drug addicts.
- There was also a need for support groups to assist family members and parents of drug addicts.
- Government departments needed to provide financial support to community initiatives like those providing food, home work assistance and sport and other programmes to especially children and young people in these areas.
- The resourcing of CPFs needed to be reviewed to ensure that the funding of CPFs and Community Safety Forums were on par.
- It was recommended that the Bishop Lavis Police Station management and CPF meet with their Mitchells Plain counterpart to foster partnerships and learn from best practices and successes of the Mitchells Plain police that could assist the Bishop Lavis police's gang strategy.
- The Bishop Lavis police was encouraged to foster stronger ties with the community they served to assist in building up informer networks; and improving police intelligence on gang and drug-related activities.

4. CONCLUSION

Gang violence is still a major crime problem in the Western Cape despite police and community interventions that have taken place to try and curb this problem. The most important thing that needs to be taken into cognisance is the working relationship between the police and the community. Community, in the past, played an important role in dealing with gangsterism as was discussed when dealing with Peacemakers. The police are also an important role player in a war against gangsterism. These two stakeholders need to consolidate their working relationship by, among other things, implementation of sector policing which enables local communities to take ownership of their policing under the guidance of the SAPS. Neighbourhood Watches as well as CPFs should also be revived to ensure youth involvement in these structures.



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