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Responding to Gang-Related Violence in South Africa's Western Cape: Some Policy Options

By Diana Gibson and Godfrey Maringira

RECOMMENDATIONS

**The Western
Cape Provincial
Government should:**

- Initiate dialogue** with the communities affected by gang violence.

- Recognize and support** existing community-led initiatives aimed at providing security and curbing gang-related violence.

- Support programs** that engage gang members who leave gangsterism by, for example, providing them with training for alternative employment and resources for self-help projects.

- Support more research** on community policing and use the findings and recommendations from such studies as inputs in the reform and implementation of existing initiatives.

This policy brief explores the ramifications of gang-related violence in most of South Africa's large urban centers. This phenomenon has been a source of concern among policymakers, law enforcement officials, and civil society groups. These gangs are prevalent in impoverished communities, such as the Cape Flats in the Western Cape Province. Violence, especially by youth gangs, is seen as a primary concern for the Western Cape Provincial Government.¹ In Cape Town, in particular, statistics from Crime Stats SA indicate that black and coloured townships were heavily affected by crime.² In October 2017, while responding in parliament to questions concerning the persistence of crime and gang violence, the South African minister of police, Fikile Mbalula, blamed "the lazy efforts by the police to detect such crime." He called for the army to assist in fighting gang violence.³

Existing studies indicate that youth gang violence is escalating in South Africa for a number of complex reasons.⁴ One of these is the historical relocation of certain racially defined groupings from inner cities to townships during the apartheid era. This move caused significant socio-cultural dislocation, fragmentation of social groupings, economic hardship, and helped create the conditions for the rise of street gangs. Studies that seek to understand the participation of youths in gang violence, the varied factors that influence this trend, and what sustains violence are paramount. These will enable policymakers, police, and crime prevention practitioners to generate inputs into policies aimed at countering violent crime in cities.

¹Helen Zille and Patricia De Lille, "Gang Violence: Western Cape Government and City of Cape Town Intervene," Western Cape Government, August 2013, www.westerncape.gov.za/news/gang-violence-western-cape-government-and-city-cape-town-intervene.

²Crime Stats SA, "Worst ten precincts: largest number of reported crimes in Western Cape," <https://www.crimestatssa.com/toptenbyprovince.php?ShowProvince=Western%20Cape>.

³Caryn Dolley, "Crime stats: Hard Lives gang singled out in Parliament as threat to Cape Town residents," News24, October 24, 2017, <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/crime-stats-hard-lives-gang-singled-out-in-parliament-as-threat-to-cape-town-residents-20171024>.

⁴Nadine F. Bowers Du Toit, "Gangsterism on the Cape Flats: A challenge to 'engage the powers,'" *HTS Theological Studies* 70 no. 3 (2014): 1-7.

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Gangs often identify with and claim spaces in the community. Don Pinnock states that they can assume different forms, such as informal groups of young people who would ordinarily “hang out” on street corners and commit petty acts of mischief. Gangs can also develop formal structures that have links to organized crime.⁵

FORMALIZING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN FIGHTING GANG VIOLENCE

There is evidence from our fieldwork which indicates that certain communities have some capacity to deal with gang-related violence. These community-based efforts and strategies are often not valued by the state. There is limited support from the government and little attempt to include the community in its own existing programs, strategies, and policies for countering gang-related violence and crime. It is only where government efforts or policies fail or yield limited results that the community is allowed to mobilize its resources and energies against gang violence.

The government and other stakeholders need to consider that communities affected by gang-related violence are often able to support and develop mechanisms to deal with it, including street committees and street patrols at night. However, because of the lack of resources to, for example, effectively patrol these communities, they find it difficult to implement their plans and strategies on a sustainable basis. It is therefore important for the government to tap into what the communities are already doing in the fight against gang-related violence.

Existing street committees in Gugulethu and Nyanga East, for instance, patrol and try to ensure the safety of the streets.⁶ However, this does not mean that they do not want financial support and other resources. A majority of those involved in community policing and street committees are men in their early 40s and 50s, and it is important to enable the younger generation to become involved as well. The minister of police has acknowledged that the police cannot win the war against gang-related violence unless they also involve the community.⁷ However, our field-based research findings indicate that there is a lack of clarity among certain communities affected by gang violence as to what the government expects from them. They are also unsure of how communities can best collaborate with the government.

⁵Don Pinnock, *Gang Town* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2016); Andre Standing, “The threat of gangs and anti-gangs policy,” ISS Paper 116, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, August 2005, <https://issafrica.org/research/papers/the-threat-of-gangs-and-anti-gangs-policy-policy-discussion-paper>.

⁶Interview with Street Committee leaders in Gugulethu and Nyanga East Townships, 2017-2018.

⁷Mava Lukani, “Street Committees are important to win fight against crime in our communities–Fikile Mbalula,” Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, May 2017, <https://www.parliament.gov.za/news/street-committees-are-important-win-fight-against-crime-our-communities-fikile-mbalula>.

It is essential for communities to be continuously engaged in the fight against gang-related violence through local structures that assist communities to tackle social problems and crime, and foster dialogue. Structures such as community forums and street committees will complement the efforts of the police and governing bodies in fighting urban violence. Community engagement and information sharing, as well as support and responsiveness by the police and government, are vital for collaboration between civil society and government.

This engagement should not be a one-off but should happen continuously. Solutions to the problems posed by gang-related violence will be more effective and sustainable if the affected communities are directly involved in such programs and policies. While gang-related violence and street committees have a long history in South Africa, the usefulness and central role of street committees should not be ignored. Street committees, as well as other community members, are familiar with the modus operandi of gangs and the social conditions that breed gangsterism and can work closely with the government and local authorities to deal with the problem. For interventions aimed at addressing gang-related violence in the Western Cape to succeed, the government has to prioritize dialogue with communities and making resources and training available to boost and strengthen already existing community initiatives, rather than relying on largely ineffective top-down strategies.

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- Support programs that engage gang members who leave gangsterism by, for example, providing them with training for alternative employment and resources for self-help projects.
- Support more research on community policing and use the findings and recommendations from such studies as inputs in the reform and implementation of existing initiatives.

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