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Deconstructing Gangsterism in South Africa: Uncovering the Need for Gender-Sensitive Policies

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Abstract

Although the dawn of democracy promised a new beginning in South Africa, lingering effects of Apartheid remained, including the struggle to address gang violence and gender-based violence amidst the backdrop of widespread organised crime and corruption, social inequality, a sluggish economy, and poor service delivery. The last policy - National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy (2017) - required implementation at provincial level. This study examines the Western Cape policy content and deconstructs the concept of gangsterism. The paper shows that sustained anti-gang strategies and interventions demand structural obstacles and inequality are addressed in the context of the spill-over from the Apartheid era. Notably, it will be concluded that there are long-term benefits of reframing the problem of gangsterism in the Western Cape as 'a youth-at-risk-crisis' with specific attention gender-sensitivity to contribute to local peacebuilding by focusing on youth to exert agency and become empowered in pursuit of individual and community resilience and active citizenry.

Keywords

Gang Violence; Organised Crime; Gender-Sensitive; Policy; South Africa

Introduction

Gangsterism has been an on-going problem in the Western Cape province of South Africa since before the end of the Apartheid regime. Although the dawn of democracy promised a new beginning in South Africa, lingering effects of Apartheid remained, including the struggle to address gang violence and gender-based violence amidst the backdrop of widespread organised crime and corruption, social inequality, a sluggish economy, and poor service delivery. The last policy - National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy (2017) - required implementation at provincial level. Cape Town, the country's second largest city and metropole of the Western Cape province, exemplifies this problem more starkly than elsewhere, as apartheid spatial planning relegated the historically disadvantaged to the limits and outskirts of society, where they still remain, but the City of Cape Town perpetuated the relegation of the poor and working class to the verges. In 2019, the Provincial Government took some significant steps in policy development to address the problem. This paper will assess the Western Cape policy content and deconstruct the concept of gangsterism so as to discuss the measures best suited to bring about change in society. It will show that sustained anti-gang strategies and interventions demand structural obstacles and inequality are addressed in the context of the spill-over from the Apartheid era. Notably, it will be concluded that there is long-term benefits of reframing the problem of gangsterism in the Western Cape as 'a youth-at-risk-crisis' with specific attention gender-sensitivity to contribute to local peacebuilding by focusing on youth to exert agency and become empowered in pursuit of individual and community resilience and active citizenry.

The purpose of this study is to assess the assumptions of the key policy document 'Strategic roadmap towards implementation of the National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy in the Western Cape – Provincial Response to the National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy (NAGS) 2019' (hereafter NAGSWC), to identify what gangsterism is assumed to be. This document was written by [Don Pinnock and Romaney Pinnock \(2019\)](#) for the Western Cape Department of Community Safety (DoCS). Understanding what gangsterism is in this context will be achieved by employing [Carol Bacchi's \(2009\)](#) 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' approach (WRP). This paper will begin with a brief introduction, including an overview of the NAGS and the NAGSWC. This will be followed by the research question and the policy context within which the study was conducted, after which the methodology is explained. Finally, the findings are presented.

Background

South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 ushered in a new dispensation based on democracy, equality, and the rule of law. It represented a break from Apartheid governance, which was based on racial segregation. The country's constitution encompasses a range of civil and political rights, such as human dignity (s10) and freedom and security of person (s12) ('The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996') (hereafter 'the Constitution'). The South African Police Service (SAPS), previously known for human rights abuses during the Apartheid era, underwent major reforms to align itself with democratic and human rights principles including basic needs provision, as enshrined in the Constitution.

The issue of gangs, and ensuing gang violence, predates democracy in South Africa. However, after 28 years of democracy, gang violence continues to affect safety and security of many communities in South Africa, and the ways of Cape Town and the Western Cape are not an exception. The nascent democratic government and newly recalibrated police forces have, in other words, struggled to address gangs and gang violence effectively amidst the backdrop of widespread organised crime and corruption, social inequality, a sluggish economy, and poor service delivery.

Despite the constitutional human rights framework, including policing as a preventative as well as an investigative and public security institution, the state's response to gang violence has primarily relied on criminal justice approaches, characterised by forceful policing tactics ([Stemmet 2006](#)). This approach ranges

from the periodic deployment of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) into the areas of the so-called Cape Flats¹ as well as the (re-)creation of an Anti-Gang Unit which consists of:

‘Members from specialised units in the police services ...whose focus is to weaken the capacity of gangs and to disable the criminal economy linked to gangsterism and drug and firearm supply lines’ (Dougan 2018, para. 5).

South Africa is not unique in this regard; several countries are struggling with gang violence disproportionately centred in the urban environments. Nor is it the only developing country struggling to provide or uphold basic needs to socioeconomically disadvantaged citizens. Globally, gangs are present in both the global South and the global North, and in developed and developing countries alike. Gangsterism is further affiliated with other societal problems, such as dysfunctional families, disorganised communities, drug and substance abuse, as well as the deficient provision of basic needs (South Africa Constitution 1996; Alexander 2010; Pinnock 2016) often linked to the inability to access prosocial opportunities, including employment. Informal social structures and perilous livelihoods are both conditions of and amplified in areas marked by relative poverty and high inequality (Ikejiaku 2009). Coupled with the fact that areas with little or no social cohesion are more vulnerable to intergroup conflict, it is no surprise that such areas tend to experience higher levels of direct/physical violence (Seedat et al. 2009).

The government is obliged to commit to equality regardless of origin, gender, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic status or other inalienable characteristics. Yet, 28 years after the abolition of Apartheid, gangs in the Western Cape disproportionately impact livelihoods of people on the Cape Flats. Both the national government of South Africa and the Provincial Government of Western Cape have taken steps to develop policies to address gangsterism and its effects.

The Policy Documents

The Justice, Crime Prevention and Security Cluster (JCPS) approved the National Anti- Gangsterism Strategy (NAGS) as ratified by the JCPS Cabinet Committee on 2 June 2016. The strategy was adopted by the Western Cape Provincial Cabinet in 2017. The details of NAGS, the national strategy framework, are still (2022) to be made public. What is known about it is that it aligns with the National Development Plan to ensure that *all* South Africans feel safe and their community can live free of fear (emphasis added). Based on a four-pillar foundation, it seeks direct intervention through Human Development, Social Partnerships, Spatial Design, and Criminal Justice Process (Payne 2017). NAGS further calls for a holistic approach to address issues that feed gangsterism at community level and additionally, a national interdepartmental anti-gang strategy that addresses both current impacts of gangsterism as well as prevention efforts (more details on NAGS to be presented later in the material section) (Pinnock & Pinnock 2019).

DoCS began to develop its own provincial response to the NAGS, (named ‘Strategic roadmap towards implementation of the National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy in the Western Cape – Provincial Response to the National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy (NAGS) 2019’) in April 2018. The Western Cape policy was concluded after five workshops held during 2018/19, facilitated by Don Pinnock on behalf of DoCS. In these workshops, a Provincial Task Team ‘developed principles, plans, strategies and interventions to create a framework for policy and action to radically reduce the impact of gangs on communities’ with the following workshop agendas:

¹ The Cape Flats (or the Flats) refers to the areas southeast of the central part of city of Cape Town. During the Apartheid regime, Black, Coloured, and Indians were forcibly removed from the inner-city residence out onto the Flats under the infamous Group Areas Act of 1950 (Act No 41 of 1950).

- Establishment of definitions and areas of focus;
- Creation of a youth development platform to develop plans to reduce the impact of gangs on communities;
- Identification of game changers within each area of focus and development of approach principles;
- Unpacking best practices and learnings of existing or past programmes. Putting together a draft action plan for the strategy;
- Final drafting of a framework to reduce violence and the impact of gangs on communities.

The process brought together high-level inputs from government and civil society members – the task team specifically included experts from different government departments (from the Premier, the departments of Community Safety, Health, Education, and Social Development), South African Police Service (SAPS) officials, gang researchers, rehabilitation and reintegration organisation workers and other relevant ‘frontiers’ from organisations including local non-governmental organisations and civil society organisation.

The chapters on place making and community cohesion and the appendices on drugs and on firearms and gun violence highlight, in line with the literature, how gangsterism is inherently linked to the issue of drugs as a form of organised crime. NAGSWC emphasises the disproportionate effect on youth and on communities, which can be interpreted as a further commitment to the preventative approach. The control of drugs paves the road to control of an illicit and profitable economy and is viewed as a significant protective factor against offending among youth in the communities.

The NAGSWC goal to ‘develop plans for designing and adapting physical spaces that promote social cohesion and safety’ can be said to expand on earlier policy ideals of inclusions of ground level actors such as safe schools to provide safe and prosocial alternative for youth. What is suggested in NAGSWC is that mid-level collective actors, neighbourhoods and communities, as well as intentional spatial design, together constitute a front against gangs by disempowering and preventing their ability to organise and engage youth.

The Policymaking Approach and its Context

Evidence-based policymaking, such as the NAGSWC policy formulation, is increasingly used in preventative approaches to criminality and is more commonly viewed as a best practice model for interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder public policy ([Esbensen et al. 2013](#)). But what exactly does that mean? Generally, the research on gangs in South Africa includes critical definitions, identification of risk factors, and criminological/ sociological explanations for gang behaviour. However, little attention has been given to how the effectiveness of approaches and interventions and their impact on gang crime and violence reduction might interrelate with the policy formulation process and the scope of change policy allows for. Given that we know a lot about gangs but have less evidence-based knowledge about how the impact of gang prevention and disruption effectively address the related issues, this paper aims to contribute to the generation of such information by exploring means and ends in NAGSWC. Over the past years, gang violence has spiked upwards and generated challenges in different spheres and on different societal levels in South Africa, and in the Western Cape in particular. As the literature reveals, multiple risk factors are involved: anti-social behaviour, substance abuse, mental health problems, victimisation, and negative/traumatic life events as well as safety and violence issues in or in relation to family, education, peer group and community ([Pinnock & Pinnock 2019](#)). Thus, in contemporary South Africa, the realisation that multisectoral and cross-sectoral interventions is much needed, and also should include community engagement in tandem with police enforcement and justice that is essential in curbing gang violence ([Portfolio Committee on Police 2018](#)).

The lack of public engagement with NAGSWC has provoked criticism. The militarised approach to gangsterism in the Western Cape was criticised by the South African Drug Policy Initiative in Autumn 2019, as the government was called out for ‘sitting on its own report that calls for the demilitarisation of the police and the legislation of all drugs to help tackle the drug-related crime’. (‘Western Cape Government slated for “sitting on its own anti-gangsterism report” 2019’). The debate has led to accusations of the lack of willingness to engage with the issue further and publicly but also calls into question the value of a national strategy relying on a provincial implementation. Subsequently, and crucially, it prompted other questions: what is NAGSWC suggesting? What aspects of the broad issue of gangsterism are included in it and which are not? As the term gangsterism (as well as anti-gangsterism) lacks a common definition, it is valuable to assess the problem representations within the strategy, as they impact the way in which gangsterism is governed provincially, since each province must develop an implementation of NAGS that account for localised and tailored responses. But what exactly does that entail in Western Cape?

The Research Question

Social policy initiatives contain within them assumptions of what the problem to be addressed it. Using [Carol Bacchi’s \(2009\)](#) ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ approach (WRP), this study deconstructs the notion of gangsterism presented in the policy document ‘*Strategic roadmap towards implementation of the National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy in the Western Cape – Provincial Response to the National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy (NAGS) 2019*’ written by [Don Pinnock and Romaney Pinnock \(2019\)](#) for the Western Cape Department of Community Safety (DoCS) to answer the overarching research question:

- What is the problem of gangsterism in the Western Cape represented to be in NAGSWC?

This over-arching question includes the following sub-questions:

- What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the ‘problem’?
- How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
- What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
- What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?
- How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted, and replaced?

The interest in deconstructing gangsterism in NAGSWC further stems from the author’s involvement in the provincial strategy formulation from May 2018 to February 2019. As NAGS requires each province to develop individual strategies to better cope with the distinctive or localised issues of gangsterism, this analysis allows for engaging with the problem of gangsterism in NAGSWC to really understand how the phenomenon is problematised in the Western Cape and further, how that has formed the proposed strategies outlined in the policy. Ethics clearance was obtained from University of Cape Town granted by the Law Faculty’s Research Ethics Committee for a period of 12 months covering the time that I participated in the formulation of the NAGSWC.

Methodology

Carol Lee Bacchi’s ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ (2009) approach (WPR) is concerned with the role of those formulating policy in shaping certain problems and how the characters of these problems are constructed. It is grounded in the idea that policy generally claims to solve problems that need to

be addressed ([Bacchi 2009](#), p. xi). Hence, issues in policy are problematised in specific ways; they are presented to us in a certain way and put forward as ‘problems’ in a certain way. This is Bacchi’s motivation for studying how issues are thought of as problems and in what way they reduce complexity or divert from reality ([Osborne 1997](#)). Bacchi draws on feminist traditions in questioning power relations and truths and so. WPR as a method has been used in social sciences’ critical tradition since the 1990s, especially within postmodern and social constructionist research. From early on, Bacchi compared affirmative action in policies in different Western countries and concluded that affirmative action had different meanings depending on which ‘time and space’ was examined. For example, it was noted that the same problem was problematised as ‘special treatment’ for ‘disadvantaged groups’ in some places but as ‘social justice’ in others ([Bacchi 1996](#)). Her methodology differs from traditional policy theory and draws on discourse theory by acknowledging the historical development of conceptual logics that forms a specific understanding of a problem ([Bacchi 2012](#)).

WPR can therefore, with benefit, be utilised when one wishes to deconstruct texts or discourses to understand how ‘meaning is made’. To do so, it makes visible the contradictions between what is said and how it is said, question truths, false binaries, and dichotomies. WPR is therefore also a form of discourse analysis, which acknowledges that policy significantly impacts lives and is not merely a paper that solves a political issue. Bacchi’s method is now well-established and widely used to understand the effects of politics and how, and to what extent, policy addresses the problem it claims to solve.

Bacchi’s WPR has been used in a variety of different discourse analyses of policy but has not yet been applied to the topic of gangs or gangs in South Africa. The WPR approach to policy analysis is a very concrete methodological toolbox that addresses a set of questions, where the objective of the analysis is to figure out how language and problem representations shape meaning and knowledge ([Bacchi 1996](#)). However, the interrelatedness of the questions still allows for a flexible application to fit the chosen material and thus the method does not have to be applied sequentially.

Findings

In NAGSWC, gangsterism is categorised as a ‘wicked problem’ and said to manifest in several key areas: policing and justice, peer groups, families, place making and community cohesion, health and youth well-being, education, and safe spaces. The spectrum which binds these societal spheres together is violence. 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. By doing this, it is possible to utilise other knowledge and intervention systems than those that fall within law enforcement and military engagement, namely ‘the public health and public safety fields as well as multi-disciplinary, multi-sector responses.’ Although the report was still pending approval at the time of writing, NAGSWC is envisioned to replace the 2008 policy, ‘Social Transformation, Gang Prevention, and Intervention Strategic Framework’ (2008 policy).

Crime analysis is based on a problem-oriented approach, that is, a focus on the public security problem at hand. As we have seen, in South Africa, this includes collaboration between law enforcement, such as SAPS, and other organisations and local actors within preventative and repressive intervention frameworks. In effect, this means that local problems handled by the police ideally reflect regional and national outputs. But how does that happen, when the national framework (NAGS) remains under wraps and the commitment to utilise the provincial framework (NAGSWC) seemed only to become present when the report was publicly

shared². Notably, NAGSWC recognises that effective policing is more than crime control and at the same time, that there is a need to address community violence, thus asserting that policing of gangs should have a broader reach than it does at present. This is somewhat reflected within a community's perception of 'good' law enforcement; this safety, however, requires well trained officers, high standard of discipline, and proper management directed by good governance. While it is understandable that sensitive matters, ie intelligence, require a level of secrecy, it is questionable whether this is as progressively attained as the politicians contend it to be done when the intention to move forward with NAGSWC was only communicated after the report was leaked in Autumn 2019. It certainly is hard to believe that during the latest deployment of the military in the Western Cape, it was not possible to note that high-level stakeholders had been working on furthering a new integrated approach to gangsterism. Whether lack of political will, bureaucracy, inefficiency or all three, are to blame, it seems fair to assert that it has yet to be determined whether the use of resources and capacity to develop NAGSWC will impact real life change on the ground.

It has so far been identified that the dominant representation of the problem of gangsterism is youth at risk and that the main solution lies in building individual and collective resilience at community level by reducing neighbourhood violence. The central strategies to achieve this are understood to lie in the creation of both responsibility and accountability, firstly managed by a Provincial Hub but decentralised into Neighbourhood Safety Hubs to secure localised responses (WPR question one). At present, however, it is apparent that the conceptual foundation for strategy has not managed to include proper channels for the commitment to coordinated violence prevention and social transformation, as envisioned in both the applicable law and the previous strategic framework (WRP question two). This is further rooted in the historical, social, and cultural governance and policing context, which has maintained a militarised discourse, where political will and adequately sustained efforts have not been present (WPR question three). The previous part has attempted to address what has been said, how, and why (WPR questions one to three). Now, the paper will turn its attention to what has not been said (WPR question four) and what effects this might bring about (WPR question five), and how we might think about the problem differently and whether there are other apparent nuances or solutions to consider (WPR question six).

Although NAGSWC has afforded considerable attention to social violence and how to cope with the immense effects of gangsterism on communities and the disproportional impact on youth, there is less emphasis on how the different groups in the communities relate to one another and play into on-the-ground conflict and hostility. South Africa can be positioned as a strong state with excellent legal provisions for democratic rights, including so-called positive rights that provide for human rights and basic needs as a primary device for governance, yet the high levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment render most underprivileged population groups, largely along apartheid era racial groups, in perilous conditions. The analysis also showed how NAGSWC echoes the work of other scholars when stating that Prevention of Organised Crime Act (No 121 of 1998) (POCA) is not a helpful instrument in addressing gangsterism. As the earlier analysis showed, NAGSWC uses the concept of social violence to engage multifaceted solution to a so-called 'wicked problem', a problem with no definitive formulation.

Here it may be beneficial to apply the concept 'resource stress', which is used to describe the emerging perceptions of resource access in society to be disproportionately reserved for certain population groups and is embedded within Protracted Social Conflict (PSC). [Azar & Moon \(1986\)](#) developed this theory to highlight the fact that root causes for conflicts in 'multi-communal' societies are to be found within and across, as opposed to between, nation states. Though PSC has generally been studied in the context of armed

2 The anti-gangsterism strategy was handed to the Department of Community Safety in February 2019. In Cape Town – The SA Drug Policy Initiative (SADPI) has slammed the Western Cape government for 'sitting on its own report that calls for the demilitarisation of the police and legalisation of all drugs to help tackle drug-related crime'. See: Western Cape government slated for 'sitting on its own anti-gangsterism report' (url: <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/western-cape-government-slated-for-sitting-on-its-own-anti-gangsterism-report-35706643>)

conflict, it seems relevant for this study as situations of protracted social conflict are marked by hostile contact between communal groups rooted in one or more factors, such as race, ethnicity, religion, or culture. In PSC according to Azar & Moon, arguably the most useful unit of analysis is viewing gangs as not just a non-state actor but as both a communal and identity group. Moreover, by paying attention to the individual and group levels of analysis, the impact non-state actor(s) can have on the continuation of violence is recognised and examined. This makes PSC applicable to gang violence since it relates to intergang conflict, to conflict between state and gangs and between gangs and civil society groupings as well as the impact these conflicts have on communities and individuals – some affiliated with gangs themselves, some not.

PSC shows that relative poverty amplifies and prompts hostility to escalate into (violent) conflict to eliminate the competition. The lack of inclusion into the formal economy coupled with both perceived and real hindrances to political representation and participation generate frustration and increase lack of trust in the government and its agencies and, thereby, create a fluctuating upsurge in violence in communities with high levels of gang activity. Issues of poverty, inclusion, and the right to self-determination – resource stress – propagate other issues such as for example ethnic, racial, interpersonal and gender-based violence and highlight the broader socioeconomic inequality in the Western Cape. The absence of consecutive and uninterrupted anti-gang initiatives indicates that there is a disconnect; either political will or capacity to commit to strategies long-term at local and provincial level.

In the Western Cape in the Cape Flats, gang violence has involved immediate and almost uninterrupted suffering for non-gang population groups with the same immobilised socioeconomic status since Apartheid. Everyday gang activities result in violence, such as murder, violent attacks, and deprivation due to inaccessibility of basic human needs, although these are rights that are enshrined in the Constitution. Additionally, parallel informal development includes both anti-social, deviant behaviour and informal economies that generate and perpetuate conditions prone to organised crime – significantly, the presence of alcohol and drug dealing at high and low levels magnify inability to pursue life chances where gangs maintain control. As the South African literature on gangs also noted, it is no surprise that it is hitting hardest in the communities on the Cape Flats – that is, in communities that lack social cohesion devised by forced removal legislation during Apartheid (see for example [Pinnock 2016](#)). The fact that peoples' needs cut across sectors and have been shown to extend over multiple years require both urgent, responsive, and long-term solutions, encompassing more than merely criminal justice agency involvement.

What is perhaps less explicit in NAGSWC is the fact that many young people in gangs are part of larger networks that resemble armed groups because they are engaged in crime and violence, operating outside of the law. What NAGSWC is suggesting, however, is to target the high-risk youth, disengaged but parallel to dealing with institutionalised, organised crime syndicates. This distinction is very definitive for the violence prevention framework that NAGSWC is proposing. What perhaps is the issue at hand is that such a response gives less of an immediate outcome, less of a visible outcome for government in comparison, for example, to the deployment of the military. The risk is that calls for 'demilitarisation of anti-gang strategies' and 'regulation of drugs' is more commonly perceived to mean 'no military or law enforcement' and 'free drugs.' This harmful counter-narrative is increasingly provoked by the missing public commitment to NAGSWC by politicians and the provincial government.

The empirical work on gangs in the Western Cape, though conducted at different times and in different areas, established certain things about gangs in South Africa: first, 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. Second, gangs in the Western Cape are largely structured around ethnic heritage due to the demographic segregation during Apartheid. This further renders the Cape Flats areas prone to gangsterism, as social disorganisation provides optimal conditions for informal, or vigilante, justice and service provision controlled by gangs because many lack basic needs. Third, gangs provide a form of security in certain areas, even though this security often relates to

organised violence and insecurities for others. And finally, gangs are a part of the communities – as children, as parents, as siblings, or friends and therefore, an intrinsic part of the social fabric of those communities, which disproportionately affect youth (Pinnock 2016).

Gangsterism in the Western Cape is linked to organised national and transnational crime, making gangs increasingly able to maintain territorial and social control – especially considering inadequate criminal justice efforts and prevalent corruption and lack of social cohesion. To an extent, any reform government strategies may prove less effective than desired as the ‘breaking the ability of gang cooperation’ is key in disempowering gangs.

It is increasingly clear that it is difficult to separate criminal use of violence and armed violence as part of an intergroup conflict with gang actors. These are issues linked to drugs, gang control, transnational characteristics of organised crime in South Africa, as well as the socio-economic aspects, and all amplify the hostility between gangs. Here it should be noted that threats to physical security and gang violence are both an expression of hypermasculine group culture, which condones or encourages violence as a legitimate or necessary custom to safeguard illicit or informal practices to sustain authority or monetary activities, as well as a tool to contest pushback from real or perceived threats, including government, other gangs, and community actors. It should be noted that high levels of corruption in society – present amongst elites as well as in informal settlements – are key in securing webs of safe passage for criminal and violence activities. Such cooperation also suggests shared interest and benefits for gangs as well as affiliated non-gang actors. While it is not necessarily possible to establish direct linkages from transnational crime to all gang violence in Western Cape, it certainly is clear that hostile competition for control of the drug market would amplify violence between gangs. In the Western Cape, most known gangs consist of male youth – and generally alongside Apartheid racial groupings, coloured and black, due to its unique spatial configuration, shaped by the Apartheid era legislation. Stereotypes of ‘the gangster’ needs to change across government communications if a youth-at-risk centred approach is to include the communities. If communities and youth feel labelled as stereotypes, there is little chance that others can convince them that they are not, especially given the well-established culture of hypermasculinity which promotes violence and serves as a pull-factor for gang membership. Given the structural inequality and relative poverty, the gang landscape has diversified since the transition to democracy in lieu of persistent high levels of violence crime and fragmented societies, where street gangs constantly resort to secure their turf, even when the people are caught in the crossfire.

‘By labelling the behaviour of certain people gangsters, societies often make the mistake of pushing the child at risk further downstream into the hands of gang leaders. There are situations where force has to be used to contain some of the more violent gangs across the Province, but these gangs are usually in the minority. Adopting strong anti-gang measures invariably drive the younger gang members into the hands of the hardened minority’ (Western Cape Government).

So far, much attention has been afforded male youth as they are thought to be the key demographic and target group. It has been established in NAGSWC that gang activities impact especially on youth as peer groups and that the pervasiveness of violence in especially the Cape Flats affect whole communities. However, the focus on women and girls is almost nowhere to be found.

In a testimony from the Khayelitsha Commission report (2014), the principal of Chris Hani Senior Secondary School, a public school counting about 1,300 learners between grades 8 and 12, described how deeply entrenched gang violence is at the school, thus inflicting harm on girls too. He noted that learners are hiding dangerous weapons in their uniforms, some saying they do so ‘for self-protection’. Children in gang areas in the Western Cape are therefore not only at risk of being forced or drawn into gangsterism due to the severe lack of basic needs, such as food and shelter, but also that their routes to school and their learning environment, are highly marked by gang violence.

In addition, South Africa has one of the highest rates of violence against women on the entire continent, a rate five times the global average and it is estimated that one in five women has been exposed to physical abuse (Smith 2019). While high levels of rape and sexual violence are by no means restricted to gangsterism, it has many times over been documented to be embedded in gang culture. As with studies on gangs elsewhere and across studies on different types of gangs, it has been documented that hypermasculinised groups both celebrate and encourage physical and sexual violence as symbols of power.

Although men are understood and proved to commit more violence and are found more likely to engage in criminal behaviour due to the negative influence of deviant peers, the lack of addressing girls and women in NAGSWC is worth looking at. Studies and news show that the role of women and girls is increasingly entering the gang landscape – no mention is of this made in NAGSWC (see for example Shaw & Skywalker 2017). The role of women and girls is noted as either victims of sexual or domestic violence, as disrespected family members or as mothers in need of healthcare pre- or post-natally. The fact that women, young women, or girls are not explicitly envisioned a place or a space might prove problematic at ground level, especially if local offices – the so-called ‘Neighbourhood Hubs’ – are not equipped to deal with gender specific issues amidst the hypermasculinity which is intractably linked to gang culture.

Through the lens of resource stress (WPR question six), it has become clear that those who are most disadvantaged are those most at the highest risk of being affected or affiliated with gang crime and violence. Significantly, this was noted in relation to youth. Moreover, it became apparent that a negative labelling discourse perpetuating the coverage of gangsterism as an unintended effect emerged, which further resulted in the legitimisation of hard solutions (WPR question 5). The lack in the report is that of reference to women and girls, which means the report structures the problem of gangs with the absence of a representation of solutions for women and girls, as separate from men and boys in NAGSWC. This could result in gender insensitivity during implementation stages given what we know about gender issues in the Western Cape and in South Africa (WPR question four).

Summary of findings

First, the presence of gang violence and the fear and risk of gang violence can be said to fuel and be fuelled by intergroup conflict. In this sense, gangs can be viewed as groups of (young) people with the same socioeconomic status who live in the same neighbouring areas but are experiencing differential opportunity to attain safety and security and livelihood needs. In addition, structural violence in the form of unequal access to basic needs further widens the gap between people of different socioeconomic status and further, fuels intergroup conflict and violence, especially in former township areas between other groups than gangs as well (Misago 2011; Buthelezi & Mofokeng 2015). As has been mentioned, gangsterism in the Western Cape is usually associated with the Cape Flats coloured South Africans, which further complicates the gang landscape to focus on black and coloured residents, rather than people who are historically marginalised and disadvantaged due to their area of residence and not their colour. It becomes even more complex as intergroup and multi-communal communities – which the Cape Flats are – are more prone to have hostility escalate into physical violence, which impacts whole individuals and communities.

Second, the cumulative lack of access to basic needs and insecure livelihood hits hardest among the urban periphery, notably marginalised and underprivileged population groups on the Cape Flats. These groups are shown to be trapped in an intergenerational poverty cycle, which disproportionately affects individuals and communities, born out of Apartheid’s discriminatory policy and protracted by capacity challenges, politicised, and scattered anti-gang strategies.

Moreover, the lack of (human) needs provision can amplify hostile and violent behaviour among young people in communal groups and in gangs that compete for the same real or perceived means. The literature on gangs in South Africa shows that a key factor for gangs to maintain territorial control is that they can

provide access to basic needs, for example, as modes of income generation or in the form of protection from violence perpetrated by other gangs ([Adhikari 2008](#); [Petrus 2014](#)). Azar's PSC theory highlights that those basic needs do not merely encompass food and water, clothing, and shelter but also security, fair access to political institutions and economic participation ([Fisher 2001](#)). Protracted gang violence has involved immediate and almost uninterrupted suffering for non-gang population groups. Often people with the same socioeconomic status in the Western Cape on the Flats experience murder, violent attacks, and deprivation due to inaccessibility to basic and human needs which are all rights that are enshrined in the Constitution.

Even though gang activities cut across sectors, so do the needs of youth at risk. This requires urgent and long-term solutions, encompassing more than merely criminal justice agency involvement and must therefore include resilience building among individuals, especially youth, and at community level in general. NAGSWC emphasises the power of building youth and community resilience ([Pinnock & Pinnock 2019](#), pp. 21-33). Yet, it gives less attention to the gendered aspect of agency and empowerment, even though local conflict and gang violence does not only severely impact male youth in disadvantaged areas but has devastating consequences for women and girls. This has been considered particularly significant, as the toxic hypermasculinity has been deemed intractable from gang culture and violence and translates into high levels of sexual and interpersonal violence. This finally brings about a more general question, 'what is the role of youth when working towards reduction and eradication of gang violence in the Western Cape?' when wishing to establish Neighbourhood Hubs to address local gang issues. If the youth is at the centre of the issue of gangsterism, surely, they should be engaged more explicitly than they are now. Agency and capacity building mechanisms leading towards empowerment and influence as an aspect of community engagement, anchored in local knowledge and ownership, will be essential.

Conclusion

Gangs and gang violence have been a persistent feature of contemporary South Africa. Perhaps no city has been affected more by gangs than Cape Town, in Western Cape Province. Despite a legal framework promoting human rights and multiple on-going interventions by law enforcement, gangs and gangsterism have generated and continue to generate crime and localised conflicts that disproportionately affect many of the region's residents, especially those in high unemployment and low-income areas, such as the Cape Flats.

The National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy requires provincial implementation and in 2018, the Western Cape Government developed their response under the direction of Department of Community Safety through a collaborative policy formulation process and developed the Western Cape Policy response, referred to as NAGSWC throughout this paper. This strategy is aimed at reducing gang violence and preventing youth from joining criminal gangs.

This paper has sought to understand how gangsterism has been problematised and represented in the development of the NAGSWC through utilising Carol Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be' approach to policy analysis to discover how the problem is understood and represented and thus, analyse which discourses and material responses are generated, and which are not. When applied to NAGSWC, the six interrelated WPR questions brought about the following findings. First, gangsterism was represented as a 'wicked' problem with many problem feeders, rendering disadvantaged youth most vulnerable to join gangs or at risk of gang activity or violence. Of significance here are the presumptions policy makers have made about the problem of gangsterism and interventions to curb gang violence and youth joining gangs. Second, the ambitious goals within NAGSWC might not be new or impossible to implement but the plan does require long-term commitment and political will, resources, and capacity to see effect. Third, the gap between creating an action plan and implementing it poses significant challenges, as those involved in the collaborative formulation process had no possibility to control the adoption or implementation once the process was finished. Fourth, it is not possible to say for certain why NAGSWC was not utilised prior to

covid-19, as there was more than a year for processes to be implemented before the pandemic. The fact that DoCS and the Western Cape Government have apparently not begun adoption and implementation suggest that there was a problem of gangsterism producing a political pressure to ‘show action’ – hence the lack of public engagement regarding NAGSWC stands in stark contrast to recent (and not new) deployment of military into gang-ridden areas alongside the re-launch of Anti-Gang Unit, which represent the militarised, ‘tough-on-crime’ approach to gangsterism. The militarised response, which seems the only long standing approach, should be questioned if one takes into consideration findings from the empirical research on gangs in South Africa, the applicable law, and policy, notably NAGS, that requires ‘a holistic approach, which includes diverse issues rooted in communities which feed the gang problem’ (Pinnock & Pinnock 2019, p. 7) and ‘national interdepartmental anti-gang strategy requires not only the phenomenon and impact of gangsterism to be addressed, but also prevention of gangsterism’ (p. 8). Fifth, although NAGSWC does mention the high impact of violence and the vulnerability of women and girls, it is surprising that the progressive report does not employ more gender sensitivity given gender inequality and extreme rates of sexual abuse. Moreover, although the guiding principles for the section ‘peer groups’ does outline principles for working effectively with youth, NAGSWC has not explicitly created a forum for youth engagement and inclusion in the development of the anti-gang interventions, for example, in the suggested Neighbourhood Hub. Sixth, even though the action steps are carefully thought out and most likely would create meaningful results, the evidence-based model did arguably prompt the idea that this strategy would (or will) succeed where previous policies have not – despite the acknowledgement of the impact of (transnational) organised crime on gangs and subsequently, illicit drugs, issues that require solutions beyond both provincial and national levels. Additionally, the protracted social conflict lens as well as the previous research on gangsterism highlighted that the socioeconomic inequality, shaped by Apartheid legislation, still poses one of the greatest challenges with regards to youth at risk of joining gangs.

The paper has argued that there is a discrepancy between what is articulated in policy and plans and what is carried out in practice despite current and ongoing efforts, as the NAGSWC recommendations do not appear to have been utilised. It has been suggested that lack of public engagement with NAGS and a lack of political commitment to utilising the recommendations of the report aids the discourse and practice of militarised, short-term responses as adequate solutions despite research and evidence suggesting otherwise: namely, that to effectively address the conditions that foster gangsterism, more attention should be given to structural conditions, especially inequality, to effect transformation through sustained anti-gang interventions. Considering these findings, the paper concludes that more attention should be given to transforming conflict conditions in areas with high levels of gang violence as opposed to focusing on how these areas can adapt to society, just as NAGSWC proposes in devising a two-tiered model with neighbourhood level intervention. Such an approach would allow room for both groups and individuals, affording attention to youth, to gain or maintain agency and realise more active and participatory forms of citizenship through building resilience. And, of course, take an important step towards gender-sensitive policies.

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