Children's rights: The need for care, safety and protection

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Abstract
This article aims to highlight the push factors leading to children's vulnerabilities especially in historically impoverished communities in post-apartheid South Africa. These push factors are hangovers that Black[1] children continue to experience in their daily lives because of the ongoing impact of poverty and family behavioural patterns. Furthermore, the article highlights how socially constructed violence is perpetuated in the form of gangsterism when factors such as unemployment, mental health issues and lack of services contribute to a lack of care, safety and protection of children, alluding to the State's failure to provide basic services in impoverished communities. The lack of access to services coupled with the need to protect the rights of children promulgated in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child highlight how the State is directly implicated in the neglect of South African children's wellbeing. Data collection included focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with adult community members from two South African communities, exploring perceptions and experiences of everyday violence. Collaborative thematic analyses was used for analyses. Core themes that emerged centre on perceptions on the various dynamics within the family system that ruptures the family system and the various pull factors that attracts children to other replacement family systems. These factors are discussed under sub-themes.

Keywords: *children's rights; care, safety; protection, vulnerability; gangsterism, impoverishment; poverty.*

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of everyday violence poses a grave threat to social harmony, safety and peace in society. Children are especially vulnerable in such contexts given that they are often dependent on adults for care and protection, which puts them at greater risk for violence perpetrated by those in positions of power and authority (Musizvingoza, Tirivayi, Otchere & Viola, 2022: 10). Their limited understanding of social dynamics and inability to assert their rights further exacerbate their vulnerability (Moonga & Green, 2016: 350). The current study is therefore framed by a postmodern family systems theory as proposed by Gergen (1985: 273) and is complemented by a human rights perspective that is enshrined in the United Nations (UN) Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth" (1959: 1). The most salient point in family systems theory is based on the exchanges of behaviour that occurs at a particular instance of interaction among family members. These patterns of interaction among family members generate, sustain and bring about both delinquent and upright/non-delinquent behaviours. For Gergen (1994) (as cited in Puig, Koro-

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Ljungberg & Echevarria-Doan, 2008: 140), however, who proposed a social constructionism lens to family systems theory, three concepts are of importance, i.e., "socialization in context, dialogue, and identity". In describing focus group methodology within research on familial systems, Puig and colleagues (2008: 142), note that interactions between people are influenced by identities and that individual identities are shaped by the process of interactive and joint meaning-making (Puig et al, 2008: 142).

To complement family systems theory, a human right's perspective is offered as a way of understanding children's rights in relation to their communities and how these rights might be met by the State. Moreover, these rights are protected by the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to the UN Convention, these rights are entrenched basic services, care and the protection of the child. Under these rights, a decolonial feminist ethics of care allows for the child to be recognised through an African radical communitarianism (Matolino, 2009: 160) (Menkiti, 1984) (as cited in Ramose, 1999: 60) of Ubuntu. But what does Ubuntu and a decolonial feminist ethics of care mean in post-apartheid South Africa, in particular in indigent communities with high levels of violence? Recognition under these rights ensure that the child in the community is valued through decolonial love (care, safety and protection) as praxis. Therefore, a decolonial feminist ethics of care insists that children are cared for and protected within communities with the support of the State. Even when services are not guaranteed, safety should be of paramount concern. Turner, Vanderminden, Finkelhor and Hamby(2019: 272), however, found physical neglect to be related to economic stressors, as in the case of our study. Supervisory and physical neglect were further linked to the risk of being victimised and maltreated (Turner et al, 2019: 272). In Bidmead, Zerbi, Cheetham and Frost (2023: 15) the authors argue that:

> "… growing up in poverty can have significant, negative impacts on CYP's [children and young people's] physical health, mental health and wellbeing, causing feelings of exclusion, shame and a sense of unfairness. Low-income CYP's experience of school was often an unhappy one in which they struggled to fit in and join in on equal terms due to lacking many items and resources they were expected to possess."

Subsequently, rights in South Africa are constitutionally guaranteed under the Bill of Rights (South Africa, 1996: Chapter 2: Bill of Rights). Where these rights are lacking, children's wellbeing is compromised as stated by Bidmead et al (2023: 14). Failing to protect these rights can also be seen as failure within the development State, hindering the State from advancing social, political and economic stability. Thus, children's vulnerability is connected to the overall wellbeing of the community and consequently, to the State through a human rights and development perspective. This article, therefore, aims to highlight the push factors leading to children's vulnerabilities especially in historically impoverished communities in post-apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, the article foregrounds how socially constructed violence is perpetuated in the form of gangsterism when factors such as unemployment, mental health issues and lack of services contribute to a lack of care, safety and protection of children, alluding to the State's failure to provide basic services in impoverished communities.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Study design

This study utilised a participatory qualitative research design for the exploration of the minute contours and structural determinants of everyday violence in its myriad formations. The data collection methods for this study comprised focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews with adult community members exploring their perceptions and experiences of everyday violence.

Study setting and participants

The study was undertaken within two low-income communities in Johannesburg (Community A) and Cape Town (Community B), South Africa, which are both indexed as "high crime" and "low-income" communities. Available data indicates that Community A consists of 9000 households living in mostly informal housing structures, with a population that exceeds 21 000 people, including many foreign nationals (Statistics South Africa, 2011). The community continues to face various challenges including, being underserviced and having access to clean water, adequate housing and sanitation. The predominant languages spoken in the community include Setswana, isiZulu, Sesotho, isiXhosa and Xitsonga (Statistics South Africa, 2011).

Community B extends over a relatively small geographical area, with around 25 houses and about twice as many backyard dwellings. The lack of adequate community infrastructure has been linked to unsafety in this community, which includes lack of lighting, run-down streets, garbage dumps and generally a lack of safe spaces for extramural activities (for all ages, but with the youth in particular). Afrikaans is the language of preference in the community. A large portion of residents are unemployed and most residents survive on earnings of less than R1 500 per month (Isobell, Taliep, Lazarus, Seedat, Toerien & James , 2019: 27; Taliep, Bulbulia & Ismail, 2022: 154).

Convenience sampling using a system of referrals and snowballing were utilised to recruit participants. Here, the long-standing relationships that our research team has with the two specified communities allowed for community entry and access to participants. Fifteen one-on-one semi-structured individual interviews were conducted in each community (i.e., 30 participants in total) and ten participants were recruited to participate in each of the four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) (i.e., 40 participants in total) across the two communities.

Participants for the larger study were selected in accordance with the following inclusion criteria: 1) residing in the participating communities, 2) aged 18 and older and 3) heterogenous in terms of gender. Given the structuring of racial capitalism and the legacies of slavery, colonialism and apartheid in South Africa, participants all comprised "Black" South Africans (constituting people categorised as politically Black including categories such as 'Coloured') who continue to experience economic and social exclusions, poverty and unemployment.

Data analysis

The recordings (FGDs and interviews) were transcribed verbatim and translated into English by a service provider. We utilised a collaborative thematic analysis, which allowed each of us to shape the analysis in unique ways allowing for nuance. However, ongoing collaborative discussions were needed to ensure cohesion throughout the data analysis process. Braun and Clarke's (2006: 15-23) six-step approach to collaborative thematic analysis was utilised and the analysis was framed within a grounded theory approach.

Step 1: Initial organising and planning meeting and familiarisation with the data

We had two in-person collaborative meetings, which allowed for coordination and strategisation of the translation and analysis, making decisions on the theoretical stance and assignment of individual tasks. The team came to the decision that research questions should relate to the Everyday Violence Project's overarching aim. Consequently, a timeline was created for data analysis.

Step 2: Open and axial coding (generating initial codes)

During our first data analysis meeting, initial codes were generated from the data. Given that the dataset was quite large, two teams assisted with the analysis process. We followed a four-phased approach where each team identified patterns in the data and established links between those patterns. Each team member was then tasked with identifying emerging themes which they discussed with their team members. Subsequently, each team had an opportunity to present their themes, while the rest of the group offered their input and feedback to verify and refine the theme. The research collective then discussed the initial codes and negotiated the use of the different generative themes. This process allowed for the integration of various perspectives, while also addressing any inconsistencies that may have come about during coding and theme generation (Olson, McAllister, Grinnell, Walters & Appunn, 2016: 34-35).

Steps 3 and 4: Collectively developing and evaluating codes

During the initial workshop, preliminary codes were developed using the generative themes that were agreed on by the research collective. To ensure veracity, the codes were then piloted to the larger group. This was also ensured by the teams by working through the data independently and regular consultation and verification of the identified codes and themes.

Steps 5 and 6: The final coding process, revision of codes and finalising themes

During the second workshop, the respective teams continued using the codes across the datasets. All data were then analysed and a discussion was held with the research collective. Subsequently, the team agreed on a thematic framework which outlined the themes and subthemes to systematically organise our research findings.

Ethics

The study followed the ethical guiding principles specified by the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee, University of South Africa (NHREC Registration No: Rec-240816-052; CREC Reference No: 90092155_CREC_CHS_2020) and the ethical code of conduct that is recommended for social research (Babbie & Mouton, 2016: 62). Signed informed consent and consent to audio record the FGDs and the individual interviews were obtained prior to commencing with data collection. Transcription and translation service providers completed and signed a Standard Confidentially Agreement.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Core themes that emerged from the analyses of the data sets centre on participants perceptions on the various dynamics within the family system that ruptures the family system and the various pull factors that attracts children to other replacement family systems. These factors are discussed under the following sub-themes: 1. Disengaged families; 2. Lack of parental supervision; 3. Lack of Parental love and Support – Searching for Replacement; 4. Vulnerability: Becoming Pawns in a Bigger System of Organised Everyday Violence; 5. Structural determinants exacerbate everyday violence; and 6. Shaping identity in contexts of vulnerability. These themes are explored through anecdotes that in some instances challenge the existing literature on children's rights to care, safety and protection.

(1) Disengaged families

This theme explores how disconnected families push children to negative outcomes and the disavowal from consequences. By unpacking the reality of these negative outcomes, we foreground the importance of family connectedness, which was identified by Danhouse and Erasmus (2020: 860) as adding to the process of parenting in a positive way, as well as leading to individuals' wellbeing within families in South Africa. Children who reside in communities that are disparaged with violence require good familial relations, the absence thereof may affect them negatively. In a review conducted by Ozer, Lavi, Douglas and Wolf (2017: 353) which looks at community violence, the authors found that youth who had family relationships that were less close and warm in nature (compared to those who had close and warm relations with family members) had more "externalizing behaviour" related to immense violence exposure (Ozer et al, 2017: 359).

In Fisher and Ransom's (1995: 1) report, they distinguish family types, which includes the four types of *Traditional, Balanced, Emotionally Strained* and *Disconnected*. Of these family types, Ransom and Fisher (1995: 11) describe those within disconnected families as seeming to have the lowest level of attention and involvement in each other's lives. People in these types of families seek support as well as recreation elsewhere which are external to their families. Similar to disconnected families, disengaged families described by Sturge-Apple, Davies and Cummings (2010) as manifesting in uncaring, indifferent, unsupportive, and emotionally removed family relations. In a study with adolescents on family functioning typologies, Simpson, Vannucci and Ohannessian (2018: 136, 140) found that of the latent profiles which emerged, at the second time of measurement, those with low family functioning (which includes low levels of communication with parents) or those who only had a close maternal relationship experienced higher levels of depression symptomology in comparison to those who had average family functioning. They also found that those with high family functioning had less of these symptoms (Simpson et al 2018: 136, 140). We can see this disconnected and possibly low functioning type of families are present within the communities represented in this article, as seen in Participant EP6's response to the question of who is involved in the shootings: *"It's* [the] *young ...these are children who probably don't have a life. Who don't want to stay at their homes, whose parents may not be interested or worried about the child"* (EP6). This is also seen in Participant T12's reflection of parents who do not intervene in their children's behaviour:

> *"I blame the parents and us as the youth. You can't be finding a 16-year-old in the tavern and we make it as if everything is normal. What do you say as a parent if your child is not at home by 22h00pm, whilst in part I blame the youth because, some parents are at work by that time working for their families? In some cases, you do find parents who just sit at home and do nothing about this, because they don't care anymore"* (TP12).

Ransom and Fisher's (1995:1) study found that within the typology that is paternally based, adolescents who came from disconnected families consumed more alcohol than those from other types of families, namely: *Traditional* as well as *Emotionally Strained*. Parents appear to want to remain in a state of denial, pretending that their children are not involved in negative activities and get frustrated when confronted with the truth, as alluded to be a participant in the following extract:

> *"Yes, there are two sides to the story and the parents never want to know that their children are doing these things. They don't talk with the children but yet the children does the thing, understand? But if other people talk about it then it seems the parents are angry with you too. Which is now the real story. Yes"* (EP6).

This aligns with a study where all mothers' communications regarding their children involved being devoted to their children yet also being in denial and having incredulity about their children's drug use (Wegner, Arend, Bassadien, Bismath & Cros, 2014: 8). This may be indicative of a selective disengagement with children's behaviour. Notably, in Ransom and Fisher's (1995:11) outline of disconnected families, there is a positive element of members therein settling conflict and problems when compelled to do so. Contrariwise, this was not the case in this data, but we can consider this as a glimmer of hope that perhaps has potential.

(2) Lack of parental supervision

In conjunction to disengaged families with regard to lack of emotional presence, is a lack of consistent physical parental presence in the home. This theme particularly relates to the effects of a core parenting technique which requires parents to look after, set boundaries and monitor their children, and highlights the negative outcomes that may emerge due to the lack of parental supervision. Children being left alone for time periods do not have positive outcomes. Young, Fitzgibbon and Silverstone (2014: 172) noted that greater levels of "poor parental supervision" is associated with increased "youthful criminality". This theme emphasizes the need for supervision as the data reveals the negative outcomes thereof. Participants across the research communities made note of the lack of supervision. One participant (EP12 from Cape Town) alluded that primary school children go home to an empty house and a participant from the Johannesburg community stated:

> *"It's not good at all for them to be left alone from the morning until 5pm and you don't even know what the child does during the day. The child might join other kids who are being naughty. They will go and play in the streets or try to jump the fence into Area 11 in search of foods, as the Indian community normally feeds them breyani meals. Some of them end up being hit by a car and the parent does not even know since they're at work"* (TP14).

As seen in the above quote and supported by several other studies, the lack of supervision pushes children to engage in negative behaviour (Hesselink & Bougard, 2020: 462; Walters, 2021: 59; Young et al, 2014: 172). Walters (2021: 59) found weak levels of supervision by parents to be a predictor for "delinquency over a period of six months". Push factors in Hesselink and Bougard's (2020: 462) study towards involvement in gangs further included inadequate parental involvement and supervision.

One participant particularly drew attention to children's schooling schedules in the context of COVID-19 stating:

> *"COVID-19 has hit us very hard…It also affected the school calendar as children now needed to go to school on a certain day, which is a huge challenge since parents are mostly at work and the kids are expected to be home alone with nothing to do which leads to them turning to wicked ways"* (TP14).

However, as encapsulated in the following quotes, there are parents who do care for their children but because of the need to provide for their children and not having caregivers for holiday periods, there is not always supervision available. Participant 14 speaks to this inaccessibility to supervision:

> *"Children face numerous challenges since it's December, school holidays, as their parents are mostly at work and they have no one to look after them. So, you find that they sit and lie idle during the day whilst hungry as well, and so, things like a daycare centre will help remedy this situation because some parents end up leaving house keys with the neighbours and kids get naughty and sometimes end up mistakenly burning the houses. In some cases, they are left alone until 5pm with only a breakfast meal prepared and they will now have to wait the whole day for the mother to come back from work"* (TP14).

Whether parents willingly allow their children to be unsupervised or that it occurs due to circumstances i.e., parents having to go to work and cannot afford childcare, nonetheless children need supervision. UNICEF's children's rights conventions requires that governments provide protection for children from neglect by caregivers (UNICEF, nd). While this does not exempt parents from responsibility, it does place further responsibility on the State to uphold its obligation to the rights of the child and support parents with assistance to childcare.

(3) Lack of parental love and support – searching for replacement

The current theme outlines how children have been deprived of attention, care, support and love in their homes, which is necessary for a child's healthy development. When children do not have parental emotional support or physical presence in the home, they may experience an effect of lack of love and scarcity of support, contributing towards a lack of connection to those in the home. Participant 3 noted that there is a lack of guidance for young children and Participant EP6 noted that one may: "…*come out of a good house*" but still fall into the wrong things because of lack of attention and time spent with parents:

> *Its children who – like I said earlier – children who don't get attention* [at home]*, understand? There is never anyone to be there with him. That's why he goes. And I said this – it previously – he will look for it outside (the home), and outside is where he or she will find it, even better* [at home]" (EP6)

To consolidate this, another participant also noted: *"…but the problem actually lies with the parents. Because if you're not focused (attentive) parents and you're on your own buzz and you don't know about stability and security for your children. Because of this, their future is evil and dark"* (EP2).

The above excerpts demonstrate that a lack of parental support or support in the home plays a role in the outcome of children's behaviour which then makes children susceptible to external factors such as gangs. This finding is corroborated by a study conducted by Young et al (2014: 182) who found a higher risk of youth delinquency as well as involvement in gangsterism to be related to the breakdown of emotional ties with supposed loved ones, weakening bonds within families leading to family conflicts. There is a strong need for parental attention, support and love to mitigate pushing children towards negative behaviour. When prompted by the interviewer on whether involvement in gangs or the selling of drugs is an escape from what is perhaps happening in their homes, Participant EP10 from the Cape Town community responded: *"They see it in that, in that way yes... They see it that way because they take it, at home they don't get that attention"* (EP10).

A ruptured family system pushes children away from their family and propels them to search for external affirmation and replacements for love bonds. Hesselink and Bougard (2020: 462) identified inadequate parental bonding, familial conflict and the absence of the paternal figure in the household as such "push factors". One participant noted: "*It turns the children to this thing* [i.e., the gang]*, because they aren't getting enough love at home*" (EP3). Since children within the communities, where this study was conducted, are surrounded by violence in their everyday lives, the gangs then become the pull factor that provides them with a "replacement family" as demonstrated in the ensuing quote:

> *"You get a lot (of), you get gangsters who stand (together) like families, who will not betray you or anything like that.* [RES 1:*Who cares?*] *Yes, we are one, so if I get hurt then you get hurt too, you see ma'am? We will die for each other, we will die for each other, we will kill for each other"* (EP3).

When the internal family system is ruptured, the child might go to the outside to find a new system, offering the child an alternative system away from inadequate or non-existent parental bonding and a lack of belonging and love. The gang functions in a similar manner to a family where a sense of belonging is cultivated. Hesselink and Bougard's (2020: 463) study confirms this experience, claiming that inadequate parental care encourages gang membership as a way to fill the gap. In such circumstances, the gang operates as familial and extends care, safety and protection to all gang members (Ljungkrantz & Einarsson, 2022: 9). This support (although highly problematic) at times to the point of murdering others, continues to give children a group identity.

(4) Vulnerability: Becoming pawns in a bigger system of organised everyday violence

Alongside a ruptured family system, children are embroiled in everyday violence because of their vulnerability. Children's vulnerabilities are rarely caused by a single factor; their experiences are often embedded in layers of risk, this can be determined by situational difficulties, social disadvantage and physical or personal factors (Grobbelaar, 2020: 15). The following theme foregrounds children's vulnerability and speaks to how the pervasiveness of everyday violence within the community influences their lived realities both within and outside the home. Violence was depicted by participants as ubiquitous inescapable and unavoidable. Thus, children are 'not safe inside and not safe outside'.

> *"Everywhere you go – the violence is too severe, every area. We can sit here too, the children from that side come there, and from that side, or those children come there. Then it's all over the place and you get a fright. Who are all here now? Because that thing – or someone – because you didn't expect them all to walk together. Now you see this one walking with the child, you can't say:* [inaudible] *"You must not walk with the wrong friends" This is what I say to my child: "You should never point the finger at anyone, I point the finger, because you should not walk with them, because it's not your level of people, your category, you should* [do] *better* [Cross talk]*"* (EP5).

> *"This is very bad. Children are no longer safe on the roads. Children are no longer safe to go to the beaches because it's the gangsterism, it's this gangster and that is that gangster. My child stays here, my child can't walk there, but my child stays here, but my child can't walk in his own place. Do you understand?"* (EP5).

> *"Oh, very bad, because since I have to raise children – raise two children in the area – two girl children – I don't feel like there's much safety for me ... and for my children. Because they are still small, I don't think they're aware of what's going on yet. ... Like they're influenced easily– children who are – aren't at that stage yet. Maybe (they) make wrong choices with friends. ...Like for example – as they grow up they become friends with the wrong friends and start making wrong decisions with the friends*" (EP4).

Despite the dismal aftermaths of gang membership and searching for "replacement" love and support, children's vulnerability is exacerbated by their everyday material challenges, which renders them more vulnerable to becoming 'easy prey' to gangsters.

> *"Like, for example, there's a child who isn't a 'skollie', now his mother can't buy stuff either, because he sees what the other boy is wearing, which that man – ... So, it's very easy to buy for him. He also wants to wear what that one is wearing"* (EP4).

> *"It's really a gangster – it's not just what it makes them feel like, to walk with a gun and be cool in the streets. People are afraid of them– it's coolness – and they're getting dressed (snazzy). Merchants dress them, they have money, they…"* (EP4).

The lure of materialism through clothes, money, status and power coupled with offers of protection and safety easily entice younger children into gangsterism. Subsequently, the latter quote demonstrates how when children join gangs, the gangsters provide them with a sense of power, whereby they are transformed from being victims of their circumstances to "villains" that gain a sense of "false respect" through becoming bullies.

Children's vulnerability to gangsterism was further exacerbated by national lockdown measures due to the coronavirus pandemic. The recent Risk Bulletin by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (2020: 1-4) on children's vulnerability due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, argue that while the closure of schools left children struggling with their education, it also caused some children, particularly in gang-ridden communities in the Western Cape, to be at an elevated risk for gang exploitation. The study further indicates that a number of children and their families resorted to working for gangs due to economic destitution and hunger brought on by COVID-19. Notwithstanding the ramifications of the pandemic, participants in our study foregrounded the everyday structural reality within the community as a key factor that drove children to gangs long before COVID-19. With particular reference to children and their involvement in delinquent behaviour and their susceptibility to gangsterism. One participant noted that:

"Yes, because there – when you [referring to the children] *sit at home like that you just start doing funny things because you don't work. Or you start to make wrong decisions just for income for you* [during COVID, things were] *the same, my darling. There was no difference… It has always been the same, still unemployed. In COVID time – before COVID time – now still– still unemployed"* (EP4).

Parker, McLaggan and Thomas (2020: np) note that it is easy for gangs to profit from poverty, a lack of social services and high levels of unemployment. Participants in this study foregrounded how gangs intentionally target young children to become pawns in a bigger system of organised violence (crime) as demonstrated in the ensuing excerpts:

"Now they [the gangs] *use the children, young children, the older ones use the young children, to do things. Because they know the (young) kids aren't going to jail, they're not going to jail because they're minors. Then the big ones are still standing there. That's what it's about here in the world. Now anyone is going to be concerned, anyone is going to worry, … So why do they have to look like this from street to street, corner to corner, the people break into houses, make ... rob the people, all those types of things, it's not right that the world should be like this"* (EP 9).

"I wanted to say [inaudible] *that kills people like that. Like I mean, for example, many lose their children; innocent children, small children, they were still young, some of them are involved in the shooting. They don't want to be told, they rob the people. That big man says to that little kid, that little kid must do it now because he's not going to jail, because he's this age, or that age. Do you understand? Because why does that child think of doing these things? Because, I was a kid, I was scared, terribly scared, I was scared to get up to things. But then they're not afraid of getting up to things today"* (EP5).

Whilst children are used by the gangs as, what Parker et al (2020: np) refer to as "Bokkies", it should be noted that even though the notion of 'Bokkie' or 'Springbokkie' conjures up images of innocence, fragility and vulnerability to become prey to predators (gangs), in the context of this study, some participants demonised children as 'skollies' and villains, which makes us lose sight of the fact that they are victims of their circumstance. It has been reported that to avoid drawing attention from law enforcement, South African gangs have for ages taken advantage of the fact that in South African law children under ten years of age do not have criminal capacity and therefore, cannot be arrested for an offence. Whilst those under 18 years of age are still considered minors, they too cannot be tried as adults (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2020: 4). Thus, under South African law, children's exploitation by gangs for criminal activity makes children prey to such violence, inducting them into the world of gangsterism. The South African State failure to tackle poverty and the attendant socio-economic factors encourages gangsterism, making gangsterism an entrenched part of South African society.

(5) Structural determinants exacerbate everyday violence

As noted previously, Puig et al (2008: 142)emphasise that the interactions and experiences of families are impacted by the everyday social environment they find themselves in. The ways in which everyday violence persists within family systems and the outcome these everyday experiences have on children, therefore, cannot be explored without considering the role of structural impediments within these communities. Research has shown that structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, poor quality education and geographic marginalisation have dire consequences to the wellbeing of children and can contribute to other forms of violence (Brankovic, 2012: 12; McKenzie, 2019: 21; Schwebel & Christie, 2001: 1). In addition, structural violence seemingly maintains unsafe spaces within and outside the home by either creating unsafe spaces or encouraging engagement in unsafe spaces in order to survive the consequences of structural violence, often resulting in deleterious outcomes, further impacting on the vulnerability of children. In the findings of the current study, this association between structural violence and unsafe spaces were explored by examining the structural factors related to physical space, poverty and access to resources and ultimately how these manifest for children in the participating communities.

Physical environment

The quality and nature of the environment in which a child is born may either facilitate or hinder healthy development (Moore, McDonald, Carlon & O'Rourke, 2015: 103). Neighbourhoods with a high prevalence of dangerous events (e.g., motor vehicle/pedestrian accidents or gang and criminal activities) tend to increase the risk of children being exposed to these dangers. The current sub-theme therefore centres on the ever-present dangers of the physical space outside the home that are faced by children within the community, and more specifically, how these dangers within their outside environments influence the everyday experiences of children in the community. Findings illustrated that participants were highly aware of the omnipresent dangers presented by the environment external to the home and familial space. One example is the unsafe physical spaces in which children engage in their everyday lives, such as the road/streets, as expressed by the following participants: "Regarding the small streets and lack of infrastructure, that is also a problem. The streets are so small that cars pass by there while children are playing in the streets" (TP6).

For Participant TP6, the road/streets were viewed as a dangerous place for children due to poor infrastructure, essentially placing children's safety at risk. Poorly maintained infrastructure and traffic related incidents have been contributors to unsafe spaces across various studies(e.g., Cutts, Olivier, Lazarus, Taliep, Cochrane, Seedat, van Reenen, Hendricks & Carelse, 2016: 10; Koekemoer, Van Gesselleen, Van Niekerk, Govender & Van As, 2017: 208; Mmari, Lantos, Brahmbhatt, Delany-Moretlwe, Lou, Acharya & Sangowawa, 2014: 7) and is indicative of the impact structural violence can have on the everyday wellbeing and safety of children. Similarly, for Participant EP5, the road/streets were also viewed as a dangerous place for children, however, not necessarily because of the dangers presented by traffic/road hazards as expressed by TP6, but because of gang activity and the risk of being caught between gang territories:

> *"Children are no longer safe on the roads. Children are no longer safe to go to the beaches, because it's the gangsterism, it's this gangster and that is that gangster. My child stays here, my child can't walk there, but my child stays here, but my child can't walk in his own place"* (EP5).

From EP5's account, it is evident that gang turf wars present as a physical threat to the lives of children within the participating communities. Moreover, neighbourhoods that are plagued by gang activity seemingly increase one's risk to be harmed as soon as one steps out the door and is part of everyday life - a risk that has seemingly been normalised. Studies conducted in similar contexts support this finding of the omnipresent dangers in the physical environment (such as Adams, Savahl & Fattore, 2017: 30; Benninger & Savahl, 2016: 6) impacting safety and mobility whilst emphasising the need to address structural issues that manifest in the dangers of the physical spaces making children vulnerable.

Poverty and unemployment

Homes within resource-constrained environments often lack optimal material conditions, which may increase children's susceptibility and vulnerability to criminal activities. Children within low-income communities are often attracted to gangs due to the financial and material resources they offer(see Wegner, Behardien, Loubser, Ryklief & Smith, 2016: 56). This sub-theme consequently explores how structural impediments such as poverty and unemployment often manifest and perpetuate poor material conditions, which seemingly contributes to the existing vulnerabilities already faced by children in these communities. Findings showed that for many participants, structural challenges, particularly not being able to provide for your family and being unemployed, were aspects that are a part of everyday life and often lead to children engaging in further unsafe practices and behaviour (e.g., drug smuggling and gangsterism) within the community, as demonstrated by the following anecdotes:

> *"Look – if you don't work, you're easily susceptible* [to] *that merchant who tells you, 'Come here, smuggle for me.' They attract a lot of young kids, innocent kids to start with dagga first and then tik, and then he smuggles everything. And then tomorrow – the day after tomorrow a 'Sous' shoots him"* (EP1). *"Now the drug lord comes and offers the children what their parents can't buy for them, understand? This is also where it comes in"* (EP4).

This was best expressed by TP10: *"There are places where you find that the parents are not working and there is a lot of poverty in such a house, whereby that children have given themselves over to a lot of things"*.

These accounts are indicative of the impact that material conditions have on the vulnerability of children, and different outcomes of these structural factors have been noted by other authors (Bidmead et al, 2023: 15, Brankovic, 2012: 43; McKenzie, 2019: 25; Schwebel & Christie, 2001: 1). Similar to findings in this study, researchers note that gangs are often deemed as attractive due to the illusion of providing an alternative reality to a broken home, unemployment, poverty, or marginalisation (De Vito, 2019: 764; Geldenhuys, 2020: 19; Wegner et al, 2016: 56). It is thus essential to eradicate structural factors which contribute to youth engaging in delinquent and violent practices and improve the material conditions of vulnerable children in these communities.

Lack of recreational facilities

It has been shown that a lack of facilities to keep youth occupied may lead to engagement in alternative activities, such as joining gangs or being on the streets to pass the time (Ndhlovu & Tanga, 2021: 16). In lieu of this, this sub-theme sheds light on the lack of facilities for recreational purposes within the participating communities, which ultimately affects the ways in which children engage and keep themselves occupied. Current findings demonstrated the impact of boredom and lack of recreational facilities on everyday violence through its contribution to youth engaging in delinquent behaviour and activities. Participants emphasised the lack of resources/facilities for youth in the community and indicated the need for youth programmes or recreational facilities to keep youth occupied and prevent them from engaging in criminal or deviant activities, making them less susceptible to being preyed on:

> *"...there should be more youth centres. Something where* [there is] *like football and rugby and dancing. That was big, these things need to come back so that the youngsters can keep busy. Then that merchant won't get a chance to recruit that child"* (EP1).

> *"...open* [up] *programmes for the young people, to keep them off the streets because that's actually where it starts with them, you see ma'am? If they maybe* [have] *rugby teams or so, youth classes and things like that, that keep them off the streets, and they will get away from the drugs too"* (EP3).

This was also strongly captured by TP4, who stressed that: *"...as youth it just kills our strength, there are many of us and we are just sitting and doing nothing. This ends up with youth being the ones who are doing crime"*. For these participants, the idleness and lack of facilities are seemingly drivers for youth to engage in crime (Ndhlovu, 2022; Thometz, 2017) and contribute to criminal activities that create and normalise unsafe community spaces. Therefore, as noted by Geldenhuys (2020: 21), attempts need to be made to "destabilise the recruitment engine" and involve youth in legitimate activities, emphasising the importance of educational, cultural, sport and recreational programmes.

(6) Shaping identity in contexts of vulnerability

Children globally are exposed to various forms of risk and adversity, their experiences and outcomes are primarily influenced by the environment in which they grow up (Gartland, Riggs, Muyeen, Giallo, Afifi, MacMillan, Herman, Bulford & Brown, 2019: 1). Vulnerable children who lack conventional familial, neighbourhood or community support, often face difficulties in shaping a positive sense of identity, which hinders their ability to establish feelings of belonging (Benninger & Savahl, 2016: 6). Thus, these children struggle with mental wellbeing, as a result.

The environment in which a child is raised, such as the family, the home, the community and the school, all play a big role in how the child develops. Children learn mainly through their interactions with others in their environment (Gartland et al, 2019: 11). Object relations theory (Benjamin, 1988: 24; Flax 2004: 910) highlights how through recognition processes the child individuates and becomes a subject and contributes to the community. In these instances, recognition processes lend themselves to the child feeling valued. Thus, safe, secure and nurturing connections and environments represent some of the most influential, safeguarding and healing influences for a child. These bonds nurtured within the home, school and in the community form the foundation of a child's development trajectory (Lehrl, Evangelou & Sammons, 2020: 5). However, these ideals are difficult to attain in communities where violence is ever-present. Children encounter violence in various situations, which can often intersect, including at home, at school and the community (Bacchini & Esposito, 2019: 158). Against this background, we discuss the links between exposure to everyday violence and how this shapes children's trajectory.

Children often observe adults in order to discern socially acceptable behaviour, while also seeking role models to emulate in shaping their own identities. A lack or absence of positive role models may present various challenges, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who regularly face adverse social circumstances in their everyday lives (Matshabane, 2016: 1). Children in marginalised communities such as in the study are often subjected to various displays of everyday violence in the home and the community, which may hinder the process of forming an identity and developing a sense of self.

A major driver of identity development that emerged in our discussions with participants are the high rates of gangsterism. In communities which are characterised by disadvantage and deprivation, children are easily lured into gang culture. The lifestyle of gangsters promises a false narrative of a "*better life*" and is glamorised by wealth, status, power and material items (Owen & Greeff, 2015: 16). This lifestyle is publicised and advertised, and the so-called benefits become attractive to vulnerable children (Vorster, 2018: 478). This is illustrated in participants reflections below:

> *"…and like our children are starting to see the gunmen as heroes"* (EP1).

> "*So it's actually sad to see the children, they don't have something to go (back) to, like – like that guy said - a role model. They don't have role models (for themselves). To – to look up and say, "I want to be like that one". They only have the gangsters because they drive cool cars, and they have a lot of money ... things like that"* (EFGD1).

Through these narratives we can deduce that there is a sense of admiration and respect for the gangsters and the culture that accompanies gangsterism. The gangsters are seen as prominent figures in the community and are often viewed as community leaders and role models who have influence in the community. Vorster (2018: 477) asserts that gangs usually target children from low socio-economic backgrounds who crave acknowledgement, self-worth and a sense of identity. Membership or association to gangs provides children with substitute identities allowing them to redefine their self-image and enabling them to adapt to harsh realities. Furthermore, it provides them access to alternative forms of income and the presence of father and brother figures who step into the void left by the absence of positive role models in their lives (van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo, 2021: 127).

Participants also highlighted the impact of the familial environment. This is a particularly important context of socialisation during childhood (Paus-Hasebrink, Kultere & Sinner,2019: 11). Initial identity is based on interactions between children and their parents although children will incorporate new information and contexts into their identities as they move into different spaces (Crocetti, Rubini & Meeus, 2020: 208). Childhood experiences within the home, both positive and negative influences their development trajectory and identity development. Indeed, children exposed to violent environments often show a higher propensity for aggressive behaviour and antisocial behaviour (Bacchini & Esposito, 2019: 157). One theoretical viewpoint that sheds light on this is the social learning theory, which suggests that children acquire certain behaviours by observing aggressive role models in their environments (Galanaki & Malafantis, 2022: 2). This is depicted in participants extracts below:

> *"My children – I'll say how it is for them too, my boy, the eight-year-old one, has no manners anymore. None. And like, when I am giving him a hiding, he would hit me back. Because he sees his uncle doing it to my grandmother, to his mother. Or he curses at me"* (EP1).

> *"Some of them adopt these tendencies because they are unable to distinguish between what is wrong and what is right when they are angry or violent. They will sometimes assume something is correct because they witnessed their father do it to their mothers"* (TP9).

> *"Children learn what they live. If they exposed to these things on a daily basis, or monthly basis whatsoever…again the environment is going to determine my values and my system, what I'm going to accept, what's right or wrong"* (EP12).

This is similar to findings by Omidi, Heidari, Davari, Espanini, Poursalehi, Naeini, Rastkerdar, Azizi and Zakizadeh (2014: 100), who assert that often violent behaviour in children can be attributed to what they are exposed to in their environment. As seen in the reflections of Participant EP12, children could be exposed to domestic violence, gang violence and drug abuse, all of which affects how the child will internalise and respond to these forms of violence (Bacchini & Esposito, 2019). From this perspective as Participant E1 notes, because children bear witness to violence it becomes a common

experience to them, so much so that children themselves become physically violent towards others and act out that to which they are exposed. Experiences of violence in a child's environment can thus establish standards or anticipation for violence in different contexts, for example, youth exposed to community violence may view domestic violence as commonplace and become less sensitised to it (Bacchini & Esposito, 2019: 162). Given the pervasiveness of overlapping violence in various spheres of children's lives, they may perceive violence in the home and in the community as evidence that the world is unsafe and that they do not deserve protection. This understanding could promote violent behaviour as a strategy for self-defence or survival within their environment (Mrug, Madan & Windle, 2017: 3).

In foregrounding these experiences of everyday violence, it was apparent throughout the data how participants portrayed children as being robbed of their childlike innocence. As seen in the extract below:

> *"…and you know what hurts me are the children, children, young children, gentle children. They – they change when they are (involved) in things. They turn into – I have – into monsters, in other words. Because I'm talking out of experience. My grandchild was the gentlest child. Pigeons, dogs, an animal lover. If their – our dogs fought, then that child cried, he got beside himself. I'm not telling you a lie. In the blink of an eye* [snaps fingers]*, I didn't know my child! What – what happened? What – what went wrong? And I started to realise he was walking with friends he shouldn't walk with. Then he was (involved) in the gangster things. Understand? And it's hard to get out of it, and it's not fun for me. Our children are being used"* (EFGD1).

This participant demonstrates children as young, innocent and vulnerable in one moment and, then depicts how the environment demonises children, forcing them to adopt a "villain" identity. This extract particularly highlights how the innocence of childhood is irrevocably breached in the *blink of an eye*. This is representative of the ease with which children fall into gangsterism because of its pervasiveness and ever-present nature. It exists to such a degree that the gang identity is inescapable and almost imposed on children as a survival strategy.

It is evident in the data that identity development is the by-product of several social influences experienced within an individual's social environment (Price, 2014: 12; Ragelienė, 2016: 103). Individuals' identity is shaped by the exchanges that occur between an individual and others in their social environment, this includes the familial setting and the broader community. Therefore, children growing up in contexts in which they are faced with endemic violence may be subjected to several barriers in negotiating positive identity formation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this article, we see how material circumstances enables children's vulnerability to crime and gangsterism as an escape from the everyday violence of impoverished communities. Moreover, it highlights how the South African State is failing in meeting the gap of the UN Declaration on Child Rights in providing care, safety and protection. The gaps that children face in such circumstances leads and encourages them into criminal activity entrenching the cycle of poverty and crime. The lack of love in families highlighted the push factors that encouraged participants to seek to fill this gap through external factors such a gangsterism and criminal activity. The lack of childcare in after-school activities through community centres and activities made children susceptible to such influences highlighting the State's failure in securing safe and protected spaces for children. The pull factors that encouraged gangsterism were the ways in which gangs created a sense of belonging and bonds of love that were lacking in the home. Such pull factors will continue to win when the gaps of love, care and safety are not met. Material factors of impoverishment contributes significantly towards children's rights being neglected and eroded when the State fails to ensure safety of all children regarding services provided by the State such as education, health care and safe housing. Thus, the State is squarely responsible for ensuring that children's rights for care, safety and protection must be secured when rethinking breaking the cycle of poverty and crime in impoverished communities in SA.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research was conducted under unique circumstances, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This may have exacerbated existing structural impediments. In lieu of this, conditions post COVID-19 may yield different findings. The article further foregrounds the experiences of children.

Children, however, are represented through the voices of adults, who were the targeted population of this research. While not in the scope of this article, further research should consider children's perspectives of everyday violence. As a final recommendation, child-centred programmes should encompass a multi-level approach, which targets children, families and the broader community.

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Endnotes

1. This refers to the racial categories as used by the previous dispensation and will be used for the purposes of this article.

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