

THE IMPACT OF YOUTH GANG VIOLENCE ON THE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF MALE HIGH SCHOOL LEARNERS IN KHAYELITSHA

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**KEYWORDS:** youth gang violence, educational attainment, gang membership, gang membership benefits, effects of gang membership, community involvement with youth gangs

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This article draws on a study which explored youth gang violence amongst male high school learners in Khayelitsha. A qualitative research design and a snowball sampling were applied. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to conduct in-depth face-to-face individual interviews. The study found that most learners start engaging in gang activities between the ages of 12 and 14 years. The respondents wanted the gang violence to end because it interfered with their educational attainment. Respondents also perceived the community to be consciously and unconsciously promoting youth gang violence. Recommendations are proposed regarding the management of youth gang violence.



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### INTRODUCTION

Youth Gang Violence (YGV) is on the rise in South Africa and this situation seems to have led to increased fears about safety and security in and around schools in Khayelitsha. YGV and vigilantism were identified as major acute policing challenges by the Khayelitsha Commission Report (2014). The increasing number of high school learners getting involved in gang activities raises a major concern regarding the impact of their involvement on their educational attainment and/or lives in general. It is against this backdrop that the authors were motivated to conduct the study, especially as one of the researchers is a resident in Khayelitsha. The article draws on this study, which explored the educational attainment of male high school learners who were involved in YGV in Khayelitsha Site B. The objectives of the study included exploring the participants' schooling background; their motivation for joining the gangs; the benefits, if any, of gang membership; the regrets, if any, for involvement in gangs; their future intentions regarding their involvement in YGV; and the role of the community in relation to YGV. The article presents, firstly, the theoretical framework that underpinned the study, followed by a discussion on the literature review. This is followed by a summary of the methodology of the study and presentation of the participants' profiles, and a detailed discussion of the research data. The article is concluded with a summary of the key findings and the main recommendations of the study.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical perspectives underpinning the study are those related to *social inclusion and the capability approach*. Relevant theories have been proposed by Sen (1999) to understand the rights of people to achieve their goals through economic participation, political liberties, social powers, good health, quality basic education, and the access to resources. Social inclusion entails the promotion of equitable access to the benefits and services available in society. This is required for young people at risk of, or experiencing, social exclusion. Likewise, the capability approach stipulates that development involves the expansion of human capabilities. Thus, access to education, health care and employment provides opportunities for people to be agents of their own development and that of others (Sen, 1999).

Cooper and Ward (2012:224) argue that the "risk factors that increase the likelihood that a child will join a gang show a great overlap with the risk factors for delinquency and violent or aggressive behaviour in general". Sefali (2014) reported that young people involved in gang violence fight to kill with pangas, knives and using their hands; they do not even know what caused the fights, and they do not care. Hence, the marginalisation of young people in societies can therefore increase their vulnerability and heighten their exposure to, or involvement in, violence (Graham, Bruce & Perold, 2010). Mncube and Harber (2013:1) assert that "these incidents underline the extent of violence and

crime we experience in our communities, which generally impacts negatively on education and what happens in the school in particular". Mncube and Harber (2013) further maintain that even though violence in schools is a global problem, attempts need to be made to ensure that schools remain safe environments that promote effective teaching and learning. Scholars such as Sharkey, Shekhtmeyster, Chavez-Lopez, Norris and Sass (2011) believe that protective factors need to be enhanced, which could make schools compensate for the attraction of gangs by addressing the hierarchical needs of at-risk youths; these are discussed in the literature review below.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualising youth gangs

Klein and Maxson (2006:4) describe the concept of a youth gang as a "durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement is illegal activity which is part of its group identity". Akiyama (2012) seems to concur with this view, as he maintains that a youth gang is often referred to as a "criminal street gang" by law enforcement, and they generally entail ongoing group that associates on a continuous or regular basis. Akiyama (2012) further differentiates between three types of youth gangs. Firstly, the *turf gang* is the most common type of gang structure, otherwise known as the *territorial or traditional gang*. This type of gang claims a 'turf' or neighbourhood where they will operate. Secondly, the *crime-for-profit gang* is characterized as being extremely mobile, meaning that they are able to move from one area to the next very easily. because they are not bound by a specific neighbourhood, and committing crimes for profit is the main motivational factor for membership and activity. The third, the *philosophical gang*, is based on a belief system instead of a lifestyle. However, it is important to keep in mind that a particular gang could 'fit' into multiple gang-structure types (Akiyama, 2012).

According to Dwane, cited in the Khayelitsha Commission Report (2014), youth gangs operating in Khayelitsha are quite different from the gangs that are operating in Manenberg and Mitchells Plain in Cape Town.<sup>1</sup> Gangs in Manenberg are often connected to organised crime and drugs, while the gangs in Khayelitsha are more about an identity, and their gang fights are about claiming their space and their identity within these communities. The Khayelitsha Commission Report (2014: 107-108) identifies mainly four youth gangs in Khayelitsha, namely: "the Vatos, the Vuras, the Italians and the Russians". These gangs are territorial, that is, membership is determined by where a young person lives. The Italians are in Site B and Site C, while the Vuras are in Harare, and the Vatos are mainly from Kuyasa and Khayelitsha central (The Khayelitsha Commission Report 2014: 107-108).

### Age of joining youth gangs

It is important to identify the age at which young people start to associate with and join gangs, particularly for the purpose of designing and implementing programmes that are aimed at primary and secondary prevention of YGV. The literature seems to suggest that young boys start associating with gangs very early, when they are still at primary school level, between the ages of 5 to 12 years (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015; Howell, 2010; Ward, 2007; Legget, 2005). However, these learners eventually join youth gangs when they are at a high school, between the ages of 14 and 21 (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015; Howell, 2010; Legget, 2005). The implication of learners joining youth gangs at the high school stage is explored further in the discussion of research data below.

### Motivation for and benefit of joining youth gangs

Sharkey et al. (2011) assert that even though gang involvement leads to many negative outcomes, such as incarceration, drug and alcohol use, injury and death, gangs may also serve as a protective influence and offer many benefits that are unmet in their homes, schools and neighbourhoods to those who join them. In their study Sharkey et al. (2011) illustrate how gangs can meet the hierarchy of various human

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<sup>1</sup> Khayelitsha is a township whose residents are predominantly black African people, whilst Manenberg and Mitchells Plain are townships whose residents are mainly coloured African people.

needs, as theorised by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, including survival, safety, security, protection, belonging, identity and good self-esteem. Therefore gang membership "acts as a protective factor for at-risk youth who might otherwise succumb to what might be perceived as more devastating outcomes such as continuing poverty and academic failure" (Sharkey et al., 2011).

There seems to be a common understanding in the literature that poverty is one of the major pushing factors that leads many young people to join gangs, since gang members often come from impoverished socio-economic backgrounds (Sefali, 2014; Cooper & Ward, 2012; Akiyama, 2012; Ward, 2007; Burnett, 1999). Jane (2018:24) maintains that one of the attractions of gangs for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is "the ease of access to financial and material resources, particularly in a context of poverty, where fundamental human needs are often not adequately met, or met at all". Individual factors which have been identified in the literature include the safety and protection a gang can offer, substance use, appetite for aggressive behaviour, and weapon possession and use; and linked to these are common peer-group factors such as intimidation by peers to join, acceptance by peers, the loyalty and reward that comes with being part of the gang, control of turf, and a common enemy (Sefali, 2014; Cooper & Ward, 2012; Akiyama, 2012; Ward, 2007; Howell, 2010).

Risk factors that emanate from school include poor attachment to school, attention and learning problems at school, and dropping out of school, whilst those that emanate from the family include poor attachment to the parents, delinquent siblings, and violent parents and gangster family members (Wijnberg & Green, 2014; Sefali, 2014; Cooper & Ward, 2012; Akiyama, 2012; Ward, 2007; Howell, 2010). The pushing factors that originate from the community include increased risk of violent victimisation and death, high levels of drug use and violence, and poor policing (Wijnberg & Green, 2014; Sefali, 2014; Cooper & Ward, 2012; Akiyama, 2012; Ward, 2007; Howell, 2010).

### **The consequences of involvement in youth gangs for educational attainment**

The lack of transport opportunities that are affordable to and from school seems to be one of the hindrances to education for many high school learners, especially because most households in poor communities live on very little income as a result of unemployment or low wages (Klassen, 1998). Most young people walk to and from school, no matter how long the distance is from their homes. It has been found that male learners who are gang members always live in constant fear of being attacked or killed by opponent gang members, especially if they must walk to school alone without protection from other gang members (Standing, 2005). As a result, male learners would often miss many classes, which in turn often leads to poor academic performance (Sharkey et al., 2011; Ward, 2007). Mncube and Harber (2013: 4) argue that "school should be a safe environment that encourages effective teaching and learning, while violence in schools is a global problem". The spread of YGV in school premises makes gang members vulnerable to attacks and death whilst at school (Sharkey et al., 2011). This may drive learners who are gang members to stay away from school and eventually drop out of school (Wijnberg & Green, 2014).

### **Factors that influence learners to leave the gangs**

Whilst there are many benefits for learners to remain members of a gang, it has been found in the literature that there also significant drivers which could influence the learners to leave the gangs (Jane, 2018; Cooper & Ward, 2012; Ward, 2007). The factors that could potentially influence learners to leave the gangs are sometimes individual decisions, which include having ambitions to acquire an education and a career, making responsible and moral decisions in life, good social skills and association with prosocial peers (Jane, 2018; Cooper & Ward, 2012; Ward, 2007; O'Brien, Daffern, Chu & Thomas, 2013). A sense of belonging in school and a commitment to school as well as a wish to be on good terms with their own families, valuing positive relationships with loved ones, caring about loved ones' safety, parental involvement and monitoring, family cohesiveness and support were found to be significant factors that influenced learners to leave gangs (Jane, 2018; Cooper & Ward, 2012; Ward, 2007; O'Brien et al., 2013). Other factors in the community which were found to be influential in driving the learners to leave the gangs include wanting to treat others with fairness and respect,

community cohesiveness and support, connections with religious institutions, adult support in the neighbourhood, perceived neighbourhood safety and belief in moral order, no or low crime and gang activity, and access to recreational facilities in the community (Jane, 2018; Cooper & Ward, 2012; Ward, 2007; O'Brien et al., 2013).

### **High school learners' educational aspirations and goals in life**

Robinson-Easley (2012) notes that some of the young people who are involved in gang violence still aspire to complete their schooling. According to Sen's philosophical perspective, access to education is regarded as the real opportunity that enables young persons to live a life that they choose. However, Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) note that the poor quality of most public schools in South Africa tends to discourage learners from completing their studies. The South African Institute of Race Relations (2013) found that, of young black South Africans between the ages of 20 and 24, only 14.3% proceeded to institutions of higher learning in South Africa.

Keenan (2007) notes that marginalised youths have high hopes for work, and they would like to pursue careers as teachers, social workers, photographers, business people and farmers, but that is still difficult in terms of job opportunities. Motimele, Mahlangu, Tsotetsi, Nhlapo and Magongo (2011) point out that South Africa has almost 2.8 million youths aged between 19 and 24 years who are not in school and not in employment. This has put the South African government under pressure to create employment opportunities for young people in general.

### **The relationship between the community and young people involved in gangs**

Keeping young people in school and enrolled in positive activities and providing proper resources, which could minimise the chances of them joining in gang violence, help them to become agents of change rather than threats in the society (Howell, 2010). A community that adopts the value of *ubuntu* is likely to develop a sense of caring for one another rather than being disconnected (Brennan, Barnett & McGrath, 2009). According to Daniels and Adams (2010), youths in gangs are mostly disconnected from their communities because of the disorganisation of the communities they reside in. Dass-Brailsford (2005) asserts that family support, good role models, as well as supportive schools and communities could enable young people to achieve academic success, even when they are living in unfavourable circumstances.

Boqwana (2009) also noted that most people in the townships accept gang activities among young people as an initiation phase into adulthood, while others associate themselves with gangs to gain favours from them. The researchers noticed that in some communities it can be very challenging for some youths who try to quit gang violence because of the societal attitudes towards them. The literature points out that youths who are rejected and stigmatised by the community based on their past may find it futile to change their antisocial behaviour (Gxubane, 2018; Shearar & Graser, 2005). This may result in these youths escalating their involvement in antisocial gang activities.

## **THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

### **Research design**

According to Nieuwenhuis (2007:70), a researcher will select a research design that is "congruent with her or his philosophical assumptions and most appropriate for generating the kind of data required to answer the research question(s) posed". Since this study aimed at exploring YGV in relation to educational attainment and provides mainly qualitative data, it adopted and applied a qualitative and exploratory research design. Exploratory studies are considered appropriate where researchers have identified a lack of information in an area of interest so as to gain an insight into it (Fouche & De Vos, 2011).

## Sampling

The recruitment of the gang members for participation in research was challenging because of the secrecy they try to maintain about their whereabouts to avoid possible arrest by the police. However, since one of the researchers is a resident in Khayelitsha, it became easier through help from community members to identify gang members who were required for the study.

Non-probability purposive and snowball sampling was adopted and applied in the study because of the challenge of recruiting gang members to participate in the study. The sampling criteria included that the participants needed to be male high school learners who are or were involved in YGV. After on-going negotiations, out of 22 male youths who were initially approached during the recruitment phase of the research, 18 agreed to participate in the study. Those who were above 18 years of age signed the written consent forms. The parents and guardians of those who were under 18 years of age signed the written consent forms after they had confirmed with us their willingness to participate in the study (as proposed by Mogorosi (2018)).

## Data collection

Individual face-to-face in-depth interviews were considered as the most appropriate strategy for data collection to achieve the overall aim and objectives of the study. Greef (2015) asserts that face-to-face interviewing is the most appropriate mode of data collection in qualitative research. A semi-structured interview schedule was used as a research tool to collect research data. Since the questions in the interview schedule were drafted in English, which is a second language for the participants, occasionally some of the questions had to be translated into isiXhosa, the participants' first language. The ability of the researchers to speak isiXhosa and 'tsotsi taal' (a local colloquial language) enabled effective communication in the research interviews. Consent was negotiated with each participant before the start of each interview to use an audio-digital device to record the interview.

## Data analysis

The data analysis was guided by Tesch's (1990) qualitative data-analysis framework, which in general involved identifying themes, sub-themes and patterns in the research data. The process of data analysis started by reading through all the transcriptions several times and writing down the labels on the margins that capture the meanings that the participants were expressing. Labels that seemed to be linked to each other were highlighted in the same colour code. Different colours were used for different sets of categories that belong to a specific theme. This process was repeated several times with all transcriptions, being mindful of the labelling process and keeping the objectives of the study in mind. Once all the labelling had been carefully considered, direct quotes from the participants, which were selected and highlighted in the transcripts, were used to substantiate the sub-themes, categories and sub-categories that emerged from the analysis of the research data. Findings of the study were further related to existing theoretical frameworks and other studies, indicating whether the findings of the study are supported or falsified (Delpont & Fouche, 2011).

## Ethical considerations

The study adhered strictly to ethical standards of social science research, as set out by Strydom (2011). These included gaining *informed consent* from the participants for *voluntary participation* in the study. The purpose and the benefit of the study were further clarified in helping the participants to make an *informed decision* about whether they wanted to participate in the study or not. All participants participated in the study *voluntarily*. They were also informed that they had a right to withdraw from the interview at any stage. They were further assured of *confidentiality* regarding all the information they divulged, and *anonymity*. This enabled the participants to participate freely in the study. To *avoid emotional harm*, the participants were informed that they had a right not to answer any research questions which they felt were uncomfortable and/or triggering unpleasant emotions in them. Fortunately, all the interviews were completed successfully, and no participant needed trauma debriefing.

### Limitations of the study

The two main limitations of the study were a qualitative research design and a small sample size. However, Gxubane (2012:13) notes that “subjective perceptions that are derived from qualitative approaches to research offer a richer understanding of complex human problems that require in-depth investigation”. This study was limited, because of the small size of the sample. However, the overall aim of the study was to gain an in-depth insight into the perceptions of the respondents regarding the subject matter of the study rather than generalising.

### PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

This section discusses the profile of the participants.

**TABLE 1**  
**PARTICIPANTS’ AGES DURING THE PERIOD OF THE STUDY, AND THEIR AGES WHEN THEY STARTED YOUTH GANG VIOLENCE**

Participant	Ages during the period of the study	Ages started youth gang violence	Period of involvement in youth gang violence
1	19	16	4
2	19	17	2
3	17	14	3
4	18	15	3
5	17	14	3
6	19	18	1
7	20	16	4
8	17	16	1
9	16	12	4
10	17	16	1
11	16	14	2
12	17	15	2
13	14	13	1
14	19	17	2
15	18	14	4
16	19	15	4
17	18	17	1
18	15	14	1

The above table indicates the following features.

- **The ages of the participants during the period of the study**

Half of the participants (9 out of 18) were between the ages of 18 and 20 years during the period of the study. These participants were supposed to be in their final year of school, or should have completed their secondary schooling in accordance with the Department of Basic Education (2018) guidelines. This seems to indicate that half of the participants have experienced a setback in their schooling, because the average age in which high school learners are expected to complete their matric is 18 years. The reasons the participants give for the slow progress in their schooling are explored in the discussion of the research data below.



- **Participants' ages when they started engaging in youth gang violence**

Most participants (12 out of 18) started YGV between the ages of 14 and 16 years. Only a quarter of the participants (4 out of 18) started YGV very late, between the ages of 17 and 18 years. In this study very few participants (2 out of 18) started YGV very early, between the ages 12 and 13 years. This finding is contrary to those of studies which found that the most common age that boys start to engage in gang-related activity is between the ages of 11 and 12 years (Legget, 2005; Ward, 2007) and even 5 years of age (Pyrooz and Sweeten, 2015). However, other findings of the afore-mentioned scholars support those of this study, which show that most learners joined youth gangs when they were at high school between the ages of 14 and 21.

- **Participants' period of involvement in youth gang violence**

Most participants (12 out of 18) had been involved in YGV for a period of between two to four years during the period of study. Involvement in youth gangs often means association with criminal behaviour (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Jane (2018) also points out that, internationally, gang members are often expected to commit violent acts against others as part of their initiation, turf wars and other gang-related activities. Therefore, earlier involvement with youth gangs from high-school stage could signal the start of a long violent and criminal career, which is likely to interfere with their schooling and educational attainment. Gxubane (2006) found that the younger the respondents started getting involved in criminal activities, the longer they stayed in criminal careers.

## PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH DATA

### Schooling background

This sub-section discusses the research data in relation to the participants' schooling background.

**TABLE 2**  
**THE GRADES PARTICIPANTS WERE ENROLLED IN AND THOSE THEY REPEATED**

Participant	Grades enrolled in	Grades repeated
1	11	10
2	Passed Grade 12	Never
3	9	8
4	Dropped out in Grade 8	Never
5	10	9, 8
6	Failed Grade 12	8
7	Dropped out in Grade 8	8
8	10	4
9	10	Never
10	11	Never
11	9	Never
12	10	Never
13	8	5
14	11	10
15	10	8, 9
16	Dropped out in Grade 9	8, 4
17	12	Never
18	9	Never

The above table indicates the following features.

- **Grades the participants were enrolled in during the period of the study**

Most participants (11 out of 18) were enrolled in Grades 9 to 11. This indicates that most participants remained within the schooling system, since most of them had progressed to higher grades of schooling despite their long involvement in YGV. Only few participants (3 out of 18) had dropped out of school.

It can therefore be inferred that despite being involved in YGV, very few of the participants would drop out of school. This finding seems to support those of Keenan (2007) and Robinson-Easley (2012), who found that marginalised youths have high hopes, and that young people who are involved in gang violence still aspire to complete their schooling.

- **Grades repeated by the participants**

Half of the participants (9 out of 18) repeated some grades during their schooling. Three participants who were between the ages of 18 and 20 had repeated grades four times between them, and these participants had dropped out of school during the period of the study, whilst another one was 14 years old but still in Grade 8 (see also Table 1). This therefore suggests that some of the participants had experienced setbacks in their schooling, seemingly as a result of their active involvement in YGV. This confirms that they are not committed to schooling (Ward, 2007; Wijnberg & Green, 2014)

## MOTIVATION FOR JOINING GANGS

### Security and protection

The research data show that the participants joined gangs mainly because they needed protection through *fear of being victimised*.

- Fear of being victimised

Most of the participants reported that they were chased, threatened, stabbed and lost some of their friends in gang violence. After the incidents of being victimised they became angry and decided to join because they were tired of being the victims of their opponents:

*“It is because I got stabbed in my head. ... I was not involved then, I got stabbed because I was walking with the guys from U-section (Site B)... it was 2011 when I got stabbed, when I was doing Grade 8 that is why I failed Grade 8. ... I just wanted revenge from this person who stabbed me. They treated me as a gangster, and they chased me every time and that is why I joined myself.”* (R3)

*“What motivated me ... I got tired of being chased around on the street and decided to join because of that. ... Even though you tell them [opponents] that you are not part of this, they will continue beating you up.”* (R6)

- Identity and belonging

Another major motivation that the participants cited for joining gangs was a need for an identity of belonging to a specific area in Site B, Khayelitsha, which guarantees them safety and protection, as reflected in the following statement:

*“Because I have friends this side [Phase 2] who were Italians and we were going to the same school, so when they were attacked by their opponents I would help them, so that is how I started. ... I was walking in Town 2 and these guys came to me and asked whether I was a Vato and I said no, so they started beating me up.”* (R15)

The research data seem to indicate that, because of the high levels of violence in Khayelitsha, the participants were compelled to take on an identity of their local peers, which would offer them a sense of belonging and protection from the possible attacks and violence that they are exposed to daily in their social environment. This finding supports those of other scholars, discussed in the literature review, who argue that gangs help to meet the important needs of young people such as safety and protection and which are not met by their community or their families in general (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Wijnberg & Green, 2014; Ward, 2007; Sharkey et al., 2011)

## BENEFITS OF GETTING INVOLVED IN YOUTH GANG VIOLENCE

The research data seem to support Dwane (cited in the Khayelitsha Commission Report, 2014), as discussed in the literature review, who maintained that youth gangs operating in Khayelitsha are quite different from the gangs that are operating in Manenberg and Mitchells Plain in Cape Town. Gangs in Manenberg are often connected to organised crime and drugs, while the gangs in Khayelitsha are more about identity, and their gang fights are about claiming their space and their identity within these communities. When the participants were probed regarding the benefits, if any, of their involvement in YGV, they reported that there were many including *the opportunity to exact revenge, a sense of achievement of victory, and the recognition they receive from their peers as heroes.*

- Revenge

Most of the participants reported that they stabbed and killed their opponents because they felt that they had to seek revenge after losing some of their members or friends:

*“Yoh, we felt so good ... only when we killed someone ... because we get revenge, because ... died, it is like that. When we lose one of us, we cry and become angry and seek revenge from them, no matter how many they are, even if one of us dies, we don't run away from them.”* (R7)

*“When we kill we have a reason, we are angry; that is why we killed each other, we wanted revenge and we did not stab just for the fun of it. ... Because you start to think of the person you lost in this Gurans [local term which refers to gang fighting] and when you fight you think of your friend that they killed and they will make jokes about the deceased, knowing that they killed him. I was angry because of that ... I get angry, Sister, when I see the opponent, but I control my anger.”* (R14)

- Achievement of victory

The participants also stated that they gained a personal victory after getting revenge on their opponents as a sign of power over their enemies, and they celebrated after they had stabbed or killed an opponent:

*“When we stabbed or killed someone it was nice, Sister; we will be so happy and celebrate as if we have won something and say, ‘Yes! Yes!’ ... Yoh, when someone dies it is when you become so happy, because he is dead, Sister, and we really celebrate. ... You see, when we kill someone, maybe we will go to drink and celebrate the death of the other person.”* (R15)

*“Yoh, we felt so good, Sister, only when we have killed someone. ... It was a revenge, Sister, because when you get revenge you feel at ease and that made us happy also and we will raise our weapons up as a sign of victory.”* (R9)

- Recognition as heroes

Some participants indicated that they are often considered as heroes by their peers after they had defeated their opponents in extremely violent gang fights, as is reflected in the following statement:

*“In the community we are being seen as Lions because you can kill someone, like you leave your house with your panga/Isabile [axe] to kill someone [looks worried]. ... What motivated us, Sister, is to see your friend lying there being slaughtered to death and you have to carry him yourself; you will take your weapon and go and fight and feel good.”* (R16)

The research data show that the participants are involved in extreme levels of violence. This includes killing each other, and this behaviour is celebrated by gang members if they win a fight. This means that they are often put under pressure to win their fights so that they can be recognised as heroes in the community. This in turn helps to boost their self-esteem, which is an essential human need that is met through gang activities and which is one of the benefits of belonging to a gang. This finding is in line with those of scholars discussed in the literature review who believe that gangs help to meet important

needs of young people which are not met by society and their families in general (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Ward, 2007; Sharkey et al., 2011; Wijnberg & Green, 2014).

## REGRETS ABOUT GETTING INVOLVED IN YOUTH GANG VIOLENCE

All the participants reported that they regretted getting involved in YGV. The reasons the participants cited for this included: *the psychological and physical effects it has on them; replacement of prosocial activity by YGV; acquiring criminal records; and stigmatisation by the community.*

- Psychological and physical effects

Most of the participants reported that the effects of their involvement in YGV included suffering *physical injuries; their involvement in gang violence replaced their prosocial activities, acquiring criminal records; and stigmatisation by the community.*

*“My regret is that I was injured on my hand and these things [stitches] do not disappear. ... My elbow it broke into half, so they needed to attach it together.”* (R6)

*“They stabbed and beat me... I was admitted in hospital ... the guy who stabbed me, he’s still around. ... I don’t want to look at him because he makes me angry.”* (R8)

The research data show that the YGV had dangerous consequences in the lives of the participants, which left them with bad memories that were hard to forget because of the visible scars they acquired from YGV. It has been found that gang activities often leave members with psychological trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, compared to those who are not in gangs, and which results in their destructive behaviour and mental problems (Corcoran, Washington & Meyers, 2005; Ford, Hartman, Hawke & Chapman, 2008).

- Youth gang violence replaced prosocial social activities

Some participants reported that they spent most of their time in YGV, which has replaced most of the social activities they used to be involved with in the community, such as playing soccer:

*“My regrets ... it [YGV] made me stop things that I loved, and I used to love to play soccer at Site B but had to stop ... We were members of a community organisation; we loved it and some of us were in leadership, but we started getting scared.”* (R2)

The research data show that the participants’ lives were distracted because of their involvement in YGV, which has far-reaching negative consequences to their future educational and professional career aspirations. This finding is similar to that of Winton (2005), who discovered that violence had an unsurprisingly negative effect on the development and maintenance of some young people’s social networks, restricting the extent to which they participated in social activities outside the home.

- Acquiring criminal records

Some participants reported that being involved in YGV left them with criminal records:

*“I have a criminal record, and a criminal record takes five years, and I was told that I must not offend, because if I do, they will increase my criminal record years and I will be in prison.”* (R1).

*“I heard that my friend died ... I wanted revenge and I saw myself stabbing someone and when I did that, I knew there was no turning back. That’s when I got arrested.”* (R14).

The participants’ statements show that most participants had been involved in the stabbing of their opponents for revenge, but they never reported their arrests for the crime they had committed. Winton (2005) also found that the community felt that the police were afraid of the youths who were involved in violence, and the community further perceived the police as both inefficient and untrustworthy.

- Stigmatisation by community

Some participants reported that YGV left them with a *stigma in the community*, since their fights were witnessed by members of the community most of the time:

*“I regret being involved in Gurans ... They [the community] see a killer, someone who is dangerous ... I changed and saw my mistakes, but that does not change the way people perceive me.”* (R17)

*“It destroyed us ... We are no longer the same people anymore, because most people no longer look at us with the same eyes. We can no longer be trusted.”* (R16)

The research data show that, contrary to the status and recognition the gang members acquired from winning the violent gang fights, some members of the community, probably the older generation, strongly disapproved of gang violence. As a result, this contributes to the negative character some community members continue to ascribe to them. It would therefore seem that, even if the participants try to change, the community will find it hard to believe them. This may force some of the participants to see no point in doing good and rather continue with their bad behaviour, as is asserted by Gxubane (2018) and Sheerar and Graser (2005).

## **FUTURE INTENTIONS REGARDING YOUTH GANG VIOLENCE**

All the participants complained about the negative impact of YGV in some aspects of their lives, such as educational attainment, personal lives and their families. Most mentioned *their intention to abandon YGV* by terminating their *membership* or/and *relocating to other areas*.

- Termination of membership

Most participants reported that they would terminate their membership and no longer be part of YGV. The participants reported that they would focus on their schooling and make peace with their opponents.

*“I will not continue with it, because my friends are gone; they are in the grave and I don’t want to be in the grave.”* (R5)

*“You can come out, as long as you tell yourself ... once they see that you are not there, they know that you are out of it. ... Gurans take much of your time and you don’t get time to study.”* (R10)

The research data show that YGV had a bad influence in the participants’ lives, which is why some of them were thinking of disconnecting themselves from it. Spergel (1995: 105) also found that “youth reaches a certain point in his social learning or ‘growing up’ when he realizes there are long-term negative consequences for being a gang member”.

- Relocation

Some participants reported that they would rather relocate to other provinces or nearby locations, if it happens that YGV returns as a prospect, because they do not want to be part of it again. They emphasised that their lives have been turned upside-down and they do not want to go back and be the kind of people they were in YGV:

*“It is like now I have lost everything from Gurans; I got it back ever since it stopped ... If it starts again, I will have to leave, because you suffer in this Gurans.”* (R2)

*“I will not continue with it ... My mother will rather take me to the Eastern Cape and stay there ... They [at home] become happy now that they see Gurans has stopped.”* (R15)

The research data show that most participants were aware of the negative impact of their involvement in YGV on their educational attainment and life in general. Hence, they desired to discontinue their gang membership and believe that some parents are likely to relocate them to the Eastern Cape as most

residents of Khayelitsha originally come from the rural areas there. This option is not likely to be attractive to the young men. This would then compel them to continue with their schooling whilst they are still involved in YGV so long as the benefits outweigh the risks of not being a gang member. In fact, this study has found that most participants were involved with YGV for a period of between two to four years. It was pointed out in the literature review that leaving the gangs is an extremely difficult process that could expose the youth who are exiting to the possibility of being attacked even by their former gang members (Standing, 2005; Wijnberg & Green, 2014; Cooper & Ward, 2012).

Over and above all the challenges that the learners who are trying to leave gangs are likely to be confronted with are the challenges of poverty and economic hardship, which contribute to their social exclusion and eventually dropping out of school (Sen, 1999; Sefali, 2014; Cooper & Ward, 2012; Ward, 2007; Burnett, 1999). It would seem to be in the nature of a violent community, where the participants reside, that there are no protective factors which could encourage them to leave the gangs and there seem to be many risk factors which compel them to stay in gangs, even whilst at school (Sharkey et al., 2011; Jane, 2018; Cooper & Ward, 2012; Ward, 2007; O'Brien et al., 2013). This suggests that even though most participants have experienced setbacks in their schooling progress because of their involvement in YGV activities, they are determined to complete their education and achieve their career aspirations, as noted by Keenan (2007) and Robinson-Easley (2012).

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN YOUTH GANG VIOLENCE

The participants reported that there are various factors in the community that they believed contributed to YGV such as *traditional belts, community providing an audience as spectators, and failed community attempts to end YGV.*

- Traditional belts

Traditional belts are small leather belts made from the skin of a slaughtered cow or goat made by traditional healers and worn on the arm in the belief that they provide supernatural powers. Some participants use of traditional belts was for protection when they are involved in flights:

*“It is those people who make traditional belts, like witchdoctors, and they have encouraged this Gurans. When they do these belts, those who have the belts, they don’t want to stop; they want to continue because they feel protected. It is these belts.” (R14)*

*“Some of the guys said that their mothers made ... them use traditional belts for protection, which made them not to be stabbed. ... I did see them, the one that died here at Site B; we could not stab him.” (R18)*

It is evident from the statements of the participants as presented above that the traditional belts seem to have also played a role in influencing some young people to take part in YGV. Sefali (2014) also discovered that Khayelitsha gangsters believe they can get the superpowers they need to become killers through visiting traditional healers. Sefali (2014) further states that some of the gang leaders sacrificed some parts of their body in order to be powerful and feared by their peers.

- Failed community attempts to end youth gang violence

Some participants reported that there had previously been some members of the community that tried to stop YGV but failed and so they gave up. This could mean that the domination of YGV in Khayelitsha Site B overpowered the residents so that they could not stop it permanently:

*“The community members called the police services, taxi owners, but they gave up at the end ... They were scared to intervene; they would step back and watch or call the police services ... I felt like some of them were happy watching us fighting.” (R10)*

*“The pastors spoke with us and would tell us that they will take us to the camp and we will become so excited ... We are kids and we will go to the camp ... We will stop for some time, because we are being supervised by the elders, but some of us will not stop.” (R7)*

The research data seem to suggest that there were some attempts by the community to stop YGV. It would seem that there were no specific interventions put in place in fighting YGV in Khayelitsha Site B; if there were, they were ambiguous. Manaliyo and Muzindutsi (2013:122) state that “the major challenge for the South African government is to mobilise communities to participate in fighting crime, especially in townships”. Although there have been various attempts to counter or eliminate gang violence in the Western Cape, the gang culture persists. This clearly illustrates that current programmes, strategies and initiatives on the ground require an intensive and extensive evaluation, because the impact of youth gangs is felt by many (Howell, 2006).

- Community providing audience

Some participants reported that some community members watched them fight and sometimes gave them weapons to fight back. On some occasions the community members from their opponents’ side chased them away when they ran to their houses for protection. Hence, they believed that the community played a role in promoting YGV:

*“Community members ... would watch us fighting and stabbing each other ... No one was stopping us, and we were not afraid of anything. If the community members stopped us ... maybe punish us, we were going to be afraid of doing this. They failed us ... most of them do not know that we stopped Gurans; they still look at us as if we are still doing it.” (R17)*

*“Community members keep quiet, they do not talk, and they just watch us fighting. I feel hurt sister, because we get injured while people are around.” (12)*

Boqwana’s study also found that most of the people in the townships accepted gang activities among young people as an initiation phase into adulthood, while other community members associated themselves with gangs in order to gain favours from them. This is possible, because due to a lack of resources caused by poverty and unemployment in the Western Cape, gangs have used the act of providing for members of communities as a stepping stone to gaining control of the community, and that results in communities having no say in almost anything that happens in their community (Daniels & Adams, 2010). Howell (2006) further agrees that some gangs have become entrepreneurial organisations. This might explain the behaviour or reaction in observing instead of fighting the existence of YGV in Khayelitsha Site B.

## **Key findings and recommendations of the study**

### ***The participants’ schooling background***

The study found that most participants were enrolled in Grades 9 to 11 during the period of the study and only few participants had dropped out of school. It can therefore be inferred that, despite being involved in YGV, most learners continue with their schooling. Many participants had repeated some grades during their schooling. This therefore suggests that most participants has experienced a setback in their schooling seemingly as a result of their lack of commitment to their schooling and their active involvement in YGV.

### ***The participants’ ages, and period of, involvement in youth gangs***

Many participants started YGV between the ages of 14 and 16 years. Whilst a few participants joined YGV very late, between the ages of 17 and 18 years, most learners joined when they were at a high school, between the ages of 14 and 21. Most participants had been involved in YGV for a lengthy period of between two to four years during their period of study.

### ***The participants’ motivation for and benefits of gang membership***

The study found that most participants joined gangs mainly for security and protection because of their fear of being victimised. Another major motivation was the identity of belonging to a specific local gang which offered them the protection they required against possible attacks from opposing gang members. It was also found that the benefits of involvement in YGV included providing an opportunity

for gang members to seek revenge against their enemies, a sense of victory and recognition as heroes in the community, which seem to boost their self-esteem when their opponents have been defeated.

### ***The participants' regrets about involvement in gangs***

The study also found that even though the youths were involved in gang violence, they also regretted being part of it. Their intense involvement with YGV had psychological and physical effects on them; these included psychological and physical effects which were associated with suffering physical injuries during the gang fights, less involvement in prosocial activities, and the possibility of acquiring criminal records and stigmatisation within the community. The youths were stuck in a situation they found difficult to get out of.

### ***The participants' future intentions regarding their involvement in youth gang violence***

The findings showed that the youths in the study wanted to terminate their involvement in gang violence. The participants felt that YGV wasted their time in relation to their educational attainment, as well as in acquiring criminal records and losing their friends in gang violence. It would therefore seem that the YGV has caused a great deal of harm not only in the interference with their schooling but also in their personal lives.

### ***The participants' views on the role of the community in promoting youth gang violence***

The study found that the community was affected by YGV, which usually took place amongst the rival groups of youths. The study found that the community at times showed its support of gang violence through such actions as their failure to restrain the youths from fighting. In some instances community members encourage the youths to consult with traditional healers, who assured them of supernatural powers over others. Hence some community members tend to form friendships with some gang members in order to call on them should they need protection or to seek revenge on their enemies, since the gangs are the most feared people in the community, even more than the police.

## **OVERALL CONCLUSION**

The findings showed that most young men start engaging in YGV between the ages of 14 and 16 years. The age the participants started YGV is significant, because this might help policy makers to know which age group of young people they need to put more emphasis on when drawing up policies. It was also found that the participants desired that the YGV come to an end. The study further showed that the youths encouraged other young people to stay out of gang violence and focus on their studies. The findings revealed that the participants in this study saw education as the only way that could help them to achieve their goals in life. However, given the rate of escalating YGV in and around schools in Khayelitsha, as described in this article, more male high school learners will be attracted to join gangs and become members for a long time for the sake of safety and protection – even more so, now that the community and police have been found to be failing to reduce and deal effectively with YGV, as indicated in the Khayelitsha Commission Report (2014).

It would also appear from the findings of the study that some of the community members had given up on the fight against YGV, even though there were some who were taking initiatives to stop the scourge. Based on this finding, it can be concluded that the Khayelitsha community seems to have no specific and concrete initiatives in place that could help in preventing or stopping YGV. Therefore, more learners are likely to join gangs for the purposes of seeking protection and other benefits that go with being a member.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Based on the above conclusions of the study, the a number of recommendations are made below.

- Social workers who are aiming to design and facilitate YGV prevention programmes need to focus on children who are 12 years or younger at primary schools before they start engaging in YGV.



- School social workers need to identify at-risk youths such as those who are violent in class or at school, and those who perform poorly academically, and run prevention programmes for them and their families.
- There is a need for a closer collaboration between the parents of the learners and the social workers as well as teachers to offer psychological support to the learners who are trying to quit YGV, so that they will be in a position to overcome the social and psychological consequences of their involvement in YGV. This means that many young people who are involved in YGV often need a second chance to attain their educational goals.
- The Department of Education needs to improve the physical environment such as the painting of classroom walls, and improve infrastructure such as security fences in township schools not only to prevent trespassing but also to make the school environment conducive and attractive to learners. Teachers and social workers need to encourage parents through community meetings to be actively involved in the lives of their children, thus nurturing a positive and healthy parent-child relationship.
- Social workers need to formulate programmes such as life skills, youth camps, arts and culture, community violence and gangsterism workshops; these need to be implemented after school and during the school holidays in Khayelitsha to reduce the incidence of YGV.
- A longitudinal study should be conducted as follow-up after a period of three to four years to determine whether the participants of this study eventually completed their schooling or not, and whether they proceed to institutions of higher learning or not to achieve their career aspirations.
- Since the research was conducted in Khayelitsha Site B on a small sample of eighteen youths involved in gang violence, there is a need to carry out the same research on a larger scale that would include most communities that are affected by YGV in Cape Town. This would give a broader in-depth insight into the problem of YGV in marginalised communities and the impact it has on the educational attainment of young people.

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