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Concentrations of violence

A case study of Grassy Park, Cape Town

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Summary

Grassy Park, a suburb in Cape Town, South Africa, bears a disproportionate burden of gang-related violent crime. The concentration of gang violence has eroded the ability of local government – including education, social services, housing and healthcare, as well as policing and the criminal justice system – to function effectively. A concentration of effort in response to gang violence, coordinated among different branches of government, is needed in Grassy Park and similar areas – other ‘concentrations of violence’ – to break this vicious cycle.

Recommendations

- Create a new role of ‘violence reduction coordinators’ in local government who can coordinate responses across departments at the neighbourhood level.
- Prioritise interventions for child welfare delivered through schools, to protect children from the impacts of gang violence.
- Take measures to promote accountability for police and prosecuting authorities at the local level.
- Improve coordination between police and prosecuting authorities by ensuring that performance targets for these structures are aligned.
- Provide more support to local civil society organisations and encourage local cooperation.
- Reorient local government spending to ensure resources are allocated to the neediest areas.

Introduction

Heading west along Edward Avenue in Ottery, Cape Town, you'll come to a bridge where the road is intersected by a drainage canal. To the left is an expanse of open field, currently under construction for a housing development.¹ To the right, a civic centre, housing the office of a local councillor and a public library. Residents come to the centre for assistance with housing issues, while the library hosts children's day-care programmes.

Yet the canal – which to an outsider is an everyday piece of urban infrastructure – forms the unofficial boundary between gang territories. Up ahead, a set of housing blocks is the stronghold of the Mongrels, who have held sway in Ottery for three generations.² Back over the canal, a similar group of flats plays host to the Yuru Cats. Members of the Junky Funky Kids and the No Fears also occupy buildings on this eastern side.³ These rival gangs have, over the years, had countless shootouts over the territory between these flats, sometimes using the canal as a cover to dodge bullets from the other side.⁴ Residents describe feeling like 'hostages' in the overcrowded flats complex.⁵ Drive-by shootings have claimed bystanders' lives through bullets ricocheting into their homes.⁶

Violence forms part of the area's geography, with invisible boundaries between rival gang turf

Service (SAPS) station of Grassy Park, encapsulates many of the challenges this area faces when it comes to gangsterism. Violence forms part of the area's geography, overlaying the physical infrastructure with a set of invisible boundaries between rival gang turf. This shapes how residents live their lives, restricts their freedom of movement, and impacts local development and the provision of essential services (such as housing, in the case of Edward Avenue).

Thanks to the high levels of inter-gang conflict, Grassy Park can be described as a 'concentration of violence': a small local area and sub-section of the population that bears a disproportionate burden of violent crime compared to other nearby areas or global averages.¹⁰ As Chart 1 illustrates, the city of

In March 2022, community leaders came together on the field, symbolically raising a white flag in protest against the cycles of gang violence.⁷ Similar protests, vigils and memorials have repeatedly urged both sides of Ottery to come together.⁸ Yet, tensions have not abated. The new housing development – on the same field where the white flag was raised – was temporarily stalled in early 2023 due to extortion demands and threats from the Mongrels.⁹

This small (but fiercely contested) piece of land, which falls under the jurisdiction of the local South African Police

View across the Edward Avenue housing development (to the left) towards the flats complex which lies in the territory of the Mongrels gang, April 2023



Photo: Julia Stanyard

Community leaders in Ottery raised a white flag on the border between gang territories in protest against the violence which has afflicted the community, March 2022



Source: <https://www.southernmail.co.za/news/ottery-leaders-raise-white-flag-for-peace-516cc3ce-c992-4dab-b582-98587a36e7ab>

and attempted murders in the area over this period and allowed the research team to build a unique spatial dataset.

This crime is highly geographically concentrated, as the area measures less than 20km². Within this area, the shootings (the vast majority of murders in the area involve firearms) are concentrated on particular streets, which become known locally as shooting hotspots. There is a close correlation between gang territories and violence: murders and attempted murders are concentrated within gang territories or along borders between them (as visualised in Chart 3). The bulk of incidents involve young male gang members or members of the community caught up in gang shootings. In at least two incidents, accidental victims were children under the age of 10.¹²

Second, our research sought to place the violence data in context, to investigate local dynamics of gangsterism and to understand the implications of high rates of violent crime on the community and local governance. This analysis draws on field observations in the area and 45 interviews with a cross-section of current and former gang members, civil society and community leaders, and local government service providers. These service providers included areas such as education, housing, police and the criminal justice system. This qualitative part of the research has centred around three main questions:

- 1. Why is Grassy Park a 'concentration of violence' and what role does gangsterism have in driving and sustaining this violence?**
- 2. What impact does the high rate of violence and gangsterism have on local government services?**
- 3. What can be done to break these cycles of violence?**

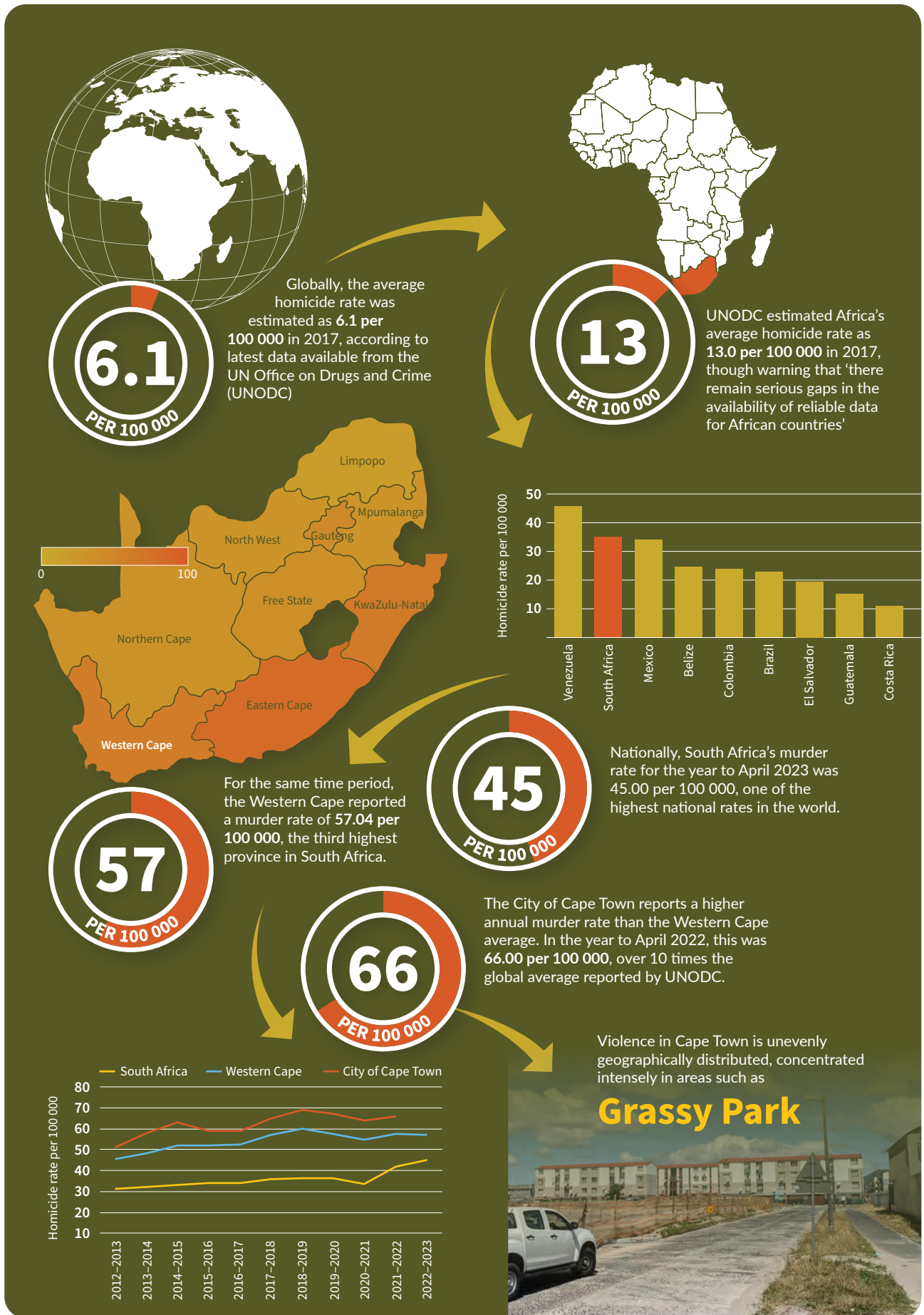
By concentrating on a single individual case study in Grassy Park, this research adds a detailed, granular example to the global research literature on 'concentrations of violence', the spatial distribution of violent crime, and criminal governance. It further serves to provide insight and practical recommendations for local policymakers and civil society in Cape Town and the Western Cape.

Cape Town is a global outlier in its levels of criminal violence. Violent crime is distributed very unevenly due to the city's history of apartheid, vast levels of inequality and high levels of gang-related crime, leading to intense concentrations of violence.

Grassy Park can be compared to areas of violent crime in other cities around the world – for example, in Latin America, which hosts most of the world's most violent cities. In Africa, Grassy Park can be compared with marginalised areas of other cities, such as parts of Nairobi, that bear a higher-than-average burden of gang violence and violence perpetrated by police.¹¹

Our research has, first, aimed to quantify and visualise the burden of violence in Grassy Park. Over 18 months, from 1 November 2021 to 1 May 2023, our field research team recorded and documented the date and location of gang-related murders and attempted murders within the jurisdiction of the Grassy Park SAPS station. This exercise recorded 123 gang-related murders

Chart 1: Concentrations of violence – Grassy Park in the context of global homicide trends



Grassy Park as a case study area

While Grassy Park is, in global terms, a 'concentration of violence', it is in many ways typical of the gang-affected areas in South Africa's Western Cape province. Taking the crime statistics reported by the SAPS covering April to June 2023, (see Chart 3), Grassy Park ranks as the 24th highest police precinct in the Western Cape for murder frequency and ninth for attempted murder. This places Grassy Park below areas in the greater Cape Town area such as Delft, Mitchells Plain and Khayelitsha, which consistently place near the top of provincial and national rankings.¹³

Chart 2A: Western Cape – 30 police stations with the highest murder frequency in the period April-June 2023

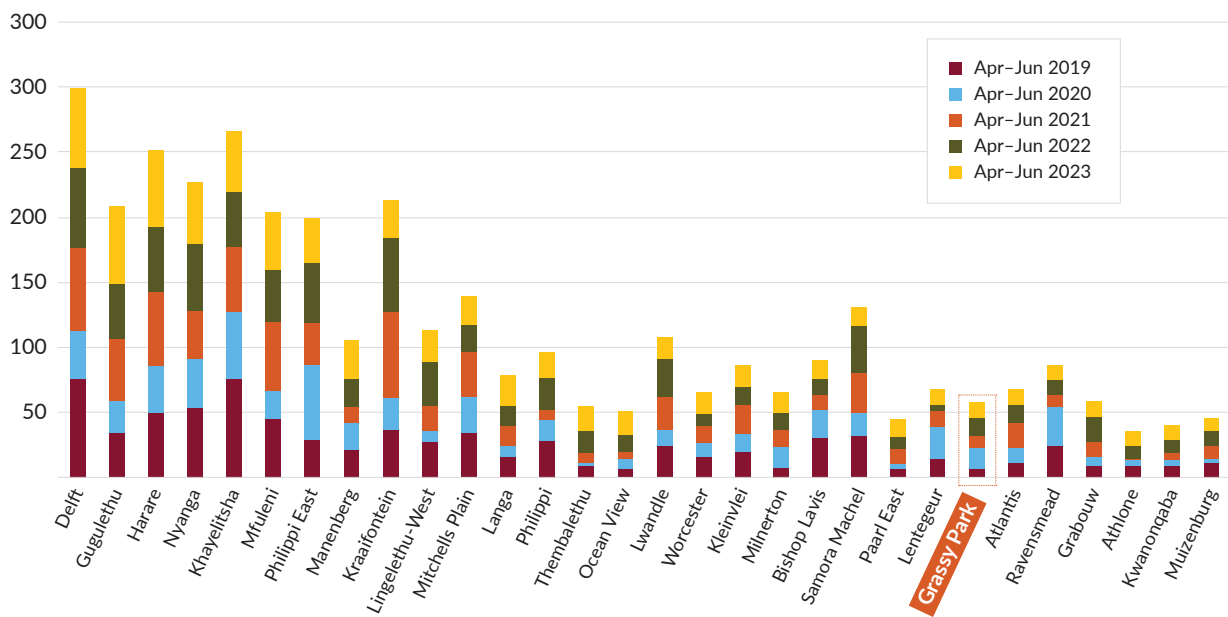
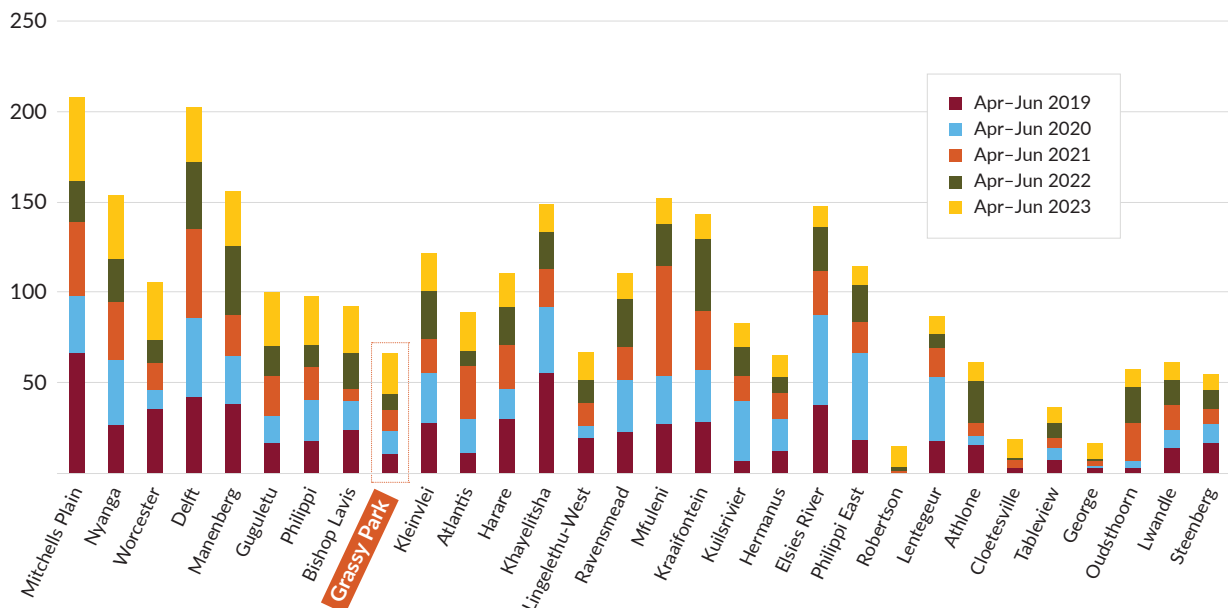


Chart 2B: Western Cape – 30 police stations with the highest attempted murder frequency in the period April-June 2023



Grassy Park is known to have a high proportion of gang-related murders and attempted murders

While it may rank below some areas in absolute terms of levels of violence, however, Grassy Park is also known to have a distinctly high proportion of gang-related murders and attempted murders. Other areas experience higher rates of other forms of violence, such as gender-based violence. The proportion of gang-related murders in Grassy Park is, police sources say, higher than the Western Cape average, so the area is known as a 'gang station' among provincial law enforcement.¹⁴ It is therefore a suitable case study area to investigate how gang activity shapes and sustains violence in the Western Cape.

Grassy Park has also been long overlooked in previous research. There is a rich base of academic and civil society research on gangs in the Western Cape covering topics such as gang recruitment (and how members leave gangs);¹⁵ criminal and informal governance dynamics;¹⁶ the impact of policies aimed at countering gang violence;¹⁷ the impact of gang activity on youth and schoolchildren,¹⁸ gender and gangsterism;¹⁹ and ethnographies of policing.²⁰ These studies have tended to focus on areas such as Nyanga,²¹ Gugulethu,²² Hanover Park,²³ Manenberg²⁴ and Khayelitsha.²⁵

There has, to date, been no dedicated study focused on Grassy Park. As such, there is scant publicly available analysis that delves deep into the drivers of violence and gang dynamics in the area. This lack of investigation is also reflected in media narratives and public perception of Grassy Park as an area. While local media report on the many murders and violent crime cases,²⁶ this rarely breaks through into the wider public consciousness.

Methodology

This report draws on fieldwork and data-gathering conducted in Grassy Park and the surrounding areas over an 18-month period.²⁷ Members of the field research team from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) have been monitoring gang violence in this area on an ongoing basis. They've been embedded in the community as participant observers in order to monitor violence and gang dynamics and to speak to key interlocutors.

The GI-TOC field research team gathered the data on gang violence incidents and the mapping of gang territories from a range of sources. This included community and gang members in the area, discussions on residents' social media groups (as information on shootings and dangerous hotspots is shared widely for safety purposes), information from police sources and the courts, local newspapers and other media. Each incident was cross-referenced and checked to ensure the highest level of accuracy in the number of violent incidents, date and location. Some shooting incidents between gang members are not reported to the police, meaning the data presented here may differ from official SAPS records.

The first phase of interviews for this study was conducted in November 2022, followed by a second phase in April–May 2023. Most interviews were conducted on condition of anonymity as interviewees expressed fears of reprisals or risks to their safety for revealing information. Interviews were conducted face to face and lasted an hour on average.

Some interviews were conducted individually, some as focus groups. Snowball sampling was used to identify additional interview subjects and locate hard-to-reach subjects, such as gang members. Some subjects were interviewed more than once to cross-check and verify information, or to discuss a particular issue in more depth. All these interviews have been anonymised in the final report.

Requests to access data were made to police and archival sources. The research also draws on a literature review of academic research on gang violence and urban governance, civil society and media reports, government and parliamentary reporting and court records.

Finally, a public focus group was conducted in Grassy Park bringing together community representatives, local civil society and law enforcement. Preliminary findings of the study were presented for comment and potential recommendations were discussed among attendees. The findings of this focus group helped shape the findings and recommendations provided here.

Section 1

How gangs shape and drive violence in Grassy Park

Violent competition for gang territory


There are (currently) six main gangs that claim territory in Grassy Park and its environs (see Chart 3). These are the Americans, Mongrels, Dog Pounds, Yuru Cats, Junky Funky Kids (JFKs) and Young Gifted Six Bob.²⁸ While the Dog Pounds are linked to the Mongrels as a ‘junior’ gang, they have a separate leadership structure. Similarly, the Yuru Cats are closely linked to the No Fears, who are also present on the side of Ottery where the Yuru Cats claim territory.²⁹

The Six Bob are currently the largest gang (with an estimated 700 members in the area) and claim the area as their main base. Others, such as the Americans – despite being one of the largest gangs in the Western Cape overall – have a relatively smaller local presence. This mosaic of gangs, territory and alliances is constantly changing, as the historical mapping of gangs in the area (see Chart 5) illustrates. The relationships between gangs, including so-called junior gangs and their senior counterparts, are fluid and complex.

In addition to this set of gangs, there are other criminal actors, such as ‘merchants’ who supply drugs to gangs, but are themselves non-aligned.³⁰ Other gangs from outside of Grassy Park may also operate here, for example carrying out drive-by assassinations in retribution for killings in other areas. For example, a dispute that erupted in May 2023 between the Flakkas gang (based in nearby Lavender Hill)³¹ and the Six Bob saw Flakkas members travelling into the area to target Six Bob members.

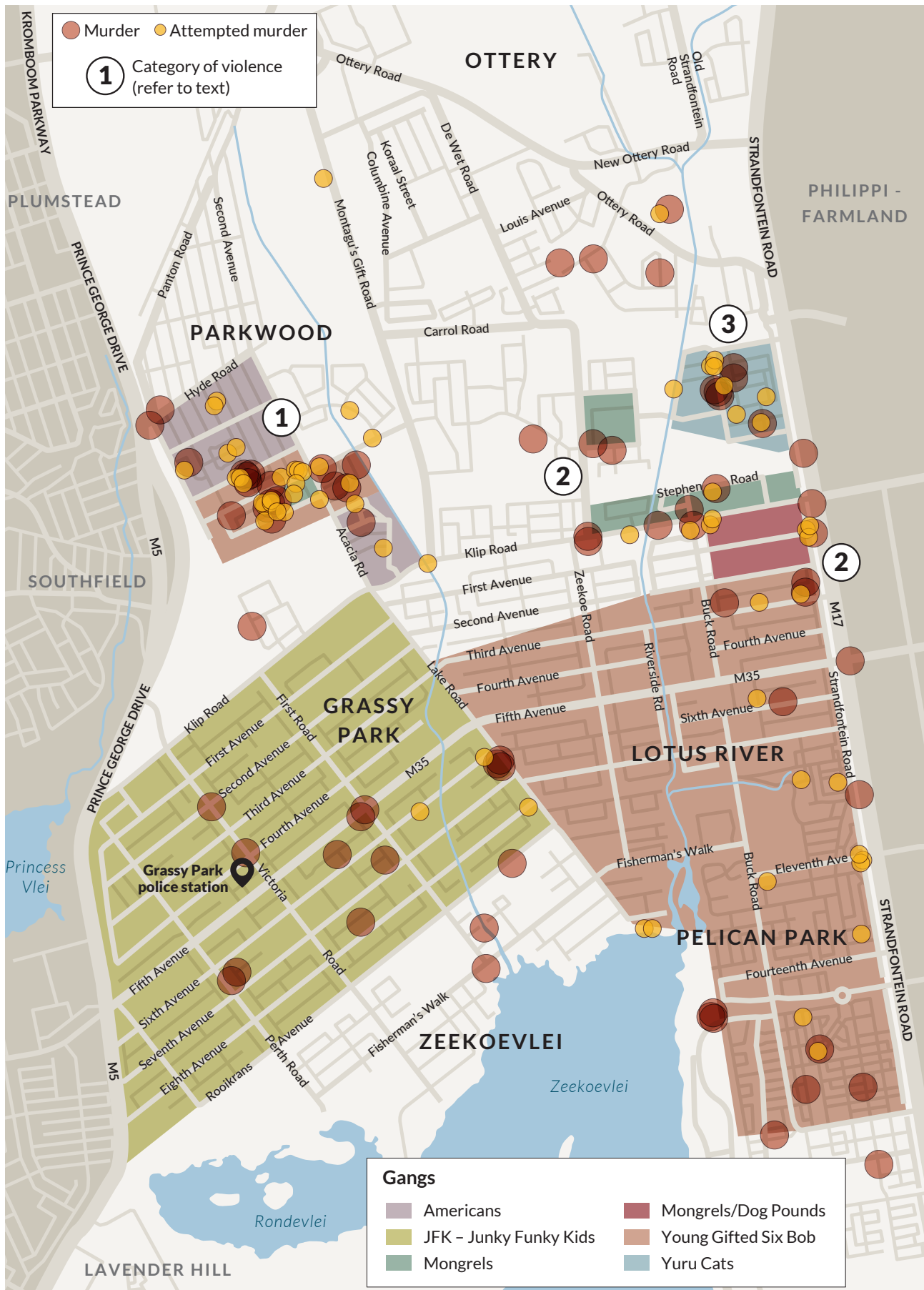
The gangs in Grassy Park also have affiliates in other areas of the Western Cape. The Yuru Cats, for example, have other bases in Tokai and Wynberg,³² whereas the Americans likewise have a set of affiliated members across the city. Members in another area can be called in for support in turf wars, having the added advantage that gang members from another area will be less easily recognised when travelling into rivals’ turf.³³

Competition between gangs for control of territory – and the income streams (for example drugs and extortion) that this control provides – was widely described by interviewees as the greatest driver of local violence. This in addition to other disputes between gangs over drugs and firearms dealing, or interpersonal feuds between gang members. Once a murder has been committed, cycles of retaliatory violence can last



Competition between gangs for control of territory is the greatest driver of violence

Chart 3: Gang-related murders and attempted murders in Grassy Park 1 November 2021– 1 May 2023 compared to boundaries of gang territories



for months, as gang culture dictates that blood feuds must be settled with more bloodshed. Police 'need to be prepared for the repercussions of a murder,' said a local officer, giving an example of one gang killing in 2016 that, he estimated, sparked a cycle of as many as 50 subsequent back-and-forth killings between different factions.³⁴

The gang-related nature of crime is reflected in the mapping data. Our research found that murders and attempted murders were concentrated within gang territories or along borders between them (see Chart 3). Many of the recorded violent incidents fit into one of three major categories of violence (indicated on Chart 3).

1. Violence in fragmented territories where multiple gangs claim territory in a small area.

Violence is particularly concentrated where multiple gangs claim territory on each other's doorstep. The standout example of this is in the Parkwood area, where the Mongrels, Americans and Young Gifted Six Bob claim territory within close quarters. This is fiercely contested territory and roads such as Blackbird Avenue and Parkers Walk, both located within the same small area, have been the site of multiple incidents.

By contrast, where one gang claims control over a large area, such as the Six Bob territory in Lotus River, the centre of this area does not see as much violence apart from sporadic drive-by shootings as it is difficult, particularly on foot, for members of another gang to reach so far into enemy territory.

2. Shootings along a major road, particularly where this road also serves as a boundary between gang territories.

Many murders and attempted murders in Grassy Park are done via drive-by shootings. A major road – illustrated by the cluster of killings along the main Strandfontein Road, or Klip Road which runs through the centre of the area – offers good mobility for drive-by getaways. In smaller residential streets, people have at times built physical barriers to prevent car access for drive-by shootings.

The aftermath of a shooting which targeted an alleged high-level gang member on the M5 road near Grassy Park, October 2022



Photo: @Abramjee/Social media

3. Targeted shootings within territories.

The cluster of shootings in Yuru Cats territory in Ottery is an example of how violence is concentrated in gang territories. Our mapping shows that while areas of Grassy Park that are not gang territories are not immune from violence, the frequency of incidents is far more concentrated in areas of gang presence.

Other studies that have mapped out the correlation between gang activity and urban 'concentrations of violence' elsewhere in the world have made similar findings for the relationship between gang territory and violence. This includes several studies from the United States that analysed gang territories and rivalries and found, similar to Grassy Park, that inter-gang conflict was an important factor in shaping where violent incidents took place.³⁵

A high concentration of gang presence and activity in an area drives violence

A 2014 study based in Camden, New Jersey, that analysed violence around gang-controlled 'drug corners' (i.e., public areas for drug sales) found that 'single-gang dominated corners have significantly more crime than non-gang corners ... Corners characterized by the presence of multiple gangs have significantly more crime than single-gang locations.' Similarly, in Grassy Park, the data and interviews both suggest that the close proximity of multiple gangs creates hotspots of violence. A 2013 study in Chicago and Boston found that 'reciprocity' – revenge attacks between gangs – was also an important

factor shaping how gang violence occurs along the boundaries of territories, similar to the cycles of retaliatory violence described in Grassy Park.³⁶

Likewise in Latin America, several studies have concluded that gang or organised crime group activity shapes the spatial distribution of crime and violence.³⁷ In some studies, this is done quantitatively, by using drug offences as a proxy for organised crime group activity, then mapping drug offences against violent incidents.³⁸ One 2020 study based in Florianópolis, Brazil, took a similar approach to this research by combining the findings of field observation and interviews with maps of violence data. This study found a strong association between violence and criminal group presence in their study area.³⁹

There are, however, few African-based studies that map out the distribution of violence and criminal groups in this way. While several recent studies in the Western Cape use spatial data to analyse patterns of crime, none have investigated gangs or organised crime groups as a contributing factor,⁴⁰ meaning comparing gang territories to patterns of violence remains the remit of internal police analysts.

Comparison to these global studies suggests that the patterns of violence seen in Grassy Park are similar to those seen in high-violence neighbourhoods around the world. A high concentration of gang presence and activity in an area drives violence and shapes how it is distributed, particularly where multiple gangs are competing for the same territory, leading to retaliatory attacks between rival gangs.

Competing for control of illicit economies

Control over gang territory brings with it control over local illicit economies, and therefore a financial incentive for gangs to expand territories and use violence to muscle out rivals. Drugs are the most crucial income stream for the gangs in Grassy Park. Drug markets have, in the words of local Community Policing Forum (CPF) members, 'ballooned' in Grassy Park in recent years and become increasingly diverse.⁴¹

In addition to the ever-present heroin, cocaine and tik (methamphetamine) – which are widely documented in other research on South Africa's drugs markets – and the use of pharmaceutical drugs like Xanax, many interviewees cited an uptick in the use of 'lean',⁴² a mixture of codeine-based cough syrup and soft drink that is reportedly increasingly popular among young people in the area.⁴³ Local activists and neighbourhood watch members described the enormous social toll drug use has on residents and families, in the absence of widespread drug addiction and rehabilitation services.⁴⁴

Extortion, or protection payments, are another major source of income for gangs. As has been widely documented elsewhere, local 'spaza' grocery shops are a common target for extortion across the Cape Town

area.⁴⁵ As theirs are small cash-based businesses operating in insecure areas, spaza shop owners are forced to pay for protection either in cash or kind to the gangs.⁴⁶

According to a local high-ranking police officer, this form of extortion became increasingly common in Grassy Park during the COVID-19 pandemic as the lockdowns curtailed some other illicit income streams for gangs.⁴⁷ These shops are commonly run by Somali shop owners, who as a group have been targeted in successive waves of xenophobic violence across South Africa. The gangs' extortion demands prey on these individuals' vulnerability as foreign nationals working in insecure areas.

Other key income streams include control of local prostitution networks and other criminal activities such as housebreaking and hijacking. Some of the funds derived from gang activities are pooled into a shared fund for the gang to be used for criminal activity-related costs such as buying firearms.⁴⁸ Other businesses, such as the construction sector (see discussion on page 23), are also targeted for extortion.

Signal jammer device seized from a suspect in Grassy Park, July 2023. These devices are commonly used during vehicle hijackings. Hijacking is one of the income streams which gangs in the area profit from



Source: Grassy Park SAPS: <https://www.saps.gov.za/newsroom/msspeechdetail.php?nid=47097>

Extortion became common during the COVID-19 pandemic as lockdowns curtailed other income for gangs

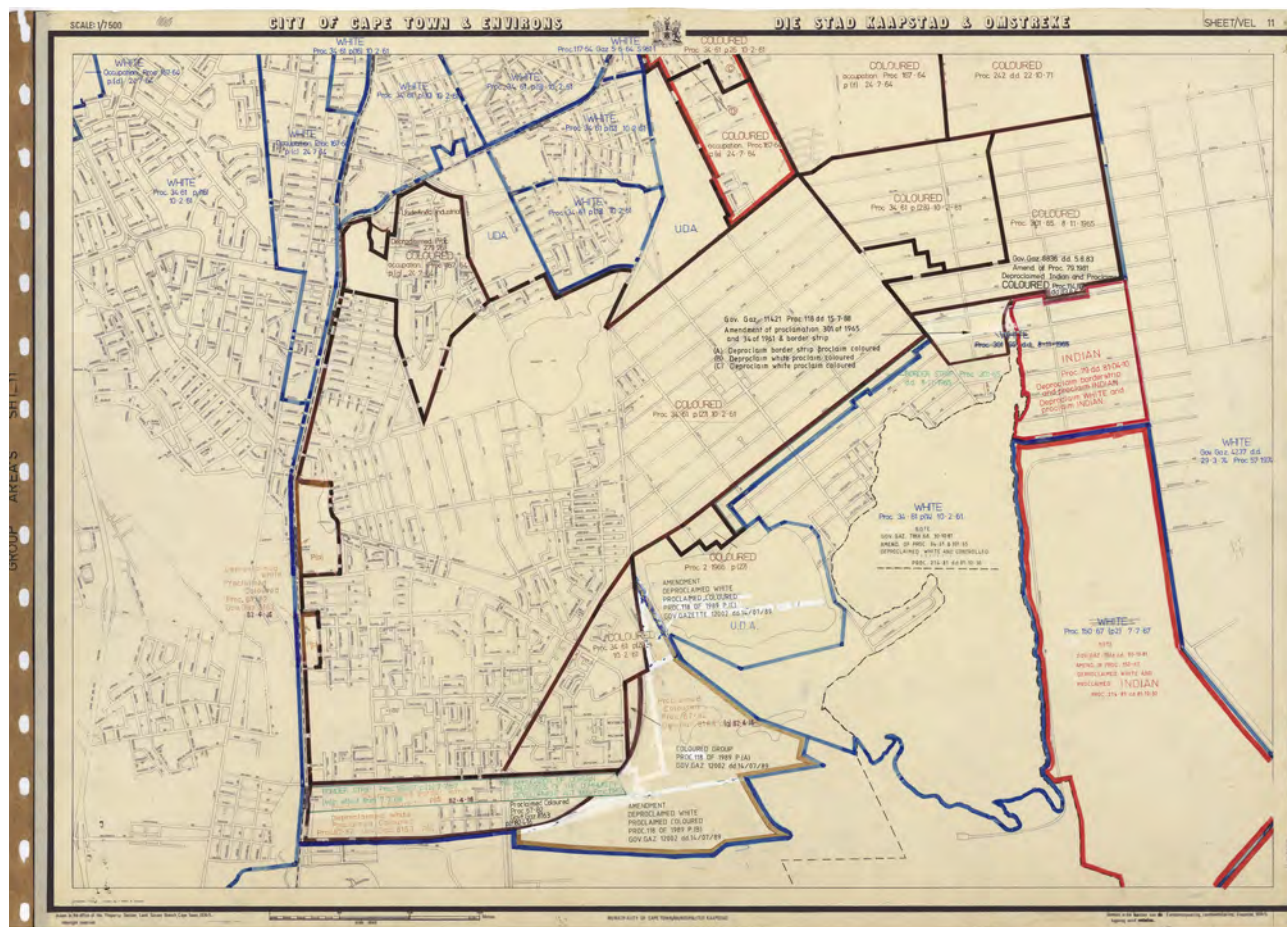
Historical and social drivers of gang violence

In asking why Grassy Park is a 'concentration of violence' today and why gangs are such a major factor in the local political economy, it's useful to look at the area's history.

The area that today falls within the remit of the Grassy Park SAPS was one of many created under the apartheid regime. Coloured communities from areas in Cape Town (including the central area of District Six) were forcibly removed to the peripheral 'Cape Flats' areas – drastically reshaping the city, socially and economically. A 1961 proclamation under the Group Areas Act (the legislation that established spatial apartheid in urban areas) designated the Grassy Park, Lotus River and Parkwood areas primarily as 'coloured' space (under the terminology for racial division used by the apartheid regime).⁴⁹ A patchwork of proclamations under the Group Areas legislation from the late 1960s to early 1980s gradually designated more areas in this remit as areas where 'coloured' or 'Indian' residents were permitted to live, progressively redrawing the divisions between communities in this area.

The social and economic disorder brought about by apartheid – in which families and communities were forcibly rehoused, social networks torn apart and families strewn across the city's periphery – is widely credited with creating the conditions for gangs to emerge.⁵⁰ 'Local government gave the gangs permission' to flourish in this area, said one long-time Ottery resident, whose family's farmland in the area was expropriated by the government to rehouse the new residents.⁵¹ A member of the Grassy Park CPF agreed, saying the gang problem in this area 'has at its root the apartheid fight for survival.'⁵² Following the transition to democracy as South Africa became more integrated with the globalised economy, these gangs 'expanded and professionalised,' in Grassy Park and across the Western Cape.⁵³

Chart 4: Archival map showing the racial division of Grassy Park under the Group Areas Act, 1961 onwards.



Reproduction courtesy of Environment and Heritage Resources Information Centre, City of Cape Town

The aftermath of a PAGAD pipe-bomb attack in the late 1990s, Grassy Park



Photo: Benny Cool

That 'struggle for survival' continues today, as the area remains socially and economically marginalised. While the centre of Grassy Park itself includes some more prosperous, middle-class areas, the peripheral areas in Parkwood, Ottery and Lotus River are more often characterised by overcrowded housing and poor living conditions, including informal settlements. A high level of migration into the area has seen the local population grow rapidly, outmatching the ability of government services to keep pace with local need.⁵⁴ High levels of unemployment, poverty and food insecurity are widely cited as key drivers for gang recruitment (as other research has extensively documented).⁵⁵ One former Americans member interviewed for this research described how gang activity – in his case, hijackings – offered a comparatively ready source of income when no legitimate job opportunities were available.⁵⁶

The local community has, at times, fought back against gang violence with violence. In parallel with its experience of gang activity, Grassy Park has a long history of anti-gang vigilantism. The vigilante group PAGAD (People Against Gangsterism and Drugs) – which is most notorious for a string of bomb attacks around Cape Town

in the late 1990s – maintains a presence in Grassy Park as well as other Cape Flats areas.⁵⁷ Grassy Park is one of the areas where PAGAD first emerged.⁵⁸

The area bore witness to some of PAGAD's heyday of assassinations and attempted assassinations of suspected gangsters,⁵⁹ including the shooting of three people in a Grassy Park hair salon in 1999.⁶⁰ Moulana Moegsien Barendse, leader of the splinter group 'PAGAD G-Force', was arrested in October 2022 for allegedly intimidating witnesses due to testify in a triple murder trial brought against his two sons.⁶¹ Barendse was also subsequently charged with conspiring to murder the investigating officer and magistrate in this case. He was released on bail in late April 2023 and is yet to stand trial on the charges.⁶²

Gangs as inheritance: inter-generational gang leadership and violence as a tool for sustaining power

Gangs have been embedded in Grassy Park for generations. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, an estimated eight gangs claimed territory in the area (see Chart 5). Some of the gangs of this generation – such as the Born Free Kids, Jester Kids and Fancy Boys, have since died out – eclipsed by younger gangs and splinter groups, driven out of territory by rivals, or disrupted by police.

A gang member in Ottery described how members of the Bad Boys, who previously had a presence in the area, switched allegiance to the still-present JFKs after some of the instrumental Bad Boys leaders were imprisoned.⁶³ The Born Free Kids, primarily seen as an older generation of gangster, have similarly faded from the Grassy Park gang landscape, as older members have either passed away or 'hung up their guns',⁶⁴ and been replaced by the Young Gifted Six Bob. Other gangs, such as the Americans in Parkwood, have remained stable and held on to the same territory for up to four decades.⁶⁵

Gang territories continue to shift over time: the JFK presence in Parkwood, for example, reportedly declined after Tasliem Bianchi, JFK leader in the area, was convicted and imprisoned in 2019 for the murder of a seven-year-old child.⁶⁶ After losing Bianchi, reportedly their leader and primary guns supplier, many of the JFKs in Parkwood seemingly joined the Six Bob for protection.⁶⁷ For example, a high-ranking Six Bob

Chart 5: Estimated historical gang territories in Grassy Park, late 1980s–1990s



member who went by the alias 'Chucky' – and who was assassinated in early 2023 by members of the Americans gang⁶⁸ – was a former member of the JFKs in Parkwood. Bianchi's prosecution was unique in being the only recent successful prosecution of a gang member from the area on charges under the Prevention of Organised Crime Act.

The Young Gifted Six Bob have become the largest gang in the Grassy Park area, expanding from the strongholds in Phumlani and Lotus River over a two-decade period under the leadership of Desmond Swartz. Swartz was following in the footsteps of his father, a leader of the Born Free Kids.⁶⁹ Since the early 2000s, the Six Bob gang has been aligned with the Young Gifted to form the Young Gifted Six Bob, or 'YGSB' as some members' posts are tagged on social media. The Six Bob recruited former members of rival gangs in the area who switched allegiance as they grew stronger.⁷⁰

The group also controls territory in other areas of the wider Cape Town area, including Hanover Park, and has historically had links in Woodstock.⁷¹ While the Six Bob is not as widespread as some of the largest Cape Flats gangs such as the Americans, these pockets of territory offer the gang a strategic reserve of fighters who can be called on to support Six Bob turf wars in Grassy Park.

The shifts in gang allegiances and territorial boundaries over time illustrate how gangs create and sustain violence in Grassy Park. They use violence to retain control over historic territory (like the Americans) to take control over new territory (like the Six Bob) or arm themselves and join forces with other gangs for self-protection in a violent area (like the JFKs in Parkwood). These shifts also create a complex set of alliances and blood feuds that can lead to further violence later.

In some cases, gang leadership has passed through multiple generations of the same families (see case studies below). Gang leaders, upon inheriting control of their criminal enterprise, must continue to use violence to maintain their own power, status and source of family wealth. This leads to the cycles of violence as seen in areas like Grassy Park.

Violence is also a key tool for internal gang discipline, to enforce order within gang territory and to defend gang members and allies in the community against the threat of other gangs. To loyal members of the community, gang leaders can offer protection and a sense of security in an insecure environment. Prominent gang leaders also ensure local loyalty by providing financial support to impoverished members of their communities. This includes, for example, paying families in financial difficulty to use their homes as sites for the storage and sale of drugs, which provides an income stream in the absence of any alternatives.⁷²

The following two case studies show how the dynamics of inter-generational gang leadership work and how violence and protection are key tools gang leaders use to create and sustain power.

Desmond Swartz, former leader of the Young Gifted Six Bob, who passed away in August 2022



Source: Facebook

Gang leaders ensure loyalty by providing financial support to impoverished members of the community

Graffiti in Grassy Park showing the 'YGSB' initials of the Young Gifted Six Bob gang, who claim territory in the area

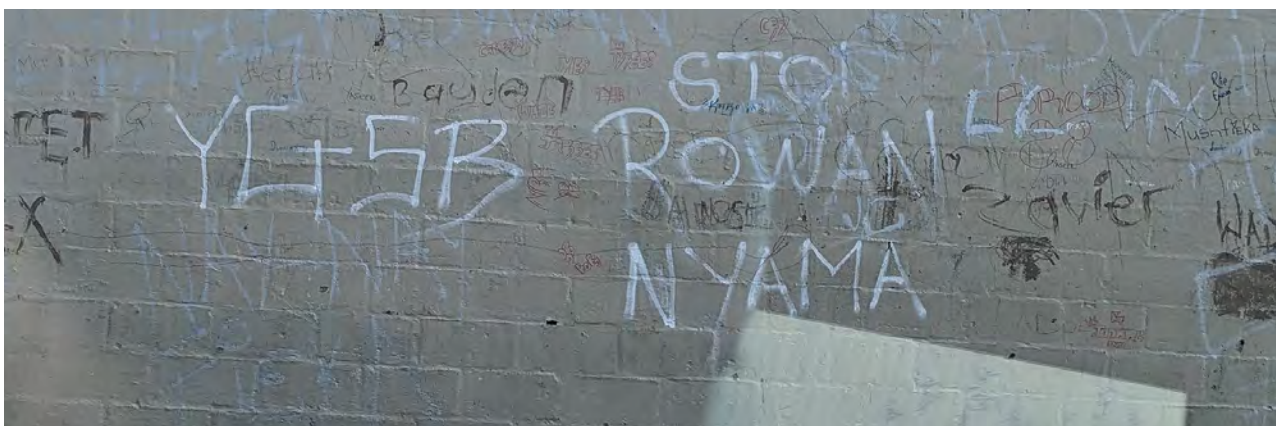


Photo: Julia Stanyard

Case study 1 - The Mongrels: inter-generational gang leadership

Leadership of the Mongrels in Ottery is, in the words of one local resident, a 'family business'.⁷³ Their longstanding presence is an example of how gangs have historically become embedded in the areas around Grassy Park. The territory currently controlled by the Mongrels in Ottery is small compared to some of the other gangs in the area, but fiercely protected. The gang has had a presence in the area since at least the 1970s; the Mongrels leaders were reportedly among the first arrivals during the forced relocations to the Ottery area under apartheid.⁷⁴

Ismail April, known as 'Bobby Mongrel', is widely credited as the founding father and first major leader of the Mongrels. He was murdered at his Grassy Park home by PAGAD in 1998. The *Mail & Guardian* newspaper reported at the time that the next generation was ready to take the helm: 'Mongrel gang boss [Ismail] April, aka Bobby Mongrel, was murdered in his Grassy Park house. His son, who took over, is currently in jail. His son-in-law, based in Lavender Hill, is now in charge.'⁷⁵

Leadership had passed to the next generation. Bobby Mongrel's son - Moegedien April, known by the alias 'Wolf' - was also a leading figure in the Mongrels before he was assassinated in 2012.⁷⁶ Bobby Mongrel's son-in-law, a gang leader widely known in the area by his surname 'Du Plooy', took over the leadership following Wolf's death.⁷⁷ Moegedien April's mother remains, according to local residents, an influential matriarch of the gang, controlling the Mongrels' activities and offering protection in return for loyalty from local residents.⁷⁸

Local rival gang members allege April's assassination was orchestrated by one of his relatives, in support of Du Plooy taking over control of the gang. The inter-family battle reportedly stemmed from split allegiances to the prison Numbers gangs (see discussion of the Numbers' role in street gang governance).⁷⁹

Since Du Plooy died of COVID-19 during the pandemic, the gang has allegedly been controlled by his two sons, Toriq and Ismodeen du Plooy.⁸⁰ Local sources claim the brothers are active in the local construction industry and are alleged to have extorted several construction projects in the area.

The Mongrels are known for showing 'no mercy' (for example, choosing to shoot assassination victims directly in the face as a show of brutality) and enforcing strict discipline on all activities in their area. This includes a particular tendency towards sexual violence as a means to enforce order, including against new recruits on initiation into the gang.⁸¹

Yet, with the brutality also comes benevolence. Local people who had negotiated with the Mongrels' leadership, approaching them for permission to work in their territory, described the brothers as 'humble' or 'approachable'.⁸² 'I'm not going to say he's a bad or good person, but you can talk to him,' said one local resident of a Du Plooy brother.⁸³ They described a 'split personality' at work: someone who can be an approachable, benevolent ruler to their community, but capable of extreme brutality in the night-time economy of gangs.

Case study 2 – Desmond Swartz: Violence, control and community relations

'He was a leader, in spite of his shortcomings. He was a role model, a role model for the community of Lotus, Grassy Park, Pelican Park. Anywhere on the Cape Flats, they will know the name Desmond Swartz. ... He could have – this is now based on confidential and classified information that he mentioned to me – he could have at any stage ... blood could have flowed through Lotus River and Grassy Park. He had that power as a human being. But he always knew that he was never in this, this game that he was in, to see blood day in and day out. He was a people person.'⁸⁴

This excerpt from the eulogy given for the late Desmond Swartz, former leader of the Young Gifted Six Bob, sums up the paradoxical figures that gang leaders can represent, and the depth of loyalty and respect they can command despite their association with violence. Thousands of people flocked to the early-morning memorial service at St Augustine's church in Lotus River in August 2022, to one of the largest funerals for a Cape Flats gang leader in recent years.⁸⁵ 'It was like Christmas,' said one local teacher of the day of the funeral, given that many schoolchildren were out of class to be there.⁸⁶

The grand scale of the event, which high-ranking members from many other gangs – Mongrels, Americans, 26s, 27s and 28s, among others – attended to pay their respects, was a testament to Swartz's status among the Western Cape gang leadership.⁸⁷ The service, which was streamed online for mourners from afar, has been viewed over 40 000 times. Unusually for a gang leader, Swartz did not die a violent death, but passed away from a heart attack in his home in Phumlani.⁸⁸ Swartz was the target of several assassination attempts throughout his life, reportedly including three separate bombing attempts from PAGAD.⁸⁹ Months later, 'RIP Dessie' signs and photographs of Swartz

were still on display outside homes around the Phumlani area.

Gang leaders are often compared to 'Robin Hood' figures. Swartz, in this vein, was relied on by his followers and community for money, food on the table and status.⁹⁰ Residents in Six Bob-controlled areas told of him paying for school fees⁹¹ and electricity bills, distributing food,⁹² or paying impoverished families to use their homes for storage and distribution of drugs.⁹³ He was also extolled as a leader and businessman, and compared to a politician who was able to offer protection in an area rife with violence.⁹⁴

In particular, he had a large following among the community of foreign nationals who looked to him for protection against attacks from other gangs. 'Foreigners will never forget you Dessie in Pumlani!! You don't know how meaningful you were to us!! May your soul rest in peace Legend!!' reads one of the top comments under the YouTube stream of his funeral.⁹⁵

Swartz was widely described as keeping a high level of control over his gang members, enforcing – sometimes brutally – obedience within the gang.⁹⁶ Local police officers even described him as a strategic leader, selecting feuds with other gangs carefully, and 'not violent' compared to some more trigger-happy gang leaders.⁹⁷

But such protection against other gangs, and enforcement of order within Six Bob, is only achieved using violence. While the public mourning may have shown love for Swartz, the fear and hatred he also inspired are not publicly shared. As one local pastor observed about gang leaders, 'these men ... people cry at their funerals. But many families, they went through hell. You only see one side of the story.'⁹⁸

Volatility and the evolving culture of violence in Grassy Park

Grassy Park's high levels of violence have intensified over the past decade.⁹⁹ Gangs in the area have become more volatile and violent over time. There are several contributing factors to this, encompassing changes in gang tactics, illicit economies and gang culture. These trends in the Grassy Park case study represent broader shifts in the Western Cape gang landscape.

In the view of one local attorney, gangs in the area are more ready to turn to violence as a form of dispute resolution than ever before.¹⁰⁰ This is attributed partly to a vast increase in the availability of firearms. As has been widely documented elsewhere, massive numbers of firearms siphoned off to Western Cape gang leaders from police stores have had a profound impact on raising the number of firearm-related homicides in the province.

An expert epidemiologist tells how gun-related deaths significantly increased as these 'Prinsloo guns' (so named after Colonel Christiaan Prinsloo, the police officer at the centre of the 'guns to gangs' scandal) flowed onto the Cape Flats from 2010 onwards. The epidemiologist explains this in an affidavit made as part of a class-action lawsuit launched in May 2023 by victims of gun violence.¹⁰¹ In 2016, Prinsloo was sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment for more than 20 charges of racketeering, corruption and money laundering. He has been on parole since August 2020.¹⁰²

Grassy Park is no exception to this province-wide trend. Gang members and police sources in the area describe how the tactics of gang violence have shifted, with drive-by shootings increasingly the most common modus operandi as firearms have become more ubiquitous.¹⁰³ Makeshift barriers and roadblocks are erected across some roads in high-risk areas such as Parkwood to protect against cars coming in for drive-by shootings.

A range of firearms seized by Grassy Park SAPS, 2022-2023. As firearms have become more ubiquitous in gang-affected areas like Grassy Park in recent years, drive-by shootings have become the most common modus operandi of gang killings.



Photos: SAPS

Residents also described a cultural shift in the use of violence, whereby gang members are more comfortable with shooting in public or in daylight,¹⁰⁴ showing off their participation in violence and broadcasting gang affiliations on social media. 'People used to wear balaclavas; now they show their whole face,' said one Parkwood local who had family links to the gangs. 'Before, the most feared guy was the guy whose face you never saw ... Today, things have changed. They put it on TikTok for all to see.'¹⁰⁵ For many in the area, this speaks to an increasing confidence among gang members that they can act with impunity.

Recruitment into gangs is increasingly targeting young children, aged around 13 or even younger.¹⁰⁶ Children have also been recruited into more serious roles within the gang. According to one Ottery gang member, whereas in previous years gangs did not allow children of such a young age to be 'shooters', this is increasingly a norm.¹⁰⁷ These younger shooters are also seen by local police sources as more volatile and dangerous.¹⁰⁸

A former teacher in the area described the long-term shift, saying that at the beginning of their teaching career in the 1980s, colleagues did not face problems of gangsterism in the classroom, but this changed over the decades. A recent student, who was a family member of an Ottery-based drug merchant and aged only 12 at the time, was recruited by gang members who 'take him out at night to train him as an assassin.'¹⁰⁹

Gang leaders are, likewise, increasingly younger men. This 'younger generation' of gang leaders, who have inherited control of their gangs from family members who have died, are commonly seen as a destabilising force. In the view of police operating in the area, younger leaders cannot wield the same level of discipline over gang members and are more readily violent to prove themselves and establish their reputation among their members.¹¹⁰ Police sources described the younger leaders as 'less easy to negotiate with,' making it more difficult to broker truces between warring gangs.¹¹¹ In the eyes of the community, younger leaders do not invest in their relationships with the local community, for example by providing financial support to local families, in the same way that their more established predecessors did.¹¹²

Interviews attributed increasing volatility and breakdown in gang governance to two linked trends. First, interviewees in the judiciary and police argued that gangs had become more 'commercial' with diversified income streams.¹¹³ Whereas previously the illicit economies controlled by gangs were more focused on drug markets, it is argued, they are now increasingly exploiting new opportunities such as extortion of a wider range of businesses. This new 'commercial' business model was seen as part of the increasing aggression in inter-gang turf wars,¹¹⁴ as taking new turf represents an ever more lucrative proposition in terms of business opportunities. Control over money has come to equal power in gang hierarchies.

Residents of Ottery take part in a 'prayer walk' following a shooting which claimed the life of a local resident, June 2021



Source: <https://www.southernmail.co.za/news/a-divided-community-joined-by-pain-fa168553-12bb-4b95-9078-7cd2501f5afc>

Second, other aspects of gang culture have also shifted. This includes the role of the notorious prison Numbers gangs – the 26s, 27s and 28s – that originated in South Africa's prisons and are a powerful force in Cape Town's underworld, both inside and outside of prison.

In their over-100-year history, the Numbers gangs have developed an intricate set of traditions that continue to be followed today. Many of these are centred around military-style hierarchies, including the subcultural 'language' of the Numbers, which initiates can use to communicate with each other and show their position within the hierarchy.¹¹⁵

Traditionally, prisoners are initiated into one of these hierarchies within the prison system. These Numbers affiliations, shared language and rituals can play a role once a Numbers gang member has left prison. The 'rules of the Numbers' provide a set of social codes and mutual respect that gang members can use to communicate and negotiate with each other across the divides of street gang allegiances and rivalries.¹¹⁶ Over time, many street gangs have developed a 'shadow' affiliation with a Numbers gang as Numbers recruits have rejoined their old street gangs on release from prison.

Paradoxically, given that they are, in themselves, a brutally violent criminal enterprise, the Numbers gangs are seen as having a regulating effect on street gang rivalries by providing this set of social networks between different gangs. One police source, for example, described it as 'advantageous' for police that most gangs in Grassy Park were aligned to the 26s, rather than divided between different Numbers.¹¹⁷

However, according to interviews with both gang and police sources, the way Numbers gangs induct new members and operate has begun to shift. While initiation in prison is still the major avenue for recruitment, in recent years it has reportedly become more common for the Numbers to recruit gang members who are in custody for only a short period (such as awaiting trial), or outside of prison.¹¹⁸ Wealthy street gang leaders have been able to 'buy' their way into the Numbers, purely through financial means, in order to benefit from the respect and protection this association offers.¹¹⁹

This has 'commercialised' the Numbers system, in the words of observers, and reportedly disrupted how Numbers hierarchies work by cheapening the social power that the affiliation will offer an individual. These 'commercial' initiates do not, interviewees argue, fully understand the norms, language and rituals that Numbers members have traditionally used. This has a knock-on effect outside of the prison system: the channels for communication between gangs and mutual respect the Numbers affiliation offered are less effective. This reportedly leads to more volatility and violence between street gangs. It was seen by police interviewees as a negative or dangerous development that Numbers norms were losing their rigidity.¹²⁰

Case study 3 – The Young Gifted Six Bob: Inheritance, gang leadership and volatility

The inheritance of leadership roles by younger gang leaders, competition for control of gangs and internal faction-fighting contribute to the increasing volatility of gangs in the Grassy Park area. The Six Bob provide an example of how leadership affects overall gang stability. After the death of Desmond Swartz, negotiations over the future leadership of the gang took place over several months.

Desmond's son Darren (still in his mid-20s) was identified early on as one of the leading candidates for Six Bob succession, according to one police officer familiar with the gang.¹²¹ This appeared to be alluded to at Desmond's funeral: 'You need to lead, you need to have a tough talk and you can resolve things without violence. Your power is very decisive,' said Desmond's cousin, addressing Darren in his eulogy.¹²²

Desmond's succession was not a foregone conclusion, nor was there an immediate transition of leadership within the gang. Other high-ranking members, Desmond's trusted lieutenants, who command loyal followings in the Six Bob, could have claimed the top spot.¹²³ This included Desmond's brother Alfonso 'Fonny' Swartz, a long-time instrumental figure in the gang.¹²⁴ Several of these senior figures in the gang continue to play a guiding role in the leadership. Darren Swartz was wounded in a shooting incident on Six Bob turf in

Lotus River in early June 2023, allegedly targeted by the Dog Pounds. The Six Bob retaliated against the Dog Pounds rapidly after the incident.¹²⁵

One aspect of the negotiations centred around the Numbers. Never having spent a long stretch in prison, Desmond's son has not been initiated into one of the Numbers prison gangs. Even though the role of the Numbers in governing street gangs has shifted and become weaker, it still plays an influential role in gang hierarchies. High-ranking members of the Numbers played a role in negotiations over whether Desmond's son would be allowed to lead.¹²⁶

In the months following Desmond's death, gang members, police and the community alike kept close watch on the new leadership, negotiating the complex politics of who makes up the highest echelons of the gang and maintaining loyalty among Six Bob factions.¹²⁷ Police interviewees reported an upsurge in drug outlets and 'shebeens' – illicit alcohol outlets – in Six Bob-controlled areas in the months following the leadership change. This shift was perceived to be a push by the new leader to increase drug sales in order to share the wealth and ensure loyalty from trusted allies.¹²⁸ While different factions of the Six Bob are now perceived to be operating more independently under a few influential leaders,¹²⁹ this has not, as yet, led to a full-scale fracturing of the gang or major infighting.

Section 2

The impact of a ‘concentration of violence’ on local government: Grassy Park as a case study

Education

Gang violence has an impact on education in many gang-affected areas that are ‘concentrations of violence’ in the Western Cape, such as Grassy Park. Between January 2019 and March 2021, 10 621 gang-related incidents were reported in Western Cape schools, including gang presence at schools, threats, intimidation, and exploitation of teachers and learners.¹³⁰

Independent figures also support this. A March 2023 study by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Equal Education reported that 53% of respondents to a survey in Western Cape schools identified gang violence as a major threat to students’ safety.¹³¹ The Western Cape Education Department, at a parliamentary committee meeting in March 2023, acknowledged that ‘it was true that gang violence and drug use were increasing in schools.’¹³² Improving safety and security at schools has been identified as a priority policing need by the Western Cape Department of Police Oversight and Community Safety.¹³³

Interviews with teachers, school staff and community workers in Grassy Park shed light on how gang violence disrupts education in several different ways.

First is violence in the classroom. As described above, recruitment of school-age children contributes to a high drop-out rate as well as violence, drug use and drug dealing in schools. When turf wars break out, gang disputes can spill over into the classroom, particularly in schools whose catchment areas draw from multiple gang territories.¹³⁴

Students in the same classrooms can have family allegiances to different gangs. ‘Don’t try having a gang leader’s child in your class,’ said one former teacher in Lotus River, describing the complications this can bring with violence and inter-gang conflict.¹³⁵ School students can also be the target of gang violence. ‘‘If I can’t get to you, I will go for your child.’’ That’s the gang mindset,’ said one interviewee. Several interviewees in the area spoke of the lasting legacy of the 2006 murder of an 11-year-old boy in Lotus River, stabbed to death in a school bathroom.¹³⁶ The murder remains unsolved.¹³⁷

An elderly resident said it was too risky to visit family in a nearby suburb

Second, some schools in the area are located near shooting hotspots and boundaries between gang territories. Violence in close proximity to schools places students at risk and disrupts schooling. Teachers remain vigilant and share information about whether the surrounding area is safe for students travelling to and from school. When shots are fired nearby, these teachers describe keeping learners under ‘lockdown’ until the area calms again.

The high levels of violence and fierce vigilance over territory by gangs has a profound impact on residents’ freedom of movement.¹³⁸ This also applies to students travelling to school. Residents of one gang territory face a higher risk of violence – such as being robbed, attacked, or profiled as a gang member – when travelling into territory controlled by a rival gang,¹³⁹ whether this is to commute to work or school,¹⁴⁰ take up employment opportunities, or visit friends and family.¹⁴¹ One elderly resident in Ottery, for example, said it was too risky to visit family living in a nearby suburb.¹⁴²

Several teachers argued that this had a profound effect on the development of young children, who were unable to be ‘free’ when moving through their neighbourhoods. It also impacts students’ ability to travel freely to school. Residents in the Yuru Cats territory in Ottery reported that children residing in their area couldn’t travel through the Mongrels territory to get to a nearby high school.¹⁴³

Gang activity in and near schools can put teachers at risk. One former teacher interviewed described being directly threatened by a gang leader, while several others expressed fear that they might be at

risk, particularly if students confided sensitive, gang-related information to them.¹⁴⁴ This means having to negotiate a duty of care to their students and the risk to their own safety. In some instances, teachers described having to negotiate directly with gang leaders. This included calling gang members into school to demand an end to violence between groups of students or negotiating for the return of stolen property.¹⁴⁵

In addition to the physical risks that gang violence poses to students, the deep psychological impact of violence has an effect on students' behaviour. Faith leaders, teachers, police officers and activists in Grassy Park described how the deep-seated trauma stemming from exposure to violence leads to many students showing behavioural and anger issues from a young age.¹⁴⁶ Some of these behaviour issues turn violent, including cases of sexual violence.¹⁴⁷

Managing these issues and dealing with students' trauma therefore becomes a major part of teachers' work, on top of their usual workload. Schooling children whose parents are involved in gangs is like 'swimming upstream,' according to one teacher, who said it becomes impossible for children to concentrate while thinking of violence and chaos at home.¹⁴⁸ Several interviewees raised the same point that children in the area are desensitised to violence from a young age due to the frequent local shootings.¹⁴⁹

Schools cooperate closely with social and child welfare services in serious cases of abuse

In response, teachers and school management try to create a secure, pastoral environment for students. Taking on this role of providing more social support, both to students and (sometimes) their families, occupies school resources and staff time.¹⁵⁰ In some cases, where school buildings have been targeted (for example, frequent thefts of copper cables), this has included investing in security infrastructure around the school, creating a highly securitised environment.¹⁵¹ Monitoring cases of at-risk students, which may lead to a referral to other services or the family courts, creates a large additional

workload on school staff.¹⁵² While the paperwork required in building these students' case files is vital for accountability purposes, it places extra strain on already strained resources.

This work requires close cooperation with other departments. Some schools reported having an 'open-door' policy with police to conduct random drug searches, as well as drug testing conducted in schools.¹⁵³ Similarly, schools cooperate closely with social and child welfare services in serious cases of abuse.¹⁵⁴ Schools have also set up partnerships with local NGOs and faith organisations, which provide interventions outside of the school curriculum and additional support.¹⁵⁵

While teachers described the relationships with other departments positively, many also expressed concern about the limited resources available through other services. Provision of school psychologists via the Western Cape Education Department, for example, was highlighted as severely overstretched.¹⁵⁶ Others expressed concern about whether external NGOs provided appropriate or effective interventions for at-risk students.¹⁵⁷

The issues outlined above affect both primary and secondary schools in Grassy Park. The toll of violence on schools is not uniform across the area: some schools are particularly known for their gang issues, whereas others do not face the same challenges. Violence does, however, place an overall burden on the local education system and the related departments that are called on to assist with the impact of violence in the classroom.

Health and social care

Gang violence places a burden on health and social care in Grassy Park, first and foremost by placing emergency service personnel and social workers at personal risk of being victims of violent crime. Attacks on and robberies of ambulances by criminal groups have been identified as a key challenge by the Western Cape Department of Health and Wellness,¹⁵⁸ which reported on 6 March 2023 that 10 ambulance crews in the province had been subject to attacks since the start of that year.¹⁵⁹ Over 4 000 hours of Western Cape emergency staff time were lost in 2016 due to staff becoming victims of violent crime, according to a 2022 report from the Department of Community Safety.¹⁶⁰ Areas in which ambulance crews come under attack

are designated as 'red zones'; emergency crews cannot go there without a police escort.

Areas in the Grassy Park SAPS jurisdiction have been designated in these 'red zones'.¹⁶¹ Residents in high-risk areas report that ambulances can be seriously delayed waiting for police escorts when no patrol vehicles are available.¹⁶² The local Community Policing Forum, SAPS and emergency services launched a campaign in March 2022 to raise community awareness about the impact of attacks on emergency service staff and the knock-on effects on service delivery.¹⁶³ In neighbouring Lavender Hill, a 2020 study that surveyed local households found that despite positive responses about emergency care overall, 'experiences with ambulances were largely negative. Most said that they were slow to arrive or never did.'¹⁶⁴ This reflects responses shared in Grassy Park SAPS areas.

Similarly, the Western Cape Department of Social Development warned in April 2023 that social workers have come under attack while working in gang-affected areas. This includes attacks on personnel themselves, as well as property, such as department vehicles and buildings. This has, at times, led to social workers reducing the frequency of home visits to at-risk individuals for fear of their own safety.¹⁶⁵

Community members in Grassy Park likewise reported that certain areas, including particular housing blocks that are known as gang strongholds, will not be visited by social workers.¹⁶⁶ Much as the ambulance crews designate such areas 'red zones', social services have at times withdrawn support out of safety concerns.¹⁶⁷

Community leaders in Grassy Park reported that there was a huge amount of unmet need for social work among families affected by gang violence and drug addiction.¹⁶⁸ Also that community members faced untenable delays or lacked support when appealing to social services for drug- or gang-related issues in the family.¹⁶⁹ The massive volume of inter-generational trauma that decades of gang violence has generated in the area creates a commensurate demand for trauma counselling, family support and social services.

Housing and infrastructure development

Gangs' use of violence as an intimidation tactic derails the provision of housing and other physical infrastructure. In recent years, so-called construction mafia cases – where construction companies in the area are extorted by gangs for cash or employment opportunities – have become more prevalent in the Grassy Park area, which has delayed the construction of houses and schools.

This is a nationwide phenomenon. These 'construction mafias' became prevalent in KwaZulu-Natal province from around 2016, as local 'business forums' started mounting heavily armed site invasions demanding a percentage of the contract

Construction companies are extorted by gangs for cash or employment opportunities

value and employment of their members. Many of these demands have been couched in the language of local economic inclusion of marginalised communities.¹⁷⁰ Since 2018, the phenomenon has spread across South Africa. In 2019, it was estimated that at least 183 projects, collectively worth ZAR63 billion, had been affected by these disruptions nationwide.¹⁷¹ Industry bodies such as Master Builders South Africa – which represents over 4 000 construction companies – have warned that the ‘construction mafia’ are tightening their grip on the entire sector.¹⁷²

This has also become a major challenge in the Western Cape. Data shared by the province’s Department of Human Settlements showed that from 2018 to December 2022, 21 housing developments that would house over 21 000 people were delayed or halted by extortion.¹⁷³ The Western Cape SAPS reported in January 2023 that accounts of extortion in the construction sector were on the rise, releasing details of 14 related criminal cases including three murders of security guards at construction sites, other attacks on site security, threats and intimidation.¹⁷⁴ In February 2023, a city official was killed while conducting an inspection at a housing construction site, in part of a spate of violence linked to extortion.¹⁷⁵

Due to extortionists, up to ZAR58.6 million worth of transport projects were at risk

Nor is the economic impact isolated to housing projects. In June 2023, the City of Cape Town’s Mayoral Committee Member for Urban Mobility warned that due to extortionists, up to ZAR58.6 million worth of transport projects were at risk. He said the ‘brazen attempts from these mafia-style extortionists are only intensifying. They are holding to ransom the City and our contractors ... at the expense of service delivery to those who need these services most.’¹⁷⁶

Housing and transportation crimes have manifested in Grassy Park. Several recent ‘construction mafia’ cases have been attributed to the Mongrels gang. A housing development on Edward Avenue – located on the boundary between Mongrels and Yuru Cats territory – was temporarily stalled in March 2023 due to extortion demands.¹⁷⁷ Several interviewees in the area described how 20–30 members of the Mongrels drove the security team off the site, reportedly demanding a ransom payment of ZAR25 000 per month.¹⁷⁸ Construction at the site later restarted and no formal complaint has ever been registered with the police.

The construction of a primary school in Lotus River was similarly delayed by extortion.¹⁷⁹ According to sources familiar with the case, a construction company belonging to one of the Mongrels leaders was contracted to work on the project. A dispute emerged when this gang leader demanded a larger and more lucrative role for his company. Threats of violence stalled the project for several months as the school, gangs and contractors negotiated.

City officials visit the construction site at Edward Avenue housing development, November 2022



Source: City of Cape Town, available at <https://www.capetown.gov.za/Media-and-news/Edward%20Avenue%20housing%20project%20on%20track%20for%20beneficiaries>

The balance shifted as the Mongrels leaders came under pressure from their own members, many of whom were losing out on opportunities for paid work on the construction site.¹⁸⁰ Eventually, work on the site resumed and was completed in October 2022.¹⁸¹ The Mongrels were also named by interviewees in connection with several other construction extortion cases in the areas surrounding Grassy Park.¹⁸²

Beyond these specific instances of extortion, gang dynamics and territories shape which members of local communities can and cannot work on construction sites. Some residents of the Yuru Cats territory,

for example, reported that they had been promised work on a construction site, but only 'within their own territories.'¹⁸³ Another argued that recruiting workers from, for example, Six Bob territory into a construction site in Mongrels territory could lead to a 'bloodbath.'¹⁸⁴

As these cases show, the problem of violence and extortion around construction projects is connected to the issue of high local unemployment and developers' obligations to distribute a share of the job opportunities among the local community. Unemployment in this area is incredibly high: COVID-19 and South Africa's worsening electricity/load-shedding crisis have affected jobs at factories, which are major employers in areas like Parkwood. Gang members are among those searching for employment on developments, while gang leaders are viewing developments as business opportunities. Increasingly, these are becoming sites of violence.

Gang activity also impacts the provision of other infrastructure in the area. Everything from electrical cables to water supplies and any other type of copper cabling becomes a target for theft.¹⁸⁵ This essentially acts as a suppression or tax on local government spending, as money allocated for improving infrastructure is either siphoned off by extortion or spent on security or repairs. Again, this is a nationwide phenomenon. In 2022, the GI-TOC research team warned in a national risk assessment that 'unless action is taken soon, the damage to the fabric of the South African state may become irreversible' due to the rampant theft of components of critical infrastructure for, e.g., electricity, rail, water, fuel and communications.¹⁸⁶

Policing and the justice system

Conviction rates for gang-related offences in Grassy Park are very low. This was raised time and again by interviewees – from community activists to magistrates and police.¹⁸⁷ Ultimately, the aim of a police and criminal justice system – particularly in a gang-affected area like Grassy Park – should be to achieve successful prosecutions of gang-related and violent crime, to ensure gangs cannot act with impunity, reduce levels of violence and weaken criminal networks.

A common observation among the community is that known gang shooters, once arrested, are soon seen again in the area, either because charges have been dropped, or bail granted.¹⁸⁸ The same shooters are then used by gangs for multiple killings with impunity.¹⁸⁹ Cases involving high-profile gang members, in particular, rarely reach the prosecution stage.¹⁹⁰ Members of the local community expressed frustration about a lack of accountability and transparency around unsuccessful investigations and prosecutions.

This frustration was particularly strong in cases where arrests of gang members were widely publicised in local media, but subsequently did not result in successful prosecutions.¹⁹¹ In one prominent example, several members of the Six Bob – including a high-profile member known by the alias 'Nabba' – were arrested in connection with torturing another of their members to death. After several court hearings and coverage in a local newspaper where Grassy Park SAPS spoke with confidence about the wealth of evidence available,¹⁹² the case was dropped in May 2023.¹⁹³

Failed prosecution is a broader problem across the Western Cape. The conviction rate for gang-related violence across the province was reported to be just 2–3%, according to figures shared in a May 2022 parliamentary committee meeting.¹⁹⁴ As a case study area, the findings from Grassy Park can shed light on some of the systemic issues that impede the prosecution of gang-related violence.

1) Withdrawal or intimidation of witnesses

Intimidation of witnesses is a key stumbling block for gang violence prosecutions. Several members of the Grassy Park community reported that they themselves would never testify as witnesses in a gang-related prosecution, due to threats against witnesses and a perception that testifying would not make a material difference to the entrenched power of gangs in the area.¹⁹⁵ Police interviewees likewise said a climate of fear impacted the community and that it was a challenge to encourage people to testify in gang-related cases.¹⁹⁶

In this small and tight-knit community, where gang members have often grown up in the area, the perpetrators of violent crime are often widely known to their victims and witnesses.¹⁹⁷ Yet, where witnesses are afraid their lives are in danger, this eyewitness evidence is never shared in a court setting. These fears are

grounded in recent events: in June 2023, a witness testifying in a murder case was shot dead outside the Wynberg Magistrate's Court, the same court complex that covers the Grassy Park jurisdiction.¹⁹⁸

Similar challenges have been highlighted province-wide. The Western Cape Department of Community Safety carried out an analysis of 80 murder dockets that had been withdrawn in 2021-22 and found they listed 'challenges with the tracing of witnesses,' often due to intimidation, among several key shortcomings in the investigation process in murder cases. Grassy Park is one among many areas facing this challenge.¹⁹⁹

2) Police corruption

There was a widespread perception among interviewees that high levels of corruption, particularly within Grassy Park SAPS, had an impact on prosecutions and community safety. Police corruption has often been a flashpoint issue for local community groups who have protested in the Grassy Park area.²⁰⁰ Local police leadership has, in response, publicly made statements that a firm stance is being taken against corruption in the precinct.²⁰¹

One gang member described how it was routine to buy confiscated firearms from police

Many interviewees shared first-hand anecdotal evidence of corruption and the allegations varied widely, from police sharing information with gang members that put other individuals (such as witnesses) at risk,²⁰² to officers collaborating with local drug vendors.²⁰³ One local gang member described how it was routine for gangs to buy confiscated firearms from police as an additional income stream for these corrupt officers. The same firearms are then circulated and reused among different gangs in the area.²⁰⁴

The impact of corruption is seen in the courtroom. Interviewees in the criminal justice system reported that Grassy Park was perceived by attorneys and magistrates dealing with cases from across similar areas of the Western Cape as an area with a particularly acute corruption problem. This alongside some other Western Cape precincts such as Gugulethu.²⁰⁵ This has an impact on the quality of evidence presented to the court by investigating officers and on basic tasks of evidence-gathering. Where the names of certain high-profile gang members appear

Residents of Grassy Park staged a protest outside the Grassy Park SAPS calling for action against gang killings and local corruption.



Source: This image was first published in Southern Mail and is used with the permission of Africa Community Media

on the court role, there is a perception among those at court that, thanks to these members' influence, it is a foregone conclusion that the prosecution will fall apart.²⁰⁶

Criminal attorneys are in a position to see the impact of corruption on the justice system, but – as one interviewee described – do not always feel in a position to call out this abuse of power because they are reliant on police cooperation to do their own work effectively, such as with sharing evidence.²⁰⁷ Several interviewees described their confidence in the efficacy of whistleblowing structures such as the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) as low. They cited anecdotal cases where IPID had not been effective.²⁰⁸

Our research has gathered these testimonies of how corruption manifests in policing and prosecutions at the local level in Grassy Park. Government and court sources have highlighted similar issues on a broader scale and at the higher level of policing hierarchies. 'Police corruption in South Africa and in some Western Cape clusters is a continuing concern,' stated a key finding of the 2021/22 Policing Needs and Priorities Report.²⁰⁹ (In response to this finding, the SAPS hit back, arguing that the research methods reflected 'generalised' allegations against the organisation and that the SAPS had a 'zero tolerance' approach to corruption.)²¹⁰

Evidence was found suggesting members of the 28s gang had infiltrated senior management of the Western Cape SAPS

A Western Cape High Court judgment in October 2022 found evidence suggesting members of the 28s gang had infiltrated senior management of the Western Cape SAPS, gaining access to high-level confidential reports. The judgment found that 28s and Mobsters gangsters were putting pressure on public prosecutors investigating organised crime, such that these prosecutors 'are under a constant and permanent threat to their lives and that of their close families.'²¹¹

3) Caseload of police and court system

The sheer volume of gang-related and violent crime to which police officers in Grassy Park are responding is another factor hindering effective prosecutions. Local police interviewees described the workload as 'impossible,'²¹² given that investigating officers are responsible for managing, in some instances, hundreds of investigations, with the evidence-gathering and court appearances that these cases entail.

Similar challenges have been reported in other precincts in historically disadvantaged areas. Figures reported by the Department of Community Safety in 2017 showed that in the Western Cape, 48% of detectives had a personal caseload of over 200 dockets, far above the 50–60 case norm.²¹³ Prosecutors dealing with cases from Grassy Park are likewise dealing with resource constraints, leaving little time to consult with witnesses before a hearing or to review available evidence and resources to ensure trials run smoothly.²¹⁴

When discussing the case load volume that local detectives must manage, interviewees in both local and city-level policing structures emphasised that local intelligence-gathering was a critically important role, particularly for investigating gang-related crime.²¹⁵ The process of collating information about local gang members and leaders, their associations and alliances, criminal histories, and the links between multiple criminal cases (such as multiple shootings in gang turf wars) relies on long-term, on-the-ground resources and personnel. Where these key officers are overloaded with existing cases, or leave the precinct for other roles, this intelligence-gathering cannot take place, nor can police adequately respond to new criminal complaints and community needs.

For several months in 2022, Grassy Park SAPS and Metro Police officers were given additional support from the Law Enforcement Advancement Plan (LEAP) programme. LEAP is a reaction unit supported by the Western Cape government that deploys additional police officers in strategic high-crime neighbourhoods to aid crime prevention. It's been credited with reducing murder rates in precincts where it has been deployed since 2020.²¹⁶ Some police and PCF interviewees did welcome LEAP as a boost to local policing resources.²¹⁷ However, as described above, the long-term investigative work carried out by detectives based permanently in the area was seen by interviewees as the most crucial role in ensuring prosecutions of gang activity.

Overstretching of police resources also damages trust between the police and community. This animosity is reflected in incidents where police in Grassy Park have violent backlash in the course of their work, including incidents where officers attempting to carry out arrests, or police vehicles, have been attacked and stoned.²¹⁸

4) Incompatible priorities between police and the court system

Interviews with police, attorneys and magistrates dealing with cases from Grassy Park reflected friction and frustration between the police and the court system. Police are frustrated when they see, in their view, too many gang-related cases not being enrolled at court and returned to the police for further investigation, or suspects in key cases being granted bail.²¹⁹ Magistrates and attorneys, by contrast, are frustrated by what they see as a routine failure of police to adequately investigate following an arrest to ensure that a case has sufficient evidence to be taken forward to trial.²²⁰

Yet, interviewees on both sides of this debate agreed that the targets and performance indicators for police and prosecution authorities were not compatible with each other. Whereas police have set targets for arrests or the number of cases that are transferred to the courts, the courts measure success based on the number of successful prosecutions *out of the cases that are enrolled to trial*. This creates a situation whereby police are incentivised to submit as many cases as possible to the courts for enrolment, yet the courts are incentivised to be selective and enrol cases where a prosecution is judged as likely to succeed. This creates competing priorities between different parts of the criminal justice system.²²¹

Conclusions and recommendations

The community of Grassy Park and its surrounding areas – Parkwood, Lotus River and Ottery – are living with a level of violence far beyond the global norm. This disproportionate ‘concentration of violence’ takes a massive toll on the lives and livelihoods of local residents, as in other areas of the Western Cape dealing with similar or even more acute ‘concentrations of violence’. Our research centred around three main questions:

- **Why is Grassy Park a ‘concentration of violence’ and what role does gangsterism have in driving and sustaining this violence?**
- **What impact does the high rate of violence and gangsterism have on local government services?**
- **What can be done to break these cycles of violence?**

In answer to this first question, violence in Grassy Park is overwhelmingly gang-driven. As our mapping of murders and attempted murders in the area has shown visually – and our interviews support this – violence in Grassy Park is concentrated where multiple gangs claim territory in one area. As studies elsewhere in the world have also found, the presence of gangs and organised crime groups will shape the distribution of violence, concentrating incidents around the borders of territories or certain flashpoints where control of illicit economies is contested.

Yet, gang dynamics have also changed and become more volatile over time, leading to the intensity of violence seen today in Grassy Park. Cape Town’s history, the legacy of apartheid, widespread poverty and inequality are the historical factors that have led to gangs becoming such a complex and persistent social phenomenon in the Western Cape. Today, recruitment increasingly targets younger children, there is easier access to firearms and gang economies have diversified. Some social norms that previously shaped gang discipline and inter-gang relations have weakened.

To turn to the second question, this gang-related violence is impacting local government services across all sectors: education, healthcare, social work and housing provision. It undermines the government’s ability to address the drivers of violence and gangsterism, which include poverty, unemployment and social exclusion. Systemic issues in policing – including corruption – prevent gang-related crime in Grassy Park from being successfully prosecuted. In turn, government’s inability to deliver services to these areas has created instability that allows gang leaders to become powerful within the community.

The gang dynamic in Grassy Park has created a situation that other global studies have termed ‘hybrid governance’, where control of an area is contested between the state and other groups, in this case criminal groups.²²² Local government service delivery is delayed, derailed, or made less effective by the gangs, who

are influential local power brokers. The 'construction mafia' extortion incidents provide a useful example. The extortion of construction projects contributes to delays in delivering housing (or other services such as schools).

This worsens the problem of housing shortages, where many local families who would qualify for housing provision remain on waiting lists for years. Money that could be directed into better housing projects or infrastructure is instead earmarked for strengthening safety and security on construction sites. This is mostly concentrated in historically marginalised communities, such as Ottery and Parkwood, and blunts efforts to address historic inequalities.

While each suburb has unique dynamics and needs, Grassy Park is a microcosm of wider trends. The 'construction mafia' has become a nationwide issue, while the challenges of gang violence impacting education and the need for designated 'red zones' where ambulances and healthcare workers require police protection are seen in other neighbourhoods in the Western Cape. These challenges across different areas of government have coalesced in this particular neighbourhood, as violence and the threat of violence shape local power dynamics.

This leads to the final question of how to break these cycles of violence in Grassy Park and other, similar, 'concentrations of violence'. Government responses to gang violence at the local level in areas like Grassy Park are ultimately governed by national-level frameworks. The South African government's primary policy framework for addressing the complex and persistent issues of gang violence is the National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy (NAGS), developed in 2016 and subsequently adopted by Cabinet.²²³ This strategy aims to provide an inter-departmental approach, recognising the need to address the root causes of gangsterism and focus on socio-economic development. It is a nationally designed approach, but the responsibility for executing this strategy lies with South Africa's provincial governments.²²⁴ The strategy is based on four broad pillars:

- Empowering communities through addressing human development, social cohesion, unemployment, poverty and inequality.
- Communicating with communities through social partnerships, and stakeholder and community engagement.
- Preventing gangsterism through improved spatial design and creating safe living spaces.
- Combatting gangsterism through effective law enforcement strategies, upholding the rule of law, and maintaining the integrity and efficacy of the criminal justice system.

The NAGS strategy has underpinned the creation of provincial-level strategies such as the Western Cape Safety Plan, which likewise emphasises the need for a holistic and evidence-based approach to violence prevention.²²⁵

Many families who qualify for housing provision remain on waiting lists for years

Stakeholders interviewed for this research almost universally expressed support for a holistic, broad-based response to gang violence. Many interviewees – including police officers – emphasised that responding to gang-related crime is never only a policing issue. It is also a social welfare issue, a poverty issue and a justice issue, which all require responses and investment from across government departments and the political will to spur cooperation among these disparate (and often unwieldy) bureaucratic structures. In a focus group convened to discuss the findings and recommendations of this research, Grassy Park community members emphasised the need for improved design of the urban environment, addressing poverty and inequality, and for government (particularly police) to engage with the community: all pillars of the NAGS document and the Western Cape Safety Plan.

However, this strategy is not currently being seen in action in Grassy Park. The response to gang violence here is fragmented and siloed across different branches of government. The coordination necessary to achieve the holistic NAGS strategy is not being achieved at the local level. The reasons for this include a lack of cross-departmental accountability, funding divisions across departments and unwieldy bureaucracies.

There are of course examples where local cooperation is effective. Some local schools, for example, reported receiving effective support from Grassy Park SAPS. Yet these examples were isolated rather than systemic. Other provincial and national structures are also not always designed to ensure effective local cooperation. For example, the competing priorities and performance targets between the police and court system create friction rather than cohesion.

The response to gang violence in Grassy Park is siloed across different branches of government

Local stakeholders and representatives of government departments argued that achieving an effective response to gangs in areas like Grassy Park needed both 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches. That is, the creation of structures that can have high-level political buy-in like the NAGS strategy, but also engage with communities and stakeholders at the local level and can communicate their needs upwards into government. What is required is coordination and strategy direction from a single point of control in the local area. In essence, a 'concentration of effort' – a concentration of local

government resources across departments – is needed to respond to a 'concentration of violence' like that seen in Grassy Park.

The Western Cape government appears to be in the process of creating structures that could address these challenges of local coordination. Area-Based Teams have started being established in high-crime areas since 2021, which are (to quote government statements) 'a group of government and non-government stakeholders in a defined geographic area that come together with the aim of sharing experiential knowledge and data to jointly address prioritised drivers of crime and violence in the crime hotspot areas.'²²⁶ These stakeholders include the SAPS and Metro Police, neighbourhood watch structures, emergency medical services and prosecuting authorities.²²⁷

The latest Area-Based Team was launched in Delft, one of the areas with the highest rates of violence nationally, in November 2023.²²⁸ These teams will also work with the newly created provincial Violence Prevention Unit, based in the Western Cape Department of Health and Wellness. This unit – first announced in 2022 – will use data from the healthcare system to design violence reduction strategies.

While the Area-Based Teams and Violence Prevention Unit government initiatives are still in their infancy, the design of these structures seems to be well-placed to address concerns about cross-government collaboration at the local level that were raised in Grassy Park focus groups. Area-Based Teams can create the forum for a 'bottom up' approach, where events in the local area can feed into local government, allowing the team to respond to unique circumstances in each area. For example, the particularly high proportion of violence that is gang-related in Grassy Park, compared to other areas that may have higher rates of domestic or gender-based violence. Support for this kind of structure emerged organically from our research and focus group in Grassy Park, unconnected to the current efforts to establish Area-Based Teams in other areas.

Therefore, the first recommendation drawing from this research is to urgently expand the creation of Area-Based Teams into more areas, beyond the 16 currently established in the Western Cape. These could be created in areas like Grassy Park, where local government coordination is lacking. These teams should be given the financial backing needed to overcome the silos in government departments' funding that can be barriers to local cooperation.

Further support should also be provided to these teams through a central authority in provincial government – whether through the Violence Prevention Unit or a higher-level structure. These could engage with the highest levels of the relevant departments, ensure a coordinated strategy from the top down, and have the financial resources available to ensure its strategies can be enacted.

If enacted effectively, this approach could be a step-change in improving the efficiency, flexibility and coordination of government services, support policing structures with other government services in at-risk areas, and help deliver nationally agreed strategies to reduce violence. As gangs have become more violent and volatile in the years since this structure was first recommended, the need for radical and creative approaches to alleviating the drivers of gang violence is more pressing than ever.

The further recommendations below are drawn from suggestions raised by interviewees at the front line of efforts to combat gang violence in Grassy Park. Many of these interventions could be directed and managed by the Area-Based Teams and a provincial coordinating body.

1) Prioritise interventions for child welfare delivered through schools to protect children from the impacts of gang violence.

Some of the worst impacts of gang activity are affecting young children. They are increasingly targeted for gang recruitment, caught in the crossfire of gang battles, and dealing with issues of violence, abuse and addiction at home. Many interviewees working in schools described the impact of trauma on children's development.

Schools are also a key channel of social support into deprived areas. Many provide feeding schemes and additional support for impoverished students. Social workers can work within the school and teachers can take a pastoral or social care role themselves.

Yet the resources schools work with to provide this support are severely overstretched. Improving education and programmes that can offer young people alternative skills and occupations, and help them avoid becoming involved with gangs, was seen by many as a key starting point for long-term change.

Some of the worst impacts of gang activity are affecting young children

2) Take measures to promote accountability for police and prosecuting authorities at the neighbourhood level.

Many in Grassy Park are frustrated or despondent about the seeming inability of the justice system to prosecute gang-related crime. Many see a lack of accountability and transparency about why prosecutions are withdrawn. Creating more accountability mechanisms could help highlight and overcome these stumbling blocks and better engage the local community with police.

Part of the role of neighbourhood initiatives such as Community Policing Forums is to provide this kind of accountability by creating a regular platform where police and community members can discuss local issues and concerns about police performance. However, there is currently no regular link between these local CPFs and the court system, meaning the local community is often unaware of developments in court in cases relating to local gang members.

The Department of Community Safety has created a Court Watching Brief Unit, which 'monitors criminal cases struck off the court roll as a result of possible SAPS inefficiencies.'²²⁹ Creating a link between this unit and local CPFs could be one way to improve transparency over court proceedings and link the findings of the Court Watching Brief back to individual police precincts.

3) Improve coordination between police and prosecuting authorities by ensuring that performance targets for both organisations are aligned.

It is a source of friction between the police and the court system that both structures appear to have competing priorities and performance targets, which shapes what prosecutions are transferred to the courts or enrolled for trial. Ensuring that targets are aligned and that prosecutors and detectives can collaborate more effectively could help reduce this friction and ultimately improve prosecution rates.

4) Provide more support to local civil society organisations and encourage cooperation between different organisations at the local level.

Civil society organisations, faith organisations and local community groups are at the forefront of dealing with the effects and drivers of gang violence in an area like Grassy Park, thanks to the challenges in government service delivery. Community groups plug the gaps in service delivery, they provide feeding schemes for those facing food insecurity, provide support groups for those dealing with addiction, offer safe spaces for children and give other frontline support. These groups – embedded as they are within the community – can intervene where government has been unable to. However, funding and support to these groups is limited and groups in the same area are often competing for limited resources. Better support to civil society groups and mechanisms to encourage cooperation can help improve this frontline support based in the community.

5) Reorient local government spending across departments to ensure resources are allocated to the most marginalised areas.

Gang activity in Grassy Park suppresses the impact of local government spending, hindering local development. In this context, the challenging task that local government faces, of righting the historical inequalities engrained in Cape Town's infrastructure, becomes even more challenging. Reinforcing local spending to these marginalised areas, by considering the current realities of the impact of gang violence, is needed to target inequality, poverty and ultimately violence itself.

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About ENACT

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