

MALE GANG MEMBERS' PERSPECTIVES ON GANG MEMBERSHIP AND THE ROLE OF DRUGS

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Abstract

Drugs play a pivotal role in the functioning of gangs, motivating deviant behaviour and meeting members' physiological and belonging needs. To understand the process of engaging in and disengaging from a gang, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was utilised. The ecological perspective was used to identify various systems that influence the individual, whilst Maslow's motivational theory was used to explain intrinsic needs that motivate human behaviour. The findings of the study reveal that gang members present with unique physiological and belonging needs, which must be understood by social workers in order to gain optimum results with intervention.



## **MALE GANG MEMBERS' PERSPECTIVES ON GANG MEMBERSHIP AND THE ROLE OF DRUGS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Kinnes (2008:5) states, "One cannot separate South African gangs from drugs". Drugs are inextricably connected to the construct and functioning of gangs. The nature of this relationship, however, is complex and unclear. Aside from dealing in drugs, gang members are the primary consumers of drugs (Legget, 2002:307). Standing (2003:7) makes the shocking statement that, as a result of exposure and high consumption rates, drug usage has become normalised and ceases to be viewed as deviant by some South African communities. There is a need for insight into the interaction between drug usage and gang involvement, as the effects of the interaction have ramifications on health and safety, and places much strain on the health, social welfare as well as defence sectors.

Various motivating factors involved in engaging in a gang have been identified, such as social stressors. However, the role that drugs play in engagement in a gang is not clearly defined. Does drug usage precede joining a gang, or is it rather a consequence of engaging in a gang? The temporal nature of this relationship is unclear (Bjerregaard, 2010:6). The Medical Research Council as well as other organisations involved in the field of substance dependence and security studies have identified the need for more knowledge about these variables (Legget, 2002:8). Both drug dependence and gang involvement have devastating consequences for those involved, as well for the broader community. This is reflected in crime statistics as well as shifts in norms within communities where exposure to this interaction is common (Standing, 2003:7). It is therefore essential that more knowledge be generated in order to gain insight into the process of gang membership and its interaction with drugs. This knowledge may be utilised to inform effective interventions, in turn decreasing the devastating consequences of this interaction.

Consequently, the aim of the study is to gain a better understanding of gang membership in terms of engaging and disengaging from a gang, as well as of the role that drugs play in gang membership.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches was utilised for the study because such a combination results in an in-depth and complete analysis of a complex research problem (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011:66). Qualitative research aims to understand the meaning that individuals place on events calling for personalised responses, and this includes the perceptions of participants (Fouché & Delport, 2002:79). Quantitative research, on the other hand, aims to explain relationships between variables as well as to describe trends. It further requires that the researcher use methods based on theory to undertake unbiased inquiry into a social phenomenon in order to draw conclusions (De Vos *et al.*, 2011:63-64). The research for the study

therefore aimed to use deductive reasoning in the form of theory and perspectives in order to confirm or validate relationships.

The population for this study included male gang members who have been associated with or are currently associated with any kind of gang. A non-probability purposive sample was utilised for the study. Strydom and Delpont (2002:334) describe this method as the process of seeking out specific participants who meet the criteria for the study. The size of the sample was guided by data saturation, which is described as the point when information gathered becomes repetitive (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont, 2002:336). Owing to the largely qualitative focus, twelve individual interviews were held as well as a focus group with four participants. The individual interviews were conducted at a selected in-patient Substance Dependence Treatment Centre and the focus group was held at another substance abuse centre. In Legget's (2002) 3-Metros Arrestee Study a limitation was identified in terms of participants' reluctance to disclose their drug usage. By sampling participants in a substance treatment centre, it was assumed that participants would be more likely to provide accurate accounts of their drug usage, seeing that the usage of drugs is normalised within this context.

Preceding data collection, physical contact was made with participants. The population group is known to be suspicious and cautious, and it was thus essential that rapport be developed with participants. Techniques of developing relationships were implemented in order to convey empathy and understanding, as well as a non-judgemental stance. The use of language indigenous to gang culture provided another means to developing a relationship. Owing to the nature of the study and population group, a very clear explanation of the aim of the study was communicated to the participants. It was essential that they were assured of anonymity. This was particularly important for this population group in order to ensure their safety. It was further emphasised that the study did not attempt to gain in-depth information on the activities of the participants' gang.

Data were collected by means of a scheduled semi-structured interview utilising a questionnaire that consisted of open- and close-ended questions (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:105-109). The focus group took on the format of an open discussion with regard to the interplay between gangs and drug usage. Responses from the participants of the focus group and those from the individual participants were integrated into the relevant themes. Interviews were transcribed and qualitative information was interpreted by identifying common themes presented by the participants.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **Engaging in a gang**

In order to understand the process of engaging in a gang two theoretical perspectives were utilised. The ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) was used to identify various systems that influence the individual, whilst Maslow's (1987) motivational theory was used to explain intrinsic needs that motivate human behaviour. In terms of the ecological perspective, individual characteristics were identified as well as various

influential systems, such as the family system, education system and peer system. The influence of these systems in the process of engaging in a gang was explored.

### **Individual characteristics**

The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 33 years with the average being 24 years. The majority of participants (6 or 50%) (n=12) had grown up in the Mitchells Plain area, with seven (58%) presently residing within the Mitchells Plain area. The majority of participants (11 or 92%) grew up in an area known as the Cape Flats, notoriously associated with the emergence and continued presence of gangs (Van Wyk, 2010:22). Standing (2003:1) states that whilst the standard of living within the Cape Flats varies from area to area, one can generalise and classify this area as a low-income area.

### **Family system**

Swick and Williams (2006:372) state that the family provides the most intimate reference point for an individual, providing a schema for viewing the world, as well as establishing norms of human interaction. Jankowski (1991:39) states that there is no correlation between experiences of an absent father and gang membership. It is, however, significant to note that seven (58%) participants within this study had an absent father and lived within a non-nuclear family system.

When salient characteristics of the participants' home environment were explored, they referred to instability (*"We were constantly moving around. Going here, going there"*), isolation (*"For me it was tough because I can never share with anyone"*) and absent parents (*"We all used to live here with my brother... they [parents] seker [probably] wanted to be on their own"*). Participants reported conflict, particularly between their parents (*"My mommy and my daddy used to argue a lot. Used to fight a lot"*). Hill (2002:152) states that exposure to marital conflict can adversely affect the individual, whilst chronic exposure can result in emotional deregulation. Heightened emotional and behavioural reactivity may occur, where the individual engages in volatile and externalised behaviour in the form of anti-social behaviour. The findings of the study illustrate that eight (67%) of the twelve participants had been exposed to some type of violence in their home environments when growing up. Two (17%) participants stated that there was no violence present in their homes when growing up and adamantly denied any form of disagreement between their family members (*"There wasn't any fighting"*). This response appears unrealistic, as conflict is a common occurrence in most relationships, thus making their narratives questionable.

Ferguson and Wormith (2005:5) state that individuals with family members engaged in a gang are more likely to become involved themselves. The study illustrates that a remarkable 75% (9) of the participants had family members who were affiliated with a gang. Of the nine (75%) participants who had family members in gangs, this family member was the primary caregiver for five (56%) of these participants. Just more than half (56%) of the participants grew up with a father figure involved in gangsterism.

Swick and Williams (2006:372) state that familial drug abuse can adversely affect the individual's development, resulting in an increased risk of engagement in a gang. Familial substance abuse may further increase the risk of substance usage for an

individual (Kilpatrick, Acierno, Resnick & Best, 2000:2). Almost all (92%) of the twelve participants have some family member who uses drugs, alcohol or both in a problematic manner. This may provide more insight into the environment in which the participants have developed considering that drug and alcohol usage may have been a norm. The study investigated whether any of the participants' family members used or sold drugs or alcohol. Seven (58%) participants have family members who are presently or have in the past been involved in selling drugs. Of the eleven (92%) participants who have family members who use drugs, six (55%) have family members who sell drugs.

Interestingly, only one participant showed no familial usage of drugs or alcohol in a problematic manner. This participant, however, identified his mother as being involved in the selling of drugs ("*My mom sold drugs*"). Thus all participants had been exposed to drugs or alcohol in their home environment. These results show an alarmingly high prevalence of illegal activities within the participants' home environment. Kinnes (2000:1) refers to the normalisation of deviant behaviour within families and communities. Drug usage and drug sales have shifted from being an illegal activity, and have even become sanctioned as a legitimate and acceptable activity within some families and communities.

The study identified unstable home environments characterised by multiple moves and overcrowded living arrangements, as well as fathers who were absent and inconsistent. Parenting styles were permissive and participants were given a lot of freedom, seeing that some parents were absent and participants were sent to live with relatives. Abuse and conflict were reported within the participants' homes with the majority of participants reporting exposure to violence within their home whilst growing up. The findings of the study thus showed unstable home environments with multiple stressors, such as exposure to aggressive behaviour and abuse. Furthermore, the study highlighted disconnectedness within families.

### **Education system**

Ward (2006:50) states that schools play an integral role in an adolescent's development. Furthermore, attachment to school activities may act as a protective mechanism, diminishing delinquent and anti-social behaviour. Craig, Vitaro, Gagnon and Tremblay (2002:55) state that gang members are usually known to be struggling with school work, or to have dropped out of school. Fewer than half (5 or 42%) of the participants completed Grade 9 and only three (25%) participants completed Grade 12. Participants' responses are consistent with Craig *et al.* (2002:55) in showing a high school dropout rate for those associated with gangs.

Participants did not complete school for various reasons. The study revealed that the age of participants when they stopped attending school was higher than the expected age for the grade they were in. For example, one participant had repeated three years of schooling and was 17 years old when in Grade 8. Another participant was a remedial student. This study does not endeavour to assess learning difficulties, but poor school performance seemed characteristic. It is, however, not clear if this is a consequence or a motivating factor in conduct issues. It should be noted that Fraser (1996:352) states that

poor academic progress plays a role in aggressive behaviour, since feelings of inadequacy are externalised. Feelings of worthlessness as a result of difficulty with school work is a risk factor for engaging in a gang, because individuals alienate themselves from the school and align themselves with the inclusive and accepting gang (Craig *et al.*, 2002:55).

Eight (67%) of the participants' families were unaware that they had absconded from school. This indicates a poor relationship between the education system and participants' guardians. The progress of these participants was clearly not traced by the education system or by their guardians. Muuss (2006:304) describes how an impoverished relationship between an adolescent's parents and the school is likely to affect his school performance. When gaps develop, the individual's motivation to succeed may decrease.

The findings highlight key issues about educational institutions as well as their poor relationship with the participants' guardians. Schools were reported as places where participants felt unsafe (*"I couldn't go to school anymore cause I joined the gang. The rival gangs ... they knew that I went to school, so they would like wait for me"*). It would appear that schools did not supervise students' attendance and performance, because participants' repeated absenteeism remained undetected or overlooked. Schools did not follow up with parents, and parents remained unaware. The participants' repeating of grades and their above-average age for the grade demonstrate a lack of intervention. These participants appear to have slipped between the gaps and consequently entered a gang, where their needs for esteem and belonging were met.

### **Peer system**

Participants stated that *peers* had facilitated their transition into a gang. Whilst socialising with friends, the participants began to engage in gang activities. Participants spoke about being influenced by friends who were already part of a gang. They wanted to imitate their friends (*"My friends they actually joined the gang ... I didn't want to be left out"*). Walker-Barnes and Mason (2001:1815) and Muuss (2006:302) state that exposure to delinquent peers is strongly linked to the development of delinquent behaviour. The literature and the participants both state that spending time with gang members can result in the individual beginning to assimilate the values and behaviour of the gang. Apart from friends facilitating the process, participants spoke about role models within their communities (*"There were like two older guys and us. They were like Jakkies.<sup>1</sup> They were like role models to us. The stuff that they had. The stuff that they done. We also wanted to do that"*).

It is consequently clear that various systems facilitated the individual's decision to join a gang. A deeper exploration of the individual's motivation, independent of systems, was then undertaken. Maslow (1987) explains that various individual needs motivate human behaviour. These include physiological, safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation needs. The participants' decision to join a gang was explored and their responses were analysed and interpreted within the hierarchy of needs identified by Maslow (1987).

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<sup>1</sup> Name of a gang.

### Physiological need

The most basic need identified in Maslow's hierarchy of needs is *physiological needs* (Maslow, 1987:21). The participants referred to *drugs* as a motivating factor. It was stated that associating with gangs may increase access to drugs, because gangs are said to give their members drugs in exchange for providing a service of some kind. For example, when one participant was asked why he had joined a gang, he responded "*to support my drug habit, cause they (the gang) would like give me*". Ward's (2006:27) findings confirm the participants' views by identifying drugs as a motivational factor in an individual's choice to engage in a gang. The concept of drugs as a motivating factor for gang membership can be linked to Maslow's physiological need, as drugs are dependence-forming substances. Individuals may join a gang in order to manage physiological cravings. From the findings it can be concluded that gangs provide access to drugs and the fulfilment of associated physiological needs. The fulfilment of this need therefore motivates individuals to join a gang.

### Safety need

The second motivational identified is that of *protection*. Participants appear to view membership of a gang as a survival mechanism in response to living within a hostile environment, i.e. failing to associate with a gang may leave one at risk ("*As ek nie in die bendes in gaan nie, is ek nie safe nie.*" [*If I don't join a gang, then I am not safe*]). Miller (2001), Padilla (1992) and Vigil (1988) echo this view, stating that individuals are motivated to engage in a gang in order to benefit from the protection gangs are seen to afford. Maslow (1987:21) mentions safety needs as a human need motivating behaviour. The participants' responses are thus aligned with the findings in the literature. The study identified that individuals are attracted to the security and protection that gangs are seen to provide. Participants generally agreed that, residing in a threatening environment with a high prevalence of gangsterism, joining a gang afforded security ("*Dit gaan oor power, as jy 'n 'frans' is, jy kan niks sê nie ... jy het nie regte ... om in die bende te wees is jy veilig.*" [*It's about power. If you are a 'frans',<sup>2</sup> then you can't say anything, you don't have rights. You are safe if you are in a gang*]).

### Belonging need

The third motivational factor is a sense of *belonging*. The participants' narratives describe a need for belonging because of unmet needs, particularly within the home environment. In the interviews participants identified a need to fit in and be part of something, as well as a need to feel acknowledged and appreciated. Participants identified these needs as a motivational factor for an individual to engage in a gang. When asked why an individual would join a gang, a participant responded, "*they need a sense of belonging. They need to fit in. They need to be a part of something that they haven't been getting ... like their family ... Just to be appreciated or acknowledged*". Concepts of love and acceptance were further mentioned as motivational factors, as gang association leads to what participants referred to as the "*broerse lewe*", or brotherhood.

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<sup>2</sup> Non-gang member.



To be affiliated to a gang means belonging to something, something that offers acceptance and support, albeit for deviant acts. Participants spoke further about feeling that they could go to the gang if they needed support or assistance, as the gang emphasises unity and support (“*Say I’m in trouble, I got people I can go to. So basically it’s support*”). When the individual engages with a gang he is part of something and willing to fight to the death for his fellow members. This extreme loyalty appears to fill a gap that participants identified as existing because of unmet needs.

Participants’ responses are aligned with the findings of Ferguson and Wormith (2005:5) and Vignoles, Gollidge, Regalia, Manzi and Scabini (2006:310), where feelings of alienation are presented as a risk factor for engaging in a gang. Maslow (1987:20) further identifies a need for belonging as a motivational factor for individuals, where individuals may even generate an external threat in order to create a sense of unity. Vignoles *et al.* (2006:310) state that when the need for belonging is threatened, the individual may join a more inclusive group, such as a gang. The participants’ narratives are thus aligned with the literature with regard to a sense of belonging being a motivating factor for engaging in a gang.

### **Self-esteem need**

Maslow’s motivational theory (1987:21) states that human behaviour is motivated by a *self-esteem* need. Humans accordingly seek self-respect, which may be attained through achievements, as well as through prestige and status. Participants’ responses echo theory by identifying status as a motivational factor for engaging in a gang. Participants stated that belonging to a gang gives one status. One participant’s narrative illustrates that gangs are a norm within his community. Failing to associate with a gang may decrease one’s status, making one obsolete (“*People join gangs cause basically they want to be something or someone ... If you are not related to someone that is in a gang, then people will just look at you like, agh, he’s not worth anything. But if they see you are in a gang ...*”).

The study identified access to *material goods* as a motivational factor in an individual’s choice to engage in a gang. Material goods seemed to be linked to fulfilling self-esteem needs. Name-branded items were likewise very important to the participants, with international labels being sought-after commodities and appearing high in status. Failure to have a name-branded item appeared to result in feelings of shame and worthlessness. A participant even expressed resentment towards his parents for their failure to buy him branded items, which he viewed as essential (“*The neighbour’s kids came home with name-brand clothing and their parents weren’t well off. So my parents were like more well off than those people (and we weren’t well-off people), and my parents never wanted to buy me name-brand stuff cause they couldn’t afford it ... So I asked my friends like where do they get it. And we spoke about like stealing it from people and robbing people ... I thought like I can live like this. This is nice. I dress nice*”). Material goods appeared to be a priority within the participants’ communities inasmuch as they symbolised status and respect. Gangs are seen as providing access to these material goods.

Participants stated that the possibility of obtaining *money* from gang involvement motivated them to become associated (“*When you needed money they could sort of give you money*”). For participants who are unemployed and have limited education, the possibility of earning some money was highly attractive. Jankowski (1991:40) expresses a similar view by saying that gangs are viewed as a means to obtaining financial security. Financial security may also be intertwined with feelings of esteem.

### **Self-actualisation need**

At the apex of the hierarchy is the need for *self-actualisation*. This need motivates an individual to seek a sense of meaning and purpose. Findings show that belonging to a gang results in feelings of pride, because it provides meaning (“*It means a lot to me. It means a lot ... I’m proud actually. It means a lot yes. It’s something that I wanted. Also I achieved it*”). It also leads to a sense of purpose through activities such as defending territory and the resulting experience of the “brotherhood” of the gang. It can be concluded that a gang’s ability to fulfil self-actualisation needs motivates individuals to engage in a gang.

Various systems and needs were thus identified by the participants as playing a role in engaging in a gang. These findings can be used to achieve an in-depth understanding of the process of engaging in a gang. After exploring how engaging in a gang occurs, the role that drugs play once the individual is part of a gang was investigated.

### **Gangs and drugs**

Kinnes (2008:4) states that within the South African context gang membership cannot be separated from drug usage. The study identified that all (12 or 100%) of the participants had tried cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana and methamphetamine. In a study conducted by Katz *et al.* (2005:81) alcohol and marijuana were identified as the most common substances used by gang members. The participants in this study added methamphetamine to the list of the most common substances used. Eight (67%) of the participants stated that methamphetamine was their drug of choice, whilst the remaining four (33%) participants identified heroin as their drug of choice.

Santé (1991) states that the connection between substances and gangs can be traced back through the history of gangs. The aim of the study was to better understand the relationship between gangs and drugs. In order to explore the connection between drugs and gangs various questions were formulated based on existing literature. At this stage information obtained from a focus group held with four members are presented together with the twelve individual participants’ responses, where pertinent.

All of the individual participants (n = 12) and group members (n = 4) strongly agreed that there is a connection between gangs and drugs. When asked to elaborate, the participants had a few common responses. The first response was related to *money*. Participants felt that drug sales are the foundation of gangs’ existence as they provide the gangs’ income. One participant stated:

*“As gangs nie dwelms het nie, dan is daar nie geld nie. En sonder geld is daar nie power nie.” [If gangs don’t have drugs, then there is no money. And if there is no money, then there is no power.]*

Participants further identified that drug usage played a role in gang functioning, as drug usage was used to encourage gang activities:

The literature (Kinnes, 2008:4; Klein, 1995; MacKenzie, Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2006:111; Nasir & Rosenthal, 209:207; Vigil, 1988) establishes that there is a connection between gangs and drugs. Participants’ responses are thus aligned with the findings of other studies, as participants vehemently stated that drugs are inextricably connected to gangs. The nature of this connection was then explored, beginning with the initiation process.

### **Drugs and the initiation process**

Padilla (1992), in describing the initiation process of Puerto Rican gangs in Chicago, identified drugs as playing an integral role in the process. Participants described how they would have to complete a task in order to be accepted into the gang, and how drugs would be provided for them to use in the process:

*“...you’re on probation. So like they will share you of their secret, ‘now go shoot at that people’... And when you come back you can drink as much as you want to, smoke as much as you want to.”*

Drugs were identified as playing a role within the initiation process. Participants explained that before going to complete the task that would prove them as worthy of being in the gang, they would be given drugs by the gang. Once the task was complete, the gang would again offer the new inductee drugs (*“Whenever you go out and shoot. So if you come back, you can use whatever you want to. There is always a party”*).

### **Sale of drugs**

Almost all of the participants (92%) had been involved in the sale of drugs. The one participant who stated that he had not sold drugs is part of the Tug Life gang, which appears to be a very small and unstructured gang consisting primarily of friends. Accordingly, almost all (11 or 92%) participants were involved in the sale of drugs. The findings illustrate that the drug trade is an activity of gangs. Gang members sell drugs on behalf of the gang and are remunerated in the form of a monetary commission as well as drugs. One participant stated that he would get a salary in return for selling drugs.

*“Every month I will get a salary. Say now the boss will buy you clothes and that. He will give a section of the money to your parents, and the other ... maybe you owe him a lot of money so he will just take it from there.”*

After further clarification this participant explained that he would never see the monetary value of his salary because, after deductions were made, he would receive drugs in lieu of the deficit amount (*“After paying back I will get drugs instead”*). These findings may provide another perspective on gangs’ tendency to condone members’ drug usage, as provision of drugs in lieu of money may be more financially beneficial for the gang.

The findings show that gangs and the drug trade are intimately linked. The drug trade is central to gang functioning and also a vital source of income and power for the gang. The drug trade is described as “work”, illustrating that the drug trade is a norm and a legitimate occupation for gang members.

### **Drugs and gang activities**

Vigil (1988) states that drugs are entrenched within the culture of a gang, further fulfilling certain functions within a gang. The participants emphatically stated that drugs were a part of their daily activities (*“Drugs will be like serving tea”*).

Also drug usage plays a pivotal role in the functioning of the gang. Participants spoke about how drugs motivate the gangs’ activities; how drugs are used before conducting gang activities and after completing a task; how drugs heighten gang members’ fortitude, diminishing inhibitions. Participants spoke about being incapable of undertaking violent acts without first using drugs:

*“I will never be able to shoot someone being sober. But there, you will maybe sit together and start smoking, and you smoke and you smoke and smoke, and all of a sudden the topic comes up of this one or that one needs to be shot or who needs to die. And then they put a gun in your hand. And you don’t care that time. You don’t have feelings towards someone else. That it’s someone else’s child, or husband or son. You just go. You just do it.”*

This participant’s statement represents a form of coping, as discussed by Anton (2010:739), where individuals use substances to alleviate symptoms such as intrusive thoughts as a result of exposure to trauma. Drugs are used by gang members to quieten their conscience and are further used as a form of self-medication after completing a task in order to cope with flashbacks and intrusive thoughts and images (*“Ya, I want to go sleep. I don’t want to think about that that I’ve done. I know it’s wrong. I want to go sleep so my mind can come off from it”*).

The findings of this study support Vigil’s (1988) view that drug usage is entrenched in gang culture. Moore (1991), Moore (1978) and Vigil (1988) suggest that a large component of gang activities is parties. Participants made mention of drugs as a part of the socialisation process (*“When there are people around like the family members of the gang ... we take out drugs and entertain them*). MacKenzie *et al.* (2006:125) state that drugs are used for functional purposes, such as assisting in developing cohesion. Participants’ responses appear aligned with this view. For example, participants’ narratives describe how drugs are used when various branches of the gangs commune for a meeting (*“Like say there is a conflict in Tafelsig<sup>3</sup> right, and then the Fancy Boys<sup>4</sup> in Hanover Park,<sup>5</sup> Woodstock,<sup>6</sup> all those places, and then everyone will come together, and then they will discuss what’s happening, and who is fighting, and where they need*

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<sup>3</sup> Area of Mitchell’s Plain in the Western Cape.

<sup>4</sup> Name of a gang.

<sup>5</sup> Suburb of Cape Town.

<sup>6</sup> Suburb of Cape Town.

help ... and there is a lot of drugs and alcohol”). Drugs usage acts as the glue, binding members from different areas.

### **Gang norms with regards to drug usage by members**

The literature reflects discrepancies with regard to gangs’ sanctioning of drug usage. Taylor (1990) and Mieczkowski (1986) state that gangs may be selective of the substances they promote and those they prohibit. The participants’ responses were polarised in terms of their views that gangs approved of or encouraged drug usage.

One of the participants stated: *“Nie r rig nie. Want daar kom die korrupsie, bedrog in ...”* [Not really because that is where the corruption, deception comes in]. This participant was valued in his gang because he did not use drugs. He was utilised in the drug trade from the age of 14 because he could be trusted with stock, not using drugs at this time. Furthermore, because of his age he may have appeared innocent and could conceal activities more easily. In the event of being caught he would also have been less likely to be prosecuted. As a non-drug user, this participant became an asset to the gang. When he began using drugs, his role within the gang changed and he was relocated to other tasks. (*“Ek het nie dwelms gebruik soe hulle kon my vertrou ... ek was jong soe as ek gevang word is dit nie soe erg ... toe ek begin rook het hulle vir my ander werk gegee.”* [I didn’t use drugs so they could trust me ... I was young so if I got caught it wouldn’t be so bad ... when I started smoking I was given other jobs]).

One participant felt that gangs did not encourage drug usage and, in fact, they discouraged usage of some kinds of drugs:

*“Not actually because it depends ... like this guy ... he doesn’t really want you to smoke heroin cause he knows what it does to you. He would rather advise you to smoke tik<sup>7</sup> instead of heroin”*

Another participant drew a distinction between the two gangs to which he belongs, namely the Jakkies and the 26 prison gang. The participant described that at first when he was a Jakkie, his drug usage was encouraged:

*“Then they tell me ‘yeah, jy mekeer drugs?’ and I say ‘ja gee vir my’.”* [Hey, do you need drugs? And I say yes give me.] *And I’m going to tik then I’m going to go fetch them that car, go fetch them those drugs, go fetch them that one ...”*

However when the participant became a 26 gang member, things became more serious and he had to act in a more responsible way (*“I smoked less, cause I just want to think about my Number.<sup>8</sup> Can’t forget my Number”*). The participant described how the 26s did not support usage of all drugs (*“They don’t really want me to smoke heroin”*).

It became clear that drugs were ranked and graded within gangs. Participants indicated that some drugs were condoned but others were discouraged (*“Most gangs are against heroin. Even in prison also. If you go to prison and they hear you use heroin, it’s almost like they treat you like a dog, cause you are sick”*). Katz et al. (2005) and MacKenzie et

<sup>7</sup> Methamphetamine.

<sup>8</sup> Number refers to any of the three prison gangs, namely the 26s, 27s or 28s.

al. (2006) explain that gangs sanction marijuana usage, because it is seen as a substance with low risk. Participants' views bear out this finding, but they add that methamphetamine and Mandrax as reportedly accepted by gangs (*"Like the gang I was in, our drug of choice was crystal meth. Crystal meth is something that keeps you awake, so your mind is active. So smoking buttons<sup>9</sup> is acceptable cause it doesn't zonk you out like other drugs"*). Heroin usage was, however, controversial. Participants whose drug of choice was heroin described how they would have to conceal their usage from their gang (*"They didn't really know that I smoked heroin because I never smoked it there with them. I smoked other places"*).

The study demonstrates that gangs distinguish drugs from each other and further selectively sanction the usage of substances. Alcohol, marijuana, Mandrax and methamphetamine appear to be accepted within a gang. Alcohol and marijuana, however, are the most acceptable, with marijuana usage being a norm within all gangs, including the prison gangs. Marijuana usage within the prison gangs was described as socially acceptable behaviour. The norm of marijuana usage within the prison gangs was illustrated by a gang member who described that he was introduced to marijuana whilst in prison. The study further demonstrates that members of the gangs within prison use Mandrax, methamphetamine and heroin, which is easily accessible (*"We get together at times. We may smoke buttons also. There in prison we tik also. We get everything"*).

As mentioned earlier, the findings reveal that gangs make a distinction between drugs. Although drug usage appears to be a norm and relatively accepted by the gang, heroin usage was discouraged by some gangs. Heroin is viewed as a more harmful drug in comparison to other drugs because of the resulting tolerance and severe withdrawal symptoms (*"Ya, he [gang leader] gives you but he doesn't really encourage heroin cause he knows what it does to you, and where it will bring you. It's not like tik ... I mean you can stay without tik, but you can't stay without heroin"*). Heroin is thus placed in an elevated category. The study described that some street gangs would supply their members with any of the popular drugs, apart from heroin. Members whose drug of choice was heroin would go to a drug merchant and exchange the drugs given to them by their gang for heroin. However, once the drugs had been exchanged, the member could return to their gang and use their heroin with the rest of the gang (*"My gang never gave me heroin. I would exchange the drugs they gave me for my drug of choice and then come back and smoke with them while they smoked tik"*). In this process the gang had not directly bought the heroin for the member. This illogical reasoning allows the gang to demonstrate a moral stand on heroin usage, and perhaps demonstrate what members appear to perceive as concern for their wellbeing.

A more practical reasoning behind gangs' disapproval of heroin usage may be because of the detrimental effect its usage may have on the gang's functioning and thus profitability. Drug-dependent individuals become motivated by their physiological craving and may then struggle to function. Members may begin to prioritise feeding their habit above loyalty to the gang and all that it entails. Drug dependence further

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<sup>9</sup> Mandrax.

affects the ability to trade drugs, as the drug-dependent individual is more likely to make mistakes and become unreliable, for example, by using the gang's stock.

Gangs tread a thin line between condoning and discouraging drug usage. Supporting drug usage may benefit the gang, because drugs play a role in encouraging and motivating gang activities. As intoxicated members lack inhibitions, they are willing to undertake any tasks, particularly violent acts, with little thought of the consequences. Gang members who become dependent on drugs, however, are a risk for the gang. Since they become unreliable and disloyal, their absolute devotion to the gang is challenged by their physiological needs. According to Maslow (1987), physiological needs are the most basic of human needs and as a result are the strongest motivator of behaviour. Gangs appear to be cognisant of the threat that physiological needs pose to the wellbeing of their business.

### **Temporal order of gang involvement and drug usage**

Swahn, Bossarte, West and Topalli (2010) and MacKenzie *et al.* (2006:116) suggest that marijuana usage precedes gang involvement. It is of interest to explore whether participants began using drugs before joining a gang, or if involvement in a gang came first. In order to establish the temporal order, the information of individual participants was utilised. As background information collected from the focus group participants was limited, they were excluded from this investigation.

Eight (67%) of the participants reported using drugs before getting involved in a gang (*"I smoked Mandrax before I used to be in a gang"*). Two (17%) of the participants reported using drugs after they became involved in a gang (*"I joined the gang first and then I started using drugs"*), and two (17%) of the participants reported that the commencement of drug usage occurred simultaneously with engagement in a gang (*"More or less the same time. We used to smoke buttons and rob the customers as they came there to buy drugs"*). Swahn *et al.* (2010) state that marijuana and alcohol use are risk factors for engaging in a gang, and MacKenzie *et al.* (2006:115) found that 51% of members had used marijuana prior to engagement in a gang. The majority (8 or 67%) of participants in this study started using drugs before they joined a gang. These results are relatively consistent with the literature (Swahn *et al.*, 2010).

All (12 or 100%) of the participants unilaterally agreed that their drug usage increased and progressed whilst engaged in a gang (*"It got from bad to worse. Because knowing that there was always drugs ..."*). The findings of MacKenzie *et al.* (2006:115) concur with the participants' responses by stating that the use of harder drugs is believed to begin after joining a gang. The study thus reveals that substance usage begins prior to engaging in a gang. Furthermore, substance usage is a risk factor for engaging in a gang because gangs offer accessibility to drugs, since they provide drugs to their members.

The aim of the study was to explore gang membership and the role of drugs in this. The process involved in engaging in a gang has been discussed, as well as the role that drugs play once one is a member of a gang. The final stage of the investigation explores the process of disengaging from a gang.

## Disengaging from a gang

### The possibility of disengaging from a gang

Mixed responses were obtained from participants with regards to the ability to disengage from a gang. Some participants stated that it was dependent on the type of gang, as well as on the individual's ranking within the gang. A participant who was affiliated with the 28 prison gang stated that since he did not have the tattoo of the gang, it could still be possible to disengage (*"Ek het nie die chappie<sup>10</sup> soe dit is moontlik"*). Some participants appeared to feel that once one is an official member of a prison gang, it would be almost impossible to leave. A member of the 26 prison gang stated: *"Gangs outside, if you want to leave and they really know you, you can leave. But you can never leave the Number."*

Another participant who also belonged to the 26s, however, gave a contradictory view, stating that it is possible to leave (*"If you want, you can"*). The narrative presented by the participant above, describing an inability to disengage from the Number, may be understood in two ways. This view may reflect a true belief, or it may be reflective of a justification that allows him to remain involved in the gang.

Participants stated that if an individual made a lifestyle change, then it may be possible to leave a gang. Lifestyle changes mentioned included becoming religious and showing devotion to one's religion. One participant stated that the lifestyle change would have to be demonstrated and proved so that the gang could see that a real change had been made (*"You will have to show that you are serious about making a change"*). Participants further stressed the importance of making peace with one's gang and rival gangs (*"They need to know that you aren't a threat and that you aren't walking with another gang"*). Standing (2003:10) describes similar findings, referring to a case where a gang member was allowed to leave the gang with few consequences after the issue was negotiated with the gang.

The study showed that gang members often felt trapped within a gang, seeing that membership is regarded as eternal. Membership of the Number gang is particularly perceived as absolute, with the only way out being death. The findings, however, illustrate that some gang members believe that it is possible to leave the Number. Examples of individuals who have managed to distance themselves from the Number gang can be identified. The study alluded to the fact that those holding the view that membership is eternal may use this belief as a justification for an unwillingness to distance themselves from their gang. It was the researcher's perception that a feeling of martyrdom pervaded the findings, considering that gang members describe themselves as brave soldiers fighting for a cause. It would seem that some gang members might enjoy the feeling of being enslaved to an immensely powerful brotherhood that calls for the ultimate sacrifice, namely one's freedom.

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<sup>10</sup> Tattoo.



### **Motivational factors for disengaging from a gang**

The participants indicated that the fear of safety with regards to oneself and the wellbeing of one's family motivates individuals to disengage from a gang (*"Cause some of the gangs, if they can't take it out on you, they take it out on some of your family members"*). Gang membership results in a constant state of anxiety and fear of attack. In response, gang members are armed most of the time, going as far as sleeping with a gun under their pillows (*"I sleep with a gun under my pillow just in case"*). Gang members are motivated to disengage from a gang by a desire for freedom from the paranoia of imminent attack.

Participants mentioned restricted mobility as another motivational factor for disengaging from a gang. This is because a gang member may not be able to walk freely in all areas, since specific territories have been reserved for certain gangs (*"You can't walk everywhere"*).

The findings describe a fear of prosecution as a motivating factor for leaving a gang. The possibility of a life sentence was a deterrent for some gang members. One participant spoke about how he had evaded being prosecuted for a crime which he had committed. This experience had motivated him to distance himself from his gang (*"Like going to court and you were meant to get a life sentence, but you get off scot-free. That kind of ... Well it opened up my eyes"*).

Participants described wanting to leave as a result of feelings of disillusionment with the gang. One participant described how he began to disengage from a gang when he realised that the gang was operating in its own best interests. When gang members feel that they do not adequately benefit from their membership, they begin to see their commitment to the gang as futile (*"Ek werk nie rêrig vir myself nie ... ek kan nie my huis koop. Alles gaan na die Firm."* [*I am not actually working for myself. I can't buy a house. Everything goes to the Firm*]).

Some participants describe the gang as failing to support its members and further exploiting gang members for the benefit of the leaders only. The study described gang members that had taken the blame and punishment for leaders, resulting in their own imprisonment. The gang would not even visit these members after they were imprisoned (*"I had to stand for their things, and then they didn't even come visit or even bring me cigarettes in prison"*). Gang members spoke about feeling that they were not profiting enough from the gangs' wealth (*"The leaders get richer"*). They felt that they were putting their lives in jeopardy and not being fairly reimbursed for their contribution. (*"I'm risking my life for them, for what."*). When gang members feel disillusioned or fail to benefit adequately from the gang, they will be motivated to disengage from the gang.

Finally, the study illustrated that gang members are motivated to leave a gang when they desire a lifestyle change. Gang members describe wanting to progress in their lives and enter a new stable phase of their lives. This phase entails settling down with a wife and children and living a generally legitimate lifestyle.

*“Ek wil op my eie voete staan. Ek wil ’n vrou vat. Ek wil ’n family begin. Ek wil anders lewe.” [I want to stand on my own feet. I want to get married. I want to start a family. I want to live differently].*

It would appear that when participants begin to experience the consequences of their gang membership, for example, when safety is threatened or when the risk of imprisonment arises, members are motivated to disengage from the gang. A powerful motivational factor identified by the participants was feelings of disillusionment. When participants began to question the supportive function of the gang, and further began to feel that they were not benefiting from gang membership, they were motivated to disengage. The desire for lifestyle changes can also motivate the individual to disengage from the gang.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS**

The aim of this study was to provide insight into the process of acquiring gang membership and the role of drugs. Since gangs and drugs are intertwined, intervention needs to acknowledge drug usage as an integral part of the issue. A holistic view is thus needed when addressing the issue. The scale of this study was relatively small; therefore more in-depth studies of this nature are required in order to include a wider range of participants. It is important that gang members be included in the dialogue when attempting to expand the knowledge base of gang functioning. It is furthermore essential that gang members be included when formulating any intervention strategies.

Gangs fulfil physiological, safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation needs. It is essential that these needs be clearly understood in order to inform effective interventions. It is recommended that role players involved in motivating gang members to disengage from a gang emphasise the fear for members’ safety that is associated with gang involvement and that they draw attention to the constant state of anxiety and paranoia. Interventions aimed at discouraging gang membership may be successful if they assist gang members and individuals who are at risk to gain an objective view of the gang as a business rather than a supportive brotherhood. Intervention should thus focus on the disillusionment mentioned in the study, assisting individuals to gain insight into the futility of their commitment to an organisation that does not prioritise their needs and well-being.

Finally, it is essential that service providers within the substance-dependence field undertake intervention with gang members and that they engage in further research regarding drugs and gangs. The gang member presents with unique treatment needs, which must be understood in order to gain optimum results. Ill-informed, generic treatment is ineffective, irresponsible and costly for service providers, communities affected by gangsterism, and those gang members with some willingness to change.

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