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## Trajectories into gang membership: Exploring risk exposure, protective factors and the factors motivating involvement in devil-worshipping gangs

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### ABSTRACT

Gangs represent a complex phenomenon, emerging in response to social exclusion, limited opportunities and systemic inequalities. In South Africa, gang-related crime is rife, impacting on individuals, families and broader society. Gang practices in the Free State province allegedly incorporate elements of the occult, including devil-worshipping and witchcraft, generating fear within affected communities. These gangs engage in spiritually-motivated crimes including blood sacrifice, animal slaughter and communication with demons. Drawing on qualitative data obtained from interviews with detained gang members, non-gang-affiliated offenders and service providers, the paper explores key factors motivating membership as well as the protective factors which safeguard against gang involvement. Moreover, the existence of 'devil-worshipping' gangs and the prominent risks and protective features in this regard are explored. The findings highlight the need for protection, poverty and peer influence as pertinent factors perpetuating gang membership, while creating prosocial activities, employment and gang-awareness were noted as key protective factors. Understanding risk exposure, gang trajectories and factors that enhance resilience from the lived experience of offenders serve to humanise the gang issue and assists social workers and other stakeholders to strengthen support services for vulnerable youths, develop targeted interventions, refine policies and systemic responses, and incorporate relevant protective factors when designing or facilitating programmes within gang-prone communities.

**Keywords:** devil-worshipping gang; gang; protective factor; resilience; risk factor; youth

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Internationally, youth gang involvement is regarded as a primary health concern with several studies exploring gang structure, theory development and gang typology (Bacchini et al., 2020; Leverso & Matsueda, 2019; Mallion & Wood, 2018; Mendez & Kerig, 2023). However, research has mostly been conducted in high-income countries such as the United States, while studies exploring the risk and protective factors for gang membership specifically are mostly quantitative and based on secondary data (Breen et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). These studies succeed in identifying the factors which perpetuate gang involvement, but they do little to explore the experiences of offenders regarding their risk exposure and their eventual pathways into gang membership. This means there is a paucity of qualitative research in low- and middle-income countries such as South Africa, particularly research conducted directly with offenders. Despite this limitation, the criminogenic and social impact gangs have on affected communities remains indisputable (Breen, et al., 2019; Smith, et al., 2019).

At an individual level, the link between gang involvement, narcotics, sexually transmitted infections, school drop-out, unemployment, injury and death are apparent (Hesselink & Bougard, 2020; Lenzi et al., 2017; Nuño & Katz, 2019; Wegerhoff et al., 2021). The evolution and growth of gangs and the related consequences on a societal level have also prioritised gang intervention initiatives for scholars, social work practitioners and policy makers, highlighting the need for continued research (Bishop et al., 2017; Lenzi, et al., 2017; Merrin et al., 2015). More specifically, the need for qualitative research aimed at exploring personal experiences regarding risk exposure and protective factors for gang membership is emphasised. This is especially relevant for developing countries such as South Africa where youth unemployment, marginalisation and domestic violence were further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, enabling gangs to continue attracting members with the promise of status, belonging, protection and access to narcotics (Petrus et al., 2022; Phillips, 2021; Phillips, 2019; Phillips & Maritz, 2015; Wood, 2019). The clandestine nature of these formations also complicates efforts to understand and manage the risks gangs pose to socio-economic and criminal justice systems globally and locally (Hazlehurst & Hazlehurst, 2018; Howell, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2017). In the Free State province, where the present study was conducted, intervention efforts faced their own unique challenges as a result of the surge in gang activity over the past two decades, and because gang practices purportedly embrace elements of the occult including devil worshipping and African witchcraft. In this context, the term 'occult' refers to structures or processes that are viewed as secret or hidden, and include the use of magic, alchemy, extra-sensory perception, spiritualism and divination. Rituals, spells and witchcraft are also included in the scope of occult-related activities (Geldenhuys, 2019; Phillips & Maritz, 2015).

Because of limited research in the province, it remains imperative to explore risk exposure, pathways to gang membership, the interrelation between various risk factors, and potential protective factors, highlighting the need for contemporary local research (Mendez & Kerig, 2023). Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to identify and explore criminogenic risk and protective factors related to gang membership in a sample of gang members, non-gang-affiliated offenders and service providers. Specific objectives include identifying variables conducive to membership, better understanding the nexus between risk exposure and gang

involvement, as well as identifying potential protective factors. The dearth of research on this topic and the need for qualitative data are what make this study valuable. Most available literature and research are based on secondary data from service providers and desktop analyses, or it is limited to specific regions such as the Western Cape. The risk and protective factors identified in those contexts may not necessarily be applicable to the Free State province, a region in which the factors motivating gang-involvement remains relatively unexplored. The study also explores the direct perspectives of current gang members, thereby serving to confirm or refute the existence of occult gang practices, and elucidate the risk and protective factors applicable to the alleged *devil-worshipping gangs*, should their existence be affirmed (Geldenhuys, 2019; Petrus et al., 2018), making a novel contribution to gang scholarship. In addition, the findings obtained could serve to improve social work and related services offered to gang-involved youths, through facilitating a greater understanding of the risk factors and trajectories toward membership, leading to more targeted interventions and programmes aimed at strengthening protective factors within the family, community and school environment.

It should be noted that reports of devil-worshipping and other occult-related gang practices documented in prior research are based solely on secondary data and desktop analyses, and that these allegations have never been confirmed by gang members directly. Although service providers work directly with gang-involved youths and affected communities, and may provide valuable insights, they are not able to provide detailed accounts of the lived-experience of gang members, thereby highlighting the importance of obtaining data directly from gang-involved youths themselves. Non-gang-affiliated offenders were included in the sample because of the strict code of secrecy within gangs, and because their direct exposure to gang members within enclosed environments may provide valuable insights that active gang members may not be willing to share with outsiders. Service provider views were also included and served to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of data obtained from gang members and non-gang-affiliated offenders, as they work closely with gang-involved youths and gang-affected communities, are well trained, and are likely to provide information which offenders may be unwilling to share.

## LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Criminogenic risk factors are aspects unique to an individual or their environment which enhance the probability for misconduct and include parental apathy, academic failure, poverty, substance abuse and deviant peer affiliation (Bishop et al., 2017; Maree, 2024; Phillips & Maritz, 2015). In contrast, protective factors mediate or buffer the effect of risk factors and include strong parental attachment, commitment to school, or residing in socially organised communities (Breen et al., 2019; Garduno & Brancale, 2017; Maree, 2024; Phillips, 2022). Internationally, several studies have examined these factors, leading to three conclusions. First, risk factors are characterised into five domains, namely the individual, family, school, community and peer-group (Bacchini et al., 2020; Bishop et al., 2017; Breetzke et al., 2022; Nuño & Katz, 2019; Phillips, 2022; Smith et al., 2019). Second, the risk for gang involvement is greater when youths are exposed to multiple factors, and third, the potential for membership is exponentially intensified by exposure to risk factors from varying domains over time (Bishop

et al., 2017; Breen et al., 2019; Phillips, 2022). A summary of the risk and protective factors most often linked to gang membership are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Risk and protective factors identified in the literature and prior research**

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Risk Factor</i>	<i>Protective Factor</i>
<i>Individual factors</i>	Age, gender, ethnicity	Strong social skills
	Prior delinquency	Resilient temperament
	Substance use/abuse	High impulse control
	Aggression/Hostility	High emotional intelligence
<i>Family-level factors</i>	Parental/Sibling gang involvement	Extended family support
	Weak attachment	Parental attachment
	Poverty	Access to resources
	Poor supervision	Adequate supervision
<i>School-level factors</i>	Academic failure	Resources for learning
	Absenteeism	Psychoeducational curricula
	Suspension from school	Positive school ethos
	Bullying	Anti-bully campaigns
<i>Peer-group factors</i>	Peer rejection	Prosocial peer acceptance
	Deviant peer affiliation	Positive peer affiliation
<i>Community factors</i>	Poverty/Unemployment	Creation of employment
	Limited access to resources	Suitable resources
	Culture of violence	Community cohesion
	Availability of narcotics/firearms	Substance abuse awareness
	Limited prosocial activities	Suitable prosocial activities

(Breen et al., 2019; Garcia-Rojo et al., 2023; Mallion & Wood, 2018; Maree, 2024; Mendez & Kerig, 2023; Nuño & Katz, 2019; Phillips, 2022; Smith et al., 2019).

Gang-involved youths are typically exposed to several risk factors across different domains. These may include poverty, academic failure, limited prosocial opportunities, community disorganisation and addiction (Breen et al., 2019, Garcia-Rojo et al., 2023; Phillips, 2022). Similarly, a range of protective factors may enhance their resilience either directly by functioning conversely as a mirror image of risk factors, or indirectly by functioning as a buffer (Phillips, 2019). However, based on available literature and research, it is apparent that similar risk and protective factors have been identified for gang membership and for youth misconduct in general, further highlighting the need for research exploring the unique trajectories toward gang involvement, particularly focused on the perspectives of offenders directly. Based on available research in the Free State province, the paucity of empirical studies exploring the factors which perpetuate gang membership is apparent, as none of the existing studies are based on data obtained from gang members directly. This is disconcerting, given that infamous gangs in the province such as the Triple Six (666) and Born to Kill (BTK) are allegedly involved in ‘spiritually motivated’ offences centred on murder, blood sacrifices and other ritualistic or

occult-related crimes (Geldenhuys, 2019; Phillips & Maritz, 2015). It is thus crucial to explore whether the factors that motivate membership and gang-related activity for these groups are similar to those influencing more traditional street gangs.

The exploration of risk and protective factors for gang-involved youths in the Free State is further warranted by the recent spike in gang activity, and because post-apartheid South Africa remains affected by an upsurge in gang-related crime and violence. Challenges related to poverty, the slow pace of transformation, youth unemployment and restricted access to education persist, driving the expansion of gangs across the country. This is particularly disconcerting in disadvantaged communities such as the Cape Flats, Westbury, Soweto and other marginalised areas, where street gangs have gained notoriety for their involvement in the narcotics trade, drive-by shootings and assassinations. Although gangsterism is a challenge across South Africa, Cape Town is generally regarded as the most notorious city with regard to gang-related crime as a consequence of the elevated levels of supply and demand associated with the narcotics and weapons trade globally. The best known gangs in the area include the Americans, Hard Livings, Mongrels and Junky Funky Kids. In some respects, gang formations in the Free State conform to the commonly held notions applicable to more traditional street gangs in terms of their modus operandi, reasons for involvement and criminal behaviour, while in other respects they differ significantly because of the allegations of their involvement in the occult. In addition, it remains unclear whether the risk and protective factors motivating involvement in these so-called 'devil worshipping' gangs reflect prominent factors identified in the literature and those applicable to more common street gangs who are not involved in the occult, thereby serving as further rationale for this study.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Because of the expansive nature of criminogenic risk and protective factors, and because exposure to a single risk factor is seldom sufficient to produce unlawful behaviour, several theoretical frameworks underpin this study, including those associated with perspectives on anomie, subcultures, social control and social learning. These theories, respectively, propose that adolescents become susceptible to gang involvement because they experience inadequate access to the socially approved means required to achieve goals, fail to achieve status or access legitimate opportunities, experience weak attachment to prosocial support networks, and have increased exposure to negative role models in their social environment (Phillips, 2022; Williams & McShane, 2018). The social control theory developed by Hirschi (1969) supports the argument that attachment to deviant peers and gangs limits the degree of control exerted by civic agencies, thus providing youths with optimal opportunities to transgress and achieve status through illegal behaviour. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) concur and note that gang membership inevitably increases the probability that youths will transgress, as illegal activities are rationalised and justified in the peer group. Similarly, the deviant peer contagion perspective of Dishion and Dodge (2005) affirms that allegiance and interaction with antisocial peers increase the likelihood of developing maladaptive behaviours. Peer influence is especially prevalent during early and middle adolescence as gender roles, norms and expectations become salient during this phase in lifespan development (McCoy et al., 2019; Phillips, 2022). Gang involvement, peer affiliation and 'contagion' are therefore linked to

higher aggression levels, in addition to reducing and weakening the effect of crime-prevention efforts (Dishion & Dodge, 2005; Phillips, 2022).

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach was used, which allowed for an in-depth exploration and understanding of the risk and protective factors related to gang involvement (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). This method facilitated the identification of pertinent risk and protective factors for gang membership as highlighted by offenders and service providers, and made it possible to explore pathways into gang membership from the direct perspective of offenders (Creswell, 2014; Hagan, 2010; Neuman, 2000). In addition, the study employed research strategies that are exploratory and descriptive, as the primary aim was to gain insight into and understanding of the factors that perpetuate gang membership as well as a grasp of those with the potential to buffer against risk exposure (Maree, 2016).

### **Sampling approach and method**

Purposive sampling was used to select 18 criminal justice system service providers. Participants were male or female, between 34 and 73 years, predominantly identified as African, and had been employed at their respective centres for between 2 and 27 years. The positions held included centre managers, social workers, youth care workers, educators and correctional officials. The inclusion criteria were permanent employment in a position facilitating direct contact with offenders/gang members and having been employed for at least 12 months. As mentioned previously, the rationale for including criminal justice system service providers was because they were in direct contact with gang members and were employed in positions where they provided a range of services to gang-affiliated youths, placing them in a position to confirm risk or protective factors reported by offenders in the sample and to augment the information provided by offenders.

Purposive sampling was also used to select the offender sample which consisted of 39 males. These participants were between 14 and 38 years, currently serving a sentence of direct incarceration or awaiting trial. The reasons for this were that prior research indicates a peak in membership between the age of 12 and 24 years, most gang scholarship pertains to males, and because men constitute the majority of correctional clients in South Africa (Khan & Singh, 2014; Phillips, 2019; Phillips, 2022). Regarding recruitment, participants between 14 and 17 years were selected from two secure care centres, while those aged 18 to 38 years were selected from a correctional centre. Participants predominantly identified as African, had been convicted or were awaiting trial for violent and/or economic offences, and resided across the Free State province prior to their admission to each respective detention centre. Of the 39 participants in the offender sample, 23 participants identified as current gang members belonging to the Triple 6, Born-To-Kill, International-Junior-Portuguese or Maroma gang, facilitating the confirmation of allegations related to devil worship and witchcraft within these groups, and the identification of risk and protective factors related to occult gang involvement.

## **Data gathering and analysis**

As noted in the previous section, the sample was comprised of 23 gang members, 16 non-gang-affiliated offenders and 18 key criminal justice system service providers. Data were obtained through individual semi-structured interviews using separate interview guides for the service provider and offender samples. Interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Collected data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis and involved identifying themes and sub-themes to understand the risk and protective factors, and to explore unique trajectories in this regard. More specifically, data were transcribed verbatim and analysed in six phases, namely (i) becoming familiar with the data, (ii) coding, (iii) generating initial themes, (iv) developing and reviewing themes, (v) refining, defining and naming themes, and (vi) weaving the data extracts together and contextualising the analysis in relation to the literature and relevant research (Byrne, 2021). A pilot study with five service providers and five offender participants, member checking and triangulation (interviews with offenders, interviews with service providers, participant observation and recorded field notes) served to ensure credibility and trustworthiness in the study. The inclusion of service provider perspectives therefore served to add credibility to the data obtained from offenders. This may be regarded as an important consideration as the study is related to the exploration of risk and protective factors for gang membership; this poses a challenge as all gangs adhere to a strict code of secrecy that prohibits sharing information about the gang with outsiders. The data obtained are presented in narratives and verbatim, including any slang terms used or language errors.

## **Ethical considerations**

The study was conducted with the assistance of the Auksano Christian Trauma Therapy Centre, the Department of Social Development and the Department of Correctional Services in the Free State province. More specifically, the offender and service provider samples were recruited from the Winkie Direko (Bloemfontein) and Thabo Mofutsanyana (QwaQwa) Secure Care Centres and the Grootvlei Correctional Centre (Bloemfontein). Functional therapists and social workers employed at Auksano, an organisation offering services related to gang involvement and substance abuse, were also included in the sample. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the General/Human Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Free State (Ethical Clearance Number: UFS-HSD2023/1845), the Research Ethics Committees of the Department of Social Development and Correctional Services respectively, and from the Board of Directors at the Auksano Christian Trauma Therapy Centre. Participants were provided with all the relevant information pertaining to the study and voluntary, informed, written consent was obtained from each participant. Permission from the centre manager of each secure care centre was also sought and obtained, as well as voluntary, informed, written assent in the case of participants aged 14 to 17 years. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality of the data provided. They were notified of their right to withdraw from the study at any phase. Furthermore, only terminology related to the correctional environment, as approved by the applicable governmental departments, was used during interviews to limit the possibility of negative labelling, thereby further restricting the possibility of causing harm.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data identified several pertinent risk and protective factors related to gang membership, confirmed the inclusion of occult-related elements associated with gang activity in the province, and served to highlight unique pathways into gang membership.

### **Theme 1: Individual-level risk and protective factors**

Individual-level risk factors refer to internal conditions which increase the likelihood of engaging in antisocial behaviour or experiencing a negative outcome (Maree, 2024). In the context of gang involvement, these factors may include age, gender, ethnicity, prior delinquency and substance use (Merrin et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2019). Participants identified several individual-level factors conducive to encouraging gang membership, which included age, gender, the need for protection, fulfilment of basic needs, access to alcohol or narcotics, peer pressure, deviant peer influence, and to gain status. The data derived from interviews were organised and sorted into subthemes, as presented in the succeeding section.

#### ***Sub-theme 1.1: Age***

Age or specifically youthfulness is frequently identified as a correlate for gang membership because individuals typically join gangs during adolescence or early adulthood, exhibiting the highest risk between 12 and 24 years (Phillips, 2021; Smith et al., 2019). Explanations for the influence of age stem from the developmental processes, associated meanings and social roles that characterise adolescence and extend into early adulthood. Youths are inclined to display impulsive and irresponsible behaviour as their personality traits and impulses are more transient, increasing their vulnerability to negative influences and external strain (Phillips, 2019). Age as a factor perpetuating misconduct and gang involvement was supported in the findings obtained, as 30 participants from the offender sample were aged between 14 and 24 years. Youthfulness, in addition to other risk factors reported, informed the decision to join a gang, as 23 participants identified as active gang members. The increased inclination towards impulsivity and susceptibility to negative influences during adolescence were affirmed by service provider participants:

*One must remember that a lot of these kids – and they really are just kids – they’re children, 12 years, 13 years, 15 years old, they are easily influenced. The leaders are older, they are normally 23 years+.*

None of the participants reported any protective factors related to age. However, age is a fixed risk factor that is not subject to modification, but older individuals automatically possess a diminished risk for misconduct and gang membership because of the development of self-regulation and impulse control as they mature.

#### ***Sub-theme 1.2: Gender***

Research identifies males as more aggressive and prone to joining gangs in comparison to females. Males also tend to spend more time outside the home, experiencing greater exposure to peers, are less empathetic and more inclined to compete for material success (Maree, 2024). However, Merrin et al. (2015) argue that the gender gap has narrowed, with a growing body of



scholarship examining female gang involvement (Mallion & Wood, 2018; Muller, 2021; Sutton, 2017). Although the literature denotes a greater risk for males, participants highlighted the role of females in all gangs active in the province. One participant explained

*In all the gangs there are females. It's a must, females must be there. In BTK, we have 'GNR' – Girls Never Respect, in IJP they have 'IJG', in Roma [Maroma] they have girls. Each and every gang has girls.*

The offender sample identified distinctive roles for female members based on fighting prowess and attractiveness. Participants noted

*The females also battle because other gangs have their own girls, so the girls fight against each other. Other girls we use for information. The girls have different ranks also.*

*Girls sometimes must go and eavesdrop on other gangs to see what are they planning against us, sometimes it's for things like sex.*

The literature tends to emphasise 'maleness' as a risk and 'femaleness' as a protective factor (Maree, 2024), but this could be attributed to the male-centred focus in research on offending and gangs. The growing body of knowledge around female criminality (Mallion & Wood, 2018; Muller, 2021; Sutton, 2017), and participant experiences in the study, suggest that such mainstream ideologies around gender should be reconsidered. The findings obtained in this regard thus challenge perceptions related to gender as a perceived protective factor with regard to being female, as it was apparent that females fulfilled a crucial role within all the gangs active in the province.

### ***Sub-theme 1.3: Ethnicity***

Youth gangs are generally racially diverse, but marginalised groups possess a greater risk for gang involvement in comparison to their White counterparts (Smith, et al., 2019). In South Africa, the racial profiling of gangs is often shaped by the country's complex socio-political history, including apartheid-era segregation and economic disparities. Gang activities are frequently linked to specific racial or ethnic groups as a result of historical, geographical and socio-economic factors most often affecting disadvantaged communities and marginalised groups. Similarly, within the context of the Free State province, most youth gang members are from disadvantaged groups and gang activity is rife in areas where marginalised groups reside. These areas often present as socially disorganised neighbourhoods where youths are exposed to several risk factors for gang membership, serving as a possible explanation as to why disadvantaged youths in the province are more prone to gang involvement. As noted previously, gang practices in the province purportedly incorporate elements of the occult (Geldenhuys, 2019; Phillips & Maritz, 2015), which are more deeply embedded in African culture, explaining why gang members are often from marginalised groups. Participants in the offender sample primarily identified as African and several service providers confirmed the inclination toward gang involvement among African youths:

*I will say at this point in time, I'd say at least 70% still Black, 70% to 80% still Black and the other 20% being White, still involved or at least exposed to it.*

The service provider later explained that gangs in the province were becoming more racially diverse and had started to filter into more prestigious schools by explaining

*First it was predominantly Black, Coloureds were slightly involved but not that much, mainly Black. But, with racial barriers becoming blurred, because you've got so many Black kids in White schools, because kids are now integrated between Black and White and have friends across racial lines, the gangs are now more integrated also.*

It should be noted that ethnicity as a risk factor for gang membership has become less prominent in contemporary literature, arguably due to the broad nature of risk factors related to gang involvement and because features such as geographic location dictate the composition of gang formations. South Africa's transition into democracy and the fluidity within gangs have also resulted in gangs becoming more racially diverse, although several instances still exist where the ethnic composition within gangs is concentrated within certain racial groups such as the 'Coloured' gangs dominating the Cape Flats or the predominantly 'African' youth gangs across the Free State. As to protective factors, ethnicity is a static risk factor, which means that it is untreatable and not amenable to change. Accordingly, no protective factors related to ethnicity were identified by the sample.

#### ***Sub-theme 1.4: Protection from rival gangs***

Protection of the self, perpetuates membership as gangs often pressurise youths to participate in gang activities and target them, should they refuse (Petrus & Kinnes, 2019; Phillips, 2019; Phillips, 2021; Van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo, 2021; Wood, 2019). Offender and service provider participants affirmed protection as a contributor to gang involvement. Several participants experienced bullying and other forms of victimisation in their community or school, motivating them to seek out the dominant gang in their area for protection and to reduce their risk of victimisation. Although victimisation stemmed from their social environment, protection is regarded as an individual-level factor as it relates to subjective and interpersonal fears or experiences of victimhood.

*If the area you grow up in have gangs, you are also going to be a gangster. If there are gangs in your area and you are not a gangster, they take your money, they take your phone. When you grow up you are going to be under pressure then you also join gangs.*

*With me, it was because the BTK were always trying to rob me and chase after me – so that's why I joined the Romans [Maromas] because they are from my area.*

In communities where gang activity is rife, specific sections are controlled by certain gangs restricting freedom of movement for non-members “Where I come from, certain areas is for BTKs, other areas is for Romans [Maromas]. You can't go to another side, so you must join a gang”. Participants were unable to attend school as they had to pass through gang territory and felt unsafe at school because of intimidation by gangs.

*The environment I'm living in, most of the guys in my area are BTKs, so when I am going to school, I need to get some sort of protection because I go to a school where there are Maromas - so the best way for me to go to school was to join BTKs so I can get protection.*

*The main cause for me to join the BTKs was because Maromas was attacking me, so I cannot fight back alone that's why I ended up joining the BTK.*

Service provider responses affirmed fear and protection of the self as key drivers for membership, based on their interactions with detained youths

*Others join because at school, they are scared. The child doesn't know how to stand up for himself or herself, so they think 'if I join this group I'm going to be protected'.*

An interesting observation in this regard, was that youths could have been initiated into one gang within the community, but join a different gang whilst incarcerated, if they perceived the latter as being the more dominant group in the detention centre. This is unique as gang allegiance typically lie with only one group, however gang members in the Free State province reported the freedom to move between different gangs in and out of prison, signifying alliances and cooperation between different gangs “*I'm a Roma [Maroma] and a RAF3 [Royal Airforce 3]. Outside [in the community] I'm a Roma, inside [in the centre] I'm a RAF3*”.

#### ***Sub-theme 1.5: Access to alcohol and narcotics***

A bilateral link between substance abuse, gang membership and misconduct exist as youths seek out gangs to gain access to substances and because substance use perpetuates gang-related crime and violence. Studies indicate that youths who consume alcohol or narcotics before the age of 13 years are three times more likely to become gang members (Merrin, et al., 2015; Smith, et al., 2019). The use or abuse of illicit substances and alcohol perpetuate gang-related crime as the associated consequences include poor judgement, recklessness, impulsivity and hedonistic behaviour (Phillips, 2019). Based on findings from the study, four offenders and two service providers identified access to substances as a pertinent risk factor.

*The things that make us to join gangs is because of drugs, drugs and alcohol. Once you are in the gang, they also give you alcohol and drugs.*

*Children that get involved – and the younger they are the worse it is – because children are put on to drugs as well. They have free access to drugs, the drug trade within those gangs is huge, by the leaders specifically, meaning that drugs are easily obtainable by the members. A lot of the 'get togethers' there is a lot of drugs. Obviously more marijuana than anything else, dagga, because it's easy, they all smoke together. Actually, that's how they also go out and do the crime because emotions are like 'numbed'.*

The nexus between youthfulness, substance abuse and sexual promiscuity within the gang context was explained by another service provider

*From about 12 they get into the more hardcore side of it, drugs plays a big role at that point and then of course the sexual side of it plays a big role, with the boys in any case.*

To increase resilience, several individual-level protective factors have been identified in the literature including the development of social skills, establishing a belief in the moral order and strengthening empathy (Lenzi, et al., 2017). Possessing a high degree of self-control would yield a similar outcome, as it would assist in delaying instant gratification and avoiding behaviours for which the consequences outweigh the benefits. Studies further show that an

increased level of empathy, in combination with high self-control, would reduce the risk for gang involvement given that gang-related activities generally include harming others, violating social norms and operating in a self-serving manner (Breen, et al., 2019; Garduno & Brancale, 2017; Lenzi, et al., 2017). Participants identified referral to rehabilitation centres and life skills programmes and substance abuse rehabilitation as important protective factors in this regard.

## **Theme 2: Social risk and protective factors**

Social risk factors manifest on a macro-level and are referred to as external conditions that increase the risk for maladaptive behaviour (Maree, 2024). As noted in the literature, these factors apply to the peer group, family, school and community and may include poverty, academic failure and deviant peer affiliation (Breen, et al., 2019, Garcia-Rojo et al., 2023; Phillips, 2022). The following section outlines the social factors conducive to gang membership, as identified by offenders and service providers.

### ***Sub-theme 2.1: Lack of resources and basic needs***

Experiences related to poverty and deprivation reflect systemic socioeconomic and political inequalities (Mendez & Kerig, 2023). Areas characterised by relative deprivation, limited resources and marginalisation, are often typified by a culture of violence, infrastructural deficiencies, positive orientation toward crime and social disorganisation (Smith, et al., 2019). These conditions are extremely conducive to misconduct and may lead youth to seek out alternative means of survival in gangs (Garcia-Rojo, et al., 2023; Nuño & Katz, 2019). Based on the findings obtained, eight participants reported joining a gang due to experiences related to poverty or deprivation and as a means with which to acquire material resources through crime.

*The first thing that I have experienced is the poverty in the house and in the family. In my house, the money was not enough to cover all the needs and wants that can help you in your life. If your family is struggling and you don't have some things that your friends have, it's going to put you under pressure.*

Other offender participants supported this view by noting that gang membership provides access to required resources, facilitates the commission of crime to gain resources, and alleviates experiences of poverty stemming from the family circumstances.

*To get somethings your family can't give you like clothes or money – if you are poor.*

*When joining a gang, things come easy. If you want money or to commit robbery, it's easier to do it in a gang. To me I was attracted to the gang by girls and money.*

*Sometimes, it's because the circumstance at home is not okay so we end up joining gangs to get things and live a certain lifestyle.*

Offender experiences were affirmed by service providers, highlighting that many youths in the province join a gang to escape poverty in the family and community. These findings support the literature and prior research both locally and internationally (Breen et al., 2019; Garcia-Rojo et al., 2023; Garduno & Brancale, 2017; Lenzi et al., 2017; Mallion & Wood, 2018; Maree, 2024; Mendez & Kerig, 2023; Merrin et al., 2015; Nuño & Katz, 2019; Phillips, 2019;

Phillips, 2022; Smith et al., 2019). Similarly, these findings support several theories which underpin the study, including those related to anomie and differential opportunities, which propose that youths become vulnerable for gang membership because of unequal access to the socially approved means needed to achieve goals and access legitimate opportunities. However, one service provider noted that in some cases youths from affluent families also get recruited into gangs, illustrating the complex nature of the trajectory into gangs, as indicated in the following comment.

*What is happening is obviously poverty, that is one of the major contributions, but even affluent parents – their kids are getting involved in it. One of the boys that I have counselled, because he specifically said he wants out of the gang. I asked him ‘but why did you get involved?’. He told me they [gang] were lying to him. They promised him things like he will become rich, and they gave him Nike ‘tekkies’ [sneakers] and t-shirts and a cell phone. So, I think poverty, the promise of actually becoming rich, but once you are in, you don’t get out easily.*

Providing access to basic resources such as food and clothing is identified as a protective factor within the social domain. When caregivers have the means to provide for the material needs of their offspring, or where financial assistance is provided by external support networks, the risk to seek out gangs to meet these needs is significantly reduced (Breen et al., 2019). The creation of employment opportunities and crime-awareness campaigns may aid in the development of constructive behavioural patterns and buffer against youth gang involvement (Phillips, 2022). Offender and service provider participants supported job creation in building resilience against gang membership and its importance in managing poverty.

*They need jobs so that they can get money there, because this thing of getting money through gang activities is not going to show them the good direction of life. But, getting money from work will help them a lot when they mix it with programmes to get good direction in life.*

Other participants believed that employment, together with sport, education and prosocial activities, would be most effective in building resilience against gang involvement.

*To be active in sports and also give us opportunities to get work, because some of us don’t have a matric certificate. We need education and good jobs to meet our needs and provide for our families.*

*There is a lot of things that is no more in the lives of youths today, you know things that will give them a sense of growing like children, social clubs, youth clubs and all these activities. Children outside [in the community] have no facilities – recreational facilities, developmental ones, that’s when they go to something to just try and keep themselves busy. You find that some might be great in art, some are musicians, some are dancers – taking them to those type of institutions to give them a chance to be able to grasp and enjoy and expose their talents.*

These findings support the literature and theories which propose that suitable support networks, extramural activities and accessibility to resources reduce the risk for gang involvement by

using youths' free time and energy, whilst also exposing them to positive models (Breen et al., 2019; Smith, et al., 2019).

***Sub-theme 2.2: Peer influence, peer pressure and sense of belonging***

The consequences related specifically to delinquent peer affiliation are among the most constant findings in the literature and research (Garduno & Brancale, 2017; Nuño & Katz, 2019; Smith et al., 2019). Peer relations form part of an interactional process that may start with rejection from prosocial peers, progress to delinquent peer association, behavioural misconduct and, ultimately, to gang membership. Peer groups exert immense influence on the behaviour of youths and are thus deemed a unique factor promoting gang involvement. The peer group functions as an ideal learning environment to develop and sustain unlawful behaviour, particularly when associated with weak parental bonds, family turmoil or exposure to other risks in the social milieu (Merrin et al., 2015; Phillips, 2022). Participants from the offender and service provider samples noted the relationship between peer influence, peer pressure and gang involvement.

*It's because of peer pressure we end up joining gangs.*

*Sometimes it's because you grow up with people who chose this lifestyle of gangs, then you end up also joining just so you can still be in the same friend group.*

One participant explained that peer influence is intensified when youths experience a lack of belonging in the family environment. Similarly, family dysfunction, parental rejection, conflict and weakened bonds serve as strong predictors for gang involvement. These factors motivate youths to join street gangs as an 'escape' to where they can experience a sense of belonging, receive affection, acquire status, attain respect and gain recognition (Garcia-Rojo et al., 2023; Garduno & Brancale, 2017; Merrin et al., 2015).

*It's peer pressure, because me, I'm like this - I never get love from my home. I saw my brother, my mother loved him most because he attend school, then after school he went to go work. That's why we join gangs because we don't get love, we don't feel belonging then we join gangs for that love and belonging.*

One service provider affirmed a lack of belonging as a pertinent risk for gang involvement and explained that the likelihood of feeling neglected is increased in households where a father figure is absent.

*Young people normally join gangs because of a lack of sense of belonging. A young person would be brought up in a family or situation where there is no sense of belonging, especially when the father is absent and then love – young people start to feel that 'well I am not loved in this house', or sometimes you promise them certain things and then you don't fulfil your promises. So sometimes they start to feel neglected, we need love. Then they go out looking for love that is really false. They join the gangs because there's a group of people, they feel they belong, they're doing what they're doing, and they feel 'at least I am part of this group'.*

Youths then develop stronger attachment to peers and often turn to peers when experiencing a lack of belonging, weak attachment or inadequate supervision within their family. However, in

the company of deviant peers, a composite risk is created as youths are then extremely susceptible to misconduct, gang membership and recidivism (Garduno & Brancale, 2017; Nuño & Katz, 2019; Phillips, 2021; Smith et al., 2019). Conversely, adequate prosocial support networks and extracurricular activities reduce the risk that youths will join gangs through occupying their free time and energy, whilst also exposing them to positive mentors (Breen et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). Keeping youths occupied with productive activities was identified as a protective factor by several participants, who believed that sport and other recreational activities may provide a deviation from delinquent peer affiliation and gang membership, in addition to decreasing the risk of substance use.

*I think if there can be more positive activities within our communities – maybe sports, drama centres and other programmes that will discourage them to have plenty of time to participate in negative things like joining gangs. As it stands now, there are no activities in our communities, hence you see them spending their time at taverns, from the taverns they start fights and then the gangs take over. If their energy is concentrated on positive stuff, because most of them they have talent, but they can't even explore it because most of the time they focus on gang activities.*

Prosocial peer networks advance feelings of safety and build resilience through managing the need for protection, a factor which offenders commonly identified as a catalyst for gang involvement.

### ***Sub-theme 2.3: Parental and sibling gang membership***

Exposure to parental and sibling gang membership poses a similar risk for gang involvement as exposure to deviant peers or peer pressure to join. The initial socialisation which occurs within the family is a key variable motivating gang involvement (Bartollas & Schmallegger, 2018; Garduno & Brancale, 2017; Maree, 2024; Phillips, 2022). This is because families are regarded as prominent microsystems where attitudes and behaviours are learnt (Garcia-Rojo et al., 2023; Garduno & Brancale, 2017; Merrin et al., 2015; Nuño & Katz, 2019). Gang membership is normalised when a parent or sibling is in a gang, creating a learning environment where youths experience gang involvement as an avenue to gain a sense of belonging, achieve status and meet their material needs. In such cases, youths may idolise and mimic the behaviour exhibited by family members in a gang, as posited by social learning theory. Parental and sibling gang membership may make youths feel pressured to join a gang:

*Like when someone in their family is in a gang like RAF3 [Royal Airforce 3] or 27, then you also choose it – not because you like it, but because your parent or someone was in that gang.*

To promote resilience, the family unit can function as a crucial protective factor against gang membership. Aspects such as parental warmth, strong attachment and the promotion of prosocial behaviour can significantly reduce the risk of youths joining a gang (Garduno & Brancale, 2017). Having a warm, supportive relationship with even one parent would encourage prosocial learning, thereby reducing the propensity to seek out gangs. Where it is not possible, members of the extended family or peer group could fulfil this role (Phillips, 2022). Positive peer affiliation is a prominent factor mitigating risks associated with gang

membership. Forming and sustaining relationships with prosocial peers is vital for psychosocial adjustment and the development of socio-communicative skills that promote morally acceptable behaviour (Phillips, 2022). Moreover, positive peer networks serve to provide a diversion from negative life events, foster a sense of belonging and provide opportunities to build strong self-concept (Phillips, 2022). Positive mentors and gang awareness were identified as protective factors by both the offender and service provider sample. Exposure to positive role models serves to replace the negative models within gangs, strengthen prosocial learning and educate youths about the negative impact associated with gang membership.

*If you are a good role model to young kids, they will like what you are doing. If you do bad things in front of young kids, they are going to want to be like that one day. So, you must give them more positive role models. You must speak to them, you must make them have activities, you must do lot of things.*

Another offender explained that gang members themselves should create awareness by warning at-risk youths of the dangers related to gang life.

*They need us gang members to talk with the community, like meetings with the community then call those in gangs to address the youth to tell them about the consequences of being a gang member – it's not nice because there it's life and death. It's not only about you, the minute you join a gang, especially BTK, you are putting your family at risk as well. When gangsters come to your house to look for you and you are not there, they can send a message by your sister, mother, your father.*

#### **Sub-theme 2.4: Gang involvement in school**

School systems are responsible for reinforcing behavioural norms which include communication skills, relationship roles, civic duty and self-efficacy (Merrin, et al., 2015). As such, schools both significantly increase or buffer the risk for adolescent gang membership (Phillips, 2022). Catalysts in this regard include school disconnectedness, academic failure, absenteeism, bullying, weak attachment to educators, negative labelling and poor school ethos (Garduno & Brancale, 2017; Garcia-Rojo et al., 2023; Merrin et al., 2015; Nuño & Katz, 2019). Based on responses from the offender sample, a clear link between schooling and gang involvement is apparent and participants confirmed that gang-related activities within the community filtered into the school system: *“I go to a school where there are Maromas, so the best way for me to go to school was to join BTKs so I can get protection”*. The interrelationship between the risk factors was affirmed as protection of the self, re-surfaced. Offender participants noted the need to feel protected on their way to school and on the premises, and explained more direct influences that gangs had on schooling in a social context. Other offender participants affirmed this by explaining the relationship between gang involvement, conflict, peer influence and the need to protect the self.

*So, at school the gangs always fought with each other. I had friends in the gang, and I wasn't in the gang. One day they fight with me and my friends tried to help me. Then I joined the gang because they helped me.*



*Sometimes we are bullied at school by a certain group or gang – then we end up joining a rival gang so that we have protection, and we know that if anyone come to us and attack us then we will have backup from the gang.*

Gangs negatively affect academic achievement, school attendance and more generally acquiring education to gain access to legitimate employment. Only one participant from the offender sample had completed school, while other participants explained that gang members typically do not attend school, have weak attachment to school, or they drop out.

*They join gangs because they don't go to school. If they don't care about doing school things, they will join a gang.*

*I'm gonna talk about BTK. BTK now is out of line, they abuse the community. They take laptops and phones of the children that are going to school. They don't work, they don't go to school. They are at the location [informal settlement]. Obviously, they wake up early – when people go to work or to school, they rob them.*

*It messed up many opportunities of mine. There are places where the BTKs rule and I cannot walk there, even at school I ended up dropping out because they robbed me there. Then I ended up joining Roma [Maroma].*

Service provider participants affirmed these experiences by highlighting the effect and severity of gang violence within schools. One participant noted that gang activity had escalated to the extent where certain gangs formed an alliance with the purpose of disrupting the day-to-day functioning of a school.

*If you just look at Botshabelo, you've got a specific school – I'm not going to mention the school – where the gangs worked together and gave the command to the BTK and some of the NBK members, and they literally started knife stabbing everyday at school. Up to the point where the teachers lost completely control, and they said directly to the principal and to the teachers 'this is our school, you don't come to school anymore'. So, the Department of Education appointed 'new' teachers, but they were too afraid, they just sat in the teachers hall, they literally don't give class. So, the kids come and go, there's literally no school going on.*

As a protective factor, schools should serve as a setting where youths can experience a warm cohesive climate, build supportive relationships and develop social competencies (Lenzi et al., 2017; Phillips, 2022). The inclusion of psychoeducational programmes into curricula further advance social and emotional skills including self-awareness, social awareness and emotion regulation. Belief in the relationship between being educated and gaining meaningful employment is also indicated as a key protective factor (Breen et al., 2019). One service provider noted the importance of creating gang awareness at school level and communicating with youths in a way they would best understand.

*I think knowledge, the more knowledge they have about it the better. More informational sessions in schools. There has got to be knowledgeable people that can give information through to children in a way that they understand it and they understand the dangers,*

*because a lot of people are talking about drugs and the dangers – they never talk about the gang situation to them.*

In terms of prevention, several offenders and service providers believed it was impossible to reduce gang-related activities or buffer the risk for gang involvement in the province. They believed that it was too deeply embedded within community culture

*There is nothing that can prevent people from joining these gangs because when you love something, you love something, so you end up joining it” and “There is no recourse or rehabilitation – there is only one door, you come in alive, and the only way out is through death.*

### **Theme 3: Recurrent risk and gang trajectories**

Exposure to risk factors seldom occurs in isolation and factors are typically interrelated (Bishop et al., 2017; Breen et al., 2019; Phillips, 2022). These factors are codependent with risk exposure in one domain such as the family, influencing behaviour in another, such as at school (Phillips, 2019). Exposure to a single factor is seldom sufficient to motivate gang involvement; however, the risk is exponentially increased when exposed to several factors from various other domains over time. The specific pathways and reported risk factor trajectories highlighted recurrent risk factor combinations and elucidated the nexus between risk exposure and eventual gang involvement, as is apparent from the findings presented in the foregoing themes. Recurrent risk factor combinations identified by participants included peer influence, protection and belonging; protection and poverty; family dysfunction, protection and access to substances; protection and having family members in the gang; poverty and belonging; as well as poverty, belonging and absent father figures. Several participants explained their trajectories into a gang as being associated with multiple-risk exposure.

*I think it's about peer pressure and low self-esteem. If you are not in a gang, you are nothing in the street – you are not allowed to go to the taverns, they don't get money, so they see those groups [gangs] they get what they want. So, they end up joining a gang.*

*The things that make us to join gangs is because of drugs, drugs and alcohol. Those things drive us toward our friends that are already in the gangs. So, it will start there when they are smoking or drinking. It also goes back to the background because people get interested in what someone tell you about gangs, then it makes you want to join. Once you are in the gang, they also give you alcohol and drugs. Here in the Free State, the lifestyle of here, it makes people join gangs easily, because here there are many activities of gangs and of crimes. In Free State, poverty is many, so that's why people can join gangs easily because of the money that they get from it.*

The findings pertaining to risk combinations and trajectories support the notion that the propensity for gang involvement is intensified when exposed to multiple factors from various domains (Bishop et al., 2017; Breen et al., 2019; Phillips, 2022). Service provider participants affirmed the amplified risk as explained below.

*Mostly, I'd say it's domestic violence, family trauma mostly, because you'll find that those who were screened – when I do the interviews, when I see their families, you will find that*

*there is family dysfunction. There was domestic violence, there was trauma, but most parents are not aware because things happen, but children don't go for counselling – they don't see it as a problem. Later in life they realise that it might be the cause – they don't take it seriously because others maybe lose a father; especially boys, so there will be signs that something is wrong. So, the child ends up resorting to the friends outside, they use substances to feel good and to escape. They start there, until they join the gangs to belong somewhere. What they are getting outside is not the same as what they are getting at home.*

*From the conversations that I've had with the different children, the thing that I have picked up the most is that they come from households that don't have fathers. Second is peer pressure, because they want the flashy lifestyle so that attracts them. Third, they end up joining gangs for protection.*

The interrelated nature and interaction between exposure to risks from varying domains is clear; however, it was noted that certain factors were typically repeated across the different combinations identified. These included protection, poverty, family dysfunction and peer influence, which formed part of several recurrent risk combinations, arguably serving as a dominant pathway into gang membership as posited by the theoretical perspectives on anomie, subcultures, social control, peer contagion and social learning (Dishion & Dodge, 2005; Phillips, 2022; Williams & McShane, 2018). It was thus apparent that gangs serve as a source of support in environments where youths are confronted with poverty, social exclusion and other criminogenic risks, and where the family, school, government and religious structures fail to holistically provide for the material and other needs of vulnerable youths.

#### **Theme 4: Occult and African witchcraft-related gang practices**

Based on existing research with service providers and desktop analyses, gangs in the Free State province purportedly incorporate elements of the occult and African witchcraft into their gang practices (Geldenhuys, 2019; Phillips & Maritz, 2015). An underlying goal of the study was to confirm occult practices and gauge offender and service provider experiences regarding involvement in these groups. More specifically, the focus was to explore risk and protective factors for these groups, in the event that their existence was confirmed by the sample. Several service provider and offender participants supported the notion that gang-related practices in the province included the use of African witchcraft (using *muti*), and in certain cases involved devil or demon worship. They believed that certain gang members possess supernatural abilities such as shape shifting or astral projection, especially amongst members within the higher echelons of the gang.

*If you talk about the Triple 6, the Sotho-speaking people in the Black townships, specifically refer to them as the devil-worshipping gangs. When they get initiated, they also get initiated into it with rituals. You've got to commit crime, you've got to make promises, you are blessed by spiritual leaders – and I'm talking occultic spiritual leaders, and then there are also crimes that is spiritually instigated where witchcraft is involved and where sangomas are involved and where they basically do the rituals where they get possessed and then they do the crimes.*

*BTK, Triple 6, Roma [Maroma]. When I arrived, there was one they called IJP. The Triple 6, its spiritual activities going on, because when you talk to them, they say 'we drink blood', 'we go at night, spiritually – you'll think that I'm sleeping there but it's not me sleeping, it's just my body. Spiritually, I'm somewhere else'. Those are the things that they say themselves.*

In this context, 'promises' as noted in the S1 excerpt above, referred to sacrificing your soul and/or that of a loved one as part of a spiritual ritualistic initiation practice. Participants in the offender sample supported these views.

*They pray to the devil and if you do that you can't serve God. I had a family member who was in Triple 6, when he had a baby, they wanted him to sacrifice his baby – then he ran away but they found him and chopped him into pieces. They get power when they do sacrifices, power from the demons. They chopped him up because he didn't want to kill his baby.*

*The only gang that I know which resorts to satanism is the Triple 6 which says sell your child's soul or sacrifice someone. They also sacrifice to have some satanism powers, like the type of powers that make them convince people. They tell you which specific person you must sacrifice – bring them his blood or his head. They consume it and after consuming it you become even more powerful. I have seen them eat a human eye, human head and testicles. If someone does not listen, they cut off his head then they eat that head.*

Findings confirmed that certain gangs such as the Triple 6 and BTK engage in devil-worshipping or other occult activities, whilst other gangs in the province use muti for various reasons including to build up physical strength, to avoid apprehension or to evade attacks from rivals. In terms of risk factors perpetuating involvement in these gangs, similar factors as those already reported apply. However, it was apparent that financial or material gain and gaining supernatural abilities or powers were viewed as unique factors motivating membership in these occult-related gangs.

*They want money, because Triple 6 gives you money. You sell your mother and you sell your soul and then it gives you money. Like, they tell you 'do you want to sell your mother or your father' then you tell them 'I'm selling my mother'. They are going to kill your mother; that people of Triple 6, they are going to kill your mother – also you, you sell your soul. Then after that, they tell you when are you going to die. They believe demons give them power – it's something like they are selling their souls, it's something like that.*

*There are factors that attract us to join gangs where there are rituals. There is no member of the Triple 6 gang, who will be hurt or stabbed by a person who is not part of the Triple 6.*

*Some other people, they join Triple 6 because they say Triple 6 is a rich gang, there is money there. I don't know how they are making that money.*

Participants further highlighted the link between joining a gang like the Triple 6 to gain supernatural power and then using that power to draw blood on behalf of the gang to get more power or status, and in turn more financial gain.

*And most of them join not only for the money or the physical power, they join for spiritual power over other people.*

*Yes, the BTK use muti. They use muti to help when they go to jail, so they can win the case. The Illuminati and Triple 6 say they drink blood because the blood is powerful and it gives them powers. When you have power, you get blood, when you get the blood you get rich.*

Regarding the protective factors related to occult or devil-worshipping gangs specifically, 32 participants from the offender sample were not able to identify any mediating factors, while five offenders outlined the importance of spiritual development through churches and other religious bodies as a key protective factor, as they believed religion could mitigate beliefs and practices related to demon or devil worship.

*It's to pray because God can change them. He will take the evil things out.*

*Church, because church can give them words they need. Like the pastors who can warn them, but you also get dodgy pastors who pretend to serve God, but actually, they serve the devil.*

*The Triple 6 gang, we once had some young people here who were practising – but at some point, we had some pastors coming here, praying for them – you could see it seems they're trying to – how can I say, that evil spirit or how can I say. They normally say its 'exorcist' but at some point, they managed to lessen this type of gang.*

These findings therefore confirm service provider reports in the literature pertaining to the suspected inclusion of occult and witchcraft-related elements in gang practices in the Free State province (Geldenhuys, 2019; Petrus et al., 2018; Phillips & Maritz, 2015) and serve to identify the unique factors motivating occult gang involvement in the province, which has until now been excluded from research in this field.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Gang involvement and activities are multidimensional, progressive and fluid in nature. These elements are demonstrated in the findings presented, which explore and highlight key risk and protective factors identified by the sample, elucidate pathways into gang membership and confirm the inclusion of occult and witchcraft-related elements within gang practices in the Free State. Accordingly, intervention at multiple levels by several governmental and social agencies are recommended together with the implementation of strategies at various levels. On a primary level, it is recommended that families, schools and communities introduce and establish support networks for youths through increased supervision, parental attachment and activities that promote civic values and gang awareness. Fragmented family units and schools within gang-affected communities should also receive specialised services from social workers, psychologists and faith-based organisations to promote moral regeneration and provide support. At a secondary level, enhanced measures should be implemented within communities and schools to strengthen the sense of safety of youths and reduce the need to join gangs as a means of protection. This may include increased police visibility, community police forums, restricted access to school grounds during school hours, and better ensuring learner safety on the way to or from school. On a tertiary level, the development of life-skills and rehabilitation

programmes should be geared toward the management and targeted treatment of the specific risk factors related to gang involvement.

Additionally, social challenges that promote gang membership need to be addressed on a macro and micro level. Such initiatives should include increased access to education, entrepreneurship courses and the development of vocational training. The findings therefore provide evidence-based knowledge pertaining to key risk and protective factors, serving to assist social work practitioners and other role players to better identify vulnerable youths, develop targeted interventions and tailor prevention programmes by strengthening protective factors such as those identified by gang members in the sample. The study also highlighted the occult and ritualistic nature of gang practices in the province, motivating the need for further research exploring the modus operandi, functions and dynamics within these groups, with the aim of creating and strengthening policy or other interventions geared specifically towards addressing such occult practices. More specifically, a provincial anti-gang strategy is recommended based on the unique nature of gangs in the Free State and drawing on the multi-dimensional nature of similar strategies implemented in other provinces in South Africa. Social workers, educators, correctional officials and other individuals providing services to gang-involved youths should be consulted regarding the development of an anti-gang strategy in the province.

In summary, the study explored the pertinent risk and protective factors for youth gang involvement from the direct perspective of active gang members and non-gang-affiliated offenders. The data provided by the offender sample were enhanced by data obtained from a sample of service providers working closely with gang-affiliated youths. The findings identified several key risk and protective factors that may have significant practical implications for social work practitioners working with gang-involved youths and gang-affected communities. Specific risk factors such as protection of the self, substance abuse, academic failure, the lack of a sense of belonging, socio-economic deprivation, familial instability and peer pressure were identified as having a prominent impact; social work practitioners accordingly can use this knowledge to aid in the development of more targeted interventions that address both the primary causes and the appeal of gang membership. Similarly, social workers may incorporate the protective factors identified in the study when providing services to gang-involved youths or when assisting gang-affected families and communities. The confirmation of occult activities among gangs adds a nuanced layer, as it highlights the role of mysticism, rituals and the cultural beliefs underpinning membership in these gangs. The study further identified the pursuit of supernatural or spiritual power and financial gain as primary motivators for occult gang involvement and highlighted the importance of religion and spiritual education as important protective factors. This may serve to equip social workers in the province with the contextual understanding needed for developing trust and rapport with individuals involved in these groups. Social workers can utilise these insights to design holistic prevention strategies, such as youth mentorship programmes, family counselling and educational workshops that demystify and counteract the allure of occult gangs and gang membership more generally.

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