

Softening the 'Iron Hand': Re-Thinking Punitive Approaches to Addressing Gang Subcultures in South Africa

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Abstract

Shortly after the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, the South African government instituted a nationwide lockdown, in an effort to curb the spread of the disease. However, a critical part of this process was the policing of communities under lockdown. In various communities throughout South Africa afflicted by gang-related crime, while the lockdown initially had an impact on gang activities, this did not last long. Gang subcultures continued despite the lockdown measures, as well as the joint military and police operations to maintain order. This article focuses on the relevance of punitive approaches to addressing gang subcultures in South Africa, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 environment. It is based on research conducted by the authors in a gang-affected community in the city of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha), located in the Nelson Mandela Bay metro, in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The main argument is that punitive

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approaches are no longer effective (assuming they never were), and are certainly no longer relevant for addressing gang subcultures in the Covid-19 era.

Keywords: Gang subcultures, gang-related crime, South Africa, gangsterism, Port Elizabeth, Covid-19

1. Introduction

Before the onset of Covid-19 in 2020, South Africa was battling an ongoing challenge of gang-related crime and violence in various communities. According to the national crime statistics released by the Minister of Police in 2019, the Eastern Cape and Western Cape provinces respectively had the highest and second highest murder rates in the country (Businesstech, 2019, n.p.). Unsurprisingly, both provinces were impacted by gangsterism and gang-related violence, which contributed to the high murder rates.

After the emergence of Covid-19, the country's National Command Council instructed that a national lockdown be imposed. To enforce this, both the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) were deployed. Since then, gang-related activities have not subsided, and most recently, two years later, gang violence has flared up again in the Western Cape. In March 2022, gang violence flared up in Manenberg on the Cape Flats, and claimed the lives of at least eight people (McCain, 2022, n.p.).

The above example, as well as those outlined later in this discussion, illustrate that the approaches used by the state and law enforcement to address gang-related crime and violence, both before Covid-19, and after Covid-19, have not been effective. In the following discussion, the authors argue for the need of alternative approaches to addressing gang subcultures in South Africa. The existing approaches are mostly based on a punitive philosophy, very similar to those implemented in Latin America, though, admittedly, not on the same level of state-enacted violence that turned many Latin American communities into war zones.

The argument put forward is that policies based on an 'iron hand' or punitive philosophy are unsustainable, and will not produce long-term positive results. Hence, the authors suggest alternative

approaches that could yield better and more sustainable results in curbing gang violence and related challenges.

2. Methodology

The research underpinning this discussion is multi-disciplinary in nature, and uses a predominantly qualitative design. Primary data was acquired mainly from semi-structured interviews with key participants, as well as from direct observation. Secondary data was obtained from scholarly literature and online news articles.

It should be noted that while semi-structured interviews formed the main primary data collection method, the authors, with the assistance of key stakeholders from the Helenvale and Northern Areas community, also organised a community dialogue/workshop. This event, held in December 2021, took the form of a livestream with a panel of four (4) participants, including the authors, and a selection of fifteen (15) to twenty (20) key stakeholders that included representatives from relevant Non-Governmental Organisations, the Nelson Mandela Bay Development Agency and a Municipal Councillor representing the metro council. The event was attended by stakeholders representing community-based organisations, political leadership and the legal fraternity. From this dialogue, useful data emerged that has been incorporated into this discussion.

From the above workshop, the following themes emerged, which are reflected in the alternative approaches to addressing gang subcultures, discussed later in this article:

- The failure of existing punitive approaches to addressing gang activity in the target community.
- The need to revitalise, restore and re-capacitate key social institutions in the community.
- The need for a more holistic approach to dealing with gangs, shifting away from punitive approaches to those emphasising mediation, consultation and negotiation.
- Support (financial and otherwise) and capacity-building of community-based organisations and assets.
- The need for ongoing research .

3. An overview of *mano dura* or 'iron hand' approaches to addressing gangs: Lessons from Latin America

Punitive approaches to gang violence in Latin America, known as *mano dura* or 'iron hand', were a characteristic feature of anti-gang policies since the early 2000s. El Salvador, regarded by some as the country where *mano dura* policies originated, first introduced the "Iron Fist" policy in 2003 (Hume, 2007, p. 739). Enforcement of the policy entailed the indiscriminate imprisonment of gang members, even if just for symbolising gang involvement through visible gang tattoos or signalling gang signs (Boraz & Bruneau, 2006, p. 38; Hume, 2007, p. 739). In addition to El Salvador, Guatemala & Honduras also adopted *mano dura* to address the gang challenge (Umana & Rossini, 2012; Ten Velde, 2012; Krause, 2014).

One of the most significant features of *mano dura* policy is that they encouraged the use of a paramilitary style of policing, particularly of youth gangs. For example, in El Salvador, one of the repressive measures used by the state to enforce iron fist policies was the deployment of "specialised military anti-gang units" (Hume, 2007, p. 745). These anti-gang units illustrated the "military participation in policing" (Holland, 2013, p. 44) that was a common feature of iron fist enforcement.

Another feature of *mano dura* that is relevant for the current discussion, is that it emerged in a "hegemonic" political context, that was based on "exclusion & polarisation" (Hume, 2007, p. 739). In fact, there is a close correlation between the historical political systems prevalent in Latin American countries, and the use of iron fist policies to fight organised crime and gangs. Several Latin American presidents in effect won elections in their respective countries on the basis of campaigns that emphasized *mano dura* approaches to crime and gang activity (Rosen & Cutrona, 2021). Some scholars have suggested that this correlation is indicative of ongoing predemocratic authoritarian political ideas by Latin American governments, despite the transition to democracy in Latin America (Ungar, 2009, p. 203). Most significant, is that despite this, Latin American governments seemingly enjoy widespread popular support for iron fist approaches to crime and gangs (Ungar, 2009; Wolf, 2017).

Most scholars are of the view that *mano dura* largely failed to address gang violence in Latin America in a sustainable manner. In fact, they argue that this policy may well have exacerbated the issue (see, for example, Hume, 2007; Del Carmen Gutierrez Rivera, 2011; Schubert, 2016; Rosen & Cutrona, 2021; Bergmann & Gude, 2021). Not only did the repressive iron fist policies not alleviate gang violence and crime, but they also turned many urban communities into war zones, with running gun battles between paramilitary forces and gangs. In this context, the solution to the problem seemed to be worse than the problem itself.

There are several key lessons that South Africa can, and should learn from the Latin American example. These lessons are critical for the development of policy interventions that will address gang subcultures and related issues in a sustainable manner.

The first, and perhaps most important lesson, is that punitive and repressive approaches to addressing gang violence do not work over the long term. In fact, as some scholars have argued, not only does an iron fist approach not work over the long term, but it can actually have the opposite effect of what was intended. For example, in reference to the El Salvador context, Bergmann & Gude (2021, p. 43) argued that mass incarceration, which is a hallmark of the “failed *mano dura* strategy”, not only caused ‘major obstacles for desistance from crime and violence’, but also posed problems for “reentry after incarceration”. Furthermore, the punitive approach of mass incarceration had the following additional impact on gangs specifically. Firstly, it “strengthened gangs organisationally”; second, it “made gangs’ criminal activity more complex”; and third, it turned gangs into “significant actors in Salvadoran life” (Bergmann & Gude, 2021, p. 43). Thus, since gangs are highly adaptable entities, an iron fist approach caused them to adapt and respond accordingly.

The second lesson emanating from the Latin American context, is that using gangs to score political points has the potential to exacerbate the issue rather than resolving it. As alluded to earlier, Rosen & Cutrona (2021, p. 324) argued that iron fist policies were often used by presidential candidates in Brazil and Colombia to win their campaigns. Although this approach won elections, and even enjoyed popular support, these scholars (and others) have

“shown empirically that tough on crime strategies have had collateral damages and have not been effective” (Rosen & Cutrona, 2021, p. 324). This supports an earlier argument by Casales (2018), who pointed out that two of El Salvador’s most notorious gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street, were not only formed in the aftermath of that country’s bloody civil war, but have continued to thrive largely due to the Salvadoran government’s failed reconstruction efforts. Casales (2018) further argued that the Salvadoran government needed to adopt a social approach, rather than a punitive iron fist approach, as the latter had failed to successfully address the gang challenge.

The third lesson is that a focus on inclusion, rather than exclusion, of gang subcultures is a much needed mindset shift in policymaking. One of the key reasons for the failure of iron fist policies in places such as Latin America, is that although initially there may be popular support for such policies, once these become oppressive to the communities themselves, then popular support may change. This argument was made by Schuberth (2016, n.p.), namely that “communities are driven to support gangs against the oppressive state when they are indiscriminately targeted through muscular operations.” The need for an inclusive approach is articulated by Van Santen (2019, p. 201), when she argued that “Inclusive national-level engagement is particularly important...because gangs play a key role in shaping urban space and urban politics.” This echoes the argument made elsewhere by Petrus (2013) that gangs are a part of the social organisation and social structure of the communities where they are found. Hence, policies aimed at exclusion not only exclude and marginalise the gangs, but in effect do the same to the very communities where gangs exist. This may explain why communities sometimes respond with hostility towards law enforcement officials investigating gang members in those communities.

4. Approaches to gang-related crime in South Africa: A brief overview

Most of the approaches used to curb gang-related crime in South Africa have been overwhelmingly based on criminalising and punishing gangs. One of the key pieces of legislation that reflects

this punitive and criminalising approach is the Prevention of Organised Crime Act, 121 of 1998 (also known as POCA). Arguably, the Act represents the first real attempt by the South African government to address, among other things, the policing of criminal gangs in the country. According to Nel (2003, p. 97), the main purpose of the legislation was to “effectively police and curb organised crime, money laundering and criminal gang activities in South Africa.” The introduction of POCA was the consequence of the significant violence that occurred in the mid-1990s in the gang-ridden Cape Flats in Cape Town (Western Cape Province), not only between the gangs, but more importantly between the gangs and the community-based organisation known as People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD). At its height, the conflict between PAGAD and the gangs in Cape Town culminated in the public execution of notorious gang leader Rashaad Staggie, as well as the execution of another twenty-four drug dealers, all at the hands of PAGAD (Monaghan, 2004, p. 1). The state was obliged to respond to rising calls for intervention in the conflict, and hence the POCA was introduced.

According to the legislation, any group that could be defined as a criminal gang, in terms of the Act, was criminalised. In Chapter 4, the POCA defined criminal gangs as:

“any formal or informal ongoing organisation...or group of three or more persons, which has as one of its activities the commission of one or more criminal offences, which has an identifiable name or identifying sign or symbol and whose members...engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity.” (Act 121, 1998, p. 6).

Chapter 4 of the POCA also criminalises membership of, and participation in, what it defines as a criminal gang. According to the Act (121, 1998, p. 10), “Any person who actively participates in or is a member of a criminal gang...shall be guilty of an offence.” Further, the Act also provides for the interpretation of criminal gang membership as follows:

- “In considering whether a person is a member of a criminal gang...the court may, have regard to the following factors, namely that such a person –

- Admits to criminal gang membership.
- Is identified as a member of a criminal gang...
- Resides in or frequents a particular criminal gang's area and adopts their style of dress, their use of hand signs, language or their tattoos...
- Has been arrested more than once in the company of identified members of a criminal gang...
- Is identified as a member of a criminal gang by physical evidence..." (Prevention of Organised Crime Act, 121 of 1998, p. 11)

From the above, it is clear that the state's response to the gang challenge in South Africa was to immediately criminalise gangs and gang membership. By creating legislation to this effect, the state legitimised the use of punitive measures to address gang subcultures, without any exploration of viable alternatives. The inherent problem with this approach is that it arbitrarily links gangs to criminal activity, without due regard for the fact that gangs can form for reasons other than to commit crime. This criticism is made by Pinnock & Pinnock (2019, p. 4), where they stated that "The POCA definition [of gangs]...unambiguously links gangs to criminal activity", while they put forward an alternative definition of gangs that "allows the possibility of understanding gangs as having formed for reasons other than criminality..."

The ineffectiveness of POCA in addressing gang-related crime necessitated the introduction of a new strategy. Consequently, the SAPS introduced its National Anti-Gangsterism Strategy (NAGS), which was adopted in 2017. The NAGS seeks to encourage a holistic and multi-governmental approach, and is based on four key pillars, namely: Human Development; Social Partnerships; Spatial Design; and the Criminal Justice Process (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2017, n.p.; Viltoft, 2021, p. 19). However, at a meeting of the National Assembly Committee on Police, various inadequacies in the NAGS were pointed out. Some of these included that the Strategy focused more on "disruption rather than neutralisation of gang activity", and that a "more innovative

policing approach is needed.” (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2017, n.p.) Another challenge with the NAGS is its reliance on provincial implementation. This has also been criticised and has led to questions about the value of a national strategy that depends on provincial implementation (Viltoft, 2021, p. 20). Much criticism against the NAGS has come from the Western Cape, regarded as the province with the greatest gang challenge in the country. The government has been criticised for contradicting itself by, on the one hand, calling for a demilitarised police service, yet, on the other, using a militarised approach to dealing with gangsterism. Furthermore, there have also been “accusations of the lack of willingness [on the part of the government] to further and publicly engage with the issue...” (Viltoft, 2021, p. 20). Although the NAGS seeks to include a collaborative and community-based dimension, it still suffers from the same problems inherent in the POCA, namely an over-emphasis on punitive approaches. This is unsurprising since the policy was introduced by the SAPS, which is also responsible for its implementation.

The Eastern Cape provincial government developed a Provincial Anti-Gang Strategy (PAGS) in 2016, which is implemented as part of the broader Provincial Crime Prevention Strategy (PSS) and feeds directly into the Social Transformation Cluster work of the government in the province. This strategy is coordinated by the Department of Community Safety (DOCS) which is mandated to promote the safety of the province and to “collaborate with key stakeholders across sectors to achieve the desired outcomes” (2016, p. 21). However, there seems to be parallel implementation of the PAGS and the NAGS with limitations towards the realisation of new policy possibilities. In the gang-affected Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha), at an operational level, the SAPS, as a national competency, executes the NAGS through the work of the Gang Unit, whilst the DOCS implements the PAGS to mobilise stakeholders in the Northern Areas in particular. There is therefore over-bureaucratisation of the state to manage gangsterism in the Eastern Cape, or at least limited oversight over the implementation of the NAGS without specific interventions towards greater accountability and policy alignment. This confusion or “lack of synergy in the implementation of anti-crime strategies between SAPS and government was already exposed as far back as the

approval of the NCPS [National Crime Prevention Strategy] by Cabinet in 1996..." (Rauch, 2003, p. 3). On the one hand, the provincial government has advanced focused community mobilisation and an integrated model to implement the PAGS. However, on the other, SAPS is a national competency and has implemented directives and operational strategies drawn from its own ranks. These approaches to anti-gang intervention strategies have lacked a measurable contribution by the economic cluster and local government role players. In the Northern Areas, researchers have observed the evolution of gang subcultures within current development projects within the Gelvandale police precinct (Jonas, 2015; Davids, 2017). Most recently, drawing on the renovation project at David Livingstone Senior Secondary School and other projects in the same area, former and current gang members have utilised the opportunity to formally evolve into the small and medium enterprises (SMME) space during the Covid-19 period. Delivering on infrastructure development and other technical expertise, there are both positive and concerning developments in this regard. The evolution from staunch gang organisation towards community-based organisation through taking key interest in development projects, should be noted as an important characteristic of modern gang subcultures in this specific area. These developments may require further study to establish whether gang members remain in gangs after entering the SMME space, and whether the access to developmental opportunities could constitute a viable exit point.

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 has undoubtedly exacerbated the problems inherent in the current approaches to addressing gang-related crime. With most law enforcement resources channelled towards enforcing national lockdown regulations, gangs have adapted and continue with their activities, as reflected in the two cases outlined earlier. In addition, the presence of both the police and military in the streets paints a picture similar to that experienced in Latin America. It has already been pointed out that a paramilitary approach is not only ineffective, but could potentially worsen gang violence. It is for these reasons that Heineken (2021, n.p.) wrote "In South Africa, the military has recently been deployed to counteract gang violence on the Cape Flats and during the Covid-19 pandemic. In all these

instances, there are concerns about how effective it is in these roles.”

The deployment of the military as a go-to strategy does not only extend to addressing gangs. In July 2021 South Africa was rocked by widespread violent looting and riots, predominantly in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. According to the head of SANDF, the call to deploy the military came on 11 July 2021. Initially, the SANDF was only supposed to be deployed for a month, but the SAPS requested that the deployment be extended by a further three months (Pijoo, 2022, n.p.). The deployment of the military to quell uprisings within the country's borders highlights two significant problems. First, the SAPS is ill-prepared to deal with the challenges of gangsterism and outbreaks of violence on the scale seen in July 2021. Second, the potential negative impact of using the military will undoubtedly be the result of the simple fact that the military is not trained for urban peacekeeping, but for war. Hence, the military is as likely to contribute towards violence as the gangs or rioters are.

5. Impact of Covid-19 on gang-related crime and violence in South Africa and internationally

Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the South African government, under instruction from the Covid-19 National Command Council, instituted a national lockdown. This policy brief is based on research that aims to determine the impact of the lockdown on issues of crime and safety in vulnerable communities in the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha). The focus is particularly on the impact of the lockdown on gang subcultures and their activities. The purpose, as is reflected in this policy brief, is to provide policy recommendations for addressing gang subcultures, and resultant crime and safety issues, that are relevant and sustainable for the new Covid-19 era.

Prior to the emergence of the pandemic, gang subcultures provided arguably the most significant challenge to safety and security in Helenvale, and the broader Northern Areas. Works by Petrus (2021a, 2021b), Petrus & Uwah (2019), Davids (2017) and Jonas

(2015) all attest to the historical challenge of gangsterism, and how it has evolved and manifested in the contemporary context.

With the institution of the national lockdown in March 2020, the South African government put specific measures in place to keep citizens confined to specific areas. Mobility was restricted through curfews and stringent restrictions on social gatherings. The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) was mandated to assist the South African Police Service (SAPS) to enforce the lockdown regulations.

However, these measures seem to have done little to adequately address gang-related crimes, in particular in the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth. Although emphasis on a holistic approach to gang intervention is a key argument evolving from the community dialogue outlined below, the weakness of the state to address gangsterism is glaring. The research findings of Jonas (2015) on the perceptions of the Helenvale community that the SAPS itself is engaged in criminal activities and is categorised as a gang itself, is a huge concern and deals directly with a trust deficit between the community and the SAPS in the same community. Structural organisational challenges within the SAPS were also further displayed at a national level during the lockdown period, specifically through a lack of cooperation between the SANDF and the SAPS National Office as the KwaZulu-Natal unrest unfolded in July 2021. The shift in policing priorities during the lockdown period enabled gangs to rethink operational strategies which eventually made a sustainable impact on their *modus operandi* during lockdown. Gang subcultures therefore acclimatised to the reality of the pandemic with minimal impact on the substantial growth of gangs, and their operations in Helenvale and the Northern Areas in general.

Below are only two brief examples of how gang subcultures continue to have a pervasive and often negative effect on communities in the Northern Areas, despite the special lockdown policing measures:

Case 1:

In January 2021, a 14-year-old girl from Helenvale was gang-raped and stabbed to death at a known drug house. According to reports,

the girl was in the company of twelve men, five of whom were later arrested for the crime. The police spokesperson confirmed that all five suspects had gang affiliations (*Times Live*, 2021). This example illustrates not only the impact of gangs, but it also alludes to another key safety and security issue in the Northern Areas, namely gender-based violence (GBV).

Case 2:

While this example does not necessarily describe an actual incident of gang-related crime, it does shed some light on the degree to which gang subcultures are entrenched in the Northern Areas.

In early February 2021, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) visited the Northern Areas and 'found an entrenched gang culture in the area' (Daniels, 2021, n.p.). The Human Rights Commissioner, Chris Nissen, stated that "gangsterism is glorified". The report also stated the following:

"The lockdown...has done nothing to ease the level of crime and violence the people of the northern areas endure. Rival gangs exchange gunfire on a daily basis while women and children suffer under spiralling gender-based crimes." (Daniels, 2021, n.p.)

The above suggest that the challenge of gang-related violence and crime remains unresolved, and has not abated despite the institution of lockdown, and despite the attentions of both the police and the army.

The ongoing gang violence and crime revealed by the primary data was also supported by secondary data on the state of affairs in other countries. Berg & Varsori (2020) argue that in Brazil the pandemic has increased the power of criminal groups, including gang formations. These authors indicate that increases in homicide and lethal crime rates in Brazil, despite lockdowns, make it highly unlikely that gang-related murders will decrease, suggesting that the lockdowns have little impact. Similar to South Africa, Brazil also initiated its first lockdown in March 2020, when Sao Paulo shut down for fourteen days (*Garda World*, 2020). Although there was initially an apparent decrease in lethal crimes in Brazil in March at the start of the lockdown, from April 2020 the rate of lethal crimes

began increasing (Berg & Varsori, 2020), and has maintained this rate since then.

In the US city of Los Angeles, while lockdowns did not see an increase in gang-related violence and crimes, it did not decrease either. According to authors Brantingham, Tita and Mohler (2020, p. 1), "Gang-related crime in Los Angeles remained stable" after Covid-19 restrictions were implemented. However, the authors warn that they expected gang-related crime in Los Angeles to not only persist, but even increase, because "gang subculture may override concerns about COVID-19..." (Brantingham *et al.*, 2020, p. 2).

The above examples assist in providing a comparative lens on the South African context, in particular the study area. As mentioned previously, the continuation of gang-related activities despite lockdown is not unique to the Northern Areas, but appears to also be the case in other gang-affected regions elsewhere. This reflects the highly adaptive nature of gang subcultures, that they are able to continue with their operations amid the upheavals created by Covid-19. In fact, it could be argued that gang subcultures thrive in unstable conditions, and are able to quickly position themselves in a way that enables them to take advantage of the current conditions.

A key participant in the study area referred specifically to how the local gangs have used the mandatory wearing of masks in public spaces to carry out their activities. The participant stated that "gangsters walk around openly with masks, and can now openly shoot without being identified" (Interview, 9 June 2021). The participant also candidly indicated the consequence of this: "The community is afraid of the gangs, and the gangs are afraid of their rivals." This heightened fear appears to be a result of the conditions created by the Covid-19 lockdown.

Another challenge relates to the politicisation of gangsterism in the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha). Participants from a study done by Davids (2017) alluded to politicians using gangs and gangsterism to achieve their political goals, going so far as claiming that gangsterism was being 'politicised' in their respective communities, and was used as a means by political officials to advance their own political agendas against their political

opponents (Davids, 2017, p. 138; see also Petrus & Kinnes, 2018). The Covid-19 pandemic has, itself, become widely politicised throughout the country. However, in an already politicised context as it pertains to the management of gang subcultures in Port Elizabeth, the politicisation of the pandemic may well have exacerbated the problem of the politicisation of gangsterism.

6. Alternative approaches for the new context

Covid-19 has highlighted the ineffectiveness of punitive approaches to gang-related crime in South Africa. In light of the above, the following are a few recommendations for alternative approaches that policymakers could consider:

- Significantly more research into alternative approaches to addressing gang subcultures is required.
- A shift in emphasis from punitive approaches, to mediation and negotiation should be explored.
- Greater attention should be paid to holistic interventions that emphasise minimising the impact of negative factors contributing to gang involvement, as well as maximising the positive factors that mitigate against gang involvement.
- More policy interventions are needed that focus on restoring and creating functional key social institutions.
- Community-based resources, assets and organisations should be capacitated to lend greater support to addressing social factors that cause gang involvement.
- Dedicated Gang Research Centres (GRCs) should be established to aid policymakers with relevant data to inform policy decisions and implementation.
- Gang policies and interventions should be de-politicised as far as possible.
- De-stigmatisation of gang affected communities should be encouraged.
- In future, lockdown measures should be sensitive to the inherent social and community dynamics in gang affected

areas to avoid inadvertently exacerbating the very conditions that give rise to gang violence and criminality.

7. Conclusion

In this article, the authors put forward the argument that a re-thinking of punitive approaches to addressing gang subcultures in South Africa is needed. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the inadequacies of existing punitive approaches to policing gangs. As illustrated, gang subcultures and their impact were already challenges in affected communities before the pandemic. But, the lockdown measures put in place did little to reduce the impact of gang subcultures.

With reference to specifically Latin America's *mano dura* or 'ironfist' approach, it was also shown in this article why punitive policies are both ineffective and unsustainable for addressing gang subcultures over the long term. Comparisons between Latin America and South Africa revealed that iron fist measures cause gangs to re-organise and adapt, given their nature of adaptability and flexibility, two traits that have contributed to their longevity, and ability to respond to prevailing conditions. Furthermore, in the South African context, the close relationship between the prison environment and gangs shows that incarceration is not rehabilitative, nor does it stop gang-related activities. The symbolic meanings attached to incarceration, such as status and hierarchy, as well as the potential for incarcerated gang leaders to maintain control over their gangs on the outside, or, the converse, where gang formations may fracture and engage in violent in-fighting and jockeying for power, all support the notion that simply arresting and incarcerating gang members and leaders does not resolve the issue.

Also, the impact of politics cannot be underscored, as it has a direct influence on the ongoing gang challenge in affected communities. The South African examples mentioned in the discussion, based on the authors' research in the city of Port Elizabeth, illustrate that the use of gangs as a political tool exacerbates the challenge. Whether it is political officials in league with gangs, or using gangs for

electioneering, the politicisation of the gang challenge escalates the conditions that give rise to gangs in the first place.

In light of the above, the policy recommendations made by the authors are designed to present alternatives to the current punitive approaches used to suppress gangs. In the case of South Africa, the decades of the unresolved gang challenge suggest that perhaps now is the time for a re-think. Shifting the policy mindset to one that focuses less on punishment, and more on integration and inclusion, may be the missing link that could finally sway the tide towards sustainable long-term solutions to dealing with the challenge of gangs.

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