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Deployment of Soldiers to Communities experiencing Gang Violence in South Africa: Policy Perspectives

By Godfrey Maringira and Diana Gibson

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government should:

- **Support community-led initiatives**, organizations and local leaders with special grants and well-funded programs that enhance their capacities to effectively partner with agencies to address gang-related violence.
- **Establish “hybrid police-military forces”** more suited for maintaining public order functions.
- **Support more thematic research-based studies** on gang-related violence and use the findings and recommendations from such studies as inputs in reforming policies and actions.

The point of departure of this policy brief is the failure by the police to effectively deal with gang-related violence in the Western Cape and the deployment of soldiers to the affected communities. It examines challenges linked to the deployment of soldiers in response to spiralling levels of urban violence and crime, which should normally fall within the purview of the police. The brief identifies the challenge of perception in black townships where soldiers are viewed as ‘strangers’ or outsiders, particularly by community leaders who are more knowledgeable and experienced in dealing with gang-related violence. Data collected during fieldwork in black townships point to the limitations of the military approach. In this regard, a case is made to the government to direct more resources towards community and non-governmental structures for combating gang-related violence. While we do not seek to over-romanticize the capacity of grassroots and non-governmental structures, there is sufficient evidence that the government and the police can tap into local knowledge, provide resources, and build capacities to effectively address gang-related violence. Community based and non-governmental organizations, which are active at the grassroots level, are often well placed to assist with social and economic interventions that can ameliorate circumstances which contribute to gang violence.¹

¹ Godfrey Maringira, & Diana Gibson, “Maintaining Order in Townships: Gangsterism and Community Resilience in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 9, no.2 (2019): 55-74.

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CONCEPTUALIZING GANG VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's history of colonialism, apartheid policies, and practices to which "non-white" marginalized communities were exposed to, as well as deep-rooted poverty and structural violence, contributed to the emergence of gang violence.² For Pinnock,³ despite the demise of apartheid, young people in marginalized townships, continue to resort to gang violence in order to survive. Thus, experiences of substance abuse and relative deprivation continue to frame the lives of many young people in these communities and sustain gang violence.⁴ This trend is confirmed by the Affordable Housing Data Centre. It shows that in greater Nyanga, an area which includes Gugulethu, 72.3% of the residents live below the Household Subsistence Level (HSL).⁵

However, gangs have increased their ability to adapt and survive by building links with certain individuals in law enforcement agencies. For Mama,⁶ lack of policing and a loss of trust in the justice system have contributed to the spate of gang-related violence in the Western Cape. While the police are viewed as lacking the capacity to effectively deal with gang violence, soldiers have resorted to a heavy-handed policing strategy or "hard policing."⁷ According to Hanson, "hard policing" methods alienate the community. Despite the efforts of the military effort to rein in violence, Maringira and Gibson⁸ note the limited success of such interventions.

DEPLOYING SOLDIERS: DEALING WITH GANGS

The military is not trained to police or to investigate civilian crime or gang-related crime. Rather, the military is trained to kill, but possesses limited skills in policing.⁹ As one of the community leaders noted, "we do not need soldiers, this is not war, we as the community we can deal with gangs." The military is strategically positioned to deploy

force against perceived enemies of the state or to defend national borders. Our research findings indicate that gangs in black townships, neither fear nor respect the police or the military, but they respect the community leaders.¹⁰ In addition, there seems to be a misleading belief that the absence of gangs on the streets during military patrols is an indication that gang activities have subsided. When the military withdraws from the streets, gangs return and intensify their operations. It should be noted that deploying soldiers in civilian communities for long periods during peacetime is neither sustainable nor effective.

Although soldiers can contain violent crime and growing insecurity to some extent, the challenges faced by the police and the community itself do not necessarily subside. Heinecken¹¹ argues that the military, unlike police, are not trained to use minimum force and can exacerbate the problem. When the military is deployed in civilian communities, they are easily perceived as "occupying forces,"¹² rather than protectors. There is no doubt that most civilians find the presence of the military rather intimidating. During our study, several participants openly expressed their objection to the presence of soldiers in their communities. Rather than perceive soldiers as preserving peace and security, they viewed the military as a threat to peace. It is therefore imperative that the government rethinks the practice of deploying the military to deal with violent crimes in black townships.

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- Support more thematic research-based studies on gang-related violence and use the findings and recommendations from such studies as inputs in reforming policies and actions.

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¹⁰ Maringira & Gibson, *ibid.*

¹¹ Hienecken, *ibid.*

¹² Baldwin, *ibid.*

² Gary Kynoch, "From the Ninevites to the Hard Livings gang: Township gangsters and urban violence in twentieth-century South Africa," *African Studies* 58, no.1 (1999): 55-85.

³ Don Pinnock, *Gang Town* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2016).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ AHDC. Suburbs Profiles – Nyanga, 2017. (Accessed 21 January 2020).

⁶ Sibongakonke Mama, "Cops need to work harder - Gugs gangsters," *IOL News*, July 15, 2019, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/cops-need-to-work-harder---gugs-gangsters-1341437>.

⁷ James Baldwin, "A Report from Occupied Territory," *The Nation*, July 11, 1966, <https://www.thenation.com/article/report-occupied-territory/>.

⁸ Maringira & Gibson, *ibid.*

⁹ Lindy Hienecken, "Why using the army to fight gang crimes in Cape Town is a bad idea," *IOL News*, July 18, 2019, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/opinion/why-using-the-army-to-fight-gang-crimes-in-cape-town-is-a-bad-idea-29404729>.