WORKING WITH JUVENILE OFFENDERS: AN EVALUATION OF TRAUMA GROUP INTERVENTION

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ABSTRACT

Many juvenile offenders in prisons have been exposed to trauma before their imprisonment. Trauma exposure amongst South African juvenile offenders is often linked to their criminal behaviour, but despite the high rates of trauma exposure among juvenile offenders, current South African prisons lack effective trauma counselling services. This article describes the process of facilitating group therapy with 30 juvenile offenders at the Johannesburg prison. The participants in these groups were 15 male and 15 female juvenile offenders. The therapy groups included 20 sessions on trauma education (what is trauma and its symptoms, the relationship between trauma and crime, and coping skills). The themes that emerged in the groups included experiences of physical, emotional and sexual abuse, as well as witnessing family violence, absent father figures, and being involved in gang violence in and out of prison. In conclusion, the article highlights the need to provide effective trauma counselling services in helping juvenile offenders to resolve their personal traumas before leaving prison. The problem of recidivism is linked to unresolved traumas due to lack of effective rehabilitation programmes in many South African prisons.

Key words: Juvenile offenders; trauma; crime; recidivism; prison; group therapy

INTRODUCTION: CRIME STATISTICS

The current high crime level is a major concern in South Africa. Crime statistics reveal that roughly 2.5 million people have been victims of different forms of crime over the past six years (Altebeker, 2005).

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Table 1. Crime statistics in South Africa for 2001–2006

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<td>24 516</td>
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<td>Robbery with aggravating circumstances</td>
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<td>126 905</td>
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<td>126 789</td>
<td>119 726</td>
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<tr>
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<td>260 082</td>
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<td>226 942</td>
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<td>Car hijacking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robbery of cash in transit</td>
<td>238</td>
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Source: South African Police Service (SAPS, 2006)

Limitations of crime statistics

Existing official crime statistics should be read with caution as they may be underestimating or overestimating the crime level in South Africa. It is difficult to measure crime accurately over sustained periods of time (Schonteich & Louw, 2001). This is because many victims or witnesses of crime do not report their crimes to the police and as a result, their incidents are not included in the crime statistics released by the Department of Safety and Security. In addition to this, some crime statistics are more accurate than others. For example, rape statistics are skewed by the fact that many victims do not report their cases. Figures for murder, however, are thought to be much more accurate as there is a dead body to be counted. A comprehensive plan on the reporting of crime statistics is needed to ensure that accurate figures are released annually. For example, victims or witnesses of crime should report all such incidents, and the police should record and investigate all crime incidents (Schonteich & Louw, 2001). Despite limitations of existing statistics, the significance of the high crime level in South Africa cannot be disputed.

Reasons for the high crime level in South Africa

“There is no single satisfactory explanation for South Africa’s high levels of crime” (Schonteich & Louw, 2001, p. 4). A number of explanations have been given for South Africa’s high crime level, including the link between crime and South Africa’s history of political violence. South Africa has a long history of political violence. During the apartheid years the state maintained its position of power and control over the majority of South Africans through the use of repressive and violent methods. On the one hand, violence was perpetrated through the policies of institutionalised racism and high levels of deprivation and poverty (Bornman, Van Eeden & Wentzel, 1998; Emmett & Butchart, 2000). On the other hand, violence became sanctioned by the liberation movements as a means of resisting apartheid and bringing about democratic change. From the 1960s onwards, Umkhonto we Sizwe
(MK) and the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA) were formed as military structures of the liberation movements to fight apartheid. In the aftermath of the 1976 Soweto uprisings, large numbers of people (including many young people) left the country to join the above-mentioned liberation movements in exile (e.g. in Angola, Uganda and Tanzania), and to train as soldiers. In the townships, young boys also actively organised themselves into defence structures responsible for patrolling and protecting their communities against state security forces. Many authors (see, e.g. Mokwena, 1991; Simpson, 1996) have argued that violence became so much a part of people’s everyday life that a “culture of violence” developed in South Africa. That is, people began to see violence as an acceptable way to resolve social, political and even domestic problems (Bornman et al., 1998; Simpson, 1996). The distinction between political and criminal violence became blurred and many violent crimes were also committed during this period.

Post 1994: Democratic dispensation
Between 1994 and 1999, crimes (such as murder, attempted murder, rape, and all forms of robbery and assault) increased (Kristen, Cock & Mashike, 2002; Schonteich & Louw, 2001). Many factors are perceived to have contributed to the increasing crime level in the new South Africa, including inequality or the increasing wealth gap between the rich and the poor (Kristen et al., 2002; Schonteich & Louw, 2001; Terre Blanche, 2006). Other factors blamed on the government include poor policing, poor police management and corruption. There is also a growing perception that the country’s criminal justice system is too lenient in sentencing criminals. “Criminals operate with impunity and they are not afraid of the police” (Bornman et al., 1998, p. 48). The easy availability of firearms has also been identified as one of the major causes of crime in the new South Africa. According to a United Nations Survey of 69 countries, South Africa has one of the highest firearm-related homicide rates in the world, second only to Columbia (Schonteich & Louw, 2001). In 2000, there were an estimated 9 million firearms in South Africa, of which only 5 million were legally owned (Schonteich & Louw, 2001). Illegal firearms are used in most violent crimes, such as murder, armed robbery and car hijacking.

Psychological understanding of crime: The link between trauma and criminal behaviour
One area of investigation in this article has been the relationship between trauma exposure amongst juvenile offenders, criminal behaviour and lack of effective trauma counselling services in prisons. Although trauma is a key focus of this article, socio-economic and political factors also appear to play a significant role in the development of youth offending. Psychological studies have been conducted to establish the link between early childhood traumas (e.g. parental loss, parental rejection or emotional deprivation, abuse, excessively punitive behaviour, or inconsistent disciplinary techniques) and criminal behaviour later in life (Burton, Foy, Johnson & Moore, 1994; Cameroon & Fraser, 1997; Greenwald, 2005; Winnicott, 1990). These studies have indicated high rates of trauma exposure among juvenile offenders (Burton et al., 1994; Greenwald, 2005). A study by Hagell (2002) found that in the United Kingdom, the prevalence rate of trauma among juvenile offenders ranged from 25% to 81%, compared with 13% in the normal population; and in the United States of America and Australia, the prevalence of trauma ranged from 41% to 66% and 67% respectively (Cocozza &
Skowyra, 2000; Domalanta, Risser & Roberts, 2000; Grisso, 1999). There has been no study to determine the prevalence of trauma among South African juvenile offenders, but it is expected that it would be similarly high. This is because other studies in South Africa conducted with the general population indicated higher exposure to traumatic experiences (see, e.g. Edwards, 2005; Hoffman, 2002; Peltzer, 2000).

For the purpose of this article, trauma is defined as an event in which the juvenile has experienced intense horror, fear, or pain, along with helplessness, powerlessness, hopelessness and anger. The examples of traumatic events for juveniles include: (a) experiencing childhood physical and/or sexual abuse; (b) experiencing a serious life threat and/or injury; (c) witnessing severe injury and/or death of another person; and (d) being involved in gang violence (McMackins, Leisen, Sattler & Kinsley, 2005). Other events that can be traumatic for juvenile offenders include imprisonment itself, violence in prison and sodomy (Gear & Ngubeni, 2002; Kupers, 2005). These kinds of events often result in the development of Acute Stress Disorder or Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), PTSD is defined in terms of three broad clusters: (1) re-experiencing (e.g. intrusive memories, nightmares and flashbacks); (2) avoidance (e.g. emotional numbing, detachment, memory loss and amnesia); and (3) hyper arousal (e.g. hyper vigilant, startle responses and insomnia). The DSM-IV specifies that in order to be diagnosed with PTSD an individual must display at least one re-experiencing symptom, three avoidance symptoms and two hyper arousal symptoms. PTSD in the juvenile offender population is linked to a history of childhood trauma with subsequent violent behaviour (Burton et al., 1994). Numerous other studies have pointed to childhood abuse/neglect in the formation of criminal behaviour. For example, Cameron and Fraser (1997) have studied hundreds of convicted criminals and found that all the subjects had been either physically or emotionally abused as children. They concluded that severe abuse, parental rejection and lack of parental affection were primary causes of antisocial personality structures. According to Winnicott (1990) and Eagle and Watts (2002), for this population group aggression is an unconscious act of trying to control trauma and its effects. So prisons should serve to rehabilitate prisoners in dealing with their own traumas before leaving prison.

Overcrowding in prisons

The Department of Correctional Services' (DCS) 2006 annual report states that 61 325 (52%) of all prisoners were between the ages of 14 and 25 years. These numbers show that many young people commit crime in South Africa. The DCS collects statistics according to five general categories of crime (aggressive, sexual, economic, narcotic and others), and the statistics from the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons reveal that 60% of young offenders were sentenced for aggressive, sexual and economic crimes (Fagan, 2005).

There are 240 prisons in South Africa, but these are not enough to accommodate the increasing number of prisoners. According to Fagan (2005), there is overcrowding of 124% in South African prisons, and a prison cell that is supposed to hold 38 prisoners, holds more than 100 juveniles. As a result, many juveniles are subjected to gangs, are sodomised, become infected with HIV/AIDS and have no access to education or rehabilitation (Fagan, 2005). According to Haralambos and Holborn (in Gaum, Hoffman & Venter, 2006), prisons often do more harm than good. While prisons are
supposed to rehabilitate they often do the opposite, perpetuating the same destructive and unhealthy behaviour that led to the offender’s incarceration in the first place. Dissel (1996) found that gangsterism, sexual violence and drug trafficking are prevalent in South African prisons. Sexual violence is also rife in the country’s prisons, which puts many inmates at high risk of HIV/AIDS infection (Gear & Ngubeni, 2002). Reliable statistics are not available on the number of HIV-positive prisoners. The occurrence of forced, coerced and consensual sodomy is a common reality of prison life, and is considerably increased by gang activities (Gear & Ngubeni, 2002).

The attitude that rehabilitation “does not work” has become disquietingly common (Gaum et al., 2006). Poor prison conditions do not allow for the proper rehabilitation of prisoners, and there is a shortage of mental health professionals. Currently, the DCS hires only 28 psychologists to provide psychological care for approximately 18 000 prisoners (Gaum et al., 2006). The lack of psychologists and other mental health professionals is attributed to the low status of the work, minimal professional authority and low remuneration (Gaum et al., 2006). Due to staff shortages, many prisoners leave prison without having undergone any form of treatment or rehabilitation. The lack of effective rehabilitation programmes in turn leads to the problem of recidivism or re-offending. Swart and Naude (in Gaum et al., 2006) estimated that 80% of released offenders more often relapse back into crime. Many factors contribute to recidivism, the main one being the lack of effective rehabilitation services to rehabilitate prisoners before the leave prison. To this end, the Trauma Clinic Staff at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) piloted a trauma intervention project with juvenile offenders at the Johannesburg prison. The main aim of this article is to discuss the process of facilitating a group therapy with 30 juvenile offenders and the challenges encountered in working in prison.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The participants in this study were 15 male and 15 female juvenile offenders, aged between 19 and 22 years. It seems that the educational level of the female juveniles was higher than that of the male juveniles. It also appears that the majority of male juveniles had been arrested for multiple crimes, including car hijacking, armed robbery, kidnapping, possessing unlicensed firearms. Many males had also committed aggressive (e.g. murder) and sexual offences (e.g. rape) and were serving longer sentences than their female counterparts.

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Procedure and ethical considerations
Permission to run therapy groups with juvenile offenders was obtained from the DCS. Following the granting of permission by the DCS, the therapy groups were advertised to all juvenile offenders in the male and female sections. Participation was voluntary and more than 30 participants volunteered to take part in the therapy groups. In order to select only 30 participants, pre-selection interviews were conducted by two psychologists and one social worker who had been working in the trauma field for the past 2 to 10 years. The requirements for qualification as group members were as follows: must be willing to volunteer to be part of the group; must be present until the end of group process; must not be due for transfer, parole, or release; and must meet the criteria for PTSD diagnosis. The interview schedule included the following information: demographic details (e.g. gender, age, grade, home language, etc.); developmental history; history of substance abuse; medical and psychiatric history; nature of offence (e.g. armed robbery, drug trafficking, etc.); length of sentence; date of release; any previous trauma(s) (e.g. abuse, neglect, loss of parents, etc.); and traumatic symptoms (e.g. flashbacks, nightmares, depression, etc.).

Group therapy with youth offenders
All 30 participants participated in 20 group therapy sessions aimed at helping youth offenders talk about their upbringing, family relations, early experiences of loss, abuse and neglect, history of substance abuse, reasons for committing crime, imprisonment, and lastly, dealing with the symptoms of trauma and depression. Two rooms were booked in the female and male sections of the prison.
respectively to facilitate group therapy sessions. Two facilitators (a social worker and a psychologist) were allocated to each group. The groups met every Wednesday from 10:00 to 12:00. English, Sotho and Zulu were used interchangeably in the group meetings.

The therapy group sessions were based on Corey and Corey’s (2000) theory of group processes and practice. They have argued that group therapy moves through several stages, namely: initial stage, transition stage, working stage and termination stage.

The initial stage with youth offenders was aimed at creating a trusting group environment. One of the limitations of group therapy is lack of trust. Thus, it was normal during this phase for youth offenders to feel scared and reluctant to talk about their personal issues and feelings. Facilitators played a significant role in fostering trust among the group members. Less intrusive group activities were quite effective in building trust among the group members. This was done through the Name Game, in which youth offenders were asked to tell others about the meanings of their names.

**Outcomes of this activity:**
- to get to know each other
- to get to know the meanings of their names
- to help participants build trust by sharing something personal but not threatening.

The initial stage of the groups also involved developing rules to govern the groups. The groups set ground rules such as starting sessions on time, respecting one another, active participation, and maintaining confidentiality. The initial stage also involved members clarifying expectations and setting goals for the project.

The goal of the transition stage was for youth offenders to share their own family history and life experiences, which lasted for six sessions. This was done through an activity called the Tree of Life. The participants were instructed to think of themselves as a tree. Then the participants were given materials (flipchart, pencil, rubber and crayons) to draw a Tree of Life. The tree started with the roots, which represented important family members, family genogram and family relations. This helped the participants to trace their family roots and also reflect about their family dynamics. The stem represented their strengths and weaknesses, the kind of person they are. The branches represented their future goals.

**Outcomes of this activity:**
- to encourage self-awareness
- to trace family roots
- to build group trust
- to develop future goals.

The River of Life was another activity used in the transition stage. In this activity, the participants were instructed to draw a river on a blank flipchart sheet, which represented their life journeys. Participants were encouraged to indicate both the good and the bad moments they had experienced in their lives. This activity also lasted for six sessions. Both these activities (Tree of Life and the River of Life) lasted for 12 sessions in total. The participants found these activities to be therapeutic as they
were able to reflect on their life journeys, including family backgrounds, early experiences of abuse, neglect, rejection, peer pressure, history of substance abuse, gangs, reasons for committing crime, and imprisonment.

The goal of the **working stage** was for each member to learn coping skills in order to manage trauma-related symptoms. In this stage, youth offenders mainly talked about their personal traumatic experiences and how these had impacted on them. These traumatic experiences included physical or sexual abuse, neglect, witnessing family violence and gang violence. For this stage, the facilitation was guided by an integration of cognitive-behavioural and psychodynamic frameworks. Facilitators concentrated on reframing, gaining cognitive mastery over trauma symptoms, decreasing avoidance, altering attributions, and facilitating integration of the self. Due to time constraints, this phase lasted for four sessions.

**Outcomes of this activity:**

- to raise awareness about trauma and its symptoms
- to allow the participants to share painful feelings
- to help the participants heal from past traumatic experiences
- to understand their anger and underlying sources
- to develop positive coping strategies.

The goal of the **termination stage** was to terminate the group and consolidate learned skills. The termination stage was characterised by a mixture of feelings, among them sadness, and a sense of loss. The feelings of separation were dealt with and members were encouraged to continue supporting each other and practising their new skills. This phase lasted for two sessions.

**DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

Facilitators collected process notes for all group meetings. Group meetings were not tape recorded (because of the prison policy), but facilitators were encouraged to write their process notes verbatim. This is the main limitation of the study. The narratives were analysed using thematic content analysis which involved reading and re-reading the process notes to extract significant themes regarding factors that influence youth offenders to commit crime. Youth offenders gave their own subjective accounts of what was important to them and how they understood their involvement in crime, its impact on their lives and others.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on group activities, multiple themes emerged which indicated factors that influence youth offenders to commit crime in South Africa. These include family backgrounds, abuse, absent father figures, poor role models, peer pressure, and joining gangs. The results suggest that youth offending behaviour occurs as a result of a combination of external socio-economic and internal psychological factors.
Family backgrounds

Most of the youth offenders who participated in this project indicated that they were born into families where only one parent was present, though some participants shared positive experiences of being raised by single parents. In cases where both parents were absent, grandparents provided care for grandchildren. Grandparents relied on their old age pension grants to support their grandchildren.

Lazarus: I grew up in the care of my grandmother. She died in 1995. I miss her. She was the most important person in my life. My grandmother was supporting all of us financially with her old age pension grant. After her death the whole family became dysfunctional. I then left home to stay with friends who influenced me to do crime until I was arrested (male participant).

Thandi: I also grew up under the care of grandparents and uncle. They were also supporting us (female participant).

Many of the participants grew up in poverty-stricken homes, wherein either only one member of the family was working, or nobody was working at all.

Themba: At home my mother and father were not working. We spent some days without anything to eat. I felt I had to make money and doing crime was the only way (male participant).

Norman: My parents were not working. I felt committing crime was a solution to my family’s financial problems (male participant).

It is apparent that certain social environments may also make it difficult for individuals to resist engaging in crime. This is particularly likely to occur in social contexts with high rates of unemployment and poverty, and where crime is directed towards alleviating hunger and other basic needs. This is in line with previous studies conducted by the researchers from the CSVR. According to Dissel (1999) and Segal, Pelo and Rampa (1999), many young offenders interviewed in Boksburg, Leeuwkop, Krugersdorp and Johannesburg prisons came from deprived, poor families. Many juvenile offenders reported that they committed crime in order to survive harsh conditions of poverty (Mkhondo, 2005; Tyson & Stone, 2002). This result was similar to that of Pfetter (in Tyson & Stone, 2002) who found that poverty was the most frequently occurring response given by Nigerian and British adolescents about the causes of youth crime. Thus, in the fight against crime, the increasing levels of poverty and unemployment also need to be eradicated. Statistics South Africa (2005) estimated unemployment in South Africa to be in the region of 40%. The majority of poor people in South Africa are black. Statistically, 61% of Africans and 38% of coloureds are poor, compared with 5% of Indians and 1% of whites (May, in Terre Blanche, 2006).

Despite economic hardships, some parents tried very hard to meet the needs of their children. Yet in some cases the children continued on the criminal path.

Thembi: Everything was right in the house. I had everything I wanted. My parents warned me...
against bad friends but I did not listen to them. They were always telling me about my friends: that they were a bad influence. I have disappointed my mother (female participant).

Papa: I feel like I have disappointed my parents. They supported me. They gave me everything I needed but because I was greedy I wanted more. I started committing crime. Here I am feeling very bad that I have let them down. I do not want to blame any person for the crimes I have committed but myself (male participant).

The above responses challenge the notion that all youth offenders have been rejected and come from poor families. Although youth offenders were given good care and love, it seems that peer pressure played a significant role in persuading them to commit crime.

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse takes different forms, but generally it affects the child socially and psychologically. Some of the youth offenders mentioned that their parents were over controlling. One of the participants in the female group provided a good illustration of emotional abuse and over controlling:

Mapule: My mother was always grounding me for petty things like not washing dishes. She would not allow me to go and play with other kids for a period of a month. She was too controlling (female participant).

For other youth offenders emotional abuse was coupled with parental rejection.

Maureen: I think I was always rejected. I think that more often my parents would say all the bad things about me even if I did something good. So I have never felt loved. I don’t remember doing anything good enough for them (female participant).

Lizo: My mother was always shouting at me but she would not shout at my brothers even if they had done something wrong. I felt so unloved and rejected that sometimes she would take my clothes and other belongings as a form of punishment (male participant).

Parental rejection is harmful as it involves labelling, putdowns and name-calling. This seems to have damaged the self-esteem of some participants. Garbarino (1999) concluded that parental rejection leads to “hostility, aggression, negative self-evaluation, and emotional unresponsiveness” (p. 16). Some parents rejected their children to the extent that they threw them out of the house.

China: I had no choice but to leave the house. My stepfather pushed me out of the house. He said to me, “Leave my house and go and live with your friends.” He said, “I don’t care because you are not my child.” I was very hurt to hear him saying [sic] he is not my father. I was very hurt (male participant).

Garbarino (1999) argued that many of these teenagers are called runaways or street children, but they are really “throwaways”. Participants who left their homes experienced many problems of mistreatment at home. Some ended up with no place to go and joined friends who were involved in doing crime and drugs.
Sexual abuse
Female participants reported experiences of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse has also been linked with other psychological effects such as low self-esteem, isolation, inability to trust, and conflict within relationships. It is also associated with depression and anxiety. In the stories below, a history of sexual abuse is more often associated with feelings of deep emotional pain and anger. Other female participants were forced to have sex by their male partners.

Nomza: I was born in 1986. In 1996 my parents got divorced. My mother re-married. We were staying with our stepfather. In 1998 my stepfather repeatedly raped me (crying). I left home and stayed with friends. In 2004 I was involved in an armed robbery (female participant).

Felicia: I left home to stay with my boyfriend. He was very abusive. Sometimes he would force me to have sex with him (female participant).

Lack of father figures
Many of the youth offenders mentioned that their fathers were emotionally absent, and unresponsive to their needs. Many participants saw their father figures as uncaring and unloving.

Chris: My father never played any significant role in my life. He never provided any meaningful support to the family. I see him as broken roots on my tree (male participant).

Tshepo: My father was always drinking. He refused to buy me things. He was spending all his money on alcohol (male participant).

The results in this article confirm Garbarino’s (1999) observation that the fathers of aggressive boys are typically hostile and rejecting of their sons. They express little warmth for interacting with them during the boy’s childhood. Later in life these boys may become involved in criminal activities. Other fathers who were involved in criminal activities were also poor role models to their children.

Tate: My father was involved in criminal activities and cash-in-transit heists. I thought this was cool because he was making a lot of money and I also got involved in crime until I was arrested (male participant).

Oupa: My father was a gang member. He was involved in cash-in-transit heists and the police were always coming to our place searching for him. They would sometimes harass or beat my mother while searching for him. My father used to hide guns under the bed (male participant).

“I don’t know my father”
Another striking finding was that many participants did not know their own biological fathers and this had left them not knowing their roots.

Luma: I don’t know my father but I would like to meet him (female participant).

Brenda: Only my mother supported us. I don’t know my father. I don’t even know whether he is alive or dead because he left when I was still a child. I miss him (female participant).
Some indicated that they only got to know their fathers later in life and they were angry about that.

Sima: I also did not know my father for so many years. When I was still very young, people used to say I look like the boys next door but I took that for granted. Eventually, as a teenager my grandmother told me that the man who lives next-door to our house is my biological father. I was quite upset to hear that because the guy lived three houses away from my house. I was so angry with him that he never bothered to support me despite being aware of the financial circumstances of my family. The way I was so angry I even called my friends that we need to go and kill him but unfortunately when we got there he was not in the house (male participant).

The story above reflects that some mothers found it very difficult to tell their children who their fathers were. It is also clear that some participants had little experience of a caring male figure in their lives. This suggests that they had little opportunity to identify with a stable male figure. A father’s role in parenting is important as children need positive male role models. Fathers cannot only define their roles in terms of material support, they also need to provide emotional support to their children.

Joining gangs and violence

Many participants in the project indicated that life on the streets with their gangster friends provided respect and a sense of belonging that they had not obtained at home. This confirms the literature review that some boys join gangs due to a loss of connectedness to parents (Dissel, 1999). Gangs provide a new sense of home, love and care. Titus’s story below reflects reasons why boys join gangs, rituals that gangs perform and the prestige associated with being a gang member.

Titus: I grew up in an environment where one needed to be a member of a gang in order to survive. Also, some of my family members were involved in gangs. I remember my family members engaging in gang fights and killing other people, and they would always make jokes and have fun about what happened during the fight (male participant).

Furthermore, being gang members gave some participants status derived from the nature of the crimes committed. With status and relative wealth came access to girls, fast cars and expensive lifestyles. Titus also confirmed the “spilling of blood” ritual.

Titus: I joined a gang where one needed to kill someone with a knife at a close range before I could qualify to carry a gun. I gained a lot of respect from gang members since I was very fast in stabbing. This is the lifestyle that I enjoyed. I always wanted to be the biggest and best criminal, doing things differently and being popular. Also, women gain confidence in you when you are well known by protecting them, and also the people in your community will not want to take chances (male participant).

It seems that being a gang member influences masculine identity concerning toughness, smartness and excitement.

Titus: We were killing people like flies and I did not want to die like one. I therefore joined gangs as a means of protecting myself from being killed by other thugs. I have been involved in
various fights as a gang member, and I enjoyed fighting as a group rather than one-on-one. After fighting one feels heroic and like a real man (male participant).

Territoriality is also common to all youth gangs. Gangs attempt to establish territorial rights over a particular area in order to secure access to local facilities. Many participants in the project mentioned having been involved in gang fights, killing others and seeing their friends being killed.

Gavin: I have been involved in many gang wars. Our gang the “niggers” were fighting with a rivalry [sic] gang. I was shot several times in my leg. I was taken to hospital for a few weeks. I stayed home until I recovered. After I mobilized my friends and went around searching for the gang members who shot me. We found one. We killed him. We took his private parts to a traditional healer to strengthen ourselves (male participant).

It seems that other group members were also part of gangs in prison because gangs also exist within the prison and provide status and protection.

Titus: I’m also a 26-gang member in prison and serving a life sentence. This will give me recognition to the thugs in a sense that I’m serving the longest sentence (male participant).

Female participants did not say much about their involvement in gang structures. This confirms Vetten’s (2000) assertion that although women are drawn into gang structures, they wield no power. Female gangsters’ main role is to be couriers of firearms or drugs. This article confirms this assertion as some of the female participants were arrested for drug trafficking and possession of illegal firearms used in an armed robbery. In addition, female gangsters normally engage in shoplifting, but more research studies are needed to understand female gangsters.

Suicide attempts

There had been three suicide attempts by members of the groups. For example, Martha, a member of the female group, was admitted to the prison hospital after she tried to kill herself by drinking detergent used in the prison laundry. Facilitators were not sure whether group sessions might have triggered suicidal ideations amongst some of these participants. It is possible that talking about traumatic events may evoke old painful memories. As a result, some participants might become more suicidal. Therapists working with prisoners need to be aware of this and be prepared to deal with these reactive emotions. By talking to Martha and other group members, the facilitators learned that many prisoners have significant emotional problems and are in dire need of counselling. For example, Lucas mentioned he finds it difficult to sleep at night. He spends lots of time thinking about the crimes he has committed. At times he has nightmares about the people he has killed. Lucas mentioned that at times he feels suicidal and he finds it difficult to cope with these feelings. It seems Lucas and many other prisoners are experiencing PTSD-related symptoms. It is important to rehabilitate perpetrators of violence and to help them understand the extent of their wrongdoing and the consequences of their actions on victims, to acknowledge full responsibility for their crimes, to take active steps to prevent re-offending, and to embark on new paths to rebuild their lives (Schmidt, 1999).
“I feel abandoned”

It seems that a lack of visitors also makes prisoners feel rejected and abandoned by close family members.

Peter: I feel so sad when I see other kids getting visitors but I do not get any. I have not seen my mother for a long time. I miss her. I wish she could just come because I only want to see her face. I feel abandoned. The more I think about it there [sic] more I feel the pain. To deal with the pain I started cutting myself with the razor and bleeding (male participant).

Other participants mentioned feelings of loneliness and boredom in prison as there are no activities to stimulate their minds. It seems that these feelings may also contribute to suicide ideation.

Lucky: Before joining the group I had been thinking a lot about killing myself. For example, you sit in your cell the whole day and you start thinking about your life. It gets into you that you think and think. The group meetings have brought a lot of relief for me. I feel free now (male participant).

“I’m so worried about my little child”

Female participants were very worried about their children back at home.


Tandi: I have not seen my child for the past three years. Every time when I think of my child I just cry. It is painful. I don’t even know how to explain this pain (female participant).

Talking cures

Participants found the process of talking about their experiences very helpful. Some participants were surprised that they were able to express their feelings and emotions. In fact, the group meetings helped some prisoners to realise that talking cures.

Lucky: I have learnt not to keep painful stuff inside, but rather discuss them [sic] with someone you trust, because if you do not you will end up doing wrong things. You keep things inside you end up hurting yourself. Talking about painful stuff helps me to relieve tension (male participants).

David: I have always had bad thoughts, but the group helped me to be positive about life (male participant).

Sima: I never thought I could express my feelings or communicate with others. The course has taught me to share with others (male participant).

A formal evaluation is needed to assess the effectiveness of these group meetings on a long-term basis. Participants mentioned the benefits of group meetings in the last two meetings of the
termination stage. It is possible that the participants might have been trying to please the facilitators and say things that they believed the facilitators wanted to hear (Mkhondo, 2005). Mkhondo (2005) has argued that facilitating group meetings with prisoners needs a longer-term evaluation to determine whether the impact is sustainable. Of course participants were still in prison, so it was impossible for them to sustain their positive behaviours while still serving their sentences. One group member, David, who was serving a long prison sentence, was worried that the group was coming to an end. He acknowledged that the group had helped him get to know himself, but he was not sure if he would be able to sustain his positive thinking. David mentioned that in prison one needs to be tough, strong and violent. It is a survival strategy in prison. Currently, it seems that South African prisons are not positive environments for rehabilitating prisoners due to overcrowding, gangs and lack of effective rehabilitation services.

Comments about the group sessions
Facilitators felt it had not been easy to facilitate all the group sessions with youth offenders. One of the main difficulties at the beginning of therapy sessions was that some prisoners (especially male prisoners) were taking pride and boasting about the nature of crimes they had committed, for example, the two participants below:

**Titus:** I was a real gangster. I have always wanted to be the best criminal. People were dying like flies. We were mugging and robbing people. I was very quick in using a knife. I enjoyed fighting. We will stab one another, sometimes to death. After fighting I will feel like a hero (male participant).

**Gavin:** I was in High School. I would miss classes with my friends to go and drink liquor during school hours. One particular teacher was always reprimanding me about my behaviour. One day I got angry. I had a gun. I shot him. I shot him dead in front of other pupils. Everyone was screaming. I ran away and the police were looking for me. One day my friend asked me to join them in an armed robbery because I had a gun. We went to a hotel, stole money and shot two people dead. In the event we were chased by the police. We were shooting each other. I was shot in the leg and arrested. I was sentenced in 2003 to life imprisonment (male participant).

It seems that boasting about the nature of their crimes was a strategy some participants used to assert their sense of power over facilitators and other group members. In prison, fellow inmates award the criminal status in line with the nature of the crime for which he is imprisoned. So, committing a violent, weapon assisted crime, proves the criminal’s bravery and claim to manhood in the prison context (Gear & Ngubeni, 2002). It seems that the prison environment encourages inmates to hide their emotions, and those that express emotions are seen as sissies (Kupers, 2005). Being tough or aggressive is the key to survival in the prison environment.

Masking feelings of vulnerability and helplessness
It seems that some group members were using grandiosity as a mask to avoid expressing their feelings of vulnerability and helplessness. For example, Gavin bragged about how he shot the
schoolteacher and other crimes he committed. He was very proud of these crimes and did not show feelings of remorse or regret. According to Kupers (2005), therapists working in prison need to be aware that male prisoners usually resist talking about their emotions. Therapists need to respect this without pressuring a prisoner to express emotions in the group. At other times, if the prisoner feels the therapist cares enough about him to learn about his situation, the prisoner might be more trusting and willing to engage in a therapeutic relationship. For example, in a later group meeting Gavin showed feelings of remorse.

Gavin: I regret. I regret all that I did (crying) (male participant).

Other group members followed Gavin’s footsteps in expressing their true feelings of helplessness, vulnerability, fear and remorse.

David: I was very playful during the early stages of the group, but as the time progressed I found value in the group. I’m able to express my true feelings now (male participant).
Remember: I never thought I could express my feelings. I would like to thank the facilitators for helping me express my feelings in a constructive way (male participant).

Trust about sharing feelings of vulnerability

Other participants were worried about confidentiality in sharing personal material in the group, especially in the early stages.

Pule: I’m not comfortable to share my story in the group (male participant).

Thabo: I’m still undecided about sharing in the group (male participant).

Facilitators indicated that participants should not feel pressured to share their stories in the group because no one would be forced to. Creating a safe therapeutic environment helped others in the group to share their stories. For example, at the beginning of the project Thabo was undecided about sharing his story. After one of the group meetings he approached a facilitator to explain his fear about disclosing that he was HIV-positive. Thabo knew about the stigma attached to HIV and the discrimination against people living with HIV. The facilitator asked Thabo to go and think about the consequences of disclosing his HIV status and to get ready to deal with group’s reaction. Thabo then told the facilitator that he had been attending courses on HIV/AIDS and he was ready to deal with the group’s reactions. In one of the group sessions, Thabo disclosed his HIV status. After a moment of silence, one group member told Thabo that he was still his friend. Group members agreed that they should not treat Thabo differently because of his HIV status. Thabo said he felt relieved at the end of the meeting that he was able to talk about his HIV status. He planned to teach fellow inmates what he had learned about HIV/AIDS by attending an HIV/AIDS training workshop.

Female participants found it difficult to disclose experiences of sexual abuse, especially in the early phases of the group. Group members were concerned that confidentiality in the group has limitations and it is not guaranteed. There were three instances where group members broke confidentiality and discussed other group members’ personal material outside the group. This negatively affected the level of trust in the groups. The facilitators reflected about the importance of abiding by group rules.
concerning confidentiality and they were able to re-create a safe therapeutic environment for group members to share their feelings and emotions.

Challenges encountered working in prisons

Lack of appropriate venues
The lack of appropriate venues to facilitate groups was the main challenge in this project. The female group was facilitated in the prison dining hall while the venue for the male group was changed from the hospital to other inappropriate places. This lack of appropriate venues interfered with the progress of the project. Some venues were not conducive to the smooth running of the sessions as other inmates were walking in and out or they were too noisy to facilitate sessions. To deal with this challenge, facilitators had to be flexible in using the available spaces or venues.

It is important to negotiate proper venues with the prison authorities, even though it is unlikely that proper venues will be available to facilitate rehabilitation activities.

Cancellation of sessions
On a number of occasions group sessions were cancelled due to other prison activities such as roll-call, memorial services and other functions including soccer, and netball games. It seems psychosocial rehabilitation programmes are not given priority within the prison environment.

Attendance
Attendance of sessions was very inconsistent, especially with the female members. Many females were attending school, and thus failed to attend group sessions. Another reason for participants missing sessions was being locked up in their cells as punishment for transgressing rules such as not waking up early in the morning or cleaning their rooms.

Drop-outs
A few participants left the groups. Initially, there were 15 female participants, but 5 were lost due to an Early Release Programme announced by the Minister of Correctional Services. In the male group only one participant dropped out due to involvement in other prison activities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The provision of trauma counselling services to juvenile offenders is important. The DCS should make efforts to recruit mental health practitioners to help prisoners deal with their emotional problems before leaving prison. In this way, prisons will become real centres of rehabilitation rather than being dubbed “universities of crime”. Furthermore, the DCS should continue to work with NGOs working in the fields of criminal justice system, restorative justice, HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, trauma and entrepreneurship.
Prison staff were identified as key agents in implementing successful prison transformation and prisoner rehabilitation programmes. It is important to train prison social workers and warders to render treatment and rehabilitation to the offenders in order to prepare them for a successful return to society.

Many prison rehabilitation programmes have not been evaluated and tested for their effectiveness. Thus, there is only limited evidence that they are effective (Gaum et al., 2006). More research studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of the work done in prisons. The main limitation of this study is that the project has not been evaluated due to time and financial constraints. A follow-up study of all the participants in the project is needed in order to assess its effectiveness.

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