VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA: KEY FACTORS IN THE BACKGROUND OF YOUNG SERIOUS OFFENDERS

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INTRODUCTION

In the period 1993-94, the first two authors conducted a research project involving a group of violent young offenders imprisoned in England. The sample comprised approximately one-third of those in the custodial population, sentenced as juveniles for offences which, had they been adults, could have attracted a sentence of fourteen years or more. A pilot project was carried out in South Africa, focusing on the backgrounds of young men serving sentences for similar types of offences in order to establish the feasibility of a more substantive study, which would provide some insight into background factors of juveniles committing violent offences in South Africa and offer some recommendations regarding handling and treatment (see Wedge, Boswell and Dissel 2000:16-22).

Using a structured questionnaire, similar to that employed in England, interviews were held with a total of 25 violent young offenders in two prisons. The methodology for the research thus was similar to that used in the English study, and similar theoretical assumptions were made about the relevance of key background factors. One of the purposes of the pilot study was to form an opinion of the applicability of the theoretical models developed in England to the South African situation. The South Africa findings will now be described and discussed.

FINDINGS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN STUDY

The inmates ranged in age from 14 to 22, most falling in the age group of 16 to 20 years. The offences for which the inmates were convicted are listed in Table 1, and range in severity from attempted theft to murder. The list in Table 1 comprises 31 offences since some inmates reported more than one each. The length of the sentences involved ranged from eight months (for theft) to 47 years for multiple offences including murder. The average length of sentence was 7.1 years with a median of 5.25 years. These details suggest that - as a group of “violent” offenders - these inmates represented a wide range of ages, offences and sentences, with a distinct leaning towards serious offences against the person (eg murder, rape, armed robbery, car hijacking,
kidnapping).

As might be expected, the family backgrounds of the 25 inmates varied considerably. When asked who they lived with (at home), seven young people reported living with their mother and father. No father figure at all was mentioned by eight of the interviewees. The others mentioned a variety of situations and had been brought up by aunts, uncles, step-parents or grandparents. The likelihood is that many of those interviewed were not living in their family home at the time of arrest/conviction; an indeterminate number will have been living on the streets, or in some form of institution.

ABUSE AND LOSS

Table 2 shows the reported extent of emotional, sexual and physical abuse in the lives of the interviewed inmates. Notably, 68 percent had experienced some form of abuse.

The term “loss” is used as in the English research, to refer to the prevalence of bereavement or other significant loss experiences. The notion of loss derives from Bowlby’s work on maternal deprivation (1951) and his own and Rutter’s later adaptations of this thesis centring around attachment and loss (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980; Rutter 1972). The emergent theory is that children who experience the permanent or semi-permanent loss of a significant figure to whom they are emotionally attached may suffer serious emotional disturbances as a result. Such disturbance is thought to be more likely when, as in many of the present cases, the children have not been effectively helped to understand and resolve their loss experiences. Although the effects may be thought similar to those of emotional abuse, they cannot be classed in the same category since the infliction of loss is rarely an act which is proactive towards the child. It is, nevertheless, an experience which, similar to acts of abuse, causes considerable childhood trauma which, depending on how it is handled, may contribute to later disturbed, aggressive, or violent behaviour (De Zulueta 1993).

The overall figure of 84 percent was considerably higher than that of the 57 percent in the English study, and certainly appeared to reflect the consequences of violence, strife and family disruption in and following the apartheid era. Many had lost parents, family and friends through shootings and killings. Another significant difference from the English study was that several young men believed strongly that loved ones who had died through illness had done so because of witchcraft practices. It was clear that, as researchers have suggested, these beliefs were very real and powerful (Minaar, Wentzel and Payze 1997). Overall it seemed clear that this group of 84 percent had been deeply distressed at the losses they had experienced.

It should be mentioned that it is common for children and young people to be reared by a relative other than the mother or father, such as a grandparent, aunt, or uncle. This is due partly to the former policy of separate development, where the majority of black South Africans were confined to living in defined “homelands” in mostly rural areas. While the father, and often the mother, would seek work in the urban areas they would leave the children in the care of a relative. Although this study dealt mainly with urban youth, parents are still often obliged to live in cities or in places closer to their employers, leaving their children behind.

In considering each of the “key factors” mentioned in the checklist, it is important to take note of the preamble or explanation provided to each interviewee prior to its completion. It was explained to them that the idea of the research was “to try and find ways to help children and young people avoid committing offences in the future. These are reasons people have given in the past for committing offences.
Please can you indicate any that apply to you?” In other words, they were invited to make a link between their offending behaviour and aspects of their childhood which they considered relevant. Remarks about bereavement, loss, physical and other abuse were not, however, confined to this area. In discussing their childhood and their criminal activities, many of these young offenders talked about violence to them, and other forms of abuse, as well as family and other losses. In many instances, these experiences, though painful, were accepted as a routine part of life, perhaps reflecting the socially and politically disruptive times through which these young people had lived in their early years.

**Emotional abuse**

Some 36 percent of the sample described themselves as being neglected or ill-treated by their parents, or others who were caring for them. This was considerably higher than the 28.5 percent in the English sample, and again may well reflect the greater societal stress experienced by families in the South African study. A typical response was that of Themba who was aged about three years when his father divorced his mother. For five years a stepfather was involved in the family but he abused Themba physically, punishing him “unfairly” and “unreasonably”. Themba also lived with his grandmother for some years and was much affected when his grandmother died. He said that he had never felt part of a caring family.

Another example is that of Pule. He said that he had never known his father and had lived for some time with his grandmother. His step-father was murdered as a result of the tensions between Inkatha and the ANC. He is the third child of six by several different fathers and felt that his mother bought clothes etc. for her other children but not for him. He believed, until he was nine, that his stepfather was his biological father and was very much affected when he discovered the truth. He considers that he was treated less preferentially by his mother because of this.

**Physical abuse**

Many inmates (44%) considered that they had experienced physical abuse. As in the English study, where this figure was 40 percent, this probably reflected the fact that it is the easiest category to recognise and the most socially acceptable form of abuse to admit to having experienced. Sipho for example, said that he had had stepfather problems. When he was about four years old, his father was pointed out to him and they began to meet sometimes. He obviously had considerable difficulties in his relationship with his stepfather who would beat him with a sjambok, having first tied him to a post by his hands. He ran away to live with his grandmother and went back and forth between his grandmother’s home and his mother’s home (where the stepfather continued to live). He became very angry with his stepfather and wanted to hurt him but felt because he was “married to my mother” he could not do that.

Moshe explained that everything he learnt he tried to put into practice. At one stage “I was very involved with the Church. I was taught about forgiveness. So if my stepfather told me stories, I would say to myself to forgive him. After a while I would start to say things back to him. He is an electrician. He would use his equipment to hit me. He would electrify me. He would beat me. I used to cry. Sometimes I was so swollen that I couldn’t go to school”.

**Apartheid/Political violence**

Some 25 percent of those interviewed related their activities to apartheid/political violence. Others had experienced factors in their lives which seemed to the interviewers to stem from apartheid, but this was
not apparent to the respondents themselves, perhaps because of their relative youth and lack of awareness of the historical and political context. One example, however, was that of Khetisi who explained that when he was ten his mother was killed by local people. This occurred because a person had been shot in the street outside their home and his mother called an ambulance which in turn called the police. The local people asked his mother why she had involved the police and the outcome was that they killed her. He described how angry he felt “in his heart” and for a long time was committed to avenging her death. Now he says he won’t do this as he has forgiven the perpetrators.

Jabu explained how he had a stable family upbringing but his problems stemmed from living in a township and associating with criminal peers. All young men of his age held up cars - usually with rich white people in them. “He used to hate white people for what they had done to blacks, but no longer”, he said.

Sexual abuse

Compared with the English study, where sexual abuse was experienced by 29 percent of the sample, there was little reported sexual abuse among this sample. Indeed, only one young person mentioned sexual abuse as relevant to his offending behaviour. However, some South African research would suggest that this phenomenon is no less prevalent than in England or other countries (Bergh 1997). It is possible that more respondents in both countries would have reported the experience had the matter been less sensitive and not generally shrouded in secrecy.

Death of someone important

Almost everyone interviewed reported the death of an important person in their lives. Eighty-four percent of these young people told of fathers, mothers, grandparents (who had cared for them in childhood) and other close relatives whose death had had a particular impact on their lives. Senzo had never lived with his father who had taken another wife. He was brought up by his grandmother and when his grandparents died he went to live with an aunt. However, he was still in touch with his mother but she, in turn, was killed in a road accident when he was about 12 years old. By this age, then, he had lost his grandparents who had brought him up, had never known his father, and had also lost his mother.

Mavezi’s situation was a mirror image. He hadn’t been in contact with his mother for many years and was brought up by his grandmother. When he was about 14 years old he met his mother, but when he was 15 his father was killed in a revenge attack. Mavezi described how this seriously affected him in school and, he considered, led to him taking drugs, which in turn resulted in violent crime in order to support his drug habit.

OVERVIEW

The overall impression created by the interviews was that most of the violent young offenders who took part in the pilot study had experienced very many traumatic experiences in their personal lives and that this was frequently coupled with a severe shortage of money for food and clothing. Among the relatively small sample, many described involvement in gangs where there would be leaders encouraging criminal activity and, on occasion, supplying firearms and other weapons to the young people. Reference was frequently made to what can only be described as a culture of violence and crime in order to obtain money to buy clothing and other status objects, or to feed a drug habit.
RELATED RESEARCH FINDINGS

Clearly not all children who have experienced abuse and loss later become violent; nor have all violent offenders been shown to have experienced these phenomena. To set up control groups for these studies, which addressed these issues, would have been impracticable. It is, however, worth taking into account the findings of a longitudinal study which compared levels of adult antisocial personality disorder (including violence) between 416 respondents abused and/or neglected in childhood and 283 who were not. There was a 50 percent greater likelihood that the first group would have developed antisocial personality disorder than the latter (Luntz and Widom 1994).

What can most usefully be said about the findings from these two studies of violent young offenders is that they show retrospectively two sets of characteristics (i.e., abuse and loss) one or more of which is likely to be present in young, largely male, people who commit violent criminal offences. This would accord with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III-R) framework which shows externalised disruptive behaviour disorders to be much more common in boys than girls, whilst internalised anxiety and repressive disorders are either equally likely or more common amongst girls (American Psychiatric Association 1987).

If many violent young offenders are, as these studies suggest, suffering from unresolved traumata, then it would be worth focusing work with them on its resolution. The growing body of work on post-traumatic stress disorder (Pynoos et al 1987; Scott and Stradling 1992) confirms that children suffer the after-effects of traumatic stress in a similar way to adults. The set of criteria commonly used to establish whether an individual is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (American Psychiatric Association 1987) has been linked with maladaptive childhood experiences which include subjugation, vulnerability to harm, emotional deprivation, abandonment and loss (Young 1990). Clearly such experiences can stem both from child abuse, loss, and significant political and societal disruption.

In a recently published study concerned with attitudes of South African youth to crime (Segal et al 1999), several interviews were held with young people in prison (15) and outside (18) who were involved in criminal activities. Broken homes and poverty were the two issues which were most mentioned as having influenced the decision to commit crime. “The youngsters were very often abandoned, or kicked out of their homes. Many experienced their parents getting divorced at an early age and having to live with a step-father or mother who rejected them.” (Segal et al 1999: 24) At least half of the interviewees described their family life as riddled with tension and conflict, and remember feeling unloved. Although these are not statistically representative findings, they do accord with the results of this pilot exercise.

Segal notes, however, that a small number of amagents (youth involved in crime) discounted both poverty and broken families as being the causative factor to their involvement in crime. Rather, they posited notions of manhood and peer pressure as the main reason for joining the amagents. Ten themes were identified in relation to a youth’s involvement in crime: Family life, poverty, masculinity, consumerism, violence, gangs, guns, gender relations/women as victims, corruption, and race (Segal 1998).

According to her research, after poor home conditions, poverty is mentioned as the next most important influence on the decision to commit crime. Many of the youths spoke of a childhood marked by extreme poverty, and of crime being the only way to address their feelings of need. Also, Segal found that perceptions of poverty were often affected by racial resentment. “Most of the amagents are unapologetic
about their racial attitudes, and feel that white people are getting what they deserve if they are victims of crime.” (Segal 1999:25)

Segal’s study further looks at the impact of peer pressure and gangs on the young person’s development. It suggests that in a world where traditional rituals, schooling and other institutions are undermined, and family life is often in disarray, it is the gang which becomes the new “home” for the agents. “The gang creates a contained and structured world that eschews the norms of conventional morality and has at its centre guns, violence and often death.” (Segal 1999:25)

Violence among young people in South Africa is an escalating problem. Indeed, this is so in many countries across the world. There may well be common global factors that are yet to be identified. Equally, the reasons may vary from one country to another and will almost certainly stem predominantly from political and cultural conflict in some settings. This is not least the case in South Africa which is making a gradual recovery from racial apartheid but finds itself in a transitional stage of economic apartheid. As conflict theory suggests (Marx 1953; Dahrendorf 1959) this is bound to leave the significant majority (in this case, black non-owners) in a state of alienation, and the young of this group searching for alternative means of establishing an income, status and identity as they grow up. As Makhathini (1996) points out, many children and adolescents in South Africa live by their wits in the street; offending is the obvious way to gain the wherewithal for survival. However, this lifestyle also makes them highly vulnerable to abuse of all kinds. Equally, in many other countries, much abuse takes place in the home and Van Niekerk (1996) refers both to the housing, poverty and family instability problems which can give way to child abuse. Swarts (1996) emphasises that this microcosm of abuse within the family can be replayed within the macrocosm of society, engendering cycles of violence, particularly in young men for whom the problem-solving model has been set by fathers resorting to violence towards family members as their only means of asserting themselves in society. This pattern can also be related to the migrant labour system, anti-urbanisation strategies and forced removals which “have wrought havoc with the family life of countless numbers of people” (Swarts 1996:40). These destructive and fragmenting policies of the apartheid era have also meant that, where fathers (and, to a lesser extent, mothers) could find work, their extended absences from the family home (referred to above) had also resulted in a consequent loss experience with the potential effects that Bowlby (1951), Rutter (1972) and others have chronicled.

CONCLUSIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE

This South African pilot study has demonstrated that, with suitable modifications, it would be possible to conduct a substantive project comparable with that carried out in England. A larger-scale exercise would, of course, be necessary to provide conclusive evidence about key factors in the backgrounds of young violent offenders. However, the pilot research itself offers valuable tentative evidence which (a) supports a priori assumptions about the impact on young people of violence in the face of oppression and (b) vindicates both the method and the broad theoretical approach “borrowed” from the English study.

To the extent that the findings from the pilot study are relevant and may potentially be replicated in substantive research, there are important lessons for policy and practice.

What seems to be important in terms of this group of offenders is that criminal justice professionals should
adopt what might be termed a “welfare-conscious justice” model (Boswell 1996) where accurate assessment is attained through questioning and information-gathering which takes into account pertinent research findings such as those described here. In intervention terms, the offender needs to be seen as responsible and accountable, rather than a helpless victim, and to be offered a systematic and consistent career plan with the ultimate aim of ceasing the offending behaviour and enabling rehabilitation. Such a plan would involve addressing the problems and forces which are external but nevertheless exert influence on the violent offending and likely progress, such as counselling following child abuse, educational, employment and social skills opportunities. As two South African writers on intervention observe: “Treating traumatised children represents an investment in South Africa’s future” (Eagle and Michelson 1997:252). Clearly this would appear to hold true both for humanitarian and public interest reasons. Finally, criminal justice professionals require the secure underpinnings of relevant research findings to enable them to focus accurately on the areas which need to change in these young offenders’ lives if society is to be protected and rehabilitation is to be successful.

This pilot study offers a contribution towards this portfolio.

### TABLE 1: REPORTED OFFENCES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OFFENCES</th>
<th>f</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theft/attempted theft</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housebreaking</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possession of unlicensed firearm</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car hijacking</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed robbery</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2: EMOTIONAL, SEXUAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of abuse</th>
<th>Percentage of sample experienced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional abuse</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuse</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apartheid/political violence</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combinations of 2 or more</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key finding:** 68 percent of the total sample had experienced emotional, sexual or physical abuse, or combinations thereof.

### TABLE 3: EXPERIENCES OF LOSS: PER-CENTAGES OF SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of loss</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Grandparent</th>
<th>Other relative</th>
<th>Friend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death of someone important</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of contact with someone</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total experiencing loss</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key finding:** 84 percent had experienced significant loss via breavement or cessation of contact and in 36 percent of the cases both.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


