

Perpetuating Injustice: The Criminalisation of Youth Gangs in Mombasa, Kenya

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Abstract

Mombasa is well known for problems with gangs. Some of them are composed of a high proportion of youths under 18 years, with some as young as 7 years old. Many use drugs, some carry out thefts, and some are known for large-scale violent robberies with the use of knives, severely injuring members of the public. In an attempt to manage the problem, the killing of perpetrators through mob justice or in police operations is commonplace. This paper contributes to our understanding of youths in gangs and interventions to tackle gang violence. We argue that not all “gangs” are involved in criminal activity. However, some gang members may be viewed as perpetrators of violent crime but also as victims of marginalisation and unfavourable environments, which constrain life choices, making violent crime a frequent path. Moreover, criminal justice approaches have failed these youths. The current inconsistent, corrupt and brutal approach by police serves to compound the problem, while external actors benefiting from youth gangs’ operations are tolerated by the state. Increased resistance is evident as youth gangs tend to increase their violence against the public in order to take “revenge” against the police. Structural violence is an important cause of the problem and is also replicated in current mitigation approaches.

Keywords: gangs; youth; policing; Kenya; extra-judicial killings; terrorism

Introduction

In January 2019, the Interior Cabinet Secretary of Kenya informed the public of an ongoing security operation in Mombasa County and some parts of neighbouring Kwale County. This, he said, was intended to “flush out criminals” who had been terrorising members of the public. He was referring to the many gangs in these areas (Kenya News Agency 2019). However, some of the Mombasa gangs are composed of a high proportion of juveniles. They go by intimidating names, including Wakali Wao (the toughest of them all); Nyuki (bees); Watalia (they will cry); Chafu (dirt); Gaza, Wakali Kwanza (toughest first); Akili za Usiku (intelligence of the night); and Vietnam and Crazy Boys. They often use drugs, and some carry out petty thefts and robberies on the streets. On occasion, they have been responsible for large scale attacks, slashing and maiming members of the public (World Bank 2019). Police and the public alike are at a loss on how to deal with the problem, and tragically, deaths of young people through mob justice or in police operations are commonplace (Mutisya 2020; Otieno 2020).

This study explores the dynamics of youth gangs, the structurally violent milieu in which they operate, and how this is replicated in the state’s approach to handling them. It aims to challenge the criminalisation narrative that is being applied with each crackdown and which tends to foster more resistance and radicalisation of the young people, perpetuating existing injustices faced by poor and marginalised youths.

The paper began life as a piece of qualitative action research, a crime and violence assessment in Mombasa County over three weeks in 2018–2019 (Mkutu and Kajumbi 2020), which was also informed by other work in the area (Mkutu and Opondo 2019). Purposive sampling and snowballing were employed to identify hotspots of violence, and then respondents for semi-structured interviews, as well as focus group discussions (FGDs) from the community, civil society, schools, religious organisations and also local government, police and probation personnel. Former gang members were included, and some under-18s participated, accompanied by adult youth-workers through community-based organisations already working with them. Documentary evidence included unpublished studies by civil society organisations as well as social media local updates.

are to some extent involved in crime, violence or illegal activity (Rodgers 1999). Functions and activities of youth gangs are highly variable, and they may even have positive social functions, providing friendship and protection where this may be lacking in a deprived or unstable context with defective social institutions (Spiegel 1995). They vary in their degree of cohesion, group identity and territoriality and also in their commitment to anti-social or delinquent behaviour. Gang activities may include drug use, street theft, robbery, drug trafficking and territorial and identity-based turf wars, which may have political, institutional, economic or social motivations (Moser 2004).

Youth gangs, like crime and violence in general, have numerous contributory factors that have been explored, particularly in the USA and Latin America. According to the often used social-ecological model, these various factors operate at several levels. To name a few: at the societal level—urbanisation, industrialisation and social breakdown (Glaser 1998), racial segregation and exclusion/marginalisation (Duffy and Gillig 2004); at the community level—peer relationships, a poor physical environment, existing crime and violence and lack of services (Chaskin 2010); and at the family level—exposure to violence and lack of parental support (Chaskin 2010). Individual choice and other individual factors must not be ignored, since not all youths under the same conditions will join a gang or engage in delinquent behaviour; however, it is clear that many individuals face severe challenges and constrained options. Some factors operate at all levels, including substance abuse and the availability of weapons. In developing countries, histories of colonial oppression, ethnic divide and rule policies, policing structures that continue in colonial models of regime protection (Hill 2007) poverty and inequality, and state weakness in the provision of services continue to provide fertile ground for the emergence and ongoing existence of gangs.

In South Africa, factors such as the urbanisation of large commuter workforces, high unemployment and lack of opportunities for Blacks have contributed to social breakdown, crime and violence and the gang phenomenon (Glaser 1998). Gangs are also influenced by other forms of violence in society, particularly in post-conflict societies, amidst which young men are socialised and express heightened forms of masculinity (Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers 2009). Structural inequalities are also behind the drug-gang link; in the USA, economic restructuring and relocation of jobs to the suburbs left inner-city residents out of work. The social fabric was weakened, and the drug trade provided alternative employment and made it more difficult for young people to “graduate” out of the gangs of their younger youth into ordinary life (Fagan 1996). In Latin America, local factors interact with global factors such as recession and neoliberal restructuring, which have put many people out of work and led to social breakdown. Youth gangs then provide an avenue for identity and expressions of masculinity (Strocka 2006).

This paper has a strong focus on interventions and, therefore, an overview of interventions and approaches is helpful. Rodgers (1999) gives four broad approaches. Firstly, suppression programmes are in the majority, involving police action in the form

of arrests and incarceration or supervision. They are intensive and expensive for the police and often only temporarily effective. At worst, they are counterproductive by incarcerating large numbers of youths who build stronger criminal networks while in prison (Schuberth 2015; Winton 2014).

Secondly, community organisation projects attempt to reverse social disorganisation, believed to be at least partially responsible for youth gang formation, by creating welfare groups that will also help to create their own policies to help with the gang problem; however, these have not been very effective where social capital is lacking or where gangs have few links to their communities. Thirdly, social intervention programmes involve outreach and counselling by social workers in an attempt to help youths accept mainstream values. These have also had limited success in transforming youths. The last category of interventions seems the best approach, that is, the opportunity-providing programmes that fulfil the need for status, identity and purpose. Such programmes require careful implementation and monitoring to avoid fraud and misappropriation of funds and also need to be flexible and holistic to cater for the various needs of youths (Rodgers 1999).

Schuberth argues for an integrated approach in which attempts are made by the state to undermine the power of gangs by effectively providing or “substituting” some of their “positive” functions, such as services and a conducive environment for community cohesion (Schuberth 2015). A public health approach to violence prevention is also increasingly popular, involving the identification of risk factors and protective factors at the four levels identified above. It generates a range of holistic interventions to be carried out by multiple agencies in partnership, including community members, schools, healthcare workers, civil society, the private sector, city planners, administrators and many others (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention n.d.).

Although most work in Kenya on organised violence focuses on political violence (Hagedorn 2008), such as that conducted by the infamous powerful and large Mungiki gang in the past two decades (Anderson 2002), this is a far cry from the activities of most gangs (Van Stapele 2015). Urban gangs and cartels may actually provide useful services to communities where the state does not; for example, in a survey in 2010 on gang activities in Kenya 48% of respondents described the collection of illegal taxes/extortion and 42% mentioned violence, but a significant number (22%) mentioned providing security for payment and 14% mentioned providing services and amenities such as house rentals, water and electricity (South Consulting 2010). Likewise, as argued by Van Stapele (2015) in her work in Kenya, what are often called gangs in Kenya are semi-legal associations of work and are a necessary means of survival. She comments that “skewed representations” of gang violence obscure the conditions from which they emerge, the “everyday violence” that is the experience of poverty, exclusion and humiliation. Poverty and inequality generate conditions in which some people resort to crime and violence (Moser 2004). However, as noted by Rodgers and Muggah, there can be an instrumental “criminalisation” of gangs by states as a means of concealing

more fundamental social and economic injustices and disparities that should be addressed (Rodgers and Muggah 2009).

Kenya's approach to gang crime tends to ignore these lessons. Kenya's policing approach reflects its colonial past, characterised by both laxity and brutality. At various points, exasperated by crime, security bosses (an interior security minister and senior police) have ordered that the police "shoot-to-kill" violent criminals, raising cries from human rights organisations about the illegality and ethics, while also questioning the effectiveness of such an approach (Kenya Human Rights Commission 2014). It is not only gangs that have been handled this way; armed pastoralists in conflict with their neighbours and terrorist suspects have also been the target of similar directives.

Moreover, there has been little attention to the rights of children (Assiango et al. 2001). However, Mugo (2011) notes that since 2001, with the creation of a new Children's Act that gave effect to international agreements on child rights (replacing the old Children's and Young Persons Act) the government has initiated various reforms, including the creation of Child Protection Units and Child Help Desks at police stations countrywide, community policing programmes and closely working with community organisations who embrace a more rehabilitative method (Langat and Odhiambo 2021; Mugo 2011).

The Variable Characteristics of Youth Gangs

Several gangs were identified by civil society and media in 2018–2020 (see table 1)¹ with particular hotspots in Mvita, Kisauni, Likoni and Nyali sub-counties, particularly in and around informal settlements. However, gangs are not static; new members join, others leave or are killed, gangs split or merge, and some change names to escape police attention. Some gangs remain persistent in certain areas and are repeatedly mentioned in studies and the media.

1 Some of this information has been provided by Ahmed (2019; 2020) and Sanga (2017).

Table 1: Gangs identified in Mombasa 2018–2020 (those in bold identified as having members under the age of 18)

Subcounty	Locality Information	Details
Mvita (Mombasa Island)	Old Town Majengo Buxton Hotel Between the Island and Likoni	Home Boys, Crazy Boys , TMK. Mawaiyo. Young Mula. Born to Kill.
Likoni	Most in Shika Adabu and Timbwani, some in Bofu and Mtongwe and a few in Likoni ward	78 gangs, including: Shiranga, Vijana wa Murima, Jamaica, Likoni Young Turks, Watalia, Wajukuu wa Bibi , Geta, Buffalo, Chafu , Geta Family, Kapenguria Six , Young Thugs , Akili za Usiku , Vijweni Boys, Gaza , Military.
Kisauni		An estimated 15 gangs in total, including: Wakali Kwanza and Wakali Wao , Wasafi and Waliotengwa (the segregated, apparently composed of younger youths). Wakware Babies (females) 86 Battalion
Nyali		Unnamed
Changamwe		Spanish Sparta, 64, Vietnam
Jomvu		64
Place unspecified		Memory

It is difficult to define the age-ranges of gangs, as these, too, change. Many youth gang members are in their late teens, such as Wakali Kwanza and Wakali Wao, whose members range from 16–25 years old, but the Gaza gang was made up of members under 15 years, and another gang had members from age 9–14. Both latter groups were carrying out violent robberies.² In Timbwani ward, Likoni, children as young as 7–8 years are organised into groups of 20–30 with their own bases³ but who are not involved in criminal activity.⁴ Youth gangs in Mombasa do not usually have a strong ethnicised identity and some gangs are multi-ethnic.⁵ It is clear that there is an overlap between gangs and socio-cultural institutions. Some gangs have emerged from within *maskans*, meaning informal male social gatherings under trees or in open spaces for evening relaxation, which are common in coastal areas.⁶ Other gangs began within youth groups

2 Communication via WhatsApp with peace worker, January 2020.

3 Interview, a peace worker in Timbwani, Likoni, 9 September 2019.

4 Interview, member of Likoni Peace and Cohesion Committee, 18 June 2020.

5 Phone interviews, civil society officers, 5 and 6 June 2020; this was supported by records of names who participated in the FGDs.

6 Interview, a local bishop, Nyali, Mombasa, 17 January 2019.

and football clubs.⁷ In a media report, a member of Wakali Wao said: “Football doesn’t pay in Kenya; that is why we started robbing people to make ends meet” (Ahmed 2020).

Youth gang members are usually males, but females are often closely associated with them as girlfriends and do play a role in delinquency, often acting as spotters.⁸ There are also some gangs made up of girls only;⁹ an elder in Kisauni was able to name girl gangs that sometimes operate violently in Kisauni and Mtwapa (on the border with Kilifi County), known as Watengwa, Mafusi Girls and Wakware Babies.¹⁰

It is important to recognise that gangs vary in terms of violence and inter-group conflict. Crime (such as theft, robbery and burglary) is common and sometimes violent, as will be described, but a civil society officer who had formerly been a gang member said that some youths enter gangs for protection alone and do not involve themselves in violent activities.¹¹

Youths as Criminals

It is undoubtedly the case that some youth gangs are responsible for shocking degrees of crime and violence. Violence occurs both within the gang and against the public and other gangs. Initiation rituals often involve tests of physical prowess, sometimes payment of fees and also some violent practices against the prospective member, violent assignments (Kurts et al. 2018) and male rape; one rape victim explained that for the sake of protection and food, he had to give in.¹² Internal fights may occur over power struggles or the spoils of thefts/robberies and these are occasionally lethal.¹³ Most gangs have a leader and an assistant leader, who may be chosen according to their fearlessness rather than age. A civil society officer noted: “The gang leader is always the most brutal, especially the young ones.”¹⁴

Gangs are generally attached to certain localities, and there is certainly some rivalry and even lethal inter-group violence, but most violence is directed against the public, a phenomenon that deserves deeper understanding.¹⁵ At funerals, members may come out in large numbers at the burial of one of their own, “revenging” the killing on the public,¹⁶ even if the deed had been done by the police.¹⁷ Burglaries from shops and houses and robberies are common activities as confirmed by juvenile court statistics (Mkutu and

7 FGD, youths in Mishimoni, Kisauni, 8 September 2019.

8 Interview, elder, Kisauni, 7 September 2019.

9 FGD with civil society officers, Kisauni, 8 September 2019.

10 Interview, elder, Kisauni, 7 September 2019.

11 Phone interview, civil society officer (former gang member) from Kisauni, 6 June 2020.

12 Story told in a phone interview, member of Likoni Peace and Cohesion Committee.

13 Phone interview, civil society officer (former gang member) from Kisauni, 6 June 2020.

14 Interview, officer from Likoni Community Development Program (LICODEP), 17 January 2019.

15 Phone interview, member of Likoni Peace and Cohesion Committee, 18 June 2020.

16 Interview, local administrator in Kisauni, 7 September 2019; Sanga 2017.

17 Phone interview, member of Likoni Peace and Cohesion Committee, 18 June 2020.

Kajumbi 2020). Often wallets and phones are taken from passers-by, threatening them with knives. Some gang members have demanded to suck the breasts of women if no money was available. Stolen phones are then processed and sold on, as noted: “My job was not [to use a knife], but to open all the phones. I was not in front. ... We had a seller from the gang (broker). They would take a commission and then divide.”¹⁸

Youth gang members are armed with sticks and knives, including *pangas*—large household knives with an 18-inch curved blade that is easy for youths to buy.¹⁹ Violence is usually purposeful. A member of Geta Gang said that the decision to “slash” was only made when a victim resisted handing over their valuables or posed a threat to the gang: “our aim is to get what we want and walk away” (Ahmed 2020). Media articles report that members of the female gang, Wakware Babies, were also carrying out attacks armed with knives in Bombolulu, Kisauni in 2018 (Ahmed 2018) and have been known to sexually assault men.²⁰ Attacks are often carried out at *madebeni* (discos), weddings, and other functions. Terrifying gang attacks, known as *reki*, are carried out on the streets at night to rob members of the public.

The following two testimonials by young men indicate the grievous extremes now reached.

I was leaving work at 11pm ... I met 30 young guys. ... Their leader had been killed at St Patrick in November 2017, so they were on a revenge mission. We were hurt, many people, I was not alone and some people were killed. They cut my hand [off] and cut my head. ... I cannot do any work now. I am just a guy that sits at home.²¹

We were surrounded by more than 50 boys. They took the phone and everything except the vest. I then came to realise that my hand was cut and there was blood everywhere. ... But no hospital would help me because doctors were on strike. Every hospital we went to required 50–70 000 and I could not be treated. I went home and stayed for two days. ... One of the political candidates came and requested for me to be assisted. ... I was told my hand could not be fixed and it was removed. No one can employ me [so] I decided to start garbage collection. So, I go to every home and they pay me 20 shillings for the trash collection.²²

Several school-going children are involved in gangs, so violence overflows into the school setting, compromising discipline and learning in school. There have been threats against teachers and even violence, as a civil society officer explained: “One child was

18 Interview, former gang member, Likoni, 19 January 2019.

19 Interview, female hardware store proprietor, 8 September 2019.

20 Interview, local administrator in Kisauni, 7 September 2019; Sanga 2017.

21 I Interview, a victim of gang violence in 2017, Likoni, 18 January 2019.

22 Interview, a victim of gang violence in 2016, Likoni, 18 January 2019.

beaten and they brought the gang, and it beat the teachers. They came in large numbers, armed.”²³ Some gangs only take drugs but are not involved in violence.²⁴

Youths as Victims

It is easy to see how youth gang members may be characterised as violent criminals; however, the following section also considers them as victims of the circumstances of poverty and marginalisation, an unfavourable environment riddled with drugs and violent role models and external players who would wish to use them.

Victims of Marginalisation

Residents of Mombasa, namely the majority indigenous Muslim Mijikenda population, have been socio-economically and politically marginalised for centuries. Mijikenda, who settled in the area from the 7th Century AD (Ochieng 1975) endured occupation, subjugation, violent exploitation and marginalisation through successive waves of colonisers: Arab races in the 10th–16th century, Portuguese in the 16th century, Omani Arabs in the 18th century, and the British in the 19th century. Land has been a key issue in the ongoing economic marginalisation of coastal people. The British took control of all coastal land in 1915 but then issued 9 000 titles to former plantation owners and other elites in order to keep plantations going, worked by the majority Mijikenda (Zezezer 1989). Independence in 1963 raised hopes for regional autonomy, but these were also dashed and subsequently, large parcels of coastal land and prime beach plots were grabbed by people from other parts of Kenya and foreigners. 9% of the land is owned by non-indigenous people (Government of Kenya 2009) (many from Arab countries) and while some resettlement programmes have taken place in the years since independence, these have failed to assist the majority. Around 60% of the population still remains legally landless (Nyanje 2010), reliant upon informal tenancy arrangements (Goldsmith 2011).

Marginalisation manifests in poor educational performance, low investment and high unemployment (World Bank 2019), which have been exacerbated further by Al Shabaab terrorist attacks since 2013 and the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 onwards. However, Mombasa is central to Kenya’s Vision 2030 blueprint, which features plans for the Blue Economy²⁵ that will encompass the fishing and tourism industries. However, it is invariably difficult for indigenous people to benefit significantly from local investment, as they lose out on jobs and opportunities to those who are educated or politically

23 Interview, programme manager for Likoni Community Development Program (LICODEP), 17 January 2019.

24 Interviews with 11 youths and 4 parents and *Mzee wa Mtaa wa Bahari* (elders for section near the beach), Timbwani, Likoni, 18 January 2019.

25 The blue economy is the “sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystem.” See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2017/06/06/blue-economy>.

connected.²⁶ Another Vision 2030 project, the creation of an inland port in Nakuru (joined to the coast by the new standard gauge railway) is already putting cargo-processing industries out of business and having a knock-on effect on other sectors (Dolan 2019). Families are under strain; previous research found that the subjugation of women, polygamy, early marriage and high divorce rate have left many single mothers struggling to parent children while working to provide for them, leaving them vulnerable to being led astray (World Bank 2019). Recruits into Al-Shabaab are largely drawn from the ranks of disenfranchised young Muslims in Kenya's northeast and coastal counties. The coastal secessionist social movement, the Mombasa Republican Council, also draws support from coastal Muslims and has been accused of militia activity at certain times (Mkutu, Marani, and Ruteere 2014).

Victims of External Manipulation

Many times, youths act under the guidance of external players. These include family and community members and even elite actors, including politicians and business people. A 13-year-old child found selling drugs in Likoni Primary School was allegedly being used by his uncle and some relatives, even parents, to get involved in the processing and sale of stolen phones.²⁷ Community elders are also sometimes beneficiaries of gang crime.²⁸ Business owners may also play a part in gang crime; in August 2019, in Kisauni, Nyali and Bamburi, at least 18 people were injured by a group of around 30 youths who robbed, looted and terrorised the public (Sanga and Kipkemoi 2019). An elder and a former gang member said that the gangs had been recruited by a nightclub owner to disrupt the business of a rival newcomer who had taken his customers.²⁹

Politicians are also external players in gang dynamics. Their support for gangs is often seemingly innocent, in the form of support for football teams or community initiatives.³⁰ However, there is also evidence of politicians funding gangs in Mombasa, offering them a daily income and physical training in return for their services.³¹ According to media reports, Wakali Kwanza and Wakali Wao have been sponsored by members of Parliament in the 2017–2018 and 2022 election cycles (Achuka 2021; Sanga 2017). They support rallies and intimidate opponents, but after elections, the funding stops and they resort to other crimes.³² As another report confirmed, spikes in violence against the public often follow elections as funding is withdrawn (Haysome and Opala 2020). A youth said: “External untouchables are the funders for the groups, especially

26 Interview, elder, Kisauni, 7 September 2019.

27 Interview, officer for Likoni Community Development Program (LICODEP), Likoni, 17 January 2019.

28 FGD with a community-based organisation, Mutopanga, 14 September 2019.

29 Interview, elder, Kisauni, 7 September, 2019; Interview, former gang member, Kisauni, 8 September 2019.

30 Interview, elder and member of Likoni Peace and Cohesion Committee, Likoni, 18 January 2019.

31 Interview, a peace worker, Nyali, 8 September 2019.

32 Interview, local administrator in Kisauni, 7 September 2019.

politicians.”³³ “The gangs that are supposed to be caught are not, because they are linked to politicians [who] get the gang members out of jail when they are arrested.”³⁴

The ethno-political dimensions of gangs have been reported elsewhere in Kenya (Hagedorn 2008). Politicians sponsor the physical training and sometimes arming of gangs in preparation for elections, and mobilise them in campaigns, voter intimidation and disruption of rival rallies (National Crime Research Centre 2012); a phenomenon observed in several counties (*Daily Nation* 2018). In Kenya, the use of gangs by politicians rose since the advent of multi-party politics in 1992 (Gimode 2001). Even younger children are not exempt from such links; a survey report by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission noted that children as young as 11 were being incorporated into the same gangs that carry out political violence, since they could operate as conduits of guns, drugs and illicit brew without detection (National Cohesion and Integration Commission 2018). Haysome and Opala conclude that political patronage of gangs is entrenched in Kenyan politics, which is one of the defining features of the country’s gang problem and undermines the state’s response to the same (Haysome and Opala 2020). Further, the misplaced wisdom of structural adjustment processes in the late 1980s and 1990s required massive cuts in public spending and led to economic decline, rising unemployment, deepening inequality, and a lack of services that needed to be provided by the private or informal sector (Gimode 2001). Therefore, the phenomenon is a symptom of weak democratic development, ethnic divides and deep structural inequalities. The political will to address this well-recognised problem has been lacking, because everyone is doing it; thus, everyone needs to do it (Haysome and Opala 2020). Further economic factors mean that this is often a lifeline for the young people employed. The National Cohesion and Integration Commission (2016) recommended a number of measures, including de-incentivising the political sector (i.e., by reducing salaries) to emphasise public service, applying various legal instruments to keep politicians accountable, and punishing those who become involved in sponsoring violence.

Victims of the Drug Trade

Gangs in Mombasa frequently take drugs, mostly *bhang* (marijuana), which costs 30 Kenya shillings (US 30 cents) per portion,³⁵ Chang’aa (home brew) and various forms of tobacco, miraa (leaves which are chewed to give a mild stimulant effect) and illegally acquired pharmaceutical drugs. A few take heroin, a trade that is controlled by some local elites who have managed to build their political power and protection from the police (Haysome and Opala 2020). Many children in Likoni primary schools, perhaps as many as 50%, are using *bhang*. Drug-peddling is also a problem in schools³⁶ and

33 FGD youths, Nyali, Kisauni and Bombalulu, in Bombalulu, 8 September 2019.

34 Interview, civil society officer, Mombasa, 18 January 2019.

35 FGD with civil society organisations in Likoni, 18 January 2019.

36 FGD with civil society organisations in Likoni, 18 January 2019; Interview, peace worker with young women and girls, Nyali, 8 September 2019.

teachers are afraid to address the problem.³⁷ Drug use is intimately related to crime and violence and vice versa. One mechanism is through disinhibition: a former gang member described what *bhang* did to him:

I turn into superman, I fear less. There is no consequence, the minute it gets into the system I am invisible. I do not see the police uniform. That is why people are shot, because they can't see. Everything is dead. The brain operates on one side. ... Bhang is what gives me power.³⁸

Thefts are carried out to sustain the habit, and addicts become pushers for the same reason. As a peace worker stated: "Drugs sustain the gangs, the gangs are the peddlers. ... If you remove the drugs, the gangs will riot."³⁹

Youths take a variety of different paths as they grow older; sometimes, these are paths to incarceration or death, and sometimes to reform, as is described in the following section. However, some simply continue with gang activities; one gang known as Shiranga is composed of "old thieves," that is, youth gang members who had not left these activities behind, together with other "outlaws" such as members of the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) (a secessionist social movement at the coast that was for a time made illegal due to alleged criminal elements) and returnees from training with the Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist organisation Al-Shabaab, in Somalia.⁴⁰ One group of respondents volunteered that there may be a pathway from gang membership into terrorism. "Those in Al-Shaebab come for you to make use of you. ... It's like a graduation from gang to Al-Shaebab."⁴¹

Failing Criminal Justice and Policing Interventions

Police handling of gangs is characterised by laxity, inconsistency, extortion, arbitrary arrests and brutality, as noted (Anderson 2002). In the August 2019 attacks in Kisauni, Nyali and Bamburi previously described, the police appeared to delay, allowing attackers to loot shops and slash residents, arriving after three hours when the attackers had left.⁴² Arrests were then carried out in an arbitrary manner. Another problem described is unprofessionalism. Details of informants are often released to the suspect⁴³ who may later take revenge—and this deters people from reporting. Corruption is a common complaint against the police. An elder in Likoni referred to gangs as an "ATM for the security."⁴⁴ A youth said: "When Mum is told I have been caught, Mum will pay

37 Interview, peace worker with young women and girls, Nyali, 8 September 2019.

38 Comment made in FGD with former gang members, Old Town, 19 January 2019.

39 Interview, peace worker, Nyali, 8 September 2019.

40 Phone interview, elder from Kisauni, 6 February 2020.

41 FGD with youths Mishimoni, Kisauni, 8 September 2019.

42 Interview, administrator in Kisauni, 7 September 2019.

43 FGD youths from Nyali, Kisauni and Bombalulu, Bombalulu, 8 September 2019.

44 Interview, Peace and Cohesion Committee member, Likoni, 18 January 2019.

20 000 Kenya shillings (US \$200), so for the security, gangs [it] is profit.”⁴⁵ Another elder concurred:

The aim by the police when arresting is to get bribes. The police hence practice collective punishment for individual problems. When an issue happens, they come and collect everyone. For them to come out of the cell you must pay 10 000 Kenya shillings (US \$100)!⁴⁶

A former gang member said: “There is a policeman who will catch you at 9 pm and will rotate with you in a police car until morning and until you pay. They caught us, and they demanded 5 000 Kenya shillings (US \$50).” Arrested girls are sometimes released in return for sexual favours given to police officers.⁴⁷

A youth worker and former drug dealer described how, at the height of her drug pushing career, she was making over 100 000 Kenya shillings (US \$1000) a month selling cocaine and other drugs. A cut of 10 000 (\$100) a month was paid to the Mombasa police as a protection fee. She was in charge of a youth gang and politicians also used her to recruit supporters. Some police use gangs to sell seized drugs.⁴⁸ Another group said that police were complicit in the sale of stolen goods:

The youth gangs take all the stolen things to the rough house, they are then sold by brokers. The police come and take pesa ya kiwanja (money for rent) from the brokers, implying that they are shareholders. It’s a house known by the state.⁴⁹

Brutality described above may also be related to corruption and complicity in crime, as a civil society officer suggested: “Police collect bribes and kill the evidence.”⁵⁰

The drug trade at the local level is linked to wider networks of organised crime in which some state actors are complicit. “Leadership is involved; now drugs are transported on aeroplanes. There are drug landing sites which are not registered or inspected.”⁵¹ An elder noted that some senior security officials are on the payroll of drug dealers, which is one of the explanations for a reshuffling of security and administrators in 2019.⁵² These links make it very difficult to address the drug issue, which is now normalised in society.

45 FGD youths from Nyali, Kisauni and Bombalulu, Bombalulu, 8 September 2019; Interview, elder, Kisauni, 7 September 2019.

46 Interview, an elder from Timbwani, 17 January 2019.

47 Phone interview, female anti-drug activist in Mombasa, 6 June 2020.

48 Interview, a peace worker, Kisauni, 8 September 2019.

49 FGD with youths from Mishimoni, Kisauni, 8 September 2019.

50 Interview, civil society officer, Mombasa, 18 January 2019.

51 Interview, peace worker, Nyali, 8 September 2019.

52 Interview, elder, Kisauni, 8 September 2019.

An important legal instrument applied to gang crime is the Prevention of Organised Crimes Act of 2010, which contains strong penalties for membership of a group involved in criminal acts—it was created with the fearsome Mungiki in mind. But however strong the law is, it is applied inconsistently, as noted. Furthermore, frequently there is insufficient evidence to prosecute because of the lack of resources for proper investigation and a breakdown in trust between the state and communities, making it more difficult to get information. Moreover, prison capacity is lacking. Such barriers contribute to the favouring of quicker “solutions” to take youth gang members off the streets.

A common response by the public to gang activities is mob justice. On 25 June 2017, a notorious young gang leader, Mohamed Bobocha of the “Old Town” youth gang, whose picture was on a police wanted poster, was lynched and killed by an angry mob after it was alleged that he had stabbed and robbed a resident (Baya 2017). Peace workers readily provided many shocking pictures, which had been circulated on social media of youths being burned alive or stabbed by mobs. A senior police officer in Mombasa noted that there are at least two deaths every week for crimes such as theft.⁵³ The victims are often aged between 13 and 19 years (Mkongo 2017). In Kisauni, some residents, including *boda boda* (motorcycle taxi) operators, have formed vigilante groups to protect against gangs.⁵⁴

Police also readily kill gang members. On 18 May 2017, four gang leaders of youth gangs Wakali Kwanza and Wakali Wao were shot in a police operation while a fifth was killed by a mob and 10 were arrested (Ahmed 2017). One informant said of the police: “They come to the house and kill you in front of your parents.” He went on to describe how a kind of conflict has emerged between police and gangs, in which gangs take revenge on the deaths of their own. A member of the Chafu gang who had managed to evade the police was finally caught, shot and treated in hospital. After his release, the police finished the job, shooting him dead, and the gang then took revenge by killing a police officer.⁵⁵ Youths described how this serves to radicalise young people: “Many children are very bitter, an eight-year-old child hates a policeman.”⁵⁶ ACLED data from 2016–2020 on gang-related incidents reveal 30 deaths of which 16 are gang members, mostly killed by the community and some by the police (Raleigh et al. 2010). However, most killings of gang members are normalised and do not make it into the media.

In terms of criminal justice approaches to managing juvenile crime, these are wanting. It is difficult for the police to handle youths under 18 in the correct manner because they are under-resourced to do so in terms of space, manpower and guidance, to name a few.

53 Interview, Senior police officer, Mombasa, 8 June 2017: See YouTube (2016).

54 Phone interview, female civil society activist from Nyali, 6 June 2020; Interview, peace worker with young women and girls, Nyali, 8 September 2019.

55 Interview, *boda boda* operator and former gang member, Kisauni, 7 September 2019; he noted that the police squad was called “speed.”

56 FGD youths from Nyali, Kisauni and Bombalulu, Bombalulu, 8 September 2019.

According to international law, to which Kenya is a signatory, the detention of a child should be used as a means of last resort. In Kenya, the law offers several options, including rehabilitation schools for those aged 10–15, borstal institutions for those aged 15–18, and a range of community-based options, including probation, community service, vocational training and counselling (Children’s Act Cap 141, section 191). Alternatives to custody, however, are not commonly used (Kariuki 2010). A report in 2019 revealed the sorry state of the juvenile justice system in Kenya, which is legally outdated, fails to provide for the rights of children through inadequate systems and facilities, and fails to safeguard children, many of whom have experienced physical and psychological abuse in the hands of police, staff at the institutions, and adults (National Council on the Administration of Justice 2019).

The NGO and faith-based sectors, funded by international donor agencies, are the most responsive to the underlying needs of youth gang members; providing for livelihoods with vocational training and equipment such as boats, fishing equipment and motorcycles and leisure facilities (Hansrod and Nemeth 2020). Community-based organisations have carried out counselling/mentoring of school children. At times, these have led to dramatic changes in the security situation, but this is not always sustained. In the case of Old Town in 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic and the curfews brutally enforced by police put an end to about a year of peace again.⁵⁷ Efforts at the rehabilitation of gang members in Likoni, as well as Covid-19 control measures, reduced the number of active gangs from as many as 78 mentioned in 2018 down to 3 in 2020, although these numbers can potentially reactivate.⁵⁸ The temptation to return to a criminal lifestyle is always present, since it is often more lucrative, and peace is often temporary.⁵⁹ Lastly, former gang members are still vulnerable to profiling, mob justice, police brutality and revenge attacks,⁶⁰ causing them to return to the gang for safety.

Discussion and Conclusions

While gangs are highly variable in their activities, some youth gangs are undoubtedly responsible for severe atrocities against the public. These youths could quite reasonably be characterised as criminals; however, they are also victims of severe marginalisation and structural inequalities, which push them to certain criminal activities, often to the benefit of external players such as politicians, drug barons and business people.

Structural violence has been well defined as “one way of describing social arrangements that put people in harm’s way” (Farmer et al. 2006). Structural violence is visible when victims of gang activity have to walk through dangerous areas at night and lack funds

57 Ongoing phone contact with peace worker in Likoni.

58 Phone interview, member of Likoni Peace and Cohesion Committee, 19 June 2020.

59 Interview and later phone communication with a peace worker, Kongwea, Morishmoni and Nairobi. 14 and 15 September 2019.

60 Interview, staff member for Red Cross, Mombasa, 19 January 2019.

for medical care, as well as when drug barons, politicians and police take advantage of youthfulness, political marginalisation and economic need. It has been said that many residents of informal settlements live “on the margins of illegality” simply because they lack other alternatives in terms of service provision, security and opportunity (Mutahi 2018). A World Bank report points out that “inequality within cities is also one of the root causes for the crime that has beset many cities. Over time violence can become institutionalised, making it difficult to dismantle. ... Core government functions can be taken over by land mafia, drug lords and other extortionists” (World Bank 2013, 21).

There is much in common between the gangs and violent extremist groups: both feed on structural violence, inequality and exclusion. Recruitment into violent extremism at the coast has been linked to a large extent to economic factors, such as the monetary incentives offered (Mkutu and Opondo 2019), and likewise in this work, economic need plays a key role in gang activities, such as thefts, robberies, burglaries and drug pushing. Furthermore, indiscriminate and brutal police operations lead to a “tipping point” and subsequent radicalisation of young people, some to greater criminality and others into the arms of Al-Shabaab recruiters. In the context of violent extremism, this has been referred to by Lindekilde (2014) as a “backfire effect.”

As in many studies of gangs, policing as an intervention is actually perpetuating the gang problem. Problems observed in Mombasa include poor resourcing of policing in informal settlements, corruption in the form of extortion and brutality, which may or may not be related to the covering of the evidence of collusion. Together, these problems undermine trust and respect for the rule of law and may lead to the rise of vigilantism and even mob justice, and subsequent revenge. This work observes that youth gangs in Mombasa tend to act out their resistance against the public, rather than the police or state institutions directly. Similarly, Jütersonke et al. note that:

Crackdown operations against gangs tend to generate perverse effects—including a greater predisposition to excessive acts of brutality and new forms of adaptation to avoid capture. Indeed, repressive tactics frequently encourage members to become more organized and violent. (Jütersonke et al. 2009)

Rather than simply being youths in conflict with the law, the law (read police) in Mombasa is in conflict with the youth. This problem is encapsulated in the phrase “War on Gangs” proclaimed by policy-makers in parts of Central and South America, and characterised by a heavy-handed and militarised approach (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011; Jütersonke et al. 2009). It has resulted in a confrontation between gangs and state security forces (Hume 2009) and the radicalisation of gangs into more extreme forms of gang violence (Rodgers and Muggah 2009). The idea that the police should see gang members, particularly those under 18, as enemies, goes against the ethos of state security as a “public good.” The *Plan Escobar* in Guatemala even contained provisions allowing juveniles to be handled as adults (Rodgers and Muggah 2009). Importantly, it has been ineffective.

An effective police force is well resourced, adequately paid, and highly trained, all of which are important in addressing the issue of gangs. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the challenges faced by the police who operate in a difficult environment, lacking manpower and resources for patrols and investigation of crimes, and are themselves embedded in a system where crime pays. This has a knock-on effect of constraining options of the police at ground-level. Police reforms, which began in Kenya in 2004, have been cognisant of the problems of brutality and corruption and the low capacity, poor morale and nepotistic bullying culture within the police force itself. However, implemented as they have been by what Osse (2016) calls “an unwilling state” they have not been very fruitful. According to a survey by IPOA, despite police reforms over the past two decades, police abuse of civilians in Kenya increased from 2013–2019, a situation which Diphorn (2019) says is structural and part of everyday policing. Adherence to the rule of law and to human rights would undermine current radicalisation against the police and weaken gangs’ authority and legitimacy, although ensuring that the police themselves are well resourced and supported is, of course, an essential aspect of this approach.

Schuberth (2015) points out three important dimensions of community-based armed groups: security, politics, and economics—and these suggest areas for intervention. In terms of security, the police need to regain their monopoly over the legitimate use of force, and they need to exercise this legitimately. In terms of politics, there is a need to promote good governance, democracy and the rule of law (including not funding gangs), and lastly, economic needs must be addressed through (depoliticised) job opportunities, providing viable alternatives to the crime economy. It is important to undermine the power of gangs by effectively providing or “substituting” some of their “positive” functions (Schuberth 2015, 17). Even leisure activities and a sense of belonging as well as training opportunities may be provided in other ways through youth clubs, community centres, churches, mosques and recreational facilities. While security interventions are an important aspect of handling gangs, these alone are insufficient and dangerously out of balance, and prompt resistance and more severe acts of violence.

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