
BOOK REVIEW

Title: *Gang Town*
Author: Don Pinnock
Publishers: Cape Town: Tafelberg/NB Publishers (310 pp)
Published: March 2016
ISBN: 978-0-624-06789-4

Possibly one of the best accounts on the cultivation of gangs in the Cape Town area, Pinnock provides real-life narratives on ‘how’ and ‘why’ they joined the gangs. The author, furthermore, depicts how a marginalised and displaced population became infested with gangs in areas surrounding Cape Town. Prominent gang areas such as the Cape Flats, Lavender Hill, Hanover Park, Heideveld, Mitchel’s Plain, Bonteheuwel, Manenberg, Woodstock, Salt River, Elsies River, Nyanga, Gugulethu, Khayelitsha, and Harare are sketched for the reader. Reasons for gang formation are drawn from racial segregation, the break-down of families, the devastating effect of apartheid, gangs becoming surrogate families, overcrowded townships, children roaming the streets, absence of recreational facilities, poor social ties, limited opportunities, poor schooling, boredom and criminal and violent role models. Pinnock portrays how generations of family gang membership, parental or sibling imprisonment and the death of significant others plays a pertinent role in gang belonging. He successfully outlines how violence begets violence, and how children living in such circumstances are “on a road to nowhere”. The author also provides insight into gang fights for reasons such as revenge, power, recognition, territory and “battles over drugs and honour”.

Chapter 1 relates to the book title **Gang Town**. This chapter explores the reconstruction of Cape Town as a result of apartheid and racial segregation where many people were displaced and lost in the system, and where involvement in crime and gangs subsequently became the order of the day. The intrinsic history of the Cape Flats and District Six is outlined from before the Anglo-Boer War and Pinnock accentuates the conditions that followed with racial segregation promoting(or exacerbating) poverty, economic depression, an incompetent criminal justice system, squatters, overcrowding, urbanisation, violence, the increase of organised crime, ineffective policing, unemployment, poor housing, people taking the law into their own hands, inferior education, and forced removals of people that lived in and around Cape Town. With this background, gang formation became a way of survival, a means to make money, to strengthen the community, a way to re-establish identity, to ensure power and control, an opportunity for business, and a means of protection against rival gangs and the police.

Chapter 2 outlines **Cape Town’s Gangs** and commences with a detailed definition of a ‘gang’ that is derived from the Prevention of Organised Crime Act and the United Nations Draft Convention for the Suppression of Transnational Organised Crime. Pinnock explicitly looks at the hierarchy, networks, markets, clans, organised crime and drug trade of the gangs in Cape Town. The connection between prison gangs and street gangs and how they operate in terms of their initiation processes, the role of violence and how street gangs embrace the ‘Numbers’ gangs (in prison) in terms of its ethos, jargon, logic, symbols, powers, networks, credibility, and punishment styles are discussed. The formation of nine female gangs (sisterhoods) and the supplementary roles that they play for their male counterparts as lookouts, in keeping the weapons and ammunition and how they operate in connection with the police, substance abuse, crime, violence and the thrills attached to being a female gang member, is provided through female gang member testimonies. The involvement of young children in gangs is also

highlighted and Pinnock affords the reader with an understanding on how and why children join gangs, and how some children became products of generations of gang membership. Factors such as overcrowded schools, lack of privacy at home, and a void in recreational facilities pulled idle children to the street corners where peer-group formation in the form of gangs occurred.

Chapter 3, concerns Understanding Adolescence. Pinnock gives an in-depth look at adolescence and why belonging to a gang, being in possession of weapons, stabbing, brand clothes, alcohol and drugs, aggressive behaviour, stealing a car, tempting fate and getting pregnant are perceived as “cool” activities by the youth who live in and around the Cape Flats. Pinnock taps into traditional African cultures – the initiations of young girls into womanhood and boys into manhood – and the meaning hereof in terms of guiding the “warrior energy” of males and “spirit energy” of females into positive passages instead of seeking a sense of belonging, recognition, and acknowledgement in gangs. Pinnock uses Moffit’s trajectories (developmental histories) into crime to explain youths’ paths with regards to life-course persistent and adolescence-limited involvement in crime and gangs.

Chapter 4, relates to Families in crisis. This chapter explains how gang members originate from the home environment and how they are formed within families. Parenting characteristics such as unresponsive parents, poor supervision and monitoring, uninvolved parents, absent fathers, abusive parents, parental love, poor parent-child attachments, emotionally numb parents, parents with a lack of empathy and sympathy, aggressive and violent behaviour, substance abuse, and desolation push children to gangs. In this regard, the gang becomes the substitute family for the child. Motherhood in the Cape Flats is outlined and characterised by poor nutrition, substance abuse, stress, violence and trauma, which in turn, may result in prenatal trauma. The consequences hereof are evidenced in children with learning and memory problems, distinctive facial features, physical defects, impulsivity, poor socialisation and communication skills, decreased brain size, and a poor emotional reaction system. Pinnock, moreover, unlocks epigenetic generational problems and the effect of stress and trauma on genes and cellular changes; creating molecular scars, whereby psychological and behavioural tendencies can be passed from parent to child, and from one generation to the next.

Chapter 5, discusses Toxic Neighbourhoods and unravels the effect of poverty, unemployment, the failing education system, availability of drugs, alcohol and weapons, family disorganisation, violence, suppressed anger and shame, single-race townships, and poor social controls on gang involvement. The role of the media (television and films) in depicting gangsters as heroes, promoting violence and associating gangs with power, money, status, respect and masculinity have a profound effect on the number of youths joining gangs.

Chapter 6, Towards Resilience, focuses on solutions for gang formation. Aspects such as early child development, parenting skills, better education, after-school care, combatting national and international drug wars, policing of local and transnational organised crime, rethinking imprisonment, the alleviation of poverty, the effect of urbanisation, scarce resources, and unemployment in creating community resilience are proffered to address gang formation. Throughout the chapter, Pinnock makes valid and practical suggestions to uplift the poor communities in Cape Town in his plight to prevent the growing problem of gang membership.

This publication is targeted at academics, researchers and students studying gangs, gang formation, and the role of the drug trade (and other factors) in the growth and criminality of gangs, with an emphasis on localised dynamics of the gang-infested areas of Cape Town.

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