Crimebusters

How youth are taking on crime in the townships

The prevailing perception is that youth tend to commit rather than combat crime in certain communities. The Peace and Development Project proves otherwise, write Ulrich Burgmer and Daniel Matutle...

Hundreds of youth in Nyanga and Crossroads are moving to the forefront of the country’s fight against crime. Through the Peace and Development Project (PDP), based on a concept introduced by German police officers seconded to South Africa, youth in the Cape Town townships have been trained as Community Peace Workers, helping to make their communities safer and saner places to live.

Since the project was launched in February 1997, 100 youth have been trained in a variety of peacekeeping and developmental skills, and 40 more are in the process of being selected - from an application pool of 2003. Demand is high because the training is diverse, thorough and a potential path out of the joblessness which runs as high as 70 percent in some areas. The youth selected - aged 18 to 35 with a minimum education level of Standard 8 and no criminal record - are trained in conflict resolution and mediation; crisis intervention; problem solving; leadership skills; basic first aid; crowd control; and radio communication. They work, in many cases, alongside the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Traffic Police and in conjunction with a variety of NGOs serving the communities and involved in combatting crime.

Community Peace Workers have helped reduce the local level of petty theft; mediated between rival gangs; found shelter for abused children; and contributed in many other ways to their communities. They have participated in key local initiatives such as: joint night patrols with the police, army, SANCO and community policing forums; child abuse awareness programmes and child abuse prevention protocol; regulating shebeen closings; scholar patrols with the Traffic Department; and roadblocks and searches with the police.

Ultimately, after one year of service, Community Police Workers receive job training to help them enter the labour market or are given support to establish their own business. The project is currently researching job prospects for youth from Nyanga and Crossroads and also the possibility of training being supplied by the Department of Labour.

Day operations
Our daily operations begin when the office opens at 6 a.m., followed by a briefing with team leaders at 6:30, which reflects on the previous day’s events. The scholar patrol starts at 7:00, covering all the local schools and any traffic trouble spots. At 8:30 the scholar patrol ends, and teams move on to information gathering for any of
the already mentioned initiatives, or possible new ones. We visit creches, schools, training centres, police stations, shopping complexes and other venues to monitor stability and to be of service.

Night operations
Our most challenging work comes at night and on weekends, when most of the crime happens. Night operations, then, are most active over weekends; we do car patrols from 8 p.m. until 5:00 the following morning. The Community Peace Workers work very closely with the police and army during night operations, and they monitor police and army activity as well. From 8:00 on into the night residents come into our offices to ask for intervention in cases of domestic conflict. We are also occupied with cases such as drug or arms trafficking, rape or pick-pocketing. We act as antennae and information detectors for the agents of law enforcement, but we also conduct citizen's arrests when the need arises.

A slice of our work

- During one night operation two children aged between eight and ten come running into the office, yelling that several people have been critically stabbed by a "mad woman". Community Peace Workers rush to the scene after directing cars off the street. They rush the injured to the hospital in a project car, and arrest the "mad woman" and keep her in one of their office-containers. The woman bangs at the door with a chair and threatens to break all the windows. She is escorted to another container, where peace workers keep a close eye on her until the next morning - when she has sobered up and is handed over to the police for further action and prosecution.

- At the same time as the "mad woman" episode unfolds, a man comes running into our offices and collapses. He is bleeding from the left side of his neck. We rush him to the hospital, and begin to investigate the incident. Soon another man comes into our offices and reports that a group of men were driving wildly and smashed into his car. The man describes how angry he was, and when he realised they would be unable to repair his vehicle, he stabbed them. After a long discussion with us, the man concedes that it was wrong to take the law into his own hands and he leaves to report the matter to the police.

- A woman comes to our office saying that she has a problem with her husband not supporting their children. When we go to visit the husband with the woman present, we determine that neither is fit to take care of the children, who are obviously suffering from malnutrition and neglect. Also, the woman appears slightly mentally disturbed. We decide to consult the extended family; fortunately, the husband’s sister comes forward and offers to take in the children, through legal procedures. We go to Child Welfare in Athlone, and establish with the social workers that the children are at risk living with their biological mother. They are then placed with their aunt in foster care.

Community Peace Workers in Nyanga and Crossroads are setting an example for their potential counterparts in many other communities. Rather than standing by and criticising from the sidelines, these young people are jumping into the core of community life and empowering themselves in the process.

Ulrich Burgmer is Founder and Trainer of the Peace and Development Project.
Daniel Matutle is the project’s Local Coordinator.