



Children and Gangs Project; COAV* Cities Cape Town

*Children in Organised Armed Violence

Press Briefing
13 December 2007

Introduction

The Department of Community Safety, Resources Aimed at the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (RAPCAN) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) hosted a Seminar on Thursday 13 December 2007 to present the *Children and Gangs Project Policy Paper Series* and the child participation research "*It feels like it's the end of the world*" Cape Town's Youth Talk About Gang and Community Violence.

History

During 2002 Viva Rio and ISER (Institute for Social and Economic Research) in Rio de Janeiro produced innovative research on armed child and youth workers in Rio de Janeiro's drug factions. Viva Rio designed and co-ordinated a 10 country comparative research study of Children in Organised Armed Violence (COAV), which included South Africa. The completed 10 country study and further information collected and posted on www.coav.org.br has demonstrated that there are causal and functional similarities between traditionally defined 'child soldiers' in situations of armed conflict and children and youth in organised armed violence, including criminal gangs, within the countries studied.

COAV is defined as children and youth employed or otherwise participating in Organised Armed Violence where there are elements of a command structure and power over territory, local population and resources.

The study found that there are strong similarities across different countries as to the contexts, the risk factors and reasons for children's engagement in Organised and Armed Violence. Children fulfil the roles of lookouts, informants and spies as well as armed functions such as acting as body guards, guarding territory and property, dealing in drugs, committing other crimes and engaging in armed confrontations and assassinations. The study found that in all ten countries children are armed, their involvement starts from as young as 12 years old, that these children are both the aggressors and the victims, and that children and youth (males between 15 and 24 years) are more affected by gun deaths than adults.

Four Cities

In 2005 and 2006, Viva Rio and IANSA worked with local partners for the establishment of working groups consisting of key actors in four municipalities affected by organised armed violence, all of which were covered by the international study. These localities are: Niteroi (Brazil); Zacatecoluca (El Salvador); Medellin (Colombia); and Cape Town (South Africa).

The purpose of the project was to engage key stakeholders in policy discussions to provide local solutions to the problem, to make recommendations regarding policy and programme interventions and to develop advocacy plans for their implementation in these cities.

Cape Town Process

The COAV Cities Project: Cape Town consisted of a rapid assessment that was undertaken in order to gain a picture of the situation in the Province. This was followed by five themed consultative workshops during 2006 with a wide range of stakeholders from government and civil society, this included the participation of children through a research process. The Departments of Community Safety and Social Development played a significant role throughout the process. A reference group

was established to guide the project. During 2007 the focus was on developing the policy paper series and doing internal advocacy with different departments.

Child Participation

A key element of the project involved eliciting the opinions and experiences of children in Cape Town. This research was undertaken by the Institute of Security Studies and the Human Sciences Research Council. The report *"It feels like it's the end of the world": Cape Town's young people talk about gangs and community violence* (Catherine Ward, 2006) produced significant insights. Children indicated that they were exposed to extremely high levels of violence in their communities on a daily basis. This was illustrated by the wide range of statements made by children in the report:

"There near us, they shoot nearly every day. They rob you there."

"Like you see it everyday. It's not something new."

"Most of our friends belong to gangs."

"So it's very dangerous for me to go out and tell the police that they are selling drugs. ...The community knows everything but they are scared to go."

"...You put your life in danger because he will come and kill you and your parents."

Yes, we are living in fear of the gangs, everyday."

The report notes that the children believed it unlikely that the presence of gangs could be ended, noting that *"it's impossible"* and that this would result in a war situation in which *"everybody will be attacking everybody"*. They noted that little or nothing could be done and that: *"it's a difficult thing to end"*, one child explained: *"you see, now guns are everywhere"*.

The children made a range of recommendations toward prevention and intervention of gangs.

Findings

The *COAV Cities Project Rapid Assessment for Cape Town* found a range of common factors in areas with high levels of gang activity. Although some factors are specific to the South African context, many are consistent with the risk factors identified in other cities that have participated in the COAV Cities Project.

Common factors identified include high population density and overcrowding as well as large numbers of informal dwellings. High levels of poverty and unemployment and a high level of inequality between rich and poor were identified as relevant factors. Small arms are commonplace and easily available to gangs in these communities, the gangs are known to be involved in or control not only illegal activities but also legal activities such as the taxi industry. Gangs and gang members are seen as philanthropists at times, offering assistance and support to families. In addition, members of a community may seek the protection of one gang against a threat posed by another.

The Rapid Assessment goes further to note that these communities tend to lack facilities and activities for children and youth, there are high rates of truancy and school drop out. Easy access to illegal drugs and alcohol for children. Strongly entrenched gender norms promoting negative notions of masculinity and male dominance are common, this is linked to high rates of domestic and sexual violence. It is common for fathers to be substantially absent from the family and the child's life.

The research indicates that children join gangs for a wide range of reasons. Gangs are perceived as providing opportunities for fun, excitement and success. Children join out of the desire to obtain friendship and to access drugs, money and girlfriends. Some children join as an act of rebellion against the family or alternatively, in order to uphold family tradition, they may also join to protect themselves from violence or to seek revenge. In certain cases, adults deliberately involve children in crime and gangs in order to protect themselves from being held accountable. Exposure to high levels of crime, violence and gang presence leads children to begin to perceive this as 'normal'. Children indicate that they perceive the situation as hopeless and inevitable, finding it difficult to avoid joining a gang and almost impossible to exit.

Recommendations

Policy Recommendations have been developed for the Departments of Community Safety, Social Development, Education, Correctional Services, Justice and Constitutional Development, the National Prosecuting Authority and the South African Police Service. These recommendations fall into four key thematic areas, namely: improving the coordination of government efforts; strengthening programme delivery; improving research; and law reform to ensure appropriate responses to children in the system.

Analysis of the various departmental strategic plans show that most departments have a good understanding of the issues underlying high rates of gangsterism and violence, most have developed goals and programmes that seek to address children's involvement in gangs and violence. The recommendations speak to the ways in which delivery can be strengthened by these departments.

Addressing children involved in gangs and violence is the responsibility of a number of different departments and organisations, to ensure effective programmes and management of children in conflict with the law, efforts in the Province must be co-ordinated.

To have an impact on the proliferation of gangs and children's involvement in gangs, a long term approach must be taken. No single programme or intervention will resolve the complex problems, thus solutions need to be multi-faceted and multi-layered.

In addition to the current law enforcement approach to gangs, programmes focussing on prevention and interventions with a rehabilitative and restorative focus must be available.

The quality of interventions must be raised for these to be made as effective as possible. In spite of the fact that there are many programmes available, there are concerns regarding the impact of these programmes. Minimum standards must be in place, programmes must be based on evidence of what works and what has been shown not to work; programmes must be sustained for longer periods of time in communities and staff implementing these programmes and generally working with children must be provided with information and skills to deliver these programmes effectively.

Ongoing research must be conducted by departments and agencies, to inform programme design and delivery, this research must be made available to other departments and organisations.

Law reform relating to the Prevention of Organised Crime Act and the Child Justice Bill must be undertaken to ensure that the legislative framework addresses children's particular vulnerability to manipulation by adults, the safety of children in the system and the availability of diversion and restorative programmes for children.

Way Forward

The Department of Community Safety has committed to strengthening its current efforts to address gangs and violence in the Province through incorporating relevant recommendations into department plans, this includes strengthening the coordination of efforts in the Province.

Continued targeted advocacy with different departments based on the recommendations.

To develop and pilot training to improve programme design and delivery.

An audit of organisations delivering programmes towards prevention and intervention of children's involvement in gangs and violence will be undertaken.

Investigation into the policies and role of the City in responding to gangs will be undertaken to develop recommendations and advocacy to improve the response of the City.

For further information please contact

Cheryl Frank 083 325 4424
Samantha Waterhouse 084 522 9646
Catherine Ward 084 601 2244