

# Gang and mental health model

[Law](#), [Criminology](#)



INTRODUCTION Gangsterism is an ever-growing crisis, which affects all youth involved as well as the entire community in a specific country in which it has taken claim. Children are growing up within communities where gang violence becomes so rife that in the end perceived as the norm. Gangs have been in these children's environment from day one; therefore, imprinted behaviors leave little or no choice of role models. The subculture of gang violence has become a most feared phenomenon in many poverty-stricken communities. The gang violence that is prevalent in these communities affects mostly the adolescents, who are supposed to be 'the leaders of tomorrow'. Gangsterism is a global phenomenon with a long history, and not restricted to certain countries. Spergel (1995, as cited in MacMaster, 2010) pointed out that youth gangs have existed in the Western and Eastern society for centuries. Recently gangs are reported in England, Scotland, Germany, Italy, Russia and other republics of the former Soviet Union, Bosnia (formerly part of Yugoslavia), Albania, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Mexico, El Salvador, Brazil, Peru, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, The People's Republic of China and Papua New Guinea. Youth gangs are therefore present in both developing and developed countries. Internationally Yahay, Boon & Buang (2008) indicate gangs as contributors to the increase rates of vandalism, threatening and drug addicts among Malaysian teenagers. This study indicated that one third of 1560 secondary schools in Malaysia have high risk to being exposed to gangs. These children are often categorizing as deviant and delinquent. These deviant and delinquent children are involved in drug addicting, playing truants and raping. Furthermore, female students and primary school students is shown

to be increasingly involved in gangsters nowadays. Nationally, research conducted by Davids (2005), indicated that the rise of gangs on the Cape flats have come about mainly after the vast removals of people under the Group Areas Act from places such as District 6 in the 1970s. Family structures were broken down, because of this removal. Areas where these people relocated were seen as barren and because homes consisted of flats, overcrowding and instability in family life often occurred. This left youth with limited choices in their home life and often would opt for spending time on streets. This further led to a lack of motivation to go to school and/or complete their education, which resulted in increased numbers of dropouts. No education due to dropping out of school, led to an increased level of unemployment and poverty. Because of this, some of the youth would look for other means to sustain themselves, which meant becoming members of gangs. Children in the Cape Flats are caught in this system and were more likely to end up as members of a gang, especially in gangs, which were family based. However, gang violence does not only include the members but also victims and victimizers. To understand this problem of gangs, it is important to realize that human action is not only an individual event. It is also bound to family, the society and institutions. Through the relationships we form with each other, we are bound to others. All human action is therefore regarding as relational. Understanding this point is important to understand the origins of violent and delinquent acts and the strategies that might be helpful in preventing them (Gilligan, 1996). Therefore, because gangsterism is a global problematic situation, that influences not only the lives of those involved, but also communities as a whole, it is important to

look at the geneses of this problem, in order to target risk factors relating to gangs in future interventions. In the following discussion, I will use the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner to discuss the geneses of delinquency/gangsterism on all four levels (micro-, meso-, exo- and macro level). This discussion will take place in the framework of one of three models namely the mental health model, social action model as well as the socio-political model. Intervention strategies will be implementing on all four levels and by using these models as framework. GENESES OF GANGSTERISM

Micro-level: The geneses of gangsterism can firstly be discussed on a micro-level. This level is defined as any given context of which the person in focus has immediate experience and personal interaction in a direct way (Visser, 2007). Interactions in the family, relationships with peers in school and friendship networks play an important role and influence the individual directly. Absent and busy parents and single parent families contribute to children and young people joining street gangs. Families need to provide three things to their members, namely protection, belonging and respect. When these are absent, children or young people may look to gangs as an alternative to fill the void (MacMaster, 2010). Unpleasant home environments due to family violence, makes a gang a more pleasant place where affirmation is more likely to be received (Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). When strains are on family structure or when families break down, it becomes more difficult for children to achieve mental health. For example, Meltzer et al. (2000) reported that sixteen percent of children living with lone parents recorded as having problems, compared to 8 percent living with married couples. Children living with parents who were experiencing mental

ill health also had higher rates of problems. Dumas & Gibson (1989) indicates characteristics of the family and styles of interactions as most consistent correlates of adolescent problem behaviours. Parental disinterest in the child and poor family management practices, such as providing inconsistent discipline to the child or adolescent contribute to delinquency/gangsterism. Family size can also contribute to the problem of delinquency/gangsterism. In large families, a child's role focuses more on satisfying the whole family's needs than on achieving personal goals. This is more so as the family increases and the interaction with an adult model decreases. This leads to weaker identification with parents and a decreased internalization of values (Bezuidenhout, 2004). In a study done by Glueck (1959), parent-child relationships are indicating as a predictor of delinquency. This study indicated that delinquents are often victims of indifferences or actual hostility from their fathers and mothers. As result, less attachment between children and their parents are present. Not only did they receive less affection from their parents, they also received less warmth from their siblings. Because of broken family structures, where children may experience emotional problems and poor mental health, children often run away from home in search for stability and security. Detachment from family makes teens vulnerable to negative peer influence. Youth in such communities succumb to pressure from peers. As a result, friends influence children, which conform to gangs, where promises of money, status, cars and other material possessions is promised in return for their loyalty in joining the gang (Davids, 2005). Relationships between the individual and teachers further contribute to this problem of youth joining gangs. It is

widely recognized that lack of participation in formal education is associated with a whole range of poorer outcomes, including poor mental health. In a study conducted by Ward & Bakhuis (2010), youth indicated dysfunctional relationships with teachers as one of the main causes in conforming to gangs. The absence of teachers in class time, overcrowding in these schools, unhelpful teachers who do not care about students, was only few of the underlying causes of becoming part of a gang. Due to the lack of support from teachers, children drop out of school. These children experience poor mental health where they go to drugs, and as they do the drugs, they become a gangster. Interventions on the micro-level: On this level, primary prevention is central while secondary prevention is also necessary. When children become part of gangs, it has tremendously negative effects that affect not only the individual but also his family, friends and school life. Therefore, programs aimed at intervening before children become at risk are extremely important. Preventing aggressive behavior before becoming more seriously is also necessary. In addressing these preventions, the mental health model as framework, could be use. Primary prevention programs should target young people in both primary and secondary schools of rural areas. Although these youth may be relative healthy and have not shown signs of problem behavior leading to delinquency or gangsterism, they might be at risk of later delinquency, due to economically disadvantaged families or neighborhoods, have parents who are part of gangs, or possesses other risk factors. Prevention on this level should also target the family, peers and teachers with whom the child is consistently in interaction. Secondary prevention, implemented in high schools should target problem behaviors

before it becomes more serious in adult life. Workshops could be implementing in schools, to educate in early years of life before kindergarten. These workshops should aim to promote children's cognitive, psychological and social-emotional development. Poor parenting skills and parent-child relations often lead to a range of negative outcome for youth, including criminal and other risk-taking behavior. Therefore, family programs should also be implementing to educate parents and provide them with skill-focused or behavioral focused training. Training provided for parents alone and training for both parents and children should be providing. Training for parents should aim to bring cognitive, affective and behavioral changes in parents. Skills of how to increase positive interactions with their children, reward positive behavior and ignore undesirable behavior should also be present in these workshops. In this way problematic outcomes like drug abuse, violence, delinquency and gangsterism can be prevent and decreased. Social-emotional learning programs can also be implemented as means of primary prevention of gangsterism. In such workshops the community psychologist should aim to enable children to recognize and manage emotions, develop care and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively. Workshops could include training of skills such as self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making to ensure maximum development and enable children to develop good mental health (Small, Reynolds, O'Connor & Cooney, 2005). Workshops implemented should target factors such as self-esteem, peer pressure and goal setting in order to build self-esteem and help to handle

peer pressure effectively. In this way, effective skills provided to children, will equip them to make the right choices and prevent them from developing delinquent behavior. Before transition occurs problem-solving skills that are needed in the new setting should be teach to youth. This transition is regarded as a time of great stress for many children, because of the larger size of the middle school, the increase in academic and peer pressure and the less personal relationships with teachers. If children do not get the necessary support to overcome this transition, they have a higher risk of joining gangs. Teachers can perform as primary mental health workers to assist youth in schools in dealing with emotional problems. In order to develop an understanding of what gangsterism entails, as well as the risk factors, training and consultation programs implemented between teachers and the community psychologists can take place. This will allow teachers to respond to situations and target risk factors to prevent youth from joining gangs. Furthermore, self-help groups as prevention strategy can be implementing, where face-to-face social interaction and mutual help is emphasized. Material assistance and emotional support should be providing as well as helping others, to attain and enhance a sense of personal identity. Shared, personal experiences in these groups should also be present. Rather than gaining professional expertise, learning from each other's experiences take place. (Visser, 2007). This entails primary prevention where activities such as support and self-help groups reduce environmental stressors and build on people's competencies and life skills. Secondary prevention programs, targeting gangsters, should focus on children and youth who already show some problem behaviors, but not been arrested yet. Programs



should be implementing in high schools to remediate these problem behaviors before they become more serious. Family training workshops, used to help families, should aim to strengthen family interactions and to provide treatment for negative patterns of interaction, in order to prevent further behavioral problems in the child. Workshops can also focus on social skills to target high school students with histories of aggressive behavior and/or victimization. In order to target such behaviors students should be training anger management and violence education. Meso-level: The meso-level consists of a set of linkages between microsystems (for e. g. school and home) that a person enters. It is indicated that when values taught at school and home correspond, the child will probably learn the values; when the values do not correspond, the child may become confused (Visser, 2007). In the middle-class neighborhood, the systems are synergistic, but in the lower-class level often, they are not. This lack of synergy can create tension in the child, affect development, which leads to problem behavior, and contribute to delinquency/gangsterism. Gangsterism on this level can be targeted through increasing synergy between systems. Community psychologists and change agents in the community can encourage teachers to interact and cooperate more with community leaders and parents to include cultural amplifiers in the curriculum. This could include discussing processes, events and things that are common to various ethnic backgrounds of the students. In this way, these cooperative programs affect the teachers, peers and parents (Scileppi, Teed & Torres, 1999). By teaching children about different cultures and values, it will allow them not to feel excluded. By learning about diverse cultures, children can identify their own, and develop and build on

their own values. This will contribute to the establishment and development of a strong foundation of values, where synergy is created between the two microsystems (schools and at home). Furthermore, school events can be used as means to include parents in the school lives of their children and to build up a strong relationship with parents, in order to create a strong synergy between these two microsystems. Exo-level: This level consists of interconnections between the micro- and mesosystems and those systems with which the person has no direct contact, but may affect his or her experience or the functioning of these two systems (Visser, 2007). This level, called the organizational level, implies that medical, educational and recreational resources available in the neighborhood can influence the notion of delinquency/joining gangs. Parents' workplace has an indirect influence on adolescence joining gangs. The children of disadvantaged families who live in poor communities whose parents work at unskilled jobs or are unemployed are at greatest risk for violent and criminal behavior (Visser, 2007). The risk is partly due to the difficulty of raising children in a poor environment and providing them with the basic needs, like food and clothes. This tension results in lower academic performance, more frequent physical and mental illness, and increased vandalism and student aggression (Scileppi, Teed & Torres, 1999). These parents and children seldom end up joining gangs or get financial help from gangs to meet basic needs. A lack of recreational resources is a further contribution to this problem of joining gangs. For example in a study conducted by Ward and Bakhuis (2010) youth described parks being used by drug dealers and users and therefore being unsafe for recreation. Those participants who did have access to recreational

opportunities described only sports and when they talked about them as protective opportunities, they described them as activities that took place outside the neighborhood. Given this lack of opportunity for safe recreation, participants described themselves as facing the severe choice of either to lock themselves into their homes after school or knowingly to put themselves in danger. An environment of failing social institutions that struggles to fulfill their mandated tasks- to educate, to provide health care, to police, to adjudicate to rehabilitate also contribute to the rise of gangsters. Within such environment, children are facing difficult choices: to stay safe or to choose gang involvement. When families, too are failing institutions, children join gangs (Davids, 2005). Interventions on the exo-level: Gangsters can be targeting on this level by means of primary and secondary prevention. Both primary and secondary prevention can take place through the mobilization and empowering of people in order to bring about change in structures and procedures that inhibits wellbeing and contributes to the problem of gangs. The social action model can be used as framework in interventions. Before implementing interventions on this level, the community psychologist should create conditions for empowerment. The community psychologist only facilitates as a consultant in the process of solving problems surrounding gangsterism. Empowerment can firstly be achieved through action research. By involving the community in the process of problem solving, communities will identify their own problems surrounding gangsters, generate possible solutions and use their own resources. By doing this they develop skills and infrastructure to solve their own problems. In the process of empowerment, it is important that a critical awareness surrounding gangsters is present.

Workshops presented in communities can create awareness of the problem of gangsters. This will enable people to question assumptions and be aware of possible change in such community. This will further lead to constructive change through active participation of members. Workshops providing behavior skills (e. g. managing conflict, peer pressure) to community members can be implemented, in order for members to participate effectively in community decisions. To prevent learners from joining gangs' recreational activities can be used. After school activities such as Sport clubs and academic writing, to develop skills and prevent them from spending time on the streets may be, implement. Boredom is mostly a reason why children spend their time on the streets after school. By spending time on the street, they are experimenting with many things. One of these things is drugs, which may lead to their involvement with gangs. By developing sport clubs and academic activities after school, boredom is replaced by something more educational. These activities will decrease the chance that they will experiment with drugs and become part of gangs. This would be both a primary and secondary prevention strategy. By creating recreational resources, children will stay away from gang activities. Children who are already part of gang activities can be encouraged by their friends (already involved in youth clubs) to join them after school. In this way, secondary prevention of gangs is implemented. Through participating in sport and academic activities after school, children become self-efficient, may be empower and may contribute to the prevention of gangsters. This will also create opportunities to form lasting friendships where social values and organizational skills are learned. These skills are transferable to other areas

of their lives. Sporting activities are an important vehicle, where marginalized young people can build competence, supportive relationships and a sense of identity, thereby enhancing their mental health and wellbeing. Adolescent peer 'rap' groups can initiate in which youth have the opportunities to discuss gangsters and make others aware of this problem, rather than joining them. The developing of youth clubs in schools, will allow opportunities for further development of interpersonal skills, leadership and responsibility as well as a sense of belonging, caring and compassion, which benefit the young member. At the same time, the activities performed by the clubs become resources available in the community. Secondary prevention can also be implemented by creating educational resources to victims and schools, to empower people. People join gangs, mostly, because they are past victims of abuse, violence and crime and have not been empowered yet. This implies that members of gangs are often themselves victims. People who were abused are much more likely to become offenders like becoming part of a gang than those who lived a normal life (Visser, 2007). The aim of the community psychologist should be to empower victims of gang violence and rape. Empowerment should occur before these victims conform to gangs, in order to deal with the abuse or rape. Help and support may be provided to these victims in order to heal and move on from the crime, with the least possible harm or loss. In this process of healing empowerment should take place to contribute to a process of restorative justice. Lay counselors to assist people who require it, can be used. In communities characterized by poverty where gangsters are increasing, there are often limited professional services and therefore the mental health of that

community cannot improve dramatically. Lay counselors can work effectively in these communities and although they do not have formal mental health training, they provide people in need. As members of the community, they already have credibility and are able to attract people in need more easily than professionals outside the community. By using volunteers or lay counselors, resources become available in the community (Visser, 2007). Due to lack safety resources in a community, members within a community can be used to target gangs. Members can be a valuable source of information. Funds can be raised for vehicles, computers and other equipment. Community policing can also be implemented, which will increase safety in communities. In this way, the community can work together with the police and increase safety in their environment to prevent gangs from increasing and at the same time create safety resources.

Macro-level: The causes underlying the rise and increase of gangs in South Africa may also be ascribing to a more global level, namely the macro level. This level does not contain a particular subject, rather a variety of influences such as laws, customs, resources and cultural values (Visser, 2007). The influences (e. g. child and parents) in the inner levels of the exosystem are affecting by the support of the macrosystem. For example: a child born into a strong Christian family will be strongly influenced by their parents (mesosystem), who would have been influenced by their parents (exosystem), who would have been influenced by the Christian values and customs passed on through the family's generations (macrosystems). The political event of Apartheid influenced economic conditions and had a tremendous effect on the lives of each person in Black and colored

townships. These economic conditions, racism and discrimination affected access to quality schools, adequate nutrition and recreational activities, all that affects the child development. In these communities, no virtual opportunities were present. Consequently, many youth and adult men particular simply hang out. Children living in these poverty situations became traumatize and eventually as adults, they suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder or other forms of anxiety, fear and even emotional difficulty and mental ill health. In a study conducted by MacMaster (2010) it is indicated that gangs often understand this pain and hopelessness of individuals, far better than any family member does or social worker ever could, which led to more people forming and joining gangs. This study further indicates that economic factors is not only part of the root causes of gangsters, but they also play a major role in sustaining the gangs. Gangs operate within communities affected by poverty, and the gangsters become providers of the basic needs of many people in the form of food and the payment of rent and school fees. The mass media plays an important role in the lives of youth and contribute to this problem of gangsterism. In the media, our attention is draw to flashy cars, massive gold jeweler and immense amounts of money. This often is regarding as the norm. Because of poverty-stricken environments, many males are draw into the gang arena by the attraction of money, power and glamour with which they associate gangsters. Children learn what they see — and, unfortunately, in our country through news reports, movies, television, and everyday life in many parts of our country, children see violence and do not learn that violence is bad. Too often, they learn that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict;

furthermore, many children, due to their home and neighborhood environments, have little opportunity to learn about alternative ways to settle disputes (MacMaster, 2010). Another concern of gangsterism can be ascribed to the lack of corrective structures and policing. In a study conducted by MacMaster (2010) it was indicated that other structures like the police, the justice systems and the prisons poor functioning contributed to the increase of gangsterism. The police were castigate for corruption and laziness, the justice system for paying more attention to the rights of prisoners than of victims of crime and the prisons as being places of induction into gangs rather than rehabilitation of offenders. Because there is no action taken on reporting these offences or speaking out about their experiences, they are often leaving with feelings of helplessness and no way of coping with what they have endured as victims of gang violence. Thus, they become part of gangs in order to cope within such a violent community (Davids 2005). Cultural factors also play a key role in joining gangs. Ethnic minorities often face a number of stressors such as being witness to or a victim of violence, lower educational attainment, lower income, the inability to secure employment and the daily experience of discrimination. These discriminatory experiences and cultural victimization appear to act as indirect risk factors that increase stress levels, influence mental health and therefore increase the likelihood of joining a gang. Hasty acculturation is also an indirect risk factor for joining a gang (Swartz, de la Rey & Duncan, 2004). Intervention on a macro-level: Political events during apartheid, created harmful consequences for colored and black people, influenced the economy and led to poverty; therefore, tertiary prevention is central on this level.



Secondary prevention should also take place to make sure that early problems created by apartheid can be targeted and primary prevention should be implementing to make sure that present structures do not encourage the forming of gangs in the future. While conducting such interventions, the psycho-political model as well as the mental health model can be used as framework. Promotion/prevention activities in mental health are essential to reduce social and economic burdens of common mental health problems and in combating stigma of mental illness. Promotion of life skills training for coping with common mental health problems should be developed for different settings. The community psychologist should aim to create a partnership with previous disadvantage people. Reorganization of human relationships, to transform social structures that petuate inequality, oppression and discrimination should take place. Community psychologists should work with mental ill people, in order for them to learn how to live with mental illness and to improve their quality of life in spite of their circumstances, like poverty, racist and discriminative feelings (secondary prevention). The culture of violence should be eradicated, by creating a culture of consultation and conflict resolution. Violent protests during the apartheid have persisted into the new democratic South Africa. Communities need to be educated to engage legitimate structures in order to get their needs met. This includes participation in political processes like local and national elections. Furthermore, poverty alleviation and social upliftment is needed. A comprehensive crime prevention strategy should include the economic and social upliftment of previously disadvantaged people in South Africa as a long-term strategy (Visser, 2007). Primary and secondary

prevention can also be implemented through the mass media.

Advertisements can use famous people as role models to give a message against violence and gangsterism, which can prevent children from forming part of delinquent activities. It can also help people who are already involved in such activities to realize that it is wrong and that they need help. To support children who need help, child line can be made available in communities and should be advertised on television, so that children are supported when they realize that they need help. Especially for those whom experience a lack of support due to poverty. Due to a lack of corrective structures and policing, workshops should be implemented at police departments. Ineffective victim support and empowerment programmes have an impact on the cyclical natures of violence and out of frustration people may become perpetrators. Workshops presented to police officers should aim to reorganize their relationship with prisoners and victims. Necessary communication skills, supporting skills to support victims and anger management should be given, in order to make sure that they handle prisoners with human dignity and not contribute to further racism and discrimination. Leadership skills should also be provided for them to handle situations in a non-violent way. The police should focus more on the rights of victims of crimes. Police stations should no longer be call charge offices, but must rather be referring to as client service centers to reflect a victim centre approach. By changing relationships between police officers and perpetrators and police officers and victims, change in police structure can occur. Police officers experience a lot of crime, violence and traumatic experiences and as a result, to cope with these situations, they become part

of drug deals and gangs. This contributes to further development of gangsters and drug dealing. Support groups should be developed and made compulsory for police officers, in order to for them to deal with secondary trauma. Workshops on coping skills should be presented in order to handle secondary trauma and prevent traumatic events that develop into drug use and conforming to gangs. Furthermore, in prisons a more restorative approach which makes the offender take responsibility for their actions is necessary. This approach could be more effective, particularly in the case of youth who have not yet become hardened criminals. It should encourage conflict resolution within the family group and communities, and make the youth a crucial part of the decision-making process. Alternatives to the strict criminal justice system and imprisonment should be provided at every stage of the process and these should become a central part of the system and include measures to prevent re-offending. Holistic community-based treatment programmes implemented to reintegrate the person into society and preventing the recurrence of conforming to gangs, can be use. Workshops can be implementing in prisons and should include anger management, stress reduction and communication skills. A cognitive behavioral approach should be use to deal with offenders' irrational thinking and to provide techniques to restructure maladaptive cognitions, overreaction to violent urges and self-sabotage (Visser, 2007).

**CONCLUSION**

The ecological model of Bronfenbrenner is ideal for the community psychologist, to explain the geneses of gangsterism, as it views events in context. Instead of explaining the inadequacy of people involved in gangsterism and ascribing it to personality traits like self-esteem, the

ecological model focuses our attention to consider the relationship interaction involved, between various levels. In other words, when we reflect on either the individual's social context or their personality, it will only allow a partial understanding of complexities surrounding gangsterism. A view of gangsterism, which does not include patterns of interaction, will give an incomplete picture of what is really happening. Therefore, it is important that the community psychologist focus on all levels of the ecological model, to get a complete picture of what is really happening. In this way, effective interventions can be developed to target gangsterism in all the levels of a society.