



CRIME

## Staring down youth violence

*A country in which grandmothers aged 94 and 82 are raped has to do some serious soul-searching. Professor Andy Dawes told PAUL McNALLY how we can solve the problem of violence in SA and how we should deal with young, unemployed, under-educated South Africans*



▲ Marvin was a gangster by the time he was 15 but left a life of violence thanks to inspirational leadership from his family. Many aren't that lucky.

### What types of crimes are our youths committing?

Gun homicide has dropped. Knives are the weapons of choice now.

### How endemic is the problem of youth violence?

Despite all the mayhem kids are exposed to in poor communities most kids don't do it. The survey data tells us only up to 22% of the teenage community get into any kind of physical trouble frequently.

It is a concentrated number of people who are doing most of the bad stuff.

### But is it mostly gang violence?

Many youngsters won't be violent unless they're in a group, particularly boys. But if they have been connected to a gang they are hammered for leaving. It is dangerous for these kids to get out. I've spoken to distraught mothers who have sent kids to another town and there is a bit of the gang in the new town and they get pulled back in.

It's rather like a drug addiction withdrawal programme with many opportunities for reverting. The kid has to be motivated and strongly

supported. There isn't a five-minute solution.

### How is a child affected by exposure to violence?

There's a range. At one end a kid can perform a violent act and feel considerable remorse. At the other end he's desensitised, like a Guantanamo Bay torture victim. They have serious problems experiencing empathy for others because there has been no reinforcement at home to do so.

Gangs in many communities will set kids up to be violent towards those close to them. It's like what happened in the civil wars in Angola and Mozambique where [militias] would train child soldiers by having them perpetuate horrible things on people in their village. Slowly but surely the way the kids cope is to cut themselves off from a sense of emotional connection with the victims.

### And this starts a cycle?

Youngsters that have experienced violence at the hands of their parents and so on are called hypervigilant. They expect others to be violent and they lash out first. Their social information processing is shot.

Like trauma or rape survivors they anticipate it happening again.

### Are certain kids genetically more violent than others?

Certain children are at risk on a genetic level from birth. International studies say 4% of kids come with that built-in risk. They will be sensitive to certain kinds of environments. They have a propensity for aggression and problems regulating their own behaviour.

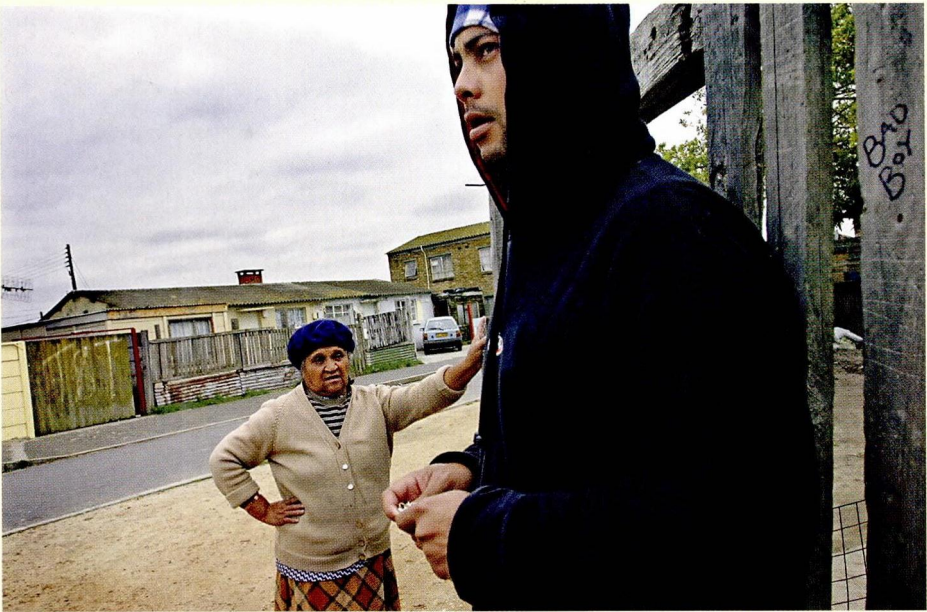
If these kids are born into a family environment where the parents have the resources to handle them you can avoid a negative spiral.

However, if the family is dysfunctional, emotion is flying around, aggression is common and the child is physically punished then it's a problem. It's called a "gene-environment correlation" and in South Africa a lot of youngsters are raised in troubled family environments so the correlation is higher.

### Surely SA's past plays a huge part?

Any society that has such massive levels of social inequality is at high risk for being violent. If you look at parts of the US with high inequality – for example, Washington, DC – you see similar





▲ It's much more difficult for parents to control school dropouts.

levels of youth violence in the inner city as you see here. If you look at Brazil, parts of the Philippines and Colombia the skewed nature of the economy is a common characteristic.

And it's possible this causes a sense of deprivation in young people. They see the huge inequalities, how they are not benefiting from the society and so on.

SA has a long history where violence was a response to combating political oppression. Apartheid doesn't explain youth violence in any simple way but it's the root to much of the structural violence we see. Neighbourhoods remain very segregated and have sinks of poverty.

There will be a few upwardly mobile folk and an increasing black middle class but in the poor areas they are stuck where they were 20 years ago.

#### What small changes would make a huge impact to stop youth violence?

Good nutrition is important. We don't know enough yet but nutrition could be a risk factor. With kids who come into compromised environments with a propensity for violence paired with malnutrition you see more aggressive activity, more irritability.

In SA 22% of children under the age of five are stunted for their age. That tells you they had serious nutritional problems in the first two years of life. This can lead to other neurological problems. It would help to guarantee adequate nutrition for the mother.

#### So we could stop youth violence by getting to the mothers before the children are born?

A small thing that does need focus is antenatal clinics. The maternal intake of alcohol during trimester one is particularly problematic.

Also, [we should] screen pregnant women who are at risk for depression. Thirty percent of women in Cape Town have postnatal depression. Where there is postnatal depression

the bond between the child and the mother is often compromised, which can lead to problems later. In poor communities the mother is withdrawn and doesn't notice the child's growth needs. We need to provide short-term treatment for mothers and follow up with home visits. Give the mothers advice and have a chat.

The image of England in the 1950s with a nurse on a bicycle going around the countryside – it worked. It was a bloody good system!

#### How do we help the teenagers?

Sometimes you find teenagers who have found an extraordinary person in their world: A teacher, a faith-based person or a leader. But that's quite rare. Young people are not exposed to many positive role models.

I refer to this as the supermarket of opportunity. It is like going into a shop. In some neighbourhoods you go into the shop and stuff on the shelves isn't great; there are lots of opportunities for bad engagements with the world. What one has to do is change that supermarket.

#### With education?

Yes. Youngsters need to be kept in school – 50% of South African children don't complete school. The majority of that 50% don't complete beyond grade 10. Of those who go on to grade 12 only 10% of those who pass matric have a pass good enough to get into a tertiary institution. So you can see this cascading decline in opportunity through adolescence.

This is because the school system has failed them. It's clear the quality of schooling is appalling. That leads to kids not being able to cope with the upper ends of high school so they drop out and are unemployable. Then [we are left with] young men hanging around with nothing to do [who] are angry, discontented and have nowhere to go.

#### How do we make schools positive places?

Very often it involves activities like music,

dance or drama. These things grip youth and adolescents.

Whatever keeps kids on the premises should be used.

#### Are there kids who are beyond help?

There are definitely youngsters who have lost it. And they will end up in prison and that is possibly the only place that can contain them.

At that point you need to look at opportunities for rehabilitation.

Young sexual offenders need to be attended to in the proper way because if they aren't there's a high probability they will carry on.

Once they get into a pattern it's very difficult to break.

#### How do you think we should handle the prosecution of these kids?

Certainly for kids under the age of 18 – and unless they have committed a [serious] offence – the Child Justice Act should divert them out of the justice system. This is so they don't get a record and they don't end up in prison with a whole bunch of kids that can teach them more bad stuff.

The justice system is brutalising. But the kids aren't being diverted often enough, partly because the police don't know how to use the Child Justice Act. They don't have the facilities.

And that's a problem. It's a common SA practice: You set up a nice Act but you don't resource the necessary facilities on the other side. You need good probation officers to do assessments on these kids. Some might just need a little counselling or skills training.

#### Should we fear the youth?

Fear of victimisation is often high in communities with very low levels of potential victimisation. In the leafy suburbs they are very scared but their potential of having a bad day is much lower than those living in a township.

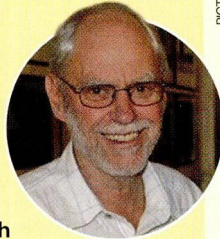
And remember: Apart from the gang violence, most violence happens between Fridays and Mondays, is amplified by intoxication and is usually between people who know each other. Violence between strangers is relatively rare.

### Who is Andrew Dawes?

DAWES is an applied developmental psychologist, an Emeritus Professor at UCT and editor of a book on violence called *Youth Violence: Sources and Solutions in South Africa*.

He specialises in policy-related research on children affected by abuse and violence.

He is a research director in the Child, Youth, Family and Social Development Research Programme at the Human Sciences Research Council.



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