
Gang Violence: The Issue Of The Violent Nature Of Crime In South Africa

South Africa is unceasingly making headline news being affected by crime and violence. The country has been afflicted by this problem for centuries and seems to be forever troubled with such indignations. Unfortunately, this issue is a deep-rooted one, and goes way back as far as the period of colonialism. The history of violence and its roots are therefore a very sensitive and contentious subject. This paper will therefore look at violence in South Africa by first doing a brief assessment of the difference between crime and deviance from a sociological perspective, and then exploring historical factors relating to violence in the country. In addition, the focus on gang violence will be emphasised to the extent of its inception and its detrimental consequences. Furthermore, will the theoretical perspective of Karl Marx's conflict theory be used to illuminate and substantiate this issue of gang violence. Finally, a reflection on violence post-apartheid in South Africa will be done with the purpose of gaining some understanding of where South Africa is at twenty five years into democracy.

Crime, Deviance and Violence: Sociological Perspectives

It has been established that the line between crime and deviance is very distinct. According to Adler (2001), crime can be defined in many terms and from many perspectives, but whichever definition is decided upon, will determine how the perpetrators and the victims of crime will be treated. It will also influence how we see ourselves as individuals and the society we form part of (Adler, 2001). However, generally, crime is perceived as behaviour that is regarded as the breaking of a law against society, and these types of behaviours are therefore punishable by law. Sutherland (2003) stated very simply that crime is a misbehaviour that is damaging to society.

On the other hand, deviance can as well be seen from different perspectives. Giddens (2009) defined deviance as the non-conformity of an individual in a particular society or community, where there are given social norms that each member of that society should follow. Another definition according to Crossman (2019), is that deviance is a behaviour that infringes on social norms, and it can be criminal or non-criminal. Examples of deviance can be such as nudity in public, making use of prostitutes, being inebriated in public, or even dressing 'weird'. Some people also view deviance as a coping mechanism or as asserting control, while others may see a person's actions as irrational, but for that person it is rational. Deviance is therefore a very complex matter.

According to Degenaar (2009) violence has to do with extreme force carried against another. Degenaar (2009) also believed that violence needs to be looked at from different levels and perspectives. He further place violence into three major categories which are physical, psychological and structural violence, in order to give a better understanding into this matter (Degenaar, 2009). In addition, Degenaar argued that certain types of violence can be justified. For instance if someone attacks a person, and the victim uses self-defence. This type of violence would then be justifiable.

Historical Factors: Violence in South Africa

Historically, it is the psychodynamics and social aspects that comes to the fore when looking at the theme of violence (Cavanaugh, 2012). Therefore, from whichever perspective violence is looked at, it needs to be viewed at from the point of where and how it all started. It was Frantz Fanon that uncovered some hard truths concerning the background of violence. Fanon (1963) claimed that it was the coloniser that brought about the idea of the 'civilised' and the 'uncivilised'. This was done with the intent of proving their superiority (Fanon, 1963). It was therefore the "superior" race that introduced violence in order to maintain their status (Fanon, 1963). The violence from their side was in the form of police and soldiers, while the colonized realised that violence could in-turn be the only way they could re-claim their dignity and humanity (Fanon, 1963).

Similarly, did Kynoch (2008) believe that the colonials used violence to regulate and subjugate the black people. Kynoch (2008) added that it was the "state sanctioned violence" during colonialism and apartheid that were the historical dynamics that subsidised the high levels of violence we experience in this country today. The forms of violence enforced on black people were by means of "police brutality, torture, gender and race discrimination, oppression and dehumanisation" (Kynoch, 2008). This directed violence into the mining compounds, prisons and ultimately the urban areas (Kynoch, 2008). This form of violence became exclusive to colonial Africa (Kynoch 2008). Thus proving that people in this country were predisposed to violence in so many ways. According to Fanon (1963), the only way to overthrow the colonial rule was through decolonisation and by liberating themselves of the mind-set forced upon them by the colonist, but this would be a violent process.

Gang violence and its detrimental consequences

Abrahams (2010) stated that it was the very laws that segregated people that played a highly influential role in the formation of gangs in South Africa. The inception occurred when Africans of different ethnic groups were placed in the same lodges on the mines (Abrahams, 2010). This set up inevitably created a sense of wanting to belong, which then brought about the creation of gangs (Abrahams, 2010). The most notorious gang during that period in South Africa, was the Ninevites (Abrahams, 2010). They were infamous for taking the law into their own hands, including dealing with the white capitalists that ill-treated black workers (Abrahams, 2010). Kynoch (2008) stated that the Ninevites were gradually wiped out by the government due to them targeting the white people.

It was around the 1950's when the Tsotsi gang emerged (Abrahams, 2010). Most of the tsotsi's were not imprisoned when they were found guilty, they were sent to Pondoland instead (Abrahams, 2010). This then resulted in the penetration of gangs in urban areas (Abrahams, 2010). Prisons on the other hand, had a continuous inflow of African males being incarcerated (Abrahams, 2010). The law made no effort to separate the hardened criminals from those that were first offenders, and this automatically gave rise to prison gangs being formed (Abrahams, 2010).

Consequently, violence was spreading on the mine compounds, prisons and in the townships. Kynoch (2008), revealed how township gang members would rape women and girls on the streets and even in their own homes. The law and police response was ineffective and

deliberately slow (Abrahams, 2010). In addition, it was evident that certain gangs were supported by the state, which encouraged urban violence even more (Abrahams, 2010). The segregation laws of the 1950's therefore created a very unequal nation (Abrahams, 2010). The whites were living in wealthy areas while the people of colour had to settle on the outskirts areas (Abrahams, 2010).

Gang violence based on the conflict theory

Karl Marx was the father of the conflict theory and highlighted a social perspective that points towards factors that creates conflicts in society (Carver, 1982). The main understanding of this theory is focused on how the rich and powerful prey on the poor and the disadvantaged (Carver, 1982). It also highlights the maintenance of social status and inequality. The ultimate goal of the conflict theorist is for social change and equality (Carver, 1982). It has however been proven that inequalities exists in almost every area of life as the capitalists are always pursuing ways to maintain their status.

It is such inequalities that causes "lesser" groups like the gangs to rise up and fight back. The competition in this regard is for power. The ones in authority are always trying to gain more power, while the gangs are merely attempting to hold on to the little power that they do have. Fanon (1963) disputed that even after colonialism, business people and property owners tried to take up positions held by the colonial. Instead of freeing people of the inequalities, they reproduced it for their own benefit and well-being.

This therefore perpetuated the struggles against inequalities and thus caused gangs to retaliate even more so (Fanon, 1963). Due to the historical factors that aided to the formation of gangs initially, gangs were now more determined to avoid a repeat of what was done to them before. Additionally, the fact that they were once robbed of their land, identity and power, they would do anything to prevent such injustices done to them even to the extreme. This is evident in the fact that gangs are territorial, they have their own identity and always fight to maintain power.

Violence post-apartheid

Violence in South Africa has clearly caused tremendous strain on the citizens as it makes headline news on a daily basis. According to 2007 statistics from the South African Police Services (SAPS), there has been a decrease in violent crimes throughout the country (Pillay, 2008). The general feel amongst the population does not agree with this finding. The government has made an effort to encourage social unity in an attempt to reduce violent crimes (Pillay, 2008). Despite all efforts made, violence and atrocities related to it, seemed to be at an all-time high.

Very recently, the country experienced xenophobic attacks that were very brutal and violent. It is the very countries who once hosted our political exiles, whose people are now being hurt, killed and ordered to leave (Khumalo, 2019). Also very recent, and still at present, is the gang violence in Cape Town. The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) was deployed to the city to deal with gang violence (Davis, 2019). Subsequently, the army has been requested to extend the period of deployment (Davis, 2019). Almost every single day someone becomes a victim of crime in one way or another.

Moreover, the country also experienced gender-based violence to the extreme. One of our very own students at The University of the Western Cape (UWC), Jesse Hess, became a victim of this senseless, heinous, crime (Hlati, 2019). Furthermore, was the senseless killings of four children whom were murdered by their own mother (Mabona, 2019). None of these are justifiable in any way or form. The sad fact is that we are twenty five years into democracy and it is as if not much has changed.

This paper has looked at the issue of the violent nature of crime in South Africa. It considered the various definitions of crime, deviance and violence, in order to provide some different perspectives. A brief investigation was done to gain some historical factors that could possibly explain the violent nature of crime. The aspect of gang violence was then explored by looking at its inception and its consequences. Furthermore, Karl Marx's conflict theory was used to view the status of gangs and the reasons behind some of their actions in their plight to maintain power. Then lastly, this essay looked at violence post-apartheid and some of the very recent experiences the country had to deal with.

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