Community perceptions of South African Police responses to substance use and the impact on health and well-being of community leaders and substance users in Cape Town

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BACKGROUND

- In South Africa, there are high levels of drug-related crime in community settings, including drug dealing, theft, and possession - a reflection of ineffective policing.

- There are also high rates of substance use and a history of violent police interventions. Socio-economic disparities and endemic criminal activity further exacerbate these issues, fostering a pervasive social malaise.

- Reports frequently highlight corrupt policing and police involvement in crime syndicates within communities, particularly in low-income areas where drug dealing, and substance use are prevalent.

- This complex dynamic between law enforcement, substance users, and community leaders is poorly understood, contributing to a climate of distrust and conflict.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

1. Describe and explore the perceptions and experiences of PWUDs* towards law enforcement activities and officials – policing and police
2. Police Officials' perceptions of substance use, policing; and relationships with PWUDs*.
3. Role of community leaders to understand how they could contribute to the improved relations between the SAPS and PWUDs; their perceptions of the relationship of policing and crime and with PWUDs*.
4. To identify strategies that will promote more effective relations between stakeholders.

*people who use drugs

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory qualitative study made use of three groups of data:

- (Group 1 informants): People who use drugs (PWUD) (n=27).

- (Group 2 informants): Community leaders identified by PWUD's (n=6) .

- (Group 3 informants): Members of the South African Police Service (SAPS) (n=8).

- Purposive sampling methods were used.

- Data were collected through focus groups for Group 1, followed by in-depth one-on-one interviews for Groups 2 and 3.

- Data were analysed using thematic content analysis.

- Findings were interpreted using the Social Determinants of Health and the socio-ecological model

- Ethics obtained from UCT (614/2017); and approval from SAPS National.

RESULTS: GROUP 1 INFORMANTS PWUDS

Daar is baie 'boere' met wie ek my 'besigheid' *(have sex with)* doen… ek koop nooit my eie drugs nie [Translate*: There are many policemen with whom I do 'business'(have sex with)… I never buy my own drugs]* (F004)

Understanding the 'suburb'	• The dangers within the 'suburb' • The 'suburb' as a dumping ground • Lack of choices • Desperation of addiction
Us vs Them	• Lack of safety • Identifying as a population to be policed • Fear of police • Government gangsters: unlawful behaviours
Community solutions	• Improving policing • Improving relationships

Ek is 'n 'tikkop', nou wil ek complain by die polisie. Dan, dan is permy, " hey gan man, hy is 'n 'tikkop'. So julle help nie vir ons nie . [Translate*: I am a tik-head, now just say I want to make a complaint with the police. Their response is always: "Hey go! You are a 'tik-head'. So, they don't even help us]* (M003).

Dan sien jy net more, hulle gee vir jou twee or drie klappe "Hey, jy jou 'piel gat', jy's 'n piemper". [Translate*: then you'll see tomorrow, they'll give you two or three smacks, "hey you 'penis-bum,' you are a tell-tale"*] (M001).

Go to the root ja. The man buying the stuff, the lots of stuff, not to me. I buy one, this guy buy one. You coming to me, but you leave the dealer out (M002).

RESULTS: GROUP 2 INFORMANTS COMMUNITY LEADERS

Role of Community Leaders	
Youth Challenges	• Drug problem -lack of facilities • Lack of referrals
Police interaction with Community Leaders	• General interaction • Threats and victimization • Lack of response
Violence and corruption	
Impact of gangsterism on the community	
Recommendations	

'Mediating'...petty crimes that is done in my area. The police is kilometers from my house, so anything, even sometimes murder scenes, I will go visit the rape victims, and I will get the people... get help from SAPS...and monitor the scene until SAPS come, and then they will take over (CL002).

...There are few, honest police in the area. There are police that should be supported for trying to bring about the change...(but) because they exist in a context where there is so much ugliness, if they speak out, they get targeted, subjected to...you know...being ostracized (CL004).

If you treat an individual like trash, like an animal... like everybody else who is actually breaking the law... he is going to become like that. (CL005)

Most of the community, they lost interest in the community leaders because um um, they give us information, they come to us for help...okay now I got this now, now I must report it. Now I report it, now this person (*the police*) does nothing. That police officer do nothing (CL001).

RESULTS: GROUP 3 INFORMANTS POLICE OFFICERS

The challenges of substance use	• The extent of the substance use problem in suburb • The role that gangsterism plays in the substance use problem
Lack of Power	• The SAPS officers' need for power • Police officers' inadequate power
Lack of support from the community	
Stressors imbedded in the organisational structure	• Becoming a part of the community • Post-traumatic stress disorder • Police involvement with illicit substances • Measurement of success
Lack of resources	• Manpower and machinery • Leadership
Lack of an efficient referral system	
Recommendations	

'cos we are not a force anymore, I have to give you a service. We are softer than what they used to call 'die blou broeke' *[Translate: The blue pants]*. You wouldn't mess with the yellow bakkie [Translate: pre 1994 police vans]. Now they (comm... they wa... respon... Those '... *and over dead ...s busy dying]...* ...ene where ..., of verkrag *...raped].* Now ...hat scene, ...her simple ...he road, or ...llicit drugs, ...om "hy nou ...en says to him, ...that. Now ...he working ...- somehow

People don't know what's going on. Gaan staan jy elke dag oor dooie mense, of iemand wat is besig om

'The National Drug Master Plan asks for a 10% reduction in drugs. Police statistics show a 400% increase... The big problem has to do with the measuring of success...we (*are)* focusing on the wrong level of the food chain... we have to reduce the supply out there. Look here, if you have 800 (*an example)* arrests this month, then they are looking for 805 arrests the next month cos you need to improve your performance. So now, you don't want to close down the outlet (*drug dealer's house)* because where am I going to get my 800 arrests next month? (P006)

Socio-ecological level of influence (CDC, 2019)	Intrapersonal	Intrapersonal	Interpersonal	Community	Societal
Prominent themes: **Participant group:**	A. Poor self -identity	B. Illicit substance use	C. Perception of Police interactions	D. Unlawful behaviours	E. Structural challenges
Group 1: PWUDs	Theme 1.3: Lack of choice Theme 2.2: Identifying as a population to be policed 2.3 Fear of police	Theme 1.4: Desperation of addiction	Theme 2.3: Fear of police	Theme 3: Government gangsters: unlawful behaviours	Theme 1.1: The dangers within the suburb Theme 1.2: The suburb: a dumping ground
Group 2: Community leaders	Theme 1: Role of community leaders	Theme 2.1: Drug problem	Theme 3: Police interaction with community leaders	Theme 5: Violence and corruption	Theme 2.2: Lack of facilities Theme 2.3 Lack of referrals
Group 3: Police officials	Theme 2.1: Lack of power Theme 4.1: Becoming a part of the community	Theme 1.1: The extent of the substance use problem in the suburb Theme 4.3: Police involvement with illicit substance use	Theme 3: Lack of support from the community	Theme 1.2: The role that gangsterism plays in the substance use problem Theme 4.3: Police involvement with illicit substance use	Theme 4.2 Post traumatic stress disorder Theme 4.4: Measurement of success Theme 5: Lack of resources Theme 6: Lack of an efficient referral system Theme 5.1 Manpower and machinery
Identified associated social determinants of health (WHO, 2025)	Early childhood development Unemployment and job insecurities Education Structural conflict Housing, basic anemities and the environment social inclusion and non-discrimination ,	Income and social protection; education; unemployment and job insecurities; food insecurity; early childhood development; social inclusion and non-discrimination; structural conflict; housing, basic amenities and the environment.	Social support and community inclusivity; structural conflict; housing, basic amenities and the environment.	social inclusion and non-discrimination; structural conflict; housing, basic amenities and the environment.	Income and social protection; social inclusion and non-discrimination; structural conflict; housing; basic amenities and the environment.

OVERARCHING THEMES

Poor self-identity

Illicit substance use

Unlawful behaviours

Perception of police interactions

Structural challenges

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PWUD'S

PWUD's need to better utilize NGOs in their community (NGO's should improve their marketing strategies and bring the services to the people).

Social workers must respond to the needs of individuals and families by pulling together collaborative efforts between integrated service delivery, neighbourhood, civic and economic development

Mobile outpatient services – offering substance use treatment – but also additional services such as referrals to other social support services, basic healthcare, assistance with ID's, bank services (a one stop shop).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS

Mobilizing and empowering community leaders to be more engaged and accountable to authorities - instead of them hindering investigations – equip them with skills to safe-guard a crime scene.

Equip them with resources such as airtime, data, supervision, a stipend as they can be involved in enhancing and maintaining their social environment

Implementing an annual exhibition with all NGO's, government department and support services showcasing and providing their services to improve the utilization of substance use a and prevention services.

The intentional use of community leaders to assess community needs when planning programmes or interventions

The community would feel more supported, and community leaders would feel acknowledged.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICE OFFICERS

Equity considerations such as needs assessments to identify any biasness or imbalances - having clear and transparent criteria for the process of the allocation of resources. To be implemented and monitored effectively

SAPS to not work in the area that they live, however literature does suggest that if you police where you reside, it creates a sense of ownership and familiarity.

Measurements of success reassessment and new metrics created measuring gains towards the goal. Eg: the number of drug busts.

Trained in leadership and soft skills

Handling mental disorders

Making use of community-policing – specializing in prevention activities

SAPS officers expressed the need for discretion in handling drug-related offenses and better support for their mental health.

Addressing the organizational factors that promote corruption; improving police job satisfaction could foster higher integrity and restore trust in law enforcement.

FINAL THOUGHTS

My hope is that by identifying possible synergies and antagonisms between substance users, community leaders and the South African Police Service, this will serve as evidence to start a conversation to improve the relationships, create additional opportunities and enhance prevention and control efforts around substance misuse in peri-urban areas.

Learning from this experience may also assist managing the difficult issue of substance use in other settings.

THANK YOU

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