

“You can’t be a gangster and be secret about it”

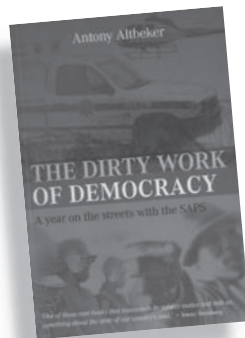
Policing gangs in Elsie’s River

According to **Antony Albekker** who accompanied an Elsie’s River police team on patrol, policing on the Cape Flats is a war of attrition where gangs while preying on poor community members are also admired for their power and wealth.

Elsie’s River is a ghetto in the heart of the ganglands around the Mother City, and I spent most of my time there with eight uniformed cops who worked their beat harder than any others I met.

Unusually for street-cops, they were led by a captain, a stocky man in his forties called ‘Cappy’ Roets whose approach to his work was as quirky as it was intense. “Let’s pay a little visit to Moeradien,” he would say to his driver, Constable Daniels, a six-foot-four giant who I could only think of as The Terminator. As he said this, Cappy would point in the general direction in which he wished to go with a pipe which he held in a leather-gloved left hand. When his team bust shebeens or, as happened twice, when they chanced upon drunken brawls in the street, he would reach between his legs and haul out an old-fashioned, chips-style motorbike helmet that sported a police badge.

The rest of Cappy’s team was made up of cops who ranged from the greenest, constable fresh out of police college, to a hard-boiled



inspector with spiked hair and a bulldog’s temperament.

Elsie’s is made up of regimented lines of bare, cinderblock buildings. Each is a series of cells, grey and cold. Built of the cheapest materials, they are piled two, three or four stories high. Access to

apartments above the ground floor is up steep stairs in front of the buildings and along short passages that branch away from them. There is no wall protecting the passages or the staircase from the elements and the heavily-gated apartments are small, cramped and gloomy. The ground before the buildings is bare and hard and is surrounded by more project housing of the same sort. The tenements and their yards are the natural habitat of the Cape Flats’ gangs.

“You see them,” Terminator said to me once, pointing at a group of young toughs propped against a broken wall, staring malevolently back at the police van. “*I grew up around people like that. Hulle is vullis vir my.*” [They are rubbish for me].

Corner gangs like this are

everywhere in Elsie’s and across the Cape Flats and are usually affiliated to one of the regions super-gangs, The Firm or the Americans. They most visibly showed that predators governed the local economy.

The gangs showed that predators govern the local economy, but they also showed something else. They showed that when modern institutions, needed to guarantee society’s rules, are absent, others will emerge. Here, those institutions, the gangs, were based on the rough order of a world in which only the strong survive and the weak perish.

The gangs were bound together with local interpretations of the ideals of strength, of group solidarity and of honour. These values themselves are noble and their emergence in this form, as others who have studied the gangs have argued, reflects on the failure of formal governance, on the failure of the law. But, looking at these young men as they determinedly ignored the police, I thought that all of this worked the other way too: where the gangs had become entrenched, there could be no law.

Elsie’s River was a target-rich environment for the jump-out policing that was Cappy’s squad’s specialty.

They would drive down

township streets weaving their way into the tenement complexes and, with their game-drive sharp eyes, they would look for, and frequently spot, unusual things. Kids who were too close to the storm-water drains in which addicts were known to fire up their pipes got the treatment. So did men who made suspicious movements of hands or face as the van went by. I could never see what it was about these men's actions that had attracted the officers' attention, but, almost without fail, when the van stopped, the appointed target would run, dropping or throwing something away as he did so. This would usually turn out to be a small, tight bundle of dagga or Mandrax.

At other times the squad would just throw a group of *skollies* up against a wall, frisk them roughly and tell them to get off the street, pushing them along and reinforcing the point by aiming their nightsticks at soft-looking spots.

They spent some of their shift-time visiting people they knew to be selling drugs in the more-or-less forlorn hope that they might catch one of them with his stash. One was a vegetable *smous*, selling his legal wares from a table in the commercial district. Another worked a shebeen from a battered brick house. In the open plot next to it, one of the cops found a bag full of pills which, on closer examination, turned out to be aspirin.

The cops knew, of course, that they were up against it.

The terrain was a tactical nightmare, perfect for anyone who wanted to hide a stash of drugs. More importantly, they also knew that they ruled only where they stood, and that as soon as their backs were turned, the street would once again be dominated by the local heavies. It was a game they had to play, half-heartedly pretending that it was one they might one day win.

On one occasion, Cappy's squad paid a visit to a high flier they'd been harassing for months. His house and what must once have been a shebeen in the yard was a fortress of solid security gates and watchful lackeys. After his officers were done, Cappy told me how their constant attention had disrupted this man's shebeening, adding that because his shebeen was the base of operations for the local gang which the man led, the disruption of its operations had cost him much of his status. "It's the only way," he said. "You have to hit them and hit them and hit them. If you let up for a while, they start again. Like weeds. There must be no rest for them. No rest for the wicked."

That was also the view of Cappy's boss, Superintendent Jeremy Vearey.

Vearey's approach to the gangs was based on his understanding of their psychology, the semi-feudal conception they had of themselves and their relationship with their subjects. He wanted officers on the offensive, engaging the enemy on their turf. It was tough policing, but it was also psychological warfare. It was law enforcement that engaged both with real people and with the image they had of themselves and which they sought to project into the minds of those they lived amongst.

"The problem that they have," Vearey explained, "is that you can't be a gangster and be secret about it. You must manifest yourself in the community. They must see you on your turf and around your assets. If you can't do that, then it looks like you are hiding. Why must someone respect you if you are hiding? Fear makes you vulnerable."

In response to this, he wanted to demonstrate to all gangsters that the gangs couldn't really control the territory they claimed. "This is very important to us. If we can come in and arrest them for carrying drugs

or for being drunk in public, close down their shebeens and pour the alcohol down a drain, if we can walk into their area and push them up against a wall to search them, then it says that they are not the ones who govern these streets. That's very damaging for them."

Nailing the shebeens was also an assault on the gangs finances. "These are their most valuable assets," he told me. "They make much more money from alcohol than they do from drugs and prostitution. So when we hit the shebeens, we are hitting them in the pockets."

Much has been written about the relationship between gangs and the communities in which they operate and, while the general picture painted by Vearey of predatory packs of criminals extracting a living from the efforts of others is part of the story, that is not all there is to it. Gangs and the charismatic men who lead them, it turns out, are not seen by the community as foreign invaders. Parasitic they may be, but they are also part of the community and can enjoy a surprising degree of legitimacy. This is sometimes explained by the way in which some of the leading figures in the super-gangs have laid claim to the heritage of Robin Hood. They give or loan money to the poor, they sponsor local soccer teams and provide, believe it or not, funds for golf lessons.

The Robin Hood-ism is nonsense, of course. The gangs' incomes are derived largely from the poor, not the rich, and whatever they hand back, bears little resemblance to what they take away. Nevertheless, because the state is weak and people are poor, the welfare they offer does buy them some support.

But there had to be something more interesting going on because this account seemed to reduce community members to people who could be easily and cheaply bought off. I had no other account

to offer, however, until I read something VS Naipaul wrote about the relationship between the people of his native West Indies and the first generation of leaders after independence.

The people had more than adulation for their leaders, Naipaul wrote. What they wanted was that their leaders would represent them, and not just in "a parliamentary way". Instead, they wanted their leaders, who had once been as poor as they, to be rich and powerful and glorious. Precisely how leaders became rich was irrelevant. All that mattered to them was that their glory would also be the glory of their people, so that the latter could live through the former. If the leader were grand, larger than life, his people too would be grand.

This, I think, is at the heart of the challenge of building respect for the kinds of social values our Constitution protects in places like Elsie. Too often, these are places where power, whether exercised by cops or by the gangsters, was a raw, untamed force. People bowed before it or were crushed. The courtesies demanded by our law enforcers, the legal checks and balances, the cultivated social graces in our Constitution, none found an echo in the social rules by which these communities lived. The result was that policing here was as tough and uncompromising as was the world in which it functioned.

Antony Altbeker is a senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies. This is an edited extract from his book, "The Dirty Work of Democracy: A year on the streets with the SAPS," written while at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation. It has recently been short-listed for the Alan Paton Award. This is the last in a series of three articles.

The crisis of HIV prevention Where to now?

Leadership in the struggle against HIV/AIDS is in disarray.

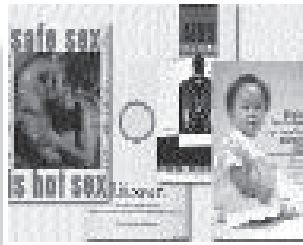
Warren Parker examines why this is the case and posits an urgent strategy for dealing with the crisis.

such as *loveLife* have been demonstrably hollow, despite massive investments. Vulnerabilities to HIV infection are distinctly imbalanced with girls and women considerably more likely to be HIV positive. The poor and marginalised are disproportionately living with and affected by HIV and AIDS. Groundswells of popular mobilisation in line with the scale of response to apartheid have not materialised, and overall leadership in the struggle against the disease is in disarray at every level. Where to from here?

BEYOND INDIVIDUAL SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

'Abstain, be faithful, condomise' - ABC - is the oft repeated mantra of HIV prevention and we need to look at why this concept has not brought the epidemic into check. 'ABC' is a prevention response that is often attributed to underpinning 'the successes in Uganda'. It is important to recognise that 'ABC' was only one element of the Ugandan response. The HIV prevalence declines that were documented amongst youth in Uganda took place in a context of very little national funding and/or programmatic response to the epidemic (including quite limited supplies of resources such as condoms).

The focus of the 'ABC' concept is on individual sexual behaviour. It is based on a number of poorly grounded assumptions that people



HIV prevention is a slippery concept. Over the past decade, despite the rhetoric and promises of some prevention campaigns, and the overarching reach and knowledge base produced by others, there have not been tangible gains in terms of reducing HIV prevalence in South Africa.

Ambitious promises to halve prevalence amongst youth through high cost 'scaled-up' interventions