

Gang Typologies of the Western Cape

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The Safety Lab

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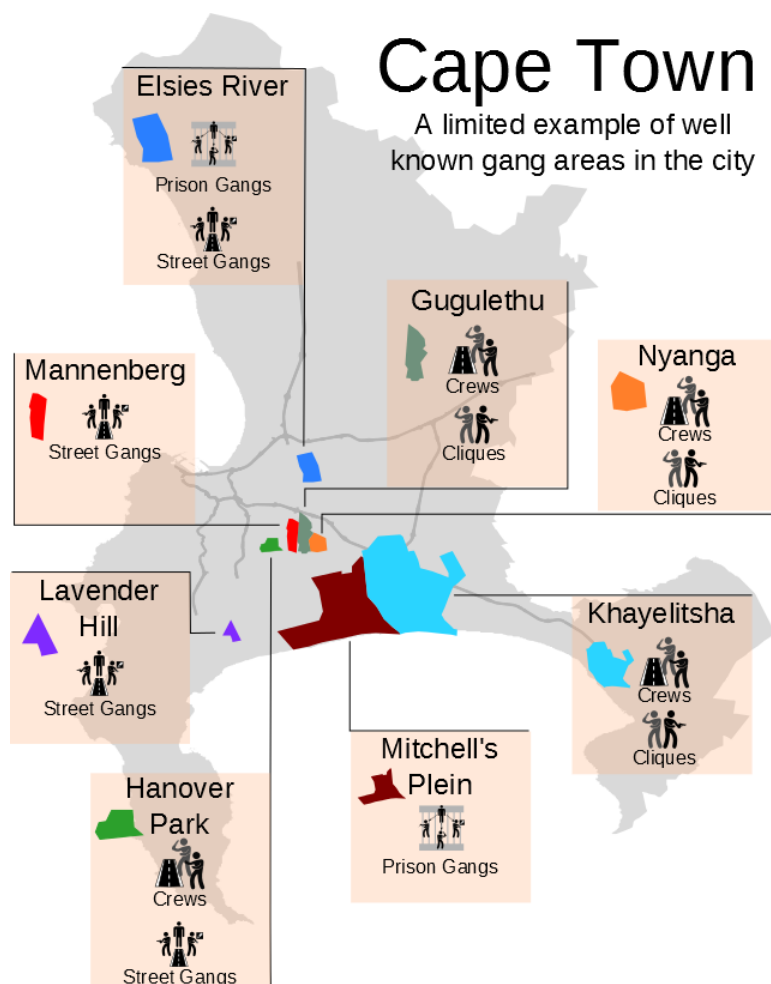
This brief aims to clarify the main types of gangs, their form, function, operation, and causes therein. By doing so, it will allow for a more concrete and informed style of intervention and allow policy to be more directed at the root causes of gangsterism in its various forms throughout the Western Cape and greater South Africa where similar gangs are found. Gangs are constantly evolving and this brief should not be used as a categorical definition of what is found in the Western Cape, but rather a useful tool for considering integrated solutions. Where new, formalized subtypes might exist, descriptions will be placed in the most appropriate major typology. This brief moves concepts of gangs into scientific descriptions similar to genus and species.

South Africa's Western Cape suffers from high levels of gang participation and violence. None of the gangs we see in South Africa are unique to South Africa in their make-up or style within global gang development. However, the varied form of gangs in a relatively small geographical area is unique. In the Western Cape, four gang typologies are emerging. The four main category of gang could be articulated in common gang typology of **Crew, Clique, Gang, and Prison Gang**.

This brief explores and defines the basic typologies of the varied gangs of the Western Cape.

These types of gangs do not all reside in the same space. They are also constantly evolving with time and the influence of globalization. However, in order to determine the best manner of intervention, one

must better understand how gangs are organized and for what purpose. A solution that fits some townships will be completely moot in another. The basic necessary components of determining a typology















are: **economics, hierarchy, structure, size, geography, violence, operation, and relationships**. Each of these components can be broken down into many parts. This brief intends to clarify the basic aspects and understanding necessary to generate

Gangs have many different levels of involvement and types of participation. Nations define gangs differently, however some general similarities exist. The basic components required to be considered a street gang: a group larger than three people, common identity, name and/or other identifier, engaged in illegal activity including violence. For the purposes of this study, we will only include gangs that have a street presence used, in part, to intimidate civilian community members.

Understanding gangs will yield many new typologies in the future. At the moment the field is still emerging, very little is understood in a comparative, international, or methodological fashion. Despite this, many models of intervention are being exported from the United States, not always with due consideration to the realities on the ground. As South Africa finds itself more prominently in gang intervention territory, variations of gang intervention are sure to proliferate with the better awareness and understanding. However, to best pair an intervention to a form of gang violence, one must better understand both the form and function of the specific nature of the gang.

Typologies Matrix

	Crew 	Cliques 	Street Gangs 	Prison Gang 
Economics 	None	Semi-Formal: Illicit, Fraud	Formal and Informal: Drugs	None: Insignificant
Hierarchy 	None	Low	High	None
Structure 	None	Low	Medium - High	High
Size 	Small: 15-35	Small: 15-35	Medium 15-200	Large: 1000s
Geography 	Localized and Territory	Localized, Non- Territory	Localized and Territory	Within Prisons
Violence 	High Visibility, Low Mortality	Low Visibility, High Mortality	High Visibility, High Mortality	Medium, Mostly in Prison
Operation 	Informal	Formal, but not Organized	Organized & Managed	Highly Organized, Around Operation
Relationships 	Low: Rarely Formal	Medium: Political and Criminal Networks	High: Police, Political, Community and Criminal Networks	High: Criminal Networks, Political and Intra-Prison



Crew

Crews are a common gang in the black townships and have been in existence in their modern form for about 10 years. The crews observed today are similar to youth crews that have existed throughout South Africa during and after Apartheid. They are not the gangs that are most commonly reported on, but are often referred to by community members when they comment on Gangsterism in dominantly Black townships. Youth crews exist in most townships in the Western Cape, and could often be confused for informal groups of disaffected youth. There is a variant that is reported on more commonly, which I title the 'Mob Crew' here, that consists of multiple locations and larger groups of youth. Sometimes the smaller Crews become affiliates of, or taken-over by, the Mob Crews. Where the Mob Crews differ from regular Crews, I will acknowledge both in title and description.



Economics: No Official Economy

No formal economy or economic outcome exists within the Crew structures of the Western Cape. The youth that participate may be seen to have some economic ends, however they often spend much of their time collecting coins from people who don't use all their coins outside of a local Spaza shop in order to share a bag of chips or drink. They do not organize around a common cause, but instead might be engaged in illegal theft and mugging for the sake of various drug addictions. Because crews are usually made up of adolescents in the Western Cape, their drug habits are usually simple, dagga (marijuana) or Mandrax (Quaaludes).



Hierarchy: No Official Hierarchy

Similarly to the Economics of Crews, there are no official leaders or organizers therein. The Crews of the Western Cape often have influential members, but rarely have official leaders. The communal nature of the Crews leads them to draw one another into fights, assaults, and, sometimes murder. There is almost no formal targeting mechanism for the victims that they encounter. You can be guilty by association or non-association. In this sense, there are no bosses picking victims or calling for gang related violence.



Structure: No Official Structure

Youth Crews are generally unstructured and operate informally. There are many manners in which one gains influence and power within the Crews, none formal. For this reason, the structures vary

considerably, but have no official roles, titles, or responsibilities, yielding no technical structure but that which exists naturally between the members in the moment.

Size: Small, 15-35 members

Most youth Crews in the Western Cape are small in size. They may swell to larger sizes during specific activities, but are usually made up of 15-35 members. The membership in the group is self-determined so the number moves up and down fluidly.

***Mob Crew: 100 - undetermined**

Mob Crew: These Mob Crews are defined largely by their greater size; they incorporate other Crews and maintain higher numbers. The term Mob Crew applies to their size. Mob Crews may actually claim more members than any other type of gang in the Western Cape and are proliferating fast because of the easy right of entry.

Geography: Severely Localized and Territory Based

Crews in the Western Cape are localized around very small sets of boundaries. Two competing Crews will often inhabit territory across the street from one another. Membership to a Crew is often dependent upon where you live. Because territory bears no benefit, save security from other gangs, most Crewmembers participate in the Crew that claims the territory where they reside. These Crews are often generated as a function of informal organization of the youth to protect or retaliate against another Crew victimizing their neighborhood.

***Mob Crew: Franchised Local Geographical Participation**

Mob Crew: The territory that Mob Crews claim is often much larger and looks more like a franchised model. Where you rarely find regular Crews in multiple townships, you frequently find the Mob Crews in several locations throughout a township and crossing the borders of townships throughout the Western Cape. The *Vatos* and *Vuras* are in nearly every black township in the Cape Town area and continue to spread despite being relatively new.

Violence: High Visibility, Low Comparative Mortality: Fists, Sticks, Knives

Crews in the Western Cape participate in frequent crime of convenience. They might gang beat a rival crew member, engage in stone throwing across roads, throw multiple fire bombs at houses of rival gang members, break and enter into someone's home to steal material, but usually to make very little money,

use their numbers to rob from individuals. The violence from Crews usually emerges from groups of youth traveling beyond their usual territory or when youth in other crews infringe upon other groups 'territory.'



Operation: Informal

The operations of Crews can largely be considered informal. The Crew may choose to engage new territory or conflict with other Crews and Gangs. However, rarely is this form of operation targeted or considered. There is rarely an end game other than perceived retribution. Because economy plays little-to-no role in the behavior of the Crew, operations are often ad-hoc and without additional operative intent. For these, and similar reasons the operations of the Crews are generally disorganized and reactive to immediate concerns and opportunities.



Relationships: Low, Rarely Formal

Relationships for Crews in the Western Cape are rare because of the general lack of formality. There are a numbers of informal alliances among Crews. In both Black and Coloured townships the Crews develop relationships with other gangs. Additionally, Crews have a significant effect on schools as youth belonging to a Crew outside the territory of the specific school face violent pressure within and without the school. A common reason for drop out in townships is fear and unfamiliarity of the neighborhood in which the school exists.

***Mob Crew: Often collaborate with multiple Crews**

The Mob Crews are different only in that they collaborate with other neighborhood crews, often swelling the size of a conflict or altercation.



Cliques

Cliques are a generally unknown phenomenon in the Western Cape. They inhabit primarily Black township spaces. They are mostly unknown to law enforcement, civil society, and most of the community. The youth Crews often act as a smoke screen for the behavior and crime committed by the Cliques. Most Cliques in the Western Cape exist in the Black townships and commit significant and untracked crime. Because so much is unknown and secretive about Cliques, this section will contain less detail. The Cliques are significant in their impact despite this lack of awareness and knowledge.



Economic: Semi-formal, Opportunistic

The Economy of Cliques in the Western Cape is generally illicit. Cliques thrive on their internal network of informants and relationships to yield contract-like work to commit robbery, murder, and other forms of typically illegal acts for money. Despite being largely economic in orientation, the formality of the economic activity is low, non-systemic.



Hierarchy: Low

There is only a very low sense of hierarchy in the Clique. There are typically more 'active' members or more influential ones, but rarely is there a boss associated with the Clique. Often there are no specific leaders that officially head the Clique.



Structure: Low

The structure of the Clique of the Western Cape is generally low. They keep a low-profile and keep themselves to very specific and private locations which lends to the idea of high organization. However, the actual organizational structure of the Clique tends to be informal. Like the Crews, it is often made up of groups of friends from the same neighborhood with an informal operating process.



Size: Small, 15-30 members

Usually the Cliques are very small, but connect to larger illicit networks of other forms of gangs. Generally, membership fluctuates depending on activity, but many people choose to affiliate with various Cliques for the cache or the security of being associated with one of the dangerous organizations in the townships.



Geography: Very Little, Location Based

The Cliques of the Western Cape exist mostly in Black townships, and are not based on geographical territory, but might have an affiliated region of a community in which people know them to hang out. This is not patrol oriented, nor real estate based, but security oriented. The Cliques often operate at a specific locale or business that becomes associated with that particular Clique.



Violence: High, Severe

The Cliques are known for being highly dangerous, and likely responsible for many murders in the Black Townships that go unrecorded or unsolved. They often target others; take out 'contracts' or 'tenders' to commit murder. Often, in the Western Cape, the Cliques are responsible for much of the violence surrounding the Taxi ranks, in part because of how commonly people enter the space.



Operation: Organized, Informal

Although there are few hierarchies in the Western Cape Cliques, the operations they conduct are highly organized. In many ways, they engage in similar activities of a mafia, with specific street gang components. For the same reason, the Cliques typically exist, formally, in the Black townships. The informality of the Black townships in the Western Cape makes space for street activity of the Cliques. Cliques often commit crimes of opportunity: theft of vehicles, equipment, house robbery, extortion, and ATM fraud. In addition, they will take money for action, contract kills or 'tenders' as they are referred to in the townships.



Relationships: Medium, Contract Based, Sometimes Political

The relationships between Cliques is tenuous. Only rarely do they get involved with one another, but when they feud, frequent murder results. When death tolls go up in the Black townships of the Western Cape, Cliques are often responsible. The Cliques have built relationships with other formal and informal networks within the townships. They often have a contract-based relationship with the formalized gangs in Coloured townships. Additionally, the Cliques will often use and manipulate the disorganized Crews to scapegoat and hide behind their obvious miscreant behavior.



Street Gangs

Street Gangs are the most written about gangs in the Western Cape. They are most commonly found in the 'Coloured' townships in and around Cape Town. They are most famous for the high profile they've been given in the media as the root cause for the violence emanating from the townships. However, realistically, the gangs of the Coloured townships have largely risen to prominence as a result of the complete disintegration of the community structures during the last 20-30 years in those townships as unemployment has risen significantly. These street gangs are the most evident from their street presence as well and have the most developed street marking systems.

***Street Syndicates**

Street Syndicates have arisen recently out of the Street Gangs as highly organized and franchised versions of the street gangs. The Americans and the Brits are the largest of these syndicates. Of the two the Americans are far more organized, but the Brits are growing in numbers quickly as a counter measure to the dominance of the Americans.



Economics: Formal and Informal, Drug Trade

The economics behind Street Gangs in the Western Cape revolves primarily, although not exclusively, around drugs. The drug trade is what garners the most significant amount of money. They also might have legitimate businesses they support and front the gang additional money. Because of the high price of maintaining gun wars, these gangs end up being as much based on economy as anything else. The gang is many members' livelihood.



Hierarchy: High, Common and Tiered

The hierarchies of the Street Gang are pretty established. They might not all have the same kind of hierarchy exactly, but they all have at least three tiers to their structures. Leaders, Shot callers, and Soldiers. These are not titles given amongst the gangs, but they are likely the most descriptive and accurate. Additionally, there are usually a number of affiliates and active members that fall under a simple patronage category. It looks good to have more numbers, so many gangs allow people to claim membership even when they don't necessarily have a role in the gang.



Structure: Medium – High

The structure of the Street Gangs in Western Cape highly revolves around leadership, territory, and economics. In this case, the leader of the street gang is rarely involved in the activities. They may often make decisions that get carried out somewhere else, they may initiate specific activities or hits, but that is rare. The *shot callers* are used to reorganize territory. They often have the influence in the gang to help redirect the way the soldiers operate. They are generally the planners and trusted by the leader. They provide a strong buffer between the leaders and the illicit activity of the gang. Finally, the *soldiers* are typically no more organized than Crews, unto themselves. However, the presence of the Shot Callers often organizes the place and manner of the crime they commit.



Size: Small – Medium, 15 – 200

The Size of the ordinary Street Gangs in the Western Cape vary greatly. Some may be old holdovers from early youth crews, or they can be medium sized conglomerated and highly organized street structures managing large territories in a community. The smaller Street Gangs have a new tendency to become part of the larger Street Syndicates as they don't have the power to protect themselves from the other gangs in the area anymore. The medium sized Street Gangs pose a different problem, they are sometimes large and powerful enough to maintain their space and size, or sometimes they need to make alliances with larger Street Syndicates.

***Street Syndicates: Large 500+**

The Street Syndicates are much larger, but not easy to track. The Americans, for example, have large territories throughout most of the Coloured Townships. They have similar issues to the Street Gangs, because of their large size and their spread, they have many competitors and managing the territory can become challenging.



Geography: Localized, Neighborhood Based

The geographical boundaries of most Street Gangs are very specific. In many of the Coloured townships of the Western Cape, entire regions of the area are named after the gangs themselves. In Hanover Park, there are areas with American names to represent the territory of the Americans. Equally unique names exist throughout the township to denote where most violence occurs, or the specific manner in which a Street Gang prefers the area to look. The Street Gangs, therefore, know street by street which area belongs to whom. Some Street Gangs might only be safe in a couple square blocks, or one tenant building. Others may claim up to ½ of an entire township.

***Street Syndicates: Franchised, Large Territory Management**

The Street Syndicates operate differently in that they have territory in many areas. They still must keep their territory similarly to the Street Gangs, however, they have greater responsibility to manage the many territories, which causes specific differences in the way resources are allocated or violence is committed and sometimes spills over across multiple townships simultaneously



Violence: High, Severe, Guns and Casualties

The Street Gangs of the Western Cape engage in regular shootouts although usually these are warning shots fired at rival gang members. Often, if a Street Gang wants new territory, this results in general shooting. It is these forms of shooting that often result in civilian deaths. However, much of the violence is very targeted. The gangs often plan for weeks or months to kill someone before they decide to do so. Additionally, some of the murder associated with Street Gangs comes from internal gang punishment of someone for various betrayal-based infractions.



Operation: Organized, Managed

The Street Gangs have strong organizational management. Their operations tend to be premeditated. There is an acceptable amount of chaos that surrounds the drugs and abuse aspects of the Street Gangs, because there are no incentives to prevent it. However, when a member acts outside the rules or alliances of the gang, they are often punished with death. In this manner, not all shootouts or killings are known at the management level before hand, although much of the specific, targeted killing occurs on account of the order from the leader or *shot callers*. In smaller Street Gangs, all these processes merge into one. There may still be a leader, but fewer if any official shot callers.



Relationships: Inter-gang alliances, Community, Political, and Economic

Most Street Gangs have highly diverse relationships with a wide range of both criminal and non-criminal entities. Ranging from partnerships with Cliques to informal relationships with other gangs and crews. Additionally, they have strong relationships with various community organizations and members. Street Gangs can sometimes have relationships with SAPS and other political officials that yield money, drugs, or weapons. Most of all, Street Gangs are money oriented, so they try to build relationships toward that end, including both organized international crime, and legitimate manufacturing-style business in South Africa.



Prison Gangs

Prison Gangs in South Africa are one of the oldest institutions in the country. Over the past one hundred years these gangs organized and permeated all corners of the penal system of South Africa. During the Apartheid era, the Prison Gang operated as a basic prison management and prisoner rights organization amongst the gang and violent activity they also engaged in. Today, the Prison Gangs operate in every prison in South Africa and most people in prison for any medium term become members of the various number gangs. The number include, principally, 26s, 27s, and 28s. There are a couple other smaller number gangs that have been built since the 1980's, and a larger history can be found in multiple places. Most people are more familiar with the number than any other gang in South Africa. It is the most documented gang in the country, however, with real documentaries and ethnographies available.

***Street Prison Gangs**

Street Prison Gangs are a relatively new phenomenon. They exist formally in the Coloured townships more than in the Black townships, and only nominally in the former prison population of White townships in South Africa. The major new development in the Western Cape is that prison gangs are operating as Street Gangs. In the past, this was against the doctrine of the Prison Gangs. They operated largely as a networking agency without any direct street organization. In addition, Street Gang members were expected to put that aside in order to participate in the Prison Gang. Now these two things have merged in various ways.



Economics: Very Little

Prison Gangs function largely within the confines of the prison. This means that the only value to economic engagement comes from what can be used inside prison. The 26 number gang is largely responsible for money management and economics according to the bylaws of the Prison Gang. This means that they organize and manage the various investments made into the prison in whatever form that might take: Cell phones, cigarettes, and other forms of contraband.

***Street Number: High, Frequent Import/Export/Drug**

The Street Number has economies more typical of the Street Gang. The myriad Street Number are primarily involved in money making ventures similar to that of the Street Gangs with some additions. The Number operates as a network for former prisoners looking for informal ways to make money, sometimes illegal, ranging from drug distribution, extortion, to the import and export of contraband.



Hierarchy: Very Highly Formalized Roles

The hierarchy differs between the Street Number and the Prison Number, however they are both very organized and hierarchical. The Prison Number have specific roles for each gang that make up part of the hierarchy. In brief, the 26s are in charge of economy, the 28s are supposed to be governance, and the 27s are meant to be the mediators and judges of conflict between gangs and between individual prisoners – the adjudicators. In many ways this hierarchy resembles government. Within each of the Number, there are leadership and structural roles identified to manage the operations of the gang. These roles are highly tiered and organized.

***Street Number: Strong tiered system**

The Street Number has moved closer and closer to Street Gangs in their hierarchy. They now have similar hierarchies to support the structure they must maintain in the street to compete with other Street Gangs. The 26s and 28s seem to have made particular inroads into Street Gang life recently. For a short time there was allowable crossover between the Street Number and Prison Number, as this has shifted the Hierarchy of the Street Number has become independent and tiered in the same way as Street Gangs with some reverence for the leaders of the Prison Gangs.



Structure: Highly Structured

The structure of the Prison Gangs is much higher, and well documented. The Prison gangs have many designated roles within each to maintain the structure of the organization. The complexity of these roles rivals most businesses and even some corporate structures. Most everyone in the Prison Gang has a purpose within the gang and within the prison, from dispute adjudication to performing duties within the cell. These structures rarely translate into the streets, however some of their reputation can follow them into the streets.

***Street Prison Gangs: Slightly Less, Direct Challenge to Prison**

The Street Number operates in a structure similar to the Street Gangs. They may have some basic reverence for the Prison Number, and will include Prison Number in the Street Number Gangs, however, their general construction mirrors the Street Gangs. There can be tension in terms of the confusing/contradicting mandates between the two organizations.



Size: Large, National Size

The Prison Number are likely the largest network of people in the country. If we look at all the people that are in the Number from the prisons alone, the size of the 26s, 27s, and 28s would rival the Americans. Because these identities are not relinquished once reintegrated, the Prison Number (those not participating in the Street Number, but maintain membership in their respective Number) are likely the largest gangs in the country, including the Western Cape.

***Street Prison Gangs: Smaller, Community Size**

The Street Prison Gangs are smaller. Their size parallels the Street Gangs. Generally, they haven't organized a street presence across townships either, which prevents them from crossing over to the Street Syndicate level.



Geography: Whole of Prisons, Diaspora

The Prison Number saturates all Prisons in the country. There are very few people that attend prison for more than several months without becoming a member. For this reason, most of the country, in both rural and urban areas, have members of the various number living nearby, usually not active in any way. Most of the Number in rural areas are not active as they have taken a vow to keep the Number only for prison.

***Street Prison Gangs: Localized, Neighborhood**

The Street Number generally function like Street Gangs. So they have staked out areas within townships and in suburbs where they might commit crime, fraud, violence, etc. For more info see section on Street Gangs: Geography.



Violence: Medium, Fists/Knives, Stabbing, some Murder

The violence of the Prison Number usually stays in the prison walls. The various assaults and murders that occur within the prison are often orchestrated, planned, or otherwise permitted by the Prison Number. Some of the Prison Number operating outside the prison might also be engaged in violence, but usually outside the mandate of the Prison Number. Rarely do the organizations within the prison order anything from outside it.

***Street Prison Gangs: High, Violent Gun and Knife Murder**

The Street Number is much closer to the 'Street Gang' types and causes of violence. The addition of guns and territory into the equation of membership, combined with the economic influence over the operations of the Street Number pushes them into competition with the Street Gangs. For more information see 'Street Gangs: Violence.'



Operation: Highly Organized, Principally Operational

The operation of the Prison Number Gang is not only highly organized; it was originally put together to maintain organization of a vastly unmanaged prison system in the 19th and 20th centuries. The new function of the Prison Number is to manage the social lives of the prison itself. The 26s are the economic management side of the prison social system. The 27s are the adjudication and dispute resolution gang within the prison. The 28s are the governance and rule generators of the gangs. Within each they have

various types of leaders and administrators to manage the operational mandate. There remains a secret prison language taught only to the number that allows members to discuss issues in prison, but also in the street, without others being able to listen in.

***Street Prison Gangs: Organized, Managed**

The Street Number function similarly to the Street Gang. The Street Number, in most cases, began as derivatives of the Prison Number. However, due to the detached nature of the Prison Number, combined with the rule from within the Prison Number that the Number stay in the prison, has lead to a generally detached, although sometimes reverent Street Number. For more info see 'Street Gangs: Operation.'



Relationships: Intra-Prison Gang, Operational

The key relationships the Number in prison have are within the prison and then as the network mentioned throughout this section. They have a vast network outside the prison as well, which permeates all the levels of business, crime, and politics. The Number tends not to need much from prison. They are a monopoly in that space. However, their relationships outside of prison aid them in prison, and even more so once removed. More often than not, the Prison Number pose little harm to the public or street, although they are often spoken about otherwise.

***Street Prison Gangs: Prison Gangs, Street Gangs, Political, Community, Economic**

The Street Number relationships are much more complex. They have all the relationships of the Street Gangs with some additional connections as a result of having been members of the Prison Number. Their relationship to the Prison Number varies, but usually exists in some ways specific to each Street Gang. Then the Street Number also participate in all the political and Inter-gang relationships mentioned in 'Street Gangs: Relationships.'

Conclusion

In the very confined and defined territories of the Cape Flats outside Cape Town, there are several distinct types gangs as described above. Understanding the type of gang that permeates any given township or neighborhood is key to understanding what types of interventions might be appropriate for the scenario. The Coloured townships suffer principally from the varied forms of Street Gangs. Black townships suffer with the Crews and Cliques. The only way to appropriately address the challenges any community faces in terms of gangs and youth violence, one should first diagnose the type of street violence and gangs before considering the appropriate solution.

Solutions to these problems vary greatly. Some solutions will work more effectively on the Crews and less so on the Syndicated Gangs. These interventions have been in development throughout much of the last 100 years. Interventions can be tailored to the type of gang issues faced. In order to take a look at a manner in which one would begin understanding the most targeted intervention, please see the [Safety Lab's slide show \(insert link\)](#)

Gangs, in their various forms, make up a large part of the social network, economic opportunity, or security provision of the environments mentioned above. The manner in which these facts change must be accounted for in their multiplicity. Economics, hierarchies, structure, size, geography, violence, operation and relationships are the key factors that require consideration before constructing various interventions.

Gangs are different throughout the world. In the case of the Western Cape, the gangs change dramatically from one neighborhood to the next. Studying and understanding the nature of the gangs, how they function, why they function and where they exist will allow for informed action from civil society, government, police, the community, and media.