

# Watch your man

## Young black males at risk of homicidal violence

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*This article will argue that masculine domination is a crucial factor in black male homicidal victimisation in South Africa, but that this is not always appreciated. Under apartheid it was black men who were most likely to be at the receiving end of fatal political violence. Currently black men are still most likely to die violently from interpersonal conflicts. This article aims to underline the fact that it is important for political leaders, policy makers and police chiefs to speak out more often, publicly and without beating around the bush, that young black males are at the highest risk of homicide in South Africa. The article also offers an explanation why young black males are most vulnerable to homicidal violence.*

The 2010 Global Peace Index (GPI) shows South Africa to have slightly improved in its rankings year-on-year.<sup>1</sup> The country remains one of the least peaceful societies in the world, but it has moved up from number 123 out of 144 in 2009, to 121 out of 149 countries in 2010. This ranking puts us far below neighbouring Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia and Swaziland when it comes to peace. The main drivers for South Africa's ranking are the high negative scores the country is given on perceptions of criminality in society, the number of homicides per 100 000 people, levels of violent crime, the likelihood of violent demonstrations, and levels of organised internal conflict.

The results of the 2010 GPI confirms other studies that have indicated that South Africa has some of the highest rates of violence in the world, even though there has been a steady fall in the per capita murder rate<sup>2</sup> in the country since the advent of democracy.<sup>3</sup> Researchers report that nearly half of the injury-related deaths in the country stem from interpersonal conflicts.<sup>4</sup> While

interpersonal, together with self-directed, violence has been estimated to constitute about a quarter of all non-natural deaths globally, it is estimated to account for approximately half of reported non-natural mortality in South Africa.<sup>5</sup> And whereas globally the homicide rate for males is more than three times higher than for females, the homicide rate for South African males is nearly six-fold that for South African females.<sup>6</sup>

Statistics such as these may at times leave the impression that the country is so unsafe as to be uninhabitable. These numbers reproduce perceptions of a country overrun by violent criminals, as can be inferred from the GPI. The fact is, South Africa experiences high levels of violence, but violence is almost never a random event. Despite the seemingly intractable levels of interpersonal violence globally and in South Africa, the determinants and distribution of criminal violence across and within countries are generally relatively well understood. This holds even more for homicidal violence: it is controllable and should, therefore, be preventable.<sup>7</sup> Studies undertaken from around the world show homicide to be concentrated amongst certain identifiable groups and locations.<sup>8</sup> The majority of homicides, available evidence indicates, are committed by someone relatively close to the

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victim – with closeness here referring not only to geographic distance, but more significantly to economic and social distance. Even in cases where the parties are strangers to one another, the economic and socio-psychological variables that contribute to the perpetration of interpersonal violence and victimisation are, on the whole, well grasped. This is of course not to argue that individuals are never killed by strangers, but the number of persons who are accidentally or deliberately murdered by total strangers is relatively low when compared to persons murdered by intimates and others who are socially, economically and geographically close to the victim.

There are a number of studies and reports of violence in South Africa that suggest or even confirm that fatal interpersonal violence can be prevented, even if it is not altogether predictable.<sup>9</sup> This form of violence is shown to be concentrated amongst young men, that is, males in their late teens to mid-40s.<sup>10</sup> More pertinently, urban young black men are at disproportionately higher risk of homicidal victimisation than other groups in South Africa.<sup>11</sup> For instance, in South African cities, black males between the ages 20 and 40 are roughly nine times as likely to die from homicidal violence as black females in the corresponding age group, 17 times as likely as white males in the same age group, and about 35 times as likely as Indian females.<sup>12</sup>

Considering that it is widely acknowledged that South Africa is one of the most violent countries in the world today, the high number of violent deaths of young black males is the metaphorical mammoth in the room that everyone pretends not to notice. Perhaps it is time that political leaders and police chiefs are pushed to stop ignoring it. Then again, if it is well known that homicidal violence is largely predictable and controllable, there is possibly a good reason why it is difficult for the country's political and police leaders to prevent South Africans from dying prematurely in such high numbers. Reasons may include a combination of the following: a weak criminal justice process, a lack of political will, a lack of integrated inter-sectoral strategy, weak

management and leadership, an unconvinced focus on social crime prevention, and other factors that have been suggested by researchers as impeding the state's efforts to deal with violence.<sup>13</sup> However, from a reading of the research and reports on violence, there are very few references to the issue of young black male homicides in South Africa. It is therefore important to gain a better understanding of why more black men die as a result of interpersonal violence than members of other groups; even before dealing with what things may need doing, or doing differently, to save more young black male lives.

### **WHY YOUNG BLACK MEN IN URBAN AREAS DIE AT HIGHER RATES FROM INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE**

Fearlessness is a compelling stereotype about manhood that a significant number of boys grow up to internalise. This prevalent characterisation of masculinity persuades many young males to actively support the idea that successfully masculine males are always ready for a fight, never show fear, ignore pain, and play it cool. For some men, manhood has thus come to be imagined as a set of ideas and practices that includes a fearsome look and drinking hard, a gangster pose and weapon under the clothes.<sup>14</sup> In many places in the country, but perhaps more so in large townships such as Khayelitsha, Soweto and Umlazi, which remain informally segregated, economically poor, and infrastructurally underdeveloped when compared to previously white areas, this set of images and behaviours is expressive of the ruling version of what it means to be a man. Support for this risk-courting idea of manhood may be what puts significant numbers of young black males at greater risk of premature violent death than other men and women.

Doubtless, not all actions engaged in by men put them at risk of homicide. Vulnerability to homicidal victimisation is unevenly distributed among men and, needless to say, not all men are aggressive.<sup>15</sup> A similar picture holds for black

men: the risk of violent death and violent behaviour varies between ages, socio-economic groups, and areas. Hence, it is those things black males of particular ages engage in to assert that they are successfully masculine, in specifiable locations, at particular times, on certain days, during certain months,<sup>16</sup> that renders them vulnerable to premature death from interpersonal violence.

More precisely, not *all* things *all* males do to assert or confirm their masculinity will put them at risk of being murdered, or of murdering another young person. Wanting to be gainfully employed so as to support a family, for instance, is an important element in the construction of certain forms of black, Indian, white, and coloured South African manhood, however, it is not in itself supportive of risky masculinity. Rather, it is specifically those practices that some men engage in within particular social, economic and neighbourhood contexts to express their manhood and demonstrate fearlessness – 'badness', carrying weapons, and behaviours around alcohol usage – that heighten vulnerability to, or perpetration of, violence.

What this understanding of masculinity and vulnerability underlines is that young black males are killed because of some of the things they do within the constraints or freedoms of their social, economic and physical environments. Their attempts at defining masculinity within these environments and constructing masculine domination are what puts them in the way of early violent death. For instance, while behaving as if they own the neighbourhood at night may enable young black males to feel successful in their manhood, however temporarily, such behaviour renders them vulnerable to conflicts with other males and eventually violent death. And while a black young male may feel he needs to show bravado to be regarded as a man by his peers and females, such an act is the very thing that, in certain contexts, will put him at risk of violent victimisation.

This version of fearless, 'clever' and 'pant-sula-esque'<sup>17</sup> manhood in its various guises has for

decades been promoted by various cultural sources such as radio, magazines, newspapers, television, cinema and advertising, from within and outside South Africa. Thus it has become an unavoidable and powerful idea of what 'being a man' ought to be. This dominant idea of manhood appears to underpin some young black men's lives in their interactions with others. Interestingly, this particular set of 'masculinist'<sup>18</sup> urban young black male practices appears by and large resistant to change, in spite of the fact that manhood has been shown to be socially manufactured, historically shaped, culturally contingent, full of contradictions, dynamic, and, most of all, to have different forms. So, it could be that those young black males most vulnerable to homicide are precisely those who 'isolate specific aspects of masculinity and represent these as common and universal', failing to appreciate 'masculine diversity'.<sup>19</sup> Put differently, it could be that some young black males who have limited opportunity to observe and develop different forms of being a man because of the constraints of their cultural, social and economic conditions, are exactly those who have a high likelihood of dying violently.

The notion of different forms of masculinity, or masculine diversity, is one that runs counter to the idea of masculinity as something inborn and inflexible. Researchers around the world have shown that, contrary to the still well-supported idea of sex roles, there is likely to be more than one form of manhood in any one place such as a shebeen, football field, township – or country.<sup>20</sup> These forms of manhood are usually hierarchically organised.

The appreciation that manhood is defined by diverse elements forms part of a wider understanding by researchers from around the world about men's acts as gendered. In addition, there are different masculinities, which are unequally valued by men and women, and which are differentially positioned with respect to available power. In relation to homicide it is important to recognise that these different masculinities can play themselves out in intra-male group rivalries. Beyond verbal altercations or psychological intimidation, physical fights often

break out between individuals and groups of males to show each other who embodies the genuine, hard stuff of manhood. Ultimately, then, fighting between males for dominance is the most likely reason why males, more than females, die from violence.

## **WHAT NEEDS DOING TO SAVE MORE YOUNG BLACK MALE LIVES?**

The number of homicides in South Africa, and the seeming intractability of the problem, may be due to the fact that history continues to hold some of us hostage, especially those who hold the important levers of governmental power. The structural and physical violence of the South African state has historically been levelled against black men and women. The fact that apartheid violence was primarily targeted at blacks may have something to do with the caution exercised by those in positions of power when talking about the violence against black men – which is most likely at the hands of other black men. However, this studied carefulness evades a number of issues, such as the obvious fact that the lives of black men need saving. Ironically, in recent times South African politicians and police commissioners have often 'talked tough' about violent criminals, but it is usually without acknowledging that black men are most at risk of dying as a result of criminal violence.<sup>21</sup> How then do we get to talk about and decrease black men's vulnerability to homicide violence, so often committed by other black men?

Three changes or additions to current policies are proposed. These three recommendations ought to be read as adding to, rather than replacing, previous policy proposals that have been called for by several South African researchers and activists regarding the prevention of violence.<sup>22</sup> The political will to decisively move against violence; strong leadership in relevant public service structures; and well-coordinated, multi-sectoral, evidence-based action that brings in health, finance, economic development, social development, education and, of course, justice and police departments, are some of the crucial elements that must go into a national strategic framework on violence prevention.

## **Homicide is more than a law and order issue**

There appears to be a lack of conviction among political leaders and police heads that violence generally, and homicide in particular, are more than law and order issues.<sup>23</sup> At the least, there is no visible action to support any such conviction that might exist. Changes or additions to policy on policing that take cognisance that black male homicide victimisation is a health, development, gender, and human rights issue, in addition to its criminal and justice aspects, are overdue. What this demands in relation to the high levels of black male homicide is for the state policy on policing to take on board strategies that emphasise less reactive law and order enforcement logic, and more of a better-informed preventative and security logic that recognises the social, economic and infrastructural aspects of the problem.

## **Recognise masculine domination as a significant driver of the black male homicide problem**

A take-home lesson from critical studies on men referred to above is that some masculinities are motivated to dominate others. The dominance motivation appears to be central to the relationships that certain males have with females; and even more importantly here, the desire to impose their will on others has been shown to be significant to the relationship some men have with other men. In highly unequal societies, where avenues for individual and social human development opportunities are unevenly distributed and where large numbers of young black males are unemployed and without good prospects, violence becomes a critical mechanism in some men's strivings to be regarded as successfully masculine. As has been noted in respect of some African countries, if the violence of men is to be drastically reduced, governments and other role players have to take into consideration the association of masculinity with aggression.<sup>24</sup> What this suggests is that knowing something about the expression of masculinity in low-income environments within unequal societies is an important factor in any serious effort to

effectively police young black males and, more critically, to prevent them from being murdered. In policing young black men, the South African police need to get better, up-to-date knowledge and training in young black men's constructions of masculinity. Such knowledge and training could make the police more effective in policing places where young black men hang out, with a good chance that it will save many more lives than is the case at present.

## Moving beyond unhelpful racial self-consciousness

Lastly, in view of the fact that in the past it was black men who were likely to be at the receiving end of apartheid's patriarchal racist violence, and that in the present dispensation black men are still most likely to die violently from interpersonal conflicts, it may be time that those in relevant leadership positions tread less cautiously when it comes to tackling the problem of black male homicide. In short, saving lives seems to call for less racially self-conscious, appropriately targeted, and well thought-out policing of black men, while remaining aware of the history of violence against black men.

Given South Africa's historical and current race-based inequalities some of these recommendations will almost certainly be regarded as problematic. However, given the apparent silence or equivocation in respect of the problem of black male homicide, it is imperative to state these recommendations forthrightly.



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## NOTES

- 1 Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index: 2010 Methodology, results & findings*, Institute for Economics and Peace, Sydney, 2010.
- 2 While there are challenging debates and important differences across countries, national agencies within countries, and between researchers with regard to how murder and homicides are understood and recorded, in this article they carry the same meaning: both are taken to refer to death deliberately inflicted on a person by another person. Therefore, homicidal violence is meant to refer to any injuries by any means

- intentionally inflicted on a person by another person leading to death. See, for example, A Altbeker, 'Puzzling statistics: Is South Africa really the world's crime capital?', *SA Crime Quarterly* 11, 2005, 1-8; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) Coding Manual Revised [Online]*, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, [www.cdc.gov/injury](http://www.cdc.gov/injury), (accessed 23 Aug. 2010), 2008; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC homicide statistics, <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/homicide.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2010); World Health Organisation, International Classification of Diseases, <http://www.who.int/classifications/icd/en/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2010).
- 3 See for example, A Altbeker, 'Murder and robbery in South Africa: a tale of two trends', in A Van Niekerk, S Suffla and M Seedat (eds.), *Crime, Violence and Injury Prevention in South Africa: Data to Action*, Tygerberg: Medical Research Council-University of South Africa Crime, Violence and Injury Lead Programme, 2008, 122-149; South African Police Service, *Annual Report: 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009*, [http://www.saps.gov.za/saps\\_profile/strategic\\_framework/annual\\_report/2008\\_2009/2\\_crime\\_situation\\_sa.pdf](http://www.saps.gov.za/saps_profile/strategic_framework/annual_report/2008_2009/2_crime_situation_sa.pdf) (accessed 14 Dec 2009); M Seedat, A van Niekerk, R Jewkes, S Suffla and K Ratele, 'Violence and injuries in South Africa: prioritising an agenda for prevention', *Lancet* 374, 2009, 1011-1022; GD Breetzke, 'Modeling violent crime rates: A test of social disorganisation in the city of Tshwane, South Africa', *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 2010.
  - 4 Seedat et al, Violence and injuries in South Africa.
  - 5 H Donson (ed), *A profile of fatal injuries in South Africa 2007*, Medical Research Council-University of South Africa Crime, Violence and Injury Lead Programme, Tygerberg, 2008.
  - 6 Donson (ed), *A profile of fatal injuries in South Africa 2007* in EG Krug, LL Dahlberg, JA Mercy, AB Zwi and R Lozano (eds), *World Report on Violence and Health*. World Health Organisation, Geneva, 2002; Seedat et al, Violence and injuries in South Africa.
  - 7 See for example, JA Mercy, ML Rosenberg, KE Powell, CV Broome and WL Roper, 'Public health policy for preventing violence', *Health Affairs* (Winter), 1993, 7-29; Krug et al, *World Report on Violence and Health*; G Stevens, M Seedat, and A Van Niekerk, Understanding and preventing violence, in K Ratele & N Duncan (eds), *Social psychology: Identities and relationships*, Cape Town, UCT Press, 2003, 353-371.
  - 8 See, for example, B O'Flaherty and R Sethi, 'Homicide in black and white', *Journal of Urban Economics*, 2010, 1-16; South African Police Service, *Annual Report: 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008: Crime situation in South Africa*, [http://www.saps.gov.za/saps\\_profile/strategic\\_framework/annual\\_report/2007\\_2008/2\\_crime\\_situation\\_sa.pdf](http://www.saps.gov.za/saps_profile/strategic_framework/annual_report/2007_2008/2_crime_situation_sa.pdf) (accessed 10 Aug. 2010); S Kramer, *Risk factors for homicide by firearm discharge in night time Johannesburg*, Paper presented at the 16th South African Psychology Congress, International Convention Centre, Durban, 6 August, 2010.

- 9 C Tittle, 'Is a general theory of socially disapproved violence possible (or necessary)?', *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 3(1), 2009, 60-74.
- 10 K Ratele and S Suffla, Men, masculinity, and cultures of violence and peace in South Africa, in C Blazina & D Shen-Miller (eds), *An International Psychology of Men. Theoretical Advances, Case Studies, and Clinical Innovations*, New York, Routledge, 2010.
- 11 However, see JDS Thomson, 'A murderous legacy: coloured homicide trends in South Africa', *SA Crime Quarterly*, 7, 2004, 9-14. Using data sets from Stats SA and the National Injury Mortality Surveillance System, Thomson has contended that between 1938 and 2003 the coloured male homicide rate has been higher than for any other group.
- 12 K Ratele and M Smith, van Niekerk, Seedat & Van den Borne, *Race, age, masculinity and homicide in urban South Africa*. Paper presented at the Medical Research Council-University of South Africa Safety and Peace Promotion Research Unit, Medical Research Council, Tygerberg, August, 2010.
- 13 See for example, D Bruce and C Gould, 'The war against the causes of crime: advocacy for social crime prevention in the face of tougher law enforcement', *SA Crime Quarterly* 30, 2009, 13-20; R Jewkes, N Abrahams, S Mathews, M Seedat, A Van Niekerk, S Suffla, K Ratele, *Preventing rape and violence in South Africa: call for leadership in a new agenda for action*, 2009, MRC Crime Violence and Injury Lead Programme, Tygerberg; Seedat et al, *Violence and injuries in South Africa*.
- 14 K Ratele, 'Masculinity and male mortality in South Africa', *African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention* 6(2), 2008, 22-35.
- 15 See for example, R Luyt, *Masculinity and aggression in South Africa*, *Sexuality in Africa* 2(1), 2005, 1-3; L Segal, *Changing men: masculinities in context*, *Theory and Society* 22(5), 1993, 625-641; L Walker, 'Men behaving differently: South African men since 1994', *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 7(3), 2005 225-238.
- 16 See for example, H Donson (ed), *A profile of fatal injuries in South Africa 2007* in L Swart & Donson, *A Profile of Fatal Injuries in Mpumalanga: The 2nd Annual Report of the Provincial Injury Mortality Surveillance System 2008*, MRC-UNISA Crime, Violence & Injury Lead Programme, 2009.
- 17 'AmaPantsula' was a significant South African urban subculture based around particular forms of clothing practices, adeptness at the use of knives, and walking in cool stylizations. Arguably, it had its heyday in the 1970s and 80s, with its place possibly having been taken by the subcultural practices of young males who self-identify as 'amaGents'.
- 18 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr), *Into the heart of darkness: journeys of the amagents in crime, violence and death*, 1998. Paper prepared as part of research conducted for the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. Available on [http://www.csvr.org.za/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=blogsection&id=8&Itemid=200&limit=101&limitstart=303](http://www.csvr.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=8&Itemid=200&limit=101&limitstart=303). In the study on young men the CSVr suggested that 'masculinism' may be implicated in the introduction of the group studied into a life of crime and violence. It defined masculinism as involving elements of 'defiance, experimentation and the need to push boundaries in their lives in order to prove their manhood and independence'.
- 19 R Morrell, 'The times of change: men and masculinity in South Africa', in R Morrell (ed), *Changing men in southern Africa*, Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2001, 3-37.
- 20 T Carrigan, RW Connell and J Lee, *Toward a new sociology of masculinity*, *Theory and Society* 14, 1985, 551-604.
- 21 See for example, Bruce and Gould, *The war against the causes of crime*; Jewkes et al, *Preventing rape and violence in South Africa: call for leadership in a new agenda for action*.
- 22 See for example, A Butchart, D Brown, A Wilson, and C Mikton, *Preventing violence and reducing its impact: How development agencies can help*, Geneva, World Health Organisation, 2008; Jewkes et al, *Preventing rape and violence in South Africa: call for leadership in a new agenda for action*; Krug et al, *World Report on Violence and Health*.
- 23 See for example, R Matzopoulos, B Bowman, S Mathews and J Myers, *Applying upstream interventions for interpersonal violence prevention: An uphill struggle in low- to middle-income contexts*, *Health Policy*, 2010; S Schopper, JD Lormand and R Waxweiler (eds), *Developing policies to prevent injuries and violence: guidelines for policy-makers and planners*, Geneva, World Health Organisation, 2006.
- 24 G Barker and C Ricardo, *Young men and the construction of masculinity in Sub-Saharan Africa: implications for HIV/AIDS, conflict, and violence*, Social Development Papers: Conflict Prevention & Reconstruction, Paper No. 26, June. Conflict Prevention & Reconstruction Social Development Department, The World Bank, Washington, DC, 2005.