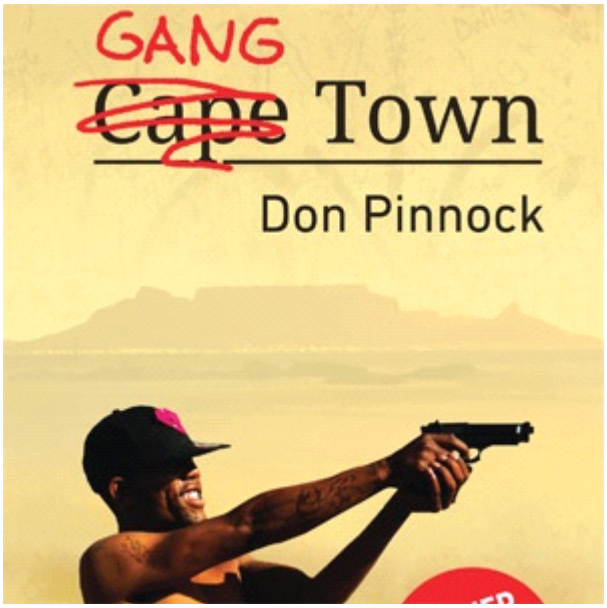
Gangster’s paradise: why Cape Town’s gangs are thriving

Police efforts to curb gang membership and violence in Cape Town are failing. In an attempt to find a solution, a new book, Gang Town, by Don Pinnock turns existing theories on their head.



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About the book:

Cape Town is two cities. One is beautiful beyond imagining, known since its beginning as the 'fairest cape' in the world. Here tourists come to lounge on beaches, scale misty peaks and dine in fine restaurants.

The other is one of the most dangerous cities in the world, where police need bullet-proof vests and sometimes army backup. Here gangs of young men rule the night with heavy calibre handguns, dispensing heroin, cocaine, crystal meth and fear.

This is a story of the second city...

In Gang Town, investigative journalist and criminologist Don Pinnock draws on more than thirty years of research to provide a nuanced and definitive portrait of youngsters caught up in violent

crime.

Rethinking delinquency

In a single year ending in March 2015 more than seventeen thousand people were murdered in South Africa. This is higher than some countries at war. Around 600 000 other violent crimes were reported, including attempted murder, rape, robbery and assault.

The country's murder rate per 100 000 is 30.5 per 100 000, one of the world's highest. In Cape Town it's much higher at 55. This number masks the city's huge internal disparities. In Nyanga, it's estimated the murder rate above 200 per 100 000. In 2012 contact crime in the Western Cape was 1 852 per 100 000.

Much of this is attributed to gangs.

Reasons for Cape Town's high crime rate are generally given as mass population removals under apartheid, a history of peri-urban alcohol production, poverty, poor education, unemployment, drug use and single parents.

Most proposed solutions are notable by their generality, unworkability and lack of analytic precision. The standard official response is: Lock them up. We do, in large numbers, but it's not working. Recidivism is estimated at around 90%.

As a criminologist working on youth gangs, my job is to understand causes and come up with solutions. Since the problem was first raised by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim in the mid-19th century there have been many theories of adolescent delinquency: Social disorganization, deviance, social learning, anomie, strain theory, labeling, differential association, subcultural theory.

All these had to do with the environment in which a young person was raised. Recent biosocial research points in a different direction.

Every creature is created from the intersection of two environments. One is ancient, a response to environmental changes over millions of years which is 'memorised' by the DNA within each cell. It changes so slowly that if you shaved Homo Naledi and dressed her in jeans and a T-shirt you might not distinguish her from us, though she may be more than a million years old.

The other surrounds the DNA within its cell – countained by the cell membrane – as well as linkages between the cell and the body. This is described as the epigene and is the real engine that 'makes' who we are in every moment.

To put it another way, the DNA is the historical blueprint and the epigene is the factory that uses it to guide construction. The DNA has all the plans, but the epigene builds a baby in response to the influence of its environment. This startling realisation has overturned all previous genetic theory. So what's this got to do with gangs?

For a start it collapses the dichotomy between nature and nurture which has bedeviled delinquency studies since Durkheim. The hoary old binary which asks: Are we born or made criminal? is the wrong question.

The issue is not about criminality or even delinquency but about a biosocial cascade of responses to environmental signals which strengthen or weaken adolescent resilience from the moment of conception.

A mother who is undernourished or smokes, drinks, takes drugs or highly stressed during pregnancy IS that environment. In places like Manenberg or Hanover Park drugs abound and stress escalates with every gunshot. How does that affect her child?

Apart from lower birth weight and physical stunting, it can precipitate changes to an area of the foetal brain known as the prefrontal cortex. This can result in later behavioral changes which cascade through a person's entire life.

Life-path studies in New Zealand, the United States and the Netherlands have made compelling links between such pre- and immediate postnatal biosocial environments and later adolescent behavior. Prenatal stress was found to correlate with higher levels of adolescent violence, greater drug use and generally a-social behaviour.

But here's an important question. Is this damage, or is it biochemical adaptations to prenatal and early postnatal signals of a high-risk, stressful environment?

We are a species that has survived ice ages, famines, the dangers of hunting and war and the stress

of being a small, toothless, clawless mammal in a very dangerous world. Why would natural selection have favored organisms that, by default, respond to chronic adversity by becoming dysfunctional?

In high-risk areas of the Cape Flats there's no shortage of adversity: problems of attachment, inept or harsh parenting, absent fathers, peer pressure and the environment into which they were born. That most kids make it through okay despite poverty and all the rest is a testament to loving parents and caregivers.

It's significant that areas of extreme violence in Cape Town map largely on gang territories and almost exactly on areas with very high numbers of one-parent families, drug and alcohol use and toxic levels of stress. An epigenetic perpective is a clue to the harshness, pervasiveness, violence and fast-life strategy of the gang culture in such neighbourhoods.

There's a strong possibility that gangsters don't only cause but are, from conception, biosocially attuned to their fierce ecological context and that their hair-trigger aggression and risky behavior is essential for their survival.

They take drugs to feel normal, kill to stimulate a dopamine high and feel no remorse because of impaired ability of their pre-frontal cortex to mediate their actions. To this his is added the shame of fatherlessness and early parental non-attachment from hyper-stressed mothers.

Prenatal biosocial stress and an un-loving, unsupportive environment without caregiver attachment will exacerbate later a-social behaviour. It's a high road to the unforgiving surrogate family of the gang.
Understanding the epigenetic impact of the environment within the first 1000 days of existence opens up novel possibilities for adolescent containment programmes which work with – and not against – subcortical, dopamine-driven hyperdrive, lowered empathy and aggression.

Any programme dealing with high-risk adolescent behavior needs to be careful not to 'declaw the cat', by trying to make these kids 'more like us' and blunt their survival skills. We simply need to give them skills to use their innate tendencies in pro-social ways.

Of course prenatal damage or genetic inheritance are not the only indicators of later delinquency. And it's unlikely that all gang members have subcortical lesions, ancestral damage or attachment

deficiencies and that law-abiding citizens do not.

But there is a possibility that young people primed for threat detection through pre- and postnatal hurt may seek each other out, recognising themselves in each other. This might, therefore, be a way to understand gang formation.

Such compromised young people may form the core of the Cape's many gangs and explain their tendancy for easy violence and the toxic climate in which they engage.

On the other hand, the effect of maternal support, early love and care on still-plastic epigenetic processes which stimulate the development of empathy, caution, reflection and sociablity are a hedge against high-risk a-social behavior.

This suggests that increased support for pregnant women and effective early child development programmes are central to the reduction of violence and to gang formation.
That's a hopeful message.