Young boys behind bars: An ethnographic study of violence and care in South Africa
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Moving Beyond the Physical Confinements of the Institution and Back In

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MOVING BEYOND THE PHYSICAL CONFINEMENTS OF THE INSTITUTION AND BACK IN

While the previous chapter focused on the fluidity of the roles and positions of staff and boys within the institution and the influence from the outside on the enactment of these roles and positions, this chapter focuses on movements across the physical boundaries of the institution as another aspect of its permeability. After a brief overview of the range of physical movements across the walls of the institution, I specifically examine the boys’ running away from the institution, a practice that is termed abscondment in legal and policy documents and accordingly also within the institution.

My extensive experience in adult prisons made me believe that it would be difficult if not virtually impossible for boys in such places of confinement to escape from the grounds. However, in Middletown running away was not such a rare and arduous action. In fact, it was a regular, almost routine occurrence. The study of this practice sheds more light on the boys as social actors in the secure care facility where they are supposed to be confined. I will subsequently address the following aspects of abscondment: the ways it is enacted; the boys’ reasons for running away as well as their reasons for returning to the institution following their escape; the various responses staff members give to the running away; and the institutional sanctions in the case of abscondment.

I conclude that while moving beyond the physical confines of the institution and moving back again does contribute to the communication between incarcerated boys and their families and communities, as favoured by policy documents, in the end this movement leads to a reinforcement of the objective of the ideal type of a total institution.

7.1. Communication and physical movements across the walls of the institution

In Middletown there was full recognition of the importance of the boys’ maintaining contact with their family and friends. This contact was encouraged in a variety of ways. Middletown is supposed to be a visitor-friendly space. It arranges transport for family and friends living outside of the city who want to visit a boy in the institution. Weekly telephone calls by boys to friends and family are encouraged. Also, supervised sleepovers are organised in which family are allowed to visit and stay over for the night with their children. Often family and friends would come to the institution without having arranged an appointment. In those cases they were usually welcomed and facilitated to see the boy they came to visit.

Besides family and friends, various professionals also moved in and out of the institution. Religious leaders, doctors, social workers, probation officers, police officers, lawyers and others were able to move through its gates. Through the fences, boys within the institution sometimes interacted with their peers outside the institution. During the holidays,
the boys would play different sports on the field. On one occasion, I watched a group of young boys standing outside the barbed wire fence surrounding Middletown chatting with a group of boys inside, challenging each other about the sports they did.

Boys themselves could cross the physical boundaries of the institution for various reasons. A boy could, for instance, be sentenced to confinement in another institution or he could be moved to another institution because he had become too old to be housed in a secure care facility. In addition, boys might be placed elsewhere because of being bullied or bullying others or because space was needed for a new admission. The only thing a boy could do to leave the institution on his own initiative was to run away.

For governmental departments responsible for the institutionalization of boys suspected of criminal behaviour or sentenced for it, and for secure care facilities themselves, running away is referred to as abscondment. This term refers to the act of scaling the walls irrespective of whether the boy plans to return on his own account or for how long he absconded. However, whether staff members at secure care facilities documented the combined act of running away and returning as an abscondment, I do not know. This latter kind of abscondment can be perceived as one of the ways they were able to maintain contact and interact with people outside the institution.

7.2. The act of running away

On a cold day in June, as I was leaving the institution to go home, Denise, a care worker, asked the boys to sing a few gospel songs for me. She told them to stand in a circle and invited me to join them in closing the circle. The boys started to sing. They looked as if they were enjoying themselves: clapping hands and dancing. The boys chose specific gospel songs they wanted to sing. While they were singing, I was standing in the circle, watching and listening while some of the boys started to act out the lyrics. The contrast between their situation of incarceration and their enactment of happiness through singing and dancing was an emotional experience for me because I was very aware that I had a choice when I wanted to leave the place but they were confined to this space against their will. Soon, however, this preconception of mine was challenged.

While the boys were singing, we all saw a security guard run past the barred windows next to the dormitory. The guard pushed the gate open and continued to run towards the square, grass-patched courtyard situated behind Sharks and Panthers. All the boys in the dorm ran to the window to watch. They started screaming, ‘Daar spat hy, daar spat hy!’ (He is running, he is running!). Denise explained to me that one of the boys from another dorm was trying to run away. I made my way to the window, wanting to see if the guard would catch the boy or whether the boy would successfully escape. The guard was running back and another guard came to assist him. Denise then said to the boys in the dorm, ‘Nee wat, hy gaan dit nie maak nie’ (No way, he is not going to make it). The boys laughed and seemed excited. They challenged Denise, and said that they believed the absconder had escaped. After all the commotion, the boys moved away from the window and continued singing as if nothing had happened.

This was one of numerous attempts to abscond from the secure care facility I observed or heard about during the period of my stay at the institution. Some were successful, some not. In the earlier days of my fieldwork, I would vaguely hear the whispers of boys as
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they planned their escapes or spoke about those who had already escaped the institution. As time passed and my relationships with the boys deepened, they started to include me in their planning and their reasons for wanting to escape. Nasief was one of these boys.

Nasief was a 13-year-old boy. Early one morning he attempted to run away but was caught. Later the same day, he told me he was planning a second attempt that day. As the day progressed, I asked him, ‘So are you still thinking of running away today?’ He replied with no hesitation, ‘Yes!’ as he stared outside the window and then turned to catch a glimpse of my response. ‘How are you planning to do it?’ I asked, waiting to see whether he would include me in his plan. He placed his arms on the table and moved closer so that I could hear him quietly explaining his earlier attempt that morning:

I got up here [as he pointed to the steel gate next to the dorm where he sleeps], when the gate was closed. Then I climbed onto the wall and onto the roof. Then I ran down here [pointing to the ceiling of the room] till by the Panthers. I walked across the sink roof and jumped down there [over the barbed-wire fence]. When I ran this way [as he signalled in the direction of the main road near the institution], the security saw me. So he caught me.

6.2.1. Escaping from unsafety in search of freedom

At the time of the interview, Nasief had been institutionalised for 18 days. When I questioned him about why he wanted to escape, he made it clear he was unhappy at the institution. I asked him whether he wanted to tell me what was wrong. We went to the staff room in the dorm and he disclosed how he was being bullied in the dorm. The seasoned boys physically beat him, stole his belongings and constantly verbally abused him.

His story confirmed my impression of him. I had noticed that he had been struggling to adapt to the boys and the ways of the institution, and that other boys were always picking on him and challenging him. The seasoned boys realised Nasief was less confrontational than many of the other boys. I had also observed that in most cases Nasief did not respond with physical aggression or verbal abuse, which tends be normalised behaviour among staff and boys. Nasief replied to my further questioning about his reasons for absconding that for him being institutionalised is a waste of time. He added: ‘I also don’t want to be here every day when there’s trouble. Each day here, I cry because they are always hurting me. Now what I’m going to do is run away and come back when it’s my court date’. For Nasief, running away was his solution to being victimised. According to him, he was being assaulted every day and he wanted it to stop. By absconding he would be free from being abused in the institution.

Nasief had followed the protocol of reporting the assaults he underwent to the care worker on duty. During the interview he seemed distraught as he told me about the incident that morning. He explained:

This morning, Zipho hit me hard. So I told Mrs Jantjes [the care worker – Iris, as I will call her below]. She then told the manager, but the manager did nothing about it. Mrs Jantjes then said to me that the manager must understand now what you doing [absconding]. Mrs Jantjes said that she herself will not blame me for absconding because even though I had reported these assaults, the manager will not respond to it.
While Nasief appreciated the care worker’s response, he was also aware of his position and responsibilities as an awaiting trial inmate. He mentioned that if he did not return and show up for his court appearance, it would be detrimental to his case and he ran the risk of being institutionalised for a longer period or be sentenced for the crime.

At this point in our conversation, I became interested in where Nasief was planning to run to and what he would do once he was outside. He responded: ‘I don’t care where I end up. I will run until I see the train and jump between the carriages.’ Then I will go to town, where everybody knows me and from there take a taxi to Bellville.’ Bellville is a suburb about a twenty-minute drive away from the institution. Nasief, like other locals, was aware this was a central point for the mini-bus taxis where he could take a taxi to any part of the city. When I asked him where he would get money to take a taxi from town to Bellville, he responded confidently, ‘I’m a gaatjie. I don’t pay to take a taxi. They [taxi drivers] all know me’. He continued, ‘I’m going to Bellville to get my friend there. Then from tomorrow, I’m going to work until the weekend is over’.

I concluded from my exchange with Nasief that he had planned his escape and that he was confident that he could rely on his social networks and social support in the outside world, a consequence of his experience as an employee and his adult behaviour and role in the community.

Nasief’s experiences of unsafety in the institution as a reason to abscond were shared by other boys. In a group discussion I talked to the boys who were participating about their perceptions as to whether the institution was a place of actual safety. As they expressed their views, one of the boys said: ‘They must destroy Middletown. Everyone runs away because they are being hit.’ Boys subsequently spoke about another reason for absconding: ‘We can’t play outside, only one shift allows us to,’ said one of them. Another one interrupted: ‘That’s the reason why we have to stay indoors because the boys run away. So we all have to stay indoors!’

Later in this chapter, I will address the policy measures, taken towards the end of my stay in Middletown, to restrict the boys’ previous relative freedom within the institution. However, this increased control did not prevent them from absconding.

6.2.2. Escaping boredom in search for excitement

The lack of freedom boys experience within the institution is closely related to their experiences of boredom and their desperate need for excitement. ‘It’s boring. It does not feel nice … You just have to sit all the time! If you stand up, they tell you to go and sit in the hall,’ said one of the boys when he described what they as boys do during the day. Boys are locked up in their dorms for the better part of the day. Every day, ideally, the boys are escorted to the school that is situated on the grounds of the institution. This means they do not need to leave the premises to attend school. At school, the boys attend for two hours and after

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1 ‘Jumping’ between the carriages and ‘jumping train’ refers to a person not paying yet stepping onto the train and travelling to a certain destination. This is an illegal and dangerous (but common) way for people to use the public train in Cape Town without paying.
2 ‘Gaatjie’ is a slang word for ‘guard’. A gaatjie is a person who works in the mini-taxi services. This person works alongside the taxi driver and collects the money from the passengers. He or she will also usually seat people when they enter the taxi.
the two hours, they are escorted back to the dorm. The staff (therapists or care workers) can facilitate programmes to entertain the boys. But the reality is that more often than not the boys are left to their own devices.

Care workers and therapists are unable to conduct and facilitate groups of boys throughout the day, mainly because of the limited resources available and the emotional and physical strain of this kind of work. Yet occasionally the boys will be led to the grass fields where they can entertain themselves with sport, bask in the sun or play games. Otherwise, after hours of being locked up, the boys and care workers become frustrated and bored because there is not much activity. Boys are restricted most of the time to sitting in the common room of the dorm, under surveillance. As Ryan said in a discussion about reasons for running away, ‘We may not play outside. Only one shift allows us to play outside. So what must we do?’ Michael continued, ‘On Sunday, I couldn’t even watch a movie.’ In such situations, abscondment then transforms boredom, frustration and a sense of entrapment in the daily routine and structured lifestyle of the institution into a creative, exciting ‘time-out’, or as staff members jokingly called it, a ‘sabbatical’.

While exploring what the boys were doing during their time-out, they told me: ‘We go to Mr. J [a drug dealer in an informal settlement situated within walking distance from the institution] to buy dagga. It’s not that far from here. We first smoke it all, and then we come back. When we get back, we are hungry from smoking the dagga.’ It became clear the boys were leaving the premises to find excitement in engaging and participating in what is perceived and generally understood among staff members and the institution as ‘bad behaviour’. This includes smoking dagga, drinking alcohol, engaging in sexual behaviour, and so forth. In that outside world, drugs, sex, violence are less objected to and frowned upon than inside the institution.

The decision to abscond and the execution of that decision, however, can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, boys are absconding to create space for themselves to engage outside in what is considered to be unacceptable behaviour inside, while, on the other hand, they do engage in ‘bad’ behaviour when they abscond. In other words, they are running away to be good – adhering to the rules of the institution by not using drugs or participating in sexual behaviour inside the institution – only to return being bad because they absconded.

7.3. Reasons for returning to the institution

It was interesting to observe that many boys abscond only to return a few hours or days later. After having questioned various boys about this return, I started to understand even better that from their perspective abscondment is an escape from routine and, as such, a form of entertainment. Boys search for ways of expanding their position and situation while refusing to succumb completely to the institutional ‘trimming’ and ‘programming’ of their personal identities. They create social and physical space to bypass and lessen the experience of physical, emotional and social isolation from society. In other words, the boys literally climb over the physical walls, thereby escaping the restrictions imposed on them. However, if this is the case, why would they return to the institution on their own after their escape?

When I posed this question to the boys, I received a variety of answers. These included: ‘My mother would have sent me back’; ‘I can go home but it’s too far’; ‘some of the boys run but they don’t want to go home or they don’t know the way home’. Thus the
geographical location of the institution is one reason for the boys’ return. As I explained in my Introduction, Middletown is placed outside the city centre of Cape Town, close to a town called Stellenbosch, nestled in midst of the wine-farming region. Many of the boys live on the Cape Flats, in the Overberg region or even closer to the city. They hence are not too familiar with the region of the institution’s location. Consequently, the geographical location of the institution and the boys’ unfamiliarity with the space surrounding it influence their choice to return to the institution after abscondment.

Another major reason for return is that the drugs and other commodities boys buy for themselves and their peers inside during their time outside can be used for gaining more safety and a sense of power upon their return. Drugs are a highly desired commodity inside the institution. Secretly using drugs is experienced as recreation during the long hours of being locked up. The case of Rico, one of the newer boys at the time, illustrates how drugs can bring safety and power inside the institution.

Rico told me he had absconded to buy dagga for himself. The other boys commented that they bring the dagga with them when they return. Rico agreed and continued, ‘Someone gives you money to go and buy dagga for them. So you go, buy it and come back.’ As I probed Rico’s statement, I started to understand that absconding was a means to an end for him and others. Rico’s action of also absconding for someone else communicated to his peers that he was daring and willing to follow instruction from peers. It could be understood that the boys who sent Rico were using him for their own gain and that he was being victimised. However, Rico’s choice to abscond also involved strategic calculation. Previously, he was rather of an outsider among his peers: whereas the staff generally liked him, he was socially excluded by the other boys and frequently assaulted. When he absconded to purchase the dagga for his peers and returned with it, the staff punished him. More importantly for Rico’s purposes, he was now accepted among his peers, in addition to which he had created allies with the boys for whom he had bought the dagga – alliances which served to give him greater safety and protection. As such, abscondment can be understood as an action boys take to create or reproduce relationships, alliances and a position of power. Absconding allows boys to purchase or accumulate goods that can be used as negotiating tools inside.

4. The gamble of abscondment

Although boys abscond to create a safe social space for themselves within the walls of the institution, it also places the boys at high risk of being victimised inside and outside, during and after abscondment. They are exposed to a range of risks, including committing additional criminal acts, perpetrating violence or falling victim to violence (including sexual violence), social exclusion, and drug abuse upon return to the institution. The cases of Dimples and Dylan illustrate some of these risks.

On a Friday afternoon, Dimples, along with four other boys, decided to run away. According to Dimples, they ran away because they wanted to buy dagga. Their intention was to return. After having jumped the wall at Middletown, they ran to the shacks close to the institution. These shacks are known among the boys and staff as a place where boys frequently head to after absconding. When Dimples and the others arrived at the shacks, they asked people where they could buy dagga. After having indulged in drugs, the boys were
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‘gerook’.

Tevin, one of the absconders, then wanted to visit his mother. The other boys decided to tag along and possibly visit their families as well. They headed in the direction of the train station, which was also within walking distance of the shacks and the institution.

Once they arrived, they bumped into boys from the town. As Dimples said, ‘We wanted to take a train to go to our neighbourhoods. We were walking and there was a train coming on, so those boys started chasing us.’ I asked him why the boys were chasing them and he replied that he did not know. He implied that the boys wanted to harm them. As our conversation continued, Dimples explained why he returned. ‘We decided to come back because we don’t live a good life on the outside.’ As I explored this statement, Dimples confessed, ‘Die jongens gebruik ons’ [The other guys use us]. We have to break in and steal for them. It’s not worth stealing for other people and making them rich ...’ He added that he would be paid with drugs and a little money.

Here, he was alluding to a rather familiar and complicated issue of young children being used by older people to commit crimes. Adults use children to commit criminal acts as way of them avoiding being caught and imprisoned for a longer period. They hope that children will receive a lesser punishment or that the charges against them will be dropped. In addition to being targeted as victims outside and the increased chance of becoming further involved in criminal activities, Dimples allegedly fell victim to another crime, one of sexual abuse and exploitation.

On Dimples’ return, staff, including myself, noticed a drastic change in Dimples’ behaviour. Staff members then asked me whether I could speak to him and find out what was happening. When I approached Dimples, he was reluctant to talk. This was unusual for him as he was always one of the first who would be interested in communicating. Days went by during which he did not speak. Eventually the boys who absconded alongside Dimples started speaking out. They told me of the older man whom they encountered while being outside. They mentioned that Dimples disappeared with the man behind a bush near the train station. According to them, Dimples disappeared for a while and then returned with money. This money allowed them to buy food and drugs. Although it was not directly said, Dimples must have offered the man sexual favours in return for money. One of the boys who went along claimed that Dimples was closing the buttons of his jeans as he was walking towards them. All the boys seemed to have had a similar story about their experience outside, including the one related to Dimples’ encounter with the older man. Whether Dimples was coerced or not into having sexual relations with this man was not clear to me. What is certain is that that was the kind of experience the boys occasionally had when outside the institution.

The case of Dimples illustrates that the boys are at risk of being victimised inside and outside the institution. Yet strangers are not the only people who can put these boys at risk. Dylan’s case illustrates that even the boys’ peers can do this.

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3 ‘Gerook’ refers to when someone is intoxicated and more commonly understood and referred to as being ‘high’.

4 For further information on how children are used in criminal activities, see the website of the COAV (Children and youth involved in Organised Armed Violence) project www.coav.org.br, which addresses the issue of children and youth in organised and armed groups active in countries not at war. This international project is administered in Brazil, the Philippines, Ecuador, Colombia, Nigeria and South Africa. The study report on South Africa is entitled, ‘Terugskiet [returning fire]: Growing up on the street corners of Manenberg, South Africa’ (author Ted Legget). The findings of the overall international COAV study are presented in Dowdney’s book Neither war, nor peace: International comparisons of children and youth in organised armed violence (2005).
Dylan was well-liked among his peers. The boys were always teasing him affectionately and saying he was locked up for glue-sniffing, one of the ways in which they implied he was not aggressive. One day Dylan absconded with the boys from the Owls dorm. After gallivanting in the town near the institution, the boys decided to return to the institution. Earlier that day, they were able to purchase dagga for themselves, deciding they were going to smuggle the drugs into the institution; as all of the boys had smoked while outside, one of the boys would have to take the responsibility of bringing in the drugs. This individual would have to find a way to smuggle the drugs onto the premises and if he were caught, he would have to take the punishment. The boys then decided that Dylan was that person. But before they entered the institution Dylan was coerced into pushing the dagga up his anal cavity.

Once this task was completed, the boys jumped back over the wall onto the premises. After the staff’s response to this abscondment, it became known that Dylan was persuaded or agreed to be the ‘mule’ and anally carry the illegal substances onto the premises. Staff then approached Dylan, and a further exploration of the case was administered. Unfortunately, I was excluded from the ongoing intervention and therefore could not follow the procedures. Despite what happened, Dylan continued living in the institution. Months later, he was eventually sentenced to another youth centre.

7.5. Institutional and staff responses to absconding

Staff are expected to respond to abscondment according to the institution’s protocol. This protocol is in line with laws stating what to do in case of abscondment. Below, I will first give a brief overview of these laws and present the main rules, the staff of Middletown, are supposed to follow in the case of abscondment by the boys. Some of the case studies above already hinted at the fact that not all staff rigidly applied these rules. Staff members understand and manage abscondment in different ways. I will delve into this diversity based on case studies already presented in this chapter as well as new ones.

7.5.1. Legal and policy approaches

Various executive responses for when children abscond from ‘alternative care’ are included in the Children’s Amendment Bill (CAB) of 2005 (Minister of Social Development 2006). After some changes in its content, the Bill became current on 1 April 2010 as the Children’s Act. Alternative care, in accordance with section 167 of Children’s Amendment Bill, refers to when a child is placed ‘(a) in foster care; (b) in the care of a child and youth care centre following an order of a court in terms of this Act or the Criminal Procedure Act, 1977 (Act No. 51 of 1977) or (c) in temporary safe care.’

In chapter eleven of the Bill (section 170) the official responses for abscondment are clearly stated under the bold heading, ‘Child absconding from alternative care’. In summary, this section states that the police official or designated social worker can apprehend a child in alternative care who (a) absconded from a facility or person in whose care that child has been

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5 A ‘mule’ or ‘courier’ is someone who physically smuggles something using his or her body as a means of transporting the goods across various borders. In this case, the older boys employed the younger boys as mules, reducing the risk of getting caught themselves.
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placed or (b) has been granted leave of absence by the child and youth care centre or person in whose care that child has been placed and who fails to return to that centre or person. If a police official or designated social worker has reasonable grounds to believe that a child is on certain premises, the police official or social worker can enter the grounds without a warrant and search the area with the aim of apprehending the child (for further details see the Children’s Amendment Bill).

In line with the existing legal and policy documents, Middletown has developed its own policy on how to deal with abscondments. The institution’s policy states that staff members are expected to go after the boy promptly once he has absconded, apprehend him and return him to the institution. The Children’s Amendment Bill clearly states what should happen once a child is returned or returns (on his own) to the institution. The child should then be brought before a presiding officer of a children’s court who will inquire into the reasons for the abscondment by questioning the child. Based on the outcome of the inquiries, the child is to return to the centre or must be sent somewhere else.

7.5.2. Variation in staff responses

In practice the responses by some of the staff members to abscondment were anything but by the book. It gradually became clear to me that the boys and staff in many instances had different conceptions of abscondment. For most staff, running away had connotations that reflect negatively on the boy concerned. These connotations include the child resisting the institution and institutional life in terms of not wanting to follow adult supervision, having trouble with authority figures and deciding to return to a life of drugs and crime. However, not all staff shared this perspective. As illustrated by the cases of Nasief and other boys presented in this chapter, some staff supported the boys in their perspectives on abscondment and the act of abscondment itself.

While according to the protocol staff members are expected to go after the boys once they have absconded, staff members do not always respond in this way. Instead, I have witnessed how staff members would try and catch the boys before they jump the wall to leave the institution but once they have jumped the wall, no immediate action was attempted to re-capture the boy. One of the care workers also said, ‘No! Why must I run after them? If they want to leave, they must leave. It’s their choice.’ Many staff members also informed me that the boys would return and, if they did not, in some instances if they ran home their families would send them back. Nevertheless, staff members would initially make an attempt to recapture the boys, but in many instances they would abandon the attempt and wait for the boys to return. However, as I mentioned, staff responses to abscondment varied.

Staff members informed me that during the earlier days of the institution the common response was to jump into the vans at the institution and look for the boys. Care workers and other staff members alike would search for the boys. However, over time, most staff decided not to run after the boys anymore. Newly employed staff might still do so, but in the course of their employment they would also lose interest. Like other staff members, they would let the boys run away as they suspected that in some cases the boys would return. Factors that influence the responses of staff in addition to length of employment are age, gender, cultural background, and the staff member’s experience and understanding of the situation. To illustrate this point, let us return to the case of Nasief.

Nasief absconded because he was being physically assaulted in the institution. The care worker Iris is the staff member who was most directly involved in this case. She had
been working at Middletown for more than fifteen years, was furthering her education while working at the institution, and was also more highly educated than many other staff members at the facility. Iris was studying social work, but after a few years dropped out of the programme because it was too ‘challenging’, according to her, to balance her job at the institution with her studies at university.

Iris knew Nasief was going to abscond but did not try to stop him. I understood her response to be a consequence of feeling rather disempowered as a care worker. On numerous occasions, Iris and I would have discussions on these issues and on the safety of children in the institution. When I asked her about her response to Nasief’s abscondment, she replied, ‘This is supposed to be a secure care facility and if we can’t keep the boys safe, then what is the point? If Middletown can’t protect him then I will support his decision to run away’. She continued, ‘I also told Nasief that he should lay a charge against Zipho if he does not feel safe or if other children are hurting him’. During this discussion Iris informed me that Nasief’s mother was very upset when she heard he was being assaulted.

Here we see how staff members, especially the care workers, who deal with the children for most of the day, not only have responses that reflect negatively on boys who abscond, but are also able to understand and sympathise with the boys’ experiences in the institution. This happens especially when a boy is being victimised and staff consider him to ‘have potential’. In these cases, such as the one of Nasief, Iris felt disempowered to assist him. She explained that even though the boys were expected and encouraged to report an assault, in most cases the case would not be raised by the boy in question. Instead, the boy would continue to interact and live where he was being victimised.

Iris was not the only staff member who supported Nasief’s abscondment. During the interview I had with Nasief, he said, ‘And when I ran this way that security saw me. So he caught me. But he told me that I must not run that way, I must go the other way. He understood me and that is why he tried to help me’. According to Nasief, the security guard said, ‘But I already saw you and I must take you back inside … The next time, run the other way’. The security guard’s response was rather different from Iris’s. She had more contact with Nasief in the dorm whereas the security guard did not. Yet he advised Nasief on where and how it was best to abscond. Nasief’s analysis of why the guard assisted him was ‘because he understood me’. According to Nasief, what the guard understood was that it was difficult for Nasief to live at Middletown. The guard believed that the institution was not a suitable place for children.

Iris and the security guard’s responses and understanding of Nasief’s abscondment were exceptional compared to many of the other staff members. In most cases, care workers and management staff at the institution maintained that a child who absconds should be punished and, if necessary, even be sent to a different institution. When a child absconds or attempts to abscond numerous times, placing this boy in an institution becomes more complicated, and staff respond by requesting that the child be placed somewhere else.

For example, one of the care worker managers, Faik, received a call from a probation officer while I was in his office. He spoke to the officer and mentioned how a boy who had to be placed in an institution was ‘high risk’. The boy had already been placed at Middletown but absconded on various accounts and was always trying to escape. He was a bad influence to the others. Therefore Faik asked whether the probation officer could rather send the boy to another institution. He continued to ask the officer if he had any other new placements. Here
we see how recurrent or attempted abscondment can result in a boy being shifted from one facility to another instead of being reunited with his family and community.

7.5.3. Change in institutional policy

I was able to witness not only staff responses to abscondments but how these actions by boys influenced and transformed the local policies of the institution.

On 5 December 2007 I participated in a gender violence programme that staff members had created for the boys. This programme was a follow-up to an earlier one held for staff members only. Inga, a resident social worker, opened the programme. Next, visitors invited from outside were offered the opportunity to discuss their experiences, perceptions and work on gender-based violence. Police officers and different non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and legal representatives were involved. At the end of the programme, staff arranged for music to be played. Gifts and food were presented to the boys. This was a common occurrence at the institution. After the presentations, the boys would be given the chance to dance and have fun. This time, however, things took a negative turn.

While the boys were enjoying their popcorn and Cokes (party packs were given to them), one of the care worker managers, Mr. M, came into the hall. He turned to one of the boys and asked him to stop the music. Once there was complete silence in the hall, he informed the boys that he had bad news to tell them. Everyone went quiet. He explained that the magistrates’ court had decided the boys were not allowed to have ‘outside’ excursions any longer. This meant they were not allowed to have home visits. Also, the boys would not be allowed to go on outings during the holidays anymore. The boys were clearly disturbed by the news and started murmuring. When Mr. M wanted to explain further what had happened, the boys continued to talk to one another, unperturbed by what Mr. M had to say. As he was standing in the middle of the hall, he turned to Panthers and screamed, ‘Hou jou bek!’ (Shut up!). The boys were shocked and sat silently as he continued to explain.

Mr. M told the boys that it was the courts that had decided that all secure care facilities were not allowed to arrange excursions and home visits any longer. Magistrates had agreed that the number of abscondments at the institutions was too high. Boys were running away on these excursions and this was why they, as magistrates, had decided to keep them locked up in the institutions and take away the privilege of being able to reconnect and experience the outside while being incarcerated. The magistrates had decided this in an attempt to decrease the risk of boys absconding. Mr. M subsequently attempted to empathise with the boys and began to explain that for staff, too, being locked up with no excursions is boring, that they also enjoyed the excursions. He continued, ‘But unfortunately, this is how it is now and the staff at Middletown will make the new situation as interesting and fun as possible.’ He said they (staff) would try their best to make the boys’ holidays enjoyable. He closed his talk with the words, ‘There is a lesson to be learnt from this: don’t do crime.’

Faik, the other manager, younger than Mr. M, continued on this topic. He is less authoritarian and is considered more approachable than his older colleague Mr. M. Faik said

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6 Home visits refer to when boys are escorted to their homes, allowing them to interact with family and friends. This is an attempt by the government to create and maintain a relationship with society outside the institution.
that it was a real pity that staff were unable to take the boys out but that the boys were also responsible for this. Referring to the incident when Nasief ran away that Monday and earlier incidents when others had tried, he told the boys that it is their own fault and then asked them if what he was saying was right, to which they reluctantly agreed.

This intervention dictated by the policymakers – in this case the magistrates – in reaction to increasing efforts at abscondment in secure care facilities, shows how intentional actions of individual boys may add up to collective patterns that invite reactions at structural level, where policies had been made that caused these actions in the first place. The boys’ individual actions are inspired by their longing for more freedom and an escape from boredom and further victimisation and make sense in the context of the boys’ daily experiences, even to the extent that some staff members support them. On an individual level their actions are not intended to change the structures as such. Neither do boys unite in collective efforts to improve their situation. Nonetheless, the collective pattern resulting from their individual actions did indeed result in structural change, albeit in a negative way, leading to greater restrictions to boys’ individual agency.

7.6. Conclusion

This chapter focused on abscondment as another aspect of the permeability of the institution where they boys are placed. Boys usually absconded with an explicit intent to return, regardless of the consequences they might have to face, using the community near the institution as a place to be at large. Thus, in practice, until the more restrictive policy was introduced, the boundaries of the institution were fluid to the extent of incorporating the community. Iris’s response to Nasief’s efforts to abscond, and staff’s decision to sometimes not bother to find the boys in anticipation of their return, revealed that staff members may be implicated in maintaining a flow between the institution and the community, either for the entire dorm or an individual.

My findings show that boys who abscond have a clear understanding of why, how and when they should run away. Abscondment therefore reflects boys’ decision-making process and intentional agency: through abscondment they intentionally act upon their situation and environment. Analysis of policy documents, observations in the institute and interviews with staff showed that abscondment is generally understood and managed as a strategy of resistance on the part of the children, a form of behaviour evaluated sometimes by staff, such as Iris in the case of Nasief, as just resistance to an unjust system. However, as I will argue in the concluding chapter, there may be ways to understand the agency of abscondment as different from resistance, which could have implications for managing boys differently.

The Children’s Act encourages ongoing communication between the incarcerated child and his or her family and community. The Act does this on the basis of two very important principles set in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), as well as in Section 28 of the Constitution of South Africa. These principles include the best interests of the child and children’s participation in matters that concern them. Abscondment can be perceived as a way of contributing to this communication. However, running away is illegal and should therefore be punished. In the end, the collective actions and reactions of boys and staff regarding abscondment only reinforce the objective of the ideal type of a total institution, thereby once again reinforcing the detachment and distancing of the boys’ from outside society.