Young boys behind bars: An ethnographic study of violence and care in South Africa
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To this day I continue to reflect on the days I grew up on the Cape Flats, wondering why it was that my family and I were largely able to escape the world of violence that consumes the lives of so many other people, in particular the young males at the heart of this study. While I remain perplexed when attempting to identify the factors that allowed specific individuals to be exposed to, yet steer clear of, the forms of the violence that many of the boys experienced, I will highlight a few influences that I believe had a preventative effect in my own life.

First, my family played a vital role in the process. My parents as well as grandparents were crucial in protecting me from becoming a victim of violence. Some of their strategies included restricting my social interaction with children and others in the community; strict parenting and surveillance was also vital in protecting me as a child. My social and physical movement was restricted and constantly monitored. My grandparents also reinforced certain rules, such as prohibiting me from playing outside in the garden where I would be exposed otherwise to a variety of threats. Other adults in the family, such as uncles and aunts, acted as protectors when I was away from home. In general, then, the adults in my family were constantly involved in whatever I was doing.

Secondly, education was highly influential in enabling me to avoid violence. Under the social circumstances at the time, my parents made an effort to educate themselves academically and in other ways. Both of my parents worked, which created various opportunities for them as well as me. An example was being able to move outside the area at weekends to participate in different social activities. Their personal drive was such that my parents made significant, and continuous, social and physical investments in the education of their children.

Thirdly, another factor that helped to protect me from becoming a victim to violence and/or witnessing high levels of violence was that my parents were able to move our family out of a community regarded as one of the more dangerous areas in Cape Town. In other words, due to their financial and social development, my parents were able to relocate us from Bonteheuwel and buy a house in a safer area. There I was allowed greater physical and social freedom in that I was encouraged to make friends with children who lived close by and, in the company of peers, was able to walk to and from school without the fear of being confronted by gang members.

I spent most of my teenage and university years in this area, but, after 17 years, my parents had witnessed deterioration in its social fabric as drugs, crime and violence began to infiltrate it and decided to move us to another community: a previously ‘white’ suburb that was considered safer than most ‘coloured’ communities. When we arrived, people were seen walking about freely, and houses were not enclosed with high fences and burglar bars. Today, a decade later, residents have started to become haunted by reports of crime and violence and the possible increase thereof. More and higher walls are being built, and neighbourhood patrols are on the lookout for suspicious persons and activities. Those who have lived in the area for a long time are moving away, in search of safer residence. Yet my parents remain, for now.
Reflecting on how they were able to avoid being implicated in violence as its victims or perpetrators, I realise that there are those who possess forms of capital, financial or otherwise, which enable them to avoid violence in a quite literal way: by picking up and moving house and home. By the same token, there are others who lack such capital and opportunities. They must find ways of coping within these unsafe spaces, and for many their response is to embrace what they cannot flee: that is, to become perpetrators of violence themselves.
REFERENCES


References


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