

Children in the Cape Flats see violence very early in their lives and many end up in jail or killed.

Under the power of the gun

Catherine Sofianos

The yellow police tape had been cradling the street corner until a stiff Cape Flats breeze tossed it down the street to a nearby bush. Two men were gunned down the day before. Their bodies bled out, while from behind barred windows, children at the kindergarten took in the scene, noticing the shooters, their ages, their clothes, their tattoos, where they came from, where they went. In defiance of what adults may tell you about the integrity of child witnesses, the prevailing wisdom in gang-rife areas like this one is that if you want to know what happened, ask the children.

Nearly 900-million guns are in circulation on the planet. That's one gun for every seven people. On the Cape Flats, many of those guns are in the hands of child "foot soldiers" of gangs.

A survey conducted by the Canon Collins Educational and Legal Assistance Trust found that about 54% of boys and girls between 11 and 13 years of age in Hanover Park admitted to having carried a knife or a gun in the previous four weeks. How children come to possess and use weapons without even knowing how to, begins many years before, with the witnessing of acts of violence.

Children growing up in the Cape Flats face injury, disability, orphanhood, imprisonment and loss of life — their own, their friends and their family.

Boys are particularly vulnerable. According to Child Gauge, gang violence and interpersonal violence is the cause of death for 60% of boys aged 15-19 in South Africa.

The global average for child death from injury is 8.8 in 100,000. The Western Cape's department of social development told parliament last year that in South Africa that rate is 39.8, and the more significant proportion of those deaths in South Africa are young men aged 13 to 17, living on the Cape Flats, who have died as a result of gang violence or interpersonal conflict with peers.

The Western Cape government recognises that gang violence has resulted in "the normalisation of violence". Yet the cost to society of gangsterism has been allowed to escalate to astronomical levels.

Fabian* became a hit man at the age of 11. He grew up wanting to become one "because all my uncles are hit men".

His family rules a Cape Flats gang. There were also days when he swore that he would never become a gangster. He hated the way his uncles spoke to their "soldiers". He hated violence and drugs. He lost three uncles and three cousins, and of his 13 childhood friends, today only four are left. His parents, both drug merchants, are alive, but they had no part in raising him.

Fabian learned about the power of the gun at about the same time that he started school, age six.

A man came into the house, and sometime later, this man followed Fabian's uncle into the yard where he was playing.

The two were arguing. His uncle raised a gun.



Young gun: A small boy carrying a toy gun runs through the Marikana informal settlement, near Philippi East (above). The violence in the area continues with the City of Cape Town Law Enforcement team (below) battling to patrol the gang-ridden communities. In July 2019 the army was deployed to the Cape Flats after more than 70 people were killed over three days of fighting, a move that has been deemed by many as unsuccessful.

Photos: David Harrison



"I grew up with that bang sound," Fabian says.

He cannot remember the man's face. This bothers him because his child's reasoning convinced him that if he remembered, it might answer why his mother abandoned him when he was little.

Poor shots

Three years later, Fabian's uncle was partying at the house. He gestured to Fabian to come over, took out his gun and laid it on the table. He explained each part and how it worked. He showed him how to cock it, how to take out a magazine, the type of lifts you put in and how to hold the gun.

Some may say Fabian was lucky. He was given a lesson that many "foot soldiers" never receive.

"Gangsters are often very poor shots," explains Michael McLaggan of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime.

"They're given guns from a very

young age. They're not trained on how to use them properly. They hold firearms the way you see it in movies, and that affects the trajectory of the bullet. It's part of the reason so many bullets go astray and why there's so much collateral damage."

With all this happening, it is little wonder that Fabian's schooling became populated with incidences of violence from an early age. His first stabbing of a fellow pupil was in Grade 2. "What do you expect, a boy of 10 years old?" asks gang intervention specialist and reformed gangster Colin Barends.

"The whole night, they smoke drugs in this house. The whole night they sabela (the language of the prison gang). He sees guns; he sees drugs; he sees adults having sex with one another. Tomorrow he sleeps in the class. They say he's naughty, and he doesn't want to listen. But he couldn't sleep at his house. He didn't even have breakfast.

"They buy him a packet of 50 cents chips. Then you go to school. Now the educators see him as a naughty child. They don't see this, where he is coming from. And then they put him out of school. Who's going to take care of him now? The gang leader?"

Fabian remembers missing out on school because they were caged up in the house for weeks as gang wars waged in the streets. Fabian couldn't take the strain, so he ran away to live under a bridge for two months, close to an affluent shopping centre.

He smoked buttons and sniffed glue. He scratched the bins of the mall for food and begged for money.

But Fabian says he enjoyed learning; scoring top marks and winning awards. Too often gang alliances and warfare spilt over on to the playground. There were times where he experienced brutality from his teacher. It was almost inevitable for Fabian that despite his obvious intelligence, he dropped out of school.

Public schools on the Cape Flats are not equipped to cope with the toll that violence takes on teachers and learners. Classrooms have up to 56 learners, all from the same environment of poverty and violence. Teachers, when presented with a problem child, find it easier to exclude the child through neglect and suspension — occasionally abuse.

Grant Stewart, a trauma disrupter, describes a teacher who attacked a learner with a hammer. Eventually, children don't come back to class, he says, and if a child has been away from class for more than 10 days, the school can deregister them.

In an ideal world, the school is the place to teach behaviours and values of nonviolence, social inclusion, empathy and anger management.

Forced to commit murder

At age 11, Fabian moved out to live with his mother. It was good. They reconnected, and he made new friends. One day, he went to his friend's house to play TV games. As they were playing, his friend's brother came running into the house. Gunmen followed him in, killing first the mother, then the father and then the son. The two boys scrambled under the bed at the first sound of fire, but it was dusty, and his friend sneezed just as the gunmen were leaving.

His family all bear a striking resemblance to one another. One of the hit men recognised Fabian's features. So instead of killing them, they gave them guns and forced Fabian and his friend to commit their first murders.

Fabian became the very thing he hated, and it terrified him. He also experienced a new feeling — power.

"Before I go out in the morning, I would shoot mad [sic], and people would be running. For me, it was fun. Almost like I had to do this thing because I know no one can do anything to me."

At 13, Fabian had his first brush with the law.

He and his friends tied up a neighbourhood watchman with bread packets they found tangled in the fence. Then they stole his firearm.

"Deny everything," his uncle advised.

It worked. They found women to stand in for their mothers and won the case. It would be the first of seven arrests. Of those seven, he only received two sentences. All the other times, he said his family paid the police for his records to go missing.

The power to change

When a gang member changes, it's never because of any intervention. Stewart has found that those who changed could all point to someone in their lives that believed in them. Or they changed with the birth of a child.

Fabian clearly remembers the day it all changed for him. He was in prison, lying on his bed in the cell. He had just received the news that friends had killed his cousin. He blamed himself for the death. Up to that point, he had been making the most of prison — rising through the ranks of the Numbers Gang and eating KFC. The wardens were his allies, and he was invincible.

Through the clamour of the overcrowded cells that unhappy night, the voices of singing reached his ears.

One of them walks us through how he ended up behind bars



Not child's play: Toddlers are all too often caught in the crossfire of this ongoing, deep-rooted social issue on the Cape Flats Photos: David Harrison

The voices carried a single thread of hope to Fabian that he has drawn himself along ever since.

Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness/ Opened my eyes, let me see/

"Those words touched me hard," he remembers. "It showed me the light. It showed me what I could do with my life. Even though I had the best protection there and the best life, I didn't want to be there. I wanted to make children. I wanted to become a father and have a family."

In the days that followed, he

noticed a woman walking through the prison. When she walked past his cell, he called to her. She found a piece of paper and asked him to write his name. Her name was Lisa Marqua and she runs a non-governmental organisation, Restore, that focuses on restorative justice. Fabian is one of the thousands of young men who Marqua and partner Celeste van Es have worked with in their combined 21 years of Christian prison ministry.

In each course that Restore facilitates, they survey how many times

their class of 15 has been a victim of crime. They have found in a single class; there can be up to 9,000 accounts of the prisoners' victimisation by crime.

The course fed the new song in Fabian's heart. It was his first experience of what he calls the "purity of love" and the beginning of a journey towards feeling human.

These days, Fabian works at different youth centres, diverting young people from gangs. He has earned no salary from this. This kind of work is woefully under-supported,

many non-profits are closing down or are close to it. Without an income or an education, without electricity or water and with a new baby, the R10,000 a day he once earned as a hit man and selling guns and bullets could go far. But Fabian has inexhaustible energy for what he calls, "positive change".

In his spare time, he goes to the scrapyard to find parts to fix broken bicycles in his neighbourhood. He likes to surprise neighbours with fixed bikes. He uses his own money and the odd donation to maintain a

small fleet of bicycles. Then on the weekend, he rounds up a few young men and takes them on long bike rides to Sea Point.

Fabian's reformed life is punishing. The horror of what he has done seeps into his conscience. He is terrified of retaliation and something happening to his child. His choices will pay off one day soon, he tells himself.

*Not his real name

This article was provided courtesy of the Canon Collins Educational & Legal Assistance Trust



In remembrance: A cross marks the spot where teenager Dale Jordaan (15) was shot dead during a gang turf war between the Junky Funky Kids and Corner Boys in 2011.