

Children become gangland killers in South Africa

Jane Flanagan, Cape Flats

September 15 2018, 12:01am, The Times

- [Africa](#)



Byron Hendricks killed his best friend on a gang's orders

Share

Saved

The order to kill his best friend came from their gang leader and Byron Hendricks did not hesitate. Drugs numbed his conscience but not his common sense; a refusal to carry out the hit would make him the next target.

“I was picked for the job because my friend trusted me. I would get to him easy,” he told *The Times*, describing in a matter-of-fact manner how, years ago, he lured his 18-year-old victim to waste ground where they had kicked a ball about as children before emptying the magazine of a 9mm pistol.

“He started to run but I counted 11 bullets that hit him. I knew him from way back but he was a witness in a murder case against a gang member and that couldn't happen,” he shrugged.

Growing up in the Cape Flats, the sand-blown sprawl 20 minutes' drive north of central Cape Town, Hendricks, now 35, witnessed gunfights from the window above his mattress. His father, brother and cousins were gang members, selling drugs from the cramped slum dwelling they called home.

“When the police did a sweep, it was my job as a kid to take stuff outside and hide it. I was doing that from the time I knew how to walk,” said Hendricks, whose first stint in jail came at the age of 16.

More than half of the 3,729 murders committed last year in Western Cape province took place in the Flats, an apartheid-era dumping ground for non-whites evicted from more desirable parts of the city in the 1950s and 60s.

The Group Areas Act not only secured the best suburbs for the minority white population, but wrecked stable communities by shifting them to areas away from jobs and transport links, creating conditions where economic decay soon fuelled lawlessness, criminality and gangsterism.

The death toll here has surged dramatically over the past decade: murder is up by 59 per cent and attempted murder by 110 per cent, driven by a 122 per cent surge in drug-related crime and underscored by youth unemployment of at least 70 per cent.

“The worse it has got, the less we see the police,” Roegshanda Pascoe, 45, an anti-gang activist, said.

The area was described as “a war zone” by Bheki Cele, the police minister, this week and Ms Pascoe said that was spot on, although she feels the real murder rate has been played down. “We can get 30 or more bodies in just a week. Are they really counting them all?” she asked.

As with other war zones in Africa, child soldiers have become a reality. Where youngsters were once deployed as lookouts and drug mules they are now being given guns and training by gangs with names such as the Nice Time Kids and the Sexy Boys. “The gangs are looking after families in return for getting access to their kids, to turn them into young soldiers who will do all the dirty work,” said Hendricks, who was released from jail four years ago and is now a volunteer in a rehabilitation centre.

South Africa's laws prevent children below ten from being arrested and the state has a tough job to prove criminal capacity in anyone under 14.

In Hanover Park, a notoriously violent district of the Flats, young killers are responsible for many of the 30 or so murders recorded each month.

After a recent visit to the Flats, one of Uganda's leading experts in the child soldier phenomenon drew a direct parallel between young fighters recruited by African militias and those in the grip of South Africa's murderous gangs.

“When children are forced to become part of these armed groups and kill, they too are child soldiers — it is not a concept that is exclusive to the context of Uganda or military conflicts,” said Jino Mwaka, rector and vice-chancellor of the University of the Sacred Heart in Gulu.

Maulana Rodrigues, a community leader and counsellor, estimates that there are 500 young fighters in her area of Athlone and as many as 10,000 in the whole of South Africa.

“Children get from these gangsters what they don’t get from their parents and they will stay indebted to the gang for the duration of their lives. They pay the debt by killing rivals. When we sit some of these children down, they tell us that they felt remorse after the first killing but by the second they become bloodthirsty.”

For those who survive to adulthood, there is little chance of escape. After refusing to return to his gang, the Americans, when he left prison, Hendricks lives in constant fear, unable to visit the area of the Flats where he once followed his gang lord’s orders. “My dad and brother were both murdered, my mum is dead. I don’t know if I will be allowed to live this new life. The gang don’t want that,” he said.

- [Africa](#)

Share

Saved

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

[Back to top](#)



Get in touch

- [Contact us](#)
- [Help](#)
- [The Times Editorial Complaints](#)
- [The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints](#)
- [Place an announcement](#)
- [Classified advertising](#)
- [Display advertising](#)
- [The Times corrections](#)
- [The Sunday Times corrections](#)

More from The Times and The Sunday Times

- [The Times e-paper](#)
- [The Sunday Times e-paper](#)
- [Times Currency Services](#)
- [The Sunday Times Wine Club](#)
- [The Times Dating](#)
- [Times Print Gallery](#)
- [The Times Archive](#)
- [Times Crossword Club](#)
- [Sunday Times Driving](#)
- [Times+](#)

- [The Sunday Times Rich List](#)
- [Insider City Guides](#)
- [Good University Guide](#)
- [Schools Guide](#)
- [Newsletters](#)
- [Best Places to Live](#)
- [Best Places to Stay](#)
- [Announcements](#)
- [Times Appointments](#)

© Times Newspapers Limited 2018.

Registered in England No. 894646.

Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

- [Privacy & cookie policy](#)
- [Licensing](#)
- [Cookie settings](#)
- [Sitemap](#)
- [Topics](#)
- [Commissioning terms](#)
- [Terms and conditions](#)