

# Gangsterism and a Safe Schooling Environment: Assessing The Perspectives of Learners in South Africa



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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative interpretivist research paper assessed the perspectives of learners in the Free State province regarding the impact of gangsterism and a safe schooling environment in South African public schools. The formation and association of gangsterism in schools and misuse of alcohol, narcotics, and other intoxicants exacerbate most violent incidents in schools. Due to this, learners lose their control, become unruly, and are unable to focus or work with teachers and other learners as a result, teachers and learners are regularly the targets of violent attacks using the weapons, which frequently result in tragic fatalities. This study employed Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a research framework, which uses an ecology model where humans are placed inside interactive systems and characterises the traits that influence protection and risk factors that can either raise or lower the likelihood of aggression and violent exposure. In-depth interviews were conveniently employed to address the following questions: What are the perspectives of learners on school safety in the school context? To what extent does gangsterism in school threaten the safety of learners in schools? Data was analysed thematically. The results showed that gangsterism still makes schools dangerous places for many learners to learn, which impairs their wellbeing over the long run. This study recommends the establishment of school safety policies which prohibit gang activities and encourage greater community participation, collaboration, and ownership of safety issues at nearby schools. The study contributes to a debate on the safety of learners and their well-being in schools amid the alarming increase in violence in schools.

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## INTRODUCTION

Several fundamental needs, including those for food, safety, love, and self-worth, must first be satisfied to reach self-actualization. According to Maslow, requirements must be met in the specified order.<sup>1</sup> The same idea holds true for learners, who require safety assurance to reach their full potential and cultivate a positive sense of self-worth. Effective teaching and learning are hampered by gangs and gang-related activities in and near schools. Gang formation, on the other hand, is a result of the desire for respect and

<sup>1</sup> N. Jerome, "Application of the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory; Impacts and Implications on Organizational Culture," Human Resources and Employee's Performance, 2013; Anjanaben J Trivedi and Amit Mehta, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs-Theory of Human Motivation," International Journal of Research in All Subjects in Multi Languages 7, no. 6 (2019): 38–41.

is a kind of recognition and power.<sup>2</sup> According to research by Desmet and Fokkinga, and Weber, when these needs are met, one feels secure and valuable as a person; when they are not met, feelings of unhappiness, weakness, and worthlessness are likely to surface.<sup>3</sup> Ngqela and Lewis noted that the most probable people to have an impact on learners in schools are young gangsters.<sup>4</sup> The term "gangsters" describes groups of learners or people who belong to various groups at school and out of school and are known by specific names.<sup>5</sup> The various gangs, who in this case are school-age children, use various forms of violence and corrupt behaviour to establish their presence and power. This allows them to become well-known and, as a result, conceal their flaws. The purpose of this study is to investigate secondary school learners' opinions regarding pervasive gangsterism as a barrier to a secure learning environment. Improved regulations regarding gangsterism, school violence, and the protection of learners and staff may result from the findings. Furthermore, the results may help schools, and their communities work together to reduce gangsterism in and around schools.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualising gangsterism as a violent activity in schools

Gangsterism is the creation of organisations with the intention of committing crimes and acts of violence.<sup>6</sup> Gangsters appear to carry out their violent and criminal acts by using physical force to defend themselves against other gangster organisations. Gangsters usually use violent tactics to instil fear and win respect from other gang organisations and community members. In their attempt to change the learners' focus by conceptualizing the gangs, Wergerhoff, et al. attest that gangster violence also includes property damage caused by graffiti with their group's emblems and offensive comments aimed at other gangsters and the people who are most likely to have an impact on learners in schools are young gangsters.<sup>7</sup>

In the townships where these gangster groups are formed, most of their members are children under the age of 18. Given their age, these children are likely to have attended multiple schools, have been expelled from those schools, or have dropped out altogether. This structure would imply that the learners and staff in these schools are used as soft targets by various gangster factions during conflicts. These learners in South Africa use knives, verbal threats, and, to a lesser extent, stolen firearms to mug people for things like cash, designer clothing, and cell phones. According to Moore and Stuart, educators and learners may endure psychological distress, physical suffering, and spiritual anguish, in addition to significant financial loss.<sup>8</sup>

### The Modus Operandi of Gangs

In South Africa, young gangsters use verbal threats, knives, and, to a lesser extent, stolen firearms to mug goods including cash, designer clothing, and cell phones.<sup>9</sup> Gangs are known to bring deadly weapons

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<sup>2</sup> Dena C Carson and Finn-Aage Esbensen, "Gangs in School: Exploring the Experiences of Gang-Involved Youth," *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 17, no. 1 (2019): 3–23.

<sup>3</sup> Pieter Desmet and Steven Fokkinga, "Beyond Maslow's Pyramid: Introducing a Typology of Thirteen Fundamental Needs for Human-Centered Design," *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction* 4, no. 3 (July 7, 2020): 38, <https://doi.org/10.3390/mti4030038>; Joseph Weber, "Youth Gangs: Causation, Theory, and Strategies," n.d.

<sup>4</sup> Nozuko Ngqela and Andrew Lewis, "Exploring Adolescent Learners' Experiences of School Violence in a Township High School," *Child Abuse Research in South Africa* 13, no. 1 (2012): 87–97.

<sup>5</sup> Bekithemba Dube and Dipane Hlalele, "Engaging Critical Emancipatory Research as an Alternative to Mitigate School Violence in South Africa," *Educational Research for Social Change* 7, no. 2 (September 1, 2018): 74–86, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2018/v7i2a5>; Nomanesi Madikizela-Madiya and Vusi S. Mncube, "The Hybrid Nature of School Space and the Manifestation of Violence in South African Schools," *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology* 5, no. 2 (April 2014): 197–205,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09766634.2014.11885624>.

<sup>6</sup> M. Z. Ramorola, "The Links between School Violence and Drug Usage in Schools: External or Internal Factor?," *Journal Of Sociology And Social Anthropology* 05, no. 01 (February 8, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.31901/24566764.2014/05.01.02>.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Wegerhoff, Louise Dixon, and Tony Ward, "The Conceptualization of Gangs: Changing the Focus," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 47 (July 2019): 58–67, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2019.03.004>; Caylin Louis Moore and Forrest Stuart, "Gang Research in the Twenty-First Century," *Annual Review of Criminology* 5, no. 1 (2022): 299–320.

<sup>8</sup> Moore and Stuart, "Gang Research in the Twenty-First Century."

<sup>9</sup> Charl C Wolhuter and Johannes L Van der Walt, "Indiscipline in South African Schools: The Parental/Community Perspective," *Koers: Bulletin for Christian Scholarship= Koers: Bulletin Vir Christelike Wetenskap* 85, no. 1 (2020): 1–11; Oluwatosin Egunlusi, "Teachers' Authority: Strategies for Instilling Discipline in a Post-Corporal Punishment Era," 2020; Tshilidzi Netshitangani, "Management Style and School Violence: South African Perspectives," *International Journal of Educational Management* 32, no. 1 (January 8, 2018): 96–106, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-06-2016-0136>.

such as knives, pangas, sticks, screwdrivers, axes, and firearms to schools.<sup>10</sup> Teachers and learners are regularly the targets of violent attacks using these weapons, which frequently result in tragic fatalities.<sup>11</sup> The prevalence and misuse of alcohol, narcotics, and other intoxicants exacerbate most violent incidents. These learners lose their control, become unruly, and are unable to focus or work with teachers and other learners.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Cornell, Madikizela-Madiya and Mncube emphasised the idea that drug users frequently turn to a range of illegal acts to maintain their addiction.<sup>13</sup> According to Hlatshwayo, gangster violence also includes graffiti that defaces school property and includes offensive comments and group symbols aimed at rival gangsters.<sup>14</sup>

### **Learner Safety at Schools**

The Republic of South Africa's Constitution prioritises school safety since it guarantees everyone's safety, their right to life, and a safe and healthy environment. Accordingly, gang violence puts students', teachers', and the school environment's safety in danger and has a major impact on learning.<sup>15</sup> According to Segalo and Rambuda, Jacobs, Maphalala and Mabunda, threatening these gangs can result in school conflicts, physical torture, psychological pain, financial loss, violations of spiritual sanctity, and sometimes the murders of innocent students and teachers.<sup>16</sup> The threat is not just on school property, though, since students are likely to get caught in the crossfire while travelling to or from class.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**

The different tiers of the ecological model of human development are interconnected and impact humans directly as well as indirectly. Five environmental systems were distinguished by Bronfenbrenner: the ecosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem. These systems operate in a systematic manner and consistently display unique behaviours because of their diverse effects on human development. According to the ecology model, humans are placed inside interactive systems. Characteristic traits influence protective and risk factors that can either raise or lower the likelihood of aggression and violent exposure.<sup>17</sup> Children's development is influenced and guided by the interplay of their social environment, immediate family/community surroundings, and developing biology. One layer's conflicts or changes will affect other layers.<sup>18</sup> Conflicts within one layer of the environment influence other layers, and each layer is complex and influences a child's development. The researcher looked at a child's interactions with the outside world as well as their personal environment to study how they develop.

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10 Netshitangani, "Management Style and School Violence: South African Perspectives."

11 Dewey G. Cornell, "Threat Assessment as a School Violence Prevention Strategy," *Criminology & Public Policy* 19, no. 1 (February 10, 2020): 235–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12471>.

12 Nigel King, Joanna Brooks, and Christine Horrocks, "Interviews in Qualitative Research," 2018.

13 Cornell, "Threat Assessment as a School Violence Prevention Strategy"; Madikizela-Madiya and Mncube, "The Hybrid Nature of School Space and the Manifestation of Violence in South African Schools."

14 Puleng M. Hlatshwayo, "The Nature And Prevalence of Gang Related Violence on Learners in Secondary Schools in the Lejweleputswa District." *Central University of Technology, Free State (Unpublished Dissertation)* (2018).

15 Maringira and Gibson, "Maintaining Order in Townships: Gangsterism and Community Resilience in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 9, no. 2 (2019): 55, <https://doi.org/10.2979/africanconfpeacrevi.9.2.04>; Mncedisi C. Maphalala and P.L. Mabunda, "Gangsterism: Internal and External Factors Associated with School Violence in Selected Western Cape High Schools," *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology* 5, no. 1 (January 31, 2014): 61–70,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09766634.2014.11885610>; Umziuvukile James Tshatshu, "Strategies to Deal with Poor Learner Safety in the North-West Province Township Secondary Schools: Towards the Development of a School Safety Strategy" (Central University of Technology, 2016).

16 L. Segalo and A.M. Rambuda, "South African Public School Teachers' Views on Right to Discipline Learners," *South African Journal of Education* 38, no. 2 (May 31, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n2a1448>; Lynette Jacobs, "Framing of School Violence in the South African Printed Media-(Mis) Information to the Public," *South African Journal of Education* 34, no. 1 (2014): 1–16; Maphalala and Mabunda, "Gangsterism: Internal and External Factors Associated with School Violence in Selected Western Cape High Schools."

17 Kalen Flynn and Brenda Mathias, "'How Am I Supposed to Act?': Adapting Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to Understand the Developmental Impacts of Multiple Forms of Violence," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 40, no. 1 (2025): 192–225.

18 Xiaomin Sheng, "Using Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time Model to Conceptualize a School-Based Intervention to Help Prevent Adolescent Intimate Partner Violence," *RAIS Journal for Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2023): 34–44.

Aggressive children are less likely to come from families where the parents have a good rapport with their kids, punish them consistently without being harsh, and give them enough supervision. In areas with a high incidence of child abuse, better parenting needs to be prioritised.

Research must be done to create culturally appropriate, cost-effective, and easily accessible parenting treatments for those in need. Although there are a few viable interventions from other contexts, neither local nor other therapies have been assessed here. In South Africa, intimate partner violence is common. The effectiveness of interventions to lessen domestic violence is not well understood. There is no concrete proof that involvement in programs for batterers has decreased male violence, either domestically or globally.<sup>19</sup>

According to Verrecchia and Hendrix, parental involvement at many schools is limited to attending meetings to discuss the child's progress when retention forms need to be filled out, participating in fundraising events, and attending general parent meetings where parents are informed about problematic behaviours their child may be exhibiting.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it seems that schools are not actively working to create and maintain positive, productive relationships by continuously including parents in all aspects of their kids' growth. The fact that some parents are not considered equal participants in their children's development may be the reason behind their reluctance to work with the school.

Learners are unable to understand the relationship between the school and their parents in terms of their growth because there aren't any cooperative relationships between educators and parents. As a result, the learners might perceive their parents and teachers as distinct individuals who operate independently of one another.<sup>21</sup> South African Schools Act (No 84 of 1996) regards parents as very valuable stakeholders in education, this implies that in order for learners to pass, they must also help and encourage them. Learners may be negatively impacted by an area that is violent and has a high crime rate. Street killings, shootings, gangsters stabbing each other and other people, fights between families or houses, fights between people from bars on the street, rapes, carjackings, home invasions, thefts of cell phones and other property, yelling at each other, and bullying are examples of such activities. Since all of these activities are common, cultural, and a part of the area where the kids grow up, they may ultimately lead to learners being impacted by their surroundings. The children who reside in these neighbourhoods are not immediately impacted by these encounters, but they are indirectly or subconsciously influenced, and as a result, they participate in these illegal behaviours at school.

The external system is the network of organisations that the adolescent does not interact with directly; these organisations will indirectly affect the adolescent and their microsystem. These institutions include, but are not limited to, the government/social policy, family friends, legal services, the community, the media, corporations, and parent-teacher organisations. Even though he may not be actively participating at this level, the child feels the positive or negative power connected to the touch with his own system. All levels of ecological systems are impacted by school shooting incidents. For instance, the criminal and civil justice systems' reactions to these regrettable incidents are likely to attract public attention at the external system level.<sup>22</sup>

By periodically spreading unwanted ideas like fighting, stealing, shootings, and criminal activities -especially in soap operas or movies-the mass media can also have an impact on a child's development. Unaware that they are only acting out different parts of the drama, children wind up adoring these lifestyles and hoping to imitate certain superstars as a result. This has an adverse effect on children, and since they like the actors' TV performances, they usually see them as role models. The macrosystem includes the adolescent's home culture and subculture. This system consists of the adolescent's environment's attitudes, beliefs, cultural values, customs, laws, behavioural patterns, and other effects. This layer could be viewed as the child's environment's outermost layer. The interactions of every other

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19 Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, "Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects," *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People* 7, no. 1 (2018): 23–48.

20 P.J. Verrecchia and Nicole Hendrix, "College Students Perceptions Toward Carrying Concealed Weapons on College Campuses," *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 29, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 62–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2017.1344260>.

21 Johanna L Geldenhuys and N E J Wevers, "Ecological Aspects Influencing the Implementation of Inclusive Education in Mainstream Primary Schools in the Eastern Cape, South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 33, no. 3 (2013).

22 Zackary Okun Dunivin et al., "Black Lives Matter Protests Shift Public Discourse," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119, no. 10 (March 8, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2117320119>.

layer are impacted by the macrosystem's overarching principles. The structures in which the parents operate are subsequently impacted. This system covers the upbringing of children by parents, educators, and other people. All other layer's interactions are impacted by it.

Depending on how those involved react to the situations, the culture of masculinity may be enhanced or undermined at the macrosystem level. Policies pertaining to firearms can also be made stronger or weaker. Some young people find it reasonably possible to get and carry guns at school, even though they are forbidden on school property. To take part in state and municipal talks on more stringent gun control measures in the community, school social workers must work in tandem with school officials.<sup>23</sup> In essence, time—that is, the socio-historical circumstances and the amount of time since life events—is the focus of this chronosystem layer or environment. Human life will alter because of the events that impact the adolescent's development. Different ecological system layers would have had an impact on schoolchildren to the point that some begin to exhibit signs of joining various gangs.

Furthermore, their behaviour and demeanour deteriorate, and they frequently do violent and illegal acts in school, such as stabbing, shooting, stealing, fighting, and cursing, which fuels student or gang-related violence. These would only happen if the many environments the students were required to endure were harmful to them and less successful than they were supposed to be. To promote human development, these environments/layers must be sufficiently effective.

## **METHODOLOGY**

According to Flick, Creswell and Poth, a qualitative study design can provide insight into the phenomena of gangsterism as a barrier to a safe school environment from the viewpoints of secondary school learners.<sup>24</sup> Participants were ten secondary school learners in grades eight, nine, and ten from two secondary schools in a single educational district in South Africa's Free State Province. A convenient sampling technique was employed to select the participants and all the learners who participated were Black Africans who are between the ages of 14 and 17. Under the guidance of their parents and teachers, the learners who took part in this study gave their agreement after being recruited at their schools. The two provincial departments of education were asked for and granted permission to conduct the study, and parental consent was acquired. The purpose and reasoning behind the study were explained to the learners. For ethical considerations, schoolchildren were anonymously designated as learners A, B, and so on.<sup>25</sup> Learners' opinions on how school gangsterism compromises their safety in terms of teaching and learning were gathered through an extensive English-language interview. Open-coding techniques were employed in thematic data analysis. In these processes, data was methodically arranged, categorised, and summarised before being described in terms of significant themes.<sup>26</sup> As recommended by Flick, randomly allocated numbers were utilised as de-identifiers for the data reporting, and themes were given codes to help group the data into categories.<sup>27</sup> As a result, information about secondary school learners' opinions of school gangsterism and its effects on their safety while learning was arranged and explained.<sup>28</sup>

## **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

To determine whether there are any similarities or differences, the results of the study that follows are compared to the literature review on student gangsterism, safety, teaching, and learning in secondary schools. The themes that emerged for discussion are (a) a school climate devoid of gangs and (b) bullying by gangsters.

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23 Ramorola, "The Links between School Violence and Drug Usage in Schools: External or Internal Factor?"

24 Uwe Flick, "The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection," 2017; John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage publications, 2016).

25 King, Brooks, and Horrocks, "Interviews in Qualitative Research."

26 Michael Williams and Tami Moser, "The Art of Coding and Thematic Exploration in Qualitative Research," *International Management Review* 15, no. 1 (2019): 45–55.

27 Flick, "The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection."

28 Gareth Terry et al., "Thematic Analysis," *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology* 2, no. 17–37 (2017): 25.

### **a. Gang-free school environment**

Most learners surveyed (96%) said they would rather attend a school without gangs. The fundamental human rights to life and a secure environment are compromised by gangsterism and gang activities. Teachers cannot instruct, and pupils cannot learn, in the absence of a secure learning environment. Threats are thought to divert pupils' focus from productive learning.<sup>29</sup> Learner A stated that:

*“Gangs bring weapons to school. Most learners join gangs for the sake of belonging to a certain group.”*

Learner G further mentioned that the school is home to numerous gangsters that pose a threat to learners' safety and education. The actions of these gangsters occasionally cause learners to lose focus on their studies:

*“They sometimes fight with the gangsters from other schools and those on the streets and they would get through the gate because there is no security, sometimes through the fences because there are holes.”*

Another learner, Learner F reported that:

*“Learners believe that bullies are sometimes members of gangs, and sometimes, learners who are afraid of them skip classes out of fear.”*

At one school, Learner E mentioned:

*“There was no security as intruders could access the school property without any measurable control, the gang came looking for one learner who is of the opposite gang group.”*

Learner B observed that gangsters are mainly male learners.

*“They are mostly male gangsters, these gangsters normally fight one another and they are very rude towards other learners when they fight they use the knives and that actually threaten them a lot, they normally steal the other learners' belongings such as their bags, cell phones, money and the stationery, they threaten other learners and sometimes beat them or promise to beat them up if they report them, they are even scared to go to school in most cases because they will wait for them outside the school in the morning and sometimes after school.”*

Learner G further added.

*“A learner was stabbed with a knife in 2012, and we suspect that it was a gang-related incident, fortunately, he did not die. Stabbing outside school grounds has occurred two times, assault on school has occurred five times, and assault outside school grounds has occurred two times as well.”*

This learner again stated:

*“There was a case of the girl who was hunted by gang members when teachers were gone after school. She had to hide herself from the assailants who gained access to the schoolyard.”*

It is frequently maintained that investing in security measures will be worthwhile and can improve the overall safety of the school building if it is located in a neighbourhood that is dangerous and has a high crime rate.<sup>30</sup> Free admission to the school was another issue that Learner I pointed up:

*“Drugs are easily accessible and are used by learners and cause a problem to learners' discipline because when they supposed to be studying, they often go to toilets to smoke and come back to cause disruptions. Marijuana is the most smoked drug. Learners who take drugs do it in school toilets. Such learners tend to disrespect teachers in classes. Learners who are under the influence of drugs instil fear in innocent learners. Sometimes due to a lack of adequate access control, some*

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<sup>29</sup> Cornell, “Threat Assessment as a School Violence Prevention Strategy.”

<sup>30</sup> Moore and Stuart, “Gang Research in the Twenty-First Century.”

*learners have developed a tendency to bring drugs into the school premises during events such as the bashes. They easily bring drugs through the vandalized school fence at the back.”*

According to the passages, there is no restriction over strangers' access to the numerous school grounds. According to Burden, a young person's life experiences shape their likelihood of engaging in delinquent activity, and the school has the most influence after their family.<sup>31</sup> This statement cautions educational organisations like schools against taking learners' aggressive behaviour for granted because it could develop into a negative habit. Learners are entitled to an education in a secure, educationally supportive setting.<sup>32</sup> Learners have a right to property security, well-maintained facilities, school supplies and furnishings, hygienic restrooms, water, and green space, as well as the freedom from harassment during class and test-taking. According to Teise, teaching and learning are enhanced in a school setting free from violence.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Jacobs stated that focused and well-organised learning environments are unquestionably essential components of prosperous educational institutions.<sup>34</sup>

### **b. Bullying by Gangs**

According to a significant percentage of the learners (96%) surveyed, gang members at their school are primarily responsible for common assaults. The learners, for instance, retorted that there are a lot of violent incidents at school since learners occasionally hurt and injure one another in front of everyone. Due to the persistent emergent feeling of being attacked, which is an indication of a lack of safety, learners do not feel safe.

Learner H recorded that:

*“Often learners are shoved around for no apparent reason, either kicked or slapped on the face, this brings a lot of crying and emotional instability.”*

Learner H further stated that.

*“Bullying takes place often and incidents of bullying inside the school premises and the classroom take place. This is because sometimes the teachers would not be around the premises of the school (during break time or free periods) and leave the learners alone inside the classes without checking if everything is okay.”*

Despite these mentioned instances, nothing was done or documented regarding the bullying occurrences that occurred at the school. Theft at schools, either to learners or to school property, was another issue mentioned by learners.

Learner B stated:

*“There was loss of property at the school, but there was no case of robbery. There are many cases of theft of school property, vandalism, and theft of personal property.”*

Learner J mentioned that:

*“It is easy for the gangs to take by force valuable items from other learners such as cell phones and money, especially after school.”*

Gang members' theft or damage of school property impedes the school's progress. Gang members waste time and money repairing and purchasing new equipment. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers always keep an eye on their learners during playtime to make sure they are acting appropriately. Raising awareness is crucial to preventing learners from committing the same offences at school and to letting them know that teachers follow up on each instance of misbehaviour. In order to comply with the procedure, teachers must also be informed that they must document any wrongdoing that occurs in the schools.

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31 Paul Burden, Classroom Management: Creating a Successful K-12 Learning Community (Wiley Global Education, 2012).

32 Paul D Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, Practical Research: Planning and Design (Pearson, 2023).

33 K Teise, “Are South African Education Policies on School Safety and Learners’ Discipline Geared for Restorative Discipline?,” Journal of Educational Studies 14, no. 2 (2015): 50–73.

34 Jacobs, “Framing of School Violence in the South African Printed Media-(Mis) Information to the Public.”

## Implications for Learners' Rights

The rights of learners to education are infringed because gangs in schools make teaching and learning difficult. Protection from bodily, psychological and emotional harm is clearly required and schools' resources are limited to curb and stop the spread of gangsterism in schools. Seeing or being afflicted by gangster actions might leave a long-lasting psychological scar on young learners which might influence them to be violent or use dangerous weapons to retaliate or protect themselves in the future.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study demonstrated that violence had a detrimental impact on schoolchildren. Secondary school security measures are insufficient to guarantee learners' academic performance and general well-being. It was evident that gangsterism was quite common in schools, which caused learners to fear for their lives and, in most situations, hindered instruction. Any student found guilty of encouraging gang violence or recruiting members on school property should be immediately dismissed, according to the school safety policy, which should also prohibit gang activity and gang-related clothing, banners, insignia, and language. Therefore, following a fair and just hearing, such a dismissal ought to take place. Finally, schools ought to maintain records of each student's aggressive behaviour and encourage greater community participation, collaboration, and ownership of safety issues at nearby schools.

## CONCLUSION

This paper assessed the perspectives of learners in the Free State province regarding the impact of gangsterism and a safe schooling environment in South African public schools. The paper employed Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a research framework to address the following questions: What are the perspectives of learners on schools' safety in the school context? To what extent does gangsterism in school threaten the safety of learners in schools? According to these findings, there is school-based violence that both teachers and learners must deal with. This makes teaching and learning ineffective because of the fear of death, threats, lack of motivation, disregard for rules, and violent actions by gang members, all of which have an adverse effect on other learners' well-being. The study argues that the incorporation and appropriate application of ecological systems can impact learners' growth and produce the nation's future responsible citizens.

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