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Whistles and Sjamboks: Crime and Policing in Soweto, 1960-1976

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Whistles and Sjamboks: Crime and Policing in Soweto, 1960-1976

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Given the near obsession with crime in contemporary South Africa the historical literature on crime and policing is surprisingly sparse. Several thoughtful volumes have appeared recently dealing with current aspects of the crime crisis.¹ But these contributions focus almost exclusively on the post-1994 period with only an occasional explanatory nod to the politically volatile 1980s and early 1990s. The social history of criminal movements in the pre-1980 period, though sporadic and Rand-centric, is fairly well established. Criminal gangs were a central concern in Charles van Onselen's early history of Johannesburg. Phil Bonner has written on East Rand youth gangs in the 1940s and 1950s and on Basotho immigrant gangsterism. *Amalaita* gangs in Durban have received attention from Paul la Hausse. My own work details the rise of *tsotsi* gangs in Johannesburg's townships.² Brewer has made an impressive institutional study of the South African police from the 1910s to the early 1990s.³ But very little has been written about policing 'from below', attempts to combat crime by ordinary township residents, prior to the 1980s.

David Goodhew, focusing on the Western Areas of Johannesburg from the 1930s to the early 1960s, has written the most sustained historical analysis of

1. See, in particular, J. Steinberg, ed., *Crime Wave: The South African Underworld and its Foes* (Johannesburg, 2001); M. Shaw, *Crime and Policing in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Transforming Under Fire* (Indianapolis, 2002); *African Studies*, 63, 2 (2004), special issue on vigilantism edited by Lars Buur and Steffen Jensen.
2. C. van Onselen, *Studies in the Economic History of the Witwatersrand*, vols 1 and 2 (Johannesburg, 1982); P. Bonner, 'The Russians on the Reef, 1947-1957: Urbanisation, Gang Warfare and Ethnic Mobilisation', in P. Bonner, P. Delius and D. Posel, eds, *Apartheid's Genesis, 1935-1962* (Johannesburg, 1987); P. Bonner, 'Family, Crime and Political Consciousness on the East Rand 1939-1955', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, 3 (1988); P. la Hausse, "'Mayihlome": Towards an Understanding of Amalaita Gangs in Durban, c 1900-1930', in S. Clingman, ed., *Regions and Repertoires: Topics in South African Politics and Culture* (Johannesburg, 1991); C. Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The Youth Gangs of Soweto 1935-1976* (Portsmouth, NH, 2000).
3. J. Brewer, *Black and Blue: Policing in South Africa* (Oxford, 1994).

communal policing and its relationship with the state.⁴ Jeremy Seekings has also written a valuable overview of 'social ordering' initiatives in African townships throughout South Africa from the 1940s to the 1990s. His work is particularly rich on the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s.⁵ My work on *tsotsi* gangs deals only peripherally with civic guards, although I do subject the Makgotla movement of Soweto in the mid 1970s to closer scrutiny.⁶ Massive gaps remain in the South African historical record on the subject of communal and state responses to crime. Following Goodhew's example, I attempt here to sketch in some of that absent history, in this case focusing on an important phase of communal policing in Soweto from the beginning of the 1960s until the 1976 uprising.

Perhaps the most obvious lesson from the historical record is that rampant crime is not a new problem in urban South Africa. As early as the 1940s, residents of the Witwatersrand townships regarded crime as a major social grievance. By the late 1950s Soweto experienced a murder rate which made Chicago and New York, cities with legendary reputations for crime, seem tame by comparison.⁷ Night life had been virtually destroyed in the townships while public transport, particularly trains, was extremely hazardous. Workers returning home on Friday evenings had to run a regular gauntlet of muggers and pick-pockets and the rate of sexual assault was staggeringly high.⁸ The crime problem, as perceived by the mass media and local administrators, grew steadily throughout the 1950s, levelled off to an extent around 1960-1961, and then continued to escalate throughout the remainder of the 1960s and early 1970s.⁹ In the case of Soweto in the 1960s the 'moral panic'

4. D. Goodhew, 'The People's Police-Force: Communal Policing Initiatives in the Western Areas of Johannesburg, circa 1930-1962', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 3 (1993). Also in the Western Areas, Deon van Tonder has examined clashes between Basotho gangs and civil guards in Newclare during the early 1950s: see D. van Tonder, 'Gangs, Councillors and the Apartheid State: The Newclare Squatters' Movements of 1952', *South African Historical Journal*, 22 (1990).
5. J. Seekings, 'Social Ordering and Control in the African Townships of South Africa: An Historical Overview of Extra-State Initiatives from the 1940s to the 1990s', in W. Scharf and D. Nina, eds, *The Other Law: Non-State Ordering in South Africa* (Cape Town, 2001), 71-97.
6. For the Makgotla, see Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi*, 148-53, 178.
7. An article appeared in the *New York Times*, 4 Jan. 1959, featuring crime in Johannesburg. Murder statistics in Soweto, the writer claimed, were substantially higher than those of New York or Chicago. In 1972 Soweto experienced a murder rate of 84 per 100 000 people, over four times that of New York with 20.58 per 100 000: see *The Star*, 8 July 1972.
8. For an analysis of violent juvenile crime on the Rand in the 1940s and 1950s, see C. Glaser, 'Anti-Social Bandits: Juvenile Delinquency and the Tsotsi Youth Gang Subculture on the Witwatersrand, 1935-1960' (MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1990), 134-38.
9. These conclusions are drawn from references too numerous to list. My sources include crime reports from the two major Johannesburg daily newspapers, *The Star* and the *Rand Daily Mail* (*RDM*), as well as the two local Sowetan papers, *The World* and *Golden City Post* (*GCP*, later simply *Post*); minutes from township Advisory Board meetings and Johannesburg Non-European Affairs Department (JNEAD) letters and memoranda. See also Brewer, *Black and Blue*, 261.

around crime arose out of a deteriorating sense of security among residents and a growing belief that urban youth were out of control.

According to most Sowetan residents, local crime was dominated by young men from as early as the 1940s. This perception seemed to strengthen during the 1960s. Sowetan residents and the mass media tended to perceive crime and juvenile delinquency as one and the same problem. As one speaker commented at a National Council of Women conference held in Orlando in 1964 to discuss crime: 'It is our children who are doing this to us'.¹⁰ In March 1967 the local Sowetan newspaper, *The World*, opened its front page lead article with these words: 'Teenage gangsterism has become Soweto's Public Enemy Number One. Latest figures just released show that young hoodlums under the age of 21 made up more than half the people convicted for cases of death by violence.'¹¹ Parents regarded the control and discipline of youth as the key to crime prevention.

From the late 1940s, residents, generally under the leadership of elected Advisory Board members, organised local civic guards and parents' associations to protect themselves from criminal youths. There were constant appeals to the government to provide better policing as well as social services which would indirectly tackle the crime problem, such as schooling and street lighting. Residents generally received a relatively sympathetic hearing from the local Johannesburg Non-European Affairs Department (JNEAD) on the issue of crime. The Johannesburg municipality was run by the United Party and, although there was increasing central government interference after 1948, there was substantial continuity in the JNEAD until the late 1960s. During the 1950s a municipal police force was established to supplement the South African Police (SAP) and cautious recognition and support was extended to local civic guards. However, while the local government saw solutions in terms of improving urban social conditions, the central Native Affairs Department solution hinged on the control of African mobility. From the late 1950s until the early 1970s urban crime was a social problem which the central government felt could best be combated through the strict implementation of influx control. The government took little notice of Advisory Boards, residents associations and other township bodies which appealed for improved urban services, choosing instead to deal with crime unilaterally.

In the first section of this article I assess central government policy towards township crime during the 1960s and early 1970s. In the second and third sections I examine the response of residents to crime in Soweto in the era of high apartheid.

10. *GCP*, 23 Feb. 1964.

11. *The World*, 1 Mar. 1967. For further evidence see, for example, *The World* editorial, 13 Aug. 1964, and a letter to the editor from M.M. Itumaleng of Diepkloof, 3 Feb. 1966.

Policing under Apartheid

Brewer has argued convincingly that the South African Police (SAP), along with its allied policing units, was far more an instrument of political control than civil policing. It was designed largely to maintain political order and protect white interests. Moreover, during the 1960s the security wing of the police services was prioritised to the detriment of 'ordinary policing': the Riot Police were established in 1962, the Special Branch was reorganised and strengthened in 1963, and the counter-insurgency unit, the Bureau of State Security (originally Republican Intelligence) was set up with substantial resources and new powers in 1969.¹²

As for ordinary crime, the priority was to provide security in the white neighbourhoods. As I have argued elsewhere, the SAP leadership was primarily interested in containing township crime rather than combating it.¹³ This is not to suggest that the SAP deliberately allowed crime to flourish in the townships in order to destabilise them politically. This would not have been in their interest. They wanted to portray themselves as a progressive force of law and order. Rampant criminality reflected badly on the police force. There was also the consideration that crime could spill over into white areas. Rather, it was a question of gross neglect and a huge imbalance in the allocation of resources. The SAP hierarchy hoped that township crime could be controlled adequately through the implementation of pass laws and the mounting of massive periodic raids.

Crime in the white suburbs could be restrained if black residential areas were segregated from white suburbs. The Group Areas legislation was designed not only for political control objectives but also to quarantine the various perceived social evils of the township, including crime. The forced removal of the crime-ridden Western Areas in the late 1950s was consistent with this strategy. An adequate buffer had to be created between black and white neighbourhoods.

The central government and the SAP believed that influx control could be used as an instrument to control crime. In their own reasoning, criminals, almost by definition, did not have legitimate urban status. The 'criminal element', they assumed, was made up of people who had no fixed home, who were unemployed, who did not have their passes in order. Senior police officials believed that if these 'vagrants', 'idlers', 'loafers' and 'undesirables' were removed from Johannesburg the crime problem would decline significantly.

Under the Native (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1945 police had the right to arrest 'idle and undesirable Natives' in an urban area without a warrant. Thousands were arrested under this legislation throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. In response to a spate of payroll robberies and street attacks in November 1960, a senior Johannesburg police officer argued that insufficient measures had been taken to enforce this act. He promised an intensification of its enforcement

12. See Brewer, *Black and Blue*, especially 258-66.

13. See Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi*, 101.

to curb crime.¹⁴ In the same month it was announced that camps would be established on the fringes of Johannesburg for the rehabilitation of delinquents (those who fitted into the 'idle and undesirable' category) who had not necessarily committed specific acts of crime. The Minister of Justice, J. M. Erasmus, observing that 'among non-Whites, lawlessness and delinquency are again reaching proportions that militate against the orderly development of their communities', informed the public that the law 'would be tightened up to make it easier for magistrates to commit young idlers and deviates to these rehabilitation centres.'¹⁵ This set the tone for the rest of 1960s.

While influx control could be used directly to control what was perceived as the 'criminal element' in the townships, it had an equally important role to play in keeping rural Africans out of the city and thereby reducing the competition for urban employment. The urban labour preference policy (ULPP) was designed to soak up the urban unemployed, mostly youth, and reduce pressure on urban resources.¹⁶ The M.C. Botha Commission of 1962, looking into the problem of '*ledige en nie-werkende Bantoe*' ('idle and unemployed Bantu'), made an explicit connection between juvenile delinquency and youth unemployment. Botha pointed out that urban unemployment was concentrated in the 16-25 age group and argued that the best way to tackle delinquency was through the creation of jobs for urban youths. The biggest threat to urban youth job creation was '*werksoekende Bantoe van buite die stedelike gebiede*' ('Bantu from outside of the urban area looking for work').¹⁷ A similar observation was made at a meeting of South African municipal officials in 1962.¹⁸ In 1966 Colonel D.H. Botha of the Newlands Police Station, commenting on the regular monthly deportation of several hundred 'illegals' from Soweto, insisted that it was for the good of most Sowetans because there were too few resources for all. The deportations were 'to safeguard people legally in the townships from being unemployed and overcrowded.'¹⁹

Although a few police stations were established in Soweto (with mostly black staff and a few white officers), minimal resources were allocated to patrolling the townships. Consequently, the SAP could only make an impact through the raid system. Soweto was regarded as too big and too dangerous for an effective regular

14. *The Star*, 22 Nov. 1960, 'Rand Police clamp down on vagrants'. Police repression was generally stepped up in the 1960s in a climate of white political fear.

15. *The Star*, 29 Nov. 1960.

16. For a fuller discussion of this issue, see D. Posel, *The Making of Apartheid: 1948-1961: Conflict and Compromise* (Oxford, 1991).

17. *Verslag van die Interdepartementele Komitee insake Ledige en Nie-werkende Bantoe in die Stedelike Gebiede* ('Report of the Inter-departmental Committee on Idle and Unemployed Bantu in the Urban Areas'), chaired by M.C. Botha (henceforth Botha Report), Pretoria, 1962.

18. Intermediary Archive Depot, Johannesburg: West Rand Administration Board Archive (hereafter IAD, WRAB), 401/44/20, extract from minutes of meeting of the United Municipal Executive of SA 20/21 Feb. 1962. The IAD holdings were subsequently transferred to the Central Archive Bureau, Pretoria.

19. *Post*, 24 July 1966; see also *Die Transvaaler*, 23 Jan. 1964.

presence on the streets to be maintained.²⁰ Police patrols, particularly at night, were rare. There were constant complaints from residents that SAP officers were unlikely to appear at the scene of a crime.²¹ Instead, hundreds of policemen would periodically raid the townships in close formation, set up road blocks and conduct door-to-door pass checks. They would make numerous arrests and within hours the force would withdraw.

Raids reached a peak in 1965 and 1966, probably in response to urgent appeals from residents to do something about crime. The biggest raids tended to coincide with peak crime periods such as Christmas and New Year. During the Christmas week of 1965, for example, about 2 000 people were arrested in two huge raids. Two thousand five hundred police carried out a house-to-house raid on the homes of about 200 000 people in what African National Congress (ANC) veteran and Advisory Board member, Philip Vundla, described as a 'mass invasion' of the townships. Most of the arrested were screened and released. Almost 500 were charged with apartheid related offenses. Senior police officials stated that the raids would 'continue until the criminal element has been stamped out'.²² The intensity of raids continued into 1966. According to B.J. Vorster, then both Prime Minister and Minister of Police, during 1966 the police undertook 33 special operations to combat crime in the urban and peri-urban areas of Johannesburg and the townships of Soweto and Alexandra. The number of police used varied from 75 to more than 1 000 and a total of more than 8 000 were arrested. More than 7 600 were convicted at Magistrate's and Bantu Affairs Commissioner's courts.²³

It was in the nature of raids that police were not reacting to specific acts of crime. They could only deal with pass offenders, illegal beer brewers and perhaps those found with dangerous weapons. In the absence of a real police presence, they could only hope to rid the townships of 'criminals, vagrants and undesirables'. Although the raids often had some short-term impact on crime and some fairly credible local leaders expressed approval of raids during the 1965/66 crime spiral, their effectiveness was negligible.²⁴ Readers of the *Post* and *World* complained regularly that the real criminals got away in raids. Take, for example, 'R.N.' in 1964 who asked, 'Will the police leave the innocent working people and check on

20. *The Star*, 13 July 1972, 'Violence in Soweto'.

21. See IAD, WRAB, N9 vol. 1, minutes of Jabavu AB meeting 17 Nov. 1962; IAD, WRAB, N9/4, letter from Dube Residents' Committee, Urban Bantu Council (UBC) General Purposes and Housing Committee, UBC 95/1971. In 1972 prominent Soweto businessman and Councillor, Richard Maponya, complained that the SAP very rarely came to the scene of a crime in Soweto: see IAD, WRAB, N9 vol. 3, minutes of meeting of the Liaison Committee on Crime, 18 May 1972.

22. *Post*, 2 Jan. 1966 and 9 Jan. 1966; *RDM*, 30 Dec. 1965, 31 Dec. 1965 and 4 Jan. 1966; *The World*, 31 Dec. 1965; see also IAD, WRAB N9, vol. 1, extract from minutes of Non-European Affairs Committee meeting, 13 Jan. 1966.

23. *The World*, 1 Mar. 1967, p. 1 lead story; see also *Post*, 14 Aug. 1966 and 27 Mar. 1966.

24. For approval of the raids, see *Post*, 1 May 1966, 9 Jan. 1966 and 24 Apr. 1966.

the murderers, loafers and gangsters... [?]'²⁵ Or Douglas Ndebele in 1966: 'While law-abiding citizens are humiliated in the morning raids, thugs go free in the townships. These raids are almost useless. Most of our crimes are committed at the weekends when the criminals come out of their hide-outs.'²⁶ Or Oka Sopisi in 1969: 'Why are these raiders not on duty during the weekends when such crimes as rape, assault and murder take place?'²⁷

Not only were apartheid policies ineffective in dealing with township crime but they profoundly deepened the crime crisis. The harsh implementation of the pass laws, coupled to the raid system, turned township residents against the police. Residents, angered by this failure to differentiate urban illegality from criminality, tended not to co-operate with the SAP. Police, both black and white, were regarded with great suspicion in Soweto.²⁸ Following the massive raids during the Christmas period of 1965, Philip Vundla and Peter Lengene, another passionate local spokesman on the crime issue, raged against the raid system. Lengene told *Post* that

the raids in Soweto shocked the law-abiding people, particularly those whose houses were searched. The feeling of these people was that they were regarded as suspects or criminals, he said... To conduct indiscriminate raids would only turn the people away and the police would fail to get the cooperation they expected.²⁹

Soweto crime thrived as long as the police themselves were mistrusted and lacked credibility.

Pass controls and discriminatory laws damaged the credibility not merely of the police, but of law more broadly. Urban anthropologist Ellen Hellmann argued this point in a letter to the manager of the Johannesburg NEAD, Willem Carr, in April 1967:

It seems to me that when large areas covered by the law are regarded as unjust and people feel no inner compulsion whatsoever to conform – falling foul of the pass laws carries about as much social stigma as if I get caught for a parking offence – respect for the law as such is undermined. You go to gaol for a pass offence if you happen to have no money to pay the fine, and you go to gaol for assault or robbery. (I believe the same gaols.) How does one retain the distinction in the public mind and harness the indispensable sanction of public opinion? ... I think we are inclined to confuse enforced African acquiescence in the racial

25. *The World*, letter from 'R.N.' of Alexandra, 9 Oct. 1964.

26. *Post*, letter from Douglas K. Ndebele of Westonaria, 11 Dec. 1966.

27. *Post*, letter from Oka Sopisi of Diepkloof, 9 Nov. 1969; for other examples, see *The World*, letters from Yeta Mashiya, 1 Feb. 1966 and F. Nhlapo of Zola, 6 Mar. 1967, and *Post*, 8 Dec. 1968, 'The Doc Bikitsha Show'.

28. See letter from Philip Vundla in *The World*, 2 Sep. 1966; IAD, WRAB, N9 vol. 2, 'Causes of Crime in Soweto' by Y. Merafe (undated, c Mar. 1967) and 'Crime in Soweto', WJPC/MH, 20 Apr. 1967, p. 3.

29. *Post*, 9 Jan. 1966.

order here with acceptance of it. I don't think even the most apparently subservient sell-outs accept the racial hierarchy ... and I think the thugs and gangsters are sheltered by common animosity to the law.³⁰

Although Soweto residents felt brutalised and persecuted by local criminals there was a powerful tendency to draw on their own resources rather than place their trust in the South African law and police force. In terms of combating township crime, influx control backfired viciously. This was articulated clearly in a 1960 *World* editorial:

A major cause of crime in the towns is the out-of- date network of apartheid laws which is creating a class of permanent outlaws, not only on the Rand, but throughout the Union's many urban areas. [Apartheid laws are] creating a growing class of men, women and children who have no prospect of permanent jobs and no hope of ever having a permanent roof over their heads. They live like hunted beasts, on the fringes of the towns, always on the move and always hungry. From an early age, they learn to take their sustenance where they can, and how they can. They also try to live one jump ahead of the pass-raiding squads.³¹

In 1961 several Soweto Advisory Board members observed that teenagers became gang members and delinquents in response to having been endorsed out of the urban area.³² *World* journalist, Stanley Motjuwadi, made a similar point in a 1965 crime feature:

When the Influx Laws were first introduced the sole purpose was to curb crime by keeping a check on people who do not belong to a particular town. But lately, the same laws have ironically had the opposite effect. Many youths who find themselves in the urban areas and cannot get jobs because of the laws turn to crime as a source of making a living.³³

The homeland development policy also indirectly stoked urban crime. The policy diverted potential resources from the cities during the 1960s, creating a squeeze on vital urban social services such as policing, secondary schooling and social welfare.³⁴ A massive housing programme, initiated by local government in the second half of the 1950s, continued into the early 1960s and employment levels

30. IAD, WRAB N9, vol. 1, letter from Ellen Hellmann to William Carr, Apr. 1967; similar arguments appear in *The Star* features on crime, 25 Nov. 1966 and 13 July 1972.

31. *The World*, 9 Jan. 1960, editorial.

32. IAD, WRAB, 351/2, minutes from SWBT No 3 AB meeting, 15 June 1961; see also an article in *The World*, 22 Feb. 1963, which looks at a wave of crime in Zone 5, Meadowlands, being caused by a gang of youths without proper passes.

33. *The World*, 27 Sep. 1965; see also *The Star*, 27 July 1965, 'Forced to be idle', which stresses that unemployed city-born youths are often endorsed out, and *Pretoria News*, 2 Oct. 1964, which focuses on homeless urban children who turn to crime when their parents are endorsed out of town.

34. Brewer, *Black and Blue*, especially 225, 246, makes a similar point.

improved during the 'economic boom' years. Yet Soweto experienced few other benefits usually associated with rapid economic growth. The Acting Deputy Manager of JNEAD observed in 1968: 'The attitude adopted by the Minister presupposes that ... the Bantu Homeland Policy is going to take care of all Urban Areas' problems.'³⁵ Fringe extremists aside, the National Party (NP) accepted during the 1960s that the permanence of an African urban population was irreversible. But the government did hope to curb further growth, and control urban Africans more effectively through the bantustan system and influx control. When it came to the distribution of state revenue, therefore, bantustan development took priority over improvements in urban services.

The inadequacy of police services in Soweto has to be seen not only in terms of SAP strategy, but also in terms of resource shortages and priorities. As I pointed out earlier, there were constant complaints about the absence of police patrols, especially in danger zones, the inefficiency of police and the shortage of police stations.³⁶ The flagship Moroka Police station, which came under particular criticism for its inefficiency during the 1960s, had to service seventeen Soweto townships.³⁷

Urban African higher education was starved of funding throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Even in the case of lower primary and primary education, Sowetans were forced to pay for a large proportion of their education out of their internal revenue account administered by the JNEAD. In addition, the JNEAD was only authorised to build primary schools from this fund. Largely as a result of stretched resources, standards in urban centres like Soweto were lower than in the rural areas.³⁸ School shortages, particularly in secondary schooling, and high dropout rates contributed to the juvenile delinquency problem. By prioritising homeland schooling and neglecting urban schooling, then, the NP indirectly encouraged urban crime.

As in the case of schooling, Soweto's recreation and social welfare had to be financed by limited local government or private funding. There were drastic shortages of sports facilities, libraries, creches and youth centres. The Government

35. IAD, WRAB N9/8, letter from acting deputy manager to the manager JNEAD, 30 May 1968.

36. See, for example, *The World*, 15 Dec. 1964, 'Fear riddled Soweto needs protection now' and 8, 10 and 13 Mar. 1967; IAD, WRAB, N9 vol. 1, extract from discussion at Joint AB meeting, 23 Feb. 1967, and 'Reasons for crime wave in Soweto', Recreation and Community services Branch JNEAD, 20 Mar. 1967; University of South Africa Library, Urban Bantu Council Collection, (hereafter UNISA, UBC), Acc 244, minutes of meeting of General Purposes and Housing Committee, 8 Aug. 1968.

37. *The World*, 23 July 1965; *Post*, 12 Mar. 1967, 26 Dec. 1967 and 8 Aug. 1971, 'Moroka police blasted again'.

38. See, for instance, *RDM*, 15 Mar. 1968. In 1968, the article reports, only 20 per cent of urban African matriculants passed while the average pass rate at rural schools was 48 per cent.

failed to check the massive population of 'idle and loitering' youths partly as a result of its neglect of urban services.³⁹

Intensive influx control, along with the absence of urban ownership rights, deprived Africans of a sense of permanence and stability in the cities. In a 1965 *World* editorial Soweto's crime was blamed on lack of ownership and a sense of impermanence: 'People do not easily yield to crime if they have a stake in a country, if they feel the country is theirs, that it belongs to them to treasure, cherish and safeguard.'⁴⁰

Civil Guards in the 1960s

During the 1940s and 1950s informal civil guards emerged and disappeared throughout the Witwatersrand. Initially the local authorities and police tolerated the patrols. Provided the correct application procedures to the local superintendent were followed, the guards were allowed to operate, usually with some kind of police supervision. During the war years, presumably due to a severe shortage of security personnel, the authorities actively promoted the formation of the Civilian Protection Service. This was a co-ordinated civil guard which included seven white officers and over a thousand African volunteers and operated in several of the biggest townships on the Rand. The volunteers were given uniforms and trained. It was popular and effective among township residents, reportedly having an enormous impact in reducing crime. In 1947, once war-time measures were no longer deemed necessary, the Service was disbanded. There were numerous demands for the resurrection of the Service but to no avail. A number of localised civil guards emerged sporadically in the late 1940s and 1950s with some co-operation from the municipal authorities. But the NP government had little sympathy for communal policing. A series of bloody clashes between the pervasive Basotho migrant gang, the Russians, and the civil guard in Newclare during 1952 marked the end of state co-operation. Angry over the unauthorised use of violence, the government banned all civil guards. In a context of inadequate policing, this was not enough to stop the movements. But for the first time the SAP began arresting and prosecuting civic guard leaders. Forty-six leaders from three townships were arrested in 1953.⁴¹ In July 1958 George Xorile, a veteran Advisory Board member and mayor of Orlando, was charged for operating an illegal civic guard. Eleven other prominent residents appeared with him. Although the twelve were later cautioned and discharged, it dealt another blow to the civil guard

39. See, for example, IAD, WRAB, N9/8, letter from the acting deputy manager to the manager JNEAD, 30 May 1968, in which the former expresses frustration at the lack of state assistance in urban social services.

40. *The World*, 5 Feb. 1965, editorial. See also IAD, WRAB, N9 vol. 1, 'Crime in Soweto', WJPC/MH, 20 Apr. 1967, and letter from Ellen Hellmann to Carr, 5 Apr. 1967.

41. For more detail on civic guards in the 1940s and early 1950s, see Goodhew, 'The People's Police-Force', 456-66.

movement.⁴² In the mid to late 1950s the ANC attempted to organise civil guards and this almost certainly helped to convince the SAP that the guards were a potential political threat.⁴³ Few guards were able to operate effectively towards the end of the decade.

By late 1960 there were renewed demands for civil guards from township residents.⁴⁴ In December of that year Willem Carr, perplexed by the spiralling crime problem, recommended to the Deputy Commissioner of Police that permission be granted to form police-monitored civil guards.⁴⁵ His recommendation, however, was turned down by the police authorities without explanation.⁴⁶

Once crime started to accelerate in the early 1960s adult Sowetans once again turned to Advisory Board (AB) members and Urban Bantu Councillors, for leadership. Although technically powerless and later tainted as 'dummy institutions', Advisory Boards were made up of elected ward representatives who maintained a certain local legitimacy well into the 1960s. They were transformed into the slightly more powerful, though increasingly discredited, Urban Bantu Councils (UBCs) towards the end of the 1960s. In spite of growing scepticism about the official bodies, township residents regularly aired their grievances at AB/UBC meetings. Representatives usually responded, first, by appealing vigorously to the authorities and, second, through organising practical community defence, usually in the form of illegal civil guards.

By the 1960s the ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were banned and their leaders were jailed or scattered in exile. In the absence of the 'progressive' leadership, neo-traditionalists became increasingly influential in township politics. Central to their project of combating crime was the reassertion of age hierarchy and parental discipline, something which older residents felt, with some justification, had disintegrated through the process of urbanisation.⁴⁷ Corporal punishment was a divisive issue in Soweto but certain sections of the community perceived it as a necessary element of parental discipline. Seekings suggests that the issue of flogging created a split between more recent urban immigrants sympathetic to 'traditional' methods and more established second generation urban residents who

42. *The World*, 26 July 1958 and 30 July 1958.

43. See Goodhew, 'The People's Police-Force', 460, 465, 469, and C. Glaser, 'Students, Tsotsis and the Congress Youth League: Youth Organisation on the Rand in the 1940s and 1950s', *Perspectives in Education*, 10, 2 (Summer 1988/89), 11.

44. Zola residents made this demand at a big crime meeting; see *The World*, 26 Nov. 1960. See also IAD, WRAB, 351/1, letter from O.M. Makapan of the West Native Township AB to the manager JNEAD, 8 Nov. 1960.

45. IAD, WRAB, 351/1, letter from manager JNEAD to Deputy Commissioner of Police, 6 Dec. 1960.

46. IAD, WRAB, 351/1, letter from Deputy Commissioner of Police to the manager JNEAD, 28 Nov. 1960.

47. For a discussion of this with reference to the 1940s and 1950s, see C. Glaser, 'Anti-Social Bandits', 23-30; for the civil guards' emphasis on generational respect in the 1940s and 1950s, see Goodhew, 'The People's Police-Force', 451.

regarded themselves as too sophisticated to use the *sjambok* on their children.⁴⁸ This is probably broadly correct, although the popularity of 'moderate' corporal punishment should not be under-estimated.

In 1961 a prominent Soweto businessman, Paul Mosaka, tabled a proposal with the JNEAD to form the African Parent-Child Association aimed primarily at combating juvenile delinquency. He called for joint parental action and the use of corporal punishment. His proposal was greeted with enthusiasm by AB members.⁴⁹ There is no evidence to suggest, however, that the association was ever formally constituted. It is likely that it ran into the same bureaucratic obstacles and delays that dogged the civil guard movement, which I discuss later. A few years later T.W. Kambule, the popular and widely respected headmaster of Orlando High School, picked up the mood of most adult Sowetans during the 1960s by arguing that children had to be disciplined effectively in order to create an ordered society.⁵⁰ It was widely believed, moreover, that not only immediate family but any adult should have the right to discipline wayward children. This custom had fallen away in the context of 'overprotective' urban nuclear families. Local leaders also felt hamstrung by 'white laws'. At a special AB meeting discussing crime in April 1967 several prominent members argued that parents should be given more legal latitude in disciplining and, if necessary, assaulting children. Juvenile law, it was argued, protected delinquents from serious punishment and they often literally got away with murder.⁵¹

There were a number of prominent strongmen in Soweto, in the 1960s involved in the AB and UBC structures, who established substantial followings through taking a tough line on crime. They were prepared to operate on the boundaries of legality, if necessary, in organising community responses to crime. Foremost amongst them were James Sofasonke Mpanza of Orlando. Mpanza's reputation stretched back to the 1940s squatter movement where he proved himself as a man of action. He retained a power base in the Orlando AB during the 1950s and 1960s. Many residents looked to him to discipline unruly youth. It was generally known that Mpanza ran a 'parent's court' which tried youths and often

48. J. Seekings, 'Social Ordering', esp. 72, 85-6.

49. IAD, WRAB, 351/2, record of discussion between the manager JNEAD and Joint AB, 1 Mar. 1961.

50. *The World*, 4 Mar. 1966; see also letters to the editor, P. Ngwenya of Orlando East, 28 Feb. 1966 and a nameless contributor, 18 Mar. 1966.

51. IAD, WRAB, N9 vol. 2, minutes of AB meeting, 13 Apr. 1967. In a *Star* feature on Soweto crime five years later UBC members Peter Lengene and Richard Maponya blamed Soweto's violence partly on judicial procedure which tended to give criminals what they regarded as excess benefit of the doubt. Lengene commented: 'In our society it would be unthinkable that a criminal would be allowed a lawyer.' Maponya called for 'some kind of compromise between African traditions and White law', for example 'by having Black police commanders and Black magistrates take cognisance of black traditions, such as the disciplining of Black children by elders without subsequent assault charges'. See *The Star*, 13 July 1972, 'Violence in Soweto' by Jaap Boekkooi.

sentenced them to corporal punishment. Officially, Mpanza denied the existence of the court as it was illegal.⁵²

Mpanza was at the forefront of demands for the removal of legal constraints on parental discipline. He also harangued the police for providing inadequate services and underestimating the crime problem in Soweto.⁵³ Mpanza supported the transition from ABs to UBCs because the latter promised a certain widening of authority to include some policing and dispute resolution functions. In the annual AB elections in 1962 Mpanza's candidates, standing on an explicitly pro-UBC ticket, swept all four Orlando seats in spite of the ANC's strong opposition to the concept of the UBCs.⁵⁴ Mpanza, though a politically divisive figure, clearly retained a powerful support base among older householders. A Zola resident writing to *The World* in 1965 articulated the feelings of many older Sowetans: 'Sir, we are being attacked by our children. I wish to make a suggestion that Mr Sofasonke Mpanza be made the head overseer of all the locations.'⁵⁵

From the early 1960s Peter Lengene, chairman of the Jabavu AB, was extremely vocal on the issue of crime. Jabavu was known to be amongst the worst crime spots in Soweto. He regularly called for better social services and for parental participation in disciplining children.⁵⁶ In 1966 K. Mlaba, a member of the AB who served under him, began organising 'able-bodied men' for street patrols. Mlaba had also been running a parents' court to deal with minor cases.⁵⁷ In early 1967 Lengene backed a scheme by Soweto Boardmen to organise civil guards in the hope of making the townships 'too hot for the thugs'.⁵⁸ Like Mpanza, Lengene clearly had a substantial personal following. At a meeting attended by over 500 people at the Mavis Isaacson Hall in December 1967 'residents shouted hoarse approval ... when Mr Peter Lengene ... said a "tight connection" between the parents and the Boards to fight teenage crime would be made' in the following year.⁵⁹

Despite its illegality and the arduous and hazardous nature of patrol duty, there was a spate of civil guard activity in Soweto throughout the 1960s. The authorities found the movement difficult to control both because of its informal nature and its ambiguous legality. The SAP could not very well prosecute a group of established adult residents simply patrolling their neighbourhoods. The authorities could only clamp down when there were technical infringements or specific complaints of abuse. In February 1962, for instance, 'Eleven men who

52. *The World*, 24 Sep. 1967.

53. *The World*, 28 Feb. 1964.

54. Although legislation for UBCs was tabled in 1961, the ABs were eventually phased out in Soweto in 1968.

55. *The World*, 22 Feb. 1965.

56. *The World*, 28 Feb. 1962; IAD, WRAB vol. 1, extract from minutes of Jabavu AB, 16 Feb. 1963.

57. *The World*, 20 Apr. 1966.

58. *The World*, 22 Jan. 1967.

59. *The World*, 18 Dec. 1967.

went out on a weekend civil guard duty at Meadowlands landed up in the Meadowlands police cells a few hours later.' They were all fined for carrying dangerous weapons and impersonating police.⁶⁰ In November 1965 Carr again appealed to the SAP to review its position on civil guards but Brigadier L.J. Steyn, the Divisional Commissioner of the SAP, was firm in his dismissal:

My appeal to the public to assist the police in their fight against crime does not in any circumstance warrant the formation of a body of persons to take over the functions of the S.A. Police ... No necessity exists for the establishment of organisations such as you propose.⁶¹

Nevertheless, crime was out of control and somebody had to do the policing.

In 1963, 'occasioned by the fact that lawlessness is increasing in the townships', the Orlando AB called for the renewal of joint police-resident patrols which had apparently been effective in the late 1950s. The request was immediately turned down by the Divisional Commissioner.⁶² But in July 1965, following persistent appeals from residents, in a very rare case of official support police granted permission for a civil guard in Orlando with limited authority. 'With the rising crime wave and an increasing number of murders in Soweto, Mr David Twala, public spirited founder of the Orlando Parents Association, has been given the green light from the police for his home guard to patrol Orlando.' Twala managed to gather a guard of fifty people together in the hope that 'with elderly home guardsmen walking the streets at night, tsotsis are scared off.'⁶³

In 1964 AB members applied for permission to set up a civil guard in the Soweto ward of Moroka in response to a crime wave which had reached 'alarming heights'.⁶⁴ Permission appears to have been refused. A successful guard was established, though, in spite of Moroka Boardmen getting cold feet about breaching legality. In October 1964 *The World* reported: 'Rockville residents have voted against members of the local Advisory Board and unanimously agreed that the home guards carry on their task to combat crime in the area – whether it be lawful for them to do so or not.'⁶⁵

Until late 1965 residents in the Soweto township of Mofolo rejected civic patrols, preferring instead to concentrate on pressuring the SAP to take a tougher

60. *The World*, 10 Feb. 1965.

61. IAD, WRAB, N9 vol. 1, letter from Brig. L.J. Steyn, Divisional Commissioner SAP, to manager JNEAD, 30 Nov. 1965.

62. IAD, WRAB, N9 vol. 1, letter from Self Mampuru, Secretary of the Orlando AB to the manager JNEAD, 7 Oct. 1963 and letter from Divisional Commissioner, Witwatersrand, to the manager JNEAD, 21 Oct. 1963.

63. *The World*, 19 July 1965; for residents' appeals, see *The World*, 20 June 1965.

64. IAD, WRAB, N9 vol. 1, letter from the South West Bantu Township No 1 AB to the manager JNEAD, 26 May 1964.

65. *The World*, 2 Oct. 1964. Rockville is a popular alternative name for Moroka.

approach on local crime.⁶⁶ However, in response to a renewed crime wave the following year, an informal guard was set up, 'patrolling the streets at night armed with sticks and trying to break up the groups of teenagers who loiter on corners waiting to pounce on lonely women and old men'.⁶⁷ By early 1967 Boardman Hezekiel Modiba, in response to an ambush of guardsmen by a 'mob of gangsters', was appealing for more residents to get involved in the local Mofolo guard.⁶⁸

In Zola, the so-called 'Wild West' of Soweto, a successful civil guard emerged in the early 1960s. At a Zola residents' meeting in November 1960, speakers, complaining that Zola had become 'the toughest township in Johannesburg', called for a civil guard.⁶⁹ By the end of 1962 Boardmen announced the formation of a vigilante squad, primarily to deal with the activities of the two big local youth gangs, the Eleven Boys and the German Spoilers, alleged to have been responsible for several murders in the township.⁷⁰ By May 1963 Zola had established a reputation for success in dealing with crime.⁷¹ The Zola vigilantes, known as 'Masinghafi' ('let us not die'), were criticised by residents for abuse of power in early 1965 and the AB promised an inquiry into the abuses. Nevertheless, *The World* described the guard as successful.⁷² In July of that year a Zola Boardman, S.L. Zwane, commented: 'Since we started patrolling, crime has been reduced to a minimum and we feel we are getting results.'⁷³ There are no further documented references to the Masinghafi after 1965.

A successful anti-crime street committee system emerged in the Tladi/Moletsane area of Soweto in 1969 under the leadership of local strongman, Leonard Mosala. Unlike most civil guards, they obtained the approval of the nearby Jabulani Police and the backing of the local superintendent. The organisation had an early success in 1969 when it engaged in a 'pitched battle' with local youth gangs. Generally, though, they kept on the right side of the law by merely making arrests and avoiding the common civil guard practice of meting out justice on the spot. By 1972 the results had been 'sensational by Soweto standards': In Tladi there had been no street murders for two years, apart from one gang murder, and in Moletsane only one.⁷⁴

Another successful civil guard emerged in Chiawelo as early as the late 1950s. There was a fairly well established sense of community in Chiawelo as most of the residents had moved there *en bloc* from a nearby squatter settlement called

66. *The World*, 15 Nov. 1965.

67. *Post*, 24 Apr. 1966.

68. *Post*, 1 Jan. 1967.

69. *The World*, 26 Nov. 1960.

70. *The World*, 20 Dec. 1962.

71. Residents from other 'far Soweto' townships wanted to share strategies and get ideas from Zola residents at a big anti-crime meeting: see *The World*, 13 May 1963.

72. *The World*, 5 Jan. 1965.

73. *The World*, 16 July 1965.

74. *The Star*, 13 July 1972, 'Violence in Soweto' by Jaap Boekkooi.

New Look. Initially the new township suffered from *tsotsi* crime particularly since street lighting was inadequate and there was little protection for workers returning home after dark. There was virtually no police presence in the area. Under the leadership of an elected *induna*, Mqanduli, an effective guard system was put into place. Residents used whistles to alert each other of danger. 'Every male person who was not a youth,' recalls an ex-resident, 'was expected to perform duties aimed at the prevention of crime. It was an obligation for every older person to wake up at whatever time of the night when he hears a whistle.'⁷⁵ Mqanduli organised nightly patrols which disarmed youths in the streets and escorted workers home from the Kliptown Station. Criminals caught in the act were usually beaten on the spot before being handed over to the authorities. The civil guard, it seems, virtually stamped out local crime for some time. Later in the 1960s (the chronology is vague here) the guard became less effective as the SAP intervened to curb its powers. Mqanduli from then on could only deal with domestic disputes and petty criminal cases. This, combined with a certain degree of corruption, eventually reduced the effectiveness of the guard.⁷⁶

It is clear that civil guards were a sporadic and uneven phenomenon during the 1960s. Their effectiveness in particular townships depended on locally specific variables such as strong leadership figures, the attitudes of local superintendents and police and levels of community cohesion. The degree of discipline of local guards and the forcefulness of personalities tended to make the difference between success and failure. It is a testimony to the depth of the crime crisis that, despite the risks of illegality and the danger of patrols, civic guards operated so persistently. Township residents were caught in a desperate double bind between rampant youth crime and unsympathetic authorities: in order to protect their lives and property they had to risk breaking the law.

Had the South African government come up with an effective anti-crime policy during the 1960s it might well have gained substantial legitimacy amongst the older, more conservative residents of Soweto who were determined to differentiate themselves from the criminal classes. There were many Sowetans who identified with *The World* newspaper, which stressed the importance of making 'the hard and often impossible climb towards good citizenship' and called upon 'the law-abiding, self-respecting element' to 'make a stand for law and order'.⁷⁷ They were determined to salvage a degree of safety, security and dignity in the harsh Sowetan landscape. Instead of attempting to meet these needs, however, government laws and policing strategies criminalised the entire urban African

75. Interview, J. Ngenyama (transcribed interviews of Chiawelo residents, Soweto 1988-1991, in possession of Philip Bonner, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg).

76. Interviews: J. Ngenyama, J. Mahwayi, D. Mboweni, Mr Ndlovu, H. Mbulane (transcribed interviews of Chiawelo residents, Soweto 1988-1991, in possession of Philip Bonner, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg).

77. *The World*, editorials 13 June 1959 and 1 Mar. 1967.

population, blurring the distinction between 'respectable folk' and 'hooligans'. Young gangsters and adult working people were subjected to the same humiliations in pass raids; a pass offender was dealt with in the same way as a mugger or rapist. Throughout the 1960s, the central government ignored local administrators such as Willem Carr who perceived that the most effective way to achieve social stability and 'civic responsibility' in Soweto was, first, by supplying decent housing and services and, second, 'by refraining from imprisoning thousands of people for purely technical contraventions of one of many complicated laws. If only genuine criminals stood in peril of imprisonment, then the stigma of jail and fear of its consequences may slowly be restored to the ordinary people.'⁷⁸

The Makgotla

In the early 1970s the already desperate crime situation deteriorated even further.⁷⁹ The economic boom of the 1960s, which had ensured high levels of adult (albeit low-wage) employment in Soweto, gradually unwound. At the same time, a more reformist government started to relax the skills colour bar, which encouraged the expansion of an urban African middle class. The simultaneous growth of unemployment and a middle class in Soweto led to widening wealth disparity; there were even more very poor people and there were richer pickings for criminals within the township. The established employed working-class house-holders, however, continued to be the most vulnerable and the most routinely victimised. Another development in the early 1970s worsened the situation: the central government, long frustrated with the city council control of Soweto, finally scrapped the Johannesburg NEAD in 1972 and administered the township directly through the new West Rand Administration Board (WRAB). Under the WRAB, a body top-heavy with sheltered white bureaucrats, under-financed and insensitive to local grievances, services declined quite suddenly in Soweto. Fewer resources were made available to the municipal police force, making the residents even more dependent on the unpopular and neglectful SAP.

Isolated community guard initiatives, referred to variously as *izibonda* ('council of elders') or *amadoda omuzi* ('fathers of the household') or simply 'street committees', enjoyed sporadic success in Zola, Mzimhlophe and parts of Pimville and Diepkloof. In 1973 a number of local guards came together to form the Makgotla, the biggest and most sustained community policing movement since

78. IAD, WRAB, N9 vol. 2, 'Crime in Soweto', WJPC/MH, 20 Apr. 1967.

79. Official statistics specific to Soweto are extremely difficult to unearth. As I showed in C. Glaser, 'Youth Culture and Politics in Soweto', Chapter 7, official crime figures only rose strikingly in Soweto (by about 20 per cent) from the middle of 1973 to the middle of 1974. Nevertheless, official crime figures are unreliable; the rise could reflect shifts in policing strategy or changes in the methods of record-taking rather than a real change in crime. The perceptions of residents, as reflected in letters and newspaper articles and editorials, were broadly consistent with the statistics.

the officially backed Civilian Protection Service of the war years. The Makgotla was distinctive in that it amalgamated a number of home guards from various parts of Soweto.⁸⁰ The leadership, modelling itself on the image of village elders, drew deliberately on 'traditional' African values in attempting to reinstate age hierarchies and put wayward youths in their place. It drew inspiration from Mpanza's parent's court in the 1960s and even controversially formed a tacit alliance with the Russians, an often violent gang of migrant or newly urbanised Basotho who viewed rural value systems with nostalgia. The Makgotla combined a patrol and court function: while organising groups of householders to patrol township streets, the leadership made judgments on anti-social behaviour and meted out punishment, usually in the form of fines or beatings.

Probably the most important early figure in the Makgotla was Mrs Sinah 'Madipere' Makume, a formidable householder from Meadowlands who was fed up with the predations of a powerful local youth gang. She started an effective home guard in her neighbourhood. 'They were killing people,' she recalls, 'So I went to buy me a *sjambok* and a whistle and I started it.'⁸¹ She joined forces with nominated UBC councillor Siegfried Manthata and Letsatsi Radebe from Naledi to establish the Makgotla. By the end of 1974 it had set up fourteen new affiliated branches throughout Soweto. Like previous home guards, it drew heavily on UBC leadership and patronage.

From its inception, the Makgotla appealed to the government for legal recognition and official support. It was frustrated that the government was prepared only to sign up individual members to the standing reservist force. In 1974 it made an official representation to the Viljoen Commission on penal reform calling for official recognition. It offered to work in close collaboration with the SAP. With access to intimate local knowledge and the resources to mount regular patrols, the Makgotla argued that it could control crime in Soweto.⁸²

The SAP appeared to be split on its attitude to the movement. The government was more ambivalent about this initiative than any of the previous civil guards. There was much to recommend it. Unlike many of the township movements of the 1950s, it was reliably conservative and apolitical. Its 'traditionalism' fitted well with the apartheid promotion of ethnic culture. Moreover, the UBC structures, which were closely associated with the Makgotla, were in line with the government's promotion of ethnic affiliation. A portion of UBC councillors were even appointed as ethnic representatives. By contrast, the ABs, which survived into the late 1960s, were regarded as a hang-over from a pre-apartheid age. Though

80. For a detailed discussion of the Makgotla, see Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi*, 148-53, and Seekings, 'Social Ordering', 81-6.

81. Interview, Letsatsi Radebe and Sinah Madipere Senakoane (with Jeremy Seekings, Johannesburg, 7 May 1991).

82. See G. Viljoen, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Penal System of the Republic of South Africa* (Viljoen Report) 78/1976, particularly 39-40.

powerless, they had asserted urban (as opposed to 'homeland') citizenship. The government was eager to promote the credibility of the new UBC system in the early 1970s and an effective civil guard linked to the UBCs could have boosted its image. Many over-worked SAP personnel on the ground, white officers and black regulars alike, were sympathetic to the Makgotla. They saw it as something which might actually help them in their task of controlling crime. Nevertheless, the SAP leadership continued to worry about the usurpation of its powers and the tacit critique of police ineptitude. There was also concern over flogging, especially administered by ordinary members of the public. In spite of numerous representations, recognition was denied.

Even without official acceptance, there is little doubt that the Makgotla helped to curb crime in its operational areas. But its impact was by no means decisive. With its limited resources and an untrained, part-time force, it was unable to break down major youth gangs during an era of resurgent gangsterism in Soweto.

The Makgotla was also far from universally popular in Soweto. Its links to the UBC, which by the early 1970s had been widely discredited, were controversial. In addition, in spite of its attempts to fight the image, the Makgotla was widely perceived as a Sotho ethnic organisation. Aside from Swazi councillor Bob Cindi, its leadership was ethnically Sotho. It had a strong presence in Sotho areas such as Naledi, while it was largely absent in predominantly Zulu areas such as Zola and Emdeni. Its links to the Basotho migrant gang network, the Russians, controversial in itself, further reinforced the image of ethnic particularism and alienated non-Sotho residents.

While the Makgotla's patrols were widely appreciated, the courts and the use of corporal punishment often aroused disgust. There appeared to be strong resistance to the Makgotla from relatively schooled and established urban residents, the kind of people who read and contributed to *The World* newspaper. *The World* took the lead in criticism of the Makgotla, condemning its inadequate trial procedures and brutality and urging much closer police supervision.⁸³ Percy Qoboza, who ran a column called 'Percy's Pitch' and later became editor of the newspaper, accused the Makgotla leadership of 'delusions of grandeur'. He argued that vigilante groups inevitably turned into criminal gangs themselves.⁸⁴ Many letter writers to the newspaper attacked the movement. It was accused of conducting unfair trials, of being 'a frustrated body of disciplinarians' and of being 'uncivilised'.⁸⁵

In May 1976 the long-awaited Viljoen Commission noted the divided opinion on the Makgotla. 'Many residents of the Townships have adopted a Western way

83. *The World*, editorials, 12 Mar. 1974 and 26 July 1974.

84. *The World*, 16 July 1975, 18 Aug. 1976.

85. 'Disgusted' of Naledi, 10 June 1974; Joyce Dibakoang of Meadowlands, 27 Aug. 1974; Lucas Kunene of Meadowlands, 25 Sep. 1974; Archie Ramailane of Dube, 26 Feb. 1976.

of life and may not take kindly to the suggestion that their children should be chastised by a body like the Kgotla.' Viljoen went on to argue that 'severe beatings which in the past have been meted out to alleged offenders convicted by the Kgotla, are looked upon with abhorrence not only by Whites, but also by certain sections of the Black community.'⁸⁶ The commission, while acknowledging 'the rampant spread of a juvenile criminal element' and accepting some of the criticism levelled at the police, was 'unable to recommend that any vigilante group should be recognised in any form other than as a reservist force'. The commission feared that an uncontrolled vigilante force might become criminal itself and argued that Makgotla court procedures provided inadequate safeguards for defendants. Moreover, Viljoen, as I have noted, was uncertain about the movement's popularity within Soweto. Contrary to government policy of the time, the reformist commission favoured improved urban social conditions as the best way to combat the juvenile delinquency problem.⁸⁷ The Makgotla leadership was bitterly disappointed by the findings and was forced to continue operating within a conditional and restricted semi-legality. Undaunted, however, it persistently lobbied for recognition.

The Makgotla's relatively favoured position with the SAP was severely damaged during the Soweto uprising one month later. One faction of the Makgotla, rather than attempt to police the rioting, explicitly defended the activities of the students. Colonel Visser, the most senior SAP official in Johannesburg, accused the Makgotla of cowardice and stated officially that he would have no further dealings with the movement. Bob Cindi retorted that the students were fighting a legitimate struggle for their rights. The Makgotla, he argued, 'could not be expected to defend Government legislation and harass their children, who were not behaving like criminals but like keen students anywhere in the world'.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, although taking a quiet back seat during the unrest of 1976-77, the Makgotla continued to operate. It sent further delegations to Minister of Justice Kruger in September 1976 and later in 1977. Despite Visser's criticism, the Makgotla was granted temporary status to operate as a legal body in 1977.⁸⁹ The Justice ministry was perhaps hoping it might counter the growing authority of the militant Soweto Students Representative Council, which directed much of the political activity in Soweto during 1976/1977.

In 1978 the Makgotla was at last granted official recognition. By then, however, the UBC system, and everything associated with it, was in disarray.⁹⁰ The Makgotla support base was dwindling. The rising power of youth groups and civic associations rendered official recognition irrelevant. Ironically the student and

86. Viljoen Report, 78/1976, p. 40, paras 3.2.16 to 3.3.23.

87. Viljoen Report 78/1976, p. 40, paras .3.2.16 to 3.2.23.

88. *The World*, 12 Aug. 1976.

89. *The World*, 3 Sep. 1976.

90. Interview, Radebe and Madipere (Seekings).

youth organisations, first in the 1976-1977 upheavals and then during the 1980s, proved far more effective at combating juvenile crime than the Makgotla could ever have hoped to be. The student and youth groups could call on much greater numbers, had fewer responsibilities and more time on their hands. Although in many instances the activity of 'comrades' did itself shade into criminality, youth groups both policed what was perceived to be anti-social behaviour and attracted a large portion of Soweto's youth away from a purely criminal subculture into more focused political activity. But while apolitical criminal gangs were put on the defensive during the 1980s, the authority and power of youth, to the chagrin of Makgotla supporters, was consolidated. Though ordinary crime in the townships apparently declined during the politicised 1980s, youth activists tried to enforce political conformity, which could at times prove to be brutal and terrifying.⁹¹

Conclusion

Private policing has a long history in the townships of Johannesburg. Even after civil guards were officially banned in 1952 residents had little option but to defend their lives and property through private initiatives. By the 1960s the SAP, through enforcing apartheid legislation and neglecting ordinary crime, had virtually no credibility in the eyes of township residents. While local government often tried to create limited space for civil guards to operate, central government created as many obstacles as possible. Although the direct involvement of organisations like the ANC in civil guards was no longer an issue by the 1960s, the NP resented these local initiatives, which implicitly challenged their legitimacy.

When the law fails its citizens, they invariably seek extra-judicial means to protect themselves. Even the current South African Police Services, though no longer enforcing humiliating laws, struggle to establish credibility in the face of terrifying crime levels. It therefore comes as no real surprise that private groups, which provide summary trials and corporal punishment, are still pervasive in the townships. More optimistically, the bursts of success achieved by various civil guards in the past do suggest that these movements, if carefully regulated and in collaboration with a more sympathetic state, might offer one possible way forward in the current crime crisis.

91. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi*, Chapter 7 and Epilogue.