Complex Safety Issues in Informal Settlements: The case of Pienaarspoort Park community in Mamelodi East

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The case study is centred on the Mamelodi East township in the City of Tshwane, and the Pienaarspoort Park community next to the Pienaarspoort Train Station. It illustrates the complex safety and security issues faced by the community. The context includes problems such as public infrastructure vandalism, suboptimal youth development programmes, alcohol and drug abuse and insufficient law enforcement. There is also poor early childhood development infrastructure, and many other problems around service provision and infrastructure.

For the residents of Mamelodi East, the level of victimization is high, and many households have directly experienced violence in the last 12 months, most of them in the streets, at home, in a neighbour's house or in school. Other places of violence indicated are taverns, on the way to work and in town.
The types of violence varies from robberies (25%), physical attacks (21%), violent quarrels (15%), stabbing (15%) and burglaries (12%).

The Pienaarspoort Park community has a mix of formal and informal housing and the community is evenly split between shack dwellers and formal housing (RDP and old township houses). The problem is exacerbated by the use of the park by train commuters and ancillary business in the train station locale, which render the park unsafe for minors who need to use the park for development of motor skills required in early childhood development. The community has 3 creches or day care centres and yet they do not have access to the nearby Pienaarspoort park due to park vandalism and safety issues.

Improved public spaces can provide suitable opportunities for joint programmes among day care centres in the vicinity of the park and NPOs to offer local initiatives in the park. These are the options that can be explored to create cross-cutting interventions throughout component areas of public space/infrastructure, Early Childhood Development and youth development.

There is a Master Plan that has been presented to the city which is still in the process of approval. There is also a Baseline Study that has been done to start detailing the extent of the safety and security issues in the community. This was conducted by the Safety Promotion through Urban Upgrading (SPUU) programme in collaboration with Settlements and Urban Management (SUM) PHUMAF consultants in July and August 2017.

The study enabled a comprehensive assessment of the "wicked challenges" affecting safety and security in the area and made it possible to suggest what interventions will be prioritized or what the focus areas in this settlement will be for the next three years. The biggest challenges identified by the community were alcoholism/drugs (79%), lack of community services (69.5%), violence (50%), sexual violence (46%), unintended pregnancies (42.4%) and the presence of gangs (41.9%). The study found that these problems were predominantly precipitated by lack of recreational facilities, no public library, no police station, no walkways/bridges, and many unused open spaces that are unsafe throughout Mamelodi East. There are no rehabilitation centres around the informal settlement. These issues are indicative of a lack of spatial planning and infrastructure development.

The strategic issue is around safety and security in communities and how spatial design, law enforcement, social cohesion initiatives and community involvement are needed for the co-creation of workable solutions to address this complex challenge.

The challenges are related to public infrastructure provision and maintenance and law enforcement. The spatial planning problems that arise from mushrooming informal settlements put a strain on municipal services provision, causing tension between formal and informal housing structures, and vandalism/degradation of public infrastructure including parks, play areas for children and community centres.

Positive social engagement between residents is a key factor in instilling a sense of neighbourhood pride in the community's surroundings. A willingness to protect and maintain infrastructure that has been provided by municipalities is important and this requires collaboration with law enforcement agencies and local government representatives.

The problems are often attributed to interventions that focus on addressing the symptoms of the issues plaguing these areas, rather than on addressing the many root causes that lead to poor safety and security.

Question: How can this 'wicked problem' be better understood and better addressed in the context of South African cities of the future ?