

Social Issues Affecting Social Cohesion in Low-resource Communities in South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa's rural communities face significant disparities, marked by high poverty and unemployment, which threaten social cohesion and inclusion. Residents often lack access to essential services and economic opportunities, while social issues like crime, unemployment, and substance abuse further strain these low-resource communities.



While extensive research exists on social cohesion in urban settings, there is a notable gap in understanding how social issues such as unemployment, limited access to basic services, and housing insecurity uniquely impact social cohesion in low-resource communities. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the perceptions and experiences of social issues affecting social cohesion in low-resource communities in South Africa, and how one could facilitate the promotion of cohesive communities. This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach to gain a deep understanding of the participants and their lived experiences in low-resource communities. The current study was conducted in four communities within South Africa including Philippolis, Lamberts Bay, Caledon, and Grabouw. The study utilised a qualitative approach, with a phenomenological design, to interview 25 participants which included family members and community stakeholders. In-depth interviews were used for data collection and thematic data analysis. The findings highlight the disruption of societal unity in low-resource communities due to complex family dynamics, pervasive violence, substance abuse, and significant barriers to education. Dysfunctional family structures, historical factors like apartheid, and modern challenges such as urban migration and high unemployment contribute to social disintegration. Also, crime and violence, deeply intertwined with the lack of social cohesion, are exacerbated by historical and socio-economic factors. This highlights the need for comprehensive interventions which requires a multifaceted approach to tackle the underlying drivers of violence and inequality (SDG10) to achieve social cohesion in the face of entrenched inequalities is a formidable challenge, necessitating concerted efforts from both the government and civil society to bridge divides and foster a more inclusive and equitable society. This research emphasises the importance of addressing these complex social issues to build cohesive communities in South Africa's rural areas.

Keywords: Social issues, Social cohesion, Low resource communities, Sustainable development goal 10, South Africa

Introduction

South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with stark disparities that are particularly evident in its rural communities. These rural areas are often characterised by high levels of poverty and unemployment, which exacerbate a range of social issues and pose significant threats to social cohesion and inclusion. Graham and Mothapo (2019) provided a comprehensive analysis of the policies and strategies addressing poverty and inequality in South Africa, with a focus on rural communities. Their research highlighted that many rural residents lack access to basic services such as clean water, healthcare, and quality education. This deprivation is compounded by limited economic opportunities, leading to widespread unemployment and underemployment. Moreover, the agricultural sector, on which many rural communities depend, often struggles to provide stable livelihoods (Aliber & Hart, 2009; Aliber & Cousins, 2013). These systemic challenges create barriers to social cohesion, as individuals and communities face difficulties in meeting their basic needs, contributing to social fragmentation and a weakened sense of belonging. As



such, addressing these inequalities is crucial for promoting social cohesion, as inclusive development and access to resources can foster stronger, more united communities.

Social cohesion is essential for fostering sustainable development and ensuring social stability. It is commonly understood through definitions and frameworks as a collection of collective traits and behaviors, including positive social relationships, a strong sense of identity or belonging, and a focus on the common good (Moustakas, 2023). While the COVID-19 pandemic has undermined social cohesion in many societies, other communities with higher levels of cohesion have been better equipped to navigate the challenges brought by the crisis (Leininger et al., 2021). As a result, strengthening social cohesion has become a key objective for nations and the global community, particularly in addressing complex issues like gender-based violence.

Social issues such as crime, substance abuse, and domestic violence are prevalent in many communities, further straining their cohesion (Rivera et al., 2015). The legacy of apartheid continues to shape these communities, with enduring geographical and social divisions, especially in rural areas where certain racial and ethnic groups remain predominantly concentrated (Gadd et al., 2019). Despite these challenges, there are areas where communities have made progress by coming together to address shared concerns. However, achieving social cohesion in South Africa remains a slow and difficult process, particularly in rural regions where the effects of historical injustices and current socio-economic disparities are most pronounced (Maharaj, 2019). Building social cohesion in these areas requires a collaborative effort between the government and civil society to address these divisions, promote inclusivity, and create a more equitable society. This ongoing process is central to overcoming the barriers that hinder social stability and collective well-being.

South Africa's rural communities face significant disparities, marked by high poverty and unemployment, which threaten social cohesion and inclusion. Residents often lack access to essential services and economic opportunities, while social issues like crime, unemployment, and substance abuse further strain these low-resource communities. While extensive research exists on social cohesion in urban settings, there is a notable gap in understanding how social issues such as unemployment, limited access to basic services, and housing insecurity uniquely impact social cohesion in low-resource communities. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the perceptions and experiences of social issues affecting social cohesion in low-resource communities in South Africa, and how one could facilitate the promotion of cohesive communities.

Literature Review

In low-resource communities across South Africa, a range of social obstacles disrupted societal unity, perpetuating cycles of poverty and instability. Key factors included complex family dynamics such as fathers whose involvement was non-existent, single parenthood,



and intergenerational caregiving strains. Additionally, pervasive violence and substance abuse created environments of fear, while gender-based violence exacerbated inequalities. South African youth faced significant barriers to education due to inadequate resources, overcrowding, and poor infrastructure, perpetuating cycles of marginalisation.

- ***Family dynamics and family structures***

Dysfunctional family structures contribute significantly to social disintegration, evidenced by issues like absent fathers, teenage mothers, and grandparents caring for grandchildren, indicating a breakdown in functional families. In South Africa, historical factors like colonialism and apartheid, coupled with modern challenges such as urban migration and high unemployment, led to changing family dynamics. Factors like reduced fertility rates and acceptance of alternative domestic partnerships altered both extended and nuclear family structures (Makiwane, Gumede, Makoae & Vawda, 2017).

The formation and dissolution of unions impact family cohesiveness and community belonging. Children often experienced parental relationship breakdowns, residing in single-parent or blended families, necessitating a redefinition of parent-child roles (Juby et al., 2001). Family instability, particularly prevalent in black townships, was exacerbated by absent fathers (Langa, 2010), domestic violence (Abrahams et al., 2013), alcoholism, and drug abuse (Parry, Plüddemann et al., 2005).

According to Balogun et al (2023), the role of parents in shaping their children's development, particularly during the formative years, is of immense significance. The influence of each parent on a child's life can vary, with lasting effects that extend into adulthood. The ways in which parents express love, provide encouragement, and enforce discipline are distinct, meaning each parent brings unique and essential contributions to their child's upbringing. This parental influence, when positive and supportive, can contribute to the development of strong social values, fostering a sense of responsibility, empathy, and cooperation in children. These values, in turn, play a vital role in promoting social cohesion, as individuals raised with a sense of belonging, respect, and shared responsibility are more likely to contribute to a united and cohesive society.

- ***Violence and substance abuse***

The issue of crime and violence in South African communities was deeply intertwined with the lack of social cohesion (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). This lack of cohesion was exacerbated by historical factors, notably apartheid, as highlighted, which led to social disintegration and continued to have lasting effects on the fabric of society (Veit, Barolsky & Pillay, 2011). The importance of addressing crime and violence in the context of social cohesion was emphasised in policy documents such as the White Paper on Safety and Security.

Both the White Paper policy documents of 1998 and 2016 underscored the need for crime and violence prevention strategies to strengthen social cohesion in South Africa (Lamb,



2019). These strategies not only aimed to reduce crime rates but also worked towards rebuilding trust and fostering a sense of community among citizens.

Furthermore, South Africa faced a significant challenge with substance abuse, which cut across all demographics and contributed to crime, corruption, and societal harm. Substance abuse not only fueled criminal activity but also exacerbated social divisions and undermined efforts to build cohesive communities. Addressing substance abuse requires comprehensive approaches that involve prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation efforts, alongside broader social and economic interventions.

The downward spiral observed in many lower socio-economic communities, characterised by escalating social issues such as violence, unemployment, substance abuse, and lack of education, posed a significant challenge to social cohesion. This phenomenon had been highlighted by the International Narcotics Control Board (2011), indicating a troubling trend where these communities faced multiple interconnected challenges that perpetuated each other.

- ***Gender-based violence***

The ongoing global debate about the relationship between inequality, social cohesion, and violence is especially relevant in the context of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa, which is a complex and deeply rooted societal issue with widespread consequences. Evidence from Western and Northern societies suggests that the level of social cohesion, or its absence, plays a significant role in determining why some communities experience more violence than others (Barolsky & Borges, 2019). In societies with strong cohesion, people are more likely to collaborate for the common good, intervening to prevent harmful behaviors and curbing violence before it escalates. This insight is critical when examining GBV, as it is not an isolated issue but a manifestation of broader power imbalances and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. The systemic nature of GBV highlights the importance of fostering collective efficacy through policies that address these inequalities and strengthen social cohesion, potentially leading to a reduction in violence and its underlying causes.

As highlighted by Ryan and Branscombe (2013), GBV is deeply rooted in gender norms and power dynamics, often perpetuated by societal attitudes that reinforced ideals of male dominance and control. This assertion of power and control, intertwined with cultural and historical contexts, perpetuated a cycle of violence against women, exacerbated by the legacy of apartheid and ongoing socio-economic inequalities. Moreover, the intersectionality of power dynamics, including those of gender, race, class, and sexuality, further complicates the issue. Cornelius, Shahrokh & Mills (2015) aptly pointed out that GBV was not solely driven by gender dynamics but also intersected with other forms of oppression, amplifying the vulnerability of marginalised groups, particularly women of color and those living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities.



The link between GBV and HIV/AIDS further exacerbated the impact of violence against women. Victims of sexual assault were at a heightened risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, contributing to the spread of the virus within communities already grappling with high prevalence rates. This nexus between GBV and public health underscored the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that addressed both the immediate consequences of violence and the underlying societal factors driving its perpetuation.

In the context of social cohesion, the question arises whether cohesive societies could effectively combat GBV and create a more equitable society. While social cohesion theoretically aims to unite communities against crime and violence, the reality is far more nuanced. Browning et al. (2004) argued that social cohesion alone could not address deeply entrenched social issues without addressing underlying structural inequalities and power imbalances.

Thus, addressing GBV in South Africa required a multifaceted approach that tackled the underlying drivers of violence, including patriarchal norms, socio-economic disparities, and historical injustices. Achieving social cohesion in the face of such entrenched inequalities is a formidable challenge, but not an insurmountable one. It demands concerted efforts from the government, civil society, and communities themselves to dismantle systems of oppression and create a more just and equitable society for all.

- ***South African youth and education***

As of mid-2019, South Africa had a population of 58.78 million people, with approximately 17.84 million, or nearly a third of the total population, falling within the youth demographic (aged 18-34 years), as reported by Statistics South Africa (2019). This demographic distribution was indicative of a phenomenon referred to as a “youth bulge,” characterised by a disproportionately large youth population relative to older age groups. The existence of a youth bulge, as observed by Cincotta (2007), often exacerbates socio-economic issues such as unemployment, reliance on parental support, decreased self-esteem, and heightened frustrations among young individuals. This demographic imbalance contributes to what Yin (2014) identified as political unrest, increased crime rates, and societal conflicts, which were prevalent in South Africa at the time.

The nexus between education, unemployment, and social issues like crime and substance abuse in South Africa emphasise a complex web of challenges facing its youth population. The lack of job prospects due to inadequate education and high unemployment rates has left many young people vulnerable to engaging in criminal activities and substance abuse. As highlighted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2008), socioeconomic challenges significantly contribute to substance abuse within communities.

Studies conducted by Melber & Saul (2011) indicate alarming rates of alcohol abuse among South Africans, particularly among young adults aged 18 to 22. These findings stressed the



vulnerability of young people to substance abuse and highlighted the need for targeted interventions to address this issue.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) (2021) further emphasised the susceptibility of adolescents to substance use, particularly during developmental changes. Various factors, including parenting styles, peer pressure, social incompetence, and environmental influences such as poverty, contributed to youth involvement in substance abuse. The challenge of promoting social cohesion in South Africa was compounded by the lingering effects of apartheid. Segalo (2015) rightly pointed out that despite the abolition of apartheid over two decades ago, its legacy continues to perpetuate inequalities and divisions within society. The apartheid regime entrenched social disparities, making it difficult to achieve genuine unity and cohesion among South Africans.

While the government strives to foster social cohesion, entrenched inequalities, and historical injustices remain significant obstacles. Achieving a socially cohesive society requires addressing structural inequalities, promoting inclusive policies, and fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity among all citizens.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses **Ecological Systems Theory** by Urie Bronfenbrenner to examine how multiple layers of influence shape social cohesion in low-resource South African communities. The theory provides a structured approach to understanding the interconnected systems that affect individuals and communities, highlighting the dynamic interaction between local and systemic factors. The theory identifies multiple levels that explains the interconnected systems below:

- **Microsystem:** This level focuses on individuals' immediate environments, such as family and community networks (Guy-Evans, 2020). In the study communities, social cohesion is often weakened by issues like substance abuse, domestic violence, and dysfunctional family structures. These challenges disrupt trust and mutual support, which are essential for cohesive relationships.
- **Mesosystem:** The mesosystem examines the connections between different microsystems, such as families, schools, and community organisations (Hayes et al., 2017). Limited coordination and weak partnerships between these entities hinder collective efforts to address issues like youth unemployment, education access, and community safety (Langford et al., 2014).
- **Exosystem:** At this level, external factors such as local governance, economic policies, and service delivery play a significant role (Guy-Evans, 2020). The study highlights how inadequate infrastructure, unemployment, and restricted access to basic services (e.g., housing, sanitation, and healthcare) exacerbate social fragmentation and fuel community grievances.



- **Macrosystem:** The broader cultural, societal, and historical context, including the lingering impacts of apartheid, shapes the social environment (Buser et al., 2020). Inequities in resource distribution and societal norms around poverty and exclusion perpetuate divisions within these communities, further challenging social cohesion.
- **Chronosystem:** This dimension considers the influence of time, such as historical events or ongoing socio-economic changes (Guy-Evans, 2020). Urban migration, for example, disrupts traditional support networks, while prolonged poverty and unemployment strain community resilience, leading to further disintegration of social bonds.

By using this framework, the study systematically explored how these interconnected systems create challenges and opportunities for building cohesive communities. The findings underscore the importance of multi-level interventions that address both local and systemic drivers of inequality, crime, and social exclusion. This approach is vital for fostering inclusive and sustainable social cohesion in low-resource settings.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach to gain a deep understanding of the participants and their lived experiences in low-resource communities. This method allowed the researcher to adopt a phenomenological design to explore how participants perceive their own realities in their natural environment. The research was conducted in South Africa, spanning four rural communities across two provinces: Philippolis in the Free State Province, and Lamberts Bay, Caledon, and Grabow in the Western Cape Province. The selection of Philippolis, Lamberts Bay, Caledon, and Grabow as low socio-economic areas is supported by multiple socio-economic indicators. According to the Kopanong Local Municipality's IDP (2022), Philippolis is a disadvantaged and low-income area. It is located in the Free State Province and characterised by limited economic opportunities and persistent social ills.

Lamberts Bay is situated on the West Coast of the Western Cape and despite its coastal location and fishing industry potential, demonstrates significant socio-economic challenges. The town's economy, heavily dependent on seasonal fishing activities and small-scale agriculture, experiences substantial income fluctuations and employment insecurity. The fishing community faces ongoing challenges related to fishing quotas, climate change impacts on marine resources, and limited alternative employment opportunities. These factors, combined with inadequate social infrastructure and educational facilities, contribute to persistent poverty cycles and limited social mobility among residents.

Caledon, located in the Overberg region of the Western Cape, presents a complex socio-economic landscape characterised by stark inequalities. Despite being situated in an



agricultural region, many residents face significant economic hardships. The town exhibits high levels of income disparity, with a large portion of the population living in informal settlements and experiencing limited access to economic opportunities. The seasonal nature of agricultural employment, combined with limited industrial development, results in unstable income patterns for many households and restricted opportunities for economic advancement.

Grabow (Grabouw), also in the Western Cape, demonstrates significant socio-economic challenges despite its location in a major fruit-farming region. The town is characterised by high levels of poverty, overcrowded informal settlements, and inadequate basic services. The seasonal nature of agricultural work creates periods of unemployment and economic instability for many residents. Additionally, the town faces challenges related to rapid population growth, strained municipal infrastructure, and limited economic diversification, which contribute to persistent poverty cycles and social challenges. The combination of these factors - high unemployment rates, limited economic opportunities, inadequate service delivery, and significant income disparities - justifies their classification as a low socio-economic area requiring targeted development interventions.

The population was the entire group of individuals that the research was interested in. In this case, the population was all the residents of the four rural communities: Philippolis in the Free State Province, and Lamberts Bay, Caledon, and Grabow in the Western Cape Province. The sample is referred to as the subset of the population that is observed or surveyed in the research. Non-probability sampling methods were used, namely convenience and snowball sampling. The sample in this study consists of 25 individuals from these communities who participated in the study. The current population estimates for the four rural communities are as follows; Philippolis, Free State Province: Approximately 2,392 people; Lamberts Bay, Western Cape Province: Around 6,120; Caledon, Western Cape Province: About 12,375; and Grabouw, Western Cape Province: Approximately 44,593 people.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were used to capture the participant's experiences and perspectives. According to Bryman (2012), in-depth interviews provide rich, detailed responses, making this approach essential for exploring social issues affecting social cohesion in low-resource communities in South Africa. Participants included parents and stakeholders across all the communities. This study used both convenience and snowball sampling. Some participants were recruited through door-to-door requests, while stakeholders introduced and proposed others. In total, twenty-five participants participated in the study, the gender included both male and female, and the age of participants were adults 18 years and older, who were interviewed. Interviews were conducted in English, Afrikaans, and IsiXhosa, depending on the interviewee's preference, and all were scheduled and conducted face-to-face. Open-ended questions covered topics such as communication, parenting skills,



conflict resolution, family values, trust, relationships among family members, race, equality in the neighborhood, and social cohesion. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. They were conducted in municipal halls. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically. The data for this study was analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Howitt & Cramer 2011). The purpose of a thematic analysis is to identify themes and patterns that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or to say something about the issue (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Therefore, it was important to develop themes in order to establish the meanings embedded.

Ethical Considerations

The study also received ethical clearance from the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at the University of Western Cape (HS20/3/35). Following this approval, data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings were conducted.

Data Discussion and Findings

In this research, thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to draw conclusions and develop findings. Initially, the data was translated and transcribed, ensuring accuracy and comprehensibility. Subsequently, the data was analysed to identify common themes and subthemes, which facilitated the development of meaningful insights. Supporting quotes from participants were integrated to enrich the analysis, and relevant theories were incorporated to substantiate the findings. This comprehensive approach ensured that the conclusions drawn were well-supported and grounded in both empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks.

The analysis revealed several themes indicating social issues affecting social cohesion in low-resource communities in South Africa. The themes and subthemes are; 1. Community problems, 2. Substance abuse, 3. Youth, 3.1. School dropouts, 3.2. Youth deviant behaviour, 3.3. Lack of activities, 4. Family structure, 4.1. Role models, 5. Unemployment, 5.1. skills building, 5.2. Entrepreneurship, 6. Health and well-being, 6.1 HIV/Aids The detailed results are presented below:

Community Problems

The challenges highlighted by members of the community encompass a diverse array of issues, ranging from substance abuse, youth concerns, family dynamics, unemployment, neglect of children, limited recreational opportunities, absence of role models, skill development, entrepreneurship, and HIV/AIDS. Additionally, quotes from participants' statements that touch upon multiple community problems will be discussed in the next segment.

Stakeholder-principal-P10: "Social issues, it is the misuse of alcohol and going back into that, coupled with that, it stems from the poverty levels; unemployment;



parents, single parents raising their children; and even the grannies, a big number of grannies is looking after these kids; child neglect and not really involvement of these parents in the lives of the kids, they are so distant from each other and that is really a great, great uh... reality. You just have the kid, you say you love him but in terms of providing. And that must I say it is evident amongst our coloured community that neglect... amongst them are very live, very big that the kids, I don't want to use the word must fend for themselves, but uh... and that leads to a great number of dropouts at school, so in terms thereof..."

Stakeholder-pastor-P7: "Social problems, that is the three big ones. I'd say HIV, alcohol and drugs."

Stakeholder-healthworker-P9: "the infrastructure, let me see... the boredom, people have no places to go they have nothing to do. I think those are the major problems and alcohol abuse, substance abuse."

The mentioned issues of reducing poverty levels, addressing unemployment, supporting single parents, and combating drug abuse underscore the importance of social cohesion. Friedkin (2004) accentuated the impact of social dynamics on keeping individuals within a community, suggesting that tightly knit communities display enhanced resilience against factors that could lead to violence or detachment. In such cohesive environments, individuals are less likely to turn to violence as a means of expressing frustration or driving change, owing to their deep sense of belonging and interconnectedness. The next theme is substance abuse, which appears to be more widespread in many low resource communities.

Substance Abuse

The elevated levels of crime and violence observed in South Africa stem from a lack of robust social unity. The deterioration of mutual trust and solidarity within communities provides fertile ground for criminal activities to flourish and for violence to be accepted as commonplace (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). The following excerpts are highlighted in support:

"Stakeholder-policeman-P1: "From a police officer's perspective and experience, uh what we struggle with here mostly is assault. Assault and assault don't stand on its own because it comes from something else and then their reaction to that is assault. So, we still struggling with uh... what do you call it? Too much of, excessive use of alcohol...when it comes to the pay-days, when they are on the weekends, let me just say month end. We normally get a problem with those issues."

"Stakeholder-pastor- P7: "Alcohol abuse is huge. Especially month ends and that's also part of the poverty culture. If your hungry children are looking you in the face every day sometimes I cannot understand going a tavern drinking and forget about it for at least two or three hours. It is a way of escaping. But also. Yeah I think



people dealing with alcoholism. And not knowing. It is a very hard thing to discuss... Well it is managed in a sense that. If there is money they will be drinking if there is no money then. You need to go dry you'll have a periodical kind of situation."

Moreover, the misuse of alcohol by community members perpetuates a detrimental cycle, fueling the escalation of crime rates and exacerbating the erosion of social cohesion within affected regions. According to the International Narcotics Control Board (2011), many communities are caught in a dangerous cycle of worsening social issues, including drug abuse, violence, organised crime, poverty, poor health, limited education, and widespread unemployment. This environment fosters a deep sense of hopelessness among individuals and families, leading them to believe their circumstances are unchangeable and that they will never enjoy the safety, security, and economic stability available to others in society. Feeling disconnected and excluded from the broader community, some individuals may see little deterrent to adopting a lifestyle involving illegal drugs and criminal activities (INCB, 2011). Åslund and Nilsson found that low perceived social cohesion increased the odds of high alcohol consumption by 50%, and doubled the odds of smoking and [illicit drug](#) use among adolescents (Åslund & Nilsson, 2013). In another study by Tsai et al (2020), it was discovered that stronger social cohesion among men in their 20s seems to offer protection against severe substance use. Over time, the influence of social cohesion on substance use appears to be partly explained by its impact on depression.

The study revealed deeper layers of vulnerability and desperate actions by showcasing how individuals experiencing economic difficulties resorted to substance use to cope. This revelation offered a more intricate comprehension of the harsh challenges encountered by those caught in the damaging pattern of substance abuse within deprived communities (Smyth, Sheehan & Fehlberg, 2001). The next theme is youth, which depicts the high volume of unemployed youth in many low-resource communities.

Youth

Yin (2014) highlights the surge in youth unemployment as a metaphorical “demographic bomb”, underscoring the significant gap between job opportunities and the substantial cohort of unemployed youth. This imbalance within the job market not only worsens socio-economic disparities but also intensifies pressure on already burdened social structures.

Responses concerning youth have been categorised into two main subtheme areas: the social concern of school dropouts and the manifestation of deviant behavior among young individuals within the community.

- **School dropouts**

Education is identified as a key determinant of employment prospects, yet South Africa’s education system faces significant challenges, including high dropout rates and disparities in access to quality education (Weybright et al., 2017).

The following extracts are provided in support:

“Stakeholder-principal-P10: “And that must I say it is evident amongst our coloured community that neglect...amongst them are very live, very big that the kids, I don’t want to use the word must fend for themselves, but uh... and that leads to a great number of dropouts at school, so...”

“Stakeholder-healthworker-P9: “They [dropouts] don’t care. Ok, it is not that they don’t care. They don’t understand. I told myself maybe if they grow up, they will understand. Some of these kids, some of them are living with the grandmothers and the grandfathers, grandfather will think they are still at school.”

Ananga (2011) distinguishes between temporary and permanent dropouts in the education system, highlighting the complex nature of student disengagement. Temporary dropouts often result from situational factors like family issues or financial constraints, while permanent dropouts stem from deeper systemic issues such as inequality and lack of access to quality education. This differentiation emphasises the need for a comprehensive approach to address student disengagement, as temporary interventions may not adequately tackle the underlying systemic barriers. Roman et al. (2022) emphasise that dropping out of school has significant long-term effects on an individual’s future and societal standing, including increased risks of criminal activity, poverty, social deviance, teenage pregnancy, and financial strain on society (Burrus and Roberts, 2012; Roman et al., 2022). These outcomes weaken social cohesion by exacerbating inequalities, limiting opportunities for meaningful participation in society, and increasing social and economic divisions, ultimately hindering collective well-being and community stability. The next subtheme is youth deviant behaviour.

- **Youth deviant behaviour**

Addressing the pervasive issue of high youth unemployment in South Africa requires confronting the fundamental systemic hurdles, which encompass political instability, educational deficiencies, and socioeconomic inequalities (Maharaj, 2019). The behaviours exhibited by young people mirror their feelings of frustration, tendencies toward self-destructiveness, and susceptibility to various influences.

“Parent-attorney-P2: “It is not a problem but just the children making a noise because they are walking in town and not doing their homework...No, holidays they are walking around and some of them they take chances and break in, that is causing... I would say the petty crimes are increasing... People will chase them, not to be rude but to protect themselves... Or tell them to pick up the papers or this stuff... Then one would turn around and tell my husband that is job creation... The young ones are littering in the town and if you reach out to them, they say it is job creation...”



Opposing factors such as financial constraints, societal and cultural pressures, oppression, unemployment, limited interaction with their children, and inadequate parenting approaches (Mazza, 2002; Julion, Gross, Barclay-McLaughlin & Fogg, 2007; Harms, 2014) can hinder parents' ability to actively engage in promoting the well-being and positive development of their children. This lack of engagement can disrupt family dynamics and weaken social cohesion by limiting the positive development of youth. Consequently, such circumstances may increase the likelihood of youth deviancy, as children without sufficient guidance and support are more vulnerable to engaging in antisocial behaviors and deviating from societal norms

- **Lack of activities**

The enhancement of families' well-being is profoundly influenced by elevating socioeconomic status, with poverty-related circumstances serving as evidence. Consequently, there is a compelling call for proactive measures to expand working opportunities and foster development, thereby positively transforming the community. The participants shared similar experiences, as illustrated below, which confirmed the challenges they encountered due to their restricted opportunities.

“Parent-unemployed-P4: “Yeah. These a problem because we don’t have things like sports, we do not have places where our kids would play safe after school, so I would say its disadvantage in those things. And we do not have places to go that we would say we went to do something it is small and its supressing a person’s mind. Because we do not see big shops that we can buy food, groceries or clothes or do shopping of other things, its small in that sense.”

“Stakeholder-healthworker-P9:” a lot of things...: like if they could bring lots of infrastructures sports complexes things like centre games. Yeah I think it will help the community otherwise. Those things they are not here... there is nothing fun to do. Here is no swimming pool where kids could go and play games. Nothing of that matter, nothing... only the sports.”

The highlighted concern revolves around parental apprehension regarding their children's welfare and the opportunities accessible within their communities, especially given the prevalent low aspirations among youth (Duckworth & Sabates, 2005). Similarly, Ramey and Ramey (2000) underscored the significance of addressing the issue of restricted opportunities, encompassing limited access to facilities, career progression, and economic prosperity. This constraint impedes individuals from reaching their full potential, hindering meaningful employment and personal growth. Moreover, its repercussions extend beyond individuals, impacting communities and society by perpetuating inequalities and influencing socioeconomic structures. This further impacts on family functioning and family structure which is discussed next.



Family Structure

The evolving nature of familial dynamics has raised concerns as it not only disrupts traditional relationships spanning generations but also impacts interactions among parents and grandparents (Gupta, 2016). This shift in adult roles mirrors larger societal changes, highlighting the urgency to acknowledge and explore these transformations to fully grasp the intricate balance between tradition and progress in family dynamics and societal norms (Drewelies, Huxhold, & Gerstorf, 2019).

The forthcoming segment will provide insights into the family structures of single parents and grandparents, shedding light on the unique challenges and dynamics they face within these roles.

“Stakeholder-principal-P10: “parents, single parents raising their children; and even the grannies, a big number of grannies are looking after these kids...”

“Parent-unemployed-P11: “[is the family structure grandparents living with the child and their children?] Yes. [do they stay with the parents?] They will stay in the yard; they will stay in a shack.

Both participants concur that nuclear families often rely on grandparents for assistance in raising their grandchildren, recognising the crucial role grandparents play in personal growth and skill impartation (Marco & De Marco, 2010). This symbiotic relationship not only offers practical support but also fosters emotional bonds and intergenerational knowledge exchange. Grandparents contribute invaluable wisdom and experience, enriching the upbringing of grandchildren while providing a sense of continuity and stability within the family unit.

- **Role models**

In some communities, the lack of positive male role models persists despite significant socio-economic progress. While residents have gained access to education for sustenance, the absence of strong male figures remains evident. Though efforts have been made to empower individuals economically, little improvement has been seen in providing positive male role models for the younger generation.

This disparity raises questions about the factors contributing to the shortage of male role models and its impact on youth development was explored below.

Stakeholder-pastor-P7: “If you think about the teachers most of the teachers teaching were part of this community. They came back so role models in terms of academics getting out of poverty is enough. I don’t think there are enough male role models for the boys because of the absent fathers. So that causes the boys not to have guidance sometimes... I am working hard on getting a programme started, we have started with it now with a group of youngsters and some of the white guys



in town just modelling for them. Also, I think there is a gap in role models, there's no fathers and mothers left due to HIV situation. So, the natural grouping..."

In impoverished communities, the dearth of role models, particularly for young boys, casts a shadow over their aspirations and development. Without positive figures to emulate, they navigate a landscape fraught with pitfalls, often succumbing to negative influences. The absence of mentors perpetuates cycles of poverty and crime, leaving them vulnerable to societal traps (Stephens, 2007).

Studies on fathers' involvement suggest that historical, cultural, and family ideologies significantly shape the role of fathers, particularly in terms of the time they spend with their children and the activities they engage in. A common theme emerging from a study by Balogun et al (2023) is the challenge of absent fathers, which is prevalent in many families. Some children grow up unaware of their paternal identity, leading to fragmented family structures. One reason for this absence is that some fathers, due to marital commitments elsewhere, are unable to fully fulfill their parental duties to children from other relationships, fearing it might strain their current marriages (Balogun et al., 2023). This highlights the critical need for fathers to serve as role models, especially in low-resource settings where the absence of a father figure can hinder the development of children's social and emotional well-being. Fathers who are present and engaged contribute not only to the stability of the family unit but also to the broader goal of social cohesion, as they model values such as responsibility, respect, and community involvement. Their active participation is essential in fostering a cohesive society, where individuals are empowered to contribute positively to their communities.

In a briefing compiled from two peacebuilding projects with adolescents from refugee and host communities in Lebanon, it was discovered that to enhance and sustain the positive impact of peacebuilding projects, it is crucial to involve caregivers and adult members of the community in these activities (Gercama et al., 2018). Their participation can help establish vertical support structures that foster stronger social cohesion. Such mechanisms can provide adolescents with positive role models, encouraging them to set higher aspirations and achieve greater mobility and independence in their lives.

Unemployment

Within the study's framework, respondents expressed that the scarcity of opportunities and the difficulties stemming from poverty are intimately connected to issues tied to poverty. As a result, they often faced limited job prospects, which resulted in them resorting to unskilled and mundane tasks (Lynch & Kaplan, 2000). In South Africa, unemployment remains a critical challenge to social cohesion, as it undermines social inclusion, social capital, and social mobility. Despite employment growth across all sectors between 1995 and 2005, the annual growth rate of 2.6% was insufficient to match the expanding working-age population (OECD, 2011). With official unemployment consistently exceeding 20% for over a decade, job creation has been skewed toward skilled workers,



leaving unskilled laborers disproportionately unemployed. This imbalance fuels the expansion of the informal sector and exacerbates inequality, highlighting the urgent need for skills development to promote equitable economic participation and strengthen social cohesion.

The narratives below attested to the challenges that the participants encountered.

“Stakeholder-secretary-P3: “The scissors go wide apart. As we don’t have industrial areas here in the community there is unfortunately no job creation. So, the salaries and the income in general is one of the lowest in the whole country... Yes. It does not matter what colour it is the majority is struggling.”

“Parent-unemployed-P8: “Work. My biggest thing is work. We have a lot of shortcomings in Philipopolis, our work, our housing. And sometimes I say, the government doesn’t give us, or our children houses if you don’t have a job. Because that house, if you get it, then there is water and electricity that you need to pay. Now, you move into the house, but you don’t have a job, you don’t have nothing. How are you going to live? It is a good thing the house, but I think first, the job. If you have a job you can run everything, your food, your children, all the things you must do.”

The widespread occurrence of parental unemployment emerges as a significant problem, impacting the spirit and unity of families and exerting a substantial influence on their overall performance and welfare. The consequences of being without work present substantial obstacles for the day-to-day functioning of all family members, particularly children, and impose significant pressure on parents’ capacity to support their household (Repetti & Wang, 2010).

- **Skills building**

In the face of life’s myriad challenges, parents often find themselves compelled to prioritise household responsibilities, inadvertently restricting access to opportunities and hindering the development of crucial skills (Ramey & Ramey, 2000).

The narratives below have shed light on the intricate interplay between familial obligations, life’s adversities, and their collective impact on the educational and skill development landscape.

“Parent-unemployed-P4: “If we would get people who would come and teach us to sew, crouching. [Skills development? Participant nods head in agreement]And a place for our kids, because these parks (Afrikaans) when kids go they hurt themselves and come back with injuries that they get from there. And a place where maybe they can swim, swimming pool. Things that will keep children busy and not in the streets.”



“Stakeholder-pastor-P7: “Skills development and entrepreneurship... parenting skills. Life skills. I could open a discussion on land and land distribution...”

Economic hardships, familial responsibilities, and social barriers often hinder individuals from securing stable employment. This perpetuates a cycle of limited economic mobility and reinforces the absence of visible male role models in the community. Additionally, the lack of employment opportunities contributes to feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment among young males, further diminishing their aspirations and perpetuating negative behaviours (Ocholla- Ayayoyo, 2000).

- **Entrepreneurship**

In South Africa, aspiring entrepreneurs encounter significant challenges, including systemic barriers, economic constraints, high unemployment rates, and limited funding accessibility. Regulatory obstacles and inconsistent policies further impede innovation and growth, while inadequate infrastructure and socio-economic disparities worsen historical inequities, especially among marginalised communities.

“Stakeholder-pastor-P7: “I think we don’t make enough on about entrepreneurship. And because I spend a lot of my time in Zambia they don’t have any social grants. No children grant no old age grants nothing. But you will find the Zambians sitting around next to the road with potatoes or whatever they are selling putting up a little spaza shop or hair salon everybody is working in Zambia. And they are all entrepreneurs. And I think here that is the one thing about grants we are a bit lazy because you depend on the grant you don’t have to worry about income. It’s easier. But if they start to understand that they can earn more money. Then it is a different so some people you find will always be on a grant some people will make use of a grant as a stepping stone. To start up their own business for example here they are running a takeaway shop. She started up with her grant and she is working her way up. So, I think it depends on your personal drive as well.”

The limitations stemming from insufficient access to education and job prospects often culminate in a multitude of hardships, particularly prevalent among recipients of social grants and aspiring entrepreneurs in South Africa. Research by Egeland, Carlson & Sroufe (1993); Steinberg, Darling, Fletcher, Brown & Dornbusch (1995) and Fagot & Gauvain (1997) illuminate the extensive ramifications, including diminished quality of life, strained familial dynamics, and weakened parent-child relationships. Within this context, as elucidated by Duckworth & Sabates (2005), the pivotal role of parental guidance, familial environment, and socio-economic factors becomes even more pronounced, shaping the trajectory and aspirations of individuals navigating the complex landscape of social grants and entrepreneurship in South Africa.

A study by Marguerie and Premand (2019) in Cote d’Ivoire conducted an experiment within a program aimed at enhancing livelihoods and social cohesion in a post-conflict region of Côte d’Ivoire. The initiative provided participants with entrepreneurship training and



access to capital, following global economic inclusion and graduation models. It was discovered that the program facilitated regular interactions among diverse ethnic groups through village savings and loan association (VSLA), training sessions, and entrepreneurship networks. This led to greater solidarity and more active participation in economic groups within targeted villages. While these activities strengthened local ties, they did not result in broader improvements in trust, perceived security, or reduced community-level conflicts. This suggests that while entrepreneurship initiatives can build localised social cohesion, broader societal effects may require additional measures.

Health and HIV/AIDS

Health is a critical aspect often compromised in low-resource communities, encompassing both access to medical care and the quality of medical treatment. Significant gaps exist within the healthcare system in rural areas, particularly in terms of education and awareness regarding illnesses and their treatments. One notable issue highlighted in the research is the prevalence and management of HIV/AIDS. At the individual level, some evidence from African countries indicates social cohesion and civic engagement play a protective role on sexual health, increased condom use, decreased intimate partner violence, and delayed sexual debut, although not all associations have been protective.

The research conducted by Strebel et al., (2006), as well as Wells (2016), present differing viewpoints regarding the attitudes towards HIV/AIDS within various communities. Strebel et al. (2006) focused on the Coloured community, highlighting an open and supportive environment with little stigma surrounding HIV management. Conversely, Wells (2016) examined the persistent stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS in Black South African communities, despite awareness efforts and medical progress. While Strebel et al. (2006) emphasised the significance of fostering open dialogue and combating stigma within communities where discussions were embraced, Wells underscored the necessity for increased awareness, education, and empathy to address the ongoing stigma and discrimination prevalent in Black South African communities.

These studies illuminated the diverse challenges and approaches to HIV/AIDS management within distinct cultural contexts. Thus, the intersection of HIV/AIDS and cultural barriers presents a complex landscape rife with challenges and opportunities for intervention as indicated below:

“Stakeholder-pastor-P7: “HIV. Still, we have managed to kick HIV in the coloured community was a very open discussion there is no stigma about that. In the black communities, there’s still a lot of problems in terms of HIV. There’s a lot of community members that will go and visit the sangomas. Do the alternative stuff and still pass away so there’s a cultural barrier there that is very difficult.”

Culturally rooted stigmas, beliefs, and practices significantly influence the spread of the virus, access to prevention and treatment, and overall health outcomes. A study by



Lippman (2018) examined social cohesion in two rural areas of South Africa, revealed significant differences in perceived group cohesion. In Mpumalanga province where group cohesion was stronger, they observed potential health benefits linked to three HIV-related health behaviors. Conversely, in the Northwest Province where cohesion levels were much lower, there was little association between social cohesion and protective behaviors. These findings suggest that a certain threshold of group cohesion may be necessary to achieve positive health outcomes.

Limitations of the Study

Firstly, data accessibility posed significant challenges. Lower-income communities often lack robust data infrastructure and may be underrepresented in national surveys, limiting the availability of accurate and representative data for analysis. This hampers the depth and breadth of research on social issues affecting these communities.

Secondly, cultural and contextual nuances necessitate careful consideration. South Africa's diverse cultural landscape means that social issues manifest differently across communities, requiring tailored approaches to research and intervention. Failure to account for these nuances can lead to oversimplification and misinterpretation of findings.

Thirdly, resource constraints hinder the implementation of large-scale studies. Lower-income communities face numerous socio-economic challenges, including limited access to funding and research expertise. As a result, research initiatives may lack the necessary resources to conduct comprehensive investigations into social cohesion issues.

Despite these limitations, addressing social issues affecting social cohesion in lower-income communities is essential for promoting inclusive development and fostering sustainable solutions to alleviate poverty and inequality in South Africa.

Recommendations

To address the pervasive sense of hopelessness in these communities and mitigate the risks of increased violence and substance abuse, targeted interventions are essential. Residents often feel trapped in their circumstances and disillusioned about the prospects for positive change. This despair can lead to destructive behaviours. The lack of opportunities for socio-economic advancement and the perception of being marginalised exacerbate these feelings. However, amidst these challenges, there are opportunities for resilience and solidarity. Research by Lamb (2019) suggests that collective action, even if expressed through unconventional means such as activism or protests, can foster social cohesion. The following is recommended to promote social cohesion and mitigate the effects of social issues:



- Through empowerment and education strategies with parents, stakeholders, and communities, reinforce and encourage community members to come together to voice their grievances to uplift and rebuild low-resource communities.
- Practitioners and policy-makers to collectively advocate for better government services and community improvements which can foster a shared sense of identity and purpose.
- Government to address these issues through comprehensive reforms that prioritise inclusive and quality education for all, alongside efforts to enhance vocational training and skills development initiatives in order to alleviate unemployment, unskilled labour force, lack of activities and promote employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- Practitioners and educators collaboratively implement holistic interventions in dropout prevention strategies, as it will effectively tackle both immediate challenges and long-standing structural inequalities within the education system, thus promoting educational equity. This approach advocates for comprehensive initiatives that not only offer short-term support to at-risk students but also drive systemic changes aimed at fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

These recommendations align with Sustainable Development Goal 10 (SDG 10) which aims to reduce inequality within and among communities. It focuses on ensuring equal opportunities and reducing inequalities of the outcome by eliminating discriminatory acts, policies, procedures, and practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing the complex interplay between education, unemployment, crime, substance abuse, and social cohesion in South Africa demands multifaceted approaches that tackle underlying systemic issues. Efforts to promote social cohesion must be accompanied by targeted interventions to address education disparities, unemployment, and substance abuse among the youth population. Only through comprehensive and inclusive strategies can South Africa overcome its challenges and build a more united and cohesive society.

Therefore, fostering social cohesion in these communities becomes paramount in addressing the underlying issues that fuel violence and social unrest. Building trust, promoting inclusivity, and empowering community members to collectively address their challenges can create a positive feedback loop where social cohesion mitigates violence, and in turn, reduced violence strengthens social cohesion. This requires comprehensive approaches that address not only the immediate symptoms but also the root causes of social disintegration, including structural inequalities and lack of opportunities.

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