SURVIVAL AND CRISIS IN A DIVERSE INFORMAL SETTLEMENT – AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN OVERCOME HEIGHTS, SOUTH AFRICA

By Nanna Schneiderman, Shari Thanjan, Derrick Naidoo and Steffen Jensen with Yolanda Anderson, Karen Mentoor, Shakena and Haziz Noredien and Gift Piri
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PRAXIS PAPER ON URBAN VIOLENCE

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Since 2014, DIGNITY-Danish Institute Against Torture has worked to address and prevent urban violence. While it might seem odd that a human rights organization should involve itself in urban violence, it makes eminent sense at the empirical level. Torture and ill-treatment are often considered spectacular incidences of state violence against political opponents, but our research, and that of others, illustrates that what we could call mundane, everyday forms of state violence account for massive human rights violations, especially in the ordinary lives of poor people. Harassments, threats, physical punishment and disciplining are often facilitated by corruption, bribes, protection money, sexual favours or just small “favourites” levied off motorists are enabled because of the violent potential of state law enforcers like the police. Thus, poor people must constantly factor in the risk of state violence – not as a rare occurrence but as something that is always on the horizon. In this light, it is imperative for the human rights world to begin working with what in human rights terms is called extra-custodial violence – in this case, violence by law enforcement officers and police. Increasingly, we see this call echoed, for instance the Special Rapporteur’s (2018) report on the connection between corruption and torture, to which DIGNITY’s research contributed.

We have worked through a concerted effort to combine top-of-the-line research with intervention at the level of communities, state and non-state institutions, and the global human rights world. This report on Crisis and Survival in an Informal Settlement in Cape Town is one outcome of this programme. It explores exactly how ordinary people in a range of urban centres around the world cope with violence, including from the state. The main focus of the research is on the violent exchange relations between police and policed. Part of the research has been carried out with local partners in the respective urban centres. One product of this partnership is the book Corruption and Torture: Violent Exchange and the Policing of the Urban Poor. This report follows on from that research project. It tells the story of survival and suffering in one volatile and violent informal settlement in Cape Town. As the report suggests, understanding this place and how people survive will allow us to glimpse one possible, fairly dystopian, urban future as the poor and the marginalized struggle to survive in the most unequal city in the most unequal country on the planet. However, the report also researched and written with local partners and civil society organizations, the report offers hope in the form of potential solidarity and rather impressive social capital among many of the residents. In any case, it is imperative for the world of human rights to recognize the importance of understanding violence and survival in such places if it is to remain relevant to the large majority of the world’s population.

Henrik Rønsbo and Steffen Jensen
DIGNITY – Danish Institute against Torture
Main research findings

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2018, a team of community workers and volunteers carried out a research project in the informal settlement of Overcome Heights in the South Peninsula of greater Cape Town. The research aimed to understand how different groups in Overcome Heights survive a crisis-filled everyday life and how these struggles related to historical and social structures of oppression and marginalization in Cape Town.

The research was designed as a collaborative project where community workers and researchers agreed on how to collect and analyse the data. While researchers brought methodological skills and local knowledge about the area, community workers brought intimate knowledge about the area. This combination of methodological skills and local knowledge and experience was brought to bear on all phases of the project, from design through to data collection, quality control and the analysis phase.

The research used qualitative methods in the form of diary studies, interviews, focus group discussions and observations over a period of three months to better understand some of the everyday struggles of residents in Overcome Heights.

Main research findings

1. **Invisibility and lack of recognition**
   - While residents in informal settlements are often visible, they are not always recognized. The research participants emphasized the importance of identity and belonging, and how these are shaped by their experiences of violence and marginalization.

2. **Organizing crisis**
   - Residents in Overcome Heights are faced with a range of crises that have a long-term impact on their daily lives. These include violence, poverty, and a lack of access to basic services.

3. **Violence**
   - All research participants were affected by physical violence. The impact of different forms of violence depended on people’s position within the social world of Overcome Heights. Hence, migrants for instance had to deal with constant predatory violence directed at them because of their ethnicity.

4. **Youth and drugs**
   - All research participants worried deeply about the prevalence of drugs and, particularly about their effects on the young. For some research participants, especially mothers, it was a concern that often entered into family relations as they worried deeply about their own children. While the strategies to keep boys and girls away from drugs may differ, the concern was the same – how to keep boys out of gangs and girls away from teenage pregnancy and all of them out of drugs and in schools.

5. **Hunger and poverty**
   - All research participants experienced periods of hunger and lack of resources during the study. Depending on grants, work and social connections, almost all research participants relied on food aid in the form of necessary social grants, work permits, proof of address and identity documents, state in the form of necessary social grants, work permits, proof of address and identity documents.

6. **Physical and psychological distress**
   - All research participants enumerated the range of physical and psychological problems. Whether it was due to hard labour, drug and alcohol abuse or extreme forms of anxiety about the future, these problems were common among the research participants.

7. **Ongoing crisis**
   - Residents in Overcome Heights are faced with a range of crises that have a long-term impact on their daily lives. These include violence, poverty, and a lack of access to basic services.

8. **Youth and drugs**
   - All research participants worried deeply about the prevalence of drugs and, particularly about their effects on the young. For some research participants, especially mothers, it was a concern that often entered into family relations as they worried deeply about their own children. While the strategies to keep boys and girls away from drugs may differ, the concern was the same – how to keep boys out of gangs and girls away from teenage pregnancy and all of them out of drugs and in schools.

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The benefits of action research

Each of these findings must be met with appropriate strategies and interventions from the social services, the education system, housing authorities and the police. These strategies must be based on committed partnerships with and in support of local organizations, residents and families. Such partnerships have already been developed but they need to be deepened. The aim of this report has been to enable such partnerships in a more egalitarian way by:

- Showing that people can and want to work together on identifying common problems;
- Carrying out research with local residents in collaboration with civil society organisations;
- Increasing ownership of the conclusions;
- Building organic intellectuals with research and analytical skills to find community solutions;
- Facilitating collaboration across different groups by engaging in collective (research) activities;
- Providing research-based knowledge about the community to community workers and civil society organisations; and
- Making visible and giving voice to the challenges of survival for different groups of people.

1. INTRODUCING OVERCOME HEIGHTS

Overcome Heights is a shack settlement between Seawinds to the north, the low-cost housing settlement of Capricorn/Vrygrond to the south, a nature reserve to the east and, to the west, the M5 highway leading from Muizenberg to the City of Cape Town. Established in 2005 by a court ruling legalizing the settlement of thousands of squatters of different ethnic backgrounds, Overcome Heights is a product of post-apartheid South Africa. With almost no formal buildings and rapidly increasing density – pathways between shacks are in some places less than 30 centimetres – it appears as the archetypical squatter camp. It is also a contested, precarious and often violent space where tens of thousands of people are seeking to turn their lives into good lives, and trying to plot pathways towards safer, healthier and better futures for themselves and their families.

During our fieldwork between January and May 2018, Overcome Heights was affected by sinkholes, shack fires, service delivery protests, looting and gang wars. However, it is also a settlement that attracts large numbers of incoming residents with its promises of land and its relative proximity to urban centres of economic activity. Overcome Heights is inhabited mainly by three groups: coloureds, black South Africans of mainly Xhosa descent, and migrants from other African countries, many of them from Malawi. We use these categories with great caution, as the first two at least are remnants of apartheid’s racial classification system, which designated essentialized identities. These categories came to structure how life could be lived. Life in post-apartheid Cape Town has undermined the categories to a certain extent, something to which the highly diverse settlement of Overcome Heights bears testimony. In many ways, all residents face the same structural marginalization as informal settlers. However, while they occupy the same territory and space, they stake different claims to post-apartheid Cape Town and harbour different aspirations. These claims and aspirations have deep historical roots in the divided history of South Africa. The claims also point to a number of competing futures of what the city could become. In this light, it is fair to say that what happens in Overcome Heights is both an expression of and structuring for what the Mother City can and will be. Hence, exploring how different groups – together and separately – attempt to survive and build a future is imperative for understanding Overcome Heights; further, the study provides a critical lens for understanding what kind of city Cape Town may become. This research report asks: “How do different groups survive in Overcome Heights? How are these struggles related and how do they animate the emergence of post-apartheid Cape Town?”

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1 Especially the term ‘coloured’ has been embroiled in constant and decades-long debates. While we agree with the criticisms launched against apartheid usages and categories, we also note that despite this criticism, people consistently refer to themselves as coloureds. At the same time, the coloured group is far from unitary and it makes little sense to collapse middle-class and township residents. For some of the debates see Jensen, 2008; Erasmus, 2017; Adhikari, 2005.
The objectives of this report are partly scholarly, as we explore how people live, but different sociological frameworks were the same: conduit, conduit space, but this differentiates our study from other studies that are qualitative and explorative. The research revealed Vrygrond as a fractured, poor and violent community, yet it seemed that the residents had different kinds of resources at their disposal and pursued different courses of action in situations of crisis depending on their location, socio-economic status and personal networks.

However, in many ways it is oddly invisible in the political processes of the city and consequently service provision in the areas is starkly under-resourced. Furthermore, of the three groups, black South Africans are the least visible in the political process, and consequently their needs are not adequately addressed.

The overall victimization was extraordinarily high, with 50% of all households having experienced one or more violent incidents in the two years preceding the report. The report has, as we describe below, been conceived and data has been collected together for the purposes of the research project. The conclusions of that study are worth repeating here.

The rationale for the 2009 research was to explore the ramifications of community activism in relation to the xenophobic attacks of 2008. The 2009 research was explorative and qualitative, the research involved a number of Under the research, the events were much different in 2009 than they had been in 2008. Many of the perpetrators of the attacks were from the coloured community, often organisations. The attacks were important both for those who knew people who had been attacked and for the rest of the community. The report revealed a number of themes that were significant and important. Amongst these themes were the different attitudes towards violence, the role of the media in the attacks, and the role of government and other institutions in the aftermath.

The most striking difference was in how people divided along lines of language, colour and class. While the coloured community was predominantly divided along lines of language, the black community was divided along lines of colour and class. Furthermore, the coloured community had a much higher rate of violent incidents than the black community.

The report is structured in seven chapters. Immediately after the Introduction, we briefly describe the methodological and design of the research project in Chapter Three, and then we describe the history of Overcome Heights and its emergence within the larger context of the city and the country in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five we follow three people – one coloured, one black South African and one Malawian – to better understand how individual struggle feeds into collective action. In Chapter Six we trace events as they unfolded in Overcome Heights, and in Chapter Seven we draw together the conclusions of the study and propose central dilemmas that need to be part of broader political discussions of the future of Overcome Heights.

For instance, in mid-May the car of the local councillor was torched and she was reportedly killed. This information came from the local law enforcement authorities. Overcome Heights makes its presence known with its thousands of sprawling shacks, strong community activists and the dramas of everyday life. It is a community that is both a microcosm of the country and a place of political activism. Overcome Heights has been singled out as one housing area adjacent to Overcome Heights that needs to be part of broader political discussions of the future of Overcome Heights.
2. METHODOLOGY: STUDYING OVERCOME HEIGHTS

In this research project we ask the following questions: ‘How do different groups survive in Overcome Heights? How are these struggles related and how do they animate the emergence of post-apartheid Cape Town?’ The basic research design is a mixed method design and can be described as an exploratory, sequential design (Creswell 2014) in which quantitative research helps to identify a number of themes that are subsequently explored through qualitative methods. In our case, the quantitative research and the initial qualitative data collection were conducted almost ten years before the qualitative follow-up. This evidently means that we cannot draw the same conclusions (inferences) as if we had conducted the second round of qualitative research immediately after the quantitative part. Furthermore, the original research had a slightly different geographical focus. Where we conducted the quantitative research in a larger area, we zoomed in on one part of the larger area in the second round – that is, the squatter area of Overcome Heights (see maps 1 and 2).

To deal with the temporal and spatial differences, we have formulated a set of hypotheses based on the first round of research in 2009 that we have explored, if not tested, in the second round of research in 2018. Thus, we do not claim that the second round of research maps directly onto the first. However, the research in 2018 more or less confirms the hypotheses developed based on the 2009 research, at the same time as it develops and deepens the understanding. Further, the time span before the first and second rounds of data collection introduces a temporal dimension through which we are able to explore developments in the area. This particularly concerns the increasing number of people, the densification of the area and the continued and escalating conflicts over local and municipal resources. Hence, with careful methodological reflections about limitations, we are able to explore our hypotheses as well as understand historical changes.

Research design: explorative sequential design

As mentioned above, this present research project follows a quantitative victimization survey (Jensen, Naidoo and Polatin, 2011) from which we deduced two main hypotheses:

1. Overcome Heights is populated by three distinct groups based on claims to the city and aspiration. The three groups comprise coloureds, amaXhosa, and African foreign nationals. The group affiliation informs how they survive and how they engage with the urban space.

2. While the three groups are different and often live separate lives, they share the urban space in both contentious and intimate ways.

In this report, we are exploring how and the extent to which these hypotheses are correct and useful for understanding what happens in Overcome Heights. Thus we are examining the hypotheses in explorative rather than experimental ways.

Methods: diary studies as ethnographic field study

To explore the hypotheses, we have chosen ethnographic fieldwork and so-called diary studies (Jacobsen et al, 2008) as methodological techniques. Diary studies here are a particular version of a field-based case study. A case study usually involves the detailed study of relatively few individuals or items, and in this research project, we followed 12 households’ survival and health practices in a context of violence and insecurity over a period of eight weeks. While interviews give indications of how people go about survival, the main drawback is that interviews are representations of what people want to and can tell at a particular point in time. We wanted to understand evolving practices and cases over time. For example, while Elise, one of our informants, could have told us
about her problems with and fears in relation to her daughter-in-law, it was only by following the case as it evolved that we were able to appreciate the depth and nature of her worry and how she decided to act on it. Hence, a diary study is a way to systematically follow people over time. In this way it is a particular form of ethnographic fieldwork where the researchers are present and participate in activities (Spradley, 2016).

A central concern for our study was sampling. In qualitative research researchers are often too lax in their description of their sampling method. However, the sampling method determines what the researcher can say on the basis of the research. If one asks only women, one can paradoxically not say anything about the relationship between men and women. If one interviews people in a queue to the clinic, one cannot say anything about those who are sick in general, only about those in the queue (Root, 2016). In our research we combined purposive and randomized sampling. Purposive sampling refers to reasoned sampling of specific groups or individuals, whereas randomized sampling aims to avoid all selection bias and ensure that all people have the same chance to be part of the project. The choice of focus on Overcome Heights was decided to host the project in a location that was a bit controversial, but where people decided to stay, and which still has many problems with divided neighbors and grows. We had to complement the maps with our own mapping. Further, we divided the overall sample area of Overcome Heights into five subsections, to ensure that the whole area was represented in our study. In cases where we had not selected one family within the household (randomized), we interviewed the other family members of that household.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>HOUSEHOLD TYPE</th>
<th>BACKGROUND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Else</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married w family</td>
<td>coloured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married w family</td>
<td>coloured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married w family</td>
<td>coloured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumia</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>coloured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sizwe</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Married w family</td>
<td>Xhosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pumla</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>Xhosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>Xhosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nandi</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>Xhosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missy</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>Venda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitch</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Married (family in home country)</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hassan</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Married (family in home country)</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Married (family in home country)</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After selecting informants and obtaining informed consent, each participating household selected their own main contact person, and she or he was given a diary to write in. In this way we could not depend on people writing long entries. The diaries after serving their main purpose were handed over to other researchers in the project. After the final phase, the diary study coordinator (Thanjan) and the senior researchers (Schneidermann and Jensen) debriefed the fieldworkers as well. Hence, the full diary consists of diary entries, fieldworkers’ notes, debriefings and observations. We combined the diary study with longer interviews conducted through structured questionnaires, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with key informants. Researchers spent a long time explaining the project and throughout the project we carried out in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with key informants to ensure that the people could fully understand the project.
### Timeline of Overcome Heights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sipho becomes a community organizer</td>
<td>mid-1970s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ouma moves to Overcome Heights around 2010 with her granddaughter</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Town for poverty and gang violence</td>
<td>early 1940s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becomes part of the Group Areas Act</td>
<td>just south of the sand-swept land that would eventually become Overcome Heights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved just north of Seawinds to Lavender Hill, one of the most notorious townships in Cape Town</td>
<td>early 1960s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painted with the black social networks</td>
<td>mid-1970s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved to Overcome Heights</td>
<td>1999-2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ouma stayed there until she moved to Overcome Heights</td>
<td>1999-2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sipho moved to Overcome Heights around 2010 with his family</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ouma moved to Overcome Heights</td>
<td>1939-1940</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### History of Overcome Heights

**Cape Flats Transformation**
- Cape Town for poverty and gang violence (1940s-1960s)
- Vrygrond means 'free land' in Afrikaans and was referred to as such by the people who came to live there as squatters after being evicted from their homes after the Group Areas Act.
- In 1964, the construction of the new metropolitan municipality began a housing project under the Reconstruction and Development Act, leading to specific mobility and immobility patterns.

**Agricultural Activities**
- The area of Vrygrond was settled in several stages, beginning in the early 1940s and remaining a squatter camp until a post-apartheid housing project got off the ground amid intense community conflicts. Ouma stayed there until she moved just north of Seawinds to Lavender Hill, one of the most notorious townships in Cape Town for poverty and gang violence.

**Social Networks**
- Sipho became a community organizer from the mid-1970s, invading land around the township, as well as with the illicit social networks he was part of. In his own narrative, Sipho moved to Overcome Heights around 2010 with his family, who has more legitimate rights to occupy the land. This means that any history told about Overcome Heights is also contested by claims about the existence of the three different groups, but it also illustrates just how complex settlement patterns have been. Hence, in the concluding section, we briefly discuss some themes in the settlement process that we could identify from the life stories. These themes are intimately related to the history of Cape Town, like the distinction between backyarders and frontyarders, circular migration, and wars and conflict in Africa. Each step of the study was conducted in a consultative process with community activists, ensuring that their stories and experiences were included in the research. The Community Healing Network NGO chapter based in Seawinds (which had been part of the first round of research in 2009) and a series of meetings and discussions with the NGO, we identified a number of potential local residents from the three groups who might be interested in working with the project as research participants. These accounts highlight other aspects than the chapter. This analysis constitutes the empirical section of the chapter. It testifies to the research participants, these accounts highlight other aspects than the chapter. This analysis constitutes the empirical section of the chapter. It testifies to the research participants, these accounts highlight other aspects than the chapter. This analysis constitutes the empirical section of the chapter. It testifies to the research participants, these accounts highlight other aspects than the chapter. This analysis constitutes the empirical section of the chapter. It testifies to the experiences of our research participants. Throughout the research project, we conducted reflexive sessions with the resident fieldworkers around findings and the way forward. This allowed us to adjust methods and the focus of our study as it unfolded. The seven themes identified in Chapter Four were the result of these reflexive sessions and fieldworkers gave important insights into understanding each of them and what they meant. While not perfect as a method of collaboration, the report would not have been possible without it.

**Settlement Process**
- The area of Vrygrond was settled in several stages, beginning in the early 1940s and remaining a squatter camp until a post-apartheid housing project got off the ground amid intense community conflicts. Ouma stayed there until she moved just north of Seawinds to Lavender Hill, one of the most notorious townships in Cape Town for poverty and gang violence.
Misby came to Overcome Heights in 2011 from Samora Machel settlement near Malawi. While she was staying in Malawi for six years, she had traveled to Cape Town to search for a boyfriend but had yet to find one. After Misby had traveled to the Eastern Cape, she returned to the main part of Overcome Heights, which had not yet made it onto any official maps and registers.

Nandi settled in the area in 2017, now living in Reason’s yard, the original inhabitant, a coloured Malawian from 2016. Reason, who came in 2017 also from Malawi, and Grace, who came in 2016, brought in the most incoming residents, especially foreign nationals. This is where Mitch, who came from Overcome Heights, including the majority of our research participants. Each of these arrivals was first seen in backyard shacks, or sleeping arrangements inside houses. These housing arrangements were often the result of the formal townships seeming to be bursting at the seams. The living spaces of backyarders were often inadequate, with family members sharing a single room due to overcrowding in their original homes. The stories of residents of Overcome Heights are highly complex. Take Patricia for example: in the early 1990s, aged 17, Patricia moved to Capricorn to live with family members when she fell pregnant by her sister’s boyfriend. She raised her child here and met the father of her second child in Capricorn as well. By 2005, as the formal townships were extended by shacks and wendy houses to accommodate increasing numbers of residents, including our interlocutors, ended up in the Road Reserve. This part was not included in the main part of Overcome Heights, which included the majority of our research participants.

The coloured residents of Overcome Heights overwhelmingly see themselves as backyarders. The trajectories described above confirm in large part the original hypothesis that there exist three distinct groups: coloureds, black South Africans, and Africans and African migrants – and that they have distinct experiences of urbanization and development. Understanding settlement patterns

The coloured residents of Overcome Heights overwhelmingly see themselves as backyarders. The housing trajectories of residents of Overcome Heights are highly complex. Take Patricia for example: in the early 1990s, aged 17, Patricia moved to Capricorn to live with family members when she fell pregnant by her sister’s boyfriend. She raised her child here and met the father of her second child in Capricorn as well. By 2005, as the formal townships were extended by shacks and wendy houses to accommodate increasing numbers of residents, including our interlocutors, ended up in the Road Reserve. This part was not included in the main part of Overcome Heights, which included the majority of our research participants.

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the 2005 court proceedings that had made Overcome Heights a legal reality, and this is why basic servicing in the Road Reserve is so much worse than the ‘official’ part of Overcome Heights. Most of the residents came a few years later. In our sample, three out of four came from Site 5, a vast squatter camp near Fish Hoek on the False Bay coast that forms part of an ongoing circular migration between the Eastern Cape and Western Cape provinces. The Road Reserve seems much denser than the ‘front’ of Overcome Heights. There are no roads going through wide enough to allow a car (let alone a fire engine) to pass and almost all land within an ever-moving boundary has been occupied. The extreme overcrowding, lack of sanitation, water and garbage collection, together with the fact that almost all Road Reserve residents are amaXhosa from the Eastern Cape, resonate with and reproduce a potentially racialized grievance which is further fuelled by the fact that the ANC has very little influence in Cape Town and in Overcome Heights.

While the Road Reserve appears more crowded than the front, the front is dense in a different way. Many of the residents who came after 2005 have subsequently built rooms or accommodation on the plot. It is in accommodation like this that all our Malawian interlocutors stayed. Reason, for example, as mentioned above, lived in a room sharing a yard with nine other men, mostly Malawian and younger. Mitch stays with five other families in a yard or compound. Hence, while the streets are relatively wide, the compounds may be very crowded. Renting out has become an economic staple, bankrolling hundreds of families. As Mitch says, ‘we are their income’. The influx of Malawians began in the early 2000s.

In many ways, it makes sense to discuss the groups individually. However, there are also entanglements. Some forms of entanglement are less than benign, such as when foreign nationals are caught up in gang fights and service delivery boycotts and quasi-riots – or when black youths are drawn into gang structures that used to be reserved for coloureds (see below). However, most entanglements emanate from the very intimate lives of people in Overcome Heights. It is simply impossible to know nothing about the other groups and to never cross paths in one way or another. Most of these entanglements are amicable, everyday relations borne out of shared lives. At other times, like in the 2008 xenophobia flare-up mentioned above, coloured and black South Africans engaged in horrendous acts of violence – but also in heroic acts of civil courage to protect their Malawian and Zimbabwean neighbours. Thus, Overcome Heights has become a radical illustration of post-apartheid South Africa, stuck as it is at the bottom of society in the most unequal city of the most unequal country in the world: grotesquely poor, terrifyingly violent, unequal in almost incomprehensible ways – and yet its residents are still capable of extraordinary acts of generosity!

4. STRATEGIES OF COPING WITH CRISIS OR SEVEN TYPES OF RELATIONS PUTTING WELLBEING AT STAKE IN OVERCOME HEIGHTS

The central question of our research was: how do residents in Overcome Heights experience crisis and what strategies and possibilities do they have for coping with or resolving crisis? Based on the diaries of our twelve participating households, fieldworkers’ notes and longer interviews charting significant life events, in this chapter we identify and begin to explore seven types of relations that were significant for the wellbeing of our participants. These relations were at the center of both crisis and its resolution.

The seven types of relation play out at different social scales and spheres of social life in the city. While in many ways they are interlinked in practice, here we treat them individually. In doing so we highlight that while the same types of relations are at play in our interlocutors’ lives, there are distinct differences in the content and what is at stake in these relations for each of the three groups. We unpack this below.

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<th>TYPES OF RELATIONS</th>
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Relations with Authority

The informality of Overcome Heights complicates relations with formal institutions and economies. The structural dynamics of weak ties with ‘formal’ South Africa in an informal settlement often took the shape of seemingly trivial bureaucratic problems for our interlocutors. One example is the difficulties of getting ‘Proof of Address’ (PoA), a routine form of identification in activities like applying for a job, obtaining a mobile phone sim card and enrolling children in school. For several of our interlocutors not having a PoA was a
relations to underground authorities:

Relations with land and property:

Informal settlements like Overcome are filled with ambiguous claims to land and property. As mentioned above, a court ruling in 2005 legalized the settlement of the front section of the area, but as the population grows, and selling and renting of shacks becomes more common, the validity of these claims is questioned. Many residents in Overcome Heights have few of these ‘proofs’, and post is not delivered in the settlement. PoA (PoA: the deed to a home, a rental contract or even simply a bill, for instance from the electricity and sanitation services) was a frequent topic in conversation with community leaders as well. Conventionally,PoA is the deed to a home, a rental contract or even simply a bill, for instance from the electricity and sanitation services. Further, some institutions, like banks and credit unions, require proof of address in order to extend loans. Consequently, residents in Overcome Heights often have problems accessing these services or getting into job programs. The participants living in the front part of Overcome Heights had regular contact with committee members and would ask for their help in gaining access to government services and the legal economy. During our fieldwork, we witnessed two instances of a personal dispute between a committee member and a resident who was denied access to government services or had issues with the formal economy. One incident involved a resident who was denied access to water services because they did not have proof of address. The other involved a resident who was denied access to education services because they did not have proof of address. In both cases, the committee member was able to resolve the issue by providing the resident with proof of address. However, some residents in Overcome Heights are still struggling to gain access to formal institutions and economies. It is not always as clean cut, and all the participants in the study worried about what living in an area with gangs and an open drug economy meant for the future of their children. Statements like this could be heard from any of the older residents in the area; everyone was affected by and often entangled with the drug economy. Statements like this could be heard from any of the older residents in the area; everyone was affected by and often entangled with the drug economy. Statements like this could be heard from any of the older residents in the area; everyone was affected by and often entangled with the drug economy.
Renting: Several of our participants rented out space or shacks for residential or commercial purposes, which became central in disputes. Renting给他们提供了与房东谈判的机会。

Selling and buying: Not all participants who shared their shack did so out of necessity or desperation. Selling a shack was not uncommon, especially among community leaders who sold them to fund their businesses. However, buying a shack was more problematic, as residents did not own the land upon which the shacks were located. Several of our informants mentioned that they had been able to buy a shack after they had moved to another one.

Grants: Many of the female participants in our study received support in the form of government grants. Mothers who had children under the age of 18 received a grant for each child, and for some, this was their only steady income. One of the women in the study received a pension, while another did not because she had an ID. The Labour Office with few chances of making a steady income. All our informants reported relying on several strategies to generate income, and even so, they were not always successful. Families had several strategies to get money on a daily or weekly basis. The Labour Office was a common place for residents to sell their products, especially women.

Renting: Many of the male participants in our study preferred to rent a shack, especially after moving to Overcome Heights from a particularly precarious position, with no way of claiming a space of their own, nor to appeal injustice or unfair treatment. Because the rental market was illicit, the tenants had no way of claiming their rights. In this context, the role of community leaders was crucial in mediating disputes and resolving conflicts.

The Labour Office: Several of our participants rented out space or shacks for residential or commercial purposes, which became central in disputes. Renting allowed them to secure a stable income, although not always a solution that provided a sense of security. Renting out, however, was not unproblematic, as landlords might suddenly find that their tenants had left.

Selling and buying: Not all participants who sold their shack did so out of necessity or desperation. Buying a shack was more problematic, as residents did not own the land upon which the shacks were located. Several of our informants mentioned that they had been able to buy a shack after they had moved to another one.

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The black South Africans in our study, except for one, were all single mothers, and all lived with their families back home in the Eastern Cape or other provinces. They had moved from their home areas to Overcome Heights in order to provide a better life for their children. Many brought their husbands with them, while others had moved alone. Generally, they had moved to Overcome Heights because they had relatives there, but some had also found work in the area. Moreover, they had chosen to stay in the area because they had found work and hoped to better their children’s lives. They were therefore dependent on their extended family from back home for financial support, albeit minimal, and many had difficulties in maintaining these networks back home, as travel back and forth was expensive and time-consuming. Many were also dealing with the loss of relatives who had returned to the Eastern Cape due to floods or other disasters. This led to a feeling of isolation and a lack of support.

Despite these challenges, the women in our study were able to create a sense of community through their kinship networks. They relied on their family and friends to provide them with food, shelter, and support. They often visited their relatives back home or travelled to Overcome Heights to see their family. This helped them to maintain their sense of belonging and to keep in touch with their roots. In the meantime, they tried to build a social support system in Cape Town, which they did through their kinship networks. They frequently invited their family and friends to their home, and they also helped each other with domestic chores and childcare.

The quality of these relations were diverse, but they struggled to maintain them as they lived with their extended families. They often found it difficult to balance their responsibilities at home and in the community. They were also worried about the safety of their children and the impact of violence on their lives. They therefore tried to keep their children away from the streets and to protect them from the dangers of the area. They also tried to ensure that their children received an education and had access to the same opportunities as their peers in the Eastern Cape.

Support from friends and family is important for the participants in our study. They often sought help from their family and friends to overcome the challenges they faced. They also tried to build a social support system in Cape Town, which they did through their kinship networks. They frequently invited their family and friends to their home, and they also helped each other with domestic chores and childcare.

Overcome Heights is one of the few multiracial informal settlements in Cape Town, and we set out to explore the ways in which people of different backgrounds shared physical space in the city. How our participants experienced relations with their community depended on the extent to which they consciously explained and built their relations with the community based on their ethnic belonging.

The coloured households in our study were influenced by their ethnic background and to some extent they consciously explained and built their relations with the community based on their ethnic belonging. At the same time, they were also able to build relations with their neighbours, who were often of different ethnic backgrounds. The coloured households were therefore able to maintain their cultural identity while also adapting to the local context.

The black households in our study were also influenced by their ethnic background, but they were less able to maintain their cultural identity. They had to adapt to the local context and to the challenges they faced, such as poverty and violence. They were therefore more likely to build relations with their neighbours, who were often of different ethnic backgrounds. The black households were therefore more likely to be included in the local context.

We can safely assume that the participants did not note down all incidents, and they are not statistically representative, but the diaries offer vivid and poignant vignettes of how family mattered for the three groups.

All four of the participants in our study lived in Overcome Heights. They were all single mothers, and they relied on their family and friends to provide them with food, shelter, and support. They also tried to build a social support system in Cape Town, which they did through their kinship networks. They frequently invited their family and friends to their home, and they also helped each other with domestic chores and childcare.

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The quality of these relations were diverse, but they struggled to maintain them as they lived with their extended families. They often found it difficult to balance their responsibilities at home and in the community. They also tried to ensure that their children received an education and had access to the same opportunities as their peers in the Eastern Cape.
Stress had different manifestations. Here are some of the ways in which our participants described experiencing stress: personal, emotional, mental health, and physical. Men and women described specific body parts and pains in the chest.

Participants in our study felt a variety of symptoms, such as headaches, stomachaches, and muscle pain. Many described feeling overwhelmed by the stress of daily life, including the stress of their housing situations, job, and family. Some participants also described experiencing symptoms of depression, such as sadness, hopelessness, and loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed.

The people we spoke to had different strategies for handling stress and they were not necessarily exclusive. One participant wrote, "I try to relax by watching TV or listening to music, or perhaps literally crying my heart out, as one participant wrote, or to get into an argument or fight with close friends or family members." Another wrote, "I try to keep this information to myself."

Participants in our study were more overtly affected than women who described stress to us were diagnosed in the public health system with depression or anxiety. But several men described similar symptoms of diabetes like fatigue and pain in legs, feet, and hands. Some of them were treated for this. The families who were diagnosed with arthritis and two women were treated for this. The people we spoke to had different strategies for handling stress and they were not necessarily exclusive. One participant wrote, "I try to relax by watching TV or listening to music, or perhaps literally crying my heart out, as one participant wrote, or to get into an argument or fight with close friends or family members." Another wrote, "I try to keep this information to myself."

For the participants in our study, stress felt like an added vulnerability. In several conversations with residents and community leaders it was suggested that people who are stressed or depressed are particularly vulnerable to violence, robbery and burglary, as they might miss important warning signs that something is up, and not be able to assert themselves with community. This points to how what is conventionally thought of as mental health is related to violence, not only as a personal phenomenon but as part of the everyday crisis and navigating the urban periphery in Cape Town.
in their 60s and ailing from a number of cardiac issues and constantly battling with issues of pure survival. But they also seem fairly happy together. They have no children and have no close friends in the Cape. They do have a number of daily activities that dominate their lives, including daily visits to the fruit and vegetable market, going to the park for a walk, and playing bridge at the local club.

**Elise**

Elise grew up in and around Grassy Park and Parktown, not far from Overcome Heights. While she remembers happy and decent family situations in the past, she also tells her story as one of constant changes as parents die or remarry, and as the families are scattered across the country. Her life is marked by the constant fear of hunger and eviction, as well as the constant worry about her grandchildren, who often come to live with her and her husband. Elise is a woman who has lived through many changes, and her story is one of resilience and survival.

Elise claims she is the one who has to ensure that the children eat. She receives All Pay (social grants) but she is not worried. ‘It is school holidays, so all children are with me. There is nothing to eat. The mother who receives child grants for the two children is at our house, but she never comes to give us food, shoes or clothes. As she has lost her job, she is not able to support us in any way. We have to get food ourselves. But we can only buy a small amount of food at a time, and it is very difficult when no one is working but I believe in God’s plan. We have to make our own living and try to survive. We have to sell vegetables outside our yard to make some money. We also sell old clothes from a nursing home. But we have to be very careful not to be caught by the authorities. We have to be very careful not to be caught by the authorities.’

Elise’s focus is mainly on her relationship with her drug-addicted daughter-in-law and her noisy neighbours. The daughter-in-law receives child grants for the two children, but she never comes to give them food, clothes or shoes. Elise claims she is the one who has to ensure that the children eat. She receives All Pay (social grants) but she is not worried. ‘It is school holidays, so all children are with me. There is nothing to eat. The mother who receives child grants for the two children is at our house, but she never comes to give us food, shoes or clothes. As she has lost her job, she is not able to support us in any way. We have to get food ourselves. But we can only buy a small amount of food at a time, and it is very difficult when no one is working but I believe in God’s plan. We have to make our own living and try to survive. We have to sell vegetables outside our yard to make some money. We also sell old clothes from a nursing home. But we have to be very careful not to be caught by the authorities. We have to be very careful not to be caught by the authorities.’

**Mitch**

Mitch’s diary entries are marked by his struggle with physical and mental health, and relations with family and neighbours in the Cape. He is a young Malawian man who has been living in Overcome Heights for a few years. He is trying to find work, but his employers are all too recognizable by all foreign nationals trying to find a job in South Africa. His biggest worry relates to his children, who are not attending school regularly. He is trying to make ends meet by selling used clothes and doing odd jobs. He also writes about his relationship with his daughter-in-law, on how often he has nothing to eat and on how bad his relationship with his neighbours is. Nandi, recently moved to Overcome Heights with her two children, who are Mitch’s children. She is having problems with her neighbours and is facing serious issues with her relationship with her daughter-in-law. Mitch’s diary entries are filled with his struggles and his efforts to survive in his new community. His writing on conditions at work, on trying to find other jobs and on dealing with his family and neighbours is characteristic of many diary entries but again it came to nothing. Another excerpt:

‘I step out late. When I went out my husband was drinking with his friends. A friend came by and bought chips for R10. My son went to work on one day but he never came back. Now the stuff was taking place all round outside our side. Again, we were in the dark. I can’t believe this thing that is happening right now. My son will come right.’

**Nandi**

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‘I have been working in a number of strategies to make money. One day Lester had gotten hold of a bag of old clothes from a nursing home. That gave them the idea to sell used clothes outside their house. However, while it does provide some income, it is not enough. Another possibility is selling grass on one of the few tarred roads. They would give Elise money for electricity. They had come and left buckets and other equipment in their yard, but they did not come back. Now the stuff was taking place all round outside our side. Again, we were in the dark. I can’t believe this thing that is happening right now. My son will come right.’

Elise often does not have enough money to buy food for her family. Her legs hurt as those of her husband – often to crippling effect. Her biggest worry relates to her grandchildren. They often come by or seek them out to give them sugar, shoes or clothes. As she is relying on disability grants as a permanent way to make ends meet, she is fully aware that her family’s situation is precarious. Her only hope is that she will be able to provide for her family, but she is not optimistic.

**Lester**

Lester relocated to the backyard shack of his sister in the newly developed housing development in Grassy Park. The next many years are difficult; Lester develops a drug habit and Elise drinks rather excessively. He sleeps around with other women and physically abuses Elise whenever she confronts him with his extramarital activities or his drug abuse. Their one son, Lester Jnr, grows up with his mother and Elise, and they have a decent house. However, their lives are beset by three problems that dominate Elise’s diary entries and fill up the interview transcript: the constant fear of eviction, the lack of money to buy food, and the constant worry about her grandchildren. Elise claims she is the one who has to ensure that the children eat. She receives All Pay (social grants) but she is not worried. ‘It is school holidays, so all children are with me. There is nothing to eat. The mother who receives child grants for the two children is at our house, but she never comes to give us food, shoes or clothes. As she has lost her job, she is not able to support us in any way. We have to get food ourselves. But we can only buy a small amount of food at a time, and it is very difficult when no one is working but I believe in God’s plan. We have to make our own living and try to survive. We have to sell vegetables outside our yard to make some money. We also sell old clothes from a nursing home. But we have to be very careful not to be caught by the authorities. We have to be very careful not to be caught by the authorities.’

In her diary, entries like these are common. Elise often does not have enough money to buy food for her family. Her legs hurt as those of her husband – often to crippling effect. Her biggest worry relates to her grandchildren. They often come by or seek them out to give them sugar, shoes or clothes. As she is relying on disability grants as a permanent way to make ends meet, she is fully aware that her family’s situation is precarious. Her only hope is that she will be able to provide for her family, but she is not optimistic.

**Mitch’s family trouble**

A large part of the issue around food relates to the grandchildren of Elise’s drug-addicted daughter-in-law and her noisy neighbours. The daughter-in-law receives child grants for the two children, but she never comes to give them food, clothes or shoes. Elise claims she is the one who has to ensure that the children eat. She receives All Pay (social grants) but she is not worried. ‘It is school holidays, so all children are with me. There is nothing to eat. The mother who receives child grants for the two children is at our house, but she never comes to give us food, shoes or clothes. As she has lost her job, she is not able to support us in any way. We have to get food ourselves. But we can only buy a small amount of food at a time, and it is very difficult when no one is working but I believe in God’s plan. We have to make our own living and try to survive. We have to sell vegetables outside our yard to make some money. We also sell old clothes from a nursing home. But we have to be very careful not to be caught by the authorities. We have to be very careful not to be caught by the authorities.’

**Elise’s issues with her daughter-in-law**

Elise’s issues with her daughter-in-law are typical of many of the family conflicts on our research participants’ biographies. They often arise from the difficulties of managing a limited income, the responsibilities of caring for grandchildren, and the challenges of living in an informal settlement. In many cases, conflicts arise from the lack of communication, understanding and respect between family members. Elise’s diary entries often reflect her struggles with her daughter-in-law, whom she calls the ‘tik koppe’ (literally, crystal meth head). The daughter-in-law receives child grants for the two children, but she never comes to give them food, clothes or shoes. Elise claims she is the one who has to ensure that the children eat. She receives All Pay (social grants) but she is not worried. ‘It is school holidays, so all children are with me. There is nothing to eat. The mother who receives child grants for the two children is at our house, but she never comes to give us food, shoes or clothes. As she has lost her job, she is not able to support us in any way. We have to get food ourselves. But we can only buy a small amount of food at a time, and it is very difficult when no one is working but I believe in God’s plan. We have to make our own living and try to survive. We have to sell vegetables outside our yard to make some money. We also sell old clothes from a nursing home. But we have to be very careful not to be caught by the authorities. We have to be very careful not to be caught by the authorities.’

**Family trouble**

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In her diary, entries like these are common. Elise often does not have enough money to buy food for her family. Her legs hurt as those of her husband – often to crippling effect. Her biggest worry relates to her grandchildren. They often come by or seek them out to give them sugar, shoes or clothes. As she is relying on disability grants as a permanent way to make ends meet, she is fully aware that her family’s situation is precarious. Her only hope is that she will be able to provide for her family, but she is not optimistic.

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Mitch is 30 years old from Nkhotakota district in central Malawi. He is married with three kids aged 11, 7, and 4, all of whom are in Malawi with his wife. Mitch came to South Africa in May 2016, following in the footsteps of the thousands of Malawians who have sought better life chances. Mitch’s wife, Elise, lives in Malawi with their children. Mitch’s father was a foreman who taught him a lot about plumbing. Mitch never learnt it in school, but he was a competent plumber and a good foreman from a young age. His first job was with a Malawian family, where he worked for three years. The family was well respected, and Mitch was paid well for his work. He then worked for a Zimbabwean family, where he was also well paid. Mitch then worked for a South African family, where he was paid less, but he was happy with his work. He worked for this family for two years, and then he moved to another family, where he worked for three months. Mitch then worked for a company in Malawi, where he was paid well. But he was not happy with his work, and he decided to move to South Africa. Mitch is looking forward to moving to Cape Town, where he can find better work and better opportunities. Mitch is planning to stay in South Africa for two years, and then he will return to Malawi. Mitch is a good man, and he is always ready to help others. He is looking forward to living in South Africa, and he is excited about the opportunities that it offers.
Mitch continues that the ‘dangerous people’ are not interested in attracting police to them, they protect us. Some of the dangerous people, they protect us.’ Asked to explain is an ‘enemy’. With a somewhat surprising twist, Mitch asserts: ‘But you know! Some of my friends have developed an elaborate taxonomy of dangerous people: ‘The amaXhosa, the gangsters, the drug dealers, the shop owners, the taxi drivers, the owners of the cinemas. You have to know violence and where it will come from is imperative to survive. Mitch and his friends have developed an elaborate taxonomy of dangerous people: ‘The amaXhosa, the gangsters, the drug dealers, the shop owners, the taxi drivers, the owners of the cinemas. You have to know violence and where it will come from is imperative to survive.

Overcome is circumscribed by violence. To be able to know violence and where it will come from is imperative to survive.

Mitch describes the extent to which life in Overcome is circumscribed by violence. To be able to know violence and where it will come from is imperative to survive.

Children's social lives

Nandi's childhood in the townships outside Port Elizabeth was a turbulent one marked by violence, addiction and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. By 16 she had left her boyfriend and the East Cape. When she turned 23 she was in a new relationship with a man from the Eastern Cape, but this did not last. Nandi had a second child, and her boyfriend moved from Mitchells Plain to a flat in Capricorn, the second child, and her boyfriend moved from Mitchells Plain to a flat in Capricorn. They came to Cape Town with the hopes of employment and a better life. Nandi had a second child, and her boyfriend moved from Mitchells Plain to a flat in Capricorn. They came to Cape Town with the hopes of employment and a better life. Nandi had a second child, and her boyfriend moved from Mitchells Plain to a flat in Capricorn. They came to Cape Town with the hopes of employment and a better life. Nandi had a second child, and her boyfriend moved from Mitchells Plain to a flat in Capricorn. They came to Cape Town with the hopes of employment and a better life. Nandi had a second child, and her boyfriend moved from Mitchells Plain to a flat in Capricorn. They came to Cape Town with the hopes of employment and a better life.
Nandi is attending night school to redo her matric in order to qualify for a nursing degree, leaving the house at 17.30 and returning at around 20.30. During this time her children are home alone, and this is a recurring concern in her diary: ‘Leaving the kids alone is stressing me a lot because of safety reasons,’ she writes. In the evening hours, her son is instructed to make sure both children stay in the house to do homework, but Nandi describes coming home to find her house empty:

“My son came home 20.45. I tried to talk to him, trying to find out what was his problem and why he doesn’t want to listen. Raising a young teenage boy as a single parent is stressing and difficult. Even when I’m talking to him I find it hard for him to answer me. I don’t know whether I’m a bad mother or not. Yhooo [drawing of a crying face.] My heart is sore, just don’t know what to do.”

Nandi’s daughter also struggles to adapt to her new surroundings. Nandi had with well-spoken insistence managed to get both of her children enrolled in the local primary school, despite the teachers’ scepticism about how the two isiXhosa children from the Eastern Cape would cope in an English-medium school. Now Nandi worries not just for her son, but also her daughter, who she frequently describes as a ‘slow learner’. Her lack of English skills makes it impossible for her to do her schoolwork, but worse, for her fellow students she came to embody the stereotype of a recent migrant from the Eastern Cape: poor, unintelligent and lacking the street smarts and style to get by in the city. During a school ceremony the young girl became the laughingstock of the class, because of her poor clothing and lack of language skills. In her diary Nandi describes her attempts to inspire her children to face their hardships with dignity:

“I told them they must learn to stand up for themselves in a positive way. I told them if somebody is saying that she is ugly, she must always know that she is beautiful. And then they mocking her saying that she can’t speak English – the only way to help her is to read more and speak more English in order for her to learn.”

At the end of the term, both children failed several classes in school, and the difficulties in adjusting to life in Cape Town seemed merely to escalate for them both. When riots over land invasions erupted in Vrygrond, Langalasethu participated with other youths in the upheaval. He took part in stoning and looting the local Somali-owned spaza shop. Nandi, who depended on her positive relationship with the shop owner for credit, was devastated by her son’s participation in the violent everyday life of Overcome Heights and the (self)destruction it brought on the family.

Political languages and claims to the city

Nandi’s hope for solutions to her problems are vested in government and state power, and in her diary as well as interviews, she succinctly analyses her situation as a result of shortcoming of the state to provide housing and services for the residents of Overcome Heights. For instance, she makes sense of the children’s gang-like turf war over places to hang out and play as the failure of the municipality to make recreational areas like playgrounds and sports grounds accessible for children. She ends a diary entry about her son’s conflicts with children from the neighbouring Capricorn: ‘I’m pleading with the municipality [pleading with the municipality] to take a closer look at the informal settlements.’

This turn to place responsibility with public and state authorities, and to plead for their involvement in addressing violence and lack of services in Overcome, is characteristic among those in our study who were migrants from the Eastern Cape. As described above, a ‘second committee’ representing the area populated mainly by isiXhosa speakers approached questions of governance in a different way than the more recognized Housing Committee in Overcome. This kind of political consciousness also shapes Nandi’s participation in the ‘community’, as she called it. When a woman living in the same compound as Nandi was attacked in an attempted rape, Nandi attended a community meeting with local leaders, the family of the perpetrator and the victim, aiming at mediation. When the perpetrator was later arrested for stabbing his girlfriend, but was out on bail a few hours later, Nandi writes:

“Justice was not served again. I and my family don’t feel safe, because people are getting away with crime and there is nothing happening. The community is trying its best, but it took us time to find the police and get hold of them. […] I’m pleading for safety and security services.”

The same kinds of principles seem to apply when Nandi speaks about trying to hold the local Housing Committee responsible for the wellbeing of the residents in Overcome. Her compound is designated to use a row of flush toilets on the street, but they are almost always broken and at times cause sewage to overflow into the street. Nandi calls upon committee members to witness and address the problem and writes repeatedly of it in her diary. Though the problem was not resolved, Nandi continues to insist on her right to a decent life in the city, even if living in an informal settlement.

Despite Nandi’s insistence on the right to a good life in Cape Town, she was constantly faced with her inability to realize these claims. In her diary and interviews she calls this frustration ‘stress’, and she herself addresses how her problems with poverty, the children and violence are aggravated by her precarious position as a tenant in an informal settlement: ‘I’m keeping someone’s house staying with my two kids. What will happen to me if the owner can decide to come and stay back [in the house]. This is what stressing me mostly.’
Three months in Overcome Heights

In this last chapter we want to focus on a series of events that took place in the period between January and May 2018 when we were conducting fieldwork in Overcome Heights. These events were not necessarily connected but all were characterized by crisis – or had crisis-like properties. They comprised gang wars and crime; shacks collapsing into sinkholes; shack fires; land invasions; lootings; service delivery demonstrations and protests on top of a water crisis that peaked in the three months we were conducting fieldwork in Overcome Heights. While each of these crises had devastating consequences for inhabitants in Overcome Heights (death, injury, loss of property and belongings, fear), what becomes clear is that they are not extraordinary. Rather, crises are everyday occurrences that people deal with as best they can. Crisis is the context of most people’s lives when they live in precarious, unstable, uncertain and often violent circumstances, not only in Overcome Heights but around the world (Vigh, 2008). Apart from the fact that people are unsurprised at the advent of crisis, most of these crises do not affect everybody. For instance, our friend Taliah was affected by the gang war and to some extent the sinkhole (it happened next to her house), but not the other crises. Furthermore, crises can be ripe with opportunities and resources. Again, the sinkhole is a good illustration as it galvanized the municipality to dispense resources in Overcome Heights that it is otherwise unlikely to.

Using the diaries and interviews, we produced a five-month timeline of crises in the first half of 2018. In the final section of this report we revisit the timeline and describe each crisis in more detail.

Crises in everyday life

The following chronological list of events, compiled through diaries and interviews, references particular (anonymized) participants.

Late January to mid-February:
- A’s son is in a scuffle and is injured in the face by gangsters in the street
- B’s house is raided by the police
- Known murderer hides out in Overcome and tries to rape a woman in C’s yard. The community chases him but he disappears
- Unknown criminals are chased through D’s yard at night
- E complains that the neighbour is selling drugs

Late February to mid-March:
- A young man is stabbed in the stomach at F’s neighbour, they wait for the ambulance with him
- G tells of a vigilante mob which strips and kills a robbery suspect in the road
- H says a young man was shot dead in the area and police were blocked from entering
- I intervenes in a robbery in a woman’s home, knows the assailants
- J’s soccer match is cancelled this Sunday as there is shooting at the soccer field (four people are injured)
- K and her husband are robbed in their house at night
- L’s mother’s house is attacked by gangsters, the police intervene
- M’s mother’s house is attacked by gangsters, the police intervene
- P is confined at home because of shootings
- Q meets a group of gangsters in her road, with guns. Hurries home immediately
- R and her friend flee and lock themselves in the house when the gangsters start shooting in the street
- S goes to visit a neighbour in Lavender Hill, meets a group of police on the way home

Late March to mid-April:
- T’s neighbour experiences attempted break-in
- U has clothing stolen from her yard
- Community leader in V’s section arrested with large quantity of drugs
- W is a witness during robbery of Malawian man by group of colored men
- X is a witness during robbery of Malawian man by group of colored men
- Y 사업 위는色调 from the yard
- Z is a witness during robbery of Malawian man by group of colored men

In this last chapter we want to focus on a series of events that took place in the period between January and May 2018 when we were conducting fieldwork in Overcome Heights.
Late April to mid-May:

- Sinkhole next to B’s home devastates seven shacks, leaving holes and puddles of sewage
- C is held at gunpoint over local politics
- Riots spill into the M5 and a house in Marina Da Gama is petrol-bombed. D witnesses the torching of a Somali shop
- E’s shop is attacked but protected by community leaders
- Protests escalate with protesters kidnapping local councillor and torching her car near F’s house. Protests block off M5, stoning of passing cars, repeated looting of Capricorn Centre

As Y and her daughter return from daughter’s school, there is shooting, and they run home for cover

Z is robbed at gunpoint in Capricorn

Land occupation protests in A’s section

Typology of crisis

In this section, we briefly introduce the different contexts of crisis introduced above. They relate to gang wars, sinkholes, shack fires, land invasions, protests and looting.

Gang war

As is clear from the above, a gang war dominated the lives of many, especially in the front section of Overcome Heights, which is close to a large coloured township. While the war affected everyone, it prevailed mostly among the coloured segments of Overcome Heights. In fact, when asked, neither black South African nor Malawian informants were able to explain why there were shootings almost every night, while many coloureds had intimate knowledge of the workings of the gang war. Allegedly, the war began as a fight over which faction of the local gang should control the drug trade in Overcome Heights. The war escalated when the leader of one faction was killed in December 2017. After that, it escalated quickly as more gangs, especially from Lavender Hill, were drawn into the conflict. By February 2018, barely three months later, more than 20 people had been killed. In March, the conflict had escalated to such an extent that residents in one section built barricades to avoid drive-by shootings. The police called in reinforcements and patrolled heavily in the area. Community meetings were held at regular intervals. In the meantime, killings and injuries continued throughout the period we were there, with gunshots ringing out on a regular basis.

Sinkhole

In mid-April, during a working day when, thankfully, few people were at home, a sinkhole with a diameter of 20 metres opened up, swallowing seven shacks and everything in them. The sinkhole was predictable. In fact, a few years back, another sinkhole had materialized next to the present one. It resulted from the erosion of the sandy soil from below as sewage water from one of the main lines between the ocean and the city slowly ate away at the sand, leaving only the topsoil, hardened through construction and use. When the pressure built up enough, the ground collapsed. While this was a catastrophic event, it was also full of possibilities as the City of Cape Town was obligated to assist with relocation of families, rebuilding of structures, repairing the main line and dealing with the sinkhole. For this, they hired guards and workers from Overcome Heights.

Shack fires

Shack fires are absolutely terrifying for people living in informal settlements. Almost all our interlocutors can tell tales of running from raging fires as they consume hundreds of shacks. The one that happened in Overcome Heights in March was a relatively small one. It only consumed eight shacks. A heroic effort by community members, many of them well-trained in fire management, prevented the fire from spreading although the discolouring from the heat on neighbouring shacks was easy to detect. Only the charred remains of shacks and livelihoods were left. According to our interviews, the fire had started during a fight between two jealous women. However, most shack fires start because of unsafe cooking, heating and lighting arrangements like paraffin stoves, candles and bare izinyoka (illegal electricity connection) wires. They spread fast because of the density of the settlement and are close to impossible to douse because fire trucks cannot enter the areas. In 2018, there were at least two more shack fires. The one in the area called Road Reserve, the densest and least serviced part of Overcome Heights, claimed more than a hundred shacks. As one informant wrote in a text message, ‘Only A and B were spared’, indicating his own loss.

Land occupation and protests

Overcome Heights is located in one of the few areas which, until around 2000, were not densely populated. This was due to a combination of ownership, land use declarations and the sandy soil. However, as we have documented here and elsewhere (Jensen, Naidoo and Polatin, 2011), it is now densely populated. Behind the Road Reserve and nearer the sea, there is an area called the Tip, a garbage dumpsite that is fertile ground for waste pickers (skarrelaars). This area has been targeted on several occasions by people who crave land — either for housing or for livelihood (renting out). The municipal land invasion unit pays particular attention to this piece of land in an ongoing struggle between those of the city’s residents who want the land and the council. During late April, some of these skirmishes became more serious as prospective squatters, organized by one community leader, began to prepare an occupation. At the same time, there was another conflict over land, connected through the community leadership, closer to M5. This conflict turned violent and split into the local shopping mall where several shops were looted, a municipal hall was torched, tires were set alight as barricades and a house in an adjacent well-off
neighbourhood was fire-bombed. This happened amid a nationwide wave of urban land protests. As one informant said, voicing minimal disapproval of the violence: “They say that the council only comes when there is a fire. That’s why they burn the structures.”

Attacks against Somali traders

Parallel to the looting of more formal malls and street protests, informal spaza shops in the settlements, especially those owned by Somali traders, were also attacked. These attacks, carried out by black and coloured South African teenagers, were accompanied by the singing of freedom songs from the struggle against apartheid. One Malawian informant witnessed from the wall around his compound how one shop was besieged by twenty youths throwing stones and hammering at the walls while the Somali shopkeeper was inside the shop. Another Somali trader tells of his fear as the youths approached. He was rescued by local community leaders. A third Somali trader killed one of the intruders as the latter was entering his shop. These attacks are reminiscent of the xenophobic attacks that happen regularly across the country, most seriously in 2008 when hundreds of thousands of migrants were displaced.

Revisiting crisis and everyday life

While these events were all spectacular incidents of crisis, they were neither extraordinary nor surprising. Rather, they were part of everyday life in Overcome Heights as a microcosm of the conflicts that beset post-apartheid South Africa. They occurred simultaneously with the other ongoing crises of everyday life that we describe in the other chapters – hunger, crime, illness, poverty and desperation. While the Cape Town water crisis attracted much attention in the international and national media, it also became part of a general context of crisis – not even particularly visible in Overcome Heights, except as a critical reduction in water pressure, especially in the Road Reserve (leading to sanitation challenges). In this way, different crises in Overcome Heights are not exceptional; they are part of what residents cope with as part of everyday life.

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WORKS CITED


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SURVIVAL AND CRISIS IN A DIVERSE INFORMAL SETTLEMENT – AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN OVERCOME HEIGHTS, SOUTH AFRICA

Praxis paper on Urban Violence

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