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Addressing Urban Violence and Local Security: Participatory Research with Young People in Colombia and South Africa

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Abstract

Young people from underserved communities in Medellín, Colombia, and Cape Town, South Africa, experience insecurity as a compounding, interconnected system and not a set of isolated risks. Multiple forms of insecurity puts sustained strain on their mental health and increases their vulnerability to gang influence, recruitment, and exploitation by criminal groups. This report presents the findings of a two-city, participatory and action-oriented research project examining the dynamics of urban violence and insecurity affecting young people. Structured as a city-to-city dialogue, the project team co-produced knowledge with young people from communities affected by chronic violence and insecurity, Comunas 1 (Popular) and 2 (Santa Cruz) in Medellín and Mitchells Plain in Cape Town, creating opportunities for young people to reflect on how cities can become safer and more inclusive without undermining the rights and wellbeing. Combining participatory qualitative and quantitative methods, the project produced youth-centred evidence on the dynamics that generate vulnerability, along with concrete ideas for improving local security responses.

The study documented the absence of recognition, dignity, and a credible sense of future possibility as largely unrecognised dimensions of young people's safety. These conditions produce anxieties that are central to why young people in both cities describe criminal groups as sometimes offering more tangible recognition and belonging than the state or their own communities. The report documents a persistent mismatch between official security priorities, still centred on crime and armed actors, and what young people themselves identify as most urgent: unemployment, lack of opportunity, and mental health. Drawing on these findings and recognising that despite being separated by continent, language, and political history, the two cities share a history of chronic violence, deep and persistent inequality, the report closes with a set of concrete, youth-informed proposals for rethinking security policy and practice, built around care, recognition, and genuine youth participation rather than surveillance and control.

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We also thank the members of civil society organisations who participated in the project and to Corporación Con-Vivamos and YMCA Cape Flats who provided spaces for and facilitated activities with young people in their communities; their support was invaluable to overcome the difficulties of opening difficult conversations. The approach to human-centred security developed by Security4Peace and the Glocal Human Security Index were adopted throughout the research to analyse insecurity with young people.

Finally, we thank the ICLD for its generous support in undertaking this research. It has been a genuine pleasure to have met and worked with such wonderful people doing such important work, and special thanks to María José Zapata Campos, as well as Amalinda Savirani and Jesse Ribot who provided thoughtful comments to an earlier draft of this paper.

Preface



By Johan Lilja, Secretary General, Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy

Young people have the right to feel safe, to be heard and to see a future for themselves in the communities where they live. Yet, for many young people living in contexts of persistent violence and inequality, these fundamental conditions remain far from reality.

This publication based on the research project *"Addressing urban violence and local security: participatory research with young people in Colombia and South Africa"* brings together experiences and insights from young people in Medellín, Colombia, and Cape Town, South Africa. Despite the geographical distance and different historical contexts, their experiences reveal striking similarities. Insecurity is not simply a matter of crime or violence. It is also shaped by unemployment, limited opportunities, mental health challenges and a lack of recognition, belonging and hope for the future.

For ICLD, strengthening local democracy means ensuring that people can influence the decisions that affect their lives. This requires local authorities to listen to young people, recognise their knowledge and experiences, and include them as active participants in shaping policies and solutions. When young people's voices are overlooked, important dimensions of security risk remaining invisible, and responses may fail to address the realities of everyday life.

By placing young people's perspectives at the centre of the research, this project demonstrates the value of participatory approaches and dialogue between cities. It also challenges us to rethink how local security efforts can move from control and surveillance towards a more proactive approach and identify care, recognition, opportunity and meaningful participation as an important part of the solution.

I hope this publication will inspire policymakers, local authorities and practitioners to listen more closely to young people also in challenging contexts and work alongside them to build safer, more inclusive communities where everyone has the opportunity to shape their future.

Visby, Sweden



Johan Lilja,
Secretary General, ICLD

About the authors

Alexandra Abello Colak was the UK Co-Investigator on the project and worked with the team in developing the methodological strategy for co-producing knowledge with young people in both cities. She contributed to data analysis and facilitated knowledge exchange across case studies and with broader audiences. Alexandra is Senior Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science in the UK and Founding Director of Security 4 Peace. She contributed extensive experience in participatory methodologies, peace research, and complex systems thinking, which she has applied to the study of violence, human insecurity, and urban crime in Latin America, the Caribbean, and South Africa.

Gareth A. Jones is Professor of Urban Geography at the LSE and was the Principal Investigator (PI) on the project, and focused mostly on the research design, knowledge exchange and impact. His research has mostly focused on urban inequalities, including access to food, and youth, violence and security, with particular interest in Brazil, Mexico and South Africa. See: www.lse.ac.uk/geography-and-environment/people/academic-staff/gareth-a-jones

Julián Muñoz was the Colombian based Co-Investigator on the project. He is a lawyer who specialises in criminal law, with an MA in political science and doctorate in social science. Julián is Professor in the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the Universidad de Antioquia where he directs the Masters in Conflict, Peace and Human Rights and is part of the research group on conflict, violence and human security. His research interests focus on critical security studies and crime policies, themes on which he has published widely including most recently (with J. Acosta) Seguridad humana y paz total. Análisis y prospectivas. Bogotá: Tirant lo Blanch.

Natalia Maya was the academic Co-Investigator in Medellín. Natalia is a journalist, a specialist in theories, methods and techniques of social research, and holds a Masters in Political Science. She is academic coordinator at the Unidad Especial de Paz (Peace Unit) at the Universidad de Antioquia and member of the research group on conflict, violence and security in the Faculty of Law and Political Science. Natalia has been a researcher and adviser at the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Centre for Historic Memory) and to the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición (National Commission for Truth, Coexistence and Non Repetition), working on themes linked with the armed conflict, urban violence, memory and peacebuilding.

Julián Zapata was the Youth Community Researcher in Medellín. He is a social leader, peacebuilder, and community researcher with particular interest in vulnerable youth in Medellín. A specialist in human rights, peace and coexistence. Through his work with the Human Rights Committee of the Valle de Aburrá where Julián created and has led the Youth Section he advocates for the defence and promotion of human rights in the region.

Ashton Botha was the academic Co-Investigator and Research Consultant in Cape Town for the project. She holds a Bachelor of Social Sciences in Gender and Transformation and an MA in African Feminist Studies, both at the University of Cape Town. Ashton is a committed decolonial African feminist whose research interests centre on trauma, healing, gender-based violence, and the lived experiences of women and communities navigating violence and inequality. Across her research and professional practice, Ashton is passionate about amplifying community and student voices and creating space for lived experience and community knowledge within academic and institutional discourse. She is particularly interested in approaches that bridge academic research with community realities and translate knowledge into meaningful forms of support, connection, and social change.

Rivonne Valentine was the Youth Community Researcher in Cape Town. He is a youth leader with a passion for advocacy, empowerment, and building sustainable communities. Rivonne serves as the National Youth Representative of the South African YMCA, where he plays a key role in shaping youth-led initiatives across the country, ensuring young voices are heard at grassroots and national levels. With experience rooted in leadership development, programme coordination, and social impact work, Rivonne has worked to advance youth participation through initiatives such as the National Youth Camp, Y-Justice, and the National Youth Exchange Programme. Rivonne is especially committed to transforming the way young people engage with policy, leadership, and civic responsibility, and he strives to create safe, empowering spaces for youth to thrive and bring a fresh, solutions-oriented voice to national conversations.

Introduction

Most violent deaths do not occur as the direct result of armed conflict, political violence, or terrorism, but rather from interpersonal and gang violence and economically motivated crime (Small Arms Survey, 2013, 2021; Geneva Declaration, 2015; UNODC, 2019). Most of this violence takes place in cities, and with the global urban population expected to reach 68 percent by 2050 (UN DESA, 2019), understanding and addressing urban violence constitutes a major challenge for policymakers and practitioners, particularly at the local level.

This research report presents the results of a collaborative project bringing together research partners from Colombia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, together with 545 young people from communities in Cape Town, South Africa, and Medellín, Colombia, that have been historically affected by complex forms of violence and criminality. The project's goal was to generate youth-centred evidence on how to improve security in cities affected by chronic violence in ways that respect young people's rights and address the interconnected factors that make them vulnerable to violence and criminal groups.

The research recognised that although young people in communities where gangs and criminal organisations exercise significant power are disproportionately affected by violence (OECD, 2011, p. 14; UNODC, 2011, p. 39; World Bank, 2010), their voices remain largely excluded from public debate and policy responses. This exclusion not only contributes to the stigmatisation of youth in these contexts, who are often seen as the main perpetrators of violent crime, but also weakens the capacity of institutions to understand and address the drivers of violence and insecurity in ways that guarantee the rights of young people. In response to this challenge, the project also aimed to strengthen institutional accountability by generating new evidence and actionable knowledge with young people on the local dynamics of insecurity and by facilitating their participation in conversations on security, so that local institutions are better equipped to respond to the needs of a group that makes up a substantial proportion of their populations.

The project used participatory methods to co-produce knowledge and new evidence with young people from Comunas 1(Popular) and 2(Santa Cruz) in Medellín and from Mitchells Plain in Cape Town, focusing on the processes that lead young people to become involved in violence and criminal groups, how people live with insecurity in daily life, and how local institutions and civil society can strengthen their strategies and policies to improve security while also enabling young people's meaningful participation and inclusion in the public debates on security that profoundly affect their lives.

Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and collaborative work with civil society organizations and youth collectives, the project explored the following questions:

1. What are the context-specific mechanisms and processes that make young people vulnerable to violence and the influence of criminal groups?
2. What impact do existing strategies have on young people's rights and on the factors that make them vulnerable to violence and criminality?
3. What measures can reduce youth vulnerability while simultaneously protecting youth rights and wellbeing?
4. What indicators for the assessment and monitoring of security policies and violence prevention programmes are important from the perspective of young people, and how can these indicators make local institutions more accountable to young people's needs?

The project tested conceptual frameworks and data-generation tools to facilitate youth participation and to incorporate young people's perspectives into security diagnoses, the identification of strategic areas for intervention by state institutions and civil

society, and assessments of the impact of current strategies. Through a participatory approach, the research co-produced youth-centred data on security and then engaged local stakeholders in discussing findings. In doing so, the project generated insights on how cities can become safer while improving youth inclusion, rather than compromising the rights and wellbeing of their youngest residents. It also offered practical ideas for making local governments more accountable and responsive to young people's needs. The next section of the report presents the methodology used, including the rationale for the choice of cities and communities, the methods used, and the actors involved. The following section presents the findings from the research and their policy implications.

Co-producing Knowledge on Security with Young People: Our Approach

The project was developed and implemented as a collaboration between researchers from the Universidad de Antioquia (UdeA) in Medellín[1], the University of Cape Town, and the London School of Economics. The research team included academic researchers as well as *young community researchers* who live and work in the communities and are recognised and respected youth leaders with experience in community work. This facilitated safe and ethical contact with participants and the development of the participatory research activities. The project also had the support of civil society organisations in Medellín (Corporación Con-Vivamos), Cape Town (YMCA Cape Flats), and the UK (Security4Peace), which facilitated engagement with 545 young residents and co-production of knowledge with youth collectives that emerged or consolidated in the communities during the project. In Medellín we worked with *Colectivo PatiAmarilla* and *Laboratorio Juvenil de la Comuna 2* (Comuna 2 Youth Lab) and in Cape Town with *Voices of the Plain*.



Figure 1: Members of Colectivo PatiAmarilla in Medellin.



Figure 2: Members of Youth Collective 'Voices of the Plain', Mitchells Plain.

A City-to-City Dialogue between Medellín and Cape Town

Despite being located on different continents, Cape Town and Medellín share a set of characteristics that made a city-to-city dialogue particularly valuable for this research. The first is a shared history of chronic, high-intensity violence linked to gangs and organised criminal groups, in which young people from marginalised neighbourhoods with low levels of social development have been simultaneously cast as the main perpetrators of violence and its principal victims. With a homicide rate of 68.7 per 100,000 people in 2025 and the highest proportion of residents reporting feelings of insecurity in South Africa, Cape Town ranks among the most violent cities globally (Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal, 2026; Muggah, 2022). Medellín, despite a dramatic decline from the 381 homicides per 100,000 people recorded when it was considered the world's

1 Researchers were part of the Conflicts, Violence and Human Security Research Group at UdeA.

murder capital in the early 1990s to 12 per 100,000 in 2025, remains a city where some 350 gangs, coordinated by 19 larger criminal structures, control roughly 90 percent of the urban territory.

The second shared characteristic is high and persistent inequality and spatial segregation, rooted in distinct histories of urban development. In Cape Town, inequality remains deeply shaped by apartheid-era spatial planning, which concentrated poverty in the Cape Flats and left the city with one of the highest levels of income inequality among major cities worldwide, a legacy South Africa has struggled to reverse despite three decades of democratic government (Samara, 2011; Visagie et al., 2025).[2] In Medellín, inequality has instead been shaped by the trajectory of the city's local economy, first as an industrial centre attracting Colombians escaping violence in rural areas, and more recently as a hub for services, innovation, and entrepreneurship, attracting business groups and investors in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, digital technologies and finance (Corburn et al., 2020; Maclean, 2015; Melguizo, 2009).

Third, both Cape Town and Medellín have a reputation for technocratic and efficient local government at least by comparison with national and other city governments (Betancur & Brand, 2023). In Cape Town, the Democratic Alliance party has dominated city and provincial government for most of the past thirty years and currently controls the metropolitan council and mayoralty, and the provincial premiership for the fourth consecutive term. Medellín presents a more complicated political landscape in terms of party identities and shifts across the ideological spectrum from Centre-Left to Right but most administrations have been praised for technical proficiency, investment in infrastructure and policy initiatives. Governance in both cities has stressed fiscal management, emphasised innovation and digital systems, and a probusiness approach to utility and infrastructure extensions, including environmental projects, transport networks and in Medellín the interventions shorthanded as social urbanism. This reputation notwithstanding, both administrative and political systems have experienced prominent cases of corruption and the politicisation of government office.

A fourth shared characteristic is that in parallel with histories of violence and inequality, and partly due to outward-facing and enterprise-oriented local governments, both cities have become symbols of renewal and destinations for international tourism and digital nomads. Medellín has repositioned itself as one of Latin America's fastest-growing destinations, drawing over 1.2 million international visitors in 2025. Cape Town is also recognised as one of the world's leading destinations, with international arrivals reaching record levels in 2025. In both, there is concern with consequent gentrification and rising living costs, further deepening social and spatial inequalities with neighbourhoods where residents face chronic violence.

An innovative feature of the research, therefore, was to enable a dialogue between the two cities through online joint meetings of the research teams and the combined production of social media materials by young people. Our intention was that by thinking across the circumstances presented by each city, rather than treat each city as a comparison of the other, we might generate insights into how communities, civil society and governments might construct security and inclusion for young people without reproducing the exclusionary dynamics that have shaped their development.

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Within these cities, the research focused on communities that have been historically and disproportionately affected by chronic violence: Mitchells Plain in Cape Town, and Comunas 1 (Popular) and 2 (Santa Cruz) in Medellín. These sites were selected because they represent globally relevant

2 South Africa and Colombia are among the most unequal countries in the world by income inequality. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/10/where-in-the-world-are-wealth-and-income-most-unequal

cases of urban violence linked to youth vulnerability, where high rates of youth recruitment into gangs are tied to comparable structural drivers, including historical patterns of exclusion, spatial marginalisation, and socio-economic inequality.

Mitchells Plain is a township located approximately 32 kilometres from Cape Town's central business district. It was established in the 1970s by the apartheid government as a site of racialised rehousing for people classified as "coloured" under apartheid's racial segregation system, a designation used to justify forced removal and spatial exclusion (Jacobs, 2022; Ommundsen Pessoa, 2023). Today, Mitchells Plain is home to a large, predominantly young population, and continues to bear the structural legacy of apartheid spatial planning: high unemployment, limited access to services and opportunity, and sustained exposure to gang activity and community violence[3]. Fourteen gangs are known to operate in Mitchells Plain, competing over territory and illicit economies including drug trafficking, with resulting cycles of retaliatory violence that have a direct and sustained impact on young people's safety and daily lives (see GI-TOC, 2026).[4]



Figure 3: Mitchells Plain

Comunas 1 (Popular) and 2 (Santa Cruz) are located in the northeastern hillside area of Medellín. Like Mitchells Plain, these comunas consolidated in the 1970s, in this case through informal settlement by people displaced by rural violence elsewhere in Colombia and have since been shaped by high levels of poverty and the entrenchment of criminal and other armed groups. These communities have a notably young population relative to the rest of the city and continue to face acute structural disadvantage: markedly higher poverty and food insecurity than the city average and substantial barriers to postsecondary education and formal employment (Butti, 2027). Gangs linked to criminal structures such as "Los Triana" and the "Envigado Office" regulate legal and illicit economies including drug trafficking and extortion through violence and coercion (Doyle, 2019).



Figure 4: Comunas 1 and 2 in the northeast of Medellín

Despite these serious challenges, both sets of communities remain, for the people who live there, places of belonging, identity, and social organisation, a point that is central to how this research approached them: not as sites to be studied for their problems alone, but as communities whose young residents have direct, valuable knowledge of the dynamics that affect their own security and wellbeing.

3 Areas within Mitchells Palin such as Beacon Valley, Tafelsig, Eastridge, Westridge, and Portland have experienced particularly intense levels of gang-related violence in recent years.
4 Nearly 500 gang-related deaths have been recorded in the Western Cape since April 2025, according to police reports presented in Parliament. In Mitchells Plain alone, there were 50 shootings reported in a single week in September 2025.

	Mitchells Plain (Cape Town)	Comunas 1 & 2 (Medellín)
Population	Mitchells Plain: 446,493 residents, Cape Town: approx. 4.77 million (Census 2022),	Comunas 1 and 2: 259,800 people residents (total); 142,071 (Comuna 1) and 117,729 (Comuna 2), Metropolitan Area (Valle del Aburrá) approx. 4 million (DANE, 2025),
Share of youth population	43-45% of residents under 24 years old and 18-20% aged 15-24,	26.2% (Comuna 1) and 25.3% (Comuna 2) aged 14 to 28 years old,
Quality of life indicators	83.4% of households live in formal dwellings,	Comuna 1 has highest multidimensional poverty index in city (24.05%), while Comuna 2 ranks second (22.98%); figures more than double city average (11.54%), Comuna 1 (Popular) has lowest quality of life index in city (35.09 pts); Comuna 2 (Santa Cruz) has third lowest (37.88 pts),

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the communities

A Participatory Process to Co-produce Youth-Centred Knowledge

In both cities, the research used a participatory, action-oriented design combining qualitative and quantitative methods with systems thinking to co-produce grounded knowledge with young people from the selected neighbourhoods. The approach combined youth-led research processes with broader stakeholder engagement and prioritised the co-production to ensure that young people were not simply research subjects but active participants.[5]

The study was carried out in three interconnected phases. Each phase combined theme-focused participatory workshops and participatory systems mapping with young people from the communities, semi-structured interviews with young people, civil society representatives, and local officials, and an online survey co-designed with young people. In total, 545 young people aged 16 to 29 took part in the research across both cities (280 in Medellín, 265 in Cape Town), the majority (60 percent) aged 16 to 21. In both cities, the research engaged young people with no prior contact with gangs and at low risk of involvement in youth violence (for example, those in school or active in youth groups, and no contact with the criminal justice system), as well as young people at higher risk of gang involvement (in Medellín, beneficiaries of violence and recruitment prevention programmes; in Cape Town, young people out of school and unemployed in neighbourhoods with a strong gang presence). Active gang members did not participate directly in research activities, though interviews were conducted with key informants who work closely with them.

5 We adopt the term co-production deliberately but not uncritically (see Marzi et al., 2026). The initial research proposal was developed by Abello, Botha, Jones, Maya and Muñoz, and subsequently refined with input from Valentine and Zapata. The degrees of co-production varied through the project. The survey was designed with young people from the communities, who suggested questions, tone, use of terms, and structure. The communication strategies and activities involved and were often led by young people, as with Colectivo PatiAmarilla and Voices of the Plain, who took up initiatives of their own enabled by the research team.

Research Method	Medellín Activities & Participants	Cape Town Activities & Participants
Participatory workshops with young people	14 Workshops and 36 participants	8 Workshops and 120 participants
Semi-structured interviews with young people and key stakeholders	13	39
Survey	244 respondents mainly from Comunas 1, 2, 3, and 4	143 respondents from Mitchells Plain
Stakeholder engagement events	2 events	2 workshops
Creative activities co-designed by youth collectives for community reflection	Instagram live, Poster campaign, newspaper article	Podcast 'Voices of the Plain: Unravelling the Truth' (3 episodes), webinar, newspaper articles, and community Mural
Combined communication materials	YouTube video (1), Instagram Carousels in English & Spanish (2), Reels(4)	

Table 2. Summary of Research Activities and Participants by City



Figure 5: Instagram Carousel produced in collaboration with Con-Vivamos with input from young people in both cities

Phase I. Understanding Young People's Experiences and Uncovering Mechanisms of Urban Violence

The first phase focused on building a holistic understanding of young people's daily experiences and how they navigate their urban environments, to identify the processes that contribute to their vulnerability to violence and gang influence. In both cities, this phase explored the same two guiding questions: what context-specific factors and processes make young people vulnerable to violence and the influence of criminal groups, and what impact existing local security strategies have on that vulnerability, including how young people and other actors perceive current interventions and programmes.

To answer these questions, the team ran nine participatory workshops with young people across both cities (four in Medellín, five in Cape Town), combining facilitated group discussions on lived

experience with mapping exercises in which participants identified key risk factors and how they interconnect, including unemployment, violence, mental health, peer influence, technology-related insecurity, and trust in institutions. The workshops used the *human security framework* to explore how insecurity affects young people's lives, livelihoods, and rights across nine dimensions: personal, ontological, community, health, economic, food, environmental, political, and technological.[6] Across both cities, the workshops moved from an initial mapping of insecurities to the creation of a systemic map of the factors involved, to the identification of leverage points for change, and finally to consolidating reflections and preliminary analysis. Together, they generated in-depth insight into the multidimensional nature of insecurity facing young people and helped shape the key thematic areas used throughout the rest of the research.



Figure 6: Young community researcher with participants in Medellín



Figure 7: Participatory youth workshop in Medellín



Figure 8: Participatory systems mapping with youth in Mitchells Plain



Figure 9: Participatory youth workshop in Mitchells Plain

These workshops were carried out in parallel with focus groups and semi-structured interviews with civil society actors and local officials responsible for security and youth policy. In Medellín, the team conducted 13 interviews. Five were with municipal and government officials working on youth policy and urban security, including officials leading city-level youth programmes for at-risk populations and advisors on youth and peacebuilding. Two further interviews were held with young people with markedly different profiles and relationships to the research themes, one involved in formal youth representation structures, and another with direct experience of gang dynamics and of state programmes for youth affected by violence. The remaining six interviews were with leaders of civil society organisations with a strong track record in community and youth-focused work and human

6 The research tested the framework developed by Security4Peace that includes two additional dimensions to those proposed by the UNDP (1994) report on human security (also UNDP, 2013).

rights advocacy. In Cape Town, the team conducted 32 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders working in Mitchells Plain, including social workers, journalists, neighbourhood watch members, NGO representatives, community leaders, academics working on youth and violence, government representatives (including police oversight), ward councillors, religious leaders, and young people in and out of school. These interviews focused on perceptions of youth vulnerability and violence, institutional responses to insecurity, gaps in current strategies, and young people's lived experience. A further stakeholder workshop brought together local NGOs, civil society organisations, community actors, and youth practitioners to explore stakeholder perspectives on youth challenges and on violence and insecurity in the community.



Figure 10: First stakeholder workshop in Mitchells Plain

Across both cities, these methods were selected to explore how structural, community, and individual-level factors shape young people's experiences, on the understanding that urban violence and insecurity is not a self-contained or isolated phenomenon but the outcome of complex, dynamic systems. One of the outcomes of this phase was the recognition that little data exists on how young people experience insecurity in their communities in this systemic and multidimensional way, a gap that was itself identified as an obstacle to recognising and addressing the problem. Through this initial phase, a group of participants in each city also expressed interest in collaborating further with the research team to explore the dynamics of insecurity affecting young people in more depth. In Medellín, these participants belonged to an existing youth group working on popular communication processes (*Colectivo PatiAmarilla*). In Cape Town, the group consolidated over the course of the research process itself, and its members decided to organise more systematically around their shared interest in making the realities of young people in their community visible (*Voices of the Plain*).

Phase II. Co-producing Youth-based Data on Security

Building on the findings from Phase I, this phase focused on developing a survey to generate more data on the problems that participants had identified in the first phase as affecting young people in their communities. The aim was to capture not only the prevalence of these experiences of insecurity, but also the protective factors already available to young people in their communities and their coping-strategies, and the proposals young people themselves had for addressing insecurity.

The resulting survey was co-produced by the research team and young people. In each city, participatory workshops were held to design and test survey questions using the findings from Phase I, and later to analyse the data the survey produced. Young people also led the application of the survey itself (online and paper-based), which was carried out over two weeks in February and March 2026: 244 young people from the northeastern zone of Medellín, primarily from Comunas 1 and 2, and 143 young people residing in Mitchells Plain.



Figure 11: Designing the survey in Medellín



Figure 12: Completing the survey in Cape Town

The survey data, while not drawn from a statistically representative sample and not intended to support population-level claims on its own, offered a useful illustration of how widely shared these concerns were among the young people who took part, and reinforced the findings that emerged in the qualitative research. Applying the survey also helped the teams and young participants reflect on what data already existed in their cities on youth experiences of insecurity, while also surfacing gaps and weaknesses in how such data is collected, and how young people themselves feel about the way public institutions use it, a concern that was particularly pronounced in Medellín. The resulting datasets complemented the qualitative findings from Phase I validated patterns identified in the participatory workshops and provided an evidence base for subsequent stakeholder engagement and policy discussions.

Phase III. Co-production of Policy Recommendations and Dissemination of Findings

In this final phase, the team and young participants focused on analysing the results of the research process to co-produce actionable proposals aimed at improving local responses to violence and insecurity, while reducing youth vulnerability and safeguarding young people's rights and wellbeing. This phase had two main strands: first, deepening the analysis of measures that could reduce young people's vulnerability while protecting their rights and wellbeing; and second, co-producing a communications strategy with young people to disseminate the project's findings at local and international scale.

Developing these communication products involved a process of analysing the findings together with young people and thinking through how to translate them into tools suited to different audiences. The aim was to make the knowledge produced through the research accessible not only to academic researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, but also to young people, residents of their communities, civil society organisations, and youth workers running programmes with young people in situations of vulnerability.

The communications strategy was structured in two strands: 1) sets of products for local dissemination in each city, led by collaborating youth collectives; 2) a set of binational communication products and activities aimed at validating and sharing the findings of the dialogue between the two cities. These were co-developed by the research team and the youth collectives. In their locally led communication strategies, young people prioritised social media outputs. In Cape Town, *Voices of the Plain* collective decided to create an Instagram account, produce a podcast with several episodes, and a webinar to explore some of the themes that had emerged from the research in more depth. In Medellín, the local strategy included a poster campaign designed to spark curiosity and conversation in the community, displayed

across the neighbourhood to prompt discussion on the issues raised by the research, alongside an Instagram Live session followed by a community conversation exploring the process's findings with a wider group of young people from the city.



Figure 13: Colectivo PatiAmarilla with posters (with Natalia Maya & Julian Zapata)



Figure 14: Recording Voices of the Plain podcast, Mitchells Plain

In both cities, the process of co-producing recommendations included validation and dissemination activities with key stakeholders, in which young people played a leading role in presenting and discussing the findings alongside the research team. In Medellín, these included a "Círculo de la Palabra" (discussion circle) titled *"¿Y la inseguridad qué? Alternativas juveniles y comunitarias*" (And What About Insecurity? Youth and Community Alternatives), held as part of the city's Community Leadership Week with the participation of young people and social leaders from the northeastern zone of the city; and an academic dialogue with youth experts titled "*Repensando la seguridad con las juventudes* (Rethinking Security with Young People: Ideas for Transforming Frameworks and Action), which opened the research findings to wider discussion. In Cape Town, these activities included a stakeholder dissemination workshop with representatives of civil society organisations, and meetings with leaders of the Mitchells Plain Community Safety Forum.[7]

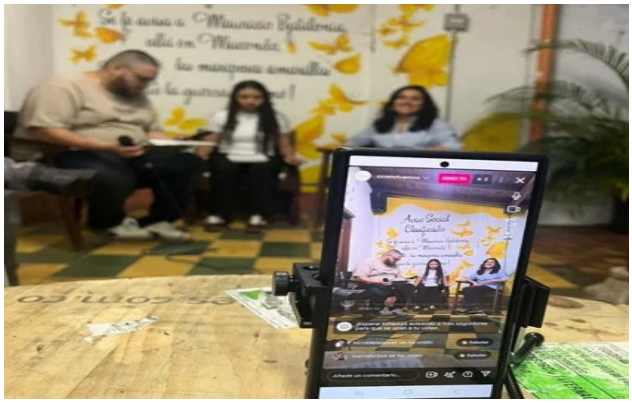


Figure 15: Discussion and livestream '¿Y la inseguridad qué? Alternativas juveniles y comunitarias' (And What About Insecurity? Youth and Community Alternatives), hosted by Con-Vivamos



Figure 16: Presentation and discussion of survey results at workshop 'Repensando la seguridad con las juventudes' hosted by the Universidad de Antioquia

7 The Mitchells Plain Safety and Development Forum was launched in March 2026 by the Western Cape government. It consists of initiatives to support families experiencing substance abuse, promotion youth development interventions and community clubs during school holidays.

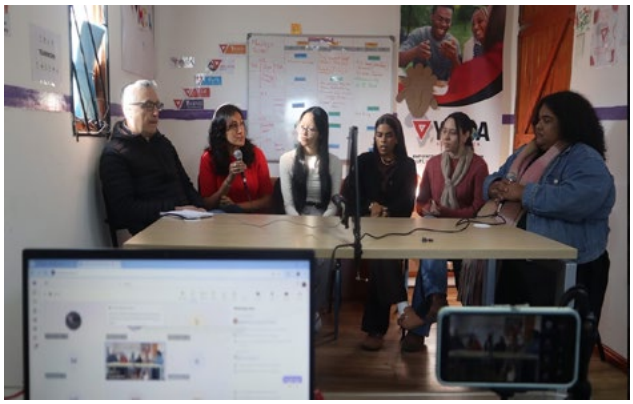


Figure 17: Webinar with Voices of the Plain hosted by YMCA Cape Flats



Figure 18: Stakeholder meeting with civil society organisations in Mitchells Plain



NEWS/PUZZLES Plainsman

Understanding youth perspectives on violence

MARSHA BOTHMA
OWN CORRESPONDENT

Young people from Mitchell's Plain are calling for a broader understanding of violence, saying the challenges they face every day extend beyond crime and physical harm to include unemployment, poor mental health, inequality and a lack of opportunities.

Their views emerged through the research project Addressing Urban Violence and Improving Local Security Strategies through Participatory Research with Young People in Colombia and South Africa, led by the London School of Economics (LSE) and funded by the International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD).

The project brought together researchers Ashton Botha and Kwonne Valentine with young people from Beacon Valley in Mitchell's Plain to explore how violence affects their lives and what can be done to improve safety and wellbeing in their communities.

Research findings were recently presented during a stakeholder workshop attended by young people, community leaders, and other role players.

The workshop focused on discussing the findings and identifying practical actions that could improve the lives of young people.

"This work is important because we are not just reshaping how we view violence.

It's not only something physical, but also structural and social. To make Mitchell's Plain safer for young people, we need integrated and holistic approaches," said Botha.

She said the project recognised young people as experts in their own lives and created a platform for them to contribute to discussions about their communities and futures.

Young people have never been silent, but silenced, and this project gave them a platform to show that," she said.

According to the research, five key areas emerged as priorities for young people in Mitchell's Plain economic security, mental health and wellbeing, belonging and participation, community protection and care, and relationships with civil society and government institutions.

Several proposals emerged from the stakeholder engagements, including expanding mental health support, creating mentorship programmes, improving training opportunities for teachers, parents, and caregivers and ensuring young people are included in community decision-making processes.

A community survey co-created by young people found that unemployment remains one of the biggest concerns facing youth.

More than 92% of respondents identified unemployment as a major issue, while over 83% highlighted gang violence.

Participants also raised concerns about substance abuse, limited resources in schools, and ongoing mental health struggles, said Botha.

The findings suggest that violence is often experienced through social and structural conditions such as poverty, exclusion, and a lack of opportunities, rather than only through physical acts of harm.

Researchers also found that while support services may exist, many young people struggle to access them because of limited information, resource constraints, and a lack of trust in institutions.

Rencia Galant from Beacon Valley said the project gave her hope that change is possible.

"Voices of the Plain helped young people feel heard, understood, and supported, while reminding them that they are not alone."Nieuwen, Ryklief, from Westridge, part of the research project, said being part of the research gave young people an opportunity to speak openly about their experiences.

"As a young person, this research was important because it gave us a voice to speak about what we've experienced in our communities and to hear others' experiences and challenges, too.

"What was important to me was the fact that the project gave us, the youth, the ability to be heard and to be involved in discussions and decision-making processes for our futures," she said.

Ryklief said understanding the realities facing young people is essential to creating meaningful support and opportunities and building a better future for communities across Mitchell's Plain. Follow Plainsman on TikTok @the.plain59 and Instagram @voicesoftheplain

Figure 19: Newspaper article in The Plainsman with focus on Voices of the Plain and the research

Findings: A New Perspective on the Forces Pulling Youth Toward Violence, and on Security Responses That Could Protect Them

In both cities, the problem of violence has been persistently associated with young people from historically marginalised communities, who are frequently cast in the public imagination as the source of the criminality. Youth from communities like Comunas 1 and 2 in Medellín and Mitchells Plain in Cape Town, face this stigmatisation on three fronts simultaneously: because of their age, their race, and because of where they live. Being young and living in certain territories is enough to generate suspicion, invite control, or produce a direct association with conflict and violence.[8] These dynamics create both symbolic and physical barriers that deny young people recognition as rights-holders and as agents of change.

Research has already identified multiple factors that increase the risk of urban violence involving young people. Researchers have documented relationships between inequality and violence (Currie, 1997, 2016; Fajnzylber et al., 2002; Stewart, 2008; Vanderschueren, 1996; Wilkinson, 2004), and have shown how precarious labour conditions, unemployment, economic deprivation, the growth of illegal economies, and marginalisation can act as triggers of urban violence (McIlwaine and Moser, 2003; Mitton and Abdullah, 2021; Moser and Holland, 1997). Others have pointed to governance failures, whether from punitive state responses, neoliberal policy choices, or the state's incapacity to deliver on a broader social contract, as factors that amplify violence (Muggah, 2014). Work on gang formation has similarly emphasised contextual drivers such as poverty and marginalisation (Sánchez Jankowski, 2003).

At the community and individual level, research mostly carried out in the Global North has shown that social disorganisation and collective efficacy can

8 In Medellín for example news headlines about young people from the northeastern comunas cast them as *fleteros,* a derogatory slang term associated with violent street robbery robberies, symbolically on motorbikes.

either increase or reduce violence and crime at the neighbourhood level (Morenoff et al., 2001; Sampson and Raudenbush, 1997, 2004), and that individuals' involvement in violence is strongly associated with their exposure to risk factors at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Krug et al., 2002). Criminologists and behavioural scientists have highlighted adverse childhood experiences, including exposure to domestic abuse, substance misuse, bullying, and other traumatic experiences, alongside communication, learning, or health difficulties, weak parental supervision, and disengagement from school, as key risk factors that increase the likelihood an individual will go on to perpetrate violence (Averdijk et al., 2016; Lyon and Welsh, 2017; Ross and Arsenault, 2018). A further strand of research on gangs has explored group dynamics such as identity formation (Jensen, 2008; Stephenson, 2015) and socialised forms of masculinity (Baird, 2024). Importantly, while only a minority of young people ever join a gang, the effect of gang presence can be far-reaching: they deepen the stigmatisation of entire neighbourhoods, attract heavier policing and security responses, constrain economic investment, and undermine institutions and the relationship between the state and society.

This literature on urban violence, although sophisticated in identifying risk factors, tends to ask **what makes a young person vulnerable to becoming involved in criminal or violent dynamics, rather than asking what it means and produces for young people themselves to be exposed to compounding risks, harms, and forms of insecurity.** The central emphasis of our approach is understand violence and its risk factors from young people's own vantage point, which is essential both for addressing these dynamics effectively, and because the social discourses that surround these problems tend to stigmatise young people rather than illuminate their experience.

The second emphasis of this research is to question, through youth-centred evidence, the simplification of policy narratives on urban violence. Despite the specialised literature's recognition of the complex, multi-causal nature of youth involvement in violence, public discourse and policy responses in both cities frequently disregard this complexity in favour of simpler, criminality-centred narratives: that the problem lies in competition over illicit economies, changes in criminal group leadership, communities' lack of control over youth, or shifts in values that make young people more likely to join criminal groups, with solutions narrowly framed around punitive policing, incarcerating criminals or competing with armed groups to prevent them from recruiting young people.[9] These responses target real problems, but they are insufficient on their own. This research speaks to these gaps by offering a youth-centred understanding of the insecurity and violence affecting young people in these neighbourhoods, and what the evidence tells us about existing security discourses, policy frameworks, and responses in their cities, and how they could be improved.

Beyond Risk Factors: A Systemic Understanding of Youth Vulnerability to Violence and Criminal Groups

Our research began by seeking young people's perspective on the key question set out in the project: how do they experience violence and insecurity in their daily lives. This starting point proved valuable for two reasons. First, it allowed us to recognise the multiplicity of forms of violence and insecurity young people navigate day to day, forms that rarely appear together in a single account. Second, it revealed a far broader understanding of what (in)security means to those living it than is typically captured in either academic or policy discussions, one that requires reframing how conversations, policies, and responses around urban security are constructed.

9 President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the deployment of units from South African National Defence Force to the Cape Flats at his state of the union address in February 2026. At time of our visit in June military units were visible at some road junctions.

In terms of direct exposure to violence, the research shows that a substantial number of young people experienced several forms of violence simultaneously rather than as a single, isolated incident. The results of the survey are indicative. In Mitchells Plain, 70 of the 128 young people surveyed (54.7 percent) reported experiencing at least one form of violence over the past year, and among them, 28.6 percent reported experiencing two or more different forms at same time. In Medellín, a smaller share of the 216 young people surveyed, 65 in total (30.1 percent), reported experiencing any form of violence, but among that group, 29.2 percent likewise reported experiencing multiple forms at once. Despite the difference in overall exposure between the two cities, the near-identical proportion of affected young people facing compounding violence in both contexts underscores that for a significant number of young people, violence is rarely a single, contained event, but a combination of harms that has a massive impact on their lives.

Alongside this exposure, young people in both cities described having little reliable access to help or protection. In Mitchells Plain, 49 percent reported being affected said they had not been able to seek help from any institution or organisation. Of those who did seek help, 34 percent turned to the police, despite the fact that the majority of young people we spoke with in the workshops, interviews, and through the survey (59 percent of respondents) told us they had very low or no trust in the police, the very institution most commonly turned to in the absence of other options.

Despite this range of individual risks, the research also showed that these forms of violence are not the only, or even the most pressing, problems generating worry and anxiety among young people. Young people experience direct violence simultaneously with a broader, compounding set of phenomena that generate deep, multidimensional insecurity. As explained below, young people are exposed to economic problems and community, institutional

Form of violence experienced in the last 12 months	Mitchells Plain (percentage of survey respondents)	Comunas 1, 2, 3, and 4, (percentage of survey respondents)
Threats	13%	4%
Violence at home	12%	4%
Street attacks or assaults	16%	7%
Sexual harassment or sexual violence	9%	13%
Cyberbullying	6%	4%
Extortion	2%	7%
Workplace mistreatment		4%
Abuse by police	3%	4%
Violence at school	9%	1%
Caught in crossfire	9%	
Forced displacement	2%	1%

Table 3. Forms of Direct Violence Affecting Young People in Selected Communities

and family dynamics that function as interlocking structures of risk and threat, in what Abello Colak (2023) has called "systems of human insecurity". This concept refers to a set of factors, actors and processes whose interaction produces intersecting and mutually reinforcing threats to people's lives, livelihoods and dignity, as well as limiting their capacity to access or develop mechanisms of protection from those threats. Young people, faced with limited agency and voice, are especially vulnerable to being immersed in such systems that reproduces endangerment to their lives, dignity, livelihoods, and sense of possibility. Understanding the working of these systems, rather than isolated risk factors, is key to understanding what young people are experiencing, as well as why, and young people become vulnerable to the influence of criminal groups and gangs. The proposal emerging from our research is that a systems perspective is needed to capture the multiple, overlapping factors, contexts, and dynamics that shape young people's daily reality, experiences and decisions.

Systemic Dynamics of Vulnerability Mapped with Young People

With the young people we co-produced two systemic maps that reveal the type of factors shaping their daily experience. Strikingly, in both maps, economic precarity (unemployment, informal or unstable income, the high cost of living) sits closely linked to family strain and breakdown, weak or eroding trust in police and other institutions, and a cluster of mental health harms, including anxiety, low self-esteem, and the sense that young people's emotions are dismissed or invalidated by the adults around them. Both maps also give real weight to identity, belonging, and recognition, showing how the erosion of community cohesion, stigmatisation, and a lack of youth-led spaces or initiatives feed directly into young people's vulnerability, alongside more visible drivers such as gang territorial control, extortion, and the presence of armed actors. The consistency of this pattern across two very different urban and national contexts

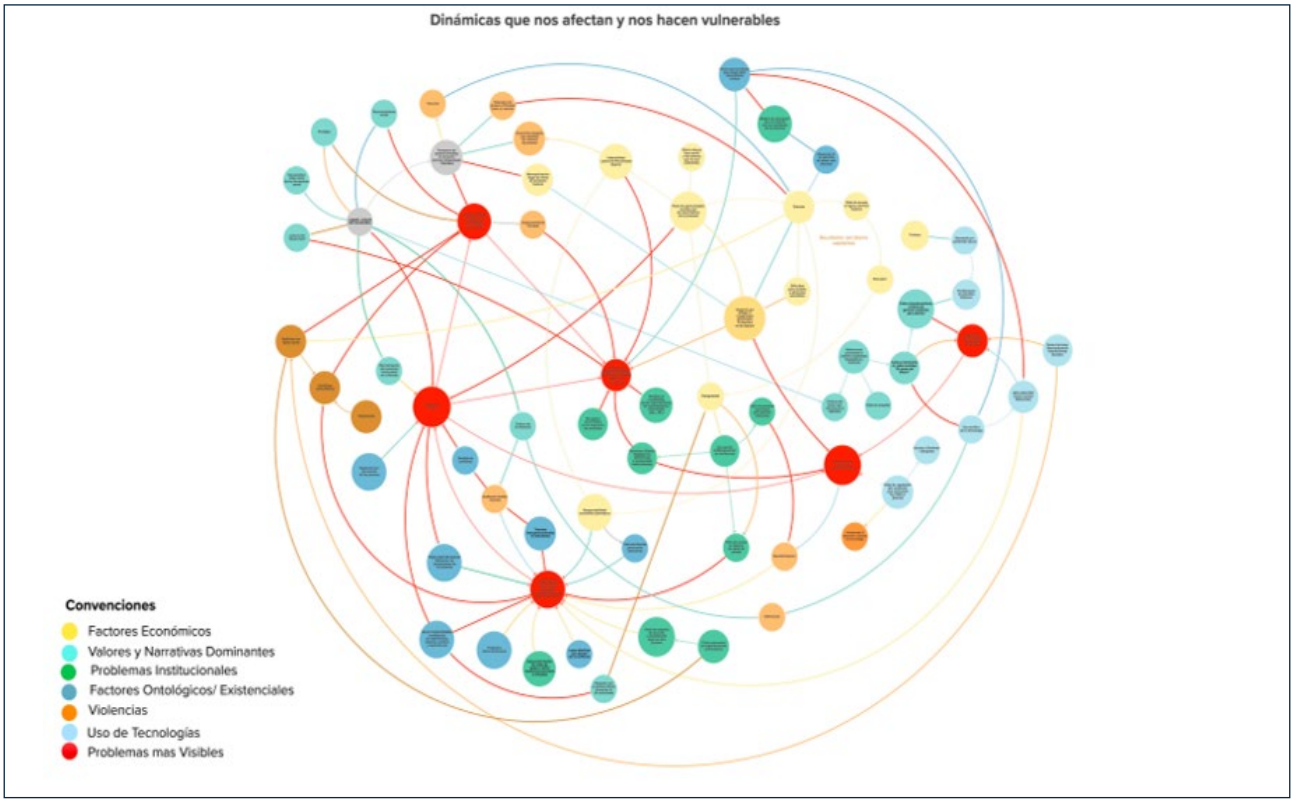


Diagram 1: System of Human Insecurity affecting youth in Comunas 1 Popular and 2 Santa Cruz, Medellín

suggests that what makes young people vulnerable to violence and criminal groups is not primarily local or cultural in origin, but a structural pattern that repeats wherever economic exclusion, weak institutions, and the erosion of recognition and belonging converge.

Key Interconneted Factors Driving Youth Vulnerability

Within the systems of human insecurity mapped with young people, economic insecurity emerged as a central source of vulnerability, one that reaches into nearly every other dimension of young people's lives. Combined with family, community, and institutional factors, it becomes a key node within the wider system of insecurity, a node that reinforces threats to mental health and, in turn, produces forms of ontological insecurity for young people, an interconnection this section unpacks in detail below.

When asked what worried them most, what actually generates insecurity and concern in their daily lives, young people in Medellín did not point first to the presence or territorial control of armed actors, nor to organised crime. They pointed instead to the lack of opportunity (65.4 percent), unemployment (58.4 percent), and mental health and the lack of spaces to be heard (33.6 percent).

The picture in Cape Town is similar in structure, if different in emphasis. Young people from Mitchells Plain are preoccupied by the violence currently affecting their neighbourhoods, besieged by shootings and carrying the trauma of violent attacks on the street, at home, at school, in online spaces, and through sexual violence. But unemployment and poverty weigh on them just as heavily, in the survey for example, 93 percent identified unemployment and lack of job opportunities as their top concern, ahead of gangs (83 percent), drugs (74 percent), corruption (50 percent), poverty (39 percent), and a lack of government services and weak institutions (31 percent).

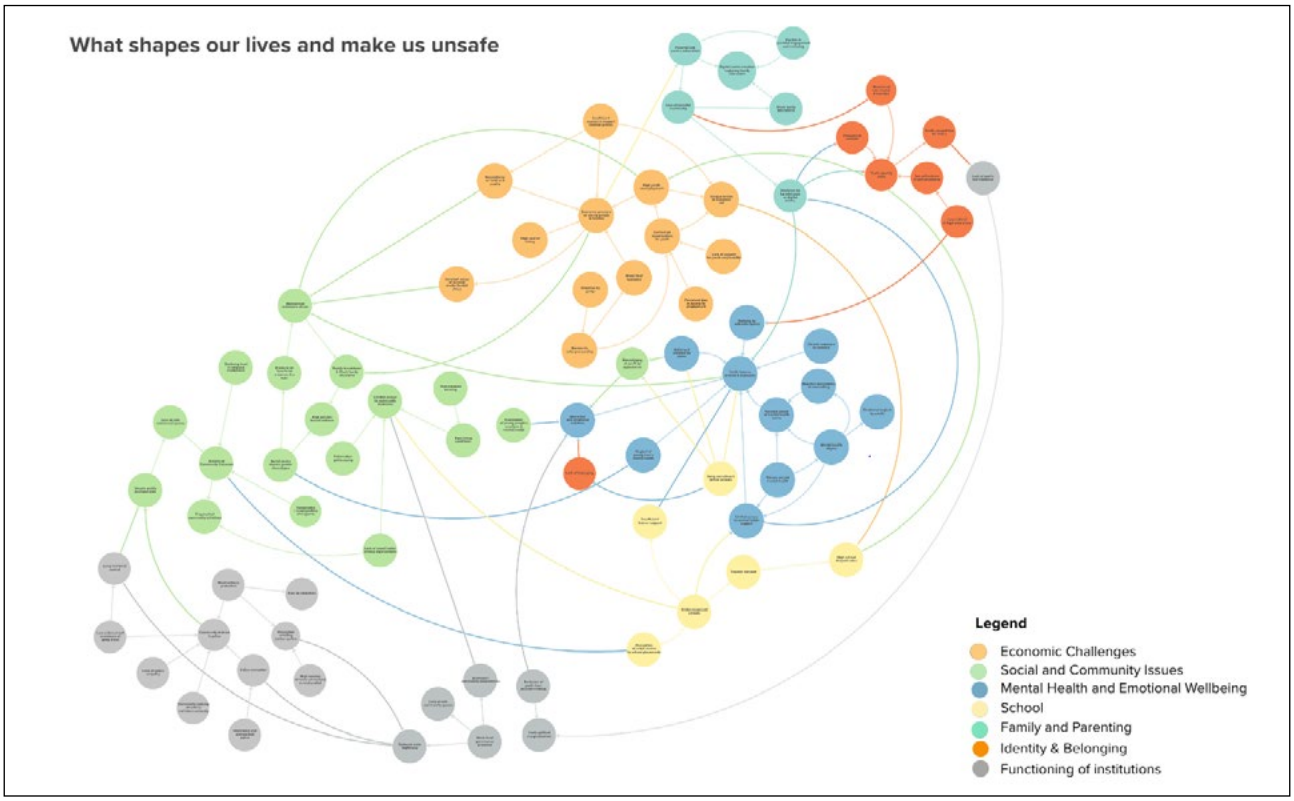


Diagram 2: System of Human Insecurity affecting youth in Mitchells Plain, Cape Town

In neither city was criminality or armed violence for young people the singular, isolated driver of insecurity that public narratives so often assume. In Medellín, where organised armed groups exercise tight, visible territorial control, young people still name economic exclusion and mental health, not the armed groups themselves, as what worries them most. In Cape Town, where gangs are a top concern, unemployment sits at the very top of the list, ahead of every other issue, including gangs, drugs, and corruption.

Economic Insecurity

Across the participatory workshops, interviews, and focus groups conducted in both cities, economic insecurity was the dimension young people highlighted most consistently when asked what shapes their daily experience of insecurity. In workshop discussions and systemic mapping exercises in both Medellín and Cape Town, young people described unemployment and precarious or informal work as a source of constant pressure, compounded by the responsibility many felt to help support families who did not have enough. These economic pressures shaped how young people described their mental health and their sense of possibility for the future, and even their perception of criminal actors and gangs, who were at times portrayed as occasional benefactors rather than simply as threats. Economic insecurity, in other words, appears structural in both cities, and goes well beyond fear of crime or physical violence to include economic uncertainty, family financial stress, and anxiety about the stability of their households.

The survey data offers a useful illustration of how widely shared these concerns were among the young people and reinforces what emerged consistently in the qualitative research. In Medellín, of the 244 young people who completed the survey, 53.6 percent said they worried "a lot" about their family's economic situation over the past six months and a further 36.9 percent said they worried "a little". When asked whether household income was sufficient to cover basic needs, 54.1 percent said it was only sometimes enough, and a further 15.5 percent said it was never enough, meaning nearly seven in ten respondents reported insufficient household income at least some of the time.

In Cape Town, the pattern was much the same. Among the 143 young people from Mitchells Plain who completed the survey, 36 percent described themselves as currently unemployed, and 7 percent had dropped out of school or university, half of them because of family problems and 30 percent because of a lack of financial resources. Aditionally, 29 percent said their household income did not cover basic needs over the past year, and a further 52 percent said it was only sometimes sufficient, while 19 percent said debt affects their mental health directly, echoes of the same concerns stakeholders and young people had already raised in interviews and participatory workshops.

Mental Health Under Strain

In these contexts, economic insecurity acts as a leverage point rather than simply one problem among several, reaching into other dimensions of young people's wellbeing, particularly mental health, drug use, and vulnerability to recruitment by criminal groups. Across workshops and interviews in both cities, young people repeatedly described mental health strain, substance use, and the pull of criminal groups not as separate problems, but as connected to underlying economic pressure.

In Medellín, mental health surfaced repeatedly in workshops and interviews as both a driver and a consequence of the broader system of insecurity young people are immersed in, closely tied to the economic pressures described above and, to substance use and the influence of social media. The survey illustrates the weight of this connection: more than half of respondents (56.8 percent) reported difficulty processing their emotions, and although joy was the single most frequently reported emotion over the past year (75.2 percent), it was followed closely by sadness (65.4 percent), anxiety (59.3 percent), frustration (53.3 percent), fear (47.7 percent), and anger (45.8

percent). This finding is broadly consistent with data from *Medellín Cómo Vamos*, used by the city's Youth Secretariat, which similarly found that 22 percent of young people describe their mental health as regular and 5 percent as poor. The connection to substance use and social media that young people described in workshops is likewise borne out in the survey: 77.6 percent of young people we surveyed said youth use drugs to escape reality, followed by peer influence (58.4 percent) and social pressure or fear of exclusion (57 percent), and three in four respondents said social media influences their decisions and behaviour "a lot." Young people also named mental health and the lack of spaces to be heard as the third most pressing concern affecting them (33.6 percent), after lack of opportunity and unemployment, with problematic drug use close behind (22.4 percent). And when asked directly what leads young people into illegal activity or criminal structures, 71.4 percent pointed to economic motives, 57.1 percent to lack of opportunity, and 33.8 percent to a violent family environment, a direct convergence between the economic and mental health pressures young people described qualitatively and their own account, in the survey, of what draws their peers toward criminal groups.

The picture emerging from workshops and interviews in Cape Town is similarly concerning. Many young people are living with extreme levels of violence that generate permanent anxiety, hypervigilance, daily fear, and accumulated trauma. In Mitchells Plain, 53 percent of young people say they are struggling with their mental health, with anxiety, frustration, depression, and sadness being the most commonly reported emotions experienced in the past six months. The coping mechanisms they rely on are: music and dance (18 percent), friends (12 percent), and hobbies (12 percent). The fact that they turn to informal, peer-driven strategies points to a significant gap in accessible formal support.

This compounding pressure unfolds, in both cities, against a backdrop that young people described consistently in interviews and workshops: feeling unheard, judged, unsupported, and left to navigate these dynamics largely on their own. The survey reflects the scale of this gap. In Mitchells Plain, 53 percent of young people said they were not aware of any services available in their community, whether cultural, health-related, recreational, or educational, and the barriers most commonly cited for not accessing services that do exist were lack of information, cost, and limited resources, accessibility, and trust. Only 28 percent of young people were currently involved in a structured activity, while a further 40 percent said they would like to participate but lacked access. On institutions specifically, 37 percent reported no trust in the police, and 17 percent identified distrust itself, not merely lack of availability, as a barrier to accessing services in the first place. Taken together, these findings suggest that economic precarity in Mitchells Plain does not simply coexist with weak institutional support, the two reinforce each other, leaving young people to manage compounding economic and emotional pressure with very little reliable help.

Ontological Insecurity

Beneath the economic and mental health pressures already described sits a form of insecurity that young people in both cities named consistently, but that rarely appears in policy discussions. This insecurity is characterised by a sense of not being free to be oneself, nor being recognised, respected, valued, and lacking tangible possibilities to shape one's own future. For the young people engaged with the project, this lack of basic trust in the world and of their position within it, a doubt about their social relevance, proximate to what Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) call "mattering", amounts to a sense of ontological insecurity (Abello Colak, 2023).[10] For young people, this insecurity is shaped by the way adults and institutions treat them, but also by their ability to study, work, build relationships, and imagine a life worth working toward, and by whether they feel that who they are is treated with respect. Such

10 Abello Colak (2023) has proposed ontological security as one of the nine key dimensions of human security. The term is preferred to existential security, the experience or feeling of anxiety over lack of freedom, sense of purpose and of isolation, as it captures a more profound condition of uncertainty over one's identity and future, and of the world.

experiences are especially profound among young people living in conditions of social, economic and cultural marginalisation as well as physical violence (see Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022).

What young people described, above all, was the experience of not being listened to or being judged. As one young person from Mitchells Plain put it, "it's not that we're lazy, they just don't understand us. Adults judge us without really seeing our daily struggles: we carry fear, trauma, lack of support, and the absence of real opportunities." Another described the same dismissal more bluntly: "no one takes us seriously when we talk. It's like, 'whatever, you're too young to understand real problems.'" When adults stop listening, young people in both cities told us, they eventually stop trying to speak.

This extends to how young people feel unable to think about their own futures. It is not that young people do not want to plan ahead, but that the economic dynamics of their daily lives make long-term planning feel like a luxury they cannot afford. As one expert interviewed in Medellín observed, "no kid buys into the idea of the future anymore, they all have an idea more focused on the present, on what can be done today." Young people described doing everything they are told they should do, studying, training, pushing themselves, and still not seeing real opportunities to build the life they imagine. Being able to imagine that today's effort will build tomorrow's wellbeing is itself, our research suggests, a form of security, one that is being systematically withheld from many young people in both cities.

This same dynamic shapes how young people experience their own identity and the judgement of others. Young people in Medellín and Cape Town converged, independently, on a shared exhaustion with the fact that simply being themselves feels dangerous. Security, in this sense, also means feeling free to express one's identity, not only individually, but as part of belonging to a community.

The consequences of ontological insecurity are not abstract. They affect mental health, undermine a sense of belonging, and leave young people vulnerable to those who are prepared to exploit that isolation. The following quote form one of the young participants in Medellin illustrates:

> *'a young person can enter an armed group looking for affiliation, recognition, and some economic opportunity, and if the armed group offers that, the young person stays there; but if institutions, community, and the city itself offer that same affiliation, recognition, opportunity, and people to admire and to care for, young people are just as likely to be there instead.'*

A youth resident of Mitchells Plain described a related pattern with substance use and small government grants:

> *'young people sometimes spend grant money on drugs because it is the one thing they look forward to, their only real sense of belonging, a dynamic that is not really about consumption at all, but about loneliness, isolation, and a lack of purpose.'*

In these contexts, dangerous spaces can become the only ones where young people feel recognised, even when that recognition comes at real risk to themselves. As in Medellín, young people in Mitchells Plain pointed to escaping reality as the dominant explanation for drug use among their peers, and across both cities, young people described difficult financial situations and lack of opportunity, difficult or violent family circumstances, the influence of friends, problematic drug consumption, and a search for protection and belonging as the main reasons why young people join gangs.

In both cities, young people described informal spaces, '*el parche*' in Medellín, friendship circles in Mitchells Plain, as the only spaces where they can let off steam, ask for help, and simply feel heard and accepted as they are. Social organisations, collectives, and community spaces, in Medellín, and religious organisations, in Cape Town, also allow small groups of young people to feel seen, heard, valued, and accompanied, however, these struggle to sustain their initiatives with limited funding and surpassed by the complexity of the context and problems youth from these communities are facing.

This compounding forms of insecurity, economic precarity, unmet mental health needs, and the absence of recognition and belonging, has a direct and measurable bearing on how young people evaluate the offers they receive from criminal groups. In Medellín, our survey found that roughly one in four young people surveyed (24 percent) had received at least one offer to take part in illicit or risky activity. The most common offers reported involved webcam work and sexual work, predominantly forms of sexual exploitation. This finding not only confirms the risks facing young men, who have traditionally been the population most associated with criminal dynamics, but it also brings into view less visible forms of exploitation affecting young women specifically, through digital and sexual exploitation rather than the more familiar routes into armed groups or drug economies. Read alongside everything described above, this suggests that when young people lack recognition, stability, and a credible path toward the future through legitimate means, the offer of belonging, purpose, or income from criminal or exploitative actors, however dangerous, can come to look less like a threat and more like an option actually available to them.

Rethinking Security Discourses and Practices from a Youth Perspective

Security strategies in both cities need to address the specific forms of vulnerability young people are facing, including ontological insecurity, yet neither city currently has a security policy that takes into account youth experiences and perspectives, even though security responses have a highly differentiated impact on young people that adult-designed policy rarely accounts for. The increased presence of police and military in high-crime areas, for instance, is often read by adults as reassuring, but young people in both cities described it as generating fear rather than protection, experienced as discipline, control, and punishment rather than safety, regardless of whether they had any involvement in the dynamics being policed.

In both contexts, young people described deeply conflictive relationships with authorities: in Medellín, the lasting effects of the violent state response to the 2019 Paro Nacional and the 2021 Estallido Social protest movements; in Cape Town, frequent, hostile, and sometimes violent everyday encounters with law enforcement. Both reinforced the same conclusion among young people, that the state is not there to protect them, and both eroded institutional trust.

This erosion of trust matters enormously given how central these institutions are to young people's daily lives. In Medellín, distrust in state institutions, including justice houses, police, the army, and the mayor's office, was one of the most significant findings of the research: 69 percent of young people reported 'little' trust in these institutions, 21 percent reported 'none'. Workshops and focus groups repeatedly linked this distrust to the human rights violations of the 2019 and 2021 protest movements.

When young people perceive the state as both incapable of protecting their rights and, at times, a source of aggression against them, this delegitimises state institutions. In Medellín, this plays in favour of the powerful criminal organisations and gangs present in these communities, which young people increasingly look to as a more reliable source of authority and order in daily life.

In Cape Town, when asked which institutions they had the most daily contact with, young people named the police more than any other, precisely the institution in which trust was lowest. In other words, the most visible arm of the state is also the one young people trust least. This is exactly why security strategies need a youth perspective, not strategies that target young people as a risk group, but strategies that recognise the specific situations affecting young people, women, and other groups, and that build in deliberate, intentional protective action for them.



Figure 20: Soldiers on patrol in Mitchells Plain (note the ambulance behind)

The Current Landscape of Security Reponses and their Contrasting Priorities

Official security strategies and young people's own priorities point in different directions. Medellín's *Plan Integral de Seguridad y Convivencia Ciudadana* (Comprehensive Security and Coexistence Plans, PISC) for both 2020–2023 and 2024–2027 consistently rank violence against young people around fifth among stated priorities, behind organised crime, gender-based violence, homicide, and forced intra-urban displacement, despite the city having had a dedicated Youth Secretariat since 2012. Young people's own account of what worries them, gathered through the youth-led survey (214 respondents), tells a different story: lack of opportunity (65 percent) and unemployment (58 percent) dominate, followed by mental health and the lack of spaces to be heard (34 percent), problematic drug use (22 percent), and the inability to continue studying (21 percent). Armed actors and organised crime, the centrepiece of local government planning, rank sixth (16.8 percent), behind even corruption and state abandonment (16 percent) and the culture of "easy money" (15 percent). Homicide barely registers as a threat, consistent with the sustained homicide reduction Medellín has experienced since June 2022.

In interviews, young people and other actors repeatedly pushed back on the idea that 'young people are the future', arguing that everyday threats to their security cannot wait, since imagining the future serves little purpose if the most urgent conditions of daily life remain unresolved. Asked directly what security means to them, in an open-ended survey question, 161 young people in Medellín converged on a handful of words: tranquillity (40), protection (22), fear (21), trust (12), care (11), peace (11), danger (10), street (9), risk (9), and freedom (9). Their definitions cluster into four registers: an emotional, subjective sense of calm; a protective, preventive sense of being shielded from harm; a spatial, everyday sense tied to being able to move through the street, the neighbourhood, and the home without fear; and a social, relational sense built on trust, care, and not being judged. Underlying all four is an understanding of security that extends well beyond crime control to include rights, material conditions, and the possibility of a dignified life project, precisely the human security framing this research set out to test.

In Cape Town, at the provincial level, in 2025 the Western Cape Safety Plan proposed three pillars for action: violence prevention (schools, youth development, substance abuse), safe and secure communities and infrastructure (surveillance, urban design, hotspot policing), and effective, responsive, and trusted law enforcement (municipal law enforcement, Law Enforcement Advancement Programme (LEAP) officers, SAPS oversight). In practice, however, committee members reviewing the plan challenged its balance, which was regarded as 'heavily enforcement-driven' (Committee Meeting, 2025) despite its stated commitment to addressing root causes. This emphasis on enforcement was echoed at the national level in February 2026, when President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the deployment of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) alongside the police to combat gang violence in the Western Cape, sending soldiers back into communities including Mitchells Plain in a repeat of a similar deployment first used in 2017.

Taking on board warnings that military deployments can only achieve tactical relief rather than a sustainable response to the underlying drivers of violence in these communities, Mitchells Plain was named as a pilot site for another initiative: the Western Cape Government's new Safety Development Plan for

Mitchells Plain (roughly R9 million) which establishes a Safety Development Forum and five priority 'safe zones', as well as holiday programmes for children. These programmes are aimed at children aged 5 to 13, leaving the 14 to 29 age group, the population most affected by the vulnerabilities this research documents, largely outside these interventions. A trauma-informed approach has also been introduced, but its consistency depends on the three-day training that organisations selected for the initiative's implementation received. Traditional law enforcement, hotspot policing and SANDF deployment, remains central to this plan, alongside active neighbourhood watch structures and NGOs such as the Safer Communities Foundation, working on youth development, substance abuse prevention, and psychosocial support.

In this policy landscape four limitations can be highlighted across both cities: interventions still rest on narrow, crime-centred understandings of security rather than the economic, social, and emotional dimensions this research documents; responses remain adult-centric, positioning young people as at-risk objects of intervention rather than agents with their own insight; heavy reliance on militarised and policing approaches undermines the trust needed for long-term cooperation; and existing services remain unevenly accessible, hampered by lack of information, resource constraints, and institutional distrust, especially in the Cape Town context.

Programmes and Strategies targeting Youth

The research documented a longer history of programmes and institutional capacity to deliver interventions targeting youth at risk in Medellín. This section explores the city's flagship youth programme, *Parceros,* which targets young people at risk of being drawn into organised crime by focusing on building individual competencies, and the national government's programme, *Jóvenes en Paz,* which similarly combines an entrepreneurship component with some effort to strengthen the social fabric of participants' neighbourhoods.

Run by Medellín's municipal government and created in 2017, the Parceros programme targets children, adolescents, and young people aged 10 to 28 who are exposed to vulnerability factors such as school dropout, substance use, extreme poverty, or forced displacement, or who have already had some contact with criminal structures or the adolescent justice system. The programme has shifted focus and institutional home more than once. Under Federico Gutiérrez's first administration it was administered by the Secretariat of Security and Coexistence, a placement that drew sustained criticism from civil society organisations working with young people, who described it as too policing-oriented and stigmatising. Under Daniel Quintero's administration it moved to the Secretariat of Non-Violence, where its director at the time reoriented the programme's language and added a community-based component, explicitly trying to avoid framing young people as inherently dangerous. Since 2024, under Gutiérrez's second term, it has returned to the Secretariat of Security and Coexistence. It is now working with five distinct target groups, ranging from children identified as being drawn toward gangs or paid sexual activity, to young people already in contact with the justice system, to women and girls who are victims of sexual exploitation, to young people leaving custodial sentences. In 2024, the programme reported reaching 2,447 young people, of whom 1,807 graduated. Encouragingly, Parceros has begun measuring outcomes against control groups: internal pre- and post-test results reported meaningful improvements in resilience and reductions in self-reported depression and anxiety among participants, though independent verification of these results was not available to this research.

Jóvenes en Paz is the national government's parallel initiative, created under the broader Total Peace policy and directed at young people aged 14 to 28 living in poverty and exposed to violence or criminality. Its design is more expansive on paper than Parceros, structured around five components: education, community co-responsibility, entrepreneurship, integral health care with an emphasis on mental health,

and conditional cash transfers tied to participation in training and community activities. The cash transfer component proved the most contested element of the programme, criticised publicly by Medellín's mayor as effectively 'paying young people not to kill', while several of the practitioners and former staff we interviewed argued the real problem was not the transfers themselves but the absence of a broader strategy to make that support sustainable rather than simply pocket money. In practice, the programme has been undermined by interruptions in payments to both beneficiaries and the young community organisers who ran it, driven by changes in the operating entity and weak coordination between national and municipal government, a fragmentation one interviewee described as making it 'impossible' to reconcile competing figures on how many young people the programme was actually meant to reach in the city.

Across both programmes, young people and stakeholders alike raised a consistent set of concerns. Trust remains the most basic obstacle: in the same survey that captured young people's priorities, 89 percent reported little or no trust in state institutions, including the police, army, justice houses, and the mayor's office, meaning both programmes operate on a population that starts from a position of scepticism toward what is being offered. Both programmes were also praised, by the same interviewees who raised these concerns, for their willingness to work with young people at the sharper edge of risk, including those with active justice system involvement, rather than only those easiest to reach. But both were criticised by young participants for retaining, in different ways, an individualising and adult-centric lens: Parceros for a coaching-style, cognitive-behavioural approach that risks detaching young people's vulnerability from the structural conditions producing it, and Jóvenes en Paz for a cash-transfer design that, however well intentioned, could not survive its own implementation failures. A further mayor obstacle identified was the absence of political will to coordinate between the national and municipal levels, with each government treating its own youth programme as a political banner rather than working to align the two.

Taken together, these two flagship initiatives illustrate that although valuable elements exist in Medellín's institutional response to youth vulnerability, such as some efforts at evaluation and a willingness to work with genuinely high-risk young people, the overall landscape remains fragmented, short-term, and prone to oscillating between stigmatisation and paternalism, rather than consolidating into a sustained and care-based policy grounded on youth perspectives and agency which tackles more structural challenges young people are facing.

Proposals to Improve Responses to Insecurity and Violence from a Youth Perspective

The research showed that security responses for young people living in the most affected communities of Medellín and Cape Town should mean care and protection, not surveillance and control, and should guarantee young people the right to live without fear and to pursue meaningful life projects. The common thread running through proposals in both cities was that **young people are asking for opportunity and accompaniment, not assistance**. Moving away from fragmented, short-term, crime-focused interventions toward **holistic, relationship-based approaches that treat young people as active contributors to their own safety,** and that integrate economic, social, emotional, and institutional responses rather than addressing each in isolation, requires action in both cities across six areas.

Family and community environments.
Interventions need to move beyond supporting only the young people identified as at risk, to include their families and neighbourhoods. Programmes that target individuals alone, while disregarding the challenges their families are experiencing, have limited effect when the family and community environment young people return to remains unsupported. This support is not only a matter of parenting skills, but of recognising the economic, social, and trauma-related strain that families in these contexts experience daily.

On community support specifically, young people were direct about what is needed: as one put it, what matters is keeping the streets safe for young people, and having "a safe chilling space in my community with proper supervision." The most consistently repeated youth request was for community support: structured programmes, activities, and accompanied spaces at the community level.

Enabling Education. Schools and other educational settings should be resourced to become places where young people can find support and guidance in navigating difficult and adverse environments, not only sites of instruction. This means strengthening schools with staff trained in trauma-informed educational practice and revising curricula to better reflect young people's actual realities, including digital literacy, practical skills for economic autonomy, communication and self-advocacy skills, and grounding in civic participation and critical awareness of their own circumstances. Cape Town's findings reinforce this from another angle: young people there asked specifically for practical, applied learning, including basic financial literacy (taxes, credit, investment), preparation for life after school, university access that does not depend on grades alone, and free education.

Dignifying Employment. Employment dominates young people's concerns, but their request goes well beyond having a job to survive. Young people asked for employment and training opportunities that recognise their full range of capacities and the diversity of their interests, including economic pathways built around vocational training, microgrants, and structured routes into work. They also asked for practical access: real vacancy listings, work experience, professional networks, and career guidance, since, as one young person put it, "the challenge isn't always education, it's what happens after."

Institutional capacity and policing. Local government agencies need strengthened capacity to embed a genuine youth perspective across their policies, strategies, and initiatives, one that accounts for young people's specific realities. This is especially urgent for police, given how much daily contact young people have with them: promoting a culture of civic respect and care toward residents, and especially toward young people, could be facilitated by community organisations creating spaces for intergenerational dialogue, helping build trust between young people and police while confronting the stigma young people from these neighbourhoods carry. This means facilitating authentic dialogue between young people and police and establishing clear mutual responsibilities. It also means gender-responsive planning that respects LGBTQ+ communities, security strategies that recognise and protect the diversity of young people's identities.

Youth participation. In both cities, existing participation spaces remain largely tokenistic, and where security specifically is concerned, they are close to non-existent: young people are almost entirely absent from public conversations on security challenges. Young people need real support to develop the skills to articulate their own voice, and strengthening community organisations is essential to build that capacity, alongside creating genuine space within official structures, such as Community Police Forums in Cape Town. Ultimately, young people should be empowered to participate directly in public conversations about security initiatives, since this is what will bring their perspectives and needs to light.

Substance use prevention. Programmes addressing problematic substance use need to be designed without stigmatising young people, and to create accessible, voluntary pathways to care grounded in dignity and respect for young people's right to a healthy life.

Beyond these shared priorities, conversations with young people and key stakeholders in each city surfaced more specific, context-particular areas for intervention[11].

Key priorities in Medellín. Against the backdrop of the substantial reduction in homicides the city has

11 For a more detailed analysis of proposals please refer to the Policy Brief and other outputs available at: https://www.lse.ac.uk/geography-and-environment/research/addressing-urban-violence-through-participatory-research-with-youth-in-colombia-and-south-africa

experienced, young people's concerns have shifted toward mental health, the experience of being young in a city defined by competitiveness, the lack of opportunity to become who they want to be rather than only what the market demands, concern over the exploitation young people face, including forms of exploitation linked to the growth of sexual tourism in the city, and problematic drug use. This shift in priorities points toward four concrete routes for decision-making: building and strengthening safe, caring community spaces through art, sport, culture, and popular communication, accessible to young people; strengthening community and neighbourhood organisations and processes to ensure these efforts are sustained, built around organisations with a trusted, ongoing local presence; expanding access to mental health support while also reinforcing peer support, helping groups of young people form, sustain, and become youth-led support networks in their own right; and expanding genuine employment and training opportunities that recognise young people's full range of capacities and interests, extending well beyond the sectors and activities favoured by the business community driving the city's neoliberal model of urban development.

Key priorities in Cape Town. Conversations in Cape Town converged on five priority areas: strengthening belonging and participation, through peer networks, intergenerational dialogue, and genuine inclusion in decision-making; addressing economic insecurity, through free and flexible training aligned with young people's own interests, mentorship, and curriculum reform; reinforcing social and community support, including forums for open dialogue on issues such as gender-based violence; expanding mental health support, reducing stigma, strengthening support at the family level, and recognising rest and recreation as a right; and improving institutional functioning, through better coordination across government and civil society and a shift toward respectful, care-based policing.

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