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PRAXIS PAPER ON URBAN VIOLENCE

#24

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

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

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FOREWORD

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

We have worked through a concerted effort to combine top-of-the-line research with intervention at the level of communities, state and non-state institutions, and the global human rights world. This report on ‘Crisis and Survival’ in an informal settlement in Cape Town comes out of such a research effort in the research programme entitled CorTo or the Corruption and Torture Research Programme. It explores exactly how ordinary people in a range of urban centers around the world – in Nairobi, Dhaka, Colombo, Kinshasa, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Monrovia – cope with violence, including from the state. The main focus in the research is on the violent exchange relations between police and policed. Part of the research has been carried out with local partners in the respective urban centers. One product of this partnership, combining research and intervention, is the book **Corruption and Torture: Violent Exchange and the Policing of the Urban Poor**.

This report follows on from that research project. It tells the story of survival and suffering in one volatile and violent informal settlement in Cape Town. As the report suggests, understanding this place and how people survive will allow us to glimpse one possible, fairly dystopian, urban future as the poor and the marginalized struggle to survive in the most unequal city in the most unequal country on the planet. However, the report – researched and written with local activists and civil society organizations – also offers hope in the form of potential solidarity and rather impressive social capital among many of the residents. In any case, it is imperative for the world of human rights to recognize the importance of understanding violence and survival in such places if it is to remain relevant to the large majority of the world’s population.

Henrik Rønsbo and Steffen Jensen

DIGNITY – Danish Institute against Torture

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2018, a team of community workers and volunteers carried out a research project in Overcome Heights together with researchers from Denmark, South Africa and the US-based NGO Community Healing Network. Overcome Heights is an informal settlement situated next to the M5 highway north of Muizenberg in the South Peninsula of greater Cape Town. The research aimed to understand how different groups in Overcome Heights survive a crisis-filled everyday life and how these struggles relate to historical and social structures of oppression and marginalization in Cape Town.

The research was designed as a collaborative project where community workers and researchers agreed on how to collect and analyse the data. While researchers brought methodological skills, community workers brought crucial contextual and intimate knowledge about the area. This combination of methodological skills and local knowledge and experience was brought to bear on all phases of the project, from design through to data collection, quality control and the analysis phase. Building on previous quantitative research by some of the team members in 2009, the research used qualitative methods in the form of diary studies, interviews and observations over a period of three months to better understand some of the everyday struggles of residents in Overcome Heights.

Main research findings

The research from 2009 had illustrated that people in Vrygrond – the wider area in which Overcome Heights is located – dealt with violence and crisis in different ways depending on their language groups, respectively Afrikaans, isiXhosa and non-South African languages. These language groups coincided uneasily with the categories of coloured, black South African and migrants from countries north of South Africa's border. However, these should not be understood as essential and fixed identities. They are the product of social and historical structures of oppression, as are those in Overcome Heights. Furthermore, residents in Overcome Heights share similar life conditions of poverty, marginalization and violence that affect everyone, regardless of race categorizations. Hence, **while there are differences between the three social groups, there are as many shared problems and expressions of solidarity across the groups.**

- **Hunger and poverty:** While there are differences in levels of poverty depending on grants, work and social connections, almost all research participants experienced periods of hunger and lack of resources during the research. Where the next meal will come from is not always evident.
- **Physical and psychological distress:** All research participants enumerated high levels of physical and psychological problems. Whether it was due to hard labour, drug and alcohol abuse or extreme forms of anxiety about the near and far future, it took its toll on participants' ability to engage with their worlds. For many participants the stress is accumulated from the past.

- **Invisibility and lack of recognition:** While residents in informal settlements are often very visible, perceived as a huge problem for the development of the city and often fought by the Cape Town City Council, they are also invisible. Again, there are differences depending on the part of Overcome Heights people stay in, their nationality and how long they have been in Cape Town. However, most of the research participants struggle to get recognized by the state in the form of necessary social grants, work permits, proof of address, position on housing waiting lists, access to water and appropriate services.
- **Ongoing crisis:** Residents in Overcome are faced with a range of crisis situations. During the period between February and May 2018, residents had to cope with sinkholes, outbreaks of a gang war, looting of Somali shops and shops in the neighbouring mall, shack fires and street protests with burning tires in the streets. While these crises affected different groups and areas differently, the crises created an ongoing sense of emergency that had become part of everyday life rather than extraordinary events.
- **Violence:** All research participants were affected by physical violence. The different forms of violence included gang violence, violent crime and domestic and communal violence, as well as xenophobic attacks. The impact of violence depended on people's position within the social world of Overcome Heights. Hence, migrants for instance had to deal with constant predatory activities, especially from coloured and black youths, in or out of gangs, who perceived migrants as both vulnerable and likely to possess cash. However, all participants were faced with the problem of staying safe.
- **Youth and drugs:** All participants worried deeply about the prevalence of drugs, and particularly about their effects on the youth. For some research participants, especially the migrants, this was an issue of personal danger. For others, especially mothers, it was a concern that often entered into family relations as they worried deeply about their own children. While the strategies may differ, the concern was the same – how to keep boys out of gangs, girls away from teenage pregnancy, and all of them out of drugs and in schools.

The benefits of action research

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

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

1. INTRODUCING OVERCOME HEIGHTS

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

During our fieldwork between January and May 2018, Overcome Heights was affected by sinkholes, shack fires, service delivery protests, looting and gang wars. However, it is also a settlement that attracts large numbers of incoming residents with its promises of land and its relative proximity to urban centres of economic activity. Overcome Heights is inhabited mainly by three groups: coloureds, black South Africans of mainly Xhosa descent, and migrants from other African countries, many of them from Malawi. We use these categories with great caution, as the first two at least are remnants of apartheid's racial classification system, which designated essentialized identities.¹ These categories came to structure how life could be lived. Life in post-apartheid Cape Town has undermined the categories to a certain extent, something to which the highly diverse settlement of Overcome Heights bears testimony. In many ways, all residents face the same structural marginalization as informal settlers. However, while they occupy the same territory and space, they stake different claims to post-apartheid Cape Town and harbour different aspirations. These claims and aspirations have deep historical roots in the divided history of South Africa. The claims also point to a number of competing futures of what the city could become. In this light, it is fair to say that what happens in Overcome Heights is both an expression of and structuring for what the Mother City can and will be. Hence, exploring how different groups – together and separately – attempt to survive and build a future is imperative for understanding Overcome Heights; further, the study provides a critical lens for understanding what kind of city Cape Town may become. This research report asks: 'How do different groups survive in Overcome Heights? How are these struggles related and how do they animate the emergence of post-apartheid Cape Town?'

1 Especially the term 'coloured' has been embroiled in constant and decades-long debates. While we agree with the criticisms launched against apartheid usages and categories, we also note that despite this criticism, people consistently refer to themselves as coloureds. At the same time, the coloured group is far from unitary and it makes little sense to collapse middle-class and township residents. For some of the debates see Jensen, 2008; Erasmus, 2017; Adhikari, 2005.

These questions emerge from and are animated by an engagement with Overcome Heights that spans a decade. In 2009, we carried out a research project in what was then called Vrygrond, of which Overcome Heights was a part (Jensen, Naidoo and Polatin, 2011).² The rationale for the 2009 research was to explore the ramifications of community activism in relation to the xenophobic attacks of 2008. The 2009 research project was primarily quantitative in scope followed by focus groups and key informant interviews. The conclusions of that study are worth repeating here. Firstly, while the research did not identify or engage with any direct, primary victims of the xenophobic attacks, the attacks were important both for those who knew people attacked and for the rest of the community. Secondly, there were many examples of courageous civil action to protect foreign nationals by individuals and by collective action. Lastly, the research revealed a number of important insights regarding ordinary life in Vrygrond that transcended, but also animated, the events in 2008. Among these insights, the research identified important and statistically significant differences in how people, divided along lines of language, coped with crisis.

The overall victimization was extraordinarily high, with 50% of all households having experienced one or more violent incidents in the two years preceding the study. Further, when the study measured categories of social capital and trust, by asking about how research participants addressed issues affecting individuals and households negatively, distinct groups based on language emerged. Afrikaans speakers – mapping on to the coloured community – relied heavily on family and kinship relations. IsiXhosa speakers relied less on kin than coloureds and more on formal organizations. Foreign nationals relied more on churches – and this group had little trust in their neighbours or expectations of anything good from them, and they were over-represented when it came to being victims of crime and violence. They perceived South Africans in highly derogatory terms with strong racial undertones – much like South Africans have been known to talk about foreign nationals. In sum, the research revealed Vrygrond as a fractured, poor and violent community, yet also one that was capable of extraordinary acts of bravery and generosity. Hence, while it seemed that the residents had different kinds of resources at their disposal and pursued different courses of action in situations of crisis depending on their background, they also shared place and marginalization. Our hope is that this report may contribute to strengthen these sources of solidarity rather than add to the continued divisions shaped by strong sociological and historical structures.

The present research picks up where the previous project ended almost a decade ago. Based on the results of the quantitative study we formed hypotheses that we wanted to explore with qualitative methods. 1) The three groups use different tactics for survival and thus engage with urban, political space differently based on their different historical claims and future aspirations but 2) they also share urban spaces in ways that are both contentious and intimate.

As we show in the following, the hypotheses we started out with were in many ways confirmed during our fieldwork in January-May 2018, but sometimes in surprising ways. For instance, while migrants are scared of and preyed upon by powerful, criminal groups, often coloured, these groups at times also defend the migrants

2 Today Vrygrond has been singled out as one housing area adjacent to Overcome Heights that, at the time of the previous research, had only slowly begun to grow and acquire an individual identity.

against younger men's predatory attacks. Another example is that differentiations in access to services and possibilities are structured by race and time of arrival in Overcome Heights, as well as political affiliations, legal processes and strategies of protest. Easy conclusions – for instance those that focus only on essentialist notions of race – will be defeated by the complexity of social and political life in Overcome Heights, and therefore they must be examined in ways that are qualitative and explorative.

The objectives of this report are partly scholarly, as we explore how people from different sociological backgrounds survive in the same, contested urban space. But this knowledge is crucial beyond the academic world, and as such, the report also feeds into political processes. Overcome Heights makes its presence known with its thousands of sprawling shacks, strong community activists and the dramas of everyday life. However, in many ways it is oddly invisible in the political processes of the city and municipal government. Like many other informal settlements, Overcome Heights struggles to be 'counted' as part of the city. Nobody knows how many people live there, and consequently service provision in the area is starkly under-resourced. Furthermore, few accounts outside Overcome Heights reveal how people survive and the dilemmas they face except as stereotypical accounts of violence and poverty.³ Hence, the purpose of the report is to make visible lives that are often overlooked and to provide residents and activists in Overcome Heights with evidence-based accounts of their struggles. The report has, as we describe below, been conceived and data has been collected together with local organizations and resident community activists of different backgrounds. We have attempted to develop this research project in consultation and collaboration with the people of Overcome Heights. We have two sets of hopes. First, we hope the report may inspire discussions between municipal authorities and local organizations to the benefit of both the city and its people. Secondly, we hope that residents may develop common agendas for the future rather than staying caught in the divisions of the past. More unites people in Overcome Heights than divides them!

The report is structured in seven chapters. Immediately after the Introduction, we briefly describe the methodology and design of the research project. In Chapter Three, we describe the history of Overcome Heights and its emergence within the larger urban economy by following our informants into the area. In Chapter Four, we explore important themes of lives and survival in Overcome Heights within each of the three groups in relation to body and mind, family, neighbours, livelihoods, violence, land and authorities. In Chapter Five we follow three people – one coloured, one black South African and one Malawian – to better understand how individual struggle feeds into communal conflict. Chapter Six traces events as they unfolded in Overcome Heights over a period of five months in early 2018. While the list may be read as indications of crisis, we must understand this as part of a continuous and chronic crisis rather than a series of one-off crises – as ordinary life rather than spectacular events. In the final chapter, we draw together the conclusions of the study and propose central dilemmas of Overcome Heights that need to be part of broader, political discussions of the future of post-apartheid Cape Town.

3 For instance, in mid-May the car of the local councillor was torched and she was momentarily held captive. This fed into media representations of the violence and disorder of Overcome and surrounding areas.

To deal with the temporal and spatial differences, we have formulated a set of hypotheses based on the first round of research in 2009 that we have explored, if not tested, in the second round of research in 2018. Thus, we do not claim that the second round of research maps directly on to the first. However, the research in 2018 more or less confirms the hypotheses developed based on the 2009 research, at the same time as it develops and deepens the understanding. Further, the time span before the first and second rounds of data collection introduces a temporal dimension through which we are able to explore developments in the area. This particularly concerns the increasing number of people, the densification of the area and the continued and escalating conflicts over local and municipal resources. Hence, with careful methodological reflections about limitations, we are able to explore our hypotheses as well as understand historical changes.⁴

Research design: explorative sequential design

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

1. Overcome Heights is populated by three distinct groups based on claims to the city and aspiration. The three groups comprise coloureds, amaXhosa, and African foreign nationals. The group affiliation informs how they survive and how they engage with the urban space.
2. While the three groups are different and often live separate lives, they share the urban space in both contentious and intimate ways.

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

Methods: diary studies as ethnographic field study

To explore the hypotheses, we have chosen ethnographic fieldwork and so-called diary studies (Jakobsen et al, 2008) as methodological techniques. Diary studies here are a particular version of a field-based case study. A case study usually involves the detailed study of relatively few individuals or items, and in this research project, we followed 12 households' survival and health practices in a context of violence and insecurity over a period of eight weeks. While interviews give indications of how people go about survival, the main drawback is that interviews are representations of what people want to and can tell at a particular point in time. We wanted to understand evolving practices and cases over time. For example, while Elise,⁵ one of our informants, could have told us about her problems with and

4 Drawing on previous research, mainly in coloured townships (e.g. Jensen 2008), we are also able to track and explore some historical changes from before the fall of apartheid. We will draw on this research as it becomes relevant.

5 All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of our informants.

fears in relation to her daughter-in-law, it was only by following the case as it evolved that we were able to appreciate the depth and nature of her worry and how she decided to act on it. Hence, a diary study is a way to systematically follow people over time. In this way it is a particular form of ethnographic fieldwork where the researchers are present and participate in activities (Spradley, 2016).

A central concern for our study was **sampling**. In qualitative research researchers are often too lax in their description of their sampling method. However, the sampling method determines what the researcher can say on the basis of the research. If one asks only women, one can paradoxically not say anything about the relationship between men and women. If one interviews people in a queue to the clinic, one cannot say anything about those who are sick in general, only about those in the queue (Root, 2016). In our research we combined purposive and randomized sampling. Purposive sampling refers to reasoned sampling of specific groups or individuals, whereas randomized sampling aims to avoid all selection bias and ensure that all people in principle have the same chance to be part of the project. After choosing to focus on Overcome Heights, we decided to choose five households from each of the three groups within the area of Overcome Heights (purposive). We then used a computer program to sample households by placing random GPS locations on a map (randomized). We used the latest Google Earth maps for this sampling technique, but as Overcome Heights constantly changes and grows, we had to complement the maps with our own mapping. Further, we divided the overall sample area of Overcome Heights into five subsections, to ensure that the whole area was represented in our study. In cases where a given GPS location was between houses or compounds, or otherwise inaccessible, we used a compass to 1) decide which compound we were interviewing and 2) choose one family within the household (randomized). The choice to focus on the three groups ruled out the possible understanding of other groups that we had not seen during the survey. This means that we cannot say anything about Overcome Heights as such but given that we took pains to randomly select people, we have done away with much of what is called selection bias. We initially recruited 15 households, and during the course of the study four dropped out and another two were recruited, ending with 13 households.

NAME	AGE	GENDER	HOUSEHOLD TYPE	BACKGROUND
Elsie	56	F	Married w family	coloured
Patricia	42	F	Married w family	coloured
Elaine	38	F	Married w family	coloured
Ouma	69	F	Single mother	coloured
Sizwe	55	M	Married w family	Xhosa
Pumla	34	F	Single mother	Xhosa
Christine	46	F	Single mother	Xhosa
Nandi	30	F	Single mother	Xhosa
Missy	48	F	Single mother	Venda
Grace	20	F	Married	Zimbabwe
Mitch	30	M	Married (family in home country)	Malawi
Reason	19	M	Single	Malawi
Hassan	52	M	Married (family in home country)	Somalia

After selecting informants and obtaining informed consent,⁶ each participating household selected their own main contact person, and she or he was given a diary to write in. Diary studies do not depend on people writing long entries. In some of the diaries only a sentence or two had been marked down. The diaries rather served as reminders of what had happened in the household, when fieldworkers came to visit participating households for informal interviews based on the diary entries. The fieldworkers kept their own notes of their conversations, and these notes are as important as the diaries themselves. In the final move, the diary study coordinator (Thanjan) and the senior researchers (Schneidermann and Jensen) debriefed fieldworkers as well. Hence, the full diary consists of diary entries, fieldworkers' notes, debriefings and observations. We combined the diary study with longer

⁶ Researchers spent a long time explaining the project and throughout the project we clarified that people could leave – as some did.

interviews with the main contact persons in participating households, seeking to understand their stories and experiences beyond the two months we followed them. These 'Significant Life Event' interviews were of a more narrative kind, sometimes lasting several hours.

Each step of the study was conducted in a consultative process with community activists in the larger area around Overcome Heights. Our initial contact was through the Community Healing Network NGO chapter based in Seawinds (which had also been part of the first round of research in 2009) and a series of meetings and discussions. Through the NGO, we identified a number of potential local residents from the three groups who might be interested in working with the project as fieldworkers. These were later trained in the diary study method and, due to their intimate knowledge of the area, they were integral to the sampling and mapping of Overcome Heights. The choice to work with local residents is not unproblematic, not least because they are often part of local conflicts. However, the benefits, in our experience (see Buch et al, 2008), far outweigh the problems if the research project is properly monitored and fieldworkers are debriefed regularly. Further, it was crucial to involve residents in the design, implementation and analysis phase of the study, as we wanted the research to be relevant to local concerns in Overcome Heights.

Throughout the research project, we conducted reflexive sessions with the resident fieldworkers around findings and the way forward. This allowed us to adjust methods and the focus of our study as it unfolded. The seven themes identified in Chapter Four were the result of these reflexive sessions and fieldworkers gave important insights into understanding each of them and what they meant. While not perfect as a method of collaboration, this report would not have been possible without it.

3. HISTORY OF OVERCOME HEIGHTS

In this chapter, we present a brief history of Overcome Heights through the life histories of our research participants. While it is possible to identify the emergence of the first settlers in the area, the history of Overcome Heights is also contested by claims about who has more legitimate rights to occupy the land. This means that any history told about Overcome Heights is also a politically situated history. Rather than attempting to produce an objective historical account, we present here a history of Overcome Heights based on the life stories of our research participants as a way to discuss how the place came into being. Using life stories and narratives clearly do not represent the full story of the settlement of Overcome Heights. However, as we randomly sampled our research participants, these accounts highlight other aspects than the histories told by authorities. This analysis constitutes the empirical section of the chapter. It testifies to the existence of the three different groups, but it also illustrates just how complex settlement patterns have been. Hence, in the concluding section, we briefly discuss some themes in the settlement process that we could identify from the life stories. These themes are intimately related to the history of contemporary Cape Town, like the distinction between backyarders and frontyarders, circular migration, and wars and conflict in Africa, each leading to specific mobility and immobility patterns.

A timeline of Overcome Heights

Ouma got off the train from De Aar in the mid-1960s as a young girl, running away from the impoverished Cape hinterlands. In 1971, while working as a domestic worker for and living with families of railway workers, she was told about a place where she could get her own space and build her own home. This was Vrygrond, the then open, bushy area just south of the sand-swept land that would eventually become Overcome Heights. Vrygrond means ‘free land’ in Afrikaans and was referred to as such by the people who had come to live there as squatters after being evicted from their homes after the Group Areas Act. For Ouma it was indeed a free land because no one claimed rent or fees from her as she settled. For complex reasons, Vrygrond had remained largely untouched by the transformations of large squatter camps into equally huge housing projects – what would become the coloured townships on the Cape Flats. Vrygrond had been established in the early 1940s and remained a squatter camp until a post-apartheid housing project got off the ground amid intense community conflicts in 1999-2000. Ouma stayed there until she moved to Overcome Heights around 2010 with her granddaughter, whose mother had moved just north of Seawinds to Lavender Hill, one of the most notorious townships in Cape Town for poverty and gang violence.

Sipho, a man of mixed racial descent, defying neat apartheid categories, also moved to Vrygrond from Lavender Hill in the early 1970s while maintaining bonds with his family in the township, as well as with the illicit social networks he was part of. In his own narrative, Sipho became a community organizer from the mid-1970s, invading land around the Cape Town municipal area. Over the years, the area of Vrygrond was settled in several waves, and the authorities repeatedly sought to move residents to other, more peripheral areas and townships. The resistance was entwined with the anti-apartheid struggle and often led to armed battles between authorities and residents. At the end of apartheid, the new metropolitan municipality began a housing project under the Reconstruction and

Development Programme (RDP) and by 1999-2000 around 1600 low-cost housing units had been built in Vrygrond. Those of Vrygrond's residents who did not qualify for RDP housing were displaced to the sandy area north of the settlement. In the mid-2000s, after a court case compelling the City of Cape Town to accept that it could not get rid of the squatters who had begun occupying the area, Thembi and a small group of community organizers became central in organizing the settlement of Overcome Heights.

The period between 2004 and 2007 represented the major influx of people to Overcome Heights, including the majority of our research participants. Each of these arrivals traces journeys across and into Cape Town. Lester and Elise came from a backyard in Parkwood (north of Lavender Hill). Pumla came with her mother from Site 5 near Fish Hoek, west down the coast. Taliah and Yusuf, married later in life, joined their households from Retreat and Mitchells Plain. Carmen came from Schaapskraal, near Klip Road. Elaine came from Lavender Hill but had lived as a backyarder in Capricorn for some time before she asked permission from Thembi and the other organizers to build a shack in Overcome. Like Ouma decades earlier, most of the people who moved to Overcome Heights learned about the opportunity to 'take the land' and erect a housing structure in Overcome from close friends or family members.

The housing trajectories of residents of Overcome Heights are highly complex. Take Patricia for example: in the early 1990s, aged 17, Patricia moved to Capricorn to live with family members when she fell pregnant by her sister's boyfriend. She raised the child here and met the father of her second child in Capricorn as well. By 2005 Patricia and her sister had made up, and together with a third sister they settled in Overcome Heights. Here Patricia met her current partner, who had himself been a backyarder in Capricorn before becoming one of the organizers of the settlement of Overcome Heights and building his own large shack on the vacant land.

A number of coloured people from the surrounding townships came to Overcome Heights to escape the extreme overcrowding in the small township houses and flats built in the 1960s and 1970s. They were desperately seeking places to call their own, as the formal townships seemed to be bursting at the seams. The living spaces of houses and flats were extended by shacks and wendy houses to accommodate growing families, and backyards were filled with several generations of relatives. Squatting on the vacant land was for many a rare opportunity to claim a private space. Hence, the settlement in Overcome Heights was part of a larger process of informal land settlement, especially from Lavender Hill, but also from surrounding African townships, elsewhere in South Africa and even beyond.

When we did our first round of research in 2009, Vrygrond had grown exponentially from the early 2000s, when only around 4000 people were registered in the area. This figure had grown to almost 40,000 (Jensen, Naidoo and Polatin, 2011). As we were sampling for the 2009 survey, we had to create a new team to accommodate the growth of Overcome Heights, which had not yet made it onto any official maps and registers. Since 2009, the area has primarily densified. This means that all space between houses has been claimed and that most, if not all, yards have been built up to accommodate incoming residents, especially foreign nationals. This is where Mitch, who came from Malawi in 2016, Reason who came in 2017 also from Malawi, and Grace who came from Zimbabwe in 2017, now stay. In Reason's yard, the original inhabitant, a coloured man, has built ten small rooms that he rents out to single, often male, foreign nationals.

Missy came to Overcome Heights in 2011 from Samora Machel settlement near Philippi, where she had been staying for six years. She had moved to Cape Town to escape ethnic violence against the Venda in Gauteng. Nandi, too, moved to Cape Town in search of a better future. After she arrived from the Eastern Cape she moved around for a while with a boyfriend, sometimes staying in Capricorn, before renting a shack on her own in 2017 in Overcome Heights.

Nandi settled in the area known as the Road Reserve. It owed its name to the fact that it had been reserved for an extension of the R300 highway. Much of the later expansion of Overcome Heights took place in the Road Reserve. This area was settled primarily after 2010. This is when Sizwe came to Cape Town from the Eastern Cape. The Road Reserve is a particularly contested area, as the council did not approve any settlement there due to the projected road extension. Hence, compared to the rest of Overcome Heights, there are very few services in the area. Water and sanitation are huge problems. Furthermore, few of the residents have the 'Proof of Address' document that the council issues to people who are on the official waiting list for formal housing. Most of the residents in this area speak isiXhosa. This lends an important ethnic dimension to perceptions around settlement of the Road Reserve as the majority of residents in the main part of Overcome Heights are coloured and, increasingly, foreign nationals.

Understanding settlement patterns

The trajectories described above confirm to a large extent the original hypothesis of the research that there exist three distinct groups – coloureds, black South Africans and African migrants – and that they have distinct experiences of urban settlement and strategies for handling crisis in everyday life. However, there are many complexities to nuance these bald statements. In this section we briefly revisit the trajectories to understand how the three groups had different experiences as well as how lives are interconnected.

The coloured residents of Overcome overwhelmingly see themselves as backyarders. 'Backyarders' is a concept used by people themselves to describe a history of marginalization or internal social hierarchies within the townships. Backyarders never owned houses or had prior rights to occupancy. They most often lived at the mercy of the frontyarders, those whose names were on the legal documents. As families grew, increasing numbers of residents were forced into precarious housing arrangements in backyard shacks or in sleeping arrangements inside houses. These housing arrangements were often conflictual – over noise, behaviour, rent, food, toilets and so on. And backyarders almost invariably lost these conflicts, often resulting in perpetual humiliations and frequent internal displacements. Hence, backyarder lives were less stable. All of our coloured interlocutors had moved several times before ending up in Overcome Heights, where for the first time, they literally occupied the front yard. While life in Overcome Heights in no way meant the end of the struggle, the move inaugurated a new phase in their relations with and claims on Cape Town land.

While there seemed to be a majority of coloured backyarders among the first big wave into Overcome Heights, black South Africans (mostly amaXhosa from the Eastern Cape) followed suit in large numbers. As many plots had already been taken, many people, including our interlocutors, ended up in the Road Reserve. This part was not included in the 2005 court proceedings that had made Overcome Heights a legal reality, and this

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

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

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



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

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

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

TYPES OF RELATIONS	
Relations with authority	The public spheres of social life
Relations with land and property	
Relations of livelihood	
Relations with community	The Intermediate/interpersonal sphere
Relations with household and kin	
Relations with the body	The personal sphere
Relations with the mind	

Relations with Authority

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

central obstacle to gaining access to government services and the legal economy, and the PoA was a frequent topic in conversation with community leaders as well. Conventionally, PoA is the deed to a home, a rental contract or even simply a bill, for instance from the waterworks or DSTV, issued to your name and address. Residents of Overcome Heights, however, have few of these 'proofs', and post is not delivered in the settlement. PoA then needs to be issued by the ward councillor's office, and she often excludes those who rent (see section on land and property). Further, some institutions, like banks and credit institutions do not accept the ward councillors' PoA because they are aware of how transitory its validity could be. This leaves many residents in Overcome in a fix: because of the informal and temporary legal status of their residence, they have no proof of address, and thus cannot make claims to formal institutions and economies. During our study, four of the 13 participating households either reported having attempted to make such claims without proof of address and failed or described how they wanted to do so but did not bother because they knew it was useless without proof of address.

All groups are challenged by this condition of informal housing, but it became meaningful, was interpreted in different ways and consequently elicited different responses from our interlocutors; black South Africans, for instance, who are largely ANC supporters, would see it as part of a discriminatory ploy in a province and city where the ANC is not the ruling party. The difficulties with proof of address highlight how bureaucratic power marginalizes poor residents in Overcome. This barrier in effect denies residents in Overcome Heights rights that residents in formal housing and with ties to the formal economy take for granted, undermining citizenship and leaving the residents to find other ways to make do and make claims to the city.

Relations with local authorities: At the center of organised political movements in Overcome Heights is the Housing Committee, commonly known as the committee – a group of community activists who were among the first residents in the current settlement of the area and who organized with support from the ANC to 'fight for the land'. The committee in 2005 gained the right to use what is today the front section of Overcome Heights from the city and went on to advocate for service delivery of electricity and sanitation in the area. There are attempts to control who settles in the area, but as the population grows, and selling and renting of shacks becomes more common, it becomes more difficult. Present and former members of the committee hold political power in Overcome Heights because of their networks, their shifting positions as liaison officers with community projects and services, and the local council, and they often act as intermediaries for residents to access government services or get into job programs. The participants living in the front part of Overcome Heights had regular contact with committee members and would ask for their help in neighbour disputes, service provisioning, job searches and so on, but those in the Road Reserve reported less frequent contact with committee members.

Several groups have attempted to establish other committees, both as a result of disagreements with the main committee but also in an attempt to represent the political interests of other groups than the original residents of Overcome. One such constellation is the committee of the Road Reserve, an area which, as touched on above, is largely ignored by authorities, and consists mainly of amaXhosa from the east of the country. This committee struggles to advocate for better services in the Road Reserve but has not been able to broker productive relations with other local authorities – or with the residents of the Road Reserve.

Relations to underground authorities: ‘There are no gangsters in our camp, it’s the outsiders.’ Statements like this could be heard from any of the older residents in Overcome Heights. But from the diaries of our participants it became clear that many families are directly or indirectly affected by the underground economy in Cape Town and the groups that run it. Conventionally, gangs in Cape Town are thought of as a phenomenon related to the people categorized as coloured. Some of our participants in the multi-ethnic Overcome echoed these sentiments, as noted by a coloured woman living in the Road Reserve with mainly black South Africans and African foreign nationals: ‘No, there is no shooting here. They [gangs] know that if they come to shoot here, the Africans will kill them.’ These divisions were, however, not always as clean cut, and all the parents in the study worried about what living in an area with gangs and an open drug economy meant for the future of their children. Several of the families in our study, both of amaXhosa and coloured background, were intensely concerned about their sons as they gravitated towards gang culture. Foreign nationals cited ambiguous relationships with gangs as well. They were often harassed and targeted by other residents in the area, some of them gang members, yet also at times found themselves under the protection of gangs.

During our fieldwork the greater area around Overcome Heights was the battleground of a war between two factions of a gang called the Junky Funkies (the JFKs), and several participants reported running for shelter or being confined indoors during shootouts in the area; everyone was affected by and often entangled with the drug economy.

Relations with land and property

Questions of land and property are at the center of national political debates in South Africa, and at the center of local politics in Overcome Heights. During our fieldwork, the National Assembly set in motion a process to amend the constitution so as to further facilitate expropriation of land without compensation amid passionate debates, fears and hopes across the country – and it ignited smouldering frustrations. During the first five months of the year, police in Cape Town were deployed at over 140 protests over land and housing, the most violent protests being about land invasion.⁷ We elaborate on this below.

Informal settlements like Overcome are rife with ambiguous claims to land in everyday life. None of the residents in Overcome Heights own the land, but both their residential histories and their cultural backgrounds condition how they lay claim to the land they live on.

As mentioned above, a court ruling in 2005 legalized the settlement of the front section of the area today known as Overcome Heights. New residents heard from friends or family that there was land available to build on, as long as they brought their own materials. The coloured families in our study had all been part of ‘taking the land’ in 2005-2006 and lived in the front section. Though they had turbulent residential histories, as described above, they saw access to land and to affordable housing as a right that the government should make available to them. The failure of the state to provide for its citizens was the premise of ‘taking the land’.

The black South Africans had more varied stories. One had inherited her shack from her mother, who had been part of taking the land in 2005. Others came later and built their own shacks in the Road Reserve, where the settlement is denser and largely unserved. Christine and Nandi, who had arrived later, rented rooms there, but still, had homes in the Eastern Cape.

All of the foreign nationals in our study rented shacks or rooms and stayed with family. One business owner who had stayed in the area for longer seemed to be relatively secure in his tenure, as he had cultivated positive relations with the committee and the community. Newer arrivals stayed with friends or family, or near them, but still found themselves susceptible to exploitation and extortion by landlords, as we describe below.

The three groups had very different patterns of settlement and made different kinds of claims to land in Overcome Heights. Moving to the informal settlement of Overcome Heights was in itself, for many, a response to a crisis – the need for safe, affordable housing. It was seemingly the best solution, though not necessarily a solution that alleviated the crisis. Three practices of managing relations with the land were fraught with tension. They point to how relations with and claims to land in an informal settlement are negotiated differently by the three groups:

Selling and buying: None of our participants said that they had bought their shack, but community leaders spoke of the sale of shacks as problematic, as residents did not own the land upon which the shacks were located. Several of our interlocutors confirmed that shacks were sold and bought when residents moved to other shacks or to formal housing. Another situation where property rights were contested was in the event of death; relatives would seek to take over the shack of the deceased, although it should, in principle, be demolished.

Renting out: Several of our participants rented out space or shacks for residential or commercial purposes and renting out was obviously a popular income generating strategy for residents who had ‘taken the land’ in Overcome Heights. Renting out, however, is not unproblematic, as landlords might suddenly find that their tenants have equally strong claims to the land as themselves. According to one of the community leaders, the right to a shack depends on being registered as a resident in public records, like a census or the electricity company checking the electricity meters connected to each ‘plot’. Being recorded as an occupant of a particular place in the government survey or by the power utility establishes a relation between the person on that particular piece of land and the state. In a place where no one formally ‘stays there’, these seemingly trivial registers, which are at best circumstantial for supporting claims to land, become central in disputes.

Renting: At the end of the month we would observe families walking through the settlement carrying mattresses, and large trunks or garbage bags filled with their belongings, as they shifted from one residence to another. Participants explained that landlords in Overcome Heights at times doubled or tripled the rent for rooms from one month to the next, leaving poor tenants constantly on the move searching for spaces they could afford. As newcomers, foreigners navigate the rental market of Overcome Heights from a particularly precarious position, with no way of claiming a space of their own, nor to appeal injustice or unfair treatment. Because the rental market is illicit, the suffering of tenants remains invisible and unaddressed.

Relations with livelihood

Getting by in Overcome Heights is hard work. All of the people who participated in our study relied on several strategies to generate income, and even so, they were not always successful. Families stated that at times they did not have money to buy food and electricity. Though there is little access to the formal job market for residents in Overcome Heights, labour is gendered; men aspire for manual labour while women take on care- and cleaning work, both in other people's homes and within the community. Below we list some of the ways our participants sought to get by and provide for their families.

Proper jobs: In the 13 households we followed, four had members who were at the time employed, formally or informally, on a long-term basis. The women worked as domestic or care-workers and the men did manual labour. Many of our other participants dreamt of getting a 'job', and the fact that so few had permanent wage-earning jobs points to the precarity of life in Overcome Heights.

The Labour Office: Several of the men in our study sought income as casual day labourers. Every morning the M5 highway towards Cape Town's city centre is lined with young migrant men, looking for work. This is what migrants in Overcome called 'the Labour Office' – the place where young men go in hopes of being picked up for a day – or more – of casual labour. At times being picked up leads to longer contracts or long-term relationships with employers, but more often they are capricious and exploitative, and the labourers find themselves back at the Labour Office with few chances of making a steady income. All our informants who had been at the Labour Office had been cheated on several occasions.

Grants: Many of the female participants in our study received support in the form of government grants. Mothers who had children under the age of 18 received a grant for each child, and for some this was their only steady income. One of the older women in the study received a pension, while another did not because she did not have an ID (see above).

Small business: Four of our participants had their own small-scale businesses in Overcome. The most formalized were the Somalis who owned spaza shops. One woman had a fruit stall; one sold second-hand clothes and small things they had collected (see below); a third made small dolls at home hoping to sell them to tourist shops. All households relied on family members to care for and participate in the business.

Skarreling: On the roads and pathways in and around Overcome Height you see people walking about collecting plastic, rubber, copper and other materials for recycling. Our participants also sourced, searched, sold and recycled items found or bartered. This is referred to as skarreling – scurrying or scrambling for something, or hustling, as one fieldworker suggested. Skarreling was at times seen as a sign of desperation, but at times more as an attitude towards life: constantly being on the lookout for resources that can help one through the day.

Local service contracts: The companies and organizations that provide services in Overcome Heights at times have policies to employ local residents to uplift the community in job programs. Residents in Overcome find work as garbage collectors, community cleaners and collectors of human waste from toilet facilities. Four of the women in our study, coloured and black South Africans, were working for a local service provider during the study or had done so in the past.

Renting out: None of our long-term participants rented out space, but we interviewed several other residents in Overcome who gained an income from doing so. Tenants might use it as premises for small business ventures such as a takeaways shop or carwash, or to live in.

Support from friends and family: Almost all of our participants reported getting help to make it through the month from family, friends and neighbours during the period of the study. This could be in the form of sharing food or money – usually small amounts of between 10 and 50 rand.

Relations with community

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

What cut across all three groups was a negative perception of the community and place they lived in. The diaries, as well as their life stories, illustrated how rare and tenuous peace and safety were. During the three months of our study four of our participants were in constant conflicts with neighbours over noise and other forms of pollution, several of them calling in local authorities to mediate. Seven incidents of attempted or successful robberies at home or on the street were reported in our participants' diaries. They also described being witness to or hearing about other incidents (foreign nationals being more affected). Four participants wrote about being confined in their homes or being displaced due to shootings, riots or the gang war during the months that we followed them. One woman described in her diary seven individual incidents where she or her family members had witnessed shootings and injuries, fled shootings or hid in the house during shootings. We can safely assume that the participants did not note down all incidents, and they are not statistically representative, but the diaries offer vivid and poignant vignettes of how conflict and violence permeate everyday life in Overcome Heights.

Relations with family and kin

Intimate relations in Overcome Heights are fraught with tension and oftentimes violence. Yet for all three groups, family was central to their quest for wellbeing in everyday life. There were, however, differences in how family mattered for the three groups. The findings in the interviews and diaries both confirm and develop the insights from the 2009 research.

The black South Africans in our study, except for one, were all single mothers, and all had ties with their families ‘back home’ in the Eastern Cape, or other provinces. The quality of these relations were diverse, but they struggled to maintain them as good mothers, daughters and sisters, for instance by sending money back home or travelling home to attend funerals. The four women were all having a difficult time trying to build a social support system in Cape Town. Although they had relatives in the area or in other parts of Cape Town, their diaries and interviews described experiences of isolation, especially with regard to the upbringing of their children. They were intensely worried about what growing up in Overcome Heights would mean for the future of their children.

For the coloured households in our study kinship was a constant source of pain and worry, often entwined with the underground economy. In interviews many of the female participants told stories of growing up with abuse and violence and shared their dismay at seeing their sons and daughters reproduce the same patterns. Elaine lost her first husband to a gang shootout while five months pregnant with their second child. When we met her, she was in a longstanding conflict with her second husband of 14 years. Though they were still in a relationship, he had built a separate shack in their yard. Their conflict revolved around her older daughters, 14 and 21, who were both using drugs and living intermittently with men who could provide for them. One of the fears was that the girls would fall pregnant – possibly even deliberately in order to get the child maintenance grant. This is a common suspicion in Overcome Heights. Elaine also worried about her granddaughter, who lived with the paternal grandmother in Lavender Hill. Elaine insisted on trying to support them, and frequently spent nights and days trying to locate her daughters and get them food to eat, but the husband disapproved. Disagreements such as these often led to domestic violence.

All four of the migrant households in the study provided material support for their family members in their home countries, and that was their main objective for being in Cape Town. Meanwhile, they also relied on kin networks in Cape Town. Kinship here had two overlapping ways of being the basis for interaction and mutual obligation: 1) kinship ties with biological family members living in Cape Town were often the initial reason for coming there 2) similar kinship terms could be extended to fellow villagers or countrymen they found there as a way of establishing social relations in a new place. Thus, one participant in the initial survey stated that he lived with two cousins, but later nuanced this by explaining that they were not so much related as coming from the same village in the home country. Building networks through idioms of kinship was for several of the younger male migrants an important means of getting by, finding a place to stay and making an income in a new city. The importance of kinship seems to have increased from the 2009 research. One explanation is surely that the numbers of Malawians had increased substantially in Overcome Heights.

Relations with the body

During the period we followed the 13 households, all experienced illness. During the research, the participants reported 14 clinic or hospital visits. In six of the 13 households either the contact person or their partner, or both, suffered from one

or more chronic illnesses (ages 19 – 69). Arthritis and vascular diseases were most common. No participants disclosed being HIV-positive, but stigma still adheres to this diagnosis and participants might have chosen to keep this information to themselves. In similar vein, no participants mentioned TB despite it being rife in Overcome Heights.

Most of the participants, regardless of ethnic background, sought help and treatment in the public healthcare system, whether at the local Seawinds clinic, the Retreat day hospital or by referral to Victoria Hospital or Groote Schuur Hospital. Two participants experienced illness and did not seek treatment in the public health system; one took a tonic of alternative medicine for his high blood pressure. They were both foreign nationals, and one was a recently arrived migrant from Zimbabwe who might not have known how to approach the South African health system.

The Malawian men in the study, who had migrated to find better job opportunities, were mainly concerned with what consequences illness would have for their capacity to work. They would force themselves to do manual labour despite not feeling well, and indeed, calling in sick did in several instances result in losing valuable relationships with ‘bosses’.

Three of the participants in the study wrote several times in their diaries about hunger and not being able to feed their families. At the same time, most of the women in our study were severely malnourished and overweight, had high blood pressure and symptoms of diabetes like fatigue and pain in legs, feet and hands. Some of them were diagnosed with arthritis and two women were treated for this. The families who experienced hunger at the time had only government grants for income.

Relations with the mind

The preceding pages describe how our participants experienced and sought to handle crisis in Overcome Heights in public, intermediate and intimate spheres of life. At times our participants expressed being overwhelmed by living with these kinds of everyday as well as spectacular crises and described their mental condition as being *stressed*.

Participants saw both specific events, like a son being shot or having an argument with a partner, and more ongoing conditions, like the drug economy dominating public space around them, as causes of stress. Women were more overtly affected than men, and several of the women who described stress to us were diagnosed in the public health system with depression or anxiety. But several men described similar ‘symptoms’ to what the women called stress and had similar strategies for handling them. One male community activist, for instance, took a small handful of painkillers every night to quiet his thoughts and go to sleep.

Stress had different manifestations. Here are some of the ways in which our interlocutors described experiencing stress: insomnia, excessive thoughts, palpitations, hyperventilation, extreme mood swings, fatigue, dark thoughts, panic attacks, noise sensitivity, hypersensitivity, weeping, feelings of hopelessness, non-specific body pains, and pains in the chest.

The people we spoke to had different strategies for handling stress and they were not necessarily exclusive. One strategy was to 'cool off'; drink alcohol (most mentioned beer) often in a social setting, and to go out in the local night life. Another was to 'cope' by trying to be very calm and accept the problem or crisis as it was. A couple of participants mentioned spiritual practices like attending church or reading the bible as ways of coping with stress. A third strategy, mentioned exclusively by coloured women, was to 'express'; to in various ways give voice to the stress such as discussing problems with a friend or family member, 'crying your heart out', as one participant wrote, or to get into an argument or fight with close friends or family members. All these types of 'expression' were associated with alcohol use and being intoxicated. Finally, there was the avenue of 'switching off' – simply taking a break from the stressful situation. The mildest version of this was to relax by watching television or listening to music, or perhaps literally switching off the phone and staying indoors to avoid social contact. More radical means included numbing oneself to sensations of stress by taking over-the-counter painkillers. Several of the people we interviewed described 'switching off' by taking a combination of the opioid Tramadol and non-prescription pain-killers with the aim to sleep or be sedated for more than a night's rest, possibly several days. Suicide may be seen as an extreme version of 'switching off'. Three of the women in our study told us about one or more suicide attempts due to stress, from overdosing on painkillers, to cutting the wrists, to throwing oneself under a moving car.

Notably, none of the foreign nationals in our study reported 'stress' as a problem, which may indicate that bundling and labelling the range of symptoms listed here has roots in the South African public health discourse. Several of the foreign nationals in our study did describe some of the symptoms but did not call it stress.

For the participants in our study, stress felt like an added vulnerability. In several conversations with residents and community leaders it was suggested that people who are stressed or depressed are particularly vulnerable to violence, robbery and burglary, as they might miss important warning signs that something is up, and not be able to assert themselves, for instance to scare off burglars – as several of the people in our study did (see above on relations with community). This points to how what is conventionally thought of as mental health is related to violence, not only as personal pathologies but as an aspect of everyday crisis and navigating the urban periphery in Cape Town.

5. STRUGGLING LIVES

In the previous chapter we identified and explored seven themes that emerged from our research participants' diaries. They revealed cross-cutting issues about physical and mental health, and relations with family and neighbours as well as with livelihood, authority and legal issues. In this chapter, we explore three lives in slightly more detail as they unfolded over the period from February to April 2018. We have selected three different biographies – one of a coloured woman, Elise, one of a black South African woman, Nandi, and the third of a Malawian man, Mitch. While these three biographies are not representative, they do express important dimensions of life lived in Overcome Heights. Elise's focus is mainly on her relationship with her drug-addicted daughter-in-law, on how often she has nothing to eat and on how bad her relationship with her neighbours is. Nandi, recently moved to Overcome Heights with her two children, focuses all her energies in her writing on trying to cope with her adolescent son, who is facing serious issues with his relocation from the Eastern Cape. Mitch spends all his writing on conditions at work, on trying to find other jobs and on dealing with his mysterious stomach ache. While these issues are clearly specific, they are also all too typical. At the same time, they confirm the existence of three different life worlds. Elise's issues with her daughter-in-law are typical of many of the family conflicts on the Cape Flats. Nandi's troubles with her son are all about relocating from one social world in rural Eastern Cape to the hard social world of a Cape Town school. Mitch's troubles with his employers are all too recognizable by all foreign nationals trying to find jobs and survive in Cape Town. We will focus on these issues rather than trying to capture the entire lives of the three people.

Elise

Elise grew up in and around Grassy Park and Parktown, not far from Overcome Heights. While she remembers happy and decent family situations in the past, she also tells her story as one of constant changes as parents die or remarry, and as the family is forced to move from one area to the next, as is the fate of many backyarders. At the age of 19, Elise fell pregnant and married Lester the following year. They moved into a shack in the backyard of Elise's mother-in-law in Grassy Park. The next many years are difficult; Lester develops a drug habit and Elise drinks rather excessively. He sleeps around with other women and physically abuses Elise whenever she confronts him with his extramarital activities or his drug abuse. Their one son, Lester Jnr, grows up. He marries and divorces one (nice) woman with whom he has two children. He gets together with a second woman, the current daughter-in-law, with whom he has two more children. In 2000, after yet another conflict with the mother-in-law, Elise and Lester relocate to the backyard shack of her sister in the newly developed housing project in Capricorn, then called Vrygrond. By 2004, more and more people from the coloured townships, especially Lavender Hill, are beginning to occupy land illegally between Seawinds and Vrygrond. Lester scouts a shack that is not occupied by anyone, just next to the tar road facing Seawinds. He buys it from a woman for R200. He contacts the housing committee and it authorizes the move there. Later that same year they move in. A year later, after a protracted legal battle with the Cape Town City Council, they earn the right not to be evicted. For the first time, the backyarders have a place of their own. When we meet the family 14 years later, Elise and Lester are in their 60s and ailing from a number of cardiac issues and constantly battling with issues of pure survival. But they also seem fairly happy together. Their son lives with them and

they have a decent house. However, their lives are beset by three problems that dominate Elise's diary entries and fill up the interview transcript: the constant fear of hunger; the *tik koppe* (drug addict) daughter-in-law and the noisy neighbours.

Hunger

"Wednesday morning, I got up so late because my body was hurting. I had to go look for bread to take with my pills. I so much want a (social) grant but I have to make my ID. I have to wait for the money to be there."

In her diary, entries like this are common. Elise often does not have enough money for food. Her legs hurt, as do those of her husband – often to crippling effect. Her biggest worry relates to her grandchildren. They often come by or she seeks them out to give them food, shoes or clothes. As she rhetorically asks, 'How can they learn if they are hungry?' Both she and her husband are trying to get disability grants as a permanent way to deal with hunger and disease. In the meantime, they are engaging in a number of strategies to make money. One day Lester had gotten hold of a bag of old clothes from a nursing home he worked in. That gave them the idea to sell used clothes outside their house. However, while it does provide some level of income, it is not enough. Another possibility had arisen when two coloured guys had asked if they could open a carwash outside their yard, which is well-placed on one of the few tarred roads. They would give Elise money for electricity. They had come and left buckets and other equipment in their yard but had not come back. Now the stuff was taking up space in the yard and they had not heard from them again. Next, some black men had asked if they could sell vegetables outside. Again, hopes were high in the diary entries but again it came to nothing. Another excerpt:

"I slept all day. When I went out my husband was drinking with his friends. A friend came by and bought chips for R10. My son went to work on a one day casual so I could buy some food and electricity. It is very difficult when no one is working but I believe that everything will come right."

This sense of constantly moving between despair and hope is characteristic for many diary entries, not only those of Elise but in almost all the diaries and stories we collected.

Family trouble

A large part of the issue around food relates to the grandchildren and especially the conflicts Elise has with her daughter-in-law – or as Elise calls her, the *tik koppe* (literally, crystal meth head). The daughter-in-law receives child grants for the two youngest children. But, according to Elise, she never spends it on the children. The daughter-in-law and Lester Jnr are engaged in a protracted custody battle over her grandchildren. Elise claims she is the one who has to ensure that the children eat before they go to school. The same problems arise around holidays. Elise complains: 'It is school holidays, so all children are by me. There is nothing to eat. The mother receives All Pay (social grants) but she is not worried.'

The conflict between Lester Jnr and his wife affects the whole family; Elise says the daughter-in-law tried to get a restraining order on her son, but the courts threw out the case. The children are caught in the middle of the conflict. Elise worries that if the daughter-in-law hears that Elise was at the school, she 'trips out' on the children. They

have asked to stay with Elise but are scared of their mother's reaction. Elise has promised them that they will make a plan. Whether the daughter-in-law can be made to relinquish control of the children is unsure. Elise, however, is certain that the tik koppe will never do so voluntarily because the child grants come to her as the legal guardian.

Trouble in the back street

"This morning I was very cross. There were flies in my house – big ones – because my neighbour is throwing shit below my window. The toilet is also standing near my window. The neighbours are always looking for trouble. I have spoken to her but she says it's her yard. I am tired of them being so dirty. It is not healthy to live like this. Before the day is over the neighbour has thrown shit in front of my gate. They also make noise during night time and the weekend till late night. Drunk! Parties! And then there are the illegal activities selling Tik!"

Elise's diary is replete with complaints about her backdoor neighbour, especially the noise and the parties. The neighbours refuse to abide by even the mildest of Elise's complaints and even harass her by deliberately, she thinks, dumping faeces in front of her house as well as gossiping about her and shouting at her. One night the husband had been especially rude and sworn at her as she fell asleep. The next morning, she wrote:

"I hear people argue in the streets. When I got up a young man was stabbed in the stomach. They waited for the ambulance. Every weekend this place is like this."

Her troubles with her neighbours were everyday reminders of the troubles of the larger community – often referred to as the back streets or the ghetto. Several diary entries talk of the escalation of the gang conflict, leading to several deaths just outside her window. She elaborates in an interview, using the Afrikaans word for chaotic, *deurmekaar*, to describe her place: 'It used to be so peaceful; now it is just *deurmekaar* [a mess]. Yo! *Deurmekaar* and *deurmekaar*! You can't walk at night or sit because of this gun people.'

Mitch

Mitch is 30 years old from Nkhotakota district in central Malawi. He is married with three kids aged 11, 7 and 4, all of whom are in Malawi with his wife. Mitch came to South Africa in May 2016, following in the footsteps of the thousands of Malawians who have sought possibilities in South Africa for decades. He had worked different jobs in Malawi, including in a sugar plantation, until 2016, when opportunities in Malawi seemed to dry up. His one uncle suggested that he came to South Africa. The uncle paid his ticket and the expenses to get a passport. Many of his kin are already in South Africa so it was not a surprise move. He stayed for one month in Johannesburg before making his way to Cape Town. His uncle organized that he could stay with a cousin in Overcome Heights and helped him get his first job. In this way, Mitch, like so many other Malawians, followed well-travelled paths and relied on a kinship network to move from Malawi into Overcome Heights. At the time of the research, Mitch stayed in a compound with an acquaintance from the same district in Malawi, a blood brother in his terms, along with four other families, including one Zimbabwean family, one family from the same district as him, and two members of his extended kinship network on his father's side. Despite the family relations, Mitch didn't engage with them, suggesting that while family is important, other relations may trump

them in everyday life. While he desperately wants to go home to Malawi, he is keenly aware that options are simply better in South Africa. Maybe because of this realization, he is increasingly building a Capetonian life, involving himself in religious practices and soccer. In the written accounts in his diary, his focus is almost uniquely on his work life – good and bad jobs, foremen and bosses, and on his recurring medical conditions that no one seems to be able to address. In our conversations he expands on these issues while also explaining how one can survive the violence of Overcome Heights. In the remainder of the section, we address these three themes.

Good and bad jobs and bosses

“Today work was good and I enjoyed myself because I was on site with my fellow labourer. Our foreman just came to tell us what to do. We must connect a valve to the main tap of the system. So it was quite nice.”

When asked what a good job was Mitch explained that it was about being trusted to carry out the job, that is, not to be constantly supervised. It is also to have the material ready and not have to go looking for it – something which could involve taking expensive, dangerous and time-consuming public transport. This comes down to the boss or the foreman on site. Since his arrival, Mitch has worked regularly with three foremen, of whom only the first was really ‘good’. He taught Mitch plumbing and trusted him to do his work properly. Since this foreman left for a job in government, Mitch has been struggling with the foremen. He has a very good relationship with the owner of the company, but while he does odd piece jobs for the family of the boss, his working life is dominated by the foremen. Throughout his written diary and in conversations, he returns to his troubled relationship with the foremen. He feels he is under surveillance and more problematically, he was told twice that he would have what is known as ‘short-time days’, that is, no work today – wait for our call. During his weeks of writing that happened with worrying frequency.

One day, when there was nothing in the house to eat, he decided to go to what is referred to as the Labour Office – the strip of road referred to in Chapter 4 where men, almost all of them Malawians, congregate in the hope of picking up casual work. Mitch went there:

“I was just lucky. I sit in my house. I don’t have any money. So I say, eish, let me just go there. I find there is more than 7 or 8 people around a car. The people in the car take out things – to check what we know. What is this? I tell them. What is this? I tell them. So they say, let’s go. So, I work with them for three days.”

While he briefly felt lucky to get this job, the Labour Office is a precarious place with few guarantees. During our interviews there, almost all of our interlocutors shared tales of stalled or missing payments, promises not kept and the sheer and utter frustration of the long days in the sun waiting for nothing. Mitch had the same experience, as he was not paid for those three days of work. Mitch then resumed his work for his old company.

Getting ill

“I feel pain in my stomach for a long time. I have been to scanning. It’s a long time I have been feeling pain in my stomach. They say that everything is fine. Then they give me an injection and things are fine, maybe for a week. And then it starts again and I go home because I am feeling sick.”

Mitch started feeling sick in September 2017. Since then, his life has been marred with frequent hospitalization, absence from work and worries about the future. Mitch depends on his body for work and for soccer – one of his important pastimes in an otherwise dreary everyday life.

Whether his illness represents a real problem depends very much on his foreman. In interviews, one of the key ways he distinguishes between good and bad foremen is by how they react in relation to illness or injury. A good foreman accepts a note from the hospital as a legitimate cause of absence and proceeds to pay and employ the worker. A bad one does not. After his first foreman, Mitch has been struggling. He says, 'The day I am ill they pay me. But when I go to the hospital, they won't pay me.' Furthermore, his illness makes his working life more precarious and he has gotten several 'short-time days' because of it. Absences that are too long and too frequent may also lead to him being replaced by other workers, of which there are plenty, especially in the context of the city-wide drought that affected activities like gardening and construction in Cape Town. This worry took on full force in his diary entry when, after a medical check-up, he was told: 'Wait till I call you.' I was worried about him [the boss]. But I know he is the owner of the company so there was nothing I could do.' His boss did call him again and things went back to a precarious normal.

Confinement and violence

In his diary, Mitch only writes about work, jobs and his illness as it directly impacts on his work. In conversations, however, he is as much concerned with how one survives in Overcome Heights and how violence impacts on his life. He says:

"There is no right [given] to us here [in Cape Town]. You feel like you are in prison. See this phone? It is mine. I bought it. But I cannot use it openly. Someone will come and take it away. If I refuse they can take my life. I got money but I cannot count it. I have to be in private to count it. I cannot work at night. By six o'clock I have to be in my house. Like a chicken, like a cow. Maybe it is worse than prison because a prisoner at least knows what will happen."

Mitch describes the extent to which life in Overcome is circumscribed by violence. To be able to know violence and where it will come from is imperative to survive. Mitch and his friends have developed an elaborate taxonomy of dangerous people: 'The amaXhosa (from the Eastern Cape) are more volatile and violent than ama-coloureds and will kill you even if you don't have a dime. Coloureds might 'just slap you if you have nothing! Some families we know in the road, they don't care what their children do. They will just rob you! You cannot go out at night or wander aimlessly around.' However, not everybody is an 'enemy'. With a somewhat surprising twist, Mitch asserts: 'But you know! Some of them, they protect us. Some of the dangerous people, they protect us.' Asked to explain Mitch continues that the 'dangerous people' are not interested in attracting police to the area, which could happen if migrants report yet another attack, not least in relation to the frequent rioting (see next chapter). This would disrupt their illegal economic activities – drug dealing, theft and robbery. Furthermore, migrants represent considerable resources that in many ways sustain life in the settlement – rent, over-charging for electricity and possible sources of loans with considerate (often powerless) creditors. Especially the rent is central where some 'land owners' control plots with up to ten shacks. 'We are the economy,' Mitch asserts.

Nandi

Nandi's childhood in the townships outside Port Elizabeth was a turbulent one, marked by violence, addiction and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. By 16 she was pregnant with her first child, but her abusive boyfriend died at the hands of a vigilante mob after an attempted murder. At the age of 21 she was in a new relationship and followed her boyfriend to Cape Town. Like many other black South Africans from the Eastern Cape, they came to Cape Town with the hopes of employment and a better life. Nandi had a second child, and her boyfriend moved from Mitchells Plain to a flat in Capricorn, the formal settlement in Vrygrond. She worked in the service industry, enjoying a relatively stable life. Both of her children lived with their grandmother in the Eastern Cape, just like Nandi herself had grown up with her grandmother, and she sent money back home to support her children. When she lost her job at a fast food restaurant, the couple moved to a shack in an informal settlement in the township Khayelitsha.

When we met Nandi, she had turned 30 and had left her boyfriend and their cramped shack. Her home in Overcome Heights is a shack in a small compound of rental units. Though she has family members living in Cape Town, she relies on friends in Overcome for help and emotional support, rather than family. Nandi's story highlights the experiences of some of the other black South Africans in our study: their lives are shaped by concerns for kin, by the oscillation between the Eastern Cape and Cape Town, and by the attempt to overcome informality and marginalization and make legitimate claims to life in the city.

Two months before we met Nandi, she decided to bring her children to Cape Town to live with her. Nandi's motivation for participating in our study was to improve the lives of children in Overcome Heights, and throughout our time together she was deeply troubled by the trajectories of her children, 12-year-old Langaletu and 7-year-old Isipho, as they adjusted to life in Cape Town.

Children's social lives

Last year a 15-year-old was killed in a 'gang war' over turf, the territory between the children of Overcome Heights and Capricorn. Nandi's shack is not far from the open sandy area known as the links ground, which is at once a thoroughfare to Capricorn and its border for the people of Overcome Heights. Now her son and his friends are becoming involved in fights and throwing stones over the right to play in the links. Nandi followed her son's life in despair as she saw him become more and more entangled with life in Vrygrond as experienced from the position of a young boy from the Eastern Cape: gang culture, violent and sexualized interpersonal relations as a mean to power and prestige, and a constant need to assert oneself to stay safe.

Nandi is attending night school to redo her matric in order to qualify for a nursing degree, leaving the house at 17.30 and returning at around 20.30. During this time her children are home alone, and this is a recurring concern in her diary: 'Leaving the kids alone is stressing me a lot because of safety reasons,' she writes. In the evening hours, her son is instructed to make sure both children stay in the house to do homework, but Nandi describes coming home to find her house empty:

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

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

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

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

Political languages and claims to the city

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

This turn to place responsibility with public and state authorities, and to plead for their involvement in addressing violence and lack of services in Overcome, is characteristic among those in our study who were migrants from the Eastern Cape. As described above, a 'second committee' representing the area populated mainly by isiXhosa speakers approached questions of governance in a different way than the more recognized Housing Committee in Overcome. This kind of political consciousness also shapes Nandi's participation in 'the community', as she called it. When a woman living in the same compound as Nandi was attacked in an attempted rape, Nandi attended a community

meeting with local leaders, the family of the perpetrator and the victim, aiming at mediation. When the perpetrator was later arrested for stabbing his girlfriend, but was out 'on bail' a few hours later, Nandi writes:

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

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

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



6. THREE MONTHS IN OVERCOME HEIGHTS

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

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

Crises in everyday life

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

Late January to mid-February:

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

Late February to mid-March:

- A young man is stabbed in the stomach at F's neighbour, they wait for the ambulance with him
- G tells of a vigilante mob which strips and kills a robbery suspect in the road
- H says a young man was shot dead in the area and police were blocked from entering by barricades of burning tires
- I intervenes in a robbery in a woman's home, knows the assailants
- J's soccer match is cancelled this Sunday as there is shooting at the soccer field (four people are injured)
- K and her husband are robbed in their house at night
- Unknown assailants try to break in at L's house at night, she screams and scares them off
- M's mother's house is attacked by gangsters, the police intervene
- N is confined at home because of shootings in her road; a young man is shot in the hand
- Large police raid or intervention in O's section, many rumours about what really happened
- P is confined at home because of shootings
- Q meets a group of gangsters in her road, with guns, hurries home. Complains of shootings every night from 8pm onwards
- R and her friend flee and lock themselves in the house when the gangsters start shooting in the street
- S goes to visit grandchild in Lavender Hill, flees from shooting on the way home

Late March to mid-April:

- T's neighbour experiences attempted break-in
- U has clothing stolen from her yard
- Community leader in V's section arrested with large quantity of drugs
- W is in a scuffle during robbery of Malawian man by group of coloured men
- Drive-by shootings at night near X's shop, police give chase, but do not catch shooters

- As Y and her daughter return from daughter's school, there is shooting, and they run home for cover
- Z is robbed at gunpoint in Capricorn
- Land occupation protests in A's section

Late April to mid-May:

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

Typology of crisis

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

Gang war

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

Sinkhole

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

Shack fires

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

Land occupation and protests

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

Attacks against Somali traders

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

Revisiting crisis and everyday life

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



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

Praxis paper on Urban Violence

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