

CHAPTER 6

GANGS, DRUGS, AND CRIMINAL MARKETS

Inner Johannesburg is generally viewed as something more than just a highly unstable and violent area. Beneath the veneer of chaos lies another type of order, an order informed by the power of the underground economy. As this survey shows, the inner city remains the central business district of Johannesburg in more ways than one.

Where the organising principle of a community is organised crime, young men often find employment and identity in gangs of one sort or another. Gangsters earn their keep in a variety of ways, but the highest profits are to be found in the drug trade. Drugs mean drug addicts, most of whom do not hold down nine to-five-jobs. Instead, their need for ready money often drives them into acquisitive crime, but this crime does not always result in cash in hand. They also find themselves in possession of hot merchandise, so drug areas tend to also be areas where stolen goods are traded.

‘Gangs’

The term ‘gang’ is used rather loosely in South Africa. In predominantly black areas like inner Johannesburg, gangs tend to be simply criminal groupings, dependent on the personalities of the individuals involved and without an independent institutional identity. This stands in contrast to coloured areas, where the gangs have adhered to many of the same names, patterns of conduct, and, in some instances, geographic territories since the Second World War.¹⁶

It is therefore not surprising that most people (71%) did not believe that there are gangs in their neighbourhood. Of those who thought there were gangs, the majority (62%) could not put a name to a gang. The inability to put a name to the criminal association is indicative that these gangs are groupings typical of other predominantly black areas. Twenty people said they felt there was a positive side to gangs in the area, with most mentioning either security or financial support provided to the community. Most of these felt the police were not reducing gang activity in the area.

Drugs

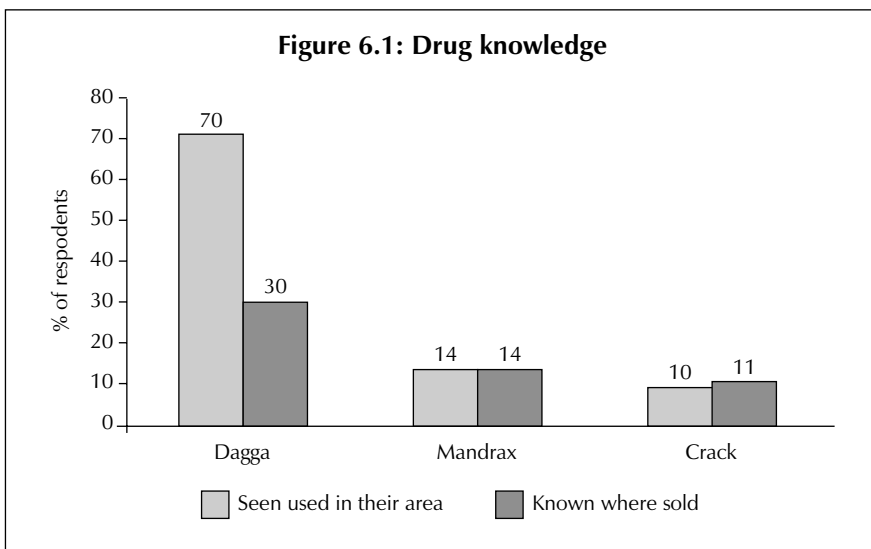
Gangs tend to be involved in a range of income generating criminal activities, typically including drug dealing. Respondents were asked two sets of questions about drugs in their area:

- whether they had personally seen certain drugs consumed; and
- whether they knew where certain drugs were sold in their area.

Respondents were not asked about their own drug use, because this sort of question does not generally yield good results in household surveys.

Those who claim to have seen certain drugs consumed came about this experience either because they themselves or their close acquaintances use the drugs, or because the drugs are openly consumed for all to see. Public consumption of drugs is indicative of the general prevalence of drug use, its 'normalisation' in the area concerned, as well as disregard for law enforcement.

Knowledge of the location of drug markets is also indicative of prevalence, as well as indicating that the markets are 'open', meaning that anyone can buy in the area, without personal connections to drug vendors. Open markets are



also indicative of disregard for enforcement. Drugs can only be readily sold to unknown buyers if there is little fear of undercover stings, and if purchase sites are well known to the general public, this calls into question the commitment of the police to drug interdiction.

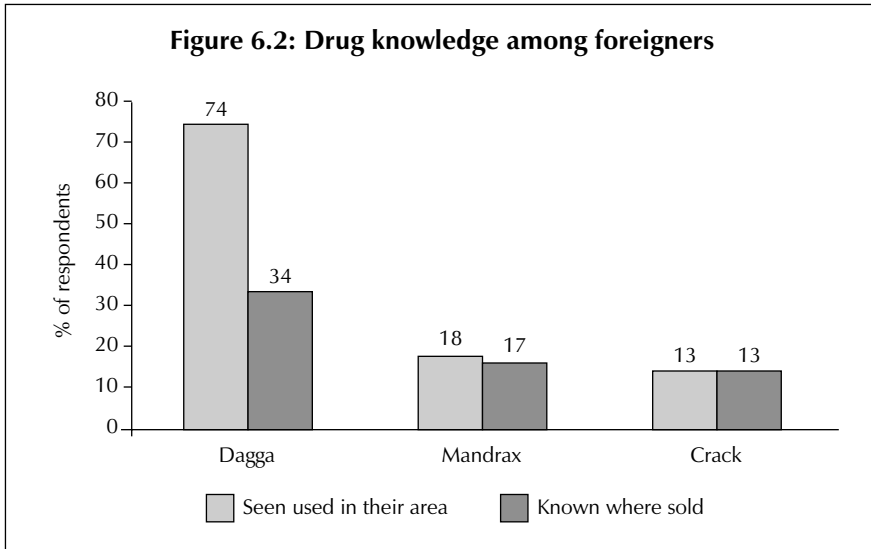
Most people (70%) said they had personally seen dagga smoked in their area, and 30% said they knew where it was sold (Figure 6.1). Aside from indicating its prevalence in the area, it is remarkable that 70% of the community is capable of identifying the behaviour of consuming an illicit drug. That nearly one in three inner city residents can tell you where to buy a prohibited substance shows just how lawless an area inner Johannesburg really is. Most people mentioned the streets (75%) or private flats (19%) as the source of this drug. This also indicates that cannabis is dealt openly in public spaces, accessible to any passers-by.

Although only 14% said they had seen Mandrax smoked, nearly all of these also knew where it was sold. Given the dangerousness and addictive quality of this bootleg sedative, this level of knowledge is frighteningly high. Furthermore, Mandrax is not a drug commonly used in public spaces, since consumption generally results in a period of incapacitation. This, teamed with the fact that most who had seen it consumed knew where to buy it, suggests a more intimate knowledge of the drug and its users. Public spaces again led the list of market sites, with about half mentioning the streets, 18% mentioning certain hotels and 29% mentioning private flats.

Just under 10% had seen crack smoked, and an even greater number knew where it was sold. This suggests that the sales locations for this drug have achieved a sort of local notoriety. When asked about these locations, 27% mentioned residential hotels, with 47% pointing to the streets and a quarter saying private flats. Once again, it is remarkable how widespread the drug is in the area: one in ten inner Johannesburg residents have actually seen crack cocaine consumed. This in a country where the drug was only seized by the police for the first time in 1995.

There is also a commonly held view that drugs are primarily controlled by foreign nationals.¹⁷ This assertion is supported by the higher levels of knowledge claimed by foreigners in the survey. Across drug categories and questions, foreigners were slightly more knowledgeable than average (Figure 6.2).

Not surprisingly, those surveyed in the residential hotel follow-up had considerably higher levels of drug knowledge. Ironically, given the reputation of



the Ibos in the area,¹⁸ if the Nigerian residents are removed from the sample, levels of drug knowledge are higher still. In addition, hotel respondents were much more likely to name hotels as the place to buy drugs, including dagga (30%), Mandrax (72%) and crack (68%).

Impact of drug use

Crack is a drug that is highly associated with robbery, because of the nature of the addiction. Crack is consumed in binges, with doses being closely spaced, rarely more than an hour apart. Priced at an average of R50 a rock, a single user can consume crack non-stop for upwards of 40 hours, desperately trying to recapture the high of the first rock and to avoid the 'crash' of coming down off the drug. Between rocks, users need to gather funds for the next hit quickly. For women, this tends to mean trading sex for the drug. For men, it often means getting cash or a highly negotiable commodity (such as a cell phone) in the quickest way possible – by taking it directly from someone else. It is therefore possible that the high prevalence of robbery and crack use in inner Johannesburg are connected.

This assertion was somewhat supported in an earlier study done by the ISS and the Medical Research Council in which arrestees had their urine tested

for drugs (the SA-ADAM study). Those arrested for all forms of robbery were more likely than average to test positive for cocaine.¹⁹

The drugs – crime link is also backed by public opinion: in the initial survey, 81% said they believe drugs contribute to crime in their area, and over a fifth said they personally knew someone who needs drugs every day. These facts underscore the commonly held view that substance abuse is at the core of the area's crime problem.

Markets

There were also high levels of knowledge about the locations of other markets for illicit goods. About 6% of the respondents said they knew where to buy illegal guns, most mentioning private flats. Thirteen percent said they knew where other stolen property could be bought, with over half mentioning the streets as the source. This again suggests that criminal activity is not terribly hidden in inner Johannesburg, that the community has the knowledge to help law enforcement if they are made to feel comfortable doing so, and that fear of apprehension is not great in the minds of those who deal in illicit goods.