

Community health in the shadow of policing and substance use, Cape Town



Jodilee Erasmus^{1,2}, Nadine Harker^{1,2}, Virginia Zweigenthal², Leslie London² ¹Mental Health, Alcohol, Substance Use and Tobacco Research Unit, South African Medical Research Council ²School of Public Health, University of Cape Town

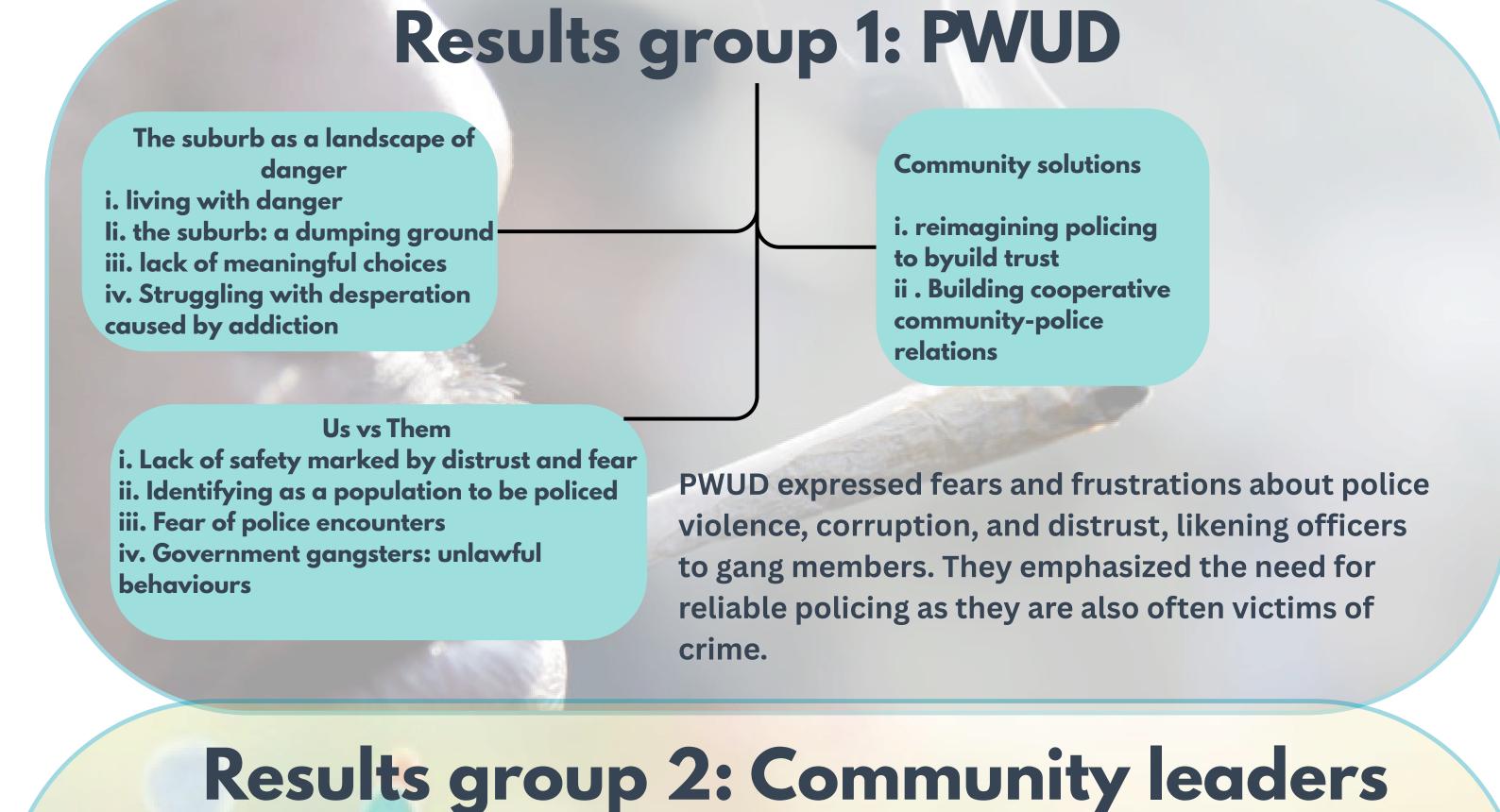
Background

- South Africa experiences high rates of drug-related crime, substance use, and violent police interventions.
- Corruption and police links to crime syndicates worsen inequalities, especially in low-income areas.
- These dynamics deepen socio-economic and health disparities.
- The relationship between law enforcement, substance users, and communities is poorly understood, driving distrust and conflict.
- This study investigates these interactions to inform strategies for improving community health and well-being.

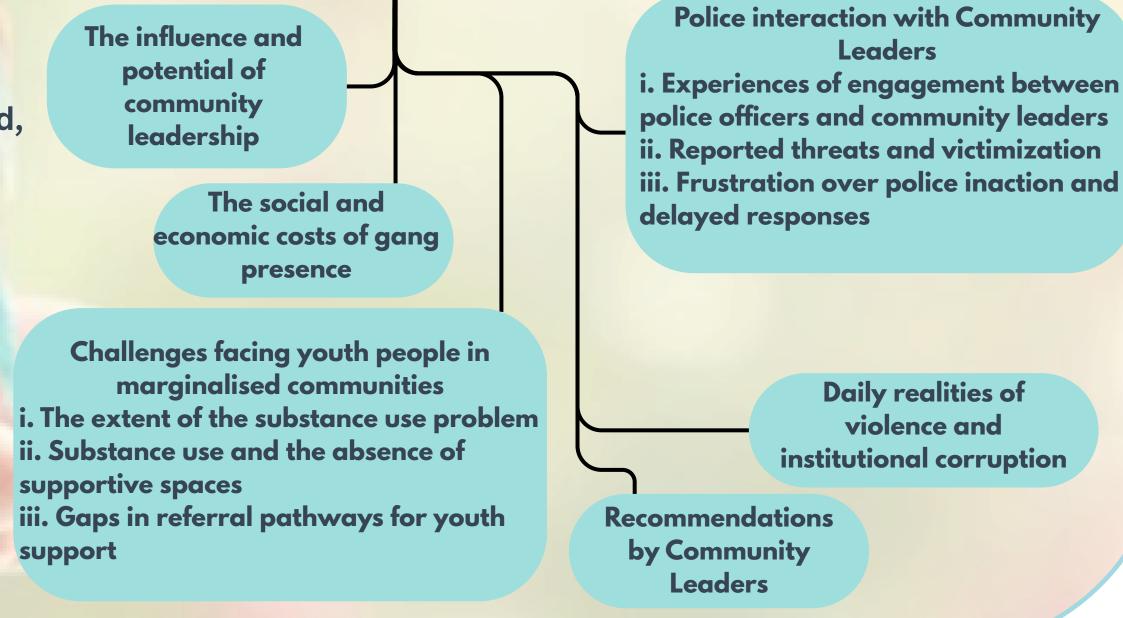
Methodology

- Participants were recruited from a peri-urban suburb in Cape Town - high unemployment, economic disadvantage, and prevalent substance use.
- Purposive sampling
- Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo12.
- Analysis was guided by the Social Determinants of Health Framework and the Socio-ecological model.

Participant groups	Methods
People who use drugs (PWUD)	4 focus groups (n=27; 9 M, 18 F)
Community Leaders	In-depth interviews (n=6)
South African Police Service officials	In-depth interviews (n=8)



Community leaders saw themselves as underutilized, calling for resources and support, especially for the youth. They highlighted police corruption and the need for community engagement to foster trust and improve health outcomes.



Results group 3: SAPS officials by SAPS officials Police officers cited links the referral Perceptions of power and between gangs and powerlessness substance use and felt The impact of i. The SAPS officers' desire powerless due to the shift for authority and control from a 'police force' to a ii. Limitations and the Stressors imbedded in the with the experience of organisational structure 'police service.' They community powerlessness i. The complex role of police within reported frustration over the communities they serve lack of respect, corruption ii. psychological toll including post-**Resource limitations** within SAPS, and traumatic stress disorder substance use within the police iii. Police involvement with i. The extent of the inadequate resources, substance use substance use problem in which hinder effective Misaligned metrics for defining i. inadequate manpowe policing. police success and machinery ii. The role that ii. Leadership gaps and gangsterism plays in the their operational impact substance use problem

Discussion

- Community dynamics among PWUDs, leaders, and law enforcement are shaped by interconnected structural, environmental, and socio-cultural influences.
- Structural barriers intersect with community norms, beliefs, and moral framings of substance use, which can hinder supportive, health-oriented responses.
- Effective interventions, informed by the socio-ecological model, should simultaneously address external structural constraints and internal narratives that influence perceptions of substance use and justice.

Recommendations

 Recommendations were informed by perspectives from all three participant groups, the researcher's immersion in the study, and relevant literature,



Scan QR link to see full list of **recommnedation**s

Advoacy message

By identifying possible synergies and antagonisms between substance users, community leaders and the South African Police Service, this will serve as evidence to start a conversation to improve the relationships, create additional opportunities and enhance prevention and control efforts around substance misuse in peri-urban areas.