

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

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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

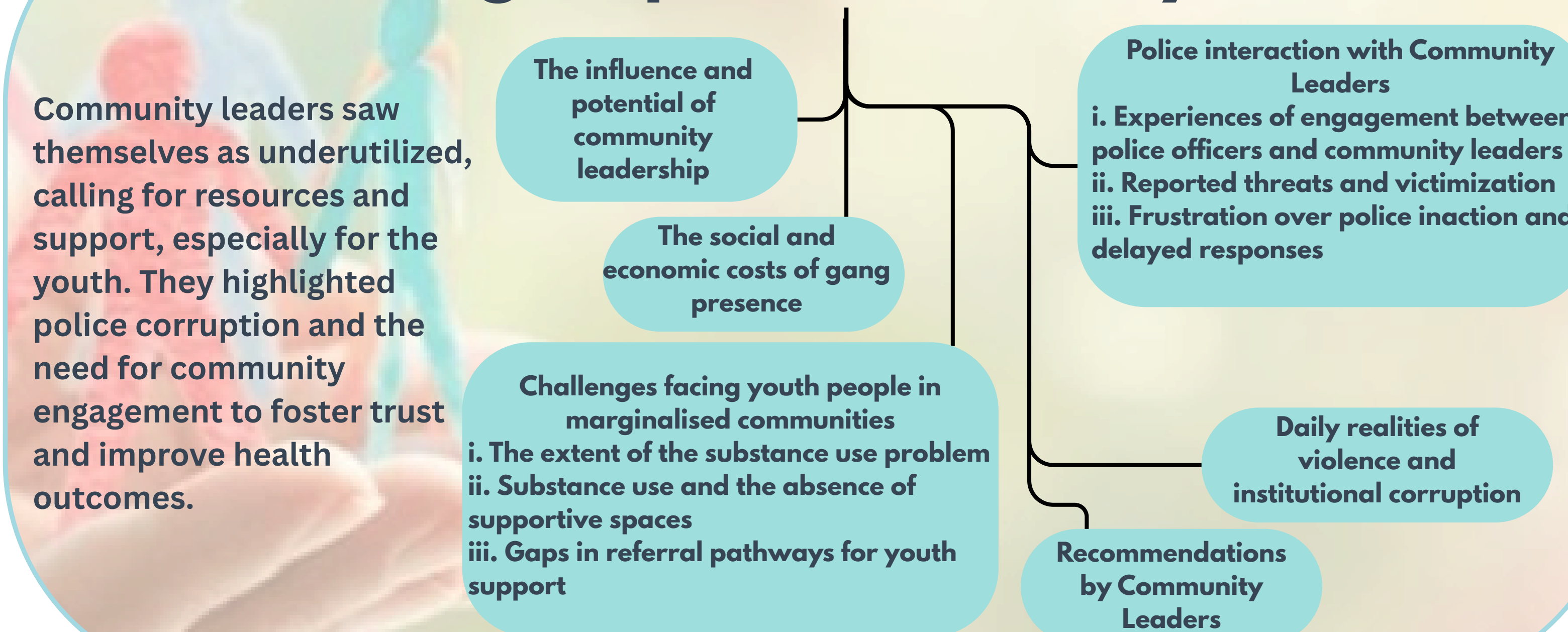
- Participants were recruited from a peri-urban suburb in Cape Town - high unemployment, economic disadvantage, and prevalent substance use.
- Purposive sampling
- Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo12.
- Analysis was guided by the Social Determinants of Health Framework and the Socio-ecological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

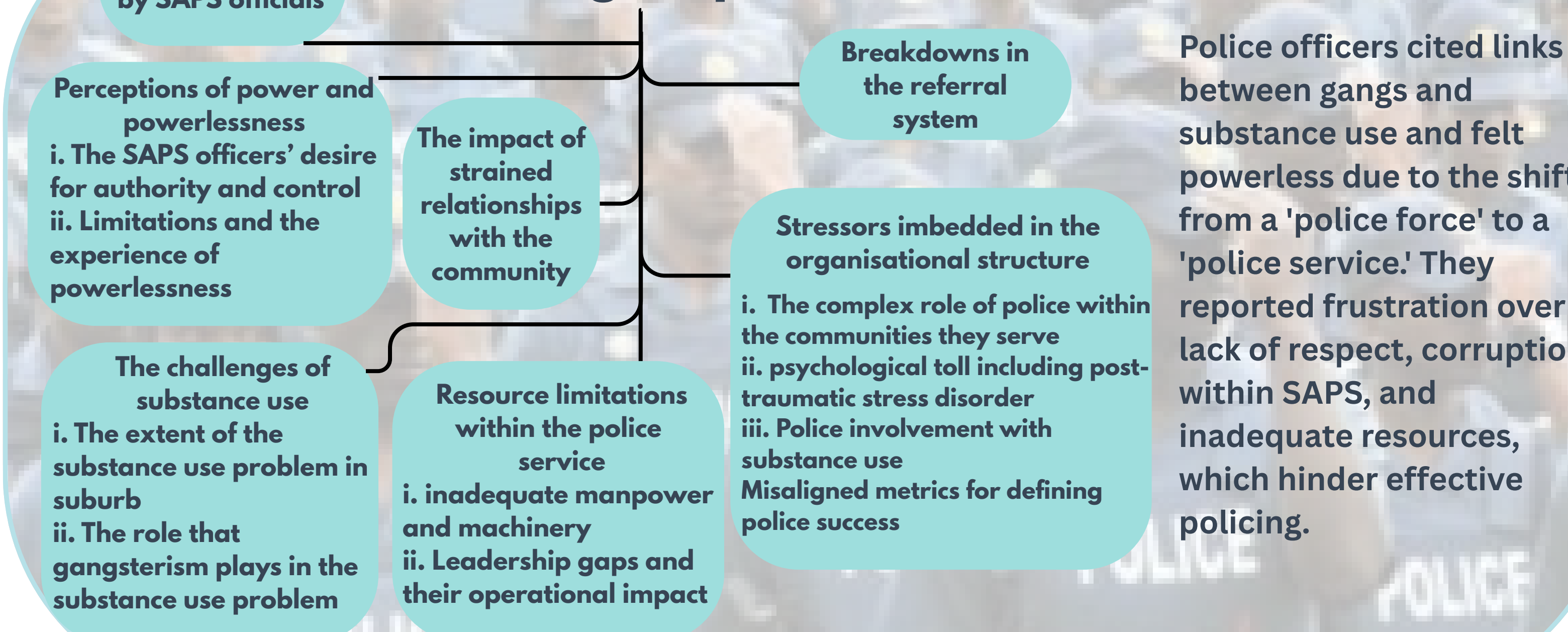
Results group 1: PWUD



Results group 2: Community leaders



Results group 3: SAPS officials



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 recommendations

Advocacy 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.