



Article

Church-Led Social Capital and Public-Health Approaches to Youth Violence in Urban Zimbabwe: Perspectives from Church Leaders

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Abstract

Youth violence in Zimbabwe's high-density suburbs has evolved into a severe public-health emergency, entrenching trauma, fuelling substance abuse, and amplifying structural inequities. Christian churches remain the most pervasive civic institutions in these settings, commanding high moral authority, psychosocial reach, and convening power. However, the mechanisms by which churches mitigate violence, and the constraints they face, continue to be under-researched. Grounded in socio-economic model lens and faith-based social capital theory, this study interrogates the intersections between youth violence and church responses in Zimbabwe's urban centres. The study adopts a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with church leaders. Twenty (20) church leaders from mainline, Pentecostal, and Apostolic traditions were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling to capture denominational diversity and varying levels of programme engagement. Interviews probed leaders' perceptions of youth-violence drivers, theological framings of non-violence, practical interventions (e.g., trauma-healing liturgies, anti-drug ministries, peer-mentorship schemes), and institutional constraints such as resource scarcity and political pressures. Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings indicate three interconnected mechanisms through which churches mitigate the cycle of violence. Nevertheless, gendered participation gaps, theological ambivalence toward activism, and limited alignment with municipal safety strategies continue to pose challenges to these efforts. By positioning churches within Zimbabwe's broader violence-prevention ecology, the study offers an empirically grounded blueprint for integrating faith actors into city-level public-health strategies and contributes towards evidence-based, structural solutions to urban youth violence.



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1. Introduction

Youth violence has reached the proportions of a global public-health emergency. According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 193,000 homicides occur annually among people aged 15–29 years, totalling approximately 40% of all killings worldwide, and homicide ranks among the leading causes of death in this age cohort (WHO 2024a). Although lethal incidents are mostly in Latin America and the United States of America, non-fatal assaults, bullying and psychological aggression are pervasive across every region, creating lifelong morbidity and enormous social costs. Violence exposure in adolescence is linked to depressive symptomatology, post-traumatic stress and heightened risk of chronic

disease, while societies absorb cascading costs through lost productivity, overwhelmed health services and intergenerational cycles of trauma (Chigiji et al. 2018; Chipalo and Jeong 2023). Increasingly, therefore, violence prevention is framed not merely as a matter of law-and-order but as an indispensable component of global sustainable development and health-equity agendas.

The evidence in Sub-Saharan Africa highlights the gravity of the crisis. While the region records lower rates of firearm-ownership, as compared to other regions, the continent records high levels of homicide and assault cases. It can be argued that this is fuelled by the rapid urbanisation, high levels of unemployment, poverty, inequality and weak institutional capacity. Zimbabwe presents a case example of this precarious challenge. WHO country data indicates homicide rates of 14 per 100,000 population in 2019, with young males disproportionately affected (WHO 2024a). Nationally representative surveys also reveal that 43% of children have endured physical violence and 33% emotional violence before the age of 18 (Chigiji et al. 2018). Weapon-mapping studies from Mazowe and Shamva districts report an alarming normalisation of machetes, knives and homemade firearms among adolescent peer groups (Dodo et al. 2019). In addition to direct victimisation, urban youths routinely witness assault, political and gender-based violence (Pswarayi 2020). Such exposure has been linked to harmful behaviours like alcohol and drug abuse, suicide cases and school dropout amongst the youths (Chipalo and Jeong 2023). Zimbabwe's protracted economic crisis, recurrent droughts and a highly polarised political environment further erode the protective social structures, which widens the number of youth susceptible to gang affiliation and electoral violence (see Pilosof 2021; Dodo et al. 2016).

Public-health scholarship underscores that such violence is socially patterned and therefore preventable. Structural determinants such as unemployment, residential crowding, substance availability, and absence of the rule of law intersect with individual risk factors like adverse childhood experiences and untreated mental-health conditions to produce a syndemic of violence and ill-health (Neville et al. 2023; Mugari 2024). However, evidence-based prevention models remain under-resourced in many African countries, and formal state responses in Zimbabwe have often prioritised punitive policing over trauma-informed or community-driven interventions (Shoko and Naidu 2020). Against this background, faith-based organisations emerge as critical and often unrecognised actors. The Christian church commands a significant influence in Zimbabwean society with majority of Zimbabweans identifying themselves as Christian. The Church community also operates schools, universities, clinics and youth clubs in even the most marginalised areas (Masengwe 2024).

Historically, Zimbabwean churches have oscillated between prophetic advocacy and complicity, yet they have also produced some notable non-violent movements such as the Ecumenical Support Services in the 1970s to recent projects like the alternatives-to-violence projects (Zambara 2014; Gukurume 2022). Empirical studies document church-led trauma-healing circles for victims of political assaults (Chemvumi 2011), peer-education campaigns against drug abuse (Tsingo et al. 2023), and entrepreneurial mentorship schemes that offer viable alternatives to gang activity (Zvaita and Kaye 2023). The findings from the 'Safe Schools' initiative further indicate that embedding violence-prevention curricula in Catholic and Protestant education systems can shift attitudes and reduce corporal punishment (Eldred et al. 2025). Nevertheless, much of the available evidence is programmatic or anecdotal; systematic inquiry into how church leaders conceptualise youth violence as a public-health threat and what concrete mechanisms they deploy to mitigate this violence amongst youths remains relatively understudied.

This presents a knowledge gap that requires empirical research to contribute to scholarship and practices of violence prevention. International frameworks such as INSPIRE

and the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children emphasise the importance of multi-sectoral coalitions, including faith-based actors, to deliver the seven evidence-based strategies for violence reduction. Failure to theorise and empirically validate church contributions risks overlooking scalable assets, such as moral authority, volunteer networks and physical infrastructure, that could strengthen state capacity and civil-society engagement. Similarly, critical engagement is required as church institutions may reproduce the patriarchal norms, stigmatise survivors or become entangled in partisan politics (Tarusarira 2015; Dodo 2023). There is therefore need for rigorous, contextually based research to explore when and how church-based interventions foster resilience, reduce weapon carrying and interrupt retaliatory cycles, and when they inadvertently sustain harm.

Against this background, this paper seeks to interrogate the intersection between youth violence and church-based activities in Zimbabwe. The paper poses some critical questions: How do church leaders understand the drivers and health consequences of youth violence, what faith-informed practices do they mobilise in response, and what contextual factors shape the effectiveness of these efforts? In answering these questions, the paper contributes to three intertwined conversations. First, it enriches the epidemiological literature on youth violence in Southern Africa by foregrounding subjective, community-embedded perspectives rather than macro-level crime indicators alone. Second, it advances the nascent field of faith-based public-health by empirically mapping the mechanisms (moral reframing, social-capital generation, trauma-healing liturgies) through which churches may disrupt violence trajectories. Finally, it offers timely insights for policymakers and multilateral agencies seeking to leverage indigenous institutions in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies. Ultimately, understanding the church's role is not merely academic; it is a pragmatic step toward crafting holistic, culturally resonant strategies capable of safeguarding Zimbabwe's youth from the lethal and lingering harms of violence.

2. Literature Review

Youth violence is now widely framed as a *syndemic*, an interaction of health, social and economic crises rather than an isolated crime problem, because it exacts severe mortality and morbidity while entrenching inter-generational poverty (Singer et al. 2021; Singer and Mendenhall 2022). The recent World Health Organization (WHO) statistics indicate that for every fatality, there are many more affected youths who suffer injuries that trigger chronic mental-health and cardiometabolic disorders (WHO 2024b). This public-health framing has prompted a paradigm shift from punitive policing toward multisectoral prevention strategies, notably the INSPIRE and CDC Community Violence Prevention Resource for Action packages, which synthesise three decades of programme evaluations (CDC 2024). However, debate persists around the relative weight to assign individual risk factors (e.g., neuro-behavioural traits, adverse childhood experiences) vis-à-vis structural drivers such as income inequality, segregation and firearm availability. Critics warn that an over-emphasis on individual behaviour “medicalises” violence and obscures power relations that perpetuate lethal environments in disinvested neighbourhoods.

2.1. Global Perspectives on Youth Violence

Empirical research studies show that effective violence-prevention interventions are layered across the social-ecological spectrum: early-childhood nurturing care, life-skills training, community mobilisation and legislative reforms all exhibit measurable impacts (Matjasko et al. 2012). The pace at which low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) can scale such evidence in the face of competing health priorities and weak surveillance systems remains highly contentious. High-income countries have generated robust data

on programme cost-effectiveness (especially around hospital-based violence-intervention programmes and firearm regulation) whereas LMIC research remains sparse and heterogeneous. A second debate concerns *gendered* violence. WHO's recent analysis shows that nearly one quarter of adolescent girls in relationships experience intimate-partner violence, with highest rates in regions marked by pronounced gender inequity (Farge 2024). It can be argued that conventional youth-violence taxonomies (largely developed in the United States) under-theorise the overlap between community, peer and dating violence, limiting the transferability of interventions across cultures.

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) have gained attention in global prevention discourse for two reasons: (1) they command deep moral legitimacy and (2) they usually have infrastructure where state services are unavailable. A recent study finds evidence that church-led initiatives have contributed significantly to wider societal conversations on the prevention of violence prevention through their emphasis on holistic understanding and inclusive strategies. (Ojemudia et al. 2024). Proponents highlight the capacity of FBOs to 'reframe' violence through moral narratives and to mobilise volunteers quickly during crises. On the other hand, critics counter that churches can reproduce patriarchal norms, stigmatise victims (especially those of sexual violence) and collude with political elites, thereby muting prophetic advocacy (Tarusarira 2015). This tension between prophetic and pastoral orientations constitutes a central unresolved debate in the field.

2.2. Regional Perspectives on Youth Violence

Sub-Saharan Africa bears a disproportionate share of youth violence. A 2024 scoping review of 97 studies from 15 African countries confirms high prevalence of physical assault, bullying and sexual coercion among adolescents, yet notes that fewer than 20% of the studies evaluate prevention outcomes (Ezenwosu and Uzochukwu 2025). South African research links concentrated poverty and alcohol outlet density to elevated homicide rates (Bachan 2022; Bowers et al. 2020), while Kenyan and Ugandan studies emphasise the spill-over of armed-group violence into urban slums (Sampaio 2020; Elfversson and Höglund 2019). Regionally, churches often fill welfare gaps; examples include Catholic Justice and Peace Commissions mediating gang truces in Cape Town, and Pentecostal youth clubs providing after-school care in Nairobi. Nonetheless, systematic impact assessments remain scarce, and little is known about how denominational differences shape programmatic models (Elfversson et al. 2024).

2.3. Youth Violence in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe epitomises the convergence of structural drivers that sustain youth violence: prolonged economic recession, high-density informal settlements, politicised policing and a burgeoning illicit-drug market (Mugari 2024). Nationally representative data show that 43% of children have experienced physical violence and over one third emotional violence before age 18 (Chigiji et al. 2018). District surveys in Mazowe and Shamva uncover normalised weapon carrying (machetes, catapults, improvised firearms) among teenage males (Dodo et al. 2019), while qualitative research in urban areas like Bulawayo and Harare have linked the escalating substance abuse to 'blessers' economies and unemployment (Muswerakuenda et al. 2023). However, political factors amplify this hazard as youths have been both perpetrators and victims of electoral and political violence (Dodo 2018). Paradoxically, the youths have also been at the forefront as leaders of non-violent hashtag movements such as #ThisFlag (Gukurume 2022).

Within this volatile context, Christian churches dominate the civic sphere with the majority of Zimbabweans associated with the various Christian communities. Churches historically oscillate between confrontation—e.g., the Zimbabwe Council of Churches' 2008

post-election peace appeals—and accommodation, especially when survival hinges on retaining state favours (Maforo 2020). Empirical studies reveal a patchwork of ecclesial responses. Trauma-healing liturgies and counselling services have assisted victims of political assaults (Chemvumi 2011; Chirambwi 2016); Apostolic congregations deploy *mukomana* peer mentors to dissuade weapon use (Dodo 2023); and the Catholic Bishops' Safe Schools initiative embeds anti-bullying curricula into parochial primary education (Eldred et al. 2025). Parallel youth-entrepreneurship ministries offer vocational training, theorised to provide alternatives to gang membership (Zvaita and Kaye 2023). Despite these initiatives, participation is often gender-skewed, resources thin, and monitoring frameworks under-developed.

2.4. Challenges in Leveraging Church Responses

Mobilising Zimbabwean churches as violence-prevention actors faces structural and ethical challenges. Chronic resource scarcity forces clergy to prioritise food relief over programme evaluation, undermining evidence generation. Political polarisation can deter prophetic critique: church leaders who condemn security-force brutality risk harassment, while those perceived as partisan lose credibility with youth sceptical of 'state churches.' Furthermore, some Pentecostal teachings emphasise individual sin and deliverance, diverting attention from systemic wage stagnation and housing deficits that underlie urban violence (Gukurume 2018). Gender dynamics present another dilemma: faith-based norms may dissuade young women from reporting partner violence or participating in mixed-gender activities, perpetuating a hidden burden documented in WHO analyses (Farge 2024). Consequently, scholars urge a nuanced approach that recognises churches' assets (moral legitimisation, volunteer labour, physical space) while scrutinising doctrinal or organisational blind spots (Tarusarira 2015).

3. Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

This study adopts a dual-lens framework that combines the public-health Social-Ecological Model (SEM) with Faith-Based Social Capital Theory (FBSCT). The integration offers both a *diagnostic* map of how youth violence is produced in Zimbabwe's urban spaces, and an *explanatory* account of how Christian congregations can disrupt that cycle. Together, they clarify the unit of analysis, inform the interview protocol, and generate testable expectations about the mechanisms through which church leaders may mitigate violence.

3.1. Social-Ecological Model (SEM)

Originally elaborated by the World Health Organization for violence prevention, the SEM posits that risk and protective factors operate across four nested tiers: individual, relational, community, and societal. Zimbabwean data vividly illustrate this multilevel pattern. At the *individual* tier, early exposure to physical or emotional abuse predicts later aggression and suicidal ideation (Chigiji et al. 2018; Chipalo and Jeong 2023). *Relationally*, peer cliques normalise weapon carrying and retaliatory tactics (Dodo et al. 2019). *Community* stressors (including overcrowded housing, flourishing drug markets, and weak policing) heighten routine exposure to assault (Mugari 2024). Finally, *societal* forces such as entrenched unemployment, electoral violence, and gender inequity entrench structural violence (Pilossof 2021; Dodo et al. 2016). Using SEM as the study's framework allows the interview guide to probe how church leaders perceive risk at *each* tier and where they locate their sphere of influence. For example, counselling ministries may target individual trauma, while public sermons may critique corrupt policing practices, addressing the societal tier. In analytical terms, SEM sensitises the coding scheme to multi-level interactions, for instance,

how a youth club (community-level) may reshape peer norms (relational) and, in turn, reduce individual propensities for violence.

3.2. Faith-Based Social Capital Theory (FBSCT)

While SEM clarifies *where* prevention must occur, it does not explain *how* congregations mobilise resources. FBSCT fills that gap by conceptualising churches as reservoirs of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital—intensive networks of trust, shared moral vocabularies, and vertical ties to external institutions (Putnam 2000). Empirical studies in Zimbabwe substantiate each facet. Bonding capital is evident in *mukomana* peer-mentor schemes within Apostolic sects that provide mutual monitoring against weapon use (Dodo 2023). Bridging capital surfaces in ecumenical youth-entrepreneurship clubs that connect high-density-suburb adolescents to business mentors beyond their immediate neighbourhoods (Zvaita and Kaye 2023). Linking capital operates when church-run schools collaborate with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to embed anti-bullying curricula, as observed in the *Safe Schools* pilot (Eldred et al. 2025).

FBSCT therefore posits that churches can mitigate violence through three social-capital-mediated pathways. Firstly, the normative pathway whereby shared religious narratives delegitimise retaliatory aggression and elevate forgiveness, reshaping peer scripts. Secondly, the instrumental pathway whereby congregational networks deliver tangible resources (e.g., vocational training, micro-grants) that furnish alternatives to illicit livelihoods. And thirdly, the psychological pathway in which trust-rich spaces facilitate disclosure of trauma and referral to mental-health or social-work services (Muswerakuenda et al. 2023). However, the theory also highlights challenges and limitations as patriarchal norms may exclude young women from decision-making, and political patronage can erode bridging capital across partisan lines (Tarusarira 2015; Maforo 2020). By foregrounding these dynamics, FBSCT enriches interview probes on gender inclusivity, resource mobilisation, and political pressures.

3.3. Application to the Study

Integrating SEM with FBSCT provides a cohesive and comprehensive explanatory model. SEM maps the *terrain* of risk; FBSCT specifies the *mechanisms* churches may deploy within that particular terrain. For instance, SEM flags community-level drug markets as a violence driver; FBSCT suggests that church-sponsored after-school programmes could generate bonding capital that steers youths away from those markets. Conversely, where FBSCT predicts that linking capital should enable policy advocacy, SEM helps interpret whether such advocacy reaches the societal tier or stalls amid political repression. This dual-lens approach addresses gaps in the extant literature. Zimbabwean scholarship richly describes either *structural determinants* (e.g., poverty, political violence) or *programmatic anecdotes* (e.g., trauma-healing liturgies) but seldom connects the two through a rigorous theoretical bridge. By explicitly tracing how social capital mediates multi-level risk, the present study advances both violence-prevention science and faith-sector scholarship. The framework guides *analysis* and *contribution*. Thematic coding will (i) classify leaders' descriptions of violence drivers by SEM tier and (ii) identify social-capital assets or deficits referenced in their narratives. Cross-tabulating these codes by denomination will illuminate comparative strengths and blind spots—thereby generating actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers seeking to integrate churches into Zimbabwe's national violence-prevention strategy.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Design

The study employs an interpretivist, qualitative design using semi-structured interviews. This approach privileges the subjective meanings church leaders ascribe to youth violence and illuminates the socio-ecological contexts in which their interventions unfold (Creswell and Poth 2018). The design aligns with Faith-Based Social Capital Theory, which assumes that congregational practices are best understood through the lived narratives of their custodians.

4.2. Study Location and Participant Sample

The study was premised on the data collected to understand church leaders' perspectives on youth violence. Data was collected in Zimbabwe's urban districts of Harare and Bulawayo. These districts were chosen for their high youth-violence prevalence, denominational diversity, and contrasting socio-economic profiles.

A purposive, maximum-variation sample of 20 church leaders captured denominational heterogeneity: mainline Protestant, Pentecostal/Charismatic, and Apostolic traditions. Eligibility criteria include (i) holding a leadership role recognised by the congregation, and (ii) direct involvement in, or oversight of, violence-prevention or youth-development activities. Initial contacts were recruited through existing ecumenical networks, while subsequent participants were identified via snowballing until data saturation was achieved (Guest et al. 2020). The study participants did not receive and remuneration for their participation, all participants engaged in the study voluntarily.

4.3. Interviews

The study employed a semi-structured interview approach to gather data on participants' demographic characteristics, perceptions of church leaders on urban youth violence. The researcher, skilled in qualitative research conducted interviews using an interview guide as a primary tool for data collection. The participants were all asked similar questions. The interviews lasted between 45 min and 90 min each. The interviews were conducted virtually as the study was conducted at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions were in place. The interviews were audio-recorded in both English, and Shona or Ndebele, with consent from the participants and then transcribed verbatim. Shona or Ndebele excerpts were translated and transcribed for analysis and interpretation.

4.4. Analysis

The study utilised thematic analysis to analyse the data, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). This method encompassed a six-phase process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis emphasized both semantic and latent content, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions on youth violence.

4.5. Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical clearance was secured from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC/00002977/2021) before the commencement of the data collection process. Participants received information sheets detailing the study's aims, voluntary nature, and confidentiality considerations. The study participants did not receive and remuneration for their participation, all participants engaged in the study voluntarily. All participants were encouraged to participate knowing that there were no benefits attached to the study, and they were all at liberty to withdraw participation at any given stage during

the process, with no consequences. Written consent (including permission to record) was sought prior to the interview sessions. Data was anonymised, stored on encrypted drives, and retained for five years in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA). Given potential political sensitivities, careful consideration was taken to avoid questions that could place leaders at risk of victimisation. Participants were informed they could withdraw at any stage of the interview process and had an option to answer any item without prejudice. However, the study has several limitations. Relying solely on leaders' perspectives may under-represent youth voices and congregants' lived realities. Findings will thus speak primarily to institutional narratives rather than programme outcomes. Moreover, purposive sampling limits statistical generalisability; nonetheless, the study aims to provide transferable insights into how faith-based social capital can be mobilised within comparable urban African settings.

5. Results

5.1. Participant Information. Theme 1: The Multi-Level Normalisation of Youth Violence

The study included 20 participants, with a higher male representation (80%). The majority (50%) were aged 35–50, 25% were under 35 years, 15% were aged 50–65 and 10% were aged 65 and above (See Figure 1 below). The prevalent denomination for the participants was Pentecostal.

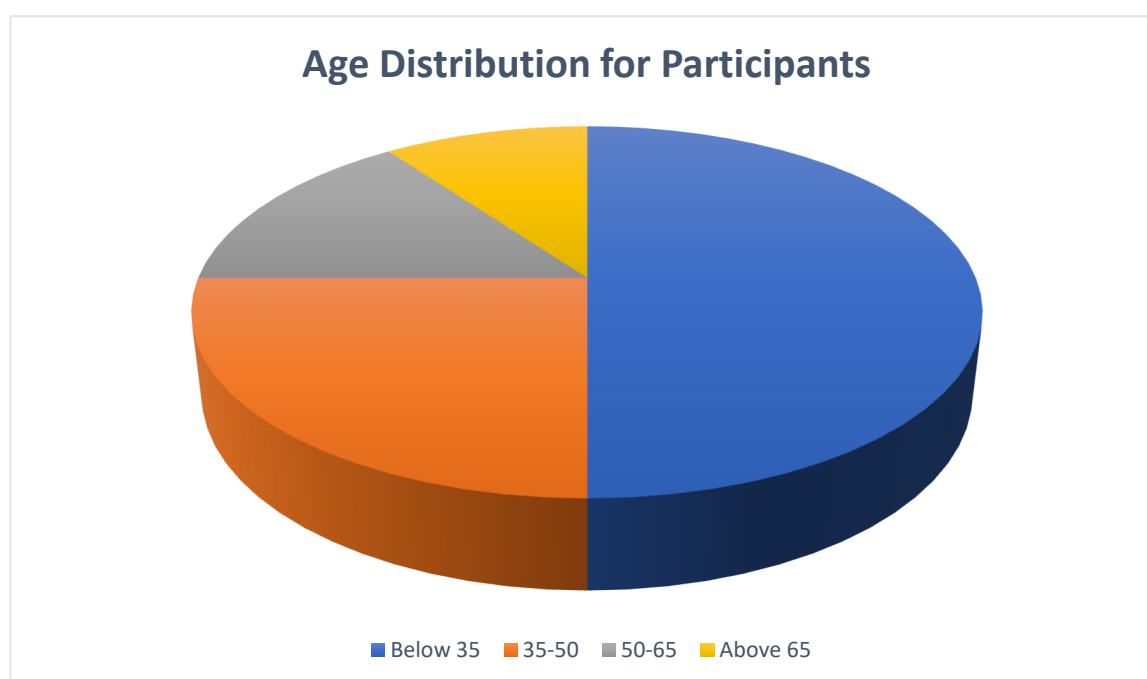


Figure 1. Age distribution for participants.

5.2. Theme 1: The Multi-Level Normalisation of Youth Violence

The church leaders portrayed violence as a routine feature of urban township life that is reproduced across the individual, relational, community and societal tiers of the social–ecological model (SEM). They emphasised that constant exposure to assault, political violence and substance-fuelled fights has made aggression appear inevitable to many young people. According to Participant 1

“You know our youths have not only been affected by political violence. There is violence everywhere. They engage in violence because of the drugs they abuse. Our township boys wake up expecting a fight the way others expect breakfast.

Yesterday it was fists at the kombi rank; tomorrow it will be knives outside the bottle-store."

This was echoed by another participant who noted that:

"Nowadays for these young people in the streets, carrying a knife is now as normal as carrying a phone. You hear young people saying I need it for my protection and you ask yourself what has our society turned into." (Participant 12)

The above sentiments by the church leaders indicate that youths are involved in violent activities. These narratives resonate with the existing findings that youths experience and are exposed to violence at a young age (Chigiji et al. 2018). The idea that young people resort to weapon carrying also aligns with the findings from Dodo et al. (2019) which also suggested that young males particularly the unemployed were synonymous with home-made weapons which have become an integral youth identity. The church leaders also reflected that the challenge is also further intensified by the fact that young people have almost been desensitised to violence in their communities. Participant 3 summarised the problem as follows:

"The reality is that our young people have become desensitized to violence. It's now almost normal. They are exposed to violent behaviour on the streets, in their homes, in their schools even. So, most of them have grown up in environments where aggression and violence are a survival mechanism. You can imagine if you've seen your friend beaten up or even witnessing a family member being subject to violence, you are most likely going to resort to finding ways of protecting yourself and this is mostly violent as well. So, it becomes a cycle that feeds on itself, and it becomes even harder to break."

This was emphasised by other participants who noted that:

"Violence has become so embedded in the daily lives of our young people. You know when they fall victim of violence, we see some of them attending church still with bruises and broken spirits, and they say, they have been involved in altercations, but it's almost like they don't see it as something out of the ordinary, just as another day in their world." (Participant 5)

"From a pastoral standpoint, we've seen how exposure to constant violence shapes the mindset of our youth. They grow up in communities where violence is the expected outcome of most disputes. It is seen as a form of power and control. As a result, our youth have a distorted reality, and the politicians capitalise on this to incite political violence. That the challenge we are dealing with." (Participant 18)

These perspectives build on the idea that violence is not just an external factor, but something deeply rooted in the lived experiences of young people. The insights from the church leaders highlights how violence has become normalized and even expected, shaping the youth's worldview and behaviours, and reinforcing the need for holistic intervention at multiple levels of the social-ecological model. Some participants attributed this normalisation to the family structure or lack thereof. As Participant 11 reflected:

"I think the violence starts from the home environment in some cases. In some families, it's the norm for young people to witness their parents or siblings engage in violent acts, whether it's physical fighting or verbal abuse. This environment doesn't teach love or peace; it teaches survival through dominance. In my experience, many of the youth we encounter in church come from these environments, so when they see violence being perpetuated elsewhere, for them it is almost as if it's normal." (Participant 11)

From the above sentiments it is evident that youths are exposed to violent activities and it has almost become a norm for young people to engage in violent behaviour. This link between family socialisation and shaping violent behaviour resonates with findings by [Baglivio and Epps \(2016\)](#) which highlighted the relationship between witnessing household violence and the development of behavioural challenges and delinquency. It has also been reported that children who grow up in households that witness quarrels, arguments, fighting and physical and/or emotional violence experience increased trauma ([Duke et al. 2010](#)). Such traumas tend to shape future violent behaviours and/or perceptions on violence by the youth ([Leban and Delacruz 2023](#)).

These findings therefore highlight a significant crisis of youth violence and links it to the various social ills like poverty, unemployment and substance abuse. The church leaders therefore indicated that the church has a great responsibility of being the moral compass of society hence its activities must seek to deal with the root causes of violence and not simply treat the symptoms. Evidence shows that beyond the provision of pastoral support, the Church is regarded as a potential moral authority with the capacity to influence peacebuilding, promote justice, and provide healing for victims of violence ([Ndlovu 2025](#)). The findings confirm that Zimbabwean youth violence is entrenched across SEM tiers, demanding interventions that extend beyond individual behaviour change to structural reform. However, while some participants attributed violence to factors such as alcohol, drugs and substance abuse by the youths, others provided a different and broadened perspective which focused on the cultural and moral breakdown as the root cause for the violence amongst youths. As participant 6 narrated:

“It’s easy to blame drugs, gangs, and poverty for youth violence, but we must also consider the cultural erosion that has taken place in our communities. The moral fabric of society has been weakened. The respect for elders, the value of life, and the sanctity of human dignity—these are things that many of our youth no longer understand or appreciate. They live in a world where material success is prioritized over community well-being, and where violence is seen as the only means to assert power. The church’s role, therefore, is to teach not just moral principles, but to restore the dignity of the individual.”

This quote highlights the role of cultural changes and the loss of traditional values in shaping youth violence. It suggests that, beyond just the physical or economic causes of violence, there is a deeper cultural and moral breakdown. The erosion of respect for life and the shift in value systems is critical in understanding the normalisation of violence in youth culture. This perspective calls for a restoration of values as part of the solution, which transcends mere criminal justice responses. Such a perspective places the church at the centre of generating solutions to the scourge of violence. The church is seen as a moral compass of society and has a responsibility to entrench Christian non-violent values in society as well as values of respect for human dignity. This same sentiment was shared by Participant 7:

“The violence we see today is not only physical but also emotional and psychological. Our young people are also victims of a society that has given up on them. Many of these youth carry scars of neglect, abandonment, and emotional trauma that fuel their anger. They lash out because they are in pain, not just because they have learned violence. It’s important to understand that the violence we witness is often a manifestation of deep-rooted hurt that has been ignored by both the state and community. Until we start addressing these emotional wounds, the violence will continue to escalate.”

This perspective shifts the focus from the external triggers of violence, such as drugs or gangs, to the internal emotional and psychological struggles faced by youth. It brings attention to the importance of understanding youth violence as a response to emotional trauma and neglect, framing it as a symptom of larger social and emotional crises. This view calls for a more nuanced approach to intervention, one that integrates emotional healing and psychological support, as opposed to focusing purely on punitive measures.

Similarly Participant 9 noted the following:

“Some of the youth are caught in a cycle of violence because they don’t see any other option. We often forget that many of them have been abandoned by systems that should have supported them. When we talk about solutions, we must ask ourselves: what alternatives are we providing for these young people? The reality is that many of them have never been given a chance to experience peaceful conflict resolution, or positive models of leadership. They simply don’t know how to deal with problems without resorting to violence.”

This suggests that youth violence stems from a lack of alternatives, both in terms of social models and practical avenues for resolving conflict. The absence of positive role models or exposure to peaceful ways of dealing with problems leads young people to adopt violence as a coping mechanism. The church, in this view, is encouraged not just to preach but to actively provide mentorship and alternative frameworks for dealing with conflict. This perspective emphasizes prevention and empowerment, rather than focusing solely on the destructive behaviours.

This above theme discusses the different perspectives that emphasise the deeper emotional, cultural, and systemic causes of youth violence. The results indicate that beyond physical violence, issues of emotional neglect, cultural disintegration, and a lack of alternatives play a pivotal role in the normalisation of violence. This aligns with the socio-ecological model which explains how different layers of an individual’s environment shapes violent behaviour and/or perceptions ([van der Merwe et al. 2013](#)). The findings indicate that the interactions of the youth with their social environments affects the manner in which they perceive and engage with violence.

5.3. Theme 2: Dealing with Spiritual and Structural Sources of Violence

A dominant narrative among participants is that violence stems from evil source and therefore according to the church leaders, youth violence must be dealt with through spiritually engaging the nation in prayer. Some church leaders interviewed perceived violence as an act of evil with an external influence of spirits. It is imperative to note that participants that shared this view are associated with the Pentecostal movement. According to Participant 15:

“Violence whether domestic, gender-based, political or youth violence begins when the heart hosts an evil spirit; we cannot deal with it without addressing the state of the heart. That is why the church is critical in the fight against violence. We have to begin the fight spiritually and then do some programs physically to sustain the spiritual work. That’s the only way we can eradicate violence in our communities.”

The conceptualisation of violence as a heart issue (harbouring evil) was also emphasised by Participant 10:

“From a spiritual perspective, violence is deeply rooted in the hearts of individuals who are disconnected from God’s love.”

The above sentiment highlights a shared view amongst mostly Pentecostal church leaders. However, other church leaders also believed that violence is not only the work of evil influence but a reaction to injustice. As one church leader noted:

“While violence is evil, we cannot hide behind evil spirits. Some of the causes of this violence are man-made like poor governance, mismanagement of resources, corruption, lack of creation of jobs for the young people in particular. So yes we can cast evil spirits out, but if the unemployment remains, we are far from getting rid of violence. That is how I see it.

We must also address the structures that oppress our youth, such as poverty and lack of opportunities. The Bible speaks of justice and fair treatment for the poor, so as a church, we must actively engage in both spiritual and structural restoration. Prayer alone will not change the fact that many of our young people have no jobs or no hope for the future.”

While the participants oscillated between spiritual and structural explanations for violence, with some framing violence as a manifestation of evil spiritual forces and others citing systemic injustices and economic marginalisation. A common and recurring theme was the need for divine intervention and social action. As participant 2 noted:

“It’s simple, we need to pray and seek God. Remember, the bible says in Chronicles, if the people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and repent from their sins I will hear from heaven and will heal their land. Prayer is the answer. We need to pray and repent as a nation from all the violence and turn to God for help.”

The church leaders acknowledged their role in the prevention and mitigation of violence. As participant 11 highlighted:

“Interestingly, this should be our role (to prevent violence) because the bible says that the blessed are the peacemakers. We should make sure that we play a role in making our communities peaceful.”

This was further emphasised by participant 4:

“Violence is indeed a manifestation of deeper spiritual issues, but we cannot ignore the socio-economic pressures that lead young people to violence. While prayer and spiritual intervention are paramount.”

The above reflections present a more nuanced approach to understanding violence by integrating spiritual insights with socio-economic factors. They emphasise the necessity for the church to balance its spiritual mission with active participation in addressing systemic issues such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption. This hybrid approach aligns with the growing recognition that faith-based efforts to reduce violence are most effective when combined with structural change. However, some participants provided more pragmatic responses to dealing with the scourge of youth violence. As Participant 9 acknowledged:

“While I understand the spiritual forces at play in violence, I do not believe that we can address violence only through prayer. Yes, prayer is essential, but we must also address the consequences of years of neglect and lack of support systems for our youth. For many, violence is an outlet for frustration, and if we only pray without offering concrete solutions—like jobs, education, and mental health support—we are not truly addressing the root causes of violence. It’s a cycle of despair that needs a holistic intervention, not just a spiritual one.”

This view presents a more pragmatic view, suggesting that spiritual intervention, while important, is not a standalone solution to violence. The church leader stressed the

importance of addressing the material and emotional needs of youth, such as providing education, employment, and mental health services as integral to reducing violence. This perspective calls for a more balanced, integrated approach, combining prayer with social support systems. Similarly, participant 14 added:

“Violence may have its spiritual roots, but we must also recognize that some people have grown accustomed to living in an environment where violence is a way of life. It becomes ingrained in their behaviour, especially when no other alternatives are offered. We can pray all we want, but we must also give our youth hope—hope for a future where they are not trapped in a cycle of violence and poverty. Prayer and spiritual intervention alone cannot fill the void left by the lack of hope or opportunity. We must actively work to provide the youth with better options for their lives.”

This perspective draws attention to the psychological and existential aspects of violence. It suggests that spiritual intervention must be coupled with efforts to restore hope and provide tangible opportunities for young people. Without addressing the broader socio-economic environment that shapes their outlook on life, the spiritual approach may not achieve long-term transformation. This viewpoint advocates for a strategy that integrates both spiritual healing and practical avenues for social mobility. In addition, Participant 16 also highlighted:

“The real challenge with addressing violence lies not just in the spiritual domain but also in the societal structures that uphold injustice. The violence in our communities often arises from structural inequality, where the poor and marginalized are left with no recourse but to turn to aggression. The church has a duty to fight for social justice, to speak out against the systems that perpetuate violence—whether in the form of corrupt leadership or exploitation of the vulnerable. It’s not just about ‘casting out spirits’—it’s about dismantling the systems that enable violence to thrive in the first place.”

This sentiment provides a perspective that focuses on structural inequality and the church’s role in social justice. It critiques a narrow focus on spiritual warfare without addressing the broader systemic forces that enable violence to persist. The church leader emphasizes that the fight against violence must include a confrontation of the socio-political systems that create and sustain conditions of injustice and oppression.

These responses indicate that the church is called not only to mediate conflicts through prayer but also to create an environment where the peace and non-violence can prevail. The teachings of Jesus, emphasizing unity, love, and non-violence, are the guiding principles of the church. The data reveals an emergent synthesis whereby leaders increasingly see spiritual redemption as a gateway to socio-economic empowerment, not a substitute for it. This hybrid stance aligns with global research showing that faith communities achieve greatest violence-reduction impact when moral messaging is coupled with structural support ([Ojiemudia et al. 2024](#)).

5.4. Theme 3: Building Safety Nets and Violence Prevention

The results indicate that across denominations, church leaders mobilise bonding, bridging and linking forms of social capital to steer youths away from violence. Internal peer networks monitor risk behaviour; inter-faith partnerships provide constructive outlets; and selective links with state agencies enable referrals to health and training services. The church leaders acknowledged that they have a responsibility to identify early warning signs of violence and intervene before it escalates. As participant 8 noted:

“In this part of the world, it is very easy for church leaders to identify these spheres of violence, because it’s very obvious in this part of the world. . . It’s very obvious to identify. . . Young people are easy to read, they can barely hide their frustrations. If they are not happy with something they will voice it out, you will see by their actions that something is wrong.”

Participant 3 also emphasised the importance on paying attention to young people’s behaviour and notice sudden changes which could point to the likelihood of violent behaviour, stating that:

“You can see that sometimes young people don’t go to church. They don’t go to church, sometimes not because they don’t want to go to church but because there are certain obstacles—for example, there’s no money for transport. . . But if the trend is persistent, it could be because of dissatisfaction and frustration. . .”

According to Participant 5:

“Our church has long-established peer networks within the youth group. These networks allow young people to monitor and influence each other’s behaviours in a way that is both supportive and corrective. If one member is going down a dangerous path, the rest of the group—often without much intervention from us—will address the issue. It’s these deep relational connections that help us prevent violence at a peer level. When the bond is strong, young people tend to help each other, and that’s a powerful resource. We just need to make sure we cultivate these networks effectively.”

This quote illustrates the concept of bonding social capital, where strong relationships within the church community, especially among youth groups, create a supportive network that enables early detection of potential risks and provides an internal system of accountability. These networks help foster positive peer pressure and support among young people, steering them away from violent behaviours. Similarly, Participant 7 added:

“We’ve seen great success in collaborating with other faith-based organizations and local NGOs to provide our youth with alternative outlets. Whether it’s sporting events, creative workshops, or community outreach, these partnerships broaden the scope of what we can offer our youth. These projects give young people a sense of belonging outside of the violent environments they may be exposed to. We have a responsibility to bridge these gaps in their lives, not just through preaching but through tangible actions that give them hope and direction.”

This perspective highlights bridging social capital, where the church mobilizes external partnerships with other faith-based organizations and NGOs to offer youth alternative forms of engagement. These partnerships create diverse opportunities for young people, extending their social networks and providing constructive outlets that can prevent them from resorting to violence. This was also corroborated by Participant 12:

“One of the most effective strategies we’ve adopted is our collaboration with local government agencies, especially those focused on youth development and employment. These partnerships enable us to provide resources, such as vocational training and health services, that directly address the root causes of violence—unemployment, lack of skills, and mental health issues. It’s crucial that the church acts as a connector, linking the youth with the resources and opportunities they need to thrive. This is where our work with state agencies becomes crucial in complementing what we do spiritually.”

The above view illustrates linking social capital, where the church leverages relationships with state agencies to provide tangible benefits to the youth, such as vocational training and health services. By connecting young people to these resources, the church helps address the structural causes of violence, such as unemployment and mental health challenges, thereby reducing the likelihood of violent behaviour. This aligns with research evidence which shows that preventing and reducing violence among youths by addressing their root causes often leads to sustainable positive outcomes in adulthood (Almeida et al. 2024). Furthermore, Participant 6 highlighted:

“It is essential to have programs where youth can voice their concerns and frustrations in a safe space. These workshops, often done in partnership with local government and NGOs, not only help them articulate their struggles but also offer them a clear path for solutions. We encourage them to look for peaceful resolutions, but these programs also introduce them to social services that can assist in dealing with trauma, substance abuse, and joblessness. This gives them real alternatives to the violence they may encounter on the streets.”

This quote highlights the bridging role of the church through collaborative workshops and programs with local agencies. The integration of external services, such as trauma counselling and substance abuse programs, offers the youth practical resources to address underlying issues, providing alternatives to violence.

Building on the same line of thinking, participant 11 added that church leaders must pay attention to what the young people are saying especially in their social media platforms where they voice their frustrations. This allows the church leaders to capture early signs of political unrest, especially among the youth, who are known to vocalize their discontent online. Such will allow the church to mobilise its capital to deal with the potential causes of violence before it occurs. The church can then implement projects that seek to prevent violence by offering alternative programs to engage the youths and keep them from environments and behaviours that fuel violence. Participant 13 underscored the importance of collaborative projects with government bodies, NGOs and relevant stakeholders in the fight against violence in communities:

“The number two way is having projects that we do with the government. . . then we come in as a church. . . it would be easier for us to identify that violence and to deal with it. The emphasis here is on the proactive, developmental role of the church. This includes conducting workshops, training programs, and leadership development courses. The church can also conduct workshops for its congregants, as much as the church does have workshops that address other subjects like HIV/AIDS, let the church have workshops that address matters of peace and reconciliation, political violence, or any other form of violence and not just narrow it down to violence and at the same time conscientize the congregants who in turn will understand their role in society. Sometimes we do have our congregants that engage in political violence when they get out there because they are not equipped. They lack conscientization.”

The data above shows that the early warning system must lead to practices and interventions that include a range of actors, parties and relevant stakeholders. This aligns with Faith-Based Social Capital Theory as intensive trust networks (bonding) detect relapse, while partnerships with local NGOs (bridging) diversify opportunities. Eldred et al. demonstrates similar success embedding anti-bullying curricula in Catholic schools (Eldred et al. 2025). Zvaita & Kaye’s study in Mbare further shows that youth entrepreneurship clubs spearheaded by civic organisations foster agency and reduce gang affiliation (Zvaita and Kaye 2023). The data shows how *rapid relational feedback* such as spotting missed church

services can serve as a micro-preventive mechanism, complementing formal programmes that deal with mitigating violence. However, it is imperative to note that the church does not have a comprehensive sustainability plan with clear plan on how to act on the early warnings and provide measures to reduce and/or eliminate future violence.

5.5. Theme 4: Gendered Nature of Youth Violence

The data shows that youth violence is not experienced the same by the young people. While youth violence is perpetuated by the youths, the youths are both victims and perpetrators of violence. The data indicates that due to economic hardships, young people have been exploited by the political elite to perpetuate violence in their communities particularly during election seasons. Secondly, the data also reveals the gendered nature of the violence as young women and girls are mostly affected by the violence as compared to their male counterparts. This gendered nature of the violence not only manifests in physical harm or loss of life but extends to emotional and psychological trauma. These long-lasting psychological and emotional scars and gendered forms of abuse such as rape, intimidation, and humiliation are often marginalised or overlooked. This means that for many young women and girls, the violence lingers long after the actual violence comes to an end. According to one participant:

“In 2008 I had a member in my church who was pregnant. And during the political violence, she was beaten to an extent that she even lost her pregnancy because of the internal injuries she had sustained. Even though we could pray for her and counsel her, it is a difficult process for her to completely heal from the whole experience. Emotionally she was broken. It is difficult for her to erase that picture, yes by grace she has forgiven them over the years but that experience lives with her forever. It’s very difficult for women (and girls) to cope with the aftereffects of violence.” (Participant 2)

Similarly, Participant 14 recounted:

“There are women who were raped in political violence. . . they cannot talk about it. Some were infected with diseases. Some were chased away from their homes by their husbands after that. Some even got pregnant and gave birth to children from these unfortunate events. The targeting of women is totally evil.”

This narrative highlights the silencing and double victimisation of the survivors of sexual violence: first at the hands of perpetrators, and then within their communities and families. The trauma is compounded by patriarchal blame and stigma, reinforcing women’s exclusion from spaces of healing and redress. This aligns with [Chidhawu \(2024\)](#) findings that in Zimbabwean context, which is highly patriarchal, gender-based political violence, particularly rape, is systematically underreported and culturally repressed. He argues that this leads to survivors being doubly punished: first by the act, then by silence. This therefore requires the church leaders to be conscious of the gender dynamics at play in violence and ensure that their approaches are sensitive to this reality. In addition, Participant 6 made the following observations:

“During conflict, young women and girls, especially in conflict zones, experience violence in ways that are not just physical but deeply psychological. The scars of sexual violence, emotional torment, and the stigma of being victims are not easily healed. . . The hardest part for them is the internal shame they feel, and it often leads to isolation. The church’s role is not only to provide spiritual healing but also to create safe spaces where women can express their pain without fear of judgment.”

The above narrative speaks to the emotional and psychological trauma that young women endure following violence. It highlights the stigma that often surrounds female victims of violence, leading to isolation and further victimization. The church leader stresses the importance of offering not just spiritual support but also safe spaces where women can share their experiences and begin the healing process. Similarly, Participant 9 added:

“The gendered aspect of violence is something we often overlook in our communities. Young men, while victims in their own right, often perpetuate violence against women because they are socialized to view women as subordinate. In our church, we must actively address these gendered norms and teach our young men about respect, equality, and the dignity of women. We cannot build a peaceful society unless we challenge the patriarchal structures that allow this violence to continue.”

This reflection focuses on the gendered norms that fuel violence, particularly how young men, shaped by societal expectations, often turn to violence against women as a form of asserting control. This aligns with findings by [Broidy et al. \(2015\)](#) that males are more likely to engage in perpetuating violence and/or offending behaviour as compared to their female counterparts. Thus, the church leader calls for educational interventions that challenge patriarchal structures and promote gender equality among young people. This view connects violence with deep-rooted gender norms that must be deconstructed for true peacebuilding. According to Participant 13:

“I’ve seen young women in my congregation who were affected by political violence, and while their bodies may heal, the emotional damage lasts forever. These women are often left to deal with the trauma alone, without the support they need from their communities. The church has a responsibility not only to provide spiritual counsel but also to address the systemic silence that surrounds gendered violence. We must speak up for the women whose pain is ignored because of their gender. Until we address this silence, the cycle of violence will continue.”

The above highlights the systemic silence that surrounds gendered violence, where women’s experiences are often neglected or minimized. The church leader calls for a more proactive role in speaking out against the patriarchal structures that suppress women’s voices and prevent proper healing. This speaks to the importance of both spiritual and social interventions that break the silence surrounding gender-based violence.

“While men often suffer physical violence, women bear the brunt of violence in ways that affect their dignity. Rape, sexual harassment, and the constant fear of being targeted simply because of their gender are daily realities for many of our young women. What is even more heartbreaking is the reluctance of the community to support them in the aftermath. Women are often blamed, ostracized, or ignored, and this is where the church’s role becomes crucial. We must not only provide support to the victims but also educate the community to stop the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes.”

This perspective underscores the gender-specific forms of violence that women face, including rape, sexual harassment, and the societal stigma that follows. The church leader stresses the importance of community education, advocating for the deconstruction of harmful gender stereotypes and calling for the church to take a leading role in addressing the cultural dynamics that support violence against women. The goal is to create a community culture that does not tolerate such violence and provides genuine support for survivors. In the same vein, Participant 10 stated the following:

“Violence against women is not just a physical act; it is a means of asserting power and control. In the context of our youth, this power dynamic is perpetuated by both social and political forces. We must address this issue at its core by educating young people about gender equality, respect for women, and the role of women in our society. The church must teach these principles clearly, because if we don’t, the cycle of violence will only continue, and women will continue to be the primary victims.”

This perspective highlights the power dynamics that underlie gendered violence, where violence is used to assert control over women. The church leader advocates for a systemic change in the way young people are educated about gender equality, emphasizing the need for respect and empowerment of women. The call for teaching these principles within the church is a recognition that the church’s moral authority can play a pivotal role in breaking the cycle of violence.

The data shows that while churches provide critical buffers, the church leaders need to navigate the patriarchal traditions in executing their interventions against violence in communities. The study argues that the church must be conscious of the existing patriarchal biases that exist in society and devise intentional systems that do not reproduce these patriarchal norms. This aligns with [Zengenene and Susanti \(2019, p. 91\)](#) who argued that there is need to deal with the root causes that undermine women (particularly patriarchal norms) that ultimately leads to violence against women. For effective peacebuilding to occur, there is need to deconstruct the same hierarchies that initially produced violence.

6. Discussion

Youth violence in Zimbabwe’s urban townships is neither a random outbreak of delinquency nor solely a question of law-enforcement failure; it is a deeply layered public-health crisis generated by intersecting structural, community and relational forces and sustained by chronic trauma and socio-economic precarity.

The Social–Ecological Model (SEM) underscores that youth violence cannot be isolated to the individual level but must be understood within the broader context of community and societal influences. Youth violence is often a dynamic process influenced by multiple levels of interactions between individuals and their broader socio-ecological environment ([Paat et al. 2025](#)). The study shows how Faith-based social capital can make a significant impact in these areas. For instance, churches, as social capital hubs, can provide an integrated approach, addressing the individual, community, and societal layers of the social ecology.

At the individual level, churches are able to foster bonding social capital through close-knit relationships within their congregations, particularly among youth groups. This kind of social capital is rooted in trust, mutual support, and shared values, allowing church leaders to monitor risk behaviours and intervene before violence escalates. It is argued that faith-based organisations possess an inherent capacity to create a culture of mutual trust that enables communities to act collectively to address challenges like violence ([Bunn and Wood 2012](#)). The results show that church leaders intuitively recognise the early warning signs of violent tendencies in youth, such as emotional distress, withdrawal from social activities, and behavioural changes. The study data highlights how these peer networks within the church help young people identify signs of distress, offering early intervention that prevents violence from escalating. As postulated by the control theory, strong bonds are argued to have the potential of weakening the influence of deviant peers on violent behaviour through enabling close social bonds that reinforce positive behaviour ([Fergusson et al. 2007](#)).

However, the bonding that occurs within these peer groups can also be problematic when group norms reinforce negative behaviours or exclusionary practices (Paat et al. 2025). In the context of Zimbabwe, these internal church networks can sometimes perpetuate gendered exclusions, where young women may find themselves marginalized or excluded due to patriarchal norms within both the church and broader community. This is evident in the participant comments, which highlight how young women often bear the psychological scars of gendered violence that are overlooked in these closed networks. Therefore, to counteract these exclusions, it is vital for church leaders to engage in gender-sensitive interventions that ensure both male and female youth benefit equally from support networks within the church.

At the community level, churches play an essential role in leveraging bridging social capital through partnerships with NGOs and interfaith organizations. These collaborations extend the church's reach and provide youth with access to resources such as sports programs, creative workshops, and vocational training. Participant 7 stresses how these partnerships help create alternative outlets for youth, steering them away from violent behaviours by offering them engaging activities that provide hope and a sense of belonging.

The results show that bridging social capital is crucial in connecting faith-based organizations with external resources, helping them to expand their impact on youth violence. In Zimbabwe, these collaborations can facilitate the provision of mental health support, career counselling, and educational opportunities. However, this potential is often constrained by political and social barriers that limit access to these resources. Bridging social capital can be significantly hindered by a lack of institutional support and resource allocation (Baker and Smith 2010). This observation is particularly pertinent in Zimbabwe, where political intimidation often curtails the church's ability to form effective partnerships with external organizations.

At the societal level, the church's capacity to form linking social capital—i.e., its ability to connect youth with state agencies and institutional resources—is crucial. These linkages allow youth to access vocational training, mental health services, and employment opportunities—all of which directly address the root causes of violence. The results emphasize that linking social capital helps faith-based organizations connect individuals to formal institutions that can offer substantial assistance in the face of systemic challenges. Participant 12 highlights how the church's relationships with government agencies provide youth with direct access to state-funded services that can help alleviate the economic and psychological conditions that contribute to violence.

However, the linking capacity of the church is severely constrained by bureaucratic inefficiencies and political resistance. Hepworth and Stitt (2007) argue that faith-based organizations often struggle to secure sustained access to government resources, particularly when political agendas undermine the effectiveness of collaborative efforts. In Zimbabwe, church-state relations are often fraught with political tension, limiting the church's ability to fully leverage these linkages for the benefit of youth violence prevention.

One of the most pressing challenges that the church faces in addressing youth violence is the gendered nature of the violence itself. Young women and girls experience violence not only in physical terms but also through psychological trauma, rape, humiliation, and emotional torment. Participants emphasize how these gendered forms of violence often leave psychological scars that extend long after the violence ends. Ndlovu (2025) highlights the need for gender-sensitive approaches within violence prevention strategies, noting that social capital must be used to address the structural power imbalances that lead to the marginalization of women. The church, therefore, must ensure that its interventions are not only spiritually restorative but also psychologically and emotionally supportive of young women, particularly survivors of gender-based violence.

Addressing gendered violence requires faith communities to become advocates for social justice, challenging patriarchal norms and providing safe spaces where women can heal (Bunn and Wood 2012). Participants underscore the importance of this by arguing that the church must educate young men about gender equality, ensuring that future generations reject violent and discriminatory attitudes toward women. This advocacy work is essential to create a culture of peace and respect, where gendered violence is actively opposed both within and outside the church community.

7. Conclusions

The study makes the following conclusions. First, the study concludes that youth violence in Zimbabwe's urban townships is a deeply layered public health crisis, not a random outbreak of delinquency or merely the result of failures in law enforcement. It is driven by intersecting structural, community, and relational forces, sustained by chronic trauma and socio-economic precarity. Thus, this comprehensive understanding situates youth violence as a complex, multifaceted issue that requires a multi-tiered approach to effectively address it. Secondly, the study highlights that Christian churches play a critical role in violence prevention, using Faith-Based Social Capital Theory to demonstrate how churches can leverage bonding, bridging, and linking social capital to intervene in youth violence. Churches offer a unique space to address both the spiritual and socio-economic drivers of violence by providing moral guidance alongside tangible and practical livelihood and psychosocial support systems. As such the study concludes that a holistic approach is essential, where spiritual practices, such as prayer and moral guidance, are complemented by practical efforts to address underlying socio-economic issues like unemployment, poverty, and lack of opportunity. Some church leaders advocate for integrating spiritual intervention with concrete social action, emphasizing the need to tackle both the spiritual and systemic causes of violence. Despite the church's potential as an agent of change, the study identifies several challenges that undermine its effectiveness. These include resource limitations, gendered exclusions, and political intimidation that constrain the church's capacity to fully mobilise its bridging and linking social capital. The church's efforts are further hindered by the lack of a sustainability plan, making it difficult to ensure long-term impact. A more coordinated, multi-sectoral approach involving state agencies, NGOs, and church communities is recommended to ensure the church's initiatives have a lasting impact on youth violence. The study further emphasises the gendered nature of youth violence, showing that young women and girls are disproportionately affected by violence, particularly through sexual violence, rape, and emotional trauma. The study advocates for the church to adopt gender-sensitive interventions that address not only physical trauma but also the emotional and psychological damage caused by gender-based violence. Furthermore, church leaders are called to challenge patriarchal norms that perpetuate gendered violence. Finally, the study concludes that church-based violence prevention programs have a critical role to play in Zimbabwe's urban townships but must be sustained, gender-sensitive, and multi-sectoral to address the root causes of youth violence effectively.

8. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, a comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach is necessary to address the deeply entrenched issue of youth violence in Zimbabwe's urban townships. Church leaders must prioritise capacity-building within their congregations to effectively address youth violence. This includes training church leaders and youth leaders in trauma-informed care, gender-sensitive approaches, and violence-prevention strategies. Training youth leaders and pastors in trauma care, focusing on psychosocial and emotional support for youth survivors of violence, is critical. This would equip church leaders to

recognise early warning signs of violent behaviour and provide safe spaces for youth to discuss their issues. The church may also benefit through organising workshops on gender equality and non-violence as part of the church's regular programming, addressing issues such as gender-based violence, sexual violence, and domestic abuse.

The study also recommends that churches should develop gender-sensitive interventions that prioritise the emotional and psychological needs of young women and girls who are disproportionately affected by violence. This includes establishing safe spaces for women and girls within the church community, where they can receive counselling, share their experiences, and heal from trauma in a supportive environment. Providing life skills and empowerment programs for young women that include vocational training, financial literacy, and leadership development will not only help young women build their own futures but also empower them to make independent decisions free from violence.

Additionally, the study recommends ecumenical pooling of resources towards violence prevention. The church should collaborate with other faith-based organisations and NGOs to pool resources for the creation of safe, supervised youth spaces. These spaces would provide alternatives to violent environments and offer constructive activities for at-risk youth. By pooling resources, the church can expand its outreach efforts and provide youth with multiple positive outlets. These collaborative programs can foster community cohesion and offer long-term alternatives to violence.

The study further recommends the implementation of multi-sectoral coordination involving churches, local governments, youth organizations, and health institutions to address youth violence from all dimensions: social, psychological, educational, and economic. This may include creating a national or regional task force on youth violence prevention, consisting of faith-based organizations, local government representatives, youth leaders, law enforcement, and mental health professionals. By adopting such a collaborative approach, these efforts can address the complex roots of violence and create an ecosystem of support that offers youth multiple avenues of protection and empowerment. Long-term partnerships across sectors will ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of violence-prevention efforts.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

FBST	Faith-Based Social Capital Theory
LMIC	Low and Middle Income Countries
FBO	Faith Based Organisation
SEM	Socio-Ecological Model
WHO	World Health Organisation

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