

## TOOLTHREE

## “ESCAPE FROM THE PRISON OF THE MIND”



The following story was originally published in The Sunday Times, 3 June 2012. It has been shortened and reproduced with permission.

### “Escape from the Prison of the Mind”

by Tshekiso Molohlanyi

When people ask why there is so much violent crime in this country, I want to tell them that I know why. Not the big answer on behalf of all violent criminals in South Africa, but a small answer on behalf of me.

There are things I have done – bad things – which I wish I could undo, but I can’t bring myself to tell you about them. I could give you a fancy reason that I don’t want to incriminate myself because justice is one-sided, but the truth is I’m scared of going back to prison.

I came out of jail consumed by anger, but determined to leave the gangster life. As a result I was forced to leave Khuma township, near Stilfontein in the North West province and go live with my grandfather in Ventersdorp. Every morning I was sent out to tend his sheep and cattle. He was strict to the point of never talking to me, and I spent most days on the hills crying in frustration, with only animals to listen. Eventually I cursed myself enough not to care what happened to me, and went home to face whatever. Nobody was there to help me bury my past, but me on my own.

During my time in prison I saw someone being strangled to death and then dismembered into three pieces. No one was charged for that. I feared to talk because I was scared that they would do the same thing to me. I was trapped in a living hell beyond anything I’d experienced outside. I was bullied and spent days without food. My gangster friends deserted me. But actually I went into prison already filled with rage. Prison did nothing to help me, but my fury had preceded it.

It was a fury borne out of bitterness and a desire for revenge. Sometimes I could contain it by smoking dagga mixed with nyaope (one very dangerous drug!) and rat poison. It killed our anxiety and boosted our confidence. It made us fearless and willing to act without hesitation. I craved money and popularity, and used drugs to hide my shame and loneliness and battle the demons within me. But that never solved the problem; instead it made matters worse. One day I was alone when I was attacked by rival gangsters. I was stabbed with a knife just above my left eye, dragged behind a moving car and left for dead. Later, I found opportunity to drive my anger through those who had belittled me, but instead of satisfying me that made me even madder.

Yet at home I was small like an ant, obedient like a sheep. Neither my father nor my mother had ever shown me love, and I feared them, not without reason. I don’t blame them though; the choices I made were mine. While I was with them, I just bottled up my anger until I could find a place to smash that bottle and hurt somebody with the shards.

**This tool is part of:**

***Building safer communities through systemic approaches to violence prevention - A toolkit for participatory safety planning***

**Published by:**

***Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH  
Inclusive Violence and Crime Prevention for Safe Public Spaces (VCP) Programme***

**The entire toolkit is available on: [www.saferspaces.org.za](http://www.saferspaces.org.za)**

## TOOLTHREE

# “ESCAPE FROM THE PRISON OF THE MIND”



The people I hurt often lived on the other side of the mine dump that hides Khuma township from Stilfontein. It's the side with the lush green golf course and the nice houses. The people who lived there took no notice of us, and I felt very small when I went there. It was there that I decided I would definitely be a 'somebody' in life, and thought that becoming a gangster would give me the self-esteem I wanted so badly. I was ten years old when I joined that gang.

I'm now part of another gang called Activate! It brings together young leaders from across South Africa, building their sense of identity, belonging and common purpose. That purpose is to make our country a better place. I had completed school after being released from prison, but had no money to study to become the political journalist that I wanted to be. I applied for bursaries and loans, but nobody seemed to want to give money to an ex-convict. So I decided to join loveLife's debating programme, and eventually became a ground-BREAKER, one of loveLife's young leaders. I loved the cut and thrust of debate. A year later, I was thrilled to be given a learnership to study child- and youth care work, but it became a dead end. For some reason there was no graduation, and I am still waiting for my certificate. The whole thing was yet another failure in my life, a fantasy without a happy ending. Still, I kept applying and was appointed as a sports facilitator as part of the Expanded Public Works Programme until March this year. I am now once again unemployed. In fact, to write this article, I had to ask for money to use a computer at an internet café. So mine is not the typical rags-to-riches story you read in newspapers. It doesn't have a fairy-tale ending, at least not yet.

But I can tell you that I'm never going back to prison, and that I'll always keep hustling for real opportunity. My friends and I would like to start a non-government organisation that can help young people navigate their lives, mediating access to opportunities for education and work. Every community should have such an information hub. I think I can lift my curse by helping other young people who lose hope, bit-by-bit, that their lives will get better.

There are so many other young people out there just like me. Our smouldering anger has few outlets. Lately, several politicians have taken to calling us a 'ticking time bomb'. They mean well, but they need to understand that the implied threat gives us a perverse sense of power in the same way that gangs hold sway through menace. Please stop defining us in terms of deficit and destructive risk. It feeds our pessimism. It traps us in the prisons of our minds. [...]

Many young people in South Africa are still looking for a new identity. They don't want to be defined as heirs of apartheid, but as shapers of the future. [...] We should be asking how we can capitalise on the youth dividend, rather than how we can deal with the 'problem of youth unemployment'.

We need to build 'small connections' for young people in every little town and rural area as much as we develop the grand schemes for jobs and education. [...]

## TOOL THREE

## “ESCAPE FROM THE PRISON OF THE MIND”



Finally, we need role models in our communities who constitute a different sort of gang leader, whom other young people respect and trust. But leadership won't just happen by itself, or even through training programmes. Those individuals who do benefit will crave to escape from the circumstances that keep pulling them down. We need to learn from the West Sides and the B.D.C's and the 27's that leadership development requires systematic organisation and structured networks, so that even the leaders feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves.

*Complete version published in Sunday Times 3 June 2012. © Sunday Times*

**What needs to be in place before using this tool:**

*You can use this tool at various stages of the process. It can be used, for example, in the very beginning of an analysis workshop or after using the tools 1 or 2 of this book.*

**Objective:**

To raise awareness of the situation of many young people in South Africa.

To get participants to realise the urgency of providing opportunities and avoiding their stigmatisation of young people.

To get participants to engage in an initial discussion of risk and protective factors in the neighbourhood/community as well as existing activities that contribute to the prevention of violence.

**Aspects of Data Collection/Analysis:**

Risk factors, protective factors, ideas for prevention activities, different aspects of the situation of young people in the neighbourhood/community. Depends on the discussion and issues brought up by the participants and/or the questions you raise as facilitator.

**Material needed:**

Flipchart paper and markers for visualisation of important issues brought up in the discussion, and conclusions drawn.

**Preparation:**

Copy the story several times, so that each working group has at least one text. You may record the story beforehand so that you can play it in the beginning, read it aloud yourself or have somebody read it. Prepare questions which you want the working groups to discuss or work on. Write them on a flipchart paper so that the participants can copy them, or have a sheet of paper with the questions ready for each working group. Under 'procedure' you find one option for such questions. You can formulate other questions, if you want to put the focus on other issues.

## TOOL THREE

# “ESCAPE FROM THE PRISON OF THE MIND”



### Procedure:

Divide the big group into smaller working groups (6-8 people per group). One option is to form completely mixed groups, and an integrated energiser is the ‘lifeboat’:

The lifeboat (energiser to form groups): Distribute several flipchart papers on the floor explaining that these are lifeboats. Put a number on each sheet. Tell the group that all participants are on a huge ship which will sink within 5 seconds after you have shouted, “four people in one lifeboat”. To start, everyone has to wander around in the room. When you shout, “four people in one lifeboat”, everybody has five seconds to stand on one of the flipchart papers together with no fewer and no more than three others (in the case of four). In the role play, every bigger or smaller group drowns, as well as those who have not found a boat at all. Those who have managed to get “four people in one lifeboat” can form groups. You repeat this game several times with only those who drowned. Thus each lifeboat forms a working group. The last few participants who are too few to form a group, should be allowed to join other groups.

Explain in the beginning that the participants will hear a story a real story written by a young man called Tshekiso Molohlanyi, and first published in The Sunday Times in 2012. Show the prepared questions on the flipchart and read them. Ask the participants to take notes while listening to the story.

Then let the participants hear the story and start the group work. The working groups are asked to visually present the results of their discussions on a flipchart paper. This might be in words, drawings or any other way they choose.

### Questions for the working groups:

Are there any circumstances described by Tshekiso which you can find in your community? Which ones? Who is affected by these circumstances (risk factors)?

Are there any circumstances or conditions in your community which support young people to turn their backs on violent or criminal behaviour? What are these (protective factors)?

Tshekiso points to some things he thinks should and can be done. Are there any things already done in your community, or which could be done? What are they (prevention activities)?

### Plenary discussion:

If there are groups who chose to visualise their responses rather than write them down, ask these groups to present their results first. Ask them to present the issues they consider most important.

## TOOL THREE

## “ESCAPE FROM THE PRISON OF THE MIND”



Then ask the first group which captured their answers in words to mention one new aspect with regard to risk factors. Then the next group gives feedback, mentioning only new points (points which have not been raised before by other groups). Continue in this way until all points have been covered in the feedback. You follow the same procedure for the protective factors and for existing prevention activities.



Figure 3: Newspaper clipping from the article published by the Sunday Times.



**Observations:** (Additional notes for the facilitator)

Another option is to play or read the story aloud in the plenary, and start an open plenary discussion. Let the participants bring their own focus to bear, and visualise important comments, insights or conclusions.



**End Product:**

By the end of the activity, the objectives set for this tool have been achieved, including the following:

- Awareness of the problem of stigmatization of youth has been raised among participants.
- Risk and protective factors in the neighbourhood/community has been discussed, as well as existing activities that contribute to the prevention of violence.

