Municipal Officers' Perspectives on Crime Associated with Illegal Shebeens in High-Density Suburbs.

Alfosina Mafere

University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how municipal officers in Harare make sense of crime linked to illegal shebeens in high-density suburbs. Illegal shebeens have become hubs of criminal activity including drug abuse, gender-based violence and underage drinking. Guided by Kelly's Ecological Theory, the study employs a qualitative descriptive design within the constructivist paradigm. The study purposively sampled eight municipal officers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews in English and Shona. The data were analysed thematically and then examined through the four principles of Kelly's ecological theory; interdependence, resource cycling, adaptation and succession. Findings reveal that illegal shebeens are perceived as criminal ecosystems that foster violence, drug distribution, theft, organised criminal activity, public disorder and exploitation of women and girls rather than mere unlicensed drinking spots. Participants described activities such as underage drinking and prostitution as survival strategies that communities often tolerate. They contrasted shebeens with licensed bars, which they saw as regulated and easier to police. The findings suggest that shebeen-related crime is not a set of separate offences but it is tied to how money flows and how people survive. However, these findings are officers' perceptions not measured crime rates. The sample is rather small and drawn from one municipal police headquarters. Closer work between municipal police and child protection services deserve further study. Future research should review whether licensing is accessible to small operators and include the views of community members and shebeen operators as well as crime data.

Keywords: shebeen, crime, regulatory frameworks, Ecological theory

INTRODUCTION

The growth of illegal shebeens in Harare's heavily populated city regions has been linked to the problems of crime and social disorder (Mpofu, 2023). Malahleha (1984) identifies a shebeen as an unlawful, nontraditional bar that offers and serves alcoholic beverages whenever it is convenient for both patrons and proprietors. The word shebeen comes from Ireland and it refers to a location that illegally sells alcohol, whether as a shop or a home. Various countries use different terms for these illegal venues that sell forbidden beer; these terms indicate not only the legal standing of these places but also the social dynamics and economic factors that support their existence. In the U.S., they are commonly called "speakeasies" or "blind pigs" (Okrent, 2010). Phrases such as blind houses, blind tigers and cantina clandestine are quite common in several contexts. In other regions, they refer to them as "sly grog shops" (Fitts et al, 2017). The word shebeen is frequently found in many areas of Southern Africa, though various local terms like spot, tamene, konkotia, and phephezela are also commonly used (Malahleha, 1984).

Literature in illegal shebeens in Zimbabwe is limited and relies heavily on newspaper reports, which often lack rigour and objectivity. Very few studies incorporate the views of municipal officers who enforce municipal by-laws and meet shebeens at a close range. This study addresses that gap. Its primary aim is to explore municipal officers' insights into crime associated with illegal shebeens in Harare's high-density suburbs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Unauthorised venues selling and distributing illegal alcohol are a worldwide concern due to the related public

health dangers, particularly amid the global increase in drug and substance misuse. Studies from several countries link illegal drinking venues with the surge of criminal activities. Various scholars argue that the covert nature of these establishments create an environment ripe for criminal activity and social unrest.

Violent crimes

The link between alcohol, drugs and substance use and abuse and violence is well-documented. The prevalence of illegal establishments distributing and selling unlicensed liquor, drugs and substances, has seen a significant rise in the use and abuse of alcohol, drugs and substances in most high density areas (Hasheela et al, 2019). Curtis et al (2019) observed that the relationship between use and abuse of substances and violence is bi-directional. Alcohol, drugs and other intoxicating substances increase aggression through their pharmacological effects on executive functioning for instance the alcohol has a disinhibition effect on aggressive impulses (Giancola, Josephs, Parrott & Duke, 2010). Illegal shebeens are reportedly breeding grounds for violence with patrons allegedly often engaging in physical altercations (Chikara, 2021; Chapuza, 2020). In some cases these altercations escalate to murder or homicide. Agere (2024) reported a case of a 33 year old man who was sentenced to sixteen years of imprisonment for fatally stabbing a fellow following a brawl over a seat at a shebeen. Moyo-Ndlovu, (2021) also reports another case of a man who was murdered at a shebeen in Emgawini in a brawl over a woman. Shebeens have also been linked to gang related violence. The gang connections are used to exert influence, control and dominate as well as settle disputes within the underground economy. However at times the violence extends beyond the patrons and operators which can have broader social repercussions within the community for instance increased gang related violence can contribute to a sense of insecurity and fear (Malleka, 2022).

A positive correlation has also been established between the increase in alcohol outlets density and domestic violence (Livingston, 2011; Mayshark et al, 2020). Curtis et al, (2019) noted two types of domestic violence to be most prevalent i.e. intimate partner and family violence. Leonard & Quigley (2017) posit that alcohol, drugs and substance use and abuse increases both the severity and incidences of domestic violence. This is consistent with Cafferky et al (2018) who argued that illegal shebeens directly and indirectly influence domestic violence. The assumption is that, the consumption and use of illicit and counterfeit products of unknown quality exacerbate the risk of violence as the patrons may not be aware of the potency of the alcohol they are consuming or substances they are using.

Substance- related crimes

Shebeens serve as hubs for distributing illicit alcohol including unlicensed, artisanal, contraband, smuggled, counterfeit and surrogate varieties, thus bypassing legal supply chains and regulatory frameworks (Euromonitor International, 2018; WHO, 2024; OECD, 2016). These illegal taverns also violate trade guidelines, tax exercises and intellectual property legislation for instance the sale of counterfeit alcohol often involve refilling, falsification and tampering with alcohol. The problem of unauthorised venues distributing and selling alcohol, drugs and substances has raised concern worldwide, particularly amid the global increase in drug and substance misuse. Peltzer & Phaswana-Mafuya (2018) discovered a significant increase in drug use in developing countries. Charman, Petersen & Piper (2013) established that there are around 190 000 to 265 000 unlicensed drinking spots in South Africa alone, not to mention the rest of the Southern African region. These taverns are the gateways of harmful alcohol, drugs and substances to the society. They also significantly contribute to the prevalence of underage drinking (Damba-Hendrik, 2015).

Property-related crimes

Research suggests a complex relationship between illegal taverns and shanties selling illicit alcohol and property crimes, for instance Anderson et al (2018) discovered that a 10% increase in drinking establishments accounted for a 3-5% increase in crime, property crimes included. Gwanda residents confirmed the link between prevalence of shebeens and robbery, (Dube-Moyo, 2022). They reportedly claimed that shebeens are hives where criminals waylay their victims. The report also details several claims of residents being robbed of their vehicles. Neurological studies indicate that long term and acute use of harmful drugs and substances induce morphological

changes in the brain regions involved in self-control, decision making and judgement, (Sontate et al, 2021). This means that under the influence of intoxicating substances individuals are more likely to commit crimes such as robbery, theft, burglary, vandalism and malicious damage. In some instances activities like robbery, theft and burglary are used as means to support the lifestyle of drinking or using substances.

Organised crimes

Due to their illegal nature shebeens have become grounds for organised crimes such as extortion, protection rackets and money laundering. As part of the shadow economy shebeen owners need protection from competitors, rivals and authorities. Racketeering is very common in the underground economies. Extortion is usually perpetrated by gangs and law enforcement officials, who often intimidate, manipulate or coerce shebeen owners forcing them to negotiate payment in order to escape punishment (Piemontese, 2023). This practice is very common to an extent that periodical payments are often made. Mugambiwa & Rakubu, (2024) contend that shebeen owners usually extort money or goods to keep their taverns safe from raids, attacks or prosecution. Shebeens have reportedly become mediums for money laundering which involves the masking of illegally obtained proceeds so that they appear to have been originated from a legitimate source. Olivia (2022) discovered that many Italian Mafia groups are involved in money laundering under the guise of food and beverage outlets. Similarly shebeens have risen to be mediums of money laundering for drug lords and other criminal groups avoiding detection by the authorities.

Public order crimes

Mpofu (2023) elaborates that unregulated access and consumption alcohol and illicit substances contribute to public disorder. Many residents complained that shebeens expose children to improper behaviour such as urinating in public, public drinking and public intoxication (Marwizi, 2012; Kutyauripo, 2013; Chikara, 2021). Other disturbing characteristics of illegal shebeens include loud music, foul language, prostitution, drug and substance use and abuse, (Pindula news, 2023). In another report the Harare Residents Trust director, Shumba said that they have been receiving numerous reports of young boys and girls being recruited into these circles (Gore, 2023). Speaking to Pindula news, (2023) the ZRP spokesperson for the Harare province, Chikanza also showed concern over the reports of noise pollution, juvenile delinquency and sex parties associated with the increase of illegal shebeens. There are also notable reports of illegal occupation of land and premises as individuals are exploiting vacant land and premises to set up make shift shebeens (Dube, 2024).

Corruption and Bribery

Herrick & Charman (2013) exposed the vulnerability of shebeens to police corruption. They established shebeens often experience police corruption over bribes, the seizure of goods for personal use and harassment. This illuminates the complexity of corruption in these settings. Operators allegedly offer payments or other forms of compensation to corrupt local officials in return for protection from legal action (Kutyauripo, 2013). Corruption Watch (2012) reports that shebeen owners in Soweto testified that the police often carry out unregulated raids confiscating goods and valuables.

Health and Safety crimes

Shebeens hardly comply with health regulations for instance they reportedly operate without running water and proper facilities exposing patrons to the risk of communicable diseases. They are often associated with the distribution and sell of illegal, artisanal, counterfeit and surrogate alcohol which poses risks of methanol poisoning. Manning and Kolwalska (2021) documented over 750 deaths and 4300 hospitalisations due to methanol poisoning from 2015-2020. Lim et al (2012) noted that illicit alcohol is considered a primary cause of mortality and impairment in the sub-Sahara Africa. As mentioned earlier, alcohol, drug and substance use and abuse is associated with disruptions in executive function which can lead to impulsive and risky sexual behaviours. Grammatico, Moll, Choi, Springer & Shenoi (2021) contend that there is a link between shebeens, unsafe sex and the transmission of STDs, HIV and AIDS.

Legal offences

The illegal operations of shebeens have seen the perpetuation of legal offences such as tax evasion and non-payment of licenses. This means that governments are deprived of revenue besides the erosion of the rule of law; the European Union for instance reported a loss of EUR1.2 billion in total government revenue due to tax evasion associated with the illicit trade of alcohol (Witty & Naggy, 2022). Shebeens are credited for their tendency to breach city zoning regulations and local laws (Charman, Petersen & Piper, 2015). Media evidence also speculates that shebeens employ and recruit underage and undocumented workers, which is a violation of the law (Pindula news, 2023; Damba-Hendrik, 2015).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study is to explore the insights of municipal officers regarding the prevalence of crime associated with illegal shebeens in Harare's high-density urban areas. However, the other specific objectives of the study are:

- To explore the types of criminal activities most frequently associated with illegal shebeens.
- To explore how the operations of illegal shebeens differ from licensed bars in terms of crime and security risks.

METHODOLOGY

Research paradigm and design

This study adopted a constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective experiences of individuals.

Theoretical framework

The study was guided by Kelly's Ecological Theory (Kelly, 1966) which stresses that people and their environments depend on each other. The theory's four core principles of interdependence, resource cycling, succession and adaptation (Trickett, Kelly & Vincent, 1985) offered a holistic lens through which the complex relationships between illegal shebeens, crime and urban systems could be understood. Interdependence means that the parts of a social system affect one another, so a change in one place has effects elsewhere. Resource cycling concerns how resources such as money, goods, skills and influence are produced, used and passed on within a setting. Adaptation concerns how people and settings change to cope with the demands of the environment. Succession refers to how settings change over time, so that the present is shaped by what came before (Jason, Glatsman, O'Brien & Ramian, 2019). The principles were used in two ways. First, they directed attention to the links between shebeens, crime, communities and enforcement meaning the principles shaped the interview guide. Second, once the themes had been developed, each principle was used to examine what the themes show about shebeens as part of a wider urban system.

Participants and sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select eight municipal officers from the Harare City Council Municipal Police Headquarters. These participants were chosen because they were directly involved in enforcement operations related to illegal shebeens, had at least three years of experience in municipal operation roles and were willing to voluntarily participate in the study.

Eight participants from one headquarters is a small sample. Its adequacy was judged using the idea of information power (Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016). The assumption is that, the narrower the aim, the more specific the sample, the richer the interview data and the fewer the participants needed. In this study, the aim was narrow (officers' experience of shebeen-related crime), the sample was specific (officers with direct enforcement experience) and the analysis worked across cases. Reviews of saturation studies suggest that in narrowly focused

studies, the main codes are usually identified within nine to seventeen interviews, while a fuller, deeper understanding may need sixteen to twenty-four interviews (Hennick & Kaiser, 2022). Eight interviews therefore sit at the lower edge of what is supported by literature. However, saturation was not formally tested and findings should be read as exploratory.

A pilot study with three staff from the University of Zimbabwe Asset Protection Services was used to refine the interview guide. The pilot data were not included in the analysis.

Data collection

Data were collected using in-depth interviews administered with the help of a tailored semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were offered in English and Shona. Because some participants were concerned about audio recording, they could respond orally or in writing. One participant responded orally and seven in writing. Interviews lasted approximately thirty-five minutes. The researcher had to take notes for the oral responses. The researcher translated all the Shona responses into English and the supervising academic reviewed the translations for accuracy.

Data analysis

Responses were transcribed and Shona material was translated into English and reviewed for accuracy. Analysis followed the steps of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This entailed becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and naming them. Coding was done by hand. The themes were developed inductively, close to the data. They were then examined against Kelly's four principles.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was approached using the four criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985)

Credibility: Participants were chosen for their direct experience of enforcement. The interview guide was piloted. Participants chose their language and mode of response, which may have helped them to air out their views freely. Findings are supported by verbatim quotations. Supervisor reviews were conducted at different stages of the study. A copy of the final research was submitted to the City of Harare. However, no other data source such as crime statistics or community accounts was used to cross-check officers' perspectives and this is an acknowledged limitation.

Transferability: The study setting, sampling criteria and participants are described in detail (Table 1) so that readers can judge to what extent findings might apply elsewhere. The findings come from one headquarters in one city and are not statistically generalisable.

Dependability: The study design, sampling, data collection and analysis steps are clearly described. An audit trail has also been kept.

Confirmability: The findings are tied to participants' words through verbatim quotations.

Ethical considerations and the challenges of researching illegal activity

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Zimbabwe, Department of Psychology and the Harare City Council prior to commencing data collection. The researcher worked together with the host department to hold initial meetings with participants, establish trust, discuss ethical matters and obtain signed consent forms.

Researching illegal activity raises further ethical and practical challenges (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2008). The main challenge that arose in this study was that officers feared exposure. They were uneasy about audio recording, so written and oral responses were used instead. This protected them but it reduced the richness of some data. Furthermore, honest comments on enforcement practice, including colleagues'

conduct could harm officers if traced back to them. As a result highest levels of confidentiality had to be maintained throughout the study.

Research findings

Participants

Eight officers took part: five men and three women. Participants aged between 25 to 53 years (mean 38.4; median 39.5). Years of service ranged from 3 to 28 (mean 14.4). There was one inspector, three sergeants and four investigative officers. Four held O' level, one A' level, two a Diploma and one a Master's degree. The study did not compare subgroups because the sample was rather small.

Table1. Demographic details of participants

Participant No	Age	Gender	Rank/ Position	Years of service	Level of Education
1	39	Male	Inspector	19	Master's Degree
2	27	Female	Investigation Officer	3	Diploma
3	39	Male	Sergeant	7	Diploma
4	40	Male	Sergeant	17	O Level
5	53	Male	Sergeant	28	O Level
6	42	Female	Investigation Officer	18	O Level
7	25	Male	Investigation Officer	5	A Level
8	42	Female	Investigation Officer	18	O Level

Overview of themes

Table 2 gives a short overview. The sections that follow present each theme with participants' words. Shona quotations are given in italics followed by their English translation in brackets.

Table 2. Themes and core findings

Objective	Sub-Themes	Summary of findings
Objective 1: Types of crimes associated with illegal shebeens	1. Violent crimes	Illegal shebeens were seen as places where alcohol, drug use and weak control lead to robberies, murder, assault, escalation of homicide and gender-based violence.
	2. Normalised, survival-linked activities	Activities such as prostitution, underage drinking and consensual drug use are frequently occurring in shebeens. They are often viewed as survival strategies which lends them social acceptance despite their legal implications
	3. Substance-related crimes	Shebeens are seen as places where drugs are hidden, sold and used.
	4. Property related crimes	Shebeens are seen as spaces where thieves meet, plan and fence stolen goods.
	5. Organised crimes	Shebeens are seen a hidden meeting points for gangs and thieves.
	6. Public disorder	The presence of shebeens has disrupted community well-being by fostering environments of public fighting, noise, loitering and moral decadence.

	7. Health and safety risks	The prevalence of poor hygiene, unsafe sexual practices, weak control of age and poor alcohol quality in these venues are seen as community health risks.
	8. Legal offenses	The operation of shebeens inherently violates multiple legal statues.
	9. Sexual exploitation and abuse of marginalised groups	Officers described the sexual abuse of girls and women, including minors being sold into prostitution.
Objective 2: Shebeens compared to licensed bars	Regulation, safety and visibilty	Licensed bars were seen as regulated, monitored and safer. Shebeens were seen as lawless, hidden and profit-driven.

Nature of criminal activities associated with illegal shebeens

Shebeens were perceived as hotspots for multi-layered criminality. Participants consistently associated illegal shebeens with multiple inter-related crimes suggesting that these spaces are criminal ecosystems rather than isolated venues for alcohol consumption.

Violent crimes

Officers described shebeens as places where violence is common often triggered by alcohol, drug use and unregulated social interactions. They mentioned robbery, murder, assault and public fighting. Violence was described as having a clear gender and age dimension, especially against women, girls and minors. Participant 8 named statutory rape, sexual harassment and gender based violence;

"..kubhinywa kwemadzimai nevanasikana uye mhirizhonga pakugarisana." (..sexual abuse of women and children as well as gender-based violence).

Participant 5 highlighted the exposure of girls and children to victimisation;

"…kushungurudzwa kwevana vadiki nezvidhakwa zvichinwa doro kazhinji vanasikana" (harassment/abuse of young children by drunkards especially girls).

These accounts point to power imbalances, gender based violence, normalisation of abuse and exploitation in these spaces.

Normalised, survival-linked activities

Officers named prostitution, underage drinking and substance use as common in shebeens. Participant 7 spoke of the use of harmful subtances by young people;

"..kutorwa kwedzimwe mhando dzezvinodhakwa zvinokuvadza nevechidiki." (use and abuse of harmful substances by the youths).

Participants appeared to treat these activities as normal in shebeens and showed some tolerance towards these activities particularly where poverty, boredom or lack of acceptable alternatives were seen as drivers. They described these acts as survival strategies shaped by hardships, not only as breaches of the law.

Substance related crime

Participant 3 painted shebeens as distribution points for illicit substances;

"Drug dealers supply drugs to customers taking advantage of the absence of law enforcement officers".

Officers saw shebeens as key nodes in the informal drug economies that attract young and vulnerable people.

Participants mentioned substance related crimes such as drug peddling, trafficking and distribution which highlighted the dangers of illegal shebeens as gateways of illicit drugs and substances into communities. They also saw substance abuse not only as a crime on its own but also as a trigger for other serious crimes such as sexual assault, murder, domestic violence and gender-based violence.

Property-related crimes

Officers linked shebeens to petty and organised theft either carried out by patrons under the influence or by individuals who use shebeens to plan or fence stolen items. Participant 6 reported that;

"thieves, robbers and murderers are found in shebeens."

Participants tied crimes to the ripple effects of substance abuse and criminal networking in these spaces.

Organised crimes

Officers suggested that shebeens function as covert meeting points for gangs and syndicates especially where law enforcement is weak. Participant 5 pointed out that due to their concealment and secrecy shebeens provide safe spaces for thieves to interact;

"inzvimbo yakahwanda inogona kushandiswa nematsotsi kutandara." (these are hidden spaces that can be used by thieves to interact).

Participants' accounts suggested that crime becomes systematic where legitimate opportunities are absent and shebeens provide a low risk setting for informal criminal economies.

Public disorder

Municipal officers attested to the prevalence of public fighting, noise, loitering, loud music and disturbance of peace. They claimed that these crimes disrupt community life and often erode trust in policing and governance. Participant 3 reported;

"Shebeens have no order; they play loud music, the people there just speak anyhow and the patrons urinate everywhere. You can always find someone drinking there any-time of the day. It's even worse at night.

Health and Safety crimes

Officers linked shebeens to poor hygiene and health risks for the community. Participant1 said;

"They have poor facilities and there is no proper hygiene which increases the risk of spreading diseases"

Participants expressed moral discomfort and a sense of helplessness about these health vulnerabilities.

Legal offenses

Officers saw shebeens as breaking laws by their very nature. They believed that shebeens create environments that hedge other criminal activities. Participant 3 noted that;

"Drug dealers supply drugs to customers taking advantage of the absence of law enforcement officers."

Officers' lived experiences with serious crimes linked to illegal shebeens

Shebeens as drug distribution hubs

Officers described shebeens as nodes in local drug networks where illegal substances are stored, sold and used.

"We have bumped into several shebeens being used for hiding and distributing drugs like brongo (bron clear)" Participant 1.

Officers saw these venues as hidden, decentralised spaces that evade formal scrutiny. Their observations during operations highlighted the criminal sophistication and concealment enabled by the informal nature of shebeens. In this context the shebeen become a site of illegal peer interaction with law enforcement failing to disrupt the networks effectively.

Sexual exploitation and abuse of marginalised groups

Participants shared deeply troubling accounts of sexual abuse, often involving minors coerced into prostitution. Participant 8 reported;

"Kune nzvimbo dzaita seHopely vanasikana vechidiki vari pasi pemakore gumi nemasere vari kumbunyikidzwa kuitwa vakadzi/ kuendwa navo pabonde nevarume vakasiyana-siyana. Mamwe mashabhini aya akushandiswa sedzimba uye vakuru vari kutengesa vana ava kumadhara." (In places like Hopely minors especially girls are forced to indulge in sexual intercourse with different man. Some homes have been turned into shebeens. Minors are sold into prostitution by the adults to older man.)

Participant 6 added that;

"…girls are being abused by older men and sexual abuse is the order of the day."

Shebeens were described as unregulated and private spaces where vulnerable women and children are exploited. These narratives appeared to carry a moral and emotional burden carried by officers which reflected a sense of helplessness in the face of normalised exploitation. It also expressed their frustration with the structures that fail to protect children. The narratives pointed to unsafe interpersonal dynamics within shebeens.

Escalation of violence and homicide

"I recall a case of patrons who were allegedly fighting over a prostitute at a shebeen leading to murder" Participant 1.

Participant 5 recalled;

"Tasangana nenyaya dzakati wandei dzekupondana kwevanhu vachirwira vakadzi mumashabhini" (we have come across several cases where people get killed in fights over women in shebeens).

Officers saw shebeens as high risk environments for conflict due to unregulated alcohol consumption, absence of security and sexual competition. They described violence as a frequent and expected outcome. Participants constructed these events as tragic but predictable, rooted in chaotic and lawless environment of illegal shebeens.

Differences between shebeens and licensed bars

Participants drew a sharp distinction between licensed bars and illegal shebeens. They described licensed bars as regulated, monitored and structured establishments and shebeens as chaotic and dangerous. Three subthemes emerged.

Regulation and compliance

Licensed bars were seen as relatively safer spaces due to the presence of formal monitoring, compliance with laws and public visibility. Partipant 8 reported;

"..mabhawa ane marezinesi anotevedzera mitemo yehurumende neyemakanzuru." (licensed bars follow government laws and council regulations).

Officers preferred these settings and described them as easier to regulate and less prone to violence. Participant 6 commented;

"In licensed bars law enforcement agents can easily perform their duties without much hindrances…"

Safety, age control and profit

Officers described shebeens as lawless zones where anything goes including underage drinking, use of violence, violation of public health laws and disregard for public health. They saw shebeens as products of systemic neglect where rules are absent and profit overrides safety. Participant 4 remarked;

"Shebeens are characterised by violence, drug abuse, prostitution and high risk of indulgence as compared to licensed bars"

Participant 1 added;

"Unlike licensed bars these shebeens sell anything even unregulated beers. They don't control the age limits for buyers and are interested in money only. They have poor facilities and there is no proper hygiene which increases the risk of spreading disease."

Location and visibility

Officers identified location as another distinguishing factor. They noted that shebeens are often located in backyards, residential homes or hidden taverns making it difficult for non- patrons to locate them. They explained that this secrecy encourages criminal behaviours including drug peddling, trafficking and hiding places for fugitives. Participant 2 elaborated;

"Kumashabini kune mikanayakakura yekuparwa kwemhosva uye kuchengetwa kwevapari vemhosva sezvo achiwanikwa munzvimbo dzakavanzika" (there are higher risks of engaging in criminal activities and harbouring criminals in shebeens because they are located in obscured spaces).

The language used by officers reflected a sense of powerlessness in the face of the physical and social invisibility of shebeens that limits their reach and response.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Shebeens as perceived criminal ecosystems

Officers did not see shebeens as merely unlicensed drinking spots. They described them as places where violence, drug distribution, exploitation and public disorder overlap. Participants pictured shebeens as hubs of interconnected crimes ranging from violent offenses to organised criminal networks. Alcohol and drug abuse in shebeens were identified as major catalysts for violence including assaults, robberies and homicides. This is consistent with prior studies that have mapped the correlation between alcohol, drugs and substance use and abuse increases with both the severity and incidences of domestic violence (Leonard & Quigley, 2017; Cafferky et al, 2018; Livingston, 2011; Mayshark et al, 2020; Curtis et al, 2019).

However, two cautions apply. First these are officers' perceptions. Officers meet shebeens through raids and incident reports, so they are likely to see the worst cases. The data cannot show how common these crimes are or whether shebeens cause them. Association claims should not be confused with cause and effect here. Second, some of the supporting literature concerns alcohol outlets in general and may include licensed ones. For example, Anderson et al. (2018) found that more licensed bars and restaurants in Kansas countries were associated with more violent crime. The violence that officers describe may not necessarily be linked to the drinking setting but other factors.

Gender-based violence and the sexual exploitation of minors

A particularly disturbing finding was the gendered nature of violence, with women and young girls facing statutory rape, sexual harassment and forced prostitution. Participants highlighted how power imbalances and normalisation of abuse make shebeens dangerous for vulnerable groups. Furthermore, existing sources on this

point are mostly media and civil society reports of underage drinking and the recruitment of young people (Damba-Hendrick, 2015; Pindula News, 2023; Gore, 2023). The absence of peer-reviewed resources shows that the subject remains under-explored and this is a critical gap.

Drug distribution and organised crime

Shebeens were identified as distribution hubs for illicit drugs, with dealers exploiting the lawless climate where enforcement is weak. Officers noted that substances like "bronco" (a commonly abused cough syrup) are easily accessible at shebeens, contributing to addiction, sexual violence and property crimes. This matches accounts of shebeens as part of wider illicit trade (Herrick & Charman, 2013). Participants also showed concern over how thieves and gangs use these spaces to plan, hide stolen items and evade arrests, reinforcing the perception of shebeens as safe havens for criminals.

Public disorder and health risks

Noise pollution, public drunkenness and loitering were cited as major community concerns. Poor hygiene and health risks such as the spread of diseases were also identified as public health threats associated with shebeens. The study also reinforced prior studies that established a positive correlation between the increase in unregistered alcohol outlets and unsafe sex and the transmission of STDs, HIV and AIDS (Grammatico et al., 2021).

Applying Kelly's ecological principles

Table 3 applies each of Kelly's principles to the findings.

Table 3.

Principle	What it asks	What the findings show
Interdependence	How are parts of the system linked?	Drug trade, theft, violence and sexual exploitation were described as linked within and around shebeens.
Resource cycling	How does money, goods and influence move?	Operators were described as "interested in money only." They reportedly sell anything for a profit including unregulated commodities. Drugs and stolen goods reportedly move through shebeens. Participants also mentioned how adults use their influence to coerce young girls and women into prostitution. Prostitution and underage drinking were seen as survival strategies.
Adaptation	How do people and settings adjust to pressure	Shebeens have adapted to evade legal monitoring and regulation. They were described as hidden in backyards, residential homes or hidden taverns which conceals them legal scrutiny. Officers described feeling powerless in the face of the physical and social invisibility of shebeens.
Succession	How does change over time shape the present	There is limited evidence from this study. Only on participant described homes being turned into shebeens.

The principles help to show that shebeen-related crime is not a set of separate offences but rather tied to how money flows, how people survive and how enforcement is organised. Succession is the weakest part of the analysis because the present study did not focus on how shebeens and enforcement have changed over time.

Limitations

The sample is small (eight officers) and comes from one headquarters, so the findings cannot be statistically generalised to other settings. Saturation was not formally tested. The findings are officers' perceptions and not crime data. There was no triangulation with other sources. Most responses were written which limited the depth

of the information gathered. Operators, patrons, residents and victims were not included in this study which means other perspectives are missing from the analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

Officers experience shebeens as multidimensional threats linked to drug use, gender based violence, underage drinking and gang activity. The moral tensions expressed by officers underscore the need for an adaptive enforcement approach, one that accounts for both criminality and vulnerability. This reflects Kelly's principle of adaption, which calls for dynamic responses to complex conditions. The study provides evidence that officers are not merely law enforcers but are embedded actors navigating ethical, social and political minefields. Their insights should inform a more nuanced urban safety strategy that balances enforcement with empowerment.

Recommendations for future research

- Future research should broaden stakeholder inclusion and explore cross-sectoral collaboration in urban municipal policing. This includes incorporating the voices of community members, shebeen operators, youth and civil society to produce a holistic understanding of the issue and inform prevention efforts.
- Comparative studies: Current literature on illegal shebeens is remarkably limited. Most of the coverage stems from local newspapers such as The Standard, NewsDay Zimbabwe, The Herald Chronicle, Sunday News, The Zimbabwean to mention a few. The challenge with popular sources is that they often fall short on rigour and objectivity. Although this study strived to bridge this evidence gap by systematically gathering and analysing insights from municipal officers who are front-line actors in dealing with shebeen-related problems, there is a dire need for comparative studies to clearly map the relationship between illegal shebeens and crime across different cities and regions within the country and beyond. The outcomes will provide a stronger foundation compared to anecdotal reporting.
- Quantitative extensions: Combine qualitative insights with crime data to strengthen rigour, objectivity and depth.

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