

# The relevance of social history projects: **the Wentworth study**

*The narratives around Wentworth in Durban tend to focus on its social problems. However, the roots of these challenges are often lost in generalisations. For the Wentworth Social History Project, a team of HSRC researchers conducted interviews with residents to better understand the evolution of this township since the 1960s, and to identify the historical events that continue to shape the community and its residents today. By **Gregory Houston, Heidi van Rooyen, Bronwynne Anderson, Chitja Twala, Darian Smith, Maree Harold, Theresa Saber, Marilyn Couch and Andrea Teagle.***

**“**I don’t believe people fully understand Wentworth. They go with what ... they read in the newspaper,” remarked Mark van Wyk, a former resident. The media often portrays Wentworth, along with similar “coloured” working-class communities, through the lens of its prevalent social ills. Another former resident, Bronwyn Jacobs, stated: “I left a long time ago ... because I wasn’t prepared to settle for the many challenges that shaped our people and shaped Wentworth, such as drugs, alcohol and prostitution”.

These are excerpts from interviews conducted for the Wentworth Social History Project, which documents the experiences of current and past residents. One of the advantages of the life histories approach is the potential to show how the impacts of major societal transformations continue to ripple through communities today.

## **Wentworth today**

Wentworth is a historically “coloured” township in the Durban South Basin. It is characterised by high levels of substance abuse and gang warfare. High levels of poverty account for several other social ills, including widespread gender-based violence, risky sexual behaviour and teenage pregnancy, a high school-dropout rate, and widespread theft and robbery. The life history interviews indicate that these problems have their roots in apartheid-era social engineering, housing developments and transformations in labour patterns.

## **Apartheid social engineering**

Most families that migrated to Wentworth between the early 1960s and early 1980s were forcefully moved there following the apartheid Group Areas Act. Another reason that people settled in the area was the availability of housing and employment opportunities in nearby industries.

Families were drawn from several mixed-race residential areas in Durban. According to resident Alwyn Bonhomme, apartheid social engineering accounted for the location of the coloured residential area and the working-class nature of its population:

*“They developed industries in the Durban South Basin. And this is why Wentworth was created. What was coming up around Wentworth at that time was [the] Motor Assemblies [plant], the carpet factory ... and the refineries. So, you put this coloured area here where you are educating their youth to become the tradesmen.”*

Settlement and ancestry explain both the maintenance or emergence of social bonds in the Wentworth community, and its lines of fracture. For instance, the interviews indicate strong social bonds between the early Wentworth residents with Mauritian ancestry, but friction between the early 1960s settlers and those who migrated from the former Transkei a few years later.

### **Housing development**

Wentworth in the 1960s consisted largely of former military barracks with communal ablution blocks and other former military houses with internal ablution facilities. This created another line of fracture, as families that initially lived in the areas with communal facilities were later “upgraded” to rental housing. Others lived in shack settlements that were originally mixed-race, such as Happy Valley, Tin Town, the Red Sands. Reggie Poultnoy, a resident, explains:

*“There were two types of people. There were the societies, as we used to call them, and the riff-raffs. We were the riff-raffs down [at] the bottom in the Red Sands.”*

The Department of Community Development built houses for private ownership in some parts of Wentworth. From the early 1970s, several phases of flats were developed, accounting for the current [1,148 flats](#) in the township.

By the mid-1980s, Wentworth was a mixed-residential area with pockets of dense flats, rental council housing, and privately-owned houses ranging from two- and three-bedroomed houses in some streets to the ocean-view mansions of Treasure Beach.

Little major housing development has taken place since then. According to Donny Anderson, “The social ills started off with the type of housing they gave us, and bringing people from so many different areas. They put us in flats with no opportunities for recreational activity. We are still all cramped up.” In parts of Wentworth, concentrations of “about 30 or 40 boys of the same age staying in the flats” are fertile grounds for gangs, said Leslie Emmanuel.

### **Labour patterns**

In Wentworth’s early years, most men were artisans, working in the construction sector as carpenters, bricklayers, plasterers or plumbers, and in the engineering sector as welders, boilermakers and fitters. The women mostly worked in clothing factories, and a smaller number in the retail sector. A few adults were teachers and nurses, with job reservation and limited financial resources restricting access to these occupations. Even fewer owned small businesses such as general dealers, cafes, laundromats and barber shops.

Most parents worked in nearby industries. Traditional nuclear families were the norm, with both parents living permanently at home.

The 1970s saw the beginning of the migratory labour system in “coloured” communities, when Sasol oil was developed in Sasolburg in the north of the country. Many fathers and young men sought artisanal work there due to high wages and the lack of educational opportunities. Workers often spent two weeks away from home at a time, returning home for weekends. As a result, many Wentworth families in the late 1970s and 1980s were female-headed with absent fathers. According to resident Beverley Issup:

*“Many men travelled up and down to Sasolburg. The mothers had to bring up these boys. So, they had no role models. And again, they would find comfort with their friends that belonged to gangs. They would get into trouble and their friends would be there for them...”*

### **The emergence and growth of social ills**

The social problems the early community faced were relatively minor compared to those of later periods. Early Wentworth was remembered as a safe community. The first gangs emerged in the late 1960s, but these were largely benign. “The social ills ... included abuse of alcohol and dagga. There were a lot of gangs fighting. But they were fighting over girls. They were not fighting with guns and over drug territory,” said Patricia Dove.

Alcohol abuse was widespread, as was gender-based violence directed at young women and mothers. Teenage pregnancy existed, but not at catastrophic levels.

In the mid-1970s, however, gang-related conflict became more violent, with many deaths resulting from gang wars between school-going and unemployed youths wielding knives and machetes (bush-knives). Several interviewees, such as Donny Anderson, ascribe this to an insider-outsider mentality among youth from different parts of the township:

*“It was territorial war. If you stayed in the Drain Rats area, you couldn’t come to this or that soccer ground and you couldn’t go to the Wentworth swimming pool...”*

Social problems mushroomed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as more and more young people grew up in crowded areas with absent, migrant fathers.

Today, Wentworth is a major source of and market for hard drugs such as “sugars” (a mixture of cocaine and heroin residue). Competition over control of the drug trade has led to widespread, devastating gang violence.

### **Understanding the roots**

Life history interviews provide useful insights into the trajectory of change in individuals’ lives. These changes often reflect transformations in the broader community, allowing us to identify factors that account for the current circumstances in such communities. Developing an understanding of the roots and nature of social challenges is a starting point for discovering solutions to them. By analysing developmental issues, social history projects can help to improve the wellbeing of vulnerable and marginalised groups, build localised research capacity and infrastructure, and foster collaboration, networks and institutional linkages. Such projects can also contribute to building social cohesion and creating safer communities.

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*CRUDE: Wentworth Community vs Big Oil*  
documentary image (Wentworth, South Africa).  
Spectators observe a soccer match at a sports  
field next to the Wentworth Engen oil refinery.  
Photo: Greenpeace