# Surveillance and Control: the Regulation of Everyday Behaviour under Covid-19 in South African Cities

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## 1 ABSTRACT

On 5 March 2020 the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) reported the first case of COVID-19 in South Africa. Since then, COVID-19 has caused unprecedented shifts in every sector of urban and social life and has reminded us of the critical role cities play in global health governance whilst also revealing their vulnerabilities when hit by an unknown virus. Cities have proved to be particularly vulnerable to the virus given their high population rates as well as socio-economic activity. As many parts of the globe continue to grapple with the COVID-19 crisis, researchers from various disciplines are constantly working to shed more light on the pandemic. Although a large share of this research is focused in the medical field, the dynamics of the pandemic and its impacts on cities has started to receive significant attention. In this paper, we reflect on how the state used various technologies of power to regulate and control everyday urban practices during COVID-19. In its endeavor to control the virus, the state was compelled to arguably radically infringe on people's everyday activities; from the food they could purchase and consume, to spaces where they could congregate, right through to the manner and fashion at which they could worship, and even bury their loved ones. While this was warranted given the urgent need to curb the virus, we argue that these actions have the potential of transforming the manner by which cities are governed. This is particularly so in highly unequal cities where the chasm between the wealthy and the poor has been made gravely stark by the pandemic. Cities might have to find that they have to expand their social security nets further, given the near collapse of the informal economy and the subsequent growth in poverty and unemployment.

Keywords: Regulations and Behaviour, South Africa, COVID-19, Urban inequality, Townships

## 2 INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Wuhan, China and it has since engulfed the whole world having reached over 200 countries in the globe (Schröder et al, 2021;Schmidt et al 2020). The World Health Organisation declared the disease a global pandemic in January 2020 after worldwide cases totalled 7818 (Mutanga and Abayomi, 2020). As of 24 March 2021 the global confirmed cases of COVID-19 stand at 123 419 065 with the African continent being in the top five of countries with the highest number of active cases (WHO, 2021). Of those, the highest number of COVID-19 patients in Africa have been reported in South Africa with 1 538 451 cases and 52 196 deaths, as of 24 March 2021 (WHO, 2021). As the virus continues to spread, very little is known about the disease and how much of a threat it is to human life. Indications on how the virus is transmitted, which is through respiratory droplets from sneezes and coughs within a 1-metre distance of an infected person and via contact with contaminated surfaces led governments around the world to frantically strategise on ways to curb the spread of the pandemic by implementing social distancing measures and other preventative measures recommended by WHO (Chan et al. 2020). These preventative measures included mask wearing, social distancing, handwashing, and isolation for 14 days if one presents symptoms of the virus.

These measures alone proved to be insufficient in curbing the spread of the virus thus closed borders and lockdowns became a global response to force the general population to stay at home and avoid crowded spaces (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). South Africa, like many other countries of the Global North and South, adopted this approach and introduced a five phased lockdown programme with each phase having its own set of restrictions on public movement and economic activity (Odendaal,2020). Although the lockdown strategy proved to be successful in containing the virus in Italy and China (see Qian and Hanser,2021), this strategy was met with mixed feelings in South Africa given the varied socio-economic milieu in the country and as a result the enforcement of these measures proved to be quite challenging within some communities in the country. De Groot and Lemanski (2020) highlight that the hardest-hit areas (in terms of the highest concentrations of COVID-19 infections) are in low-income, densely populated townships, where unlike

wealthier spaces in the city, people cannot withdraw from social interactions in a single home, work remotely, buy large quantities of supplies to avoid regular visits to the shops, or drive alone in a car to secure supplies. As such, the pandemic has further exposed and intensified the divide between the have and have-nots in society. In fact, the South African governments' draconian enforcement of the lockdown regulations has been often critiqued for reinforcing socio-spatial inequalities and historic racial and structural tensions in the country. For instance, police used rubber bullets, tear gas, water bombs and whips to ensure social distancing, especially amongst poor black communities (Odigbo, Odigbo and Eze, 2020;Human Rights Watch, 2020;Grootes,2020). This was often not the case in communities of middle to upper class neighbourhoods.

A distinct urban feature of these neighbourhoods are residential gated communities which are defined as privatised physical locations whose access is restricted by walls, fences, gates or booms and are characterised by legal agreements which tie residents to a common code of conduct (Atkinson and Blandly, 2005;Liu and Song, 2017). Residential gated communities embody a new form of collective governance as they are managed and maintained by homeowners associations and/or body corporates (Landman, 2006). Given the restricted nature of these developments, their self-regulation was upheld and respected by the government during the lockdown as state policing never surpassed the gates with the belief that law and order will persist in these spaces.

What is critical to note is that to the present day, very few cases of such police brutality and violence with the intention of implementing lockdown measures exist in the middle to upper class neighbourhoods of South African cities. While the pandemic has adversely affected virtually everybody, such deleterious effects have not been uniform, with the possibility that certain sections of society are more likely to be affected than others. It can be hypothesised that already vulnerable individuals such as those who have lost their jobs, individuals in precarious employment, those living in poor housing and neighbourhoods and the poor in general are more likely to bear the brunt of the pandemic than the relatively well off (Nwosu and Oyenubi, 2021).

It is against this backdrop that this chapter intends to critically reflect on what COVID-19 has revealed about inequalities that exist in the South African society. Additionally, given the varied socio-economic and urban landscape of the country due to the legacy of apartheid, racial capitalism and neoliberalism we ask the question how lockdown regulations were implemented in different urban settings in the country by means of comparing the realities presented by COVID-19 and lockdown in townships and gated communities. Specifically, we intend to juxtapose the experiences of lockdown in a township and a residential gated community.

## 3 LOCKED DOWN: REFLECTING ON THE STRATEGY TO "FLATTEN THE CURVE"

At the beginning of March 2020 the first case of COVID-19 hit South African shores and the country soon became the most affected country in Africa by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (Stieglera and Bouchard, 2020). From one single case on, the number of cases increased rapidly, forcing the South-African Government to swiftly react and place the country under strict lockdown for what was initially meant to be three weeks in an attempt to "flatten the curve". Stieglera and Bouchard, (2020) argue that South Africa's lockdown was one of the most restrictive in the world and lockdown become the image of the country. A series of measures and restrictions which cut across all facets of daily life as well as death, were put into place limiting the rights of South Africans (Stauton,2020).

These included the complete closure of childcare, institutions of primary and higher education as well as all public leisure activities, severe physical distancing rules, an estimated 70% reduction of shopping activities, 85% of on-site work force and a 90% reduction in other activities (Schröder, 2021). On 24 April 2020, the South African President, together with the National Command Council set up by government to strategise responses to the pandemic, unveiled a de-confinement plan in phases of "alert levels" (Dekel, 2021). This plan, organised in five stages, made provision for gradual reopening of the economy and social life as per 1 May 2020 (ibid).This clear system was organised in a way that the alert levels would move up or down depending on the level of the pandemic.

Although the lockdown has proved to be effective in curbing the spread of the virus, its application and effects in Africa have been criticised. For instance, Macamo (2020) critiqued African governments for

replicating responses to COVID-19 from European countries with the lockdown being one of them. In this context, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) argument makes sense:

"This pandemic provides an opportunity for Africa in particular and the Global South in general not to look up to the Global North for salvation but to shift the geopolitics of knowledge by using African endogenous knowledge and the epistemologies of the Global South."(p5)

The above is particularly important in the reading of the realities of countries in the Global South who have previously grappled with and subsequently managed epidemics and pandemics before. For example, many African countries learnt very difficult lessons from their responses to the Ebola and HIV outbreaks, thus it is important for the Global South to consider the lessons learnt from managing and overcoming these outbreaks and apply them in their response fighting COVID-19 (Getachew and Tih, 2020).

COVID-19 and lockdown have also brought the steep inequalities in South Africa into sharp focus, while people were invited to stay home and practice social distancing when out, not all communities within the country could afford such practice. For instance, Shani's (2020) captures this and outlines:

"What are the subjects which states are seeking to protect? [...]. But what of those who have no home? Or hand sanitiser or face mask? Or access to running water? The referent object of Coronavirus discourse is a homeowner with economic means to take time off work and stockpile food. For the majority of mankind, this isn't an option. [...]. The subject that states protect is a racialised, bourgeois and gendered subject."

This was particularly true for vulnerable communities living in informal settlements and townships who found the lockdown more unbearable (Nwosu and Oyenubi, 2020). In many cases, the residents of these communities depend mostly on informal economy, however the lockdown re-enforced anti-informality bias which saw these communities become more vulnerable and living in lack (Battersy, 2020).

The above emphasises the inequalities that COVID-19 and the lockdown present in society and the realities these present in different urban, social and, economic settings. Hulchanski (2011) highlights that neighbourhoods represent spaces in the city which contain a mix of physical, social and psychological attributes which embody the demographic and economic situation of its residents. As such, these spaces shape the lived experiences of the residents of the city therefore provide very important insights into numerous dynamics in the city. This is particularly true in the time of COVID-19 and lockdown, we find that the lived experiences of lockdown have been more unfavourable for communities of informal settlements and townships and this is in stark difference to the realities which communities in wealthier parts of the city have experienced. These experiences are closely linked to the persistent inequalities embedded in the system and society of our country.

## 4 CEMENTED DIVISIONS AND INEQUALITIES: CONSEQUENCES OF LOCKDOWN IN AN UNEQUAL STATE

Exclusion, inequality and urban segregation are key social concerns in developed and developing cities around the world (OECD 2018; Nel and Rogerson 2009; Warwick-Booth 2013). Gelderblom (2006) highlights that inequality is a multidimensional concept which speaks to structural and spatial differences in society relating to income, facilities, resources, skills, opportunities and power. In the context of South Africa, our structural legacies and socioeconomic inequalities have been inherited from decades of colonial and apartheid rule as a result of the purposeful marginalisation of the black population into poorly developed and overcrowded neighbourhoods popularly known as townships. In fact, twenty-seven years post democracy this racial-biased spatial segregation remains in place and South Africa is still one of the most unequal countries in the world with a Gini coefficient[1] of 0.7 (StatsSA,2019).

In contemporary cities, one of the major urban trends globally which contributes to inequality is the proliferation of gated communities (Duca, 2016). These developments are seen as a manifestation of an increasing buffer between the rich and the poor and "an expression of the flight of the successful" (ibid,2016:p405) which limit the poor from accessing most amenities, services and infrastructure (K'Akumu & Olima, 2007; Ramoroka, 2013). The same gated communities offer security as a private market commodity rather than a public good or right thereby perpetuating the socio-economic inequalities between

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[1] The Gini coefficient ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates perfect equality (all individuals have the same income) and 1 indicates prefect inequality (where one person has all the income and the rest have none)

the rich and poor who are residing in towns and cities (Ramoroka, 2014). Hook and Vrdoljak (2002) opine that "gating" in South Africa is driven by societies' desire to detach themselves from the broader civic engagement and responsibility.

Furthermore, Ballard (2004) identifies this form of civic detachment as "semigration" which he describes as partial emigration where people create Western utopias which further remove themselves from the broader South African community and their contributions to nation-building but instead produce an alternative representation of reality. As a result, these developments represent elite spaces within society where liberal democracy has granted residents with the choice to enclave at the expense of socio-spatial integration.

Ndlovu-Gtasheni (2020) outlined that the global pandemic hit at a time where the world was already consumed with "walling-in for other reasons such as security and obsession with migrants" (p14) however responses to COVID-19 have reinforced enclaves and cemented the differences in elite and poorer spaces within the city. From an international perspective, communities of middle class neighbourhoods as well as residential gated communities have proven to be more resilient and equipped to deal with the adverse effects of pandemics and epidemics. For example, in Bray's (2008) study of two Wuhan community residence committees (similar to gated communities found in South African cities) during the SARS outbreak in 2003, he found that the mobilisation of shequ[2] assisted in the implementation of public health measures and enforcing quarantine and screening.

Although this was well over seventeen years ago and China has since gone through significant economic, social and urban reforms, the rationale for enclosures persisted and have been strengthened in the current day. In fact, Qian and Hanser (2020) highlight that shequ, played an important role in curbing COVID-19 numbers during the peak of the pandemic. Scant literature exists on the role and experiences of residents of gated communities and middle to upper class neighbourhoods during the pandemic, particularly in the South African context. However, Lindeque (2020) reported that at the beginning of the pandemic in the country, there were concerns on how lockdown measures would be upheld within these enclosed spaces and further indicated that there was confusion among Homeowners Associations and Body Corporates around whether or not their residents are allowed limited freedom of movement inside their gated communities. Furthermore, an article on BusinessTech (2020) highlighted that since the beginning of lockdown various residential gated communities have been making their own rules which are not necessarily in alignment to the national regulations imposed under the Disaster Management Act.

It is interesting to note that even during a global pandemic, when global populations are fighting a common enemy, their choice and desire for detachment from the broader society is re-enforced. Once again, at the peak of a global pandemic, these spaces present a challenge for authorities due to their private management where government has very little control on their socio-spatial dynamics within these spaces. This further echoes the challenges these developments present to spatial transformation in cities (Landman and Badenhorst, 2012). However, Ren (2020:3) argues that a "thick network of territorial institutions and authorities" is key in managing and enforcing lockdown, thus gated communities and their privatised management could in fact be alleviating the pressure from government by ensuring compliance to lockdown regulations.

What is critical to note is that government also considered the communities of these spaces as being capable of self-regulation and this is evident in the lack of state policing and enforcement of lockdown regulations in the middle to upper class neighbourhoods (Hornberger, 2020). In fact, it is this level of "self-regulation" which enables one to critically reflect on government's responses and enforcement of the lockdown through the lens of Frantz Fanons'(1962:68) assertions on "zones of being" and "zones of non-being" in a colonial society.  Middle to upper class neighbourhoods represent zones of being that are:

"…strongly-built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly-lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage-cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but there you're never too close enough to see them. His feet are protected by strong shoes although the streets of his town are clean and even, with no holes or stones. The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easy-going town; its belly is always full of good things. The settler's town is a town of white people, of foreigners."

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[2] A form of privatized street-level governance in China which are very similar to management bodies that are found in residential gated communities in South Africa

With the above in mind, these urban utopias can be viewed as zones of orderliness that do not require any form of policing as they are capable of policing themselves and maintaining control and order. Here, de Sousa Santos' (2006) reflections apply as conflicts in the zone of being (above the abyssal line) are managed through regulation and emancipation. This is in stark contrast to how conflicts in lower class neighbourhoods are managed, where disorder and inhumanity reside,where communities incapable of saving and protecting themselves from the virus need state intervention through policing and force. This polarity is particularly disturbing in a post-apartheid South Africa where the quest to unify and undo injustices of the past is a key national priority. The next section provides further reflections on the realities of those "outside the gates" in township spaces.

## 5 EXPERIENCES FROM OUTSIDE THE GATES LOCKED DOWN AND LOCKED OUT?

The township space, as well as other spaces outside the gates, on the other hand is in stark contrast to middle to upper class neighbourhoods. The township space as explained by Jürgens et al (2013:) represent: "dormitory settlements without any substantial 'urban' elements, as witnessed by their rudimentary infrastructure (public services, recreation industry, transport, green spaces). As a rule the townships were, and still are located on the city peripheries, and were deliberately separated from the characteristically 'European' city centre by natural or artificial buffer zones"

Adversely, townships in South Africa are still characterised by high population density, informality, poverty, crime and general socio- economic backwardness (Mbambo and Agbola, 2020). They represent zones of non-being "a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other…a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light" (Fanon, 1962:p38). The COVID-19 pandemic showed clearly that social and urban justice is still far from being an achieved goal in our contemporary societies. The concept of just cities declines profoundly when we move to the context of developing counties as Balbo (1993) illustrates: [the city] is splitting into different separated parts, with the apparent formation of many "micro-states". Wealthy neighbourhoods provided with all kinds of services, such as exclusive schools, golf courses, tennis courts and private police patrolling the area around the clock intertwine with illegal settlements where water is available only at public fountains, no sanitation system exists, electricity is pirated by a privileged few, the roads become mud streams whenever it rains, and where house-sharing is the norm. Each fragment appears to live and function autonomously, sticking firmly to what it has been able to grab in the daily fight for survival (Balbo, 1993).

The above captures the painful disparities between the elite and the poor and these inequalities have been worsened by COVID-19 (Wilkinson, 2020). This is also evident in the treatment of these black low-income communities during the lockdown period. For example, a few days into the lockdown, police shot Sbusiso Amos on the veranda of his house in Vosloorus, east of Johannesburg, during a quarrel about adherence to regulations (Knoetze,2020). Not long after, Collins Khosa was beaten up and pushed against a concrete wall by military men who sought to teach him a lesson of respect and submission and such force lead to his death (ibid,2020).

To the current day, such accounts of violence in middle to upper class neighbourhoods are almost unheard of. Such cases also speak to the daily anxieties and fears which a black man carries on his shoulders when navigating the city. It is this aspect of criminalisation that immediately provokes the idea that history is once again repeating itself. After all, it was the apartheid "pass laws" that landed hundreds of thousands of "black South Africans in prison, where they were violated, abused and destroyed – a trauma which is passed on through family and sexual violence, and crime until today" (Hornburger,2020: p4-5). But back then people had no choice. Pass laws regulated people's access to the city and yet the city was the only place where work was to be found. Black people carried the brunt of the contradictions between "industry's demands and the fantasies of the state" (ibid,2020). This speaks to Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2020:15) assertion where he indicates that:

"Lockdowns have literally destroyed the "political economy of everyday life," where a majority of African people are found. The concept of the "political economy of everyday life" is better than that of "informal economy," which does not make sense in many parts of Africa, where the "formal economy" collapsed long ago. What also arises from this analysis of the political economy of COVID-19 and, indeed, that of lockdowns based on the ideas of capable states and formally employed people is to map out a possible decolonised post-COVID-19 world order"

The above is particularly true in that it was only after two weeks of lockdown when informal food vendors, who were selling uncooked foods, with existing municipal permits were allowed to start selling again (Battersy, 2020). Additionally, Battersy (2020) outlines that prior to the lockdown, most township vendors operated without municipal permits and in most cases the state was aware of this but often turned a blind eye. However, ever since the advent of lockdown law enforcement has been forcefully closing down these businesses. Therefore, under lockdown "bare lives are becoming even more bare" (Agamben, 2005 cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020) as more and more people whose lives depend on informality are being met with more sudden vulnerabilities.

South Africa's fragmented spatial landscape due to poor physical planning have also contributed to challenges faced by township communities under the lockdown. For instance, given the spatial positioning of townships in relation to the city, the transport challenge in townships, even in the face of COVID-19, also remained unresolved. Mbambo and Agbola (2020) highlight long distances to workplaces resulted in higher transport costs which were exacerbated during COVID-19 as mini-bus taxis, the main form of public transport for communities in townships, were compelled by government not to take full loads of passengers and were limited to operating at 70% capacity in an attempt to adhere to social distancing. According to the South African National Taxi Council (SANTANCO), this would see the taxi industry losing about 45% of the taxis over a period of 6 months due to repossessions by banks (Pijoos & Masweneng, 2020). The responses to these challenges were the increase in taxi fares and nationwide taxi protests, which consequently added further economic strain to the low-income communities. Later during the lockdown period, mini-bus taxi operators defiantly loaded at 100% of their capacity, which was in conflict with government's regulations (eNCA, 2020). This came as the mini-bus taxi businesses were failing to cope with the loss of income due to the lockdown restrictions imposed. As a result, social distancing became impossible for the residents travelling by mini-bus taxis. Due to the unaffordable cost of mini-bus taxis, most township commuters resorted to using the government train services as an alternative mode of transportation, but unfortunately the trains remained largely un-refurbished since the apartheid period. These trains were normally overloaded, which made it impossible to practice social distancing.

A key urban feature of South African townships are informal settlements as well as hostels which also present additional challenges to fulfilling lockdown regulations. These are also considered hotspots of the virus because of the population concertation as well as space concerns given that these settlements are densely packed together. The Human Settlements Minister, Lindiwe Sisulu, alluded to this and indicated that "[hostel overcrowding] makes it impossible for the residents to adhere to some of the COVID-19 regulations. The risks posed by overcrowding in our settlements are real. This requires all of us in the sector to work in unison to save lives by containing the spread of COVID-19" (SA News, 2020, March 12: par. 5).

## 6  A WAY FORWARD: CONFRONTING INEQUALITIES AND MAKING A CHANGE? OR AN OLD STORY, NEW CONTEXT?

From the above, it is evident that COVID-19 has illustrated new levels of inequalities and vulnerabilities. More than a decade ago, Harvey (2008) argued that we increasingly live in divided and conflict-prone urban areas. In the past three decades, the neoliberal turn has restored class power to rich elites and this is evident in the consequences of lockdown. The government's lockdown regulations have demonstrated considerable bias in their enforcement of lockdown regulations which have had adverse effects on the communities of low-income black individuals. The disease is worsening present inequalities in society along the lines of class and race disparities, uneven patterns of mobility, access to sanitation infrastructures and ability to self-isolate (Mirsha et al., 2020; Heinberg, 2020).

These social and infrastructural imbalances can influence responses to an outbreak and must be perceived as part of the answer to mitigating against future epidemics (Connolly et al., 2020). COVID-19 is being called a once-in-a-century pandemic (Gates, 2020). As such, one needs to question if it will be a turning point for people living in precarious urban environments. Here, Ndlovu-Gatshenis' (2020:p21) call for a "post-COVID-19 life of conviviality underpinned by moral economies of care as opposed to the present society of enmity and economies of profit" is most important. Historically, epidemics have acted as catalysts in transforming how diseases are handled (De La Barra, 2000). However, the extent and direction of transformation depend on how an epidemic and its context are interpreted and by whom, thus it is important for government to reflect on these lessons for the future. More importantly, these inequalities also indicate

that there is an urgent need for more research and policy development on how governments of developing and underdeveloped nations (who have large populations living in poverty) can develop lockdown strategies that are not only feasible but take into consideration the socio-economic climate that is specific to their context (Eyawo, Viens and Ugoji,2021).

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