



# News & Views



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Within the four walls of the Durban University of Technology city campus, we feel safe. But step outside this cocoon and it's another world altogether, write DUT students Nosipho Mngoma, Anathi Teyise and Ndabenhle Mthembu



This patch of land on the lower Berea, adjacent to the M4 onramp to the South Coast, has become known as Whoonga Park. Here, as many as 200 people are buying and smoking whoonga daily. Recent photographs – and the steady stream of people to and from this drug den – indicate that figure could be higher. Pictures: ROVING REPORTERS

## The park where even cops fear to go

DURBAN has a park where shoplifters, burglars and muggers gather daily. It's not a park in the official sense, and its name does not arise from the city's naming policy, old or new. It's called Whoonga Park and has become part of our urban landscape.

To get to Whoonga Park, take a drive – or a walk if you are brave – to the lower end of Che Guevara Road toward the M4 onramp to the South Coast and Maydon Wharf. As you approach the onramp, you will notice crowds gathered in circles on the patch of land alongside the railway line in Khuzimpi Shezi Road (formerly Williams Road). Here, whoonga drugging takes place on a mass scale.

At the nearby Durban University of Technology (DUT) city campus, third-year students remember when this patch of public land was clean and safe. Second-years remember avoiding the place at night. Now most students steer clear at all times. And now some policemen – both Metro and SAPS – openly say they do not venture to Whoonga Park, armed or not, unless reinforced.

One metro policeman put it bluntly to Roving Reporters: "It's dangerous. I'm not going to pretend to be a hero."

He said in these parts – Warwick Avenue, Albert Park and Umbilo in particular – muggers flee from crime scenes to Whoonga Park, where they trade in stolen items, seemingly beyond the reach of the law.

The whoonga they smoke apparently gives them a sense of euphoria. It's said that taking the drug, a cheap heroin derivative, can also lead to excessive violence.

Recently – on September 22 – Whoonga Park was the scene of a pitched street battle between police and occupants of the park. A man was shot and wounded.

"Homeless resist removal bid," the headline read. Metro police spokesman, Eugene Msomi, told the Sunday Tribune they had received a directive to remove a large group of illegal foreigners and homeless people living alongside the railway line in Khuzimpi Shezi Street. The operation degenerated into chaos when the crowd resisted. "One foreigner was shot and wounded by railway guards and four squatters were injured," said Msomi.

As part of an investigative journalism training project, DUT students were assigned to track down and interview the injured man. They never got to meet him, but they did find out more about what is taking place under the noses of authorities.

Queries to Metro Police and SAPS about whether there are plans to address the whoonga selling and associated crime, have drawn a blank, but head of the eThekweni Safer Cities and Itrump Unit, Hoosen Moolla, said intervention was needed.

"The occupation of this area and the activities taking place is having a negative impact on the city and impacts on safety and security. The area is polluted with waste and other human excrement due to no ablution facilities. An integrated intervention is required from all enforcement agencies together with the Social Development and Home Affairs departments," said Moolla.

# HOOKED ON WHOONGA

**N**OMBUSO sums up her 21-year-old life with a shrug. "Just like cows, we graze on the same grass." She means men sharing women, and vice versa, and everyone sharing HIV/Aids.

Nombuso is a Whoonga Park regular. Last week, a Mango Airlines billboard above the railway lines in Khuzimpi Shezi (Williams) Road read: "Win your share of R150 000". Underneath this billboard many people rub shoulders with whoonga dealers offering a different kind of trip.

It costs between R20 and R30 for a ready-made whoonga spliff. We were told that as many as 200 regulars buy up to five or six whoonga spliffs a day.

From the roadside people stand in tight circles, shuffling constantly. Puffs of smoke waft between them. Takeaway containers litter the place. Clearly, food sellers are raking in the money, too.

The whoonga junkies appear to be mostly unemployed youth-turned-petty criminals, beggars who have struck it lucky, and work seekers who haven't. We are warned of hardened muggers among them: guys who do not hesitate to stab and those who smash and grab what they can from passing cars. And then there are women who prostitute themselves in exchange for whoonga. We called them the Whoonga Girls.

There is no longer any grass at the place where Nombuso hangs out each day. Hundreds of feet have worn it down to a dust bowl.

A wall topped with razor wire separates Whoonga Park from the nearby railway reserve of Maydon Wharf. Every day people can be seen clambering over broken parts of the wall. This has led to

**THIS story forms part of a Roving Reporters investigative journalism training project supported by the Taco Kuiper Trust, the Open Society Foundation and the Durban University of Technology**

## ORIGINS

THERE are conflicting reports about the origins of whoonga and its contents. It was said to contain antiretroviral (ARV) drugs, but according to a 2011 Health-e report, a sample tested by Dr Thavendren Govender from the University of KwaZulu-Natal found only "trace amounts of ARVs in one of the samples." Its base components are heroin, morphine, and strychnine used in rat poison. The South African National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence, (SANCA) reckons that whoonga is similar to the heroin derivative "sugars". Some say the word whoonga is of Tanzanian origin. Others say it comes from the isiZulu word "wukeka" which means hooked.

clashes with railway guards and, more recently, an attempted clean-up operation by metro police which turned violent and made it into the Sunday Tribune as a story. After the fracas, business continued as usual at Whoonga Park.

As part of our training with Roving Reporters, we were given the newspaper

article, and told to follow up the story, and track down people injured in the clash.

We made our way to the metro police station in Albert Park, but never got there. As we crossed Khuzimpi Shezi Road, we met a guy pushing a shopping cart containing two big silver pots, a 25-litre water bottle and a plastic bag full of empty takeaway containers.

Sizwe Mchunu, 22, spends his days helping his grandmother sell cows' heads (is'kobho) for R27 in Warwick Avenue. Recently her business expanded to a catering service for people of Whoonga Park. Mchunu is her delivery man, selling half-filled containers of food for R5. We asked Mchunu to help us trace injured people pictured in the Sunday Tribune article.

As Mchunu walked away, a woman crossed the road, the wind tugging at the skirt covering her emaciated thighs. She stopped and glanced at us. Her glazed look was unmistakable: a whoonga addict.

We introduced ourselves. Mabuyi (surname not provided), 21, from Adams Mission, told us she was a girlfriend of one of the whoonga dealers. She told how on September 22, railway guards had removed vagrants from the railway property bordering Whoonga Park.

The next day the vagrants returned, again clashing with authorities. She claimed that one man was handcuffed to a pole and beaten by railway guards. Then, when metro police came that day (September

22) to remove people from Whoonga Park, they were attacked and mobbed.

"The police grabbed me. One of them said I was not the girl that they were looking for and let me go," said Mabuyi.

She got excited when we showed her pictures illustrating the Sunday Tribune article.

"Hayi, I know her. I know her," she said. "Her name is Sindisiwe. She was shot in the face. This man, too. His name is John. He's also a Bongo [derogatory slang for Tanzanian]. He also sells whoonga. He got shot in the arm."

However, Sindisiwe Ngema, 33, had not been shot, but her face was badly beaten. She had stitches around her upper lip. In hushed tones, Ngema explained she had been too sick to run away when the violence broke out.

"The railway police came with batons. They grabbed me, hit me, dragged me. I can't remember anything that happened after that." Ngema woke up in Addington Hospital, her face a bloody mess.

She said she had wanted to lay an assault charge but, after being given the runaround by the police as to where she could lay the charge, she had decided against it.

Soon Ngema was sobbing about a 13-year-old daughter she seldom sees. Poverty had forced her to give up the child to the father's family. She said she had been introduced to whoonga by a boyfriend who lost his job because of it,

and then left her. Through swollen lips she whispered: "I don't like the life that I am living."

Two more Whoonga Park girls approached, asking to see the newspaper. They were Nombuso and Bongi (not her real name). They said Ngema was crazy. Discussions soon returned to whoonga.

Mabuyi goes home occasionally, but hasn't for a while. She said she didn't want to trouble her parents by stealing from them to feed her habit.

When craving, Mabuyi said, she suffers stomach cramps. She only regains her appetite after having a hit, but insisted she is not addicted.

"My blood may be used to it, but when I am in jail, I don't smoke, so I know I can do without it."

Nombuso and Bongi talked about trading in sex, risking disease.

"You have to sleep with the men to get a hit," she said.

"Otherwise, you won't smoke, and you won't eat," added Bongi.

Nombuso's smile revealed missing teeth. "They just fall out," she said.

Unlike others from Whoonga Park, Nombuso was clean and her hair done up in a fashionable razor-cut-weave, but it was too short in places, revealing stitches.

She said she had been treated in hospital recently after being beaten by her boyfriend. The dealer was angry because she had shared, with friends, a whoonga fix he had given her.

"They are animals, like dogs," said Bongi.

"Yes," added Nombuso. "After dark, they rape us whenever they want to. I would not wish this life upon anyone, but I can't stop..."



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