

# “Honey, Milk and Bile”: a social history of Hillbrow, 1894–2016

Jonathan Stadler<sup>1\*</sup> and Charles Dugmore<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This commentary constructs a social history of Hillbrow, an inner-city suburb in Johannesburg, South Africa, based on a review of relevant published historical, anthropological and sociological texts. We highlight the significant continuities in the social structure of the suburb, despite the radical transformations that have occurred over the last 120 years.

Originally envisaged as a healthy residential area, distinct from the industrial activity of early Johannesburg, Hillbrow

majority, are black<sup>1</sup> and relatively recent arrivals, have little to connect themselves to neighbourhood histories prior to the 1990s [6]. Meanwhile, former residents of the suburb, for the most part white, lament these changes as personal losses of a 'golden era'<sup>2</sup>.

However, an overview of the social history of Hillbrow reveals a picture of enduring continuities across its 120-



the suburb was gaining a reputation for sex, prostitution and disease.

This emerging reputation was shaped largely by the type of accommodation offered for rental in Hillbrow, and assumptions about its associated social character. A large

hectare). The skyline was now dominated by the J.G. Strijdom Tower (Post Office Tower), built in 1971 and stretching 269-m high, forming the iconic image now instantly recognisable as a symbol of Johannesburg itself. But more than such physical developments, this period is marked by Hillbrow's significant challenge to apartheid legislation governing where 'non-whites' were permitted to reside.

Hillbrow was designated as a 'white' area under the Group Areas Act<sup>4</sup> that was promulgated in 1950. While

Hillbrow in the early 1980s. By 1985, an estimated 70% of apartments were occupied by whites, 25% by coloureds and Indians, and 5% by blacks [17].

In 1986, after three years of constant protests in black townships across South Africa, the worst recession since the 1930s and growing international pressure on the apartheid state, the NP government scrapped the Pass Laws and began to relax the monitoring of the Group Areas Act for blacks. As more black residents moved

itself, especially drug-related illicit activity. Mugging was a serious problem, with one in five residents having been mugged and one in ten mugged more than once. Between 1996 and 2000, armed robbery almost doubled, as did assaults [27]. Not surprisingly, this led to residents remaining in their apartments where they felt safe, and few ventured out at night [4]. Other aspects of living in a congested urban setting contributed toward resident's growing dissatisfaction with the area, including the incessant noise from taxis, music from nightclubs and domestic violence among neighbours [4].

The decline of inner-city neighbourhoods such as Hillbrow is often attributed to racial desegregation [28]. Yet in this case, urban decline had more to do with the dynamics of landlord-tenant relationships that resulted in overcrowding and the physical deterioration of buildings, than with the shifting racial profile of the area [17, 21]. Moreover, the deterioration of Hillbrow arguably has its origins in the early 1970s, preceding the era of desegregation.

A survey conducted in 1991 in the inner-city revealed a direct correlation between overcrowding of apartments (up to 24% were defined as overcrowded) and a lack of services. Those buildings with more than 5 occupants per bedroom, for example, experienced an almost permanent lack of electricity, irregular supplies of water and drainage and sewerage systems. This was primarily due to owners and landlords withdrawing services and to the absence of caretakers. Eager to fill their properties with new residents who would not be eligible for rent control, landlords encouraged overcrowding [28]. In some cases, however, buildings were deliberately destroyed by tenants as political acts. In the mid to late 1990s, black tenants in some buildings purposefully contributed toward their decline as an act of defiance against the apartheid state. Perceiving landlords as the beneficiaries of apartheid, they cast acts of vandalism and refusal to pay for services as acts of resistance [29].

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, South Africa experienced an influx of foreign nationals, and Hillbrow continued to be the main port of entry for refugees and economic migrants [30]. In his survey conducted in 1997, Morris found that 87% of residents were South African born, and the remaining 13% came from Europe (5%), Southern Africa (7%) and elsewhere in Africa (1%) [4]. Just a few years later, a different picture emerged: in a survey of residential hotels in Hillbrow undertaken in 2002, between 25 and 38% of residents were foreign born, while 89% had arrived in South Africa in the past 5 years or less [27]. Similarly, another study has estimated that 90% of the inner-city's total resident population arrived there only after the early 1990s [30].

Hillbrow's shifting demographics – the new wave of foreign nationals and refugees in particular – have led to

increasing levels of xenophobia and violence. Nearly two thirds of the non-South Africans interviewed in a survey of 200 residents of hotels in Hillbrow in 2002 reported that they feared assault by South Africans because of their foreign status [31]. Sadly, the fears of foreign residents were realised all too often in the years that followed: Hillbrow was among the areas targeted in the xenophobic violence that swept through Gauteng in 2008, leaving shops looted, homes destroyed, and more

More broadly, attention was turning to the provision of health services for the large sex worker population in Hillbrow, many of whom were at risk of HIV infection. While in the mid-1980s HIV infection was virtually absent in this population [37], by 1997, 45% of 247 sex workers surveyed tested positive for HIV [38]. The total population of sex workers in the Johannesburg inner-city is hard to assess, but has been estimated at between 5000 and 10,000 [39]. Many women who defined themselves as sex workers avoided seeking care in government clinics owing to stigma and discrimination, resulting in untreated STI and other health issues [5]. In 1994, the Reproductive Health Research Unit (now the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute, or WRHI) of the University of the Witwatersrand initiated Thursday evening health services for sex workers in Hillbrow, in addition to existing treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STI) at the Esselen Street Clinic. By 1998, services were expanded to include taking mobile clinics into local brothels to meet the growing need [39]. In around half of the identified brothels, these mobile clinics offered sex workers clinical services including treatment of symptomatic STIs, health education, safe-sex negotiation skills, and condoms [40]. In addition, outreach workers visited the numerous bar lounges and beer halls in Hillbrow to engage with men [39]. An assessment of the mobile services concluded that these efforts had transformed the perception of brothels from "diseased and dirty" to "safe and healthy" [5].

By the early-to mid-2000s, South African HIV infection rates had reached catastrophic levels, followed by



Department's official policies. WRHI Research Capacity Building funds were used to fund the publications charges for the supplement.

Availability of data and materials  
Not applicable.

Authors' contributions  
JS conceptualised the paper. JS and CD reviewed the relevant literature and co-wrote the first draft, edited and revised subsequent drafts and read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests  
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Consent for publication  
Not applicable.

Ethics approval and consent to participate  
Not applicable.

About this supplement  
This article has been published as part of BMC Public Health Volume 17