Glimmers of Light: Opportunities for Preventing Violence in South Africa

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South Africa transitioned from decades of oppressive apartheid rule to democracy in 1994 during a period of extreme violence. The country's murder rate, which had been rising since the 1980s, accelerated in the last years of apartheid, peaking at 78 per 100,000 people in 1993.[1] Over the past 24 years, South Africa has reversed this trend; by 2017 the rate had fallen by more than 50 percent.[2] Despite this improvement, South Africa still has one of the highest murder rates in the world at 34.1 per 100,000 in 2017.[3] The country has not yet overcome the societal impact of past injustices and structural violence. Inequality, poverty, and unemployment are still racialized.[4] Violence against women and children is especially pervasive.

Reducing and preventing violence is critical not only for sustaining long-term peace, but also for future social and economic development. Violence severely impacts health, education, and employment,[5] generating cycles of inter-generational poverty and compounding trauma. Family-level conflict, child abuse or neglect, and sexual violence against women and children are prevalent and self-reinforcing.[6] One in five South African children will experience sexual abuse by the time they are 18, and one in three will be physically abused by their caregivers. Children who experience these forms of violence are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety—or turn to violence themselves.[8] They are also likely to earn less than their peers and are more likely to use drugs or abuse alcohol.[9]

Research examining the life histories of offenders who committed sexual assault and other violent crimes, ranging from robbery to murder, found that most had experienced domestic violence, abuse or neglect, corporal punishment, and bullying.[10] An analysis of the social determinants of violence using several large data sets concluded that "children who have suffered some form of violence at home are at greater risk for experiencing violence outside of the home."[11]

The direct and indirect costs of violence against women and children are conservatively estimated at around R266 billion (USD $22.47 billion) annually.[12] Violence has a severe impact on the mental and physical health of victims and on those close to them. It also hinders their immediate and future ability to work,[13] and contributes to absenteeism and a loss of productivity. All this has long-term consequences for economic inclusion and development. It also threatens South Africa's prospects for meeting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.[14]

But violence can be prevented. Research shows that the most effective programs start with the family: preventing the abuse of women and children while providing treatment for the mental and physical trauma of those already victimized. While researchers and practitioners are generating evidence of effective interventions that address the risk factors for violence, they alone cannot determine whether the interventions can be sustainably scaled up, or how to do so, and this requires a partnership with the government.

This paper discusses what the South African government has done to address crime and violence and the impediments to effectively preventing violence. It then examines three ways to address obstacles for scaling-up and sustaining violence prevention programs: fostering cross-sectoral communication and cooperation, encouraging private-sector collaboration, and providing practical support for implementation.

Assessing the Response to Violence

South Africa has promulgated a number of progressive laws aimed at preventing and responding to crime and violence, especially sexual violence against women and children, intimate partner violence, and child abuse and neglect.[15] High-level policies—including the *National Crime Prevention Strategy* (1996), the N*ational Development Plan 2030,* the *Integrated Urban Development Framework (2016),* and the *White Paper on Safety and Security* (2016)—emphasize the importance of both strengthening criminal justice and addressing the underlying social risk factors that drive violent crime.

Why is violence against women and children still so prevalent despite these laws and policies? An inter-ministerial committee published a diagnostic review that found that the state's emphasis on violence prevention remained largely rhetorical: much more money is spent on policing than on social programs to reduce the risk factors for violence or help survivors recover from trauma.[16] Some of the shortcomings identified include that:

- Most laws and policies are not costed by the national treasury before they are promulgated. The consequence is that financial or human resources are not allocated by departments for implementation.

- Social workers, police, health workers, and other state employees who respond to violence suffer vicarious trauma, are inadequately managed and supported, and often have to deal with unmanageably large caseloads. As a result, they become insensitive and harsh in their attitudes. Not enough is being done to address their own inequitable gender views and normalized views of violence, nor to support and effectively manage their work.

- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that provide community-level services rely on a mix of donor and state funding, which is often inconsistent, and the services they provide are not conducted with a consistent standard across the country.[17]

A lack of political leadership exacerbates these problems. Under public pressure to respond to crime, politicians seek quick fixes, such as adding more police, rather than seeking long-term solutions that address the root causes of violence.

Academic researchers working with NGOs, sometimes in partnership with government, are developing and testing interventions that hold promise. These include, but are not limited to, school and community-based programs to change harmful gender norms, strengthen incomes, and prevent domestic violence.[18] Some are now under evaluation, such as "Stepping Stones and Creating Futures," a project to reduce intimate partner violence in urban settlements, which is being studied by the South African Medical Research Council.[19] A number of universities and NGOs, some in collaboration with the government and UN agencies have developed and tested positive parenting programs for children of all ages, including home visits with pregnant women and new mothers.[20]

However, a 2016 workshop for program developers and implementers, hosted by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and the University of Cape Town at the request of the South African National Treasury, found that it is rare for non-governmental initiatives to consider scalability and sustainability in the development and evaluation process, and many are not suitable for integration into existing government systems such as education, health, and child protection. Evidence from South Africa and other countries suggests that even when policymakers are aware of the positive results of evaluations there is often no institution or person whose job it is to work toward scaling up. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that policymakers and researchers seldom have opportunities to plan together, and discussing their mutual interests and needs.[21] That means that too often promising pilot projects are not sustained after an evaluation is completed. Further, civil society proponents of prevention have not presented and advocated for a clear set of solutions for preventing violence. The often fraught relationship between the state and NGOs, and a lack of coherence between research, policy, and resource distribution present key challenges.

Opportunities

Cross-sectoral Communication

Enabling positive interaction between government, academics, and NGOs is critical. The Dialogue Forum for Evidence-Based Programs to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children was established in 2015 to foster trusting, respectful, and collaborative relationships between the researchers and practitioners who have developed and tested violence prevention programs and the public officials responsible for providing services.[22]

The Forum recognizes that government departments, NGOs, and academics operate in unique environments, face different internal and external pressures, respond to different incentives, and use different modes of communication. Often the sectors have expectations of each other that are neither realistic nor clearly articulated. The Forum draws on peacebuilding methods to bridge these differences and to provide a safe space for information sharing and troubleshooting.

Each meeting begins by reiterating shared values, including active listening, respect, courage, and cooperation. Time is taken for initial introductions and for conveners and participants to agree on objectives. The facilitators use a variety of techniques, including humor, to put participants at ease and to stimulate frank discussion. Participants are encouraged to share and discuss opposing views while reflecting on their personal responsibility for addressing the issues, which many find empowering. The meetings include time for networking and relationship building, which are crucial for building the trust needed for future collaboration.

The Forum also has allowed participants to express their frustrations and challenges. For example, NGO practitioners have described their struggles to sustain promising projects; government officials have explained the challenges of addressing politicians' quickly changing demands, and coping with negative public perceptions of the government. The relationships formed at the Forum have encouraged and enabled collaboration outside the meetings.

Since its establishment, the Forum has grown to include participants from seven government departments, some of whom hold senior positions. Additionally, representation includes academics and NGOs that have developed and evaluated violence prevention programs, or are undertaking evaluations. The multi-sectoral group that provides strategic direction for the Forum ensures that participation is balanced by sector, gender, and race and that the meetings address the needs of all sectors. Regular qualitative evaluations help conveners and facilitators identify strengths and weaknesses and design future meetings.

Among the Forum's results are:

- A better understanding of how the government budgeting process works and how decisions about resource allocation can be informed;

- NGOs and government officials collaborating to write and disseminate policy briefs that make the case for violence prevention, with the purpose of building necessary political will;

- Collaboration between community-based organizations to increase their geographic reach, provide mutual support, and secure funding; and,

- Securing buy-in from the private sector by engaging a major national retailer, which not only provides funding for the Forum but also supports prevention initiatives for local communities.[23]

Private Sector Collaboration

Nationally and globally, the private sector has been recognized as a key stakeholder in development, but how to find alignment between the interests of business, NGOs, and government around preventing violence has not been readily evident. Corporations have the potential to reach large numbers of people, including employees, clients, and customers. Some companies have begun to integrate violence prevention initiatives into their business practices in ways that help their bottom line. Jet stores and its retail group, Edcon, are not only funding the Dialogue Forum but also working with NGOs to explore how positive parenting messages and programs could be delivered to their staff.

InterCement, a Brazilian cement producer, offers a good example of how violence prevention can be integrated into business practices. A 2005 study of truck drivers in Brazil by the World Childhood Foundation found that children were victims of sexual exploitation along road transport routes in the country. Childhood Brazil and the Ethos Institute for Business and Social Responsibility developed a pact committing companies to act to prevent and reduce this problem. Since InterCement signed the pact in 2007, it has engaged its employees, suppliers, and clients in raising awareness about child sexual exploitation and how to report cases. They have also educated truck drivers about the laws that protect children. In ten years, InterCement has reached 132,000 truck drivers through its programs. Three studies among truck drivers show that over a period of ten years the involvement of truck drivers in the sexual exploitation of children dramatically declined from 36 percent to 13 percent. In addition, truck drivers' knowledge about a human rights hotline where cases of child sexual exploitation can be reported, and their knowledge of laws to protect children increased dramatically. An unintended and unexpected consequence for the company

has been increased staff loyalty and a reduction in truck driver turnover rates, perhaps as a result of the companies' increased interest in and acknowledgment of the difficult work of truck drivers.[24]

Some private companies in South Africa are also starting to initiate violence prevention efforts. A large commercial farmer producing vegetables in the Western Cape believed that domestic conflict increased absenteeism, thus affecting productivity.[25] He decided to provide positive parenting training to his employees during the workday. While it is still too early to determine the impact on productivity, the farmer was able to earn Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) points, which reward efforts to improve the skills of employees.[26]

Both the government and NGOs could do more to help South African companies identify innovative ways to prevent violence that also increase productivity and profitability. The South African government could provide incentives, such as BBBEE points specifically for employee programs that strengthen positive parenting and reduce gender-based violence. NGOs and researchers could provide information to companies about how violence impacts business and jointly develop solutions.

Implementation Support

For the government or NGOs to implement evidence-based programs at scale while ensuring they remain effective is a challenge.[27] Implementation research has shown that ongoing implementation support, including from researchers and program developers, is critical to sustaining the effectiveness of interventions. South African researchers, policymakers, and NGO practitioners are beginning to explore how implementation science can be used to support the effective delivery of programs.[28]

The government's 2016 *White Paper on Safety and Security* envisages the establishment of a National Center for Crime and Violence Prevention. This structure could help NGOs and government service providers implement, monitor, and evaluate violence prevention initiatives by:

- Identifying the range of evidence-based programs that are appropriate for South Africa;

- Setting guidelines for assessing community needs and assets, and matching evidence-based programs to needs;

- Providing training and technical assistance for program implementers;

- Developing tools to monitor and evaluate implementation and its effect;

- Making data about the impact of programs available to policymakers; and,

- Supporting the development of policy.

These functions are critical to the successful, sustainable implementation of evidence-based programs, and for increasing reach.

Conclusion

South Africa is well positioned to take the lead in preventing and reducing violence: it has a strong policy framework to prevent and respond to violence already in place; a growing number of interventions that have been shown, at least on a small scale, to be effective; and, demonstrated potential for the government and civil society to work together, and to engage businesses to harness the private sector's capacity to reach large numbers of people with interventions that reduce the risk factors for violence.

The Dialogue Forum demonstrates how actors from the public, non-profit, and private sectors can share knowledge and collaborate to achieve the shared objective of reducing and preventing violence. Some South African private companies understand the impact of violence on productivity and profitability and are beginning to initiate projects to address this. The *White Paper on Safety and Security* offers a possible template for supporting the implementation, at scale, of evidence-based violence prevention programs and interventions.

Sustaining collaboration and communication across sectors is critical for success, as is costing and implementing the *White Paper on Safety and Security.* Reducing the high levels of violence against women and children will not be quick, nor easy, but the cost of inaction is too high for the country to bear.

For a set of policy options and recommendations related to violence prevention against women and children in South Africa, see the accompanying Africa Program Policy Brief No. 15 by Chandre Gould.

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Cover Image: African women march in Women's March via Wikipedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2018_Women%27s_March_NYC_(00564).jpg.

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