POLICY BRIEF

What is violence prevention?

By the Violence Prevention Forum

What do we mean when we speak of preventing violence? This policy brief presents definitions of violence prevention as expressed by children, researchers, non-governmental organisations, government officials, development partners, donor agencies and a private sector partner. These definitions show that preventing violence is a collective, long-term undertaking that requires time, knowledge, energy and funds to redress poverty, inequality and prejudice. It will only be achieved when there are common goals and a shared commitment.

Key findings

▶ Preventing violence requires purposeful, collective action by society as a whole.

▶ The prevention of violence requires more than just programmes, policies or interventions aimed at perpetration and victimisation. Violence can only be prevented effectively, and peace maintained, if its structural and socio-economic drivers (poverty, inequality, patriarchy and prejudice) are addressed and mental health and trauma attended to.

▶ The process of arriving at an agreement about a definition of violence prevention is an exercise in violence prevention, when undertaken in a skilfully facilitated dialogue. Such dialogue enables sharing of knowledge, evidence, beliefs, practices and information relevant to violence prevention.

▶ Without a shared definition of violence prevention – or a collective process to discuss, consider and agree on what it will take to prevent violence – there can be no shared commitment to action. It will also not be possible to secure the necessary resources. Action will thus be fragmented, efforts siloed, and intersections overlooked when bridging prevention and response.

Recommendations

The definitions by each sector make it clear that while violence in South Africa is deeply rooted, there is a willingness and intention to turn the tide and build peace. However, in order to move towards collective action, the following key actions are necessary:

▶ South Africa needs a multi-layered approach to preventing violence informed by developing a shared understanding of what is needed in each context. This should lead to clear plans of action and delineation of roles and responsibilities.

▶ Communities, government departments, companies, municipalities, associations, schools, universities and faith-based institutions are encouraged to build on and refine these definitions of violence prevention to pave the way for contextually relevant actions to build peace.

▶ Once an agreed-upon definition of violence prevention has been developed and potential solutions determined, all stakeholders – government departments, non-governmental organisations, researchers, donors, the private sector and communities – must identify how they can contribute to preventing violence. This should support the implementation of policies and plans, such as the National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide and the White Paper on Safety and Security.

Setting the scene

In April 2021, 15-year-old Lufuno Mahvungu from Mbilwi Secondary School in Limpopo took her own life after having been violently bullied at school. Her peers were captured on video cheering on her attacker during the incident. The video was later shared on social media.[1] This was just one of many incidents of bullying and violence that prompted the Department of Basic Education to undertake a national roadshow at the end of May.[2]

In the numerous media articles that followed Lufuno's suicide, teachers, educational psychologists and parents pointed to the normalisation of violence in South African society as the basis for the violence seen between children.[3] This normalisation has had a devastating impact on families, children and education.

South Africans need little reminding of the extent of violence in our country. Violence is, and has been, a daily presence for most citizens for generations, whether it manifests as a physical attack, or as chronic illness caused by poverty, or as racism and sexism. While we are quick to recognise physical violence as violence, structural and cultural violence are less acknowledged but no less present in our society.[4]

The Violence Prevention Forum supports and informs the delivery of prevention interventions at scale across SA

The speed and intensity with which physical violence can manifest in South Africa was driven home in July 2021 when the country experienced a wave of intense violence precipitated by the arrest and incarceration of former president Jacob Zuma.[5] Within a few days significant damage was done to critical infrastructure, including schools, and to the lives and livelihoods of thousands of South Africans.

This violence deepened a social and economic crisis exacerbated by successive waves of COVID-19 and the associated restrictions on movement, trade and social interaction since March 2020.

The pandemic and successive lockdowns have had a devastating effect on citizens and the economy. People of colour, particularly women, have been hardest hit by the disease, and by the loss of jobs and income. This has been shown by the National Income Dynamics – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey.[6]

However, the foundations for the social and economic crisis were laid long before COVID-19 reached the country's shores. South Africa has experienced high levels of structural, cultural and physical violence for decades.[7]

The additional stress caused by the pandemic has had a significant impact on mental health. According to Kollamparambil *et al*., the pandemic has caused a surge in depressive symptoms, as a consequence of the fear both of being infected and of losing jobs and incomes.[8] At an individual level this impacts how South Africans carry out everyday duties and tasks such as parenting or showing up for work. If the country is ever to recover, preventing and reducing violence has to be a priority for all sectors of society, from government and civil society to the private sector and communities.

Approach to defining violence prevention

The national Violence Prevention Forum (VPF) has since 2015 been involved in a long-term process that seeks to ensure that evidence-led violence prevention interventions are delivered at scale across the country.[9] To do this, it has convened representatives from government departments, the research community, NGO practitioners, development partners and the private sector.

The forum has already made a substantial contribution to understanding what is needed to prevent violence,[10] and what stands in the way of doing so.[11] One of the factors that hamper collective action is the absence of agreement on a definition of violence prevention. This stems in part from a history of fragmentation within sectors that prevent and respond to violence. Different mandates and philosophies, and different ways of working, result in different approaches, values and beliefs about violence and what is required to prevent it.[12]

To address this, in May 2021 the VPF convened a series of workshops for children, NGOs, researchers, government officials, development partners, donors and the private sector. These were aimed at defining what we mean when we speak of preventing violence in communities across South Africa.

This was the first time that the VPF convened these sectors separately. This was both to enable a larger number of people to participate in the process and to allow different insights from each sector to emerge before arriving at a common definition. This policy brief presents the five resultant definitions of violence prevention and draws out commonalities, differences and gaps.

A second round of dialogue (in September 2021) will build on this work to derive a single definition that all sectors can support and use in their individual and collaborative efforts to break the cycles of violence in South Africa.

By sharing our work in progress we intend to stimulate others to join us in thinking about what is required to break the cycles of violence that have held the country back for generations.

Why define violence prevention?

Over the past few years, participants in the VPF from the government, NGOs (including community-based organisations), development partners and research institutions have collectively grappled with how to define violence prevention. This is the work that is necessary to heal ourselves and our country, and live in peace.

Violence prevention is a difficult concept to define. Existing definitions are not specific to the South African context or the African continent.[13] While there are South African policies that provide definitions of violence, these are not uniform.

Without agreement on a definition, or on what it will take to prevent violence, it is impossible to achieve a shared commitment to action

The National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence (GBV) states that prevention means addressing the range of risk factors that drive GBV, femicide and violence and contribute to the normalisation of violence.[14]

The Programme of Action to Address Violence Against Women and Children defines violence prevention as preventing violence against women and children (VAWC) from occurring through a sustained strategy for transforming attitudes, practices and behaviours. It emphasises addressing the root and underlying causes of VAWC to stop it before it occurs. It also states that emphasis will be placed on transforming attitudes, practices and behaviours to ensure that South Africans reject VAWC.[15]

The 2016 White Paper on Safety and Security uses a three-tiered prevention model. It talks of building safer communities and states that the focus of primary prevention is the general public or environment. The focus of secondary prevention are those regarded as being 'at risk' of offending or of criminal victimisation, while tertiary prevention is aimed at those who have already succumbed to either criminality or victimisation. It argues

DEFINITIONS OF VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN SA POLICY AREN'T UNIFORM

safer communities will only be achieved through a combination of all three prevention areas – primary, secondary and tertiary.[16]

It is a challenge to define something that can mean so many different things to different people in different contexts. However, without a commonly agreed definition of violence prevention, or a collective process to discuss and agree on what it will take to prevent violence, it is impossible to achieve a shared commitment to action. It will also not be possible to secure the resources necessary to enable action. Action will thus be fragmented, efforts siloed, and intersections overlooked when bridging prevention and response.

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Defining violence prevention

After considering the definitions presented above, and identifying the gap and weaknesses from a South African perspective, children, NGOs, government officials, researchers, development partners, donors and private sector partners developed the definitions below.

How children defined violence prevention

This definition was developed by 13 children, including the deputy speaker of the Children's Parliament, Save the Children's child ambassadors and children who work closely with UNICEF. They came from Thembisa, Katlehong, Alexandra and Cape Town. There were six girls and seven boys between the ages of 14 and 17.

Violence prevention refers to ways of combating and minimising violence in a collective manner by including all stakeholders such as communities, government, children, parents, businesses, the media, NGOs and civil society at large. This is done in an effort to stop current and future abuse (i.e. physical, emotional and psychological abuse) while protecting the defenceless and ensuring that harmful acts of injustice against individuals and groups are avoided.

How NGOs defined violence prevention

This definition was developed by the representatives of 15 NGOs and community-based organisations from across South Africa. These organisations work to prevent violence, support community development, provide services and support to victims of GBV, inform policy and generate evidence about their interventions.[17]

Building peace and preventing violence requires varied acts by the whole of society (citizens, leaders, communities, families, children and individuals) to intentionally support and grow an ethic of mutual care, respect and inclusion. This includes strengthening core life skills, building healthy relationships, reducing systemic sources of harm and inequality, and healing woundedness.

How researchers defined violence prevention

This definition was developed by 18 researchers with direct knowledge and experience in the field of violence prevention, including evaluators, philosophers, experts in GBV, economists, criminologists, social scientists and public health specialists. They represented universities, research networks and research institutes from around the country[18]

Violence prevention is about collectively intervening to promote healing, dignity and care in social systems so as to reduce the structural determinants of violence, [and] reduce individual vulnerabilities to violence and the conditions that perpetuate different forms of violence.

The principles underpinning the work should be decolonial, transformative of gender inequality, strengthen and centre communities, build a fair society, achieve a fair distribution of resources, be inclusive, reduce inequality, build equity and be intersectional.

Practitioners, implementers and service providers and researchers must work with integrity and reflexivity (i.e. awareness of positionality), not perpetuate violence. This would need to be operationalised for measurability and should appreciate transdisciplinarity.

How government officials defined violence prevention

This definition was developed by 10 officials from the Department of Basic Education, the Department of Planning Monitoring and Evaluation, the Department of Social Development, the Department of Women, the Department of Health and the South African Police Service.

> Violence prevention is a collective, intentional, socio-ecological mechanism to build the social fabric to achieve a peaceful coexistence. It aims to eliminate mental and emotional states of being that may manifest in the violation of others. This requires committing to shared constitutional values and norms, and adherence to rules of engagement that enable negotiation to resolve conflict and overcome differences to stop future abuse.

The various definitions show that a commitment to long-term investment and deep transformation is required

How development partners, donors and the private sector defined violence prevention

This definition was developed by 11 people from the private sector, philanthropic funds, UN agencies and inter-governmental development partners.[19]

> Violence prevention refers to the reduction of violent victimisation or perpetration through direct efforts to remove or reduce the underlying causes. These include the structural drivers of inequality, social and cultural norms, traditional power structures, and risk factors at individual, family and community levels by harnessing the policies and programmes that contribute to reducing violence.
>
> Violence prevention can only be achieved through a social compact that fully unites government, the private sector, researchers, civil society, traditional

> leaders and healers, media actors, faith-based actors, police and public safety professionals with professionals from health, education, welfare, liquor licencing authorities, labour movements and anyone else who can take the actions needed to remove and reduce the underlying causes and risk factors of violence. We need to accelerate investment in creating safe spaces in communities and in the workplace. A commitment is needed to long-term initiatives. Everyone in society has a role to play in modelling the behaviour we would like to see.
>
> We should respect and listen to the voices of survivors and enhance their ability to build resilience and be empowered. The violence prevention approach should be intersectional and feminist.

These aspirational definitions differ in style, language and emphasis, but agree on two important issues:

- Preventing violence requires purposeful, collective action by the whole society.

- The prevention of violence requires more than just programmes, policies or interventions aimed at reducing and preventing perpetration and victimisation. Violence can only be effectively prevented, and peace maintained, if the structural and socio-economic drivers of violence (poverty, inequality, patriarchy and prejudice) are addressed and mental health and trauma attended to.

This is significant, and represents a departure from an emphasis on a criminal justice response to violence, or quick fixes.[20] It is clear that a commitment to long-term investment and deep transformation is required. However, the inherent risk with broad definitions that make violence prevention the responsibility of all sectors, and all citizens, is that no single actor is required to take responsibility for their role in prevention. This provides a clear direction for the future work of the VPF.

What comes next

In September 2021 the VPF will convene a collective, representing all five sectors, to develop a single definition and principles that all sectors can stand by. This group will also begin the task of identifying and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each sector.

Thereafter the definition will be shared, discussed and workshopped with others, including artists, parliamentarians, social commentators and faith leaders, to build a strong social movement in support of preventing violence.

Notes

1   S Mlambo, Justice for Lufuno: Limpopo pupil dies by suicide after violent school bullying incident, *Independent Online*, 13 April 2021.

2   South African Government, *Basic Education rolls our anti-bullying campaign*, Pretoria: Department of Education, 28 May 2021.

3   S Black, School bullies: 'Hurt people hurt people', *Mail & Guardian*, 13 June 2021.

4   S Molotane-Henkeman, *Disrupting denial: analysing narratives of invisible/visible violence and trauma*, Cape Town: New Adventure, 2018; J Gilligan, *Violence: reflections of a national epidemic*, New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

5   See, for example *Reuters*, Looting and violence grips South Africa after Zuma court hearing, 13 July 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/looting-violence-grips-south-africa-after-zuma-court-hearing-2021-07-13

6   N Spaull *et al*., Synthesis report: NIDS-CRAM Wave 5, National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) and Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey 2020 (CRAM), Working Paper, 2021, https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/1.-Spaull-N.-Daniels-R.-C-et-al.-2021-NIDS-CRAM-Wave-5-Synthesis-Report.pdf

7   S Molotane-Henkeman, *Disrupting denial: Analysing narratives of invisible/visible violence and trauma*, Cape Town: New Adventure, 2018.

8   U Kollamparambil, A Oyenubi and C Nwosu, Mental health, COVID-19 vaccine distrust and vaccine hesitancy in South Africa, NNIDS-CRAM, 2021.

9   See The Violence Prevention Forum, www.violence-prevention.org

10 C Gould *et al*., *Reducing violence in South Africa: from policing to prevention*, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies (ISS), 2017; C Hsiao *et al*., *Reducing violence in South Africa: from research to action*, Pretoria: ISS, 2017; C Mathews and C Gould, *Preventing violence: from evidence to implementation*, Pretoria: ISS, 2017; L Jamieson, L Berry and L Lori, *South African Child Gauge: survive, thrive, transform*, Cape Town: Children's Institute, 2017.

11 C Gould *et al*., *What will it take to prevent interpersonal violence in South Africa?*, Policy Brief 122, Pretoria: ISS, 2019.

12 J Ryan, MV Esau and NV Roman, Legislative response to family violence in South Africa: A family centered perspective, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 42, 2018, 1–8.

13 J Carnochan *et al*., Violence prevention an invitation to intersectoral collaboration, World Health Organisation, https://www.who.int/violenceprevention/about/intersectoral_action.pdf; Lawrence Sherman *et al*. (eds), *Preventing crime: what works, what doesn't, what's promising: A report to the United States Congress*, Washington DC: National Institute of Justice, February 1997.

14 IS Committee, *National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide*, Pretoria: Department of Women, Children and People with Disability, 2020.

15 Department of Social Development, *South African Integrated Programme of Acrtion Addressing Violence Against Women and Children (2013–2018)*, Pretoria: Department of Social Development, 2012.

16 Police Secretariat, *White Paper on Safety and Security*, Pretoria: Government Printer, 2016.

17 The organisations represented were the Parent Centre, Dlalanati, ISS, the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, the Women's Legal Centre, Phaphama Initiatives, Mosaic, Clowns Without Borders, Ububele, Children in Distress Network, Save the Children South Africa, the Seven Passes Initiative, and the National Association of Child Care Workers.

18 The group included representatives from the Sexual Violence Research Initiative, Cornerstone Economic Research Institute for Security Studies, Save the Children South Africa, University of Pretoria/UN (Vienna office), Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town (UCT), Medical Research Council South Africa, UCT School of Governance, UWC: School of Public Health, Abdul Latif Poverty Action Lab, Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection, and the Equality Institute at Stellenbosch University.

19 The group included representatives from UNICEF, GIZ, Tshikilulu, Ford Foundation, European Union External Action, Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project and Anglo American.

20 C Gould *et al.*, *Reducing violence in South Africa: from policing to prevention*, Pretoria: ISS, 2017.

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