
South Africa Project: Safety Pilot

Overcoming Dangerous Defaults



Summary

South Africa has one of the highest per-capita crime and murder rates of any country in the world. However, the majority of violent crime in South Africa is localized in a small proportion of low-income, marginalized communities. While increased enforcement in these dangerous areas is a potential pathway to reducing violent crime, the Western Cape Government in South Africa asked ideas42 to identify other, behaviorally informed solutions to improving safety in South Africa's low-income communities.

Working with the Western Cape's Department of Community Safety and researchers from the University of Cape Town, we sought to understand the behavioral and psychological factors that might be perpetuating the incidence of violence in these communities. We found that young people were sticking with the status quo by spending time in unsafe places, environments where – because of situational factors - they were more likely to both perpetrate crime, and become a victim of crime.

To try to overcome this tendency to spend time in unsafe environments – especially on weekend evenings when most crime was committed - we designed a computer-based activity-planning tool to help nudge them towards less risky activities. This tool drew on behavioral insights that people are:

- Less likely to go with the status quo option when they are forced to make an active decision about all available options.
- More likely to follow through on their intended actions when they make public commitments and plan ahead.

We developed a prototype tool and tested it with young people from Cape Town's Cape Flats neighborhoods. We wanted to assess whether it was more effective than the traditional approach of improving safety awareness in two respects:

- Improving how “safe” the young people reported feeling.
- Reducing the number of violent events they experienced in the past week.

The tool had powerful effects. A randomized controlled trial found that young people in the treatment group were half as likely as the control group to participate in unsafe activities by the end of the study. The treatment population was also almost half as likely as the control group to report feeling unsafe, and half as likely to report experiencing violence in the past week.

These results have significant implications for how we think about improving safety and reducing crime. In many parts of the world violent crime is a serious problem, with policy makers and practitioners alike looking to increased investment in enforcement as a way of mitigating the problem. This pilot project illustrates that supporting targeted decision-making and planning for both potential victims and perpetrators has the potential to significantly reduce violent crime.

Defining the Problem

Between 2012 and 2013, for the first time in six years, South Africa experienced an increase in both the number and rate of murders and attempted murders. During that period of time, the Western Cape province had the second highest murder rate and the highest rates for sex crimes, common robbery and common assault of all provinces in the country. Additionally, the Western Cape province experienced a 10% increase in violent crimes, with 2,580 murders in 2013 amounting to seven murders a day. While violence and murder are problematic throughout many of Cape Town's marginalized communities, Nyanga was by far the worst with 260 murders reported in 2013 (an average of one every 36 hours) and countless other violent crimes.

Municipal crime data indicated that the vast majority of violent crimes in Cape Town's poorest neighborhoods occurred on Friday and Saturday nights, when people were more likely to be out of the house, in unsafe environments, with unfamiliar people, and often in the presence of drugs and alcohol. Moreover, most of the victims were young people between the ages of 16-26.

It was in this context that we sought to develop a scalable behavioral intervention to reduce the incidence of violence in Cape Town's townships.

Problem Diagnosis

In addition to our analysis of Cape Town's municipal crime data, our diagnosis work also involved a review of the research literature that examined the determinants of violence and crime in urban and developing country contexts, and Cape Town in particular. We also had numerous conversations with governmental and non-governmental actors working to improve safety in the Western Cape to glean their first-hand knowledge of the problem. We then conducted interviews with young people from Cape Town's townships to learn more about the behavioral elements that shape how they decide what to do and where to go on weekend evenings. This included photo-based interviews with young people and various community members, assessing various vignettes of township life to understand perceptions about how safe and unsafe various locations and scenes were.

Through this behavioral diagnosis process, we identified four key behavioral bottlenecks and contextual features that we believe contributed to the problem:

- **Crime is contextual and opportunistic.** Most perpetrators don't commit premeditated crimes, but rather take advantage of situational opportunities to commit crime, such as darkness and open spaces, to target mostly strangers. What this means is that there are no clear a priori "perpetrators" or even "victims" per se, but instead contexts that invite people to become perpetrators of crime.
- **Perception of safety is contextual and built on social networks.** People reported feeling safest in environments that were familiar, and with people they knew, but when young people went out they often went without plans, and in search of their friends, ending up in unfamiliar environments and in company of strangers. Therefore, safe locations in this context are places that are familiar and predictable, where unexpected individuals, or events are less likely.
- **Young people stick to the status quo for weekend activities.** Youth consider few options when going out on weekend evenings, and often stick to their status quo activities, leading them to go to undesirable and unsafe locations.

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- **Young people do not make concrete plans about their weekend evenings.** Even if youth did consider options that deviated from the status quo, they may not have followed-through on those activities because they didn't plan the details ahead (e.g. you can't have a movie night if you don't plan for someone to pick up the movie).

Intervention Design and Testing

We used these insights to develop a prototype of a scalable computer or mobile-based intervention, the Safety Tool, to help young people choose safe weekend evening activity options, and make plans around those options. Using the Safety Tool application on a tablet or computer, users were presented with an activity suggestion (e.g. start a pickup soccer game) and prompted to make an active choice about whether they wanted to do the activity. If they did, they were prompted to develop a plan about where, when and with whom. If they didn't want to do the activity, they would be shown new activities until they found one they liked. Once users made plans about their chosen activity, they were shown a summary of their choice, and were encouraged to call or text their friends to commit to the plan. The tool was designed to leverage the participant's local knowledge of what areas and times of day were safe, so that the plans they made were safer than their status quo choices.

To test the efficacy of the prototype, we designed a month-long intervention with a population of 156 low-income, at-risk young people who resided within Cape Town's metropolitan townships. Participants were randomized into either a treatment population that interacted with the tool or control population that received information about safety statistics in the Western Cape. During each week of the intervention, on either a Thursday or Friday, the treatment population would interact with the tool, and thus be prompted to make plans for the weekend. On the following Monday or Tuesday, both the treatment and control populations were surveyed about what they did over the weekend, and how safe they felt.

The results of the experiment showed that the tool had a powerful effect: at the end of the intervention, the treatment population was found to be half as likely to participate in unsafe activities than the control population ($p < 0.01$). Even more remarkably, not only were the treatment participants .61 as likely to report feeling very unsafe over the past week ($p < 0.05$), but they were also found to be half as likely to experience violence than the control population ($p < 0.05$). With such a small and specific sample, these results cannot be generalized to other similar populations, but provide encouraging evidence that behavioral tools such as this can have marked impacts on safety.

Lessons for the Future

The insights developed through this project, and the success of the Safety Tool, point to an opportunity to use new and different approaches to crime and violence prevention. While traditional approaches emphasize increasing enforcement or providing information as methods for deterring criminal activity, we developed a tool to support active choice and planning, which was also shown to be an effective deterrent. However, due to the small sample used in this pilot, further evaluations with larger populations and different contexts will be needed to validate the results. Additionally, in further studies, we would need to examine the impact of this intervention on other, less subjective indicators, such as crime rates, to fully understand the effectiveness of the Safety Tool.

However, the results of this experiment have far-reaching implications for the Western Cape Government and other communities around the world that are struggling to mitigate crime and violence. The most effective strategies may not require hard solutions such as more police and increased enforcement, instead they may be about supporting smart planning, and developing diversionary activities to keep youth engaged and safe.