3 The socio-ecological model: A framework for violence prevention

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Crime and violence are widespread issues that stem from a complex web of socio-economic and political factors. For instance, the violence and crime rates of a country are influenced by issues such as high levels of unemployment, poverty, inequality and social values as well as declining police performance and corruption.[1] Not only do these factors increase crime, they contribute to an environment of risk that make people more vulnerable to engaging in criminal activities. The more risk factors that an individual is exposed to, the higher the chances of that individual becoming a victim or perpetrator of crime and/or violence.[2] However, it is important to understand that not all those who experience these risk factors will become perpetrators/victims. It is particularly in the absence of protective factors (such as a loving family, psycho-social/community support, parental supervision and social connection) that some are more prone than others to being vulnerable to crime and/or violence.

The socio-ecological model is a useful tool to help identify key risk and protective factors related to violence and crime at different levels of a person's life. The model highlights the multiple causes of violence and the interaction of these factors at the individual, relationship, community and societal level.[3] The model further suggests that successful violence prevention requires action across these multiple levels to ensure systemic and lasting outcomes.

THE INDIVIDUAL

The person's personality, biological factors, experiences, beliefs and values and demographic characteristics.

COMMUNITY

The characteristics of the environment the person occupies, their neighborhood, school workplace etc. Factors like unemployment, substance abuse, population density and mobility play a role at this level.

SOCIETY

The characteristics of the broader society in which the person lives. This includes social norms, economic policies, political climate and culture.
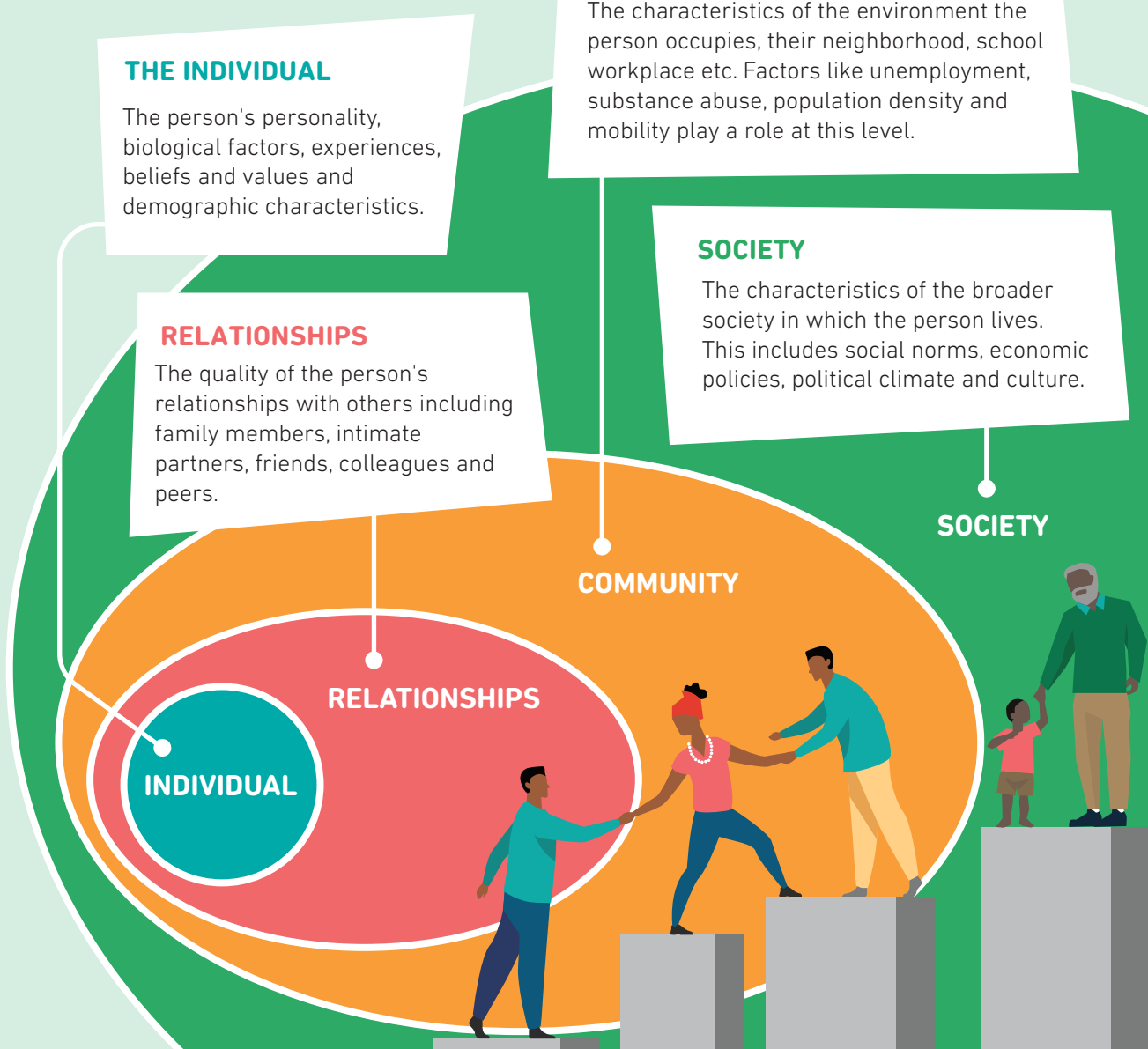
RELATIONSHIPS

The quality of the person's relationships with others including family members, intimate partners, friends, colleagues and peers.

SOCIETY
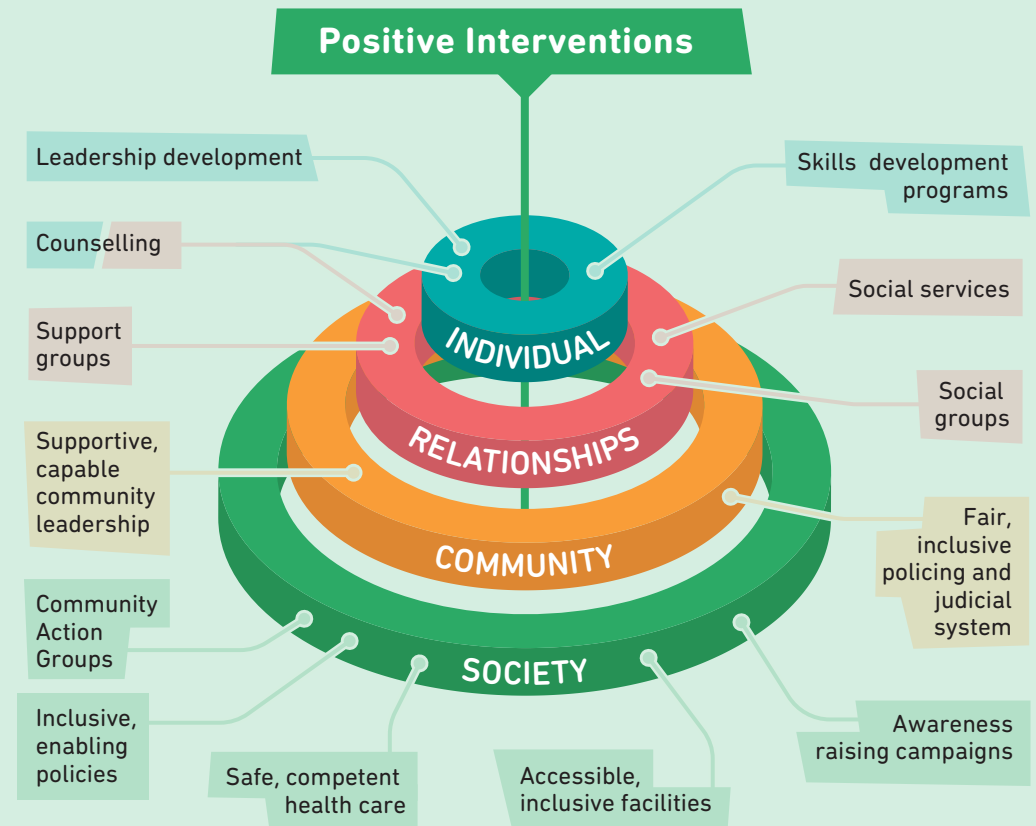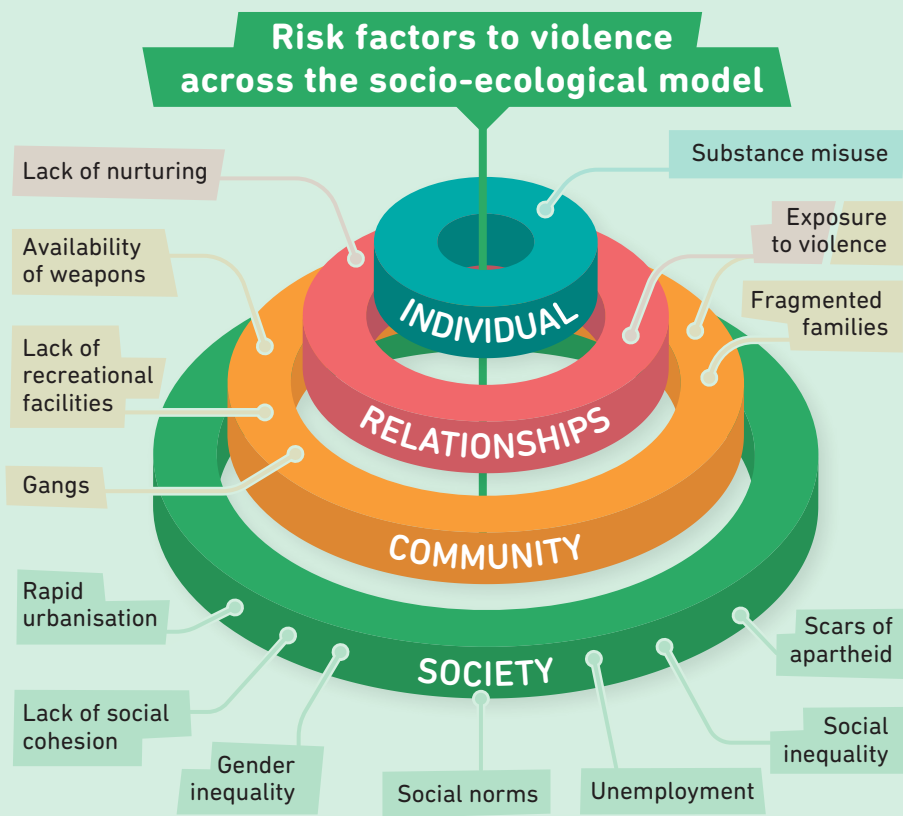
COMMUNITY

RELATIONSHIPS

INDIVIDUAL

To effectively combat the issue of violence and crime it is important to move towards approaches that prioritise prevention. Current interventions to violence and crime tend to focus predominantly on increasing security and policing. This is undoubtedly a key part of the solution. However, it is important to acknowledge the unequal access to these resources in South Africa. Townships and low-income areas, which often have a high population and higher rates of crime and violence than middle-income areas, receive a lower pro rata allocation of policing and other security resources. It is therefore paramount that there is equity and proportionality in the allocation of police resources, considering demographic and crime-related realities. Furthermore, increased policing and security interventions are only part of the solution as they only respond to the manifestations of crime and violence. These need to be complemented by interventions that address the root causes and risk factors that create the environment where crime and violence can thrive.

Similarly, by investing in positive interventions that protect against the risk factors and vulnerability one can expect to see more resilient people and dignified, safer communities.

Violence prevention efforts need to be appropriate for, and responsive to, a specific context, area or community. Working across spheres is vital to reduce risk and bolster protective factors and to ensuring best impact. This is only possible through strong, transversal partnerships.

Risk factors to violence across the socio-ecological model

Lack of nurturing

Availability of weapons

Lack of recreational facilities

Gangs

Rapid urbanisation

Lack of social cohesion

Gender inequality

Social norms

Unemployment

Social inequality

Scars of apartheid

Fragmented families

Exposure to violence

Substance misuse

INDIVIDUAL

RELATIONSHIPS

COMMUNITY

SOCIETY

Positive Interventions

Leadership development

Counselling

Support groups

Supportive, capable community leadership

Community Action Groups

Inclusive, enabling policies

Safe, competent health care

Accessible, inclusive facilities

Awareness raising campaigns

Fair, inclusive policing and judicial system

Social groups

Social services

Skills development programs

INDIVIDUAL

RELATIONSHIPS

COMMUNITY

SOCIETY

Source: Isandla Institute, 2021a. p.171[5]

Source: Isandla Institute, 2021b. p.13[6]

Notes:

1. Lancaster, L., & Newham, G. 2020. The State of Crime and Safety in SA Cities Report 2020. South African Cities Network (SACN) Urban Safety Reference Group. 1-46. https://www.sacities.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/WEB-I-3142_Giz-SACN-State-of-Urban-Safety-2018-19-1-compressed.pdf
2. Isandla Institute. 2021a. Learning Brief 2: Integrated area-based violence prevention interventions. https://isandla.org.za/en/resources/item/download/236_011fee85a7f1e6b71a70f6fa30c15e04
3. World Health Organisation. 2002. World Report on Violence and Health. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42495/9241545615_eng.pdf
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5. Ibid
6. Isandla Institute. 2021b. Learning Brief 4: Gender, safety and VPIs. Available: https://www.isandla.org.za/en/resources/item/download/238_236632166461d4540ba59408d067f291

This SPRINT resource note was produced as part of a series in the Safer Places: Resilient Institutions and Neighbourhoods Together (SPRINT) Project. Titles in the series include:

1. About SPRINT
2. Why safety needs to be at the centre of development
3. The socio-ecological model: A framework for violence prevention
4. What is ABVPI?

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The SPRINT Project is a joint initiative of the South African-German Development Cooperation with the support of the Violence and Crime Prevention (VCP) Programme, implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) as the commissioning party and Global Affairs Canada (GAC) as co-financing partner. The SPRINT Project is implemented by Isandla Institute and Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU). The primary objective of the SPRINT Project is to institutionalise area-based violence prevention intervention (ABVPI) approaches in public policy, programmes and practices in order to upscale them and have a sustainable impact.

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VCP INCLUSIVE VIOLENCE & CRIME PREVENTION