



PHOTO: SHAWN SWINGLER

Making cities safer through work and wages

South Africa's Community Work Programme targets poverty, not crime. But some feel their neighbourhoods are safer as a result of it. Research led by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) is shedding light on why this might be so, and ways to strengthen the program so that cities are safer for everyone.

Tackling poverty and inequality has been a top priority for South Africa since its first multiracial elections in 1994. But unemployment is high and rising: by 2015, rates were even higher than during apartheid, with almost one-third of the labour force out of work. Nearly 50% of youth are unemployed.

At the same time, South Africa has extraordinarily high rates of violent crime. In 2013, the country's murder rate of 32 per 100,000 people was more than five times the global average. Sexual assaults and domestic violence are also widespread, with women at greatest risk.

The challenge: how can low-wage work make communities safer?

Like many other countries, South Africa has turned to various public employment strategies to tackle poverty and unemployment. In 2007, the Community Work Programme (CWP) was launched. It provides 100 days of work a year for over 200,000 people at 186 sites. As of March 2015, workers earned around ZAR 608 or USD 38 per month. These wages are low, but for some of the country's most vulnerable families, they provide a crucial safety net.

Community Work Programme: a program with reach



The CWP is the biggest local employer in some areas.

As of 2015:

200K+



Over 200,000 participants employed



75% are women

42% >35

42% = women over 35 years



Operating in 186 locations



Reduces violence by strengthening social bonds

HOW CWP REDUCES VIOLENCE

- Community decision-making builds social bonds.
- Working near home allows parents to care for children.
- Projects focus on crime prevention.

While the program's focus is poverty reduction, there is evidence that some types of crime and violence have been reduced in CWP sites. Research by the CSVR is exploring why, detailing the program's benefits and challenges in six communities.

Bringing communities together

CSVr found that it may be the community-driven nature of the program that is making neighbourhoods safer by strengthening social bonds. Most crimes in South Africa are personal assaults or property crimes — not acts that “pay off” for criminals. Some analysts believe that South Africa's high crime rates are rooted in the psychological and social breakdown that results when large numbers of people are left on the sidelines of an affluent society.

“In South Africa, there's an inequality not just of income but of security and other services,” says Hugo van der Merwe, head of research at CSVr. “The poorer areas are more violent, but they're also less policed, less assisted by the state.”

While earlier poverty-reduction efforts focused on state-driven infrastructure projects, CWP focuses on “useful work” defined by communities. Bringing residents together to solve local problems — without favouring the better off or those with political ties — appears to strengthen social bonds among community members of diverse backgrounds. Communities may also be making their neighbourhoods safer by focusing on youth diversion, school and street patrols, and other forms of crime prevention and victim empowerment.

Opening the door to more young men

Finding ways to make the work more appealing to young men — such as including more construction and skills training — could go a long way to reaching those most involved in violent crime. Three-quarters of CWP workers are women. The program allows them to work near home, so they have time to care for children and other dependents. This means family life is more stable and nurturing. The work is also empowering young women, who gain work experience and training.

For young men, however, the public work is a source of shame and a sign of failure. Duties such as street sweeping are seen as “women's work”. Despite high rates of unemployment, they are less likely than others to remain in the CWP for extended periods.

Looking ahead: fine-tuning a successful program

CSVr's analysis of the program's potential to reduce violent crime and build community cohesion has caught the eye of state officials responsible for public employment. They have endorsed the team's recommendations, which include:

- Maintaining the community-led focus and political independence of the program.
- Increasing training opportunities for participants, especially those under 35
- Providing psychosocial counseling and training on working with crime victims

In partnership with government and other actors, a second phase of research will test practical ways to scale up interventions that are most likely to enhance community safety and wellbeing. These lessons will be applied to CWP sites across the country and shared internationally.

MULTI-FUNDER INITIATIVE



Safe and Inclusive Cities is a global research effort jointly funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Launched in 2012, it supports 15 multidisciplinary teams working in 40 cities across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America to build evidence on the connections between urban violence, poverty, and inequalities.

Safe and Inclusive Cities

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