

Safety and Violence Initiative (SaVI)

Background

The Bill of Rights enshrined in South Africa's Constitution emphasises the right to freedom and security of the person. This includes the right "to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources" (Act 108 of 1996, Chapter 2, paragraph 12(1)c). Nonetheless insecurity remains widespread. Of particular concern to South Africans is persistent high rates of violence. This has had, and is having, a significant negative impact on South Africa's capacity for development. There are multiple and interrelated factors that contribute to these high levels of insecurity. It is not surprising that the enormous challenges of insecurity and violence in South Africa have attracted attention from researchers working in the diverse but related areas of policing, preventing violence primed by substance misuse, causes of rape, prevention of child maltreatment, reducing recidivism in the criminal justice system, and the like. These challenges affect the nation's development, but also our lives as citizens.

At the University of Cape Town, there is a core group of researchers from a variety of disciplines who have been focused on these inter-related issues for some time. Together, they have formed the Safety and Violence Initiative (SaVI), with a mandate to focus on understanding and intervening in the promotion of safety and the reduction of violence (in particular criminal violence) in South Africa.

Most of the current research is conducted by researchers working on specific questions, often from within a single academic discipline, or in conversation with a specific set of policy-makers or implementers. SaVI will provide a network for research excellence that will build on and extend existing research.

Vision

The vision of the Safety and Violence Initiative is to work towards a safe South Africa, where freedom and security are the norm, rather than the exception.

Mission

The mission of the Safety and Violence Initiative is to establish a research collaboration that will contribute to promoting safety, reducing violence and to raising awareness about these issues within South African (and in due course more broadly within our African region). As a university-based research collaboration a key feature of SaVI's role will be to develop theory and to translate this into practice. This will be accomplished through:

- enabling researchers to engage with each other across disciplinary boundaries;
- facilitating socially responsive research across a number of different scales (individual, household, neighbourhood, city, national and global);

- developing a “critical mass” of researchers capable of carrying out collective, sustained research projects, and through this synergy to provide “real world” solutions to the problems;
- making wider and more efficient use of existing resources (including survey and administrative datasets, which often remain under-analysed);
- developing research capacity in the study of safety and violence;
- enabling national, continental and international networks, including existing links between the academy and the civil society and public sectors;
- facilitating the dissemination of research.

Giving life to the vision and mission

To realise its vision and mission SaVI will initially be a virtual structure with three main foci to its activities:

Cutting-edge research - identification, facilitation and coordination of strong multi-, cross- and trans-disciplinary research programmes.

Teaching - developing a strong tap-root into primary disciplines from undergraduate through postgraduate levels will be central to the vision. To this end, training in relevant disciplines will occur through Honours, Masters and PhD degrees. Teaching will be linked to outreach in a research-to-teaching-to-practitioner cycle. Students will be supervised within the distinct disciplines of staff who are a part of SaVI, although a goal may be to facilitate an interdisciplinary approach to post-graduate study if desired.

Social responsiveness - public education activities, forming part of SaVI's dissemination activities, that aim to raise awareness around the evidence base for interventions in violence.

A leader with initiative

As an indicator of the seriousness with which the University of Cape Town is approaching this problem, a Pro Vice-Chancellor will be appointed to take responsibility for developing and taking the initiative forward to realise SaVI's vision and mission. The individual appointed must have a high academic/research standing, be a good administrator, and have vision and strong leadership and facilitating skills. The Pro Vice-Chancellor will be someone who can inspire academics to work together as efficient knowledge producers and brokers, and to provide leadership in a commitment to increasing UCT's impact in the field of safety and violence.

Structure within the University of Cape Town

The SaVI will have a virtual structure that crosses faculty boundaries and overlaps with current research programmes of individuals, research units and research centres, as illustrated diagrammatically below:



Fig. 1 Schematic representation of the relationship between the SAVI as a virtual centre, and existing research groupings (a few possible examples shown for illustration only) with which it might interact to various levels.

SaVI will respect the autonomy and individualism of existing researchers and research groups while forging links between research groupings or individuals wherever possible. Once established, SaVi will consider the merits of evolving into a more formal centre, perhaps with a physical location.

SaVI's relationship with others beyond the University

