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Is security our best route to safety?

Questioning reliance on private security and technology in South Africa

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In this commentary, Barbara Holtmann draws from her experience with regard to urban safety, crime and violence prevention and community development. She examines the emphasis on private security, technology and securitisation in South Africa's approach to crime and safety. She argues that despite significant and prolonged spending in this sector, feelings of safety – and actual safety – have not substantially improved. The piece highlights the need for a more balanced approach. It should integrate technological solutions with systemic development interventions responsive to deeper underlying causes of crime, such as inequality, exclusion, and social fragmentation. It advocates for a greater consideration of 'safety' interventions that foster well-being, social cohesion and inclusive urban environments.

Distinguishing safety from security

The English language distinguishes between *security*, which derives from the Latin *secura*, meaning without anxiety, and *safety*, which derives from the Latin *salvus*, meaning whole, safe and healthy.

In South Africa, security is generally defined as protection against actual or perceived risks of attack, invasion, danger and fear. Safety describes a feeling of well-being, experiencing nurture and freedom. The distinction between these two terms describes the contemporary global political and philosophical divide

between securitisation and preventative approaches to crime and violence. In many settings, securitisation takes priority as the intervention of choice. Cities all over the world spend significant percentages of their budgets on securitisation, often installing eye-wateringly expensive physical barriers, access, surveillance and tracking systems. Despite scarce resources, many cities in South Africa have followed the same route. It is notably easier to fund a security installation than it is to support other types of initiatives. For example, programmes that aim to enhance the aesthetics or management of public spaces often struggle to secure funding. The same applies to initiatives that organise social or cultural events which promote vibrancy and harmony in the same neighbourhood.

The private security industry in South Africa grew by 43% during the past decade, with a turnover of R2,2 billion in 2025.[2] In a Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on policing held on 12 March 2025, the Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority (PSIRA) reported that there are now more than 2,8 million security officers registered in South Africa. However, only 577 444 are currently actively employed. No information was offered as to the whereabouts of the remaining 2,2 million.

What has happened to our levels of safety and our investment in safety in the same time period? There is no clear answer to this. The South African Cities Network (SACN) State of Urban Safety Report 2024 reflects on a decade of – sometimes very innovative and useful – public safety interventions in our major cities.[3] This includes the work done on early childhood development, public spaces, community participation and community development, which could be added to the numbers. Yet, there is not one credible source or even estimate of expenditure dedicated to enhancing safety. Notably, there is also no direct profit to be made out of it.

The 2024 Victims of Crime Survey recorded that 80% of people felt safe walking in their neighbourhood during the day, but only 34% felt safe walking in their neighbourhood at night.[4] Ten years ago, the same survey recorded that 86% of people felt safe walking during the day, and 31% felt safe walking at night.[5] As such, there was no conclusive change.

There is a potentially interesting gender element to securitisation and safety approaches; it is estimated that women make up less than 11% of security workers in South Africa.[6] Men dominate in metro police departments. Also, the decision-makers in public safety in municipalities are almost inevitably not only men, but men with a history in policing of some kind. This group is more likely to believe in tangible, visible security measures as opposed to 'soft' interventions. Women favours the latter more in these environments and typically come to the field from a social work or development and planning background.

Proponents of securitisation have a common refrain: 'crime and violence prevention take years if not decades to deliver impact, whereas people want a solution now'. It is true that to truly break the cycle of intergenerational violence, consistent intervention over many years is needed. However, there is obviously no such thing as a short-term or linear solution to the complex problem of unsafety. It might be that what is meant is that people want to observe something that purports to secure an environment. In such a case, private security does that visibly very well. However, at a significantly lower cost, the community can co-create a beautiful, communal space. This space will allow children to safely play under the natural surveillance of older neighbours as they tend to the gardens or sit in the sun. It is an option that quite rapidly delivers something

tangible while also increasing opportunities for community engagement. Furthermore, it is something that works well across different socio-economic spaces, with a limited extent of support from private security service providers.[7]

The *secura* approach prioritises crime reduction, securitisation and response. It is reliant on: (1) weapons; (2) boots on the ground; (3) increasingly more expensive and sophisticated technology-based security and surveillance tools; (4) armed response and big data sets; and (5) recording incidents of crime and/or violence. At the neighbourhood level, the wealthy, who can afford it and who have expensive assets to protect, favour such security systems. They are compelled to protect themselves behind solid, real or virtual walls, under lock and key, with carefully controlled access.[8] Most, if not all, security systems are grounded in suspicion and fear of the other; somewhere lies the assumption that, given any opportunity, people are likely to act in a criminal way. Public right of way and freedom of movement, as well as the right to privacy, are lost as part of the considerable cost of such systems. There is apparently little concern for the consequences.

Trust

Less than one third of South Africans trust the police, which is perhaps not surprising since little has happened to repair the fractured relationships caused by Apartheid policing.[9] In general, trust in the government is also low. Yet for an untrusting society, those in the wealthiest quartile willingly expose themselves to non-state strangers hired by security companies to scrutinise them closely. Sometimes these strangers are hired for less wages than the cost of one monthly subscription to their services. The more sophisticated the cameras are, the more invasive the knowledge of those who watch them – many of whom have less than a month's training. Yet they quickly know the habits of those they watch, as well as where the flaws and weaknesses are with regard to their physical security measures. It is either a strange kind of blindness or a double standard that is hard to explain; perhaps it is a blind faith in all things private sector versus the suspicion of all things government?[10] Perhaps if the private sector runs the government, the latter too would be more trustworthy? This is, of course, speculation; while there are many known reasons to distrust the police, little exists on why trust in private security is so pervasive – or whether it is justified.

Closed-circuit television

Internationally and in South Africa, 'intelligent' closed-circuit television is ubiquitous. So are the access and tracking systems that are constantly racing to keep pace with the innovative ways that criminals find to beat them. Such interventions often come at a high cost, yet it is a cost that many are willing to pay. Metros and municipalities in South Africa fundraise for security installations and control rooms, or they share technology and facilities with private security companies. At face value, this may seem to be at odds with the principles of the Public Finance Management Act.[11] This is because it creates a preferred relationship with private companies that is unlikely to be without hidden or even quite overt strings. Yet such Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) are encouraged and lauded. It is generally admitted that PPPs are not without risks; municipalities have a low capacity to manage and maintain such partnerships and systems to fully benefit those who need them most. Many systems come with significant maintenance costs that are beyond the municipal resources. For example, by the end of 2023, eThekwini reported that only 14% of its cameras were operational.[12] In 2024, R100 million was allocated to repairing eThekwini's camera

system, and there is an ongoing debate about the actual cost.[13]

Potentially more concerning is the lack of cost and benefit evidence.[14] A report in 2021 points out that there were no independent assessments with regard to the efficacy of such systems in either reducing crime or increasing successful prosecution.[15] This still appears to be the case. By the end of 2023, however, violent crime rates in South Africa were recorded to be the highest.[16] Court backlogs continued to grow, and prosecution rates remained shockingly low.[17]

In Gauteng, government has partnered with Business Against Crime SA and private security. Here the security company Vumacam has brought 7 000 cameras and significant control infrastructure to bear with news articles, claiming that in six months camera footage led to 72 arrests.[18] That amounts to one arrest per 97,2 cameras over six months. There is no information regarding the successful prosecution of any of those arrested.

To put this in context, in February 2025, the Portfolio Committee on Police applauded the SAPS for having arrested 244 951 wanted criminals over the year-end holiday period.[19] However, they warned that this might be rendered futile without improved prosecution and conviction rates. What is immediately apparent is that our major problem is not finding more people to arrest, given that the prison capacity of the country is currently over-subscribed at 143%.[20] It accommodates 157 056 inmates while designed for 108 804.[21] Furthermore, Vumacam claims that the cameras flag 55 000 vehicles of interest every day.[22] They do not provide information about what is done about the 55 000 vehicles of interest.

Sustainable systemic development

It feels as though we are missing something in all this. The technology may well be extraordinary, and inevitably, as is the way with technology, it is constantly evolving to greater sophistication and ingenuity. But do we need it to be? If we only spend R1,1 billion on security this year instead of the projected R2,2 billion, might we not get the same result? Are we paying for sophistication and abundance that we do not need or cannot actually use to good effect, or will we be twice as safe if we spend this R2,2 billion?

Do we have backup and response capacity and sophistication that match and justify the elegance and abundance of the technology? Can we afford it? Do we even want to have the capacity to respond to that much information?

We definitely need all the help we can get in preventing and reducing crime.

Perhaps it is time to ask, how can we improve? Without compelling evidence that our R2,2 billion in 2025 will leave us confident that we are secure or safe, what might we add into the mix? What could deliver a similar or – hopefully – a better outcome?

Contemplated through a systems methodological approach, unsafety is generally agreed to be symptomatic of uncaring, unhappy and unwell societies and communities.[23] Violence, inequality, poverty, exclusion, persecution, substance abuse and unmet basic needs are all associated with high rates of crime. Private security and surveillance deliver against none of these metrics. If anything, it arguably increases exclusion and persecution.

Responsive to these causes, however, the *salvus* approach integrates crime prevention into the context of systemic sustainable development. This can be done by connecting prevention with resilience, cohesion, inclusion, and justice. It is reliant on empathy and a deep respect for human rights to deliver an impact that members of a community, a neighbourhood or a city can feel. This is a compassionate

approach which acknowledges that a feeling of well-being is far deeper, more complex and reliant on more than a simple reduction in crime.

A really great example of an impactful safety approach is the evidence-based, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder Planet Youth programme that was initiated in Iceland 25 years ago.[24] At the time, Iceland had one of the highest rates of teenage drug and alcohol abuse in Europe. Today, it has one of the lowest. In South Africa, substance abuse is a driver of youth violence and school dropouts. The latter is a key contributor to sustained poverty and hopelessness that also feeds criminal behaviour and exacerbates already extreme levels of gender-based and sexual violence. The project is based on the key principles of local safety and public health. It provides leadership and relies on a sustained connection with the youth at the centre of the family and community. It also involves the integrative skills of researchers, practitioners, family, teachers and peers.

The George Municipality and the Touwsranten Hoekwil Community Dialogue initiative in South Africa have adopted this approach.[25] It puts essential tools into the hands of all those who can benefit most from them. At the same time, it supports real behaviour change and improving relationships – and therefore safety – throughout the community. The intervention has helped parents to gain confidence. As they feel more useful in their own and their children's lives it becomes possible to have difficult conversations that address abuse of all kinds. A strictly curated WhatsApp group shares information about rights, job opportunities and meetings, strengthening the sense of shared interest and mutual support.[26]

Data, information and knowledge

Those who promote securitisation often state that while their interventions can simply be measured in terms of the reduction of incidences of crimes, it is too complex to measure softer approaches. This is because it delivers fewer obviously tangible results.

It is true that the measurement of the *salvus* safety approach requires a systemic approach to data. Evidence is to be integrated with shared knowledge, using knowledge systems that layer different types of data to specific sites. It must also allow for collective engagement to build consensus with regard to the impact and the value of that impact.

Homicide is often used to demonstrate the value of crime statistics, being the crime most likely to be most accurately recorded. However, gender-based violence (GBV) is useful to demonstrate the inadequacy of crime statistics to understand an intransigent problem that is likely the least accurately recorded. It offers instead a powerful example of the need to balance crime statistics with other more inclusive, qualitative and caring measures. Women are less likely to report crimes of violence or sexual violence, for a number of well-recorded reasons.[27]

Women will also typically avoid known risks; they will not apply for jobs that require them to make dangerous journeys or travel at risky times. They contain their lives within what they believe they can safely manage. These avoidance strategies are not captured in crime statistics, making it impossible for government to respond strategically without a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience.

Through the use of a mobile app MySafetipin, women record their feelings of safety and unsafety in different parts of the city.[28] This delivers mandate-aligned recommendations to a cross-section of city departments for improved access, lighting, maintenance, sanitation and visibility as they traverse the city. City officials respond positively to the data and process. Many say that it delivers a 'light bulb moment' about how different departments should be

contributing to improved safety for women. However, in South Africa, this is always followed by the disclaimer that they have neither the capacity nor the resources to be responsive to what they learn.

The South African National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP) seeks to create integrated whole-of-society approaches to preventing and responding to GBV.[29] The intention is to measure the impact of the NSP using a 'synthesis methodology' based on transversal data and evidence. It uses multiple sources of evidence, collaboration, and a pluralistic approach to deliver a synthesis of what is relevant. This, like much of our security technology, is more sophisticated than our current ability to fully use it. However, once up and running, it will provide a systemic understanding of GBV that will make it progressively easier to understand and hopefully curb what is often called a pandemic in South Africa.

Local government mandate

Local government does not have a mandate to regulate crime: it does not administer criminal justice; it cannot typically make arrests and investigate or prosecute crimes. When it prioritises its securitisation mandate over all other possible approaches, action is often in the form of operations focused on so-called hotspots. It aims to either arrest offenders or strengthen the target with increased security measures. Even without intervention, crime is rarely static for long, and spatially targeted operations risk displacing crime to neighbouring areas, rather than preventing or reducing it.[30]

Local government is, however, the interface of government with communities. It is responsible for creating conducive environments that are inclusive, vibrant and economically active. In such environments everyone can healthily pursue education, economic opportunities and social harmony. Until this happens, the incidence of crime will not be reduced, safety will not be improved and we will not meet our other developmental goals.

Local government can critically impact the safety of its citizens through the delivery of its various mandates. This includes transport and mobility, economic development, access to facilities such as public sanitation, services, by-law enforcement, environmental health and more.[31]

Across the globe, cities are increasingly intervening with regard to safety rather than just with regard to security or the reduction of crime and violence. This has led to the collective exploration of ways to measure work that was previously regarded as immeasurable and, therefore, typically underfunded.[32]

A UN-Habitat Expert Working Group initiated the Urban Safety Monitor (USM) in 2020.[33] It was used as an exercise to compile a set of indicators reflecting the scattered work that had up to that point been done in isolated pockets. Furthermore, it attempted to deliver an integrated, *salvus* approach with regard to measuring safety, also useful for advocating such an approach.[34]

During the past decade, safety interventions around the world have increasingly focused on enhancing interpersonal, intergroup and intersectional relationships; it demystified others; and improved access to services that promote resilience. It also aims to create opportunities for participative arts and self-expression. Furthermore, it intervenes to deliver safe, inclusive public spaces where communities can connect, support one another, experience shared leisure activities and access opportunities.[35]

Reaching a balance?

The gap between such interventions and those dependent on securitisation and

technology has not visibly narrowed over recent times in South Africa. Also, the promotion of a softer approach might be the cause of strengthening the divide as it is often seen as a threat to the very lucrative private security industry. It is extremely unlikely that it will surpass private security in terms of spending. This is because long-standing relationships and marketing feeds the appetite for technology which is not affordable for any other sector other than the private security industry. The private security industry produces compelling ads and industry articles. It feeds into an existing and often pervasive fear while offering arms' length solutions that promise to deliver security at the flick of a switch or the press of a panic button. In any event, many municipalities and wealthy communities have already invested in technology. Dismantling it would cause much more than just a loss of face.

Security technology should not be abandoned as a whole, and it would be irresponsible to suggest that private security and its technologies have no role to play in local safety. The argument here is not that we need either security or safety. It is for a balanced both-end approach, where technology is assessed and applied to maximise our capacities and resources. Simultaneously, enough resources and capacity must be reserved for implementing other kinds of good practices. These practices should be evidence-led and aimed at creating happier, healthier, more peaceful and sustainably safe communities.

One of the core principles of safe spaces is that well-managed spaces are safer because they are less likely to attract criminal behaviour than places that are a mess. This is because a well-managed space implies that someone cares that it is a protected space. South Africa is drowning in litter, and discarded plastic, glass, paper and polystyrene characterise even highly securitised spaces.[36] The claim that 'when I throw my paper, I create a job for someone to pick it up' is often heard. If private security were to be tasked with creating a safe environment rather than simply guarding against criminals, it could deliver great results. In fact, the reduction of littering and improving the cleanliness of roads and sidewalks could be really useful and pertinent performance indicators. Speaking of which, it is unclear what their indicators actually are – it does not seem that they are held accountable for breaches of security. Nor are they required to provide feedback on how the breach occurred or how it will be repaired, while the police continue to carry the burden of blame.

Cities place varying restrictions on boomed and gated communities, for instance, requiring them to be open during certain times of the day. This and the need for residents, workers and legitimate visitors to move in and out of the enclosed area is an annoying limitation on the notion of secured space. It also provides built-in excuses for breaches. It might therefore be in everyone's interests to shift and reframe to a more systemic mandate for private security. This should include broader activities and indicators that less directly reflect crime statistics, and more broadly, a safety approach.

The USM encompasses fifteen indicators for urban safety: four crime and justice indicators, five community indicators and six local governance indicators. In an innovative move, there are only four indicators relating to crime, the incidence of crime, access to justice and perceptions of justice. The USM places a strong emphasis on other conditions in local community environments, which must be understood in order to generate an accurate understanding of safety; these include human rights, civic participation, human dynamism, neighbourhood wellness and resilience.

These conditions are, at times, in direct conflict with private security interventions, yet they need not be. There is no evidence that denying people their rights to freedom of movement makes neighbourhoods less secure. There is also plenty of evidence that civic participation improves a range of sustainable development outcomes, from minimising and resolving conflicts, to economic development, to parenting, education and local democracy. Conversely, as long as the wealthier members of society isolate themselves behind security barriers that exclude the majority of people, they will leave a poorer inheritance for all children. This includes their own. As such, South Africa will be no closer to the dream of Archbishop Tutu's 'rainbow nation'.

With their current iteration of forbidding combative uniforms, guns and vehicles, it may seem distant and unlikely that private security officers might be trained in life skills, public space management, care and empathy. Yet, with such training, they might be able to revitalise empty streets by assisting older residents and women to traverse them safely. Or they might provide a friendly accompaniment and safe passage to children on their way to and from school, or natural oversight over their play. But that does not mean it cannot be done.

There is often a refrain that government does not have the political will to make South Africa safer. Perhaps it is time to question the will of wealthy communities to share responsibility for the safety of society outside of their strongholds and to invest in more inclusive measures. If the global libraries full of evidence are correct, this should result in them feeling less alienated and needing less protection.[37]

Professor Doris Sommer, Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures and of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, introduced the concept of human dynamism into the USM process. She says: 'People are dynamic. Left to themselves, they will do something. Provided the right motivation and tools, they will do something positive'.[38] This concept of 'useful dynamism' directly contradicts the suspicion with which security systems lead; it has a wonderful optimism that is much needed in our environment. Sommer practices and explores the opportunities inherent in participative arts and inclusive cultural exchanges, neighbourhood festivals and leisure opportunities. There are some fairly isolated examples of the power of such interventions in South Africa.[39] Perhaps it is time to invest in many more. If we can set aside our suspicion of one another, there is surely no limit to what innovations might result from proper engagement instead of what is all too often a tick-box exercise.

Are we safe yet?

Will we spend R2,2 billion on private security and its ever-more-sophisticated technology this year? Probably. Will it make us safe? Probably not. If we spend R2,5 billion next year, will that make us safe? Probably not.

Perhaps the most compelling motivation to improve our collective understanding and inclusive, collaborative responses to the complex and messy problem of unsafety, is that throwing money at the problem is not working; there are demonstrably no quick fixes. The longer we delay, the more we compound the trauma and impact on our psyche, our economy and our ability to thrive as a nation.

Notwithstanding PPPs, we need public sector leadership to make decisions based on reliable information. It should be independent of a profit motive and take us down a strategic and cost-effective path to safety and security for all. Right now, it does not feel like we are getting the best bang for our safety and security buck.

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