

Provocation Piece | July 2025

# Rethinking Crime and Safety Data: Planning for People, Not Just Incidents

*Murder is often our most reliable statistic on violent crime. But safety - real safety - is more than what makes it into the crime statistics.*

South Africa produces some of the most detailed crime statistics in the world. Yet, these numbers tell only part of the story. In this month's Insight Exchange, speakers reflected on the potential and limitations of crime and safety data for municipal planning. Their collective message was clear: if municipalities want to address crime, they must plan not only for policing, but for prevention, inclusion, and place.

Murder rates are often the most reliable proxy for violence and crime statistics and generally provide crime trends over time. Yet these figures do not provide the complete picture of risk or safety. Many crimes go unreported, shaped by

low trust in policing, perceptions that certain offences "aren't serious enough," or a sense that reporting won't lead to resolution. The underreporting of non-violent and economic crimes, like extortion and cybercrime, further obscures the risks that communities face.

But beyond data gaps, there are conceptual gaps. Municipalities ask what they can do, if addressing crime falls outside of their mandate. Yet as speakers reminded us, the most common forms of contact crime (such as assault, robbery, sexual violence) are not just law enforcement issues. They are shaped by urban infrastructure, access to opportunity, and social cohesion.

Better lighting, well-maintained public toilets, accessible and decent schools, and safe transport routes can reduce the conditions under which violence flourishes. These fall squarely within the local government's domain.

Take the spatial concentration of murder. Nearly half of all murders occur in just 12% police station precincts. Or consider that most murders happen over weekends, and most victims and perpetrators are young men. These patterns suggest targeted, place-based interventions could have outsized impact. But crime data alone can't identify solutions. To do that, we need to overlay it with other information: trauma admissions, formal and informal employment locations, school infrastructure, investment flows, and land use patterns, to name a few.

Speakers stressed that the power of data lies in its ability to guide shared action. Overlaying crime data with other sectoral datasets spatially and at a neighbourhood level can help identify where government should intervene, and how. Spatialising data in this way transforms it from a record of incidents into a map of opportunities for prevention. One speaker proposed using spatialised problem statements as a foundation for integrated, transversal approaches; shared definitions of need that bring together departments and spheres of government around coordinated responses.

Speakers highlighted how departments like Health and Education are beginning to use integrated datasets to plan violence prevention initiatives, from school safety campaigns to early childhood interventions. The Western Cape's Violence Prevention Unit (VPU), for example, uses trauma data linked to police precincts to identify youth violence trends. These insights, along with qualitative experiential data collected in the areas in which they work, guide the design of their area-based, transversal approach to safety. As a catalyst for coordination, the VPU aims to transform siloed data and fragmented mandates into cohesive, locally-driven prevention strategies - showing how municipal and provincial actors can plan with people, not just for them.

Another point that echoed across the session: planning for safety also means shifting focus. Instead of asking only what we want less of - crime, fear, violence - we need to ask what we want more of. Access to quality education. Economic opportunity. Vibrant public spaces. Safe mobility. Dignified and hygienic sanitation. Trust in local systems. A functional city, especially for women, children, and the elderly. One speaker questioned whether current investments, like the billions spent on CCTV, are delivering meaningful safety outcomes. Could we redirect some of those funds toward co-designed, community-led improvements to urban life?

The [Urban Safety Monitor](#), developed by UN-Habitat, EFUS and Fixed Africa, is a tool that demonstrates how local governments might assess the state of safety through a broader lens. Using a self-assessment framework of 15 indicators, including justice access, public space, community cohesion and infrastructure, it advocates to combine administrative data with lived experience. The result is a more democratic, systems-oriented understanding of safety, which allows municipalities to identify spatial inequalities, track change over time, and design interventions rooted in local conditions.

The role of organised crime was also foregrounded. Syndicates involved in construction mafias, cable theft, extortion, and kidnapping are increasingly undermining public service delivery. This kind of criminality isn't easily captured in community-reported serious crime statistics. Yet its impact on water infrastructure, electricity supply, infrastructure investment, and public health is acute. Speakers called for broader safety datasets that include these threats and their ripple effects on municipal service delivery.

At its core, the session reminded us that municipal planning for safety can't rely on SAPS data alone. We must create a localised, interoperable data ecosystem that draws in departments, communities, and everyday experiences. We need to use data not only to react, but to anticipate; not only to identify risk, but to design for resilience.

*Safety is not a siloed goal. It is interwoven with how people live, move, and work in their communities and local government has a central role to play.*

NEXT MONTH

SAVE THE DATE

# Benchmarking with Municipal Finance Data

📅 Tuesday 5 August 2025

🕒 14:00–16:00



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