# Urban Safety Monitor:

## Knowledge Systems that Care

**Emma De Villiers**, Fixed Africa

Fixed

UCLG
United Cities
and Local Governments

## Table of Contents

UCLG
United Cities
and Local Governments

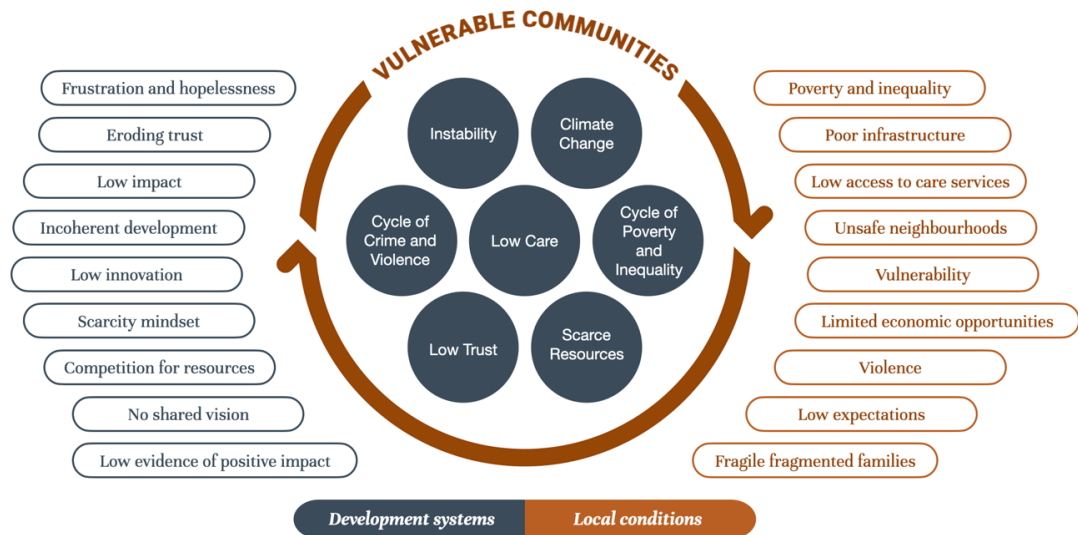# SECTION 1. Caring Safety Knowledge Systems / Quantitative Security Data

## 1.1 Background

In crime and violence prevention work, we distinguish between *security* which derives from the Latin *secura*, meaning without anxiety, from *safety*, which derives from the Latin *salvus*, meaning whole, safe, healthy. Security is protection from fear, attack or invasion, and danger, while safety describes a feeling of wellbeing, nurture and freedom. The distinction between these two terms describes the contemporary political and philosophical divide between *securitisation* and *prevention* approaches to crime and violence across the globe. The *secura* approach prioritises crime reduction and securitisation, it is reliant on weapons and big data to deliver impact. The *salvus* approach integrates crime prevention into the context of systemic sustainable development, connecting prevention with resilience, cohesion, inclusion, human rights, justice, it is reliant on large numbers of caring hearts and hands to deliver impact. The *salvus* approach is a caring approach which acknowledges that a feeling of well-being is far deeper and more complex than a simple reduction in crime.

Fixed Africa works with a systems methodology[1] which demonstrates the links between symptoms of uncaring and unwell societies and communities: violence, inequality, persecution, unmet basic needs and prompts us to reflect on caring interventions which can be implemented both in communities and in the development sector, to break the cycle.

---

[1] Find more info here [www.fixed.africa](www.fixed.africa)

## Cycle of Degradation and Deprivation



Internationally, Closed circuit television (CCTV) is ubiquitous, as are access and tracking systems constantly trying to keep pace with innovative ways that criminals find to beat them. Most if not all security systems are based on suspicion of the other and on the notion that the only way to be safe is to be secure, locked behind real or virtual walls that protect from purposeful evil intent[2]. Such interventions often come at a high cost, yet it is a cost that many are willing to pay; often choosing to do so over other less expensive, long-term caring interventions that might deliver greater freedom, vibrancy and community.

Safety interventions around the world focus on enhancing capacity for cohesion, improving access to services that promote resilience, creating opportunities for participative arts and self-expression, intervening to deliver safe, inclusive public spaces where communities can connect and access opportunities[3].

Programmes which aim to simply reduce the incidence of crime cannot be designed, and cannot deliver, other systemic results which reflect in improved lives of vulnerable and affected communities. The impact of securitisation interventions to reduce crime can only be measured in a reduction of the

---

[2] "Private Security Market Size, Share, Growth I Forecast [2023]," Fortune Business Insights, January 2025. https://www.fortunebusinessinsights.com/private-security-market-108283.

[3] "Manifesto thematic recommendations," European Forum for Urban Security, 2025. https://efus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Efus-Manifesto-2025-ENG-1.pdf

incidence of crime, relying on quantitative statistical data generated and owned by the police. Measuring the impact of safety interventions requires nuanced knowledge systems which rely on eg. information about perceptions of safety, acknowledging that human beings have innate intuitive assessment of their immediate safety and are the best positioned to determine whether a space is safe or not[4]. Measurement of the *salvus* safety approach requires a caring approach to data, evidence and integrating them into shared knowledge, using knowledge systems that can layer different types of data to specific sites, and allow for collective engagement to build consensus.

## 1.2 Lessons about Care from COVID-19

In 2020, the need to integrate a caring approach into all human development work was starkly illustrated through the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic[5]. The pandemic caused widespread trauma, grief and anxiety, the lockdowns implemented to curb the pandemic caused depression, economic downturn, isolation, intensified violence. During the pandemic an Expert Working Group of researchers from all over the world convened online to reflect on the lessons from the pandemic which were then and remain now relevant to measuring safety, responding to the need for data to understand conditions during lockdown. The working group was convened by UN Habitat and co-facilitated by the European Forum for Urban Security and Fixed Africa.

The consultation revealed that while systemic approaches to safety are increasingly acknowledged as delivering sustainable outcomes and adopted by cities around the globe to counter the equally intensifying securitisation, the measures that are predominantly used still relate to hard crime statistics. Across the globe, researchers collect and analyse big data sets on homicide, gun violence, gender-based violence, rape, robbery, car hijacking and other crime categories[6]. Often captured nationally by police services, and disaggregated to city level, crime statistics were and are used to assess and compare the trends of

---

[4] Barbara Holtmann and Emma De Villiers, "The State of Urban Safety in South Africa," South African Cities Network, Urban Safety Reference Group, 2024.
https://www.sacities.net/publication/the-state-of-urban-safety-in-south-africa-2024-report/
[5] "Personal Journeys Case Studies," Safe Spaces, July 2024.
https://www.saferspaces.org.za/resources/entry/personal-journeys-case-studies
[6] S. Harrendorf et Al., "International Statistics on Crime and Justice," European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Helsinki 2010.
https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Crime-statistics/International_Statistics_on_Crime_and_Justice.pdf

cities over time, and also to compare cities against each other. Homicide[7] is commonly regarded as the most reliable statistic because although reporting rates of other crimes vary considerably in different places for a number of reasons, it is believed that most homicides are captured relatively accurately by police, across the world.

## 1.3 Lessons from Gender-Based Violence in South Africa

In South Africa, where Fixed Africa operates, Gender-Based Violence provided a powerful example of the need to balance crime statistics with other more inclusive, qualitative, caring measures during the pandemic. In South Africa women were, even outside the context of COVID-19, less likely to report crimes of violence or sexual violence, because they don't believe the police will assist them. Women are afraid of the police, afraid of the perpetrators who are frequently known to them and the police, and they are afraid of being blamed. During the pandemic, Gender-Based Violence rates increased dramatically in South Africa, as victims and perpetrators were isolated together at home[8]. This became apparent through social media posts and information provided by women's shelters and GBV prevention and support programmes which received a significant increase in requests for assistance.

The tragic and shocking rates of GBV which were publicised during the prompted the emergence of the South African National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP)[9], which seeks to create integrated whole-of-society approaches to preventing and responding to GBV. The NSP is measured using a 'synthesis methodology' based on the experience during COVID-19 where there was an urgent need for transversal data and evidence, which uses multiple sources of evidence, collaboration, and a pluralism approach to deliver a synthesis of what is relevant. To date, the country has struggled to operationalise the measurement methodology, and the USM sought to consider some of the barriers to operationalisation of this type of best practice and assist in making this synthesis approach possible.

---

[7] Bastian Herre and Fiona Spooner, "Homicide data: how sources differ and when to use which one," Our World in Data (2023).
https://ourworldindata.org/homicide-data-how-sources-differ-and-when-to-use-which-one
[8] "Gender-based violence increases mental health strain in the Shadow of Covid-19," South African Society of Psychiatrists, accessed January 2025. https://www.sasop.co.za/gender-based-violence-covid-19
[9] "National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence & Femicide: Human Dignity and Healing, Safety, Freedom, & Equality in our Lifetime," Republic of South Africa, 2020.
https://www.justice.gov.za/vg/gbv/nsp-gbvf-final-doc-04-05.pdf

## 1.4 Cities that Care: The Systemic Safety Lens on Sustainable Development

Local government does not have a mandate to regulate crime: it does not typically administer criminal justice, it cannot typically make arrests or investigate or prosecute crimes[10]. It does however have a critical impact on the safety of its citizens through the delivery of its various mandates, including transport and mobility, economic development, access to services, environmental health and more.

The *salvus* approach demonstrates that in fact much of what cities are mandated to do aligns directly with safety outcomes, is essential to safety outcomes. Indicators which are used to measure outcomes of the diverse local government mandates can and should also be used to measure safety, which is an integrated view of all of the transversal objectives a municipality strives towards. If all the other outcomes are not in place, then a city will never be safe. Once a city is safe, it is a caring, conducive, inclusive environment for people to live happy lives.

---

[10] "Safe Women Safer Cities," Fixed Africa, Safetipin, South African Cities Network, October 2022. https://safetipin.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Safe-Women-Safer-Cities-Final-1.pdf

## SECTION 2. Urban Safety Monitor: Knowledge Systems that Care

The Urban Safety Monitor was initiated by the Expert Working Group in 2020, as an exercise in compiling a set of indicators which reflect the scattered work which had up to that point been done in isolated pockets, on an integrated, caring approach to measuring safety and on advocating for such an approach[11]. The tool was initially packaged as an excel spreadsheet, a collection of fifteen indicators with numerous measures, sub-measures and data sources for each, the output of widespread consultation with leading safety practitioners in various regions around the globe. During 2023 an opportunity arose to continue the USM journey and the decision was made to package the tool in a format which is publicly accessible and invite engagement for future phases of work on Safety Knowledge Systems. The Bigger Picture website which is home to the USM sets out principles of safety knowledge systems and offers a quick assessment tool for cities contemplating safety knowledge systems to begin thinking about where to begin their safety knowledge systems journey[12].

### 2.1. Caring Innovations

#### 2.1.1. Community indicators

The USM encompasses fifteen indicators for city safety: four crime and justice indicators, five community indicators and six local governance indicators. In an innovative move, there are only 4 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:

A Human Rights perspective addresses service delivery and safety as related to human dignity and requires engagement with data that is respectful and sensitive to human dignity and other rights.

Civic Participation encompasses the perspective that residents in cities should have agency to participate in creating any development or change in local

---

[11] UN Habitat, "Global Urban Safety Indicators and Monitoring Tool," Expert Group Meeting Report , October 2020. https://unhabitat.org/global-urban-safety-indicators-and-monitoring-tool
[12] Find more info here https://urbansafetymonitor.org/

environments, that they are protagonists in their own lives and that cities should care to hear their views, to respond to their needs.

<u>Human Dynamism</u> is a philosophical perspective that suggests that when given the opportunity to be creative, human beings will deliver the most valuable transformative outcomes. This indicator relates to artistic practice, trust and inclusion in local communities and echoes the caring, inclusive approach of the *salvus* perspective. Professor Doris Sommer says 'human beings are dynamic, left alone, they will do something. Offered an opportunity, they are more likely to do something good'[13].

<u>Neighbourhood Wellness</u> suggests a shared collective attitude towards the local shared public environment, roads without potholes, well-tended gardens, cared for public spaces.

<u>Resilience</u> relates directly to caring services such as psychosocial support, which enable individuals, families, groupings and communities to recover easily from setbacks.

These are all indicators which demonstrate the integrated nature of the safety lens, that in measuring safety the municipality is measuring all of its mandates, and it is doing so with a caring perspective on the experiences and the needs of individuals living in their cities.

## 2.2. Self-assessment tool

Individual practitioners engaging with the USM will undoubtedly find it overwhelming. The assessment tool asks some very simple questions of individuals who are interested in a Safety Knowledge Systems approach, and unsure where to begin. It is certainly proposed that any city should immediately begin measuring all fifteen indicators, so how to begin? The USM proposes a Safety Knowledge Systems Journey – assess where your city is now, assess what resources and capacities you have at your disposal, where there are pockets of activity or interest that can be leveraged for institutional shift, where there are the biggest gaps that must most urgently be addressed, assess which types of indicator are most relevant to the work the city is already doing, where it can be

---

[13] Professor Sommer is the leader of the https://culturalagents.org/ at Harvard University

useful to assess progress, diagnose baseline conditions, or demonstrate success. The questions in the assessment are designed to prompt users to return to specific indicators in the USM, to start thinking about ones which can have the greatest initial impact. The questions are also designed to prompt self-reflection. How do I map the assets and resources which are already available to a Safety Knowledge Systems Journey? Where am I most likely to get support inside this institution?

This assessment is a caring intervention itself, it acknowledges how overwhelming the demands are for evidence-driven practice, the limited capacity available for innovation, the isolation that individual practitioners may feel in embarking on journeys aimed at creating change.

### 2.2.1.  The value of lived experience

The USM places explicit value on local lived experience data. This is a fundamentally respectful and caring approach which is not often possible in monitoring and data generation processes. It holds that the nature of safety is such that human beings understand their own safety with a deep and unconscious survival instinct, which crime statistics or quantitative data can never fully grasp or express. Only people who use and experience spaces can reflect on whether or not they feel safe, and are safe, in those spaces. A knowledge-systems approach which foregrounds the value of local lived experience data:

- Acknowledges the lived experience of community members, walking children to school, taking public transport to get to work, seeking out public spaces for family leisure time, acknowledging how intimate an individual's experiences of safety are;
- Relies on functioning relationships with communities and community groupings. In the process of developing the relationship to generate local lived experience data, municipalities create channels for continuous feedback, improve the reputation of the City – demonstrating its interest in and commitment to the concerns of communities, making itself available to community members
- Enhances the capacity of community groupings to generate and analyse data and to engage in data-driven decision making, creating networks for the flow of information and knowledge

- Equips municipal officials to engage community members, and to listen. Municipal officials are rarely explicitly equipped with skills for collaboration or relationship management. When they are reliant on community groupings for input on data generation processes, they are forced to slow down and listen, and to begin to understand how to make themselves available to listen to community experiences and needs.

### 2.2.2. 'Knowledge' and plurality

By prompting the integrated use of varied types of data from diverse sources, the USM advocates for inclusion and plurality, for seeking out the hardest to find groups and information, for ensuring all perspectives and voices are heard. By attempting to demystify some of the disciplinary tropes of data practice, moving away from 'data' and towards 'knowledge', allowing for qualitative and lived experience data, encouraging knowledge systems to interface with non-government organisations operating in the area, the USM offers some tools for deconstructing and to some extent decolonising exclusionary data practices, and allows for disruptive practices which promote inclusion and plurality. The USM advocates for sharing of data, between government, civil society, community groupings, research institutions and beyond. In the age of 'big data' and commercial models which rely on the sale of data for profit[14], the notion of shared data is not always comfortable, and this tool suggests that the shared interests of community and well-being supersede any competitive interests that different participants may have and that the benefits of sharing data outweigh the potential commercial benefits of keeping data proprietary.

### 2.2.3. Indigenous knowledge

The Canadian Centre for Safer Communities has over the last two years begun the work of customizing the USM for use in communities across Canada[15]. One of the critical caring innovations in this project has been to engage Indigenous Knowledge systems[16] and to understand how to work with the tool, where to augment with further indicators, where terminology must shift, which data sources have not been considered, to allow the USM to become the Community and Urban Safety Monitor – extending outside of urban areas into rural and indigenous communities, allowing for sufficient flexibility and agility to respond to

---

[14] "Future of Big Data: Prediction for 2025 & Beyond," Simplilearn, January 2025. https://www.simplilearn.com/future-of-big-data-article
[15] This work is funded by Public Safety Canada
[16] Indigenous Knowledge Systems funded by MITACS Indigenous Pathways

traditional and cultural practices which hold critical value for understanding resilience, well-being and safety, particularly for vulnerable groups. The USM opens itself to the opportunity to learn from this process and will continue to grow and change as more experiences working with the tool unfold and more lessons are learned about people centred safety knowledge systems and how to enhance those that exist and build new ones where there are none.

## SECTION 3. Conclusion

The USM reflects safety practice as fundamentally a caring approach to crime and violence prevention linked to local government mandates. It integrates principles of care into local government safety knowledge practice.

A human rights approach, an approach which relies on community experiences to understand impact, which invites non-traditional data sources and provokes wide sharing of data, seeks to undermine traditional rigid, exclusionary, 'western scientific' approaches and allow for fluidity, inclusion, dialogue and participation. The USM suggests that without disrupting traditional data practices in crime and violence prevention, it will never be possible to achieve or demonstrate systemic safety transformation.

This fundamentally caring approach acknowledges the need for behaviour change management with and for municipal officials who feel alienated by new technologies and substantial demands for increased data generation and evidence-informed practice. It proposes embarking on a safety knowledge systems journey, rather than unrealistically requiring wholesale adoption of a new approach, it acknowledges that it will take time and thought to shift institutional practices, and that small steps are the appropriate way to begin.

# Bibliography

"Future of Big Data: Prediction for 2025 & Beyond," Simplilearn, January 2025. https://www.simplilearn.com/future-of-big-data-article

"Gender-based violence increases mental health strain in the Shadow of Covid-19." South African Society of Psychiatrists. Accessed January 2025. https://www.sasop.co.za/gender-based-violence-covid-19

Harrendorf, Stefan, Markku Heiskanen, and Steven Malby. "International Statistics on Crime and Justice." *European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*. Helsinki 2010. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Crime-statistics/International_Statistics_on_Crime_and_Justice.pdf

Herre, Bastian and Fiona Spooner. "Homicide data: how sources differ and when to use which one." Our World in Data, 2023. https://ourworldindata.org/homicide-data-how-sources-differ-and-when-to-use-which-one

Holtmann, Barbara and Emma De Villiers. "The State of Urban Safety in South Africa." South African Cities Network, Urban Safety Reference Group. 2024. https://www.sacities.net/publication/the-state-of-urban-safety-in-south-africa-2024-report/

"Manifesto thematic recommendations," European Forum for Urban Security, 2025. https://efus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Efus-Manifesto-2025-ENG-1.pdf

"National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence & Femicide: Human Dignity and Healing, Safety, Freedom, & Equality in our Lifetime," Republic of South Africa, 2020. https://www.justice.gov.za/vg/gbv/nsp-gbvf-final-doc-04-05.pdf

"Personal Journeys Case Studies," Safe Spaces, July 2024. https://www.saferspaces.org.za/resources/entry/personal-journeys-case-studies

"Private Security Market Size, Share, Growth I Forecast [2023]." Fortune Business Insights. January 2025. https://www.fortunebusinessinsights.com/private-security-market-108283

"Safe Women Safer Cities." Fixed Africa, Safetipin, South African Cities Network. October 2022. https://safetipin.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Safe-Women-Safer-Cities-Final-1.pdf

UN Habitat. "Global Urban Safety Indicators and Monitoring Tool." Expert Group Meeting Report. October 2020. https://unhabitat.org/global-urban-safety-indicators-and-monitoring-tool