



# Breaking the cycle of violent crime

The HSRC has embarked upon a project on violent crime and social citizenship, reports VANESSA BAROLSKY.

THE PROMISE OFFERED by South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994 was that, with the end of apartheid, levels of violence in South African society would drop significantly. However, various forms of social violence at all levels of society, ranging from armed robbery to sexual violence and murder, have remained at extremely high levels. Although the rate of murder has declined slightly from approximately 20 000 murders a year to about 18 000 last year, South Africa still has one of the highest per capita murder rates in the world.

South African society is therefore challenged by behaviour which undermines the bonds of solidarity, community and trust between citizens. The fundamental premise of the democratic state's capacity to govern is its ability to provide its citizens with a minimum level of security and provide an enabling

environment for all citizens to realise their constitutional rights.

If citizens are afraid, are engaged in or are victims of criminal activities (whether it be violence or corruption), drug abuse or sexual violence, the bonds of solidarity and community are undermined. This weakens the fabric which ultimately holds a society together. The critical question then is how we understand these problems of social cohesion in relation to the high levels of violence characterising South African society and, crucially, how we use this knowledge to formulate innovative social interventions which will have a significant impact on breaking the cycle of violence in South Africa today.

While considerable research has already been conducted by a variety of units within the HSRC on the question of violence – which has placed the institution in the

position to conduct particularly high quality research in the area – it is clear that there is still much work to be done if we are to break the cycle of violent crime in South Africa.

This project intends to marshal the intellectual resources of the HSRC and the expertise it has already developed in examining the problem of violence from a number of disciplinary perspectives into one research project which combines this expertise across methodologies and disciplines in a concerted effort to develop much needed new methods of intervention for policy-makers and relevant stakeholders. Such an interdisciplinary research effort for the purposes of social intervention is unprecedented in South Africa.

The project intends to make a groundbreaking contribution to the study of violent crime in South African society by utilising the unique range of interdisciplinary expertise





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violent crime? What are the problems and successes?

- In areas of low violence, we need to ask whether low levels of violence can be linked to the effectiveness of the criminal justice sector or whether there are other factors at play such as higher levels of community cohesion.
- Finally, what nationally appropriate solutions and interventions can we propose based on our research findings?

Researchers agree that a common set of risk factors characterise South Africa and other developing countries. These have to do with social dislocation, economic inequality, poverty and unemployment, and histories of authoritarian rule. Yet, these factors do not in and of themselves explain the particularly high levels of violent crime in South Africa. In order to understand what makes South Africa unique in this respect, we will have to look very closely at case studies from across society which, taken together, will inform our understanding of the national problem of violence in our society.

The principle informing the case-study approach takes its cue from international thinkers such as Amartya Sen,<sup>1</sup> who on a speaking tour in South Africa said easy answers and rushed solutions to the problem of violence should be avoided. Such approaches tend to assume rather than question the causes of violence.

Just two examples of such assumptions will suffice to demonstrate the point. Firstly, the assumption that there is inevitability a link between poverty and violence and, secondly, that there is a link between a high number of guns and violence. In the first instance, Calcutta, as Amartya Sen points out, is one of the poorest cities in India but has one of

the lowest crime levels in the country. And in the second instance, Canadians, who have more guns than Americans, have a much lower murder rate than found in the US. However, violence may indeed be linked to poverty or easily available firearms in other instances.

What this approach requires in terms of our interventions and responses to violence is an acknowledgement of the complexity of violence and consequently the need for a *differentiated* approach to the problem of violent crime. The factors involved in violent crime and the intervention measures required to break the cycle of violence in South Africa need to take differentiations in patterns of violence into account and to apply appropriate methodologies of intervention.

By choosing a representative sample of case studies, the HSRC will be able to investigate these nuances in violent crime and criminal justice intervention in order to build up a holistic national picture, which will lay an enormously important evidence-based foundation for policy formulation and the development of innovative solutions to the problem of violent crime in South Africa today.

Critically, using the case-study approach as a methodology will allow us to probe beneath the 'surface' in the chosen case-study areas in order to investigate the complex array of factors involved in the problem of violent crime. Similarly, this approach will allow for the examination of a complex range of factors in order to evaluate the criminal justice system's response to violent crime.

This study takes further the important suggestions made by scholars, experts and policy-makers following a comprehensive and representative national assessment of violent crime held in 2004,<sup>2</sup> which advocated the need for more localised studies of violence within the context of the communities in which violence takes place. ●

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<sup>1</sup> Nobel Prize winner in economics and author of the book, *Identity and violence: The illusion of destiny*.

<sup>2</sup> The conference titled, 'Violence in South Africa: critical perspectives', was held in 2004, and organised by the Criminal Justice Initiative of the Open Society Foundation. The proceedings can be accessed at [www.osf.org.za](http://www.osf.org.za).

within the HSRC as well as the expertise of identified external research organisations. Quantitative and qualitative methodologies will be combined in order to conduct in depth case studies in a sample of areas in South Africa. In our national study we will ask:

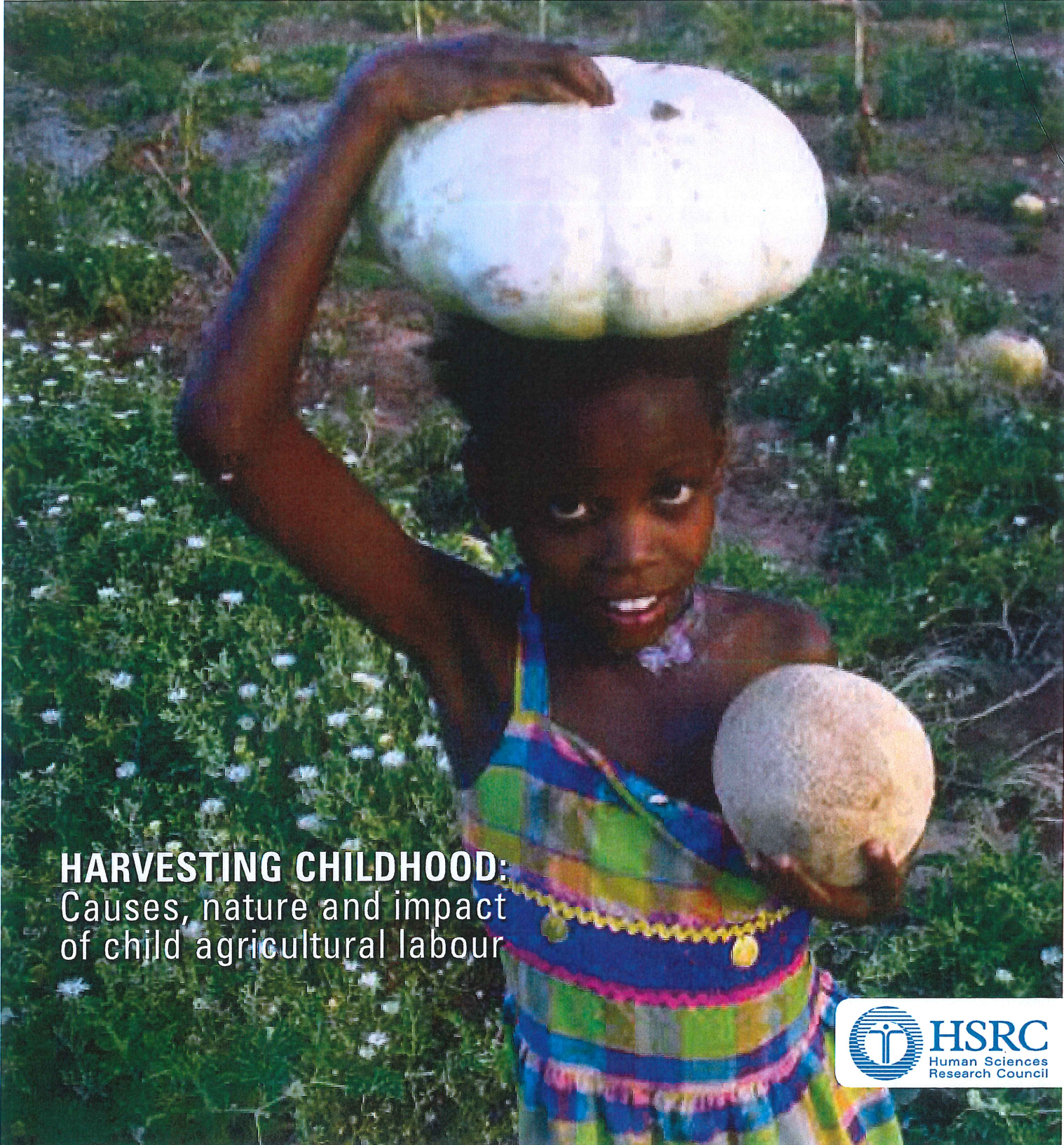
- Why are some communities prone to higher levels of violence than others? What factors contribute to these patterns of violent crime?
- Why are other areas able to maintain lower levels of violence? What are the 'resilience' factors that enable these communities to make choices that don't involve violence?
- What kinds of interventions are being implemented in areas of high violence and in areas of low violence?
- In areas of high violence, how effective are these interventions in addressing



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