

*The HSRC has launched fieldwork for its 6th South African HIV household survey, the largest to date. Researchers plan to interview 93 000 people and to collect 65 000 blood specimens in all 9 provinces. For two decades, this survey has helped to track the HIV epidemic in South Africa and has informed healthcare and prevention programmes. This time, it will also shed light on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately affected vulnerable communities during the past two years, including those living with HIV and Aids.*

*By **Antoinette Oosthuizen***

**T**wenty years ago, at the height of HIV and Aids denialism in South Africa, former President Nelson Mandela, through the Nelson Mandela Foundation, helped launch the first HSRC study to estimate HIV prevalence in the country. Those years were marked by controversy, but the [HSRC's researchers were steadfast](#), urging South Africa to follow the science.

Since then, the country has made significant strides in its fight against this epidemic and is home to world-class expertise on infectious diseases, including COVID-19. Continuing its work to track the HIV epidemic, the HSRC launched the fieldwork for the 6th South African HIV Behavioural, Sero-status and Media survey (SABSSM VI) on 8 February. The survey is the largest to date and has been expanded to collect data on SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

SABSSM has been a major source of information for measuring progress in the implementation of South Africa's national strategic plan to curb HIV, sexually transmitted infections and tuberculosis, said the HSRC's Prof Khangelani Zuma, the overall principal investigator of the study. Over the years, the researchers have increased the number of biomarkers measured, expanded participation to entire households, and have introduced electronic data collection systems, which allow them to access data immediately.

### **The 2002 survey: Speaking truth to power in the era of HIV dissidents**

Twenty years ago, at the height of HIV and Aids denialism in South Africa, the 2002 Nelson Mandela/HSRC Study of HIV/Aids found that 11,4% of the participants were HIV positive. Among those who did not believe that HIV caused Aids, the prevalence was higher than among those who did, and HSRC scientists urged the government to act. **Read more** about the complicated early history of this survey and the HSRC scientists who rooted for science and spoke truth to power in this interview with former HSRC CEO, Dr Olive Shisana.

"The main objective is to estimate HIV prevalence among adults and children at national and provincial levels, but also in a selection of priority districts where interventions are most needed due to high burdens of HIV," said Zuma. The researchers will visit 25 000 randomly selected households and all members of these households will be invited to participate. All responses are anonymous. Guardians will respond to special questionnaires for children under 12 years. Teenagers between 12 and 14 will respond to a different questionnaire that also includes questions on sexual behaviour. Those 15 years and older will respond to a detailed questionnaire designed to gather demographic data and information about their orphan status, education, media communication, and substance use.



Wearing marked uniforms during household visits, the SABSSM VI data collectors and nurses will be clearly identifiable in the field.  
**Photo:** HSRC

It will also collect information on tuberculosis, mental health, sexually transmitted infections, sexual behaviour, intimate partner violence, contraception, male circumcision, and HIV disclosure.

This type of information helps us understand what drives HIV infections and informs policies and strategies to curb the epidemic, said Zuma.

Dried blood spot specimens will be collected by finger prick from participants who consent. These samples will produce data on HIV incidence (the number of new infections per year) and prevalence (the total number of individuals living with HIV). Researchers will also measure viral load suppression (reducing HIV's ability to multiply in the body), exposure to antiretroviral treatment, and drug resistance.

A sub-sample of participants will be randomly selected to provide specimens to test for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies.

This will allow researchers to analyse co-infections of SARS-CoV-2 and HIV, said Zuma. The samples will be collected for research, but the participants will receive their results, pre- and post-test counselling, and be referred to healthcare services if needed.

Mluleki Zazini, a representative of people living with HIV, welcomed the survey, adding that communities still face several treatment challenges.



Photo: HSRC



Bobby August, an HIV testing services counsellor in the Western Cape, wears a bib that identifies him as part of the HSRC research team.  
Photo: HSRC

“For example, we need to make sure people are virally suppressed, but many do not receive their viral-load results, nor do they really understand what viral suppression is.”

Buti Manamela, Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, said the survey will allow scientists and the government to critically reflect on the effectiveness of the HIV policy and research interventions. Testing for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies will help experts to estimate the proportion of coronavirus infections at national and provincial levels.

“In the post-1994 era, South Africa’s high levels of HIV infections became the ultimate test of our country’s pandemic readiness. It will, therefore, also be interesting to see how the policy and research investments we’ve made over the past 20 years are helping us today in our fight against the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Manamela.



Study team leaders and funder representatives at the launch of fieldwork for the 6th South African HIV Behavioural, Sero-status and Media survey (SABSSM VI).  
**Photo:** Adziliwi Nemantandani

“South Africa is fortunate to have superb scientists and excellent data on HIV from many different sources,” said Dr John Blandford, country director for the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in South Africa. “But none of these can replace what we learn by going door to door across the country, speaking to South Africans about HIV.”

“From a public health perspective, the timing of SABSSM VI could not be more important. COVID-19 has impacted the health of all South Africans, including those living with HIV, and has at times interrupted access to critical HIV services. Now, more than ever, we need to understand who does and who does not have access to these essential HIV services and what barriers people face on the ground.”

SABSSM VI is funded by the President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief through the CDC. The HSRC’s partners include the South African Medical Research Council, the University of Cape Town, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, the National Department of Health, the South African National Aids Council, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the US Agency for International Development, and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and Aids.



The HSRC’s Prof Khangelani Zuma, the overall principal investigator, speaks at the launch of fieldwork for the 6th South African HIV Behavioural, Sero-status and Media survey (SABSSM VI).  
**Photo:** Adziliwi Nemantandani

**Note:** For more information about the survey, please contact Yolande Shean: [yshean@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:yshean@hsrc.ac.za).

**Author:** Antoinette Oosthuizen, a science writer in the HSRC’s Impact Centre  
[aosthuizen@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:aosthuizen@hsrc.ac.za)



**Photo:** HSRC