

## **A CALL FOR A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO PREVENTION**

Ward, C, van der Merwe, A & Dawes, A (eds) (2012) **Youth violence. Sources and solutions in South Africa**. Cape Town: UCT Press. ISBN 978-1-91989-587-1 pbk. Pages xv + 432.

*Mohamed Seedat*  
*Institute for Social and Health Sciences*  
*University of South Africa*  
*Pretoria*

In the introductory chapter the editors tell us that “the overall goal of this book is to provide a summary of the evidence to date, so that policymakers and those who implement programmes to prevent youth violence may be alerted to the critical need for interventions that are based on evidence for effectiveness and designed in a manner that takes the causes into account”. Following this stated goal as well as the structure and contents of the book, one may surmise that the book is positioned as an intervention at several levels. At a conceptual level the book is constructed as a critique of the criminal justice approach to violence containment that stresses stringent retributive and punitive measures. The book categorically adopts an ecological model and so chapters two and three, constituting section one, represent a tightly crafted conceptual foundational framework for the rest of the edited volume. In describing the magnitude and patterns of violence, Don Foster, in chapter two, offers a critical reading of the gendered, class and race dimensions of violence. In chapter three, van der Merwe, Dawes and Ward systematically draw attention to the individual, familial, communal and societal risk factors and pathways to youth violence. The ecological framing of violence resonates throughout section two of the book, which comprises of ten chapters that focus on a range of topics, including youth violence in the early years, school-based youth violence, violence in out-of school contexts, gang violence, youthful sex offenders, media violence, youth offenders in the criminal justice system, and youth violence in cities. Each of these chapters methodically illustrates how violence may be prevented within specific sites, environments or developmental stages, consistent with their respective focus. The chapters in section two are primarily replete with high-income country examples of what works for youth violence prevention. For instance, chapter five written by Tomlinson, Dawes and the late Alan Fischer provide illustrative high-income country examples focused on infancy, toddlerhood and early childhood development stages. They also offer two South African examples implemented in Lavender Hill and Khayelitsha respectively. Given the gaps in the South African prevention science knowledge base, the editors and chapter authors in section two constantly and correctly make the point that these high-income country interventions would need to be tested for local cultural congruency and efficacy.

Whereas this edited volume derives its relevance from its focus on youth violence, a national and global public health and development priority, it also contains critical value. The book's critical value is best noted in its nuanced readings of race, class and masculinities (see chapter 2 by Foster) and adoption of ecological explanations of violence and violence prevention. The ecological framework provides a critical edge in that it situates individual violent behaviour within larger familial, communal and societal contexts and draws attention to the social determinants of violence. Unlike the criminal justice approach, which de-contextualises violence the ecological approach in this book takes a critical look at structural inequalities, poverty and corrosive ideologies in the perpetration of violence. This critical perspective is particularly evident in chapter four by Saadhna Panday and colleagues who carefully locate youth violence within a development approach, and South African historical and contemporary specificities. Panday and co-authors examine youth violence within South Africa's history of youth activism, and patterns of youth access to education, employment, health care and economic participation. These authors consider youth violence alongside teenage pregnancies, substance abuse and overall mental health, and point out the significance of civic participation as a trigger for youth identity and social development.

The reflective stance of the book is also apparent in the closing chapter wherein the editors draw on section two in particular to distill lessons and future directions for youth violence prevention in South Africa. Here they reiterate the call for theory-driven, evidence-based, multisystem programmes and creative ways of introducing and adapting high-income success for resource strapped contexts in South Africa. They stress several principles, including the value of intervening early, socio-cultural congruence, a focus on risks and resilience, and community embeddedness. Even though they note the importance of inter-institutional and inter-sectoral collaboration, perhaps the significant function of political will, institutional arrangements and leadership in youth violence prevention are insufficiently explored.

As a conceptual intervention, the book succeeds in providing a convincing case for an ecological approach that is mindful of the multi-level risks and determinants of youth violence and creates a foundation for multi-systemic interventions. The book is also an intervention intended to stimulate evidence-led prevention actions' perspective. So while prospective studies may help to reveal the extent to which this edited volume succeeds in its goal to encourage evidence-led policies and interventions, it may be instructive to be reminded that both policy and intervention development are complex processes and that the relationship between empirically generated evidence and decision-making is far from a linear one. Policy-making and intervention development are enabled and constrained by a range of vested political and economic interests, ideology, donor expectations, public demands and social actor values and orientations (see Landry, Amara & Lamari, 2001; Lavis, Robertson & Woodside, 2003).

So a question that one may ask: How does an edited book such as this one obtain maximum resonance and uptake among policy and intervention level decision makers? While several public launches served to place the book within the public arena and consciousness, the specific goal of the book raises questions about how academics working in the policy and development contexts may go about creating relevance and currency for their work in an ethical manner. The issue of relevance raises another set of questions: Who produces evidence in society? Who is the evidence produced for? What are the ideological functions of empirically produced data?

In considering such questions, I also wondered about the place of a science-based book in a society such as South Africa which continues to struggle to reconcile epistemological imperatives arising from its positioning as an African modernity committed to a knowledge-driven economy (see Posel, 2002), and its parallel pledge, albeit marginal, to support community embedded knowledge systems. While these are all rather troubling issues, that are unlikely to be resolved soon, all the chapter authors demonstrate empirical clarity, scientific independence and academic rigour in their review of the science base concerned with youth violence prevention. The reader is sensitised to the finer academic debates and gaps in the international and South African science base, and throughout the book there is no space to doubt its empirical veracity.

Given its academic quality it may be safe to suggest that the book will in all likelihood enjoy extensive citations and use in academic circles among researchers and post-graduate students alike. It is difficult to know how the book will be taken up in policy and practitioner circles. However, it must be stressed that all of the chapters, especially those in section two, contain pertinent key messages for policy and intervention development and that the book is a tightly packed resource for anyone committed to advance evidence-based youth violence prevention.

In reviewing the breadth of the topics covered in the book, I was aware that most of contributors are well-regarded and esteemed scholars whose academic records serve to bring credibility to the book as an intervention intended to stimulate and support policy-making and intervention development as rational decision-making processes. There can be no doubt that the book is a valuable resource containing empirical data on the magnitude and risks factors of violence and illustrations of successful youth violence prevention strategies. The editors have succeeded in marshalling the social and public health oriented sciences to make a persuasive case for evidence-led youth violence prevention.

## REFERENCES.

Landry, R, Amara, N & Lamari, M (2001) Climbing the ladder of research utilization. **Science Communication**, **22**, 396-422.

Lavis, J N, Robertson, D & Woodside, J M (2003) How can research organizations more effectively transfer research knowledge to decision makers? **The Milbank Quarterly**, **81**, 221-248.

Posel, D (2002) A matter of life and death: Revisiting “modernity” from the vantage point of the “new” South Africa. Draft manuscript. Johannesburg: Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research.