



POLICY BRIEF

How violence and adversity undermine human development

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This policy brief uses the adverse childhood experiences framework, coupled with data from the Birth to Thirty cohort study, to show the impact of violence and adversity on the lives of South Africans. It connects violence and adversity in childhood to health and social problems almost three decades later. Understanding, foregrounding and addressing the effects of violence and adversity are essential for national development.

Key findings

- ▶ South African children are exposed to a wide range of adversity both in the home and in their communities.
- ▶ These children are more likely to experience poor health and wellbeing as young adults.
- ▶ Preventing exposure to serious and persistent adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is important for building human capital and promoting human development.
- ▶ Violence undermines our efforts to address unemployment and inequality and is an obstacle to individual and societal development.
- ▶ Investments in human development – education, health, social protection, employment and gender equality – are intrinsically important for individual wellbeing. They are also vital for building human capital, which underpins productivity and economic growth. Both are necessary for societal peace and wellbeing.

Recommendations

- ▶ Targeted interventions at specific ages are necessary to support human development. Preventing violence is key, since violence represents a threat to development throughout the life course.
- ▶ There should be coordinated, cross-sectoral efforts between government departments and between government and civil society to protect and support children through holistic family- and community-centred interventions that address the range of adversity children are exposed to.
- ▶ Policymakers should facilitate cross-sector collaboration and sharing of resources for initiatives aimed at preventing or mitigating ACEs.
- ▶ Given the central role violence plays in the lives of South Africans throughout their lifespan, all sectors should integrate the Violence Prevention Forum's (VPF) definition of violence prevention into approaches for development, across all social, health and economic policies and practices.
- ▶ Business associations and groups are encouraged to engage with research institutions and non-governmental organisations that form part of the VPF to identify what role companies can play in reducing the risk of adverse childhood experiences among their employees' children.
- ▶ As the drivers and beneficiaries of economic growth, people should be placed at the centre of development and economic policies, and South Africa's social policies should reflect this.

Adverse childhood experiences

The concept of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) captures the cumulative effect of adversity and toxic stress. This is the idea that taken together, the sum of negative experiences has an exponential impact on health and wellbeing. Environmental, socio-economic and behavioural harms may be compounded over time, resulting in accumulated risk.

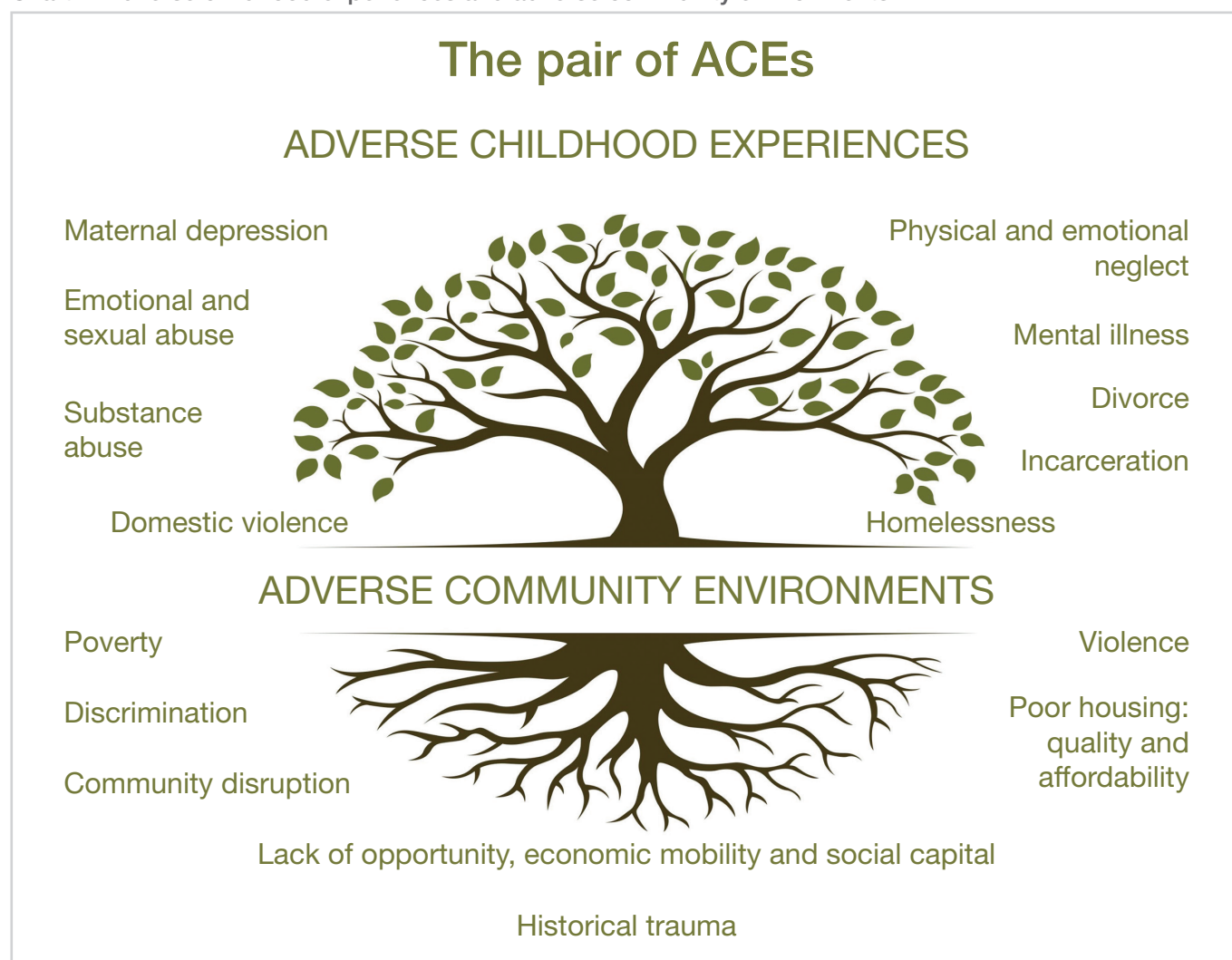
Researchers have conceptualised ACEs as having two parts – adverse childhood experiences that directly impact a child’s life, and adverse community environments (Chart 1). The latter recognises factors outside of the family’s control that combine to create an environment in which a child’s home, school or community become sources of stress.¹

Well-established literature points to early life experiences and childhood adversities setting the foundation for health and development and influencing life trajectories. Nurturing, responsive caregiving in a safe and stable environment is associated with healthy, productive lives throughout adulthood.² On the other hand, adverse experiences in childhood are associated with poor health and wellbeing, harmful risky behaviour and reduced human capital (Chart 2).³

Why study ACEs?

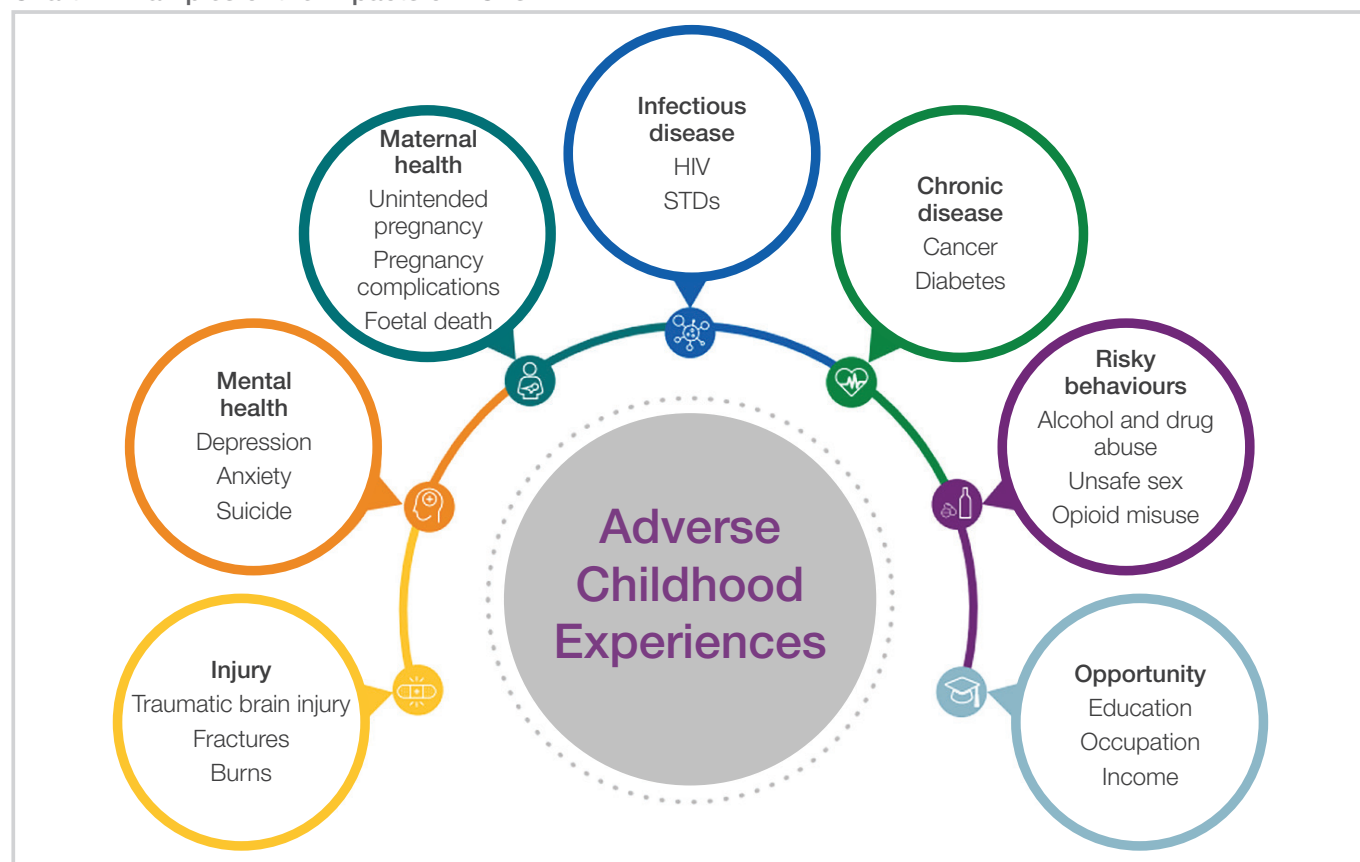
ACEs are considered a non-exhaustive list of childhood adversities, a broad term referring to circumstances or experiences that have the potential to represent a serious threat to the health or wellbeing of children, in the present and into their future. Some of these experiences, like

Chart 1: Adverse childhood experiences and adverse community environments⁴



Source: Adapted from A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experiences, WR Ellis and WH Dietz, 2017

Chart 2: Examples of the impacts of ACEs⁵



Source: Adapted from National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention

sexual or physical abuse, should be prevented altogether. Others, like experiencing divorce or the death of a close family member, may be unavoidable, but represent major stressors in a child's life that, without the proper support, can go on to have traumatic consequences.

There are four specific ways in which the ACEs framework can be useful. First, in the immediate context, ACEs help to illustrate the broad range of adversity to which children are exposed, and knowing the extent of the problem helps identify how to respond. Second, this framework shows that ACEs are often experienced together, and that holistic approaches for prevention, intervention and mitigation are essential for providing a safe, secure and stable environment for children.

Third, over the life course, ACEs help us understand the developmental pathways to risk and resilience. Understanding pathways to resilience can explain why some children thrive despite adverse conditions and help identify protective factors. These understandings could also help reveal why some interventions may work

for certain children and not others – so we can tailor interventions to children's needs.⁶

And last, ACEs are valuable for estimating population-level risk for health and social problems and provide a framework to understand how the prevention of ACEs, through intervention in complex social environments, can reduce the burden of public health challenges on both individuals and society.⁷

Burden of ACEs in South Africa

The prevalence of ACEs in South Africa varies depending on geography, socio-economic status and other factors. From the few emerging studies, we can tell that adversity in childhood is common. A small study of 250 HIV-positive youth in Soweto found that 90% of participants reported four or more ACEs.⁸

The Asenze cohort in a peri-rural area of KwaZulu-Natal estimated that by the age of five, 3% of their participants had experienced four or more ACEs.⁹ Using similar ACEs, and including parental death by

homicide, another prospective study of 10 to 18 year-olds in Mpumalanga and the Western Cape estimated that about 3.5% of their cohort were exposed to five or more ACEs.¹⁰

These last two studies assessed what can be considered severe ACEs (for example, the caregiver is HIV+ or has depression, food insecurity, the child has a major accident or illness), which may partly explain the low levels of ACEs reported. And while it is critical to capture these experiences, the ACEs framework demonstrates how the combination of multiple ACEs can have a cumulative effect even when these experiences are not as severe.

The Birth to Thirty (Bt30) cohort assessed a broad range of ACEs from physical and sexual abuse to exposure to community violence and poverty. Estimates from the Bt30 cohort indicate that 87% of children in the sample were exposed to four or more ACEs.¹¹ By age 18, only 9% of the sample had not been exposed to a single ACE assessed.

Data from the cohort also shows that the prevalence of ACEs fluctuates over the life course – with the highest number of ACEs experienced in the crucial, formative early years of life, before the age of 11.¹²

Young children are mostly exposed to household- and community-level ACEs such as substance abuse and chronic unemployment (Chart 3). During this period, more than half of the participants are exposed to four or more ACEs. Girls and boys tend to be exposed to the same number of ACEs.

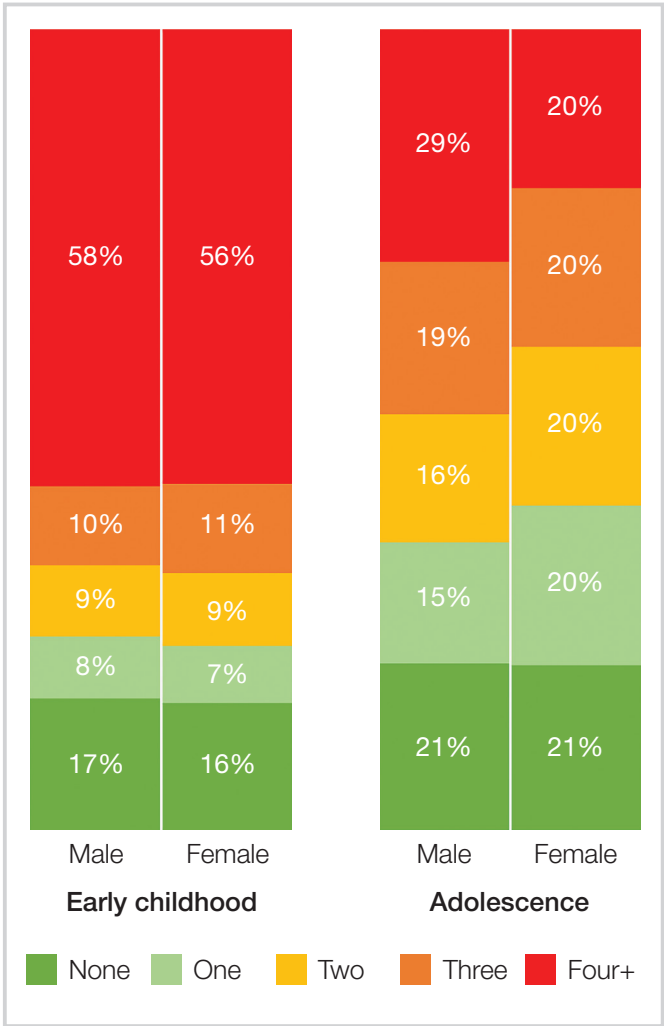
Birth to Thirty is a South African birth cohort that began in 1990 and is one of the largest and longest running prospective birth cohorts studying the growth, health and wellbeing of children. The study recruited 3 273 pregnant mothers (first generation) from the Soweto-Johannesburg area and has followed the children born to these mothers (second generation) over three decades. Numerous high-quality, robust and age-appropriate measures have captured the cohort's development, including the births of their own children (third generation).

Fewer adolescents report four or more ACEs, but overall, more adolescents report multiple ACEs, and like with younger children, exposure is relatively similar across gender. The difference between exposure to ACEs in early childhood and exposure in adolescence is that adolescence is marked by substantially fewer reports of household dysfunction, such as household illness, chronic unemployment and household death, and increased exposure to sexual and physical abuse, as well as exposure to intimate partner violence (Chart 4).

ACEs and health and social outcomes: evidence from Bt30

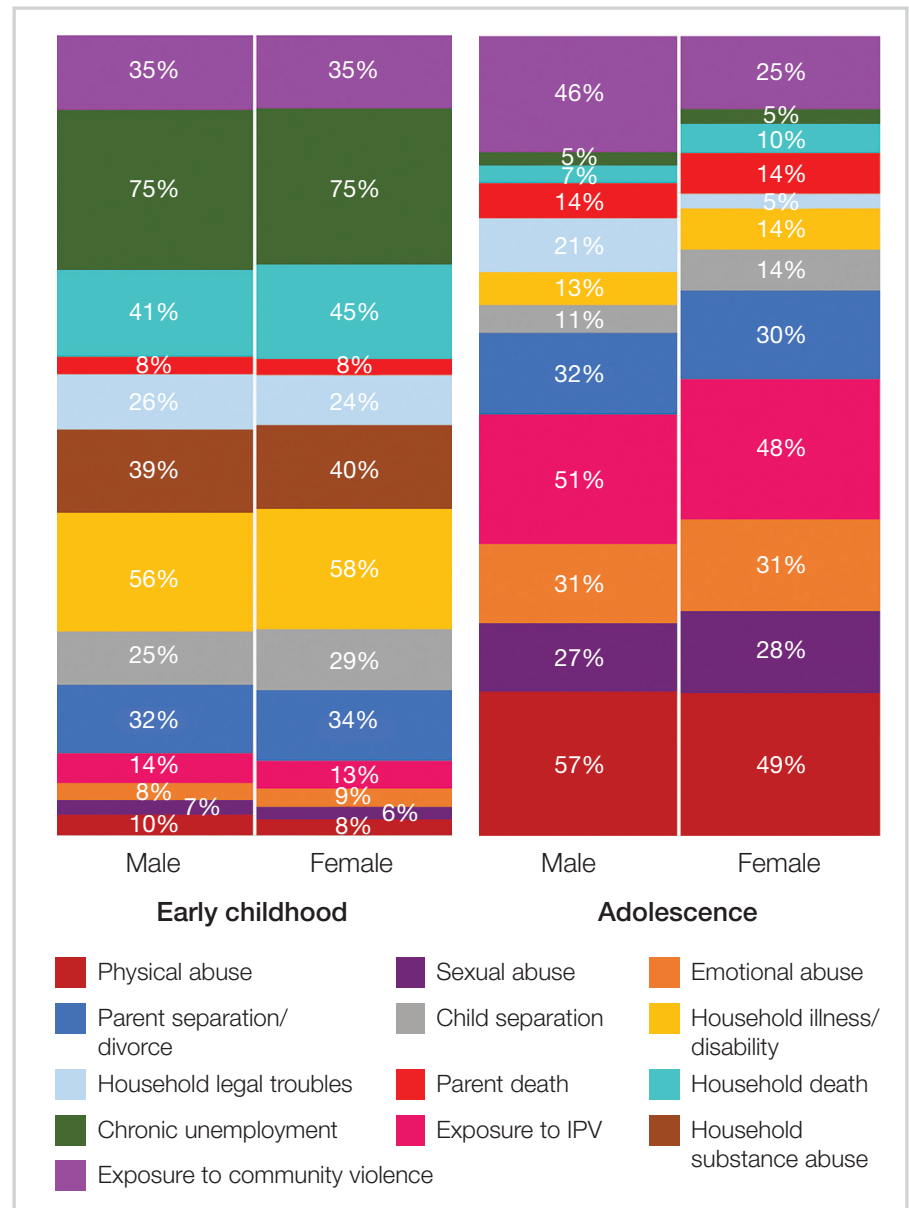
Using estimates of exposure to ACEs from birth, the study linked ACEs to numerous health and social outcomes at age 28 for just over 1 400 individuals.¹³

Chart 3: Prevalence of ACEs in Bt30 by developmental stage¹⁴



Source: Author

Chart 4: Prevalence of individual adversities by developmental stage¹⁵



Source: Author

The study confirmed that early adversity was linked to poorer health, wellbeing and social outcomes in young adulthood. The more adversities a person experienced, the greater their risk of experiencing negative physical and mental health and social outcomes (Chart 5).

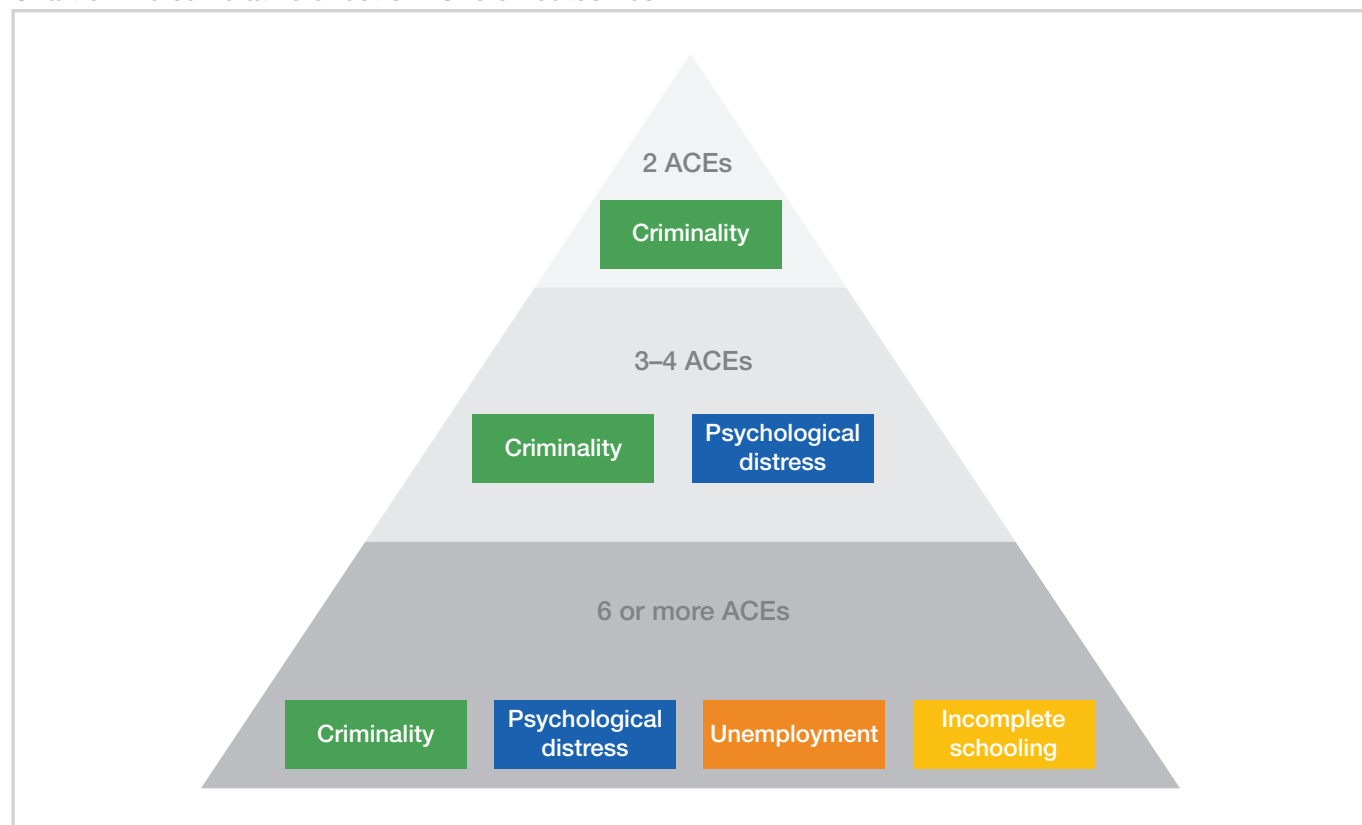
Central role of violence

One of the key findings of the study was that ACEs clustered in discernible patterns, and these patterns related differently to outcomes. Chart 6 gives a sense of the lives of children in the Bt30 cohort. In a general way, we see there is a group of the cohort who experienced few ACEs and had better outcomes, and a group who experienced high levels of all of the ACEs and had the worst outcomes. Then there are two groups with moderate levels

87%

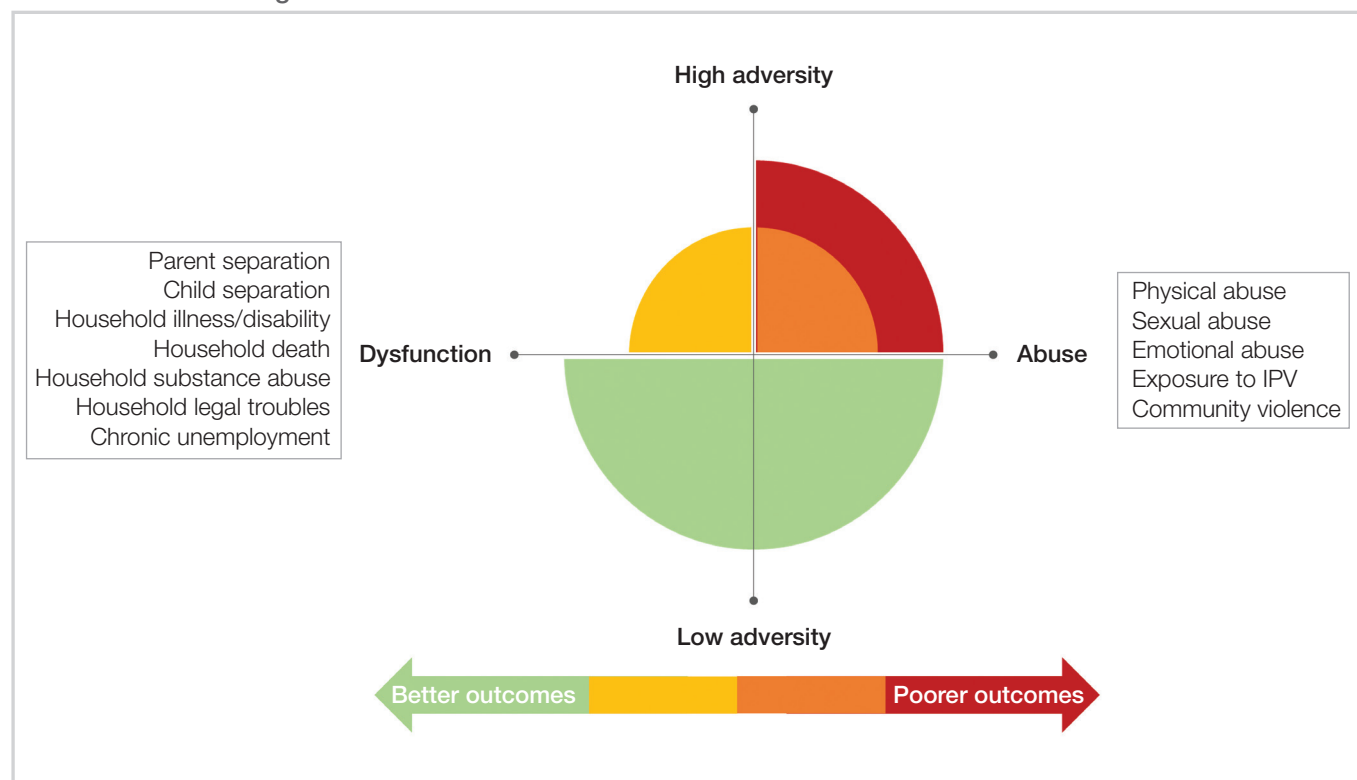
OF CHILDREN IN BT30
REPORTED EXPOSURE TO
AT LEAST 4 ACES BY THE
AGE OF 18

Chart 5: The cumulative effect of ACEs on outcomes



Source: Author

Chart 6: The clustering of ACEs



Source: Author

of exposure to ACEs – but the types of ACEs largely determined outcomes. Violence-related ACEs, whether direct or indirect, had an aggravating effect on outcomes, more so than household dysfunction ACEs.

Chart 7 shows the strong links between violence and poor outcomes, independent of other ACEs. What this tells us is that, for example, an individual who experienced physical abuse in childhood would be more likely to drop out of school, be unemployed, and experience social isolation.

While the impact of combined ACEs is strong, violence has a serious impact on health and wellbeing in adulthood

In the same way, children exposed to high levels of community violence are more likely to engage in substance abuse and to experience psychological distress as adults. While the impact of ACEs when

combined are strong, violence on its own has a serious impact on health and wellbeing in adulthood.

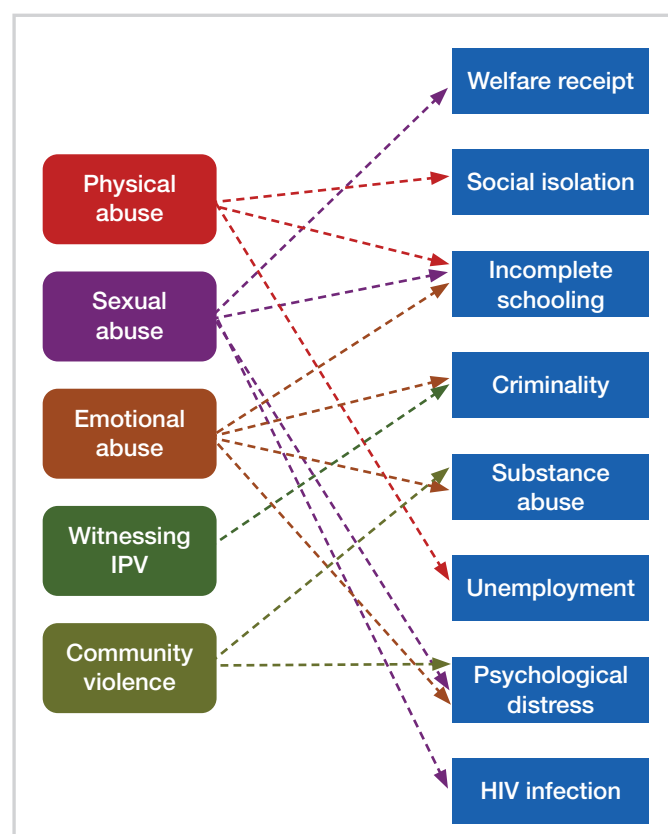
Other research using the Bt30 data has confirmed the persistent and central role of violence in determining the course of our lives. For example, a longitudinal analysis demonstrated that children were exposed to widespread, continuous and excessive violence across all settings, including in their homes, schools and communities, among their peers and in their intimate relationships.¹⁶ Only 1% of the cohort had not been exposed to any of the six types of violence measured in the study, and 40% had been exposed to five or six of the violence categories.

The impact of violence on a person's life starts even before birth and continues throughout the life course with intergenerational effects (Chart 8). For example:

- Mothers in the Bt30 study reported their levels of prenatal stress in their third trimester. Prenatal marital stress linked to partner violence or relationship breakdown was associated with behavioural problems in children when they were two years old.¹⁷
- At the age of six, young children in the cohort who were exposed to high levels of community danger and intimate partner violence within the home were displaying symptoms of anxiety, depression, aggression and poor emotional adjustment, such as oppositional behaviour – or patterns of deviant and hostile behaviour – and the impairment of social relationships.¹⁸
- In adolescence, reports of violence were amplified, with adolescents exposed to greater levels of direct and indirect violence in their homes, schools and communities.¹⁹ This broadening of exposure occurs as adolescents venture into new environments, increasingly without supervision, and their cognitive and emotional capacity to negotiate potentially harmful situations is still underdeveloped.
- Finally, in adulthood, young women who experienced high levels of exposure to interpersonal violence were more likely to suffer from mental health problems.²⁰

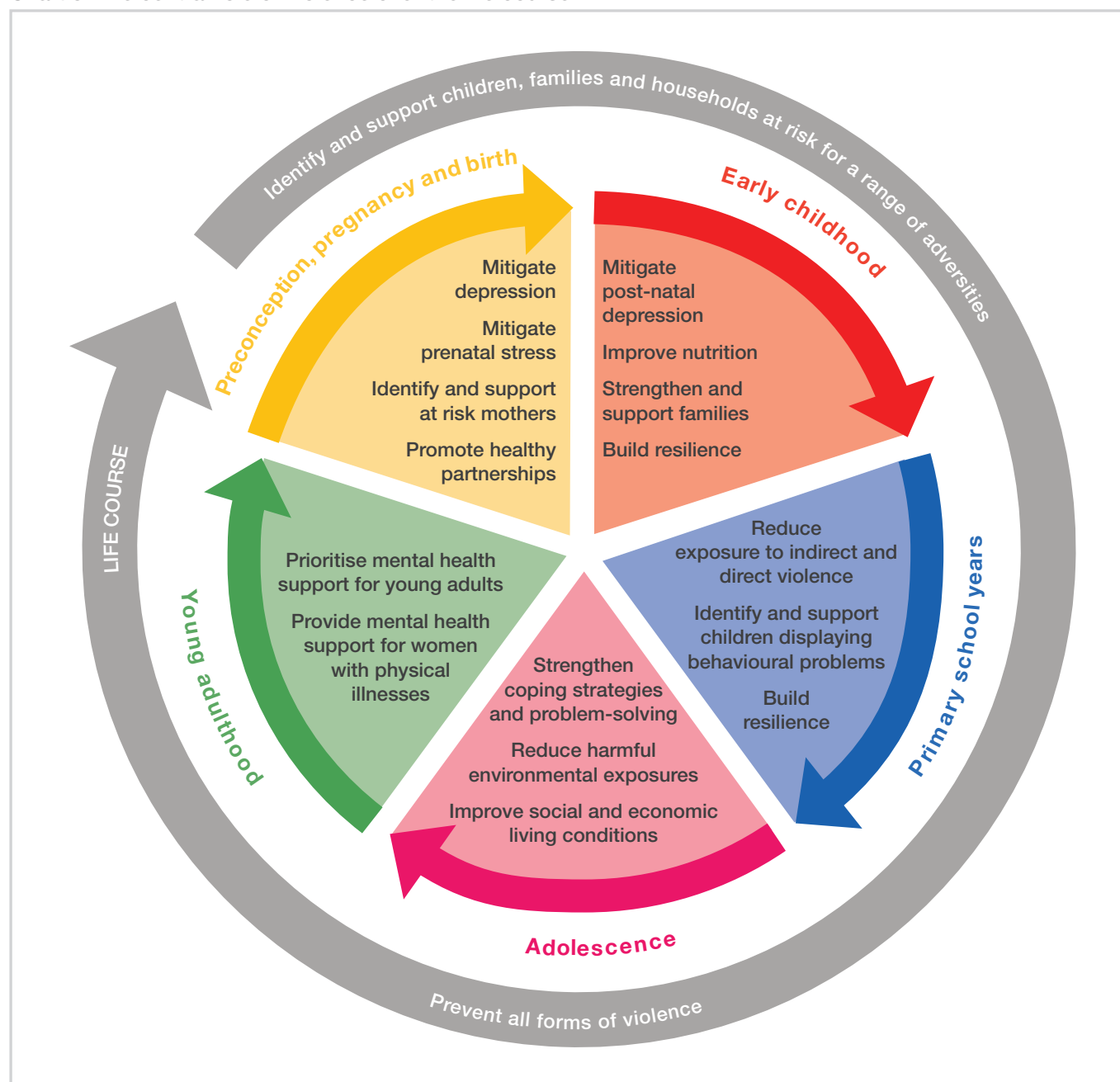
These findings show how central violence is in shaping the lives of South Africans and in preventing us from growing a healthy, happy, prosperous country. The broad range of impacts of violence throughout the life course and on many aspects of our lives indicates the need for a developmental approach to how we address these challenges.

Chart 7: Independent effects of violence-related ACEs on outcomes



Source: Author

Chart 8: The central role of violence over the life course²¹



Source: Mental health over the life course – findings from the Birth to Thirty Cohort Study, S Naicker et al.

Human development

‘Human development ... is about expanding the richness of human life rather than simply the richness of the economy in which human beings live. It is an approach that is focused on people and their opportunities and choices.’ – *United Nations Development Programme*

The first part of this policy brief showed how ACEs in general, and violence specifically, adversely affected the dimensions of human development. Based on these findings this section will argue that the prevention of adversity in general, and violence specifically, could promote development at both the individual and national levels.

Policymakers who are responsible for determining the national development plans and outcomes should be

concerned about the impact of violence on human development outcomes. This is because a country's development depends on the wellbeing of its people, and high levels of violence and adversity set a country back considerably.

At the individual level, human development is the physical, cognitive and psychosocial development of humans throughout their lifespan (Chart 9). At a societal level, our environment determines to what extent these processes of development can occur smoothly and without disruption. When barriers to development are removed, people are able to, individually and collectively, develop to their full potential and have a reasonable chance of leading the happy, productive and creative lives that they value.

At its core, human development represents the freedom all people have to choose who to be, what to do, and how to live. This is achieved when we create the best possible conditions for human development and provide people with the opportunities to grow and enhance their abilities.

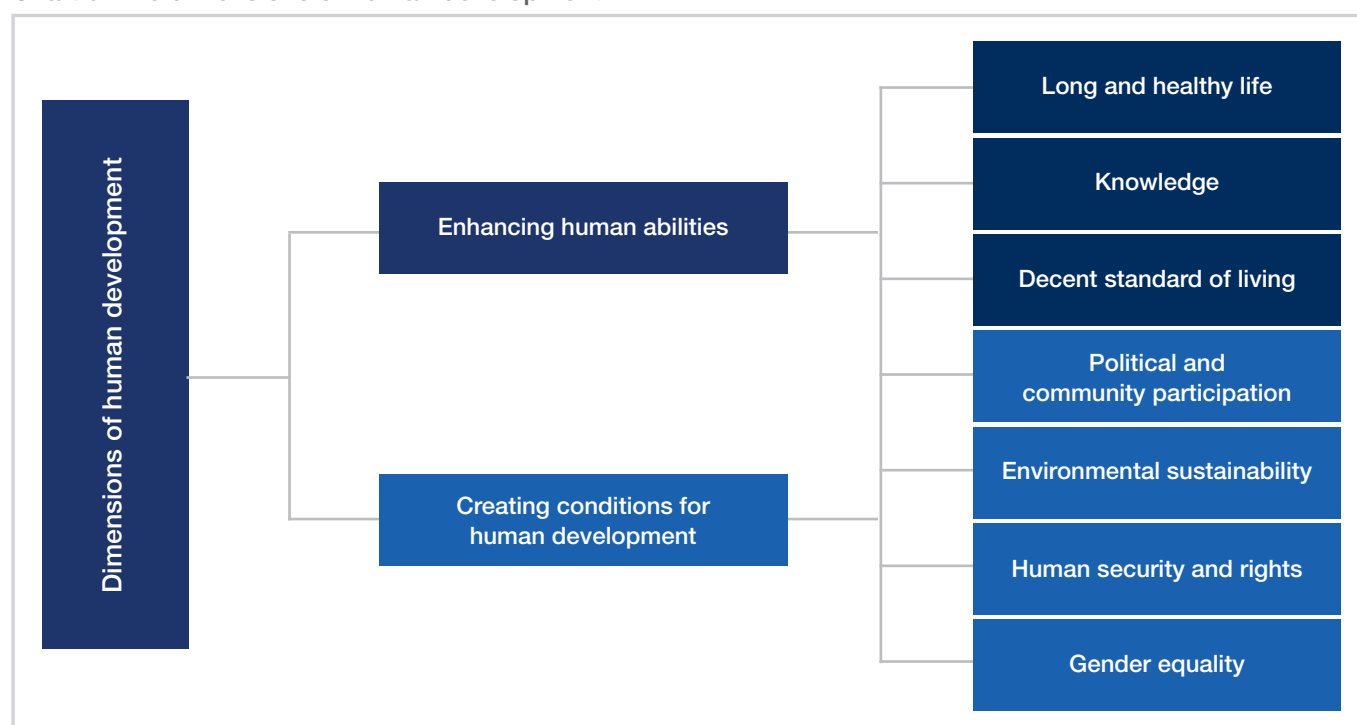
The Human Development Index (HDI) is a measure developed to capture in the simplest way the basic

ingredients of human wellbeing – people's health, their education, and their income (Chart 10). In the most recent Human Development Report, South Africa scored 0.709 in 2019, a 13.1% improvement since 1990 – with Norway in top place with 0.954 and Niger at the bottom with 0.213.²³ As a country, South Africa is classified as 'high' in terms of human development, despite ranking 113th out of 189 countries, missing the 'medium' human development category by three places.

High levels of violence and adversity set back a nation considerably as development depends on its people's wellbeing

A similar measure, the Human Capital Index (HCI), focuses on children and captures their expected potential given the conditions in their country. On this measure, a child born in South Africa today would reach only 43% of their potential productivity as an adult if they had completed their education and had full health.²⁴ South Africa fell from ranking 129th in 1990 to 144th in 2020 out of 174 countries, although its HCI score increased from 6 to 7.²⁵

Chart 9: The dimensions of human development²²



Source: Volunteering and Measures of Human Development, BJ Lough

Box 1: How can measures of human development and human capital be useful?

The Human Development Index (HDI) is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and having a decent standard of living. The HDI was created to emphasise that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, and not economic growth alone.

In its simplest form, the Human Capital Index (HCI) measures the productivity and human capital potential of children in each country, given optimal health and education conditions. Apart from differences in the indicators that comprise the indices, the HDI and HCI differ in their approach.

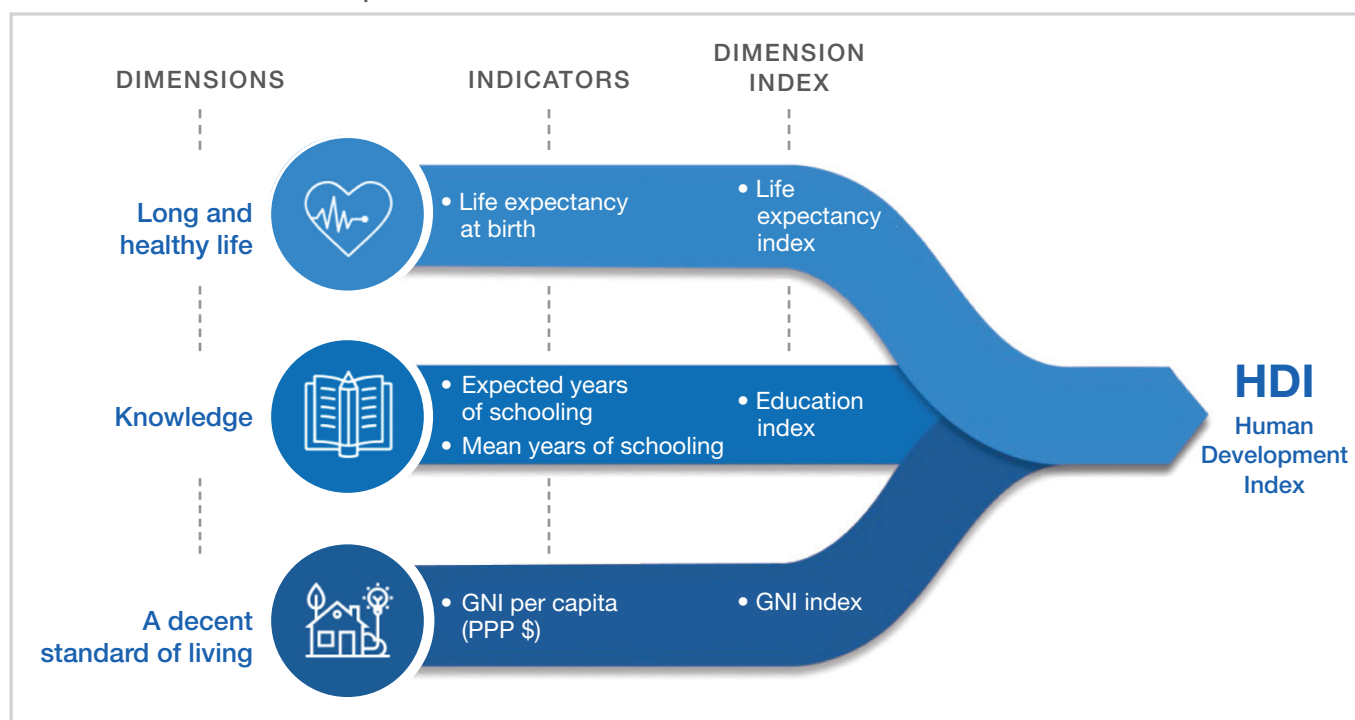
The HDI is inequality-adjusted and takes a multi-dimensional, rights-based approach to development, and moves beyond gross domestic product and per capita income to measure developmental progress. In contrast, the HCI takes a hard-nosed economic approach to measuring the essential aspects of

human capital development and how they factor into productivity and economic growth.

Both the HDI and HCI are tools we can use to help illustrate arguments and to help track our progress. Despite their limitations, indices like the HDI and HCI can help us to:

- Question national policy choices
- Compare countries with similar indicators but different human development outcomes
- Evaluate the impact and cost-effectiveness of policy interventions
- Evaluate and maximise the impact of current public spending
- Inform planning to improve the quality of public services, especially health and education, and more efficiently allocate resources
- Chart our country's path to growth and prosperity
- Hold governments accountable

Chart 10: The Human Development Index²⁶



Source: World Bank

The trends in both the HDI and the HCI reveal that despite gains made in the indicators of health, learning and income since 1990, South Africa's development progress, relative to other countries, has lagged. South Africa has also seen a strong increase in inequality, despite its declining poverty rates.²⁷ If we ranked South Africans by how much they earned, the top 10% receive about 65% of all income while the bottom 40% receive about 4% of all income.²⁸

Applying a human development framework

All children deserve to grow up in safe, loving, stable environments, protected from harm and nurtured to their fullest potential. Making the argument for concerted efforts to prioritise the prevention of ACEs in general, and violence in particular, in childhood competes with an escalating list of pressing challenges facing South Africans. These include high unemployment rates, pervasive poverty, widening inequality, social unrest, rising crime levels, generalised violence, power crises, exorbitant fuel and food costs, and slow economic growth.

However, the data shows that in fact high levels of violence contribute to increasing inequality and poverty and place a high burden of cost on health services. The Bt30 data shows just how fast the cycle moves and how interconnected many of these challenges are. In a single generation, just 28 years, children exposed to high levels of adversity and widespread violence were more likely to drop out of school, be unemployed, engage in crime, have mental health problems, be socially isolated and have poorer health.

South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030²⁹ integrates parts of the human development framework. As a goal, the NDP aspires towards better governance to build a capable and developmental state, one that will 'support and guide development so that benefits accrue across society (especially to the poor) ... so that long-term national interest trumps short-term sectional concerns.'³⁰

The NDP is geared towards one half of the human development framework – building the capabilities of its citizens, in part to fuel faster and more inclusive economic growth. There is some consensus that the country does not have sufficient capacity and resources to push a truly

developmental agenda and that economic development is urgent.³¹

A must-read review of South Africa's social policy from 1994–2017³² expertly positions our paradigms of social policy to address social development. A key takeaway is the hybrid nature of our social policy – in one sense transformative in its rights-based approach to redistribution and social protection; and in another, the stance that economic growth is the most effective driver of both social and economic development.

The widening inequality gap and what's been dubbed the 'hollowing of the middle' in South Africa – where South Africans in the middle of income distribution see little, and sometimes even negative, income growth³³ – are evidence that these policy approaches are not working.

Smart and sustainable economic growth rests on people as both the drivers and beneficiaries of the economy

While the country has made progress in closing the inequality gaps on basic capabilities so that more people live longer, are better educated and have a protected minimum wage, inequalities in enhanced capabilities continue to grow. That is, access to high-quality education, access to high-quality healthcare in all areas of life, access to technology, resilience against shocks, and gender equality. A human development approach would aim to:

- Create environments that foster rather than hamper people's development
- Build the resources and capabilities of individuals so that they can control their own lives
- Provide them with fertile environments to enhance their own individual potential, so that an individual's life chances are not determined by their ethnicity, gender or their family's socio-economic status.

A human development framework also recognises that gains made in one stage of life cannot be fully realised if the current or future environment is wanting.³⁴ For example, a stable, loving childhood may lead to healthy child development, but that potential cannot be fully

realised if their adult environment has few job opportunities. Similarly, stable economic growth leading to good employment opportunities in the future may be little salve for those who go on to develop deep traumatic wounds that impact their mental health and quality of life.

The ultimate objective of any government should be to enable all individuals to choose the life they value, and in that way gain freedom. Economic growth and productivity are a means to this end. They also enable governments and societies to provide high-quality services and social safety nets, particularly for vulnerable members of society who cannot provide for themselves.

In a single generation, just 28 years, children exposed to high levels of adversity and widespread violence were comparatively worse off in many ways

Arguments over whether human development or economic growth should be prioritised are moot when we make the decision to place human beings at the centre of economic growth development policies. Smart and sustainable economic growth rests on people as both the drivers and beneficiaries of the economy.³⁵

In developing countries, the challenges facing development are profound and complex, and are exacerbated by high levels of poverty and inequality. Comprehensive, holistic approaches that recognise the interrelated nature of harms and seek to address these holistically can make significant inroads in promoting our development as a society.

Holistic frameworks for development can be fit-for-purpose, tailored to context, cost-effective, and efficient in resource use. They improve impact through building on benefits made in other areas, and they recognise people as whole, complex humans. The VPF's definition of violence prevention is one such holistic framework:

Violence prevention is the whole of society working deliberately and sustainably to remove sources of harm and inequality, and heal woundedness, by intentionally growing an ethic of mutual care and inclusion to build peace.

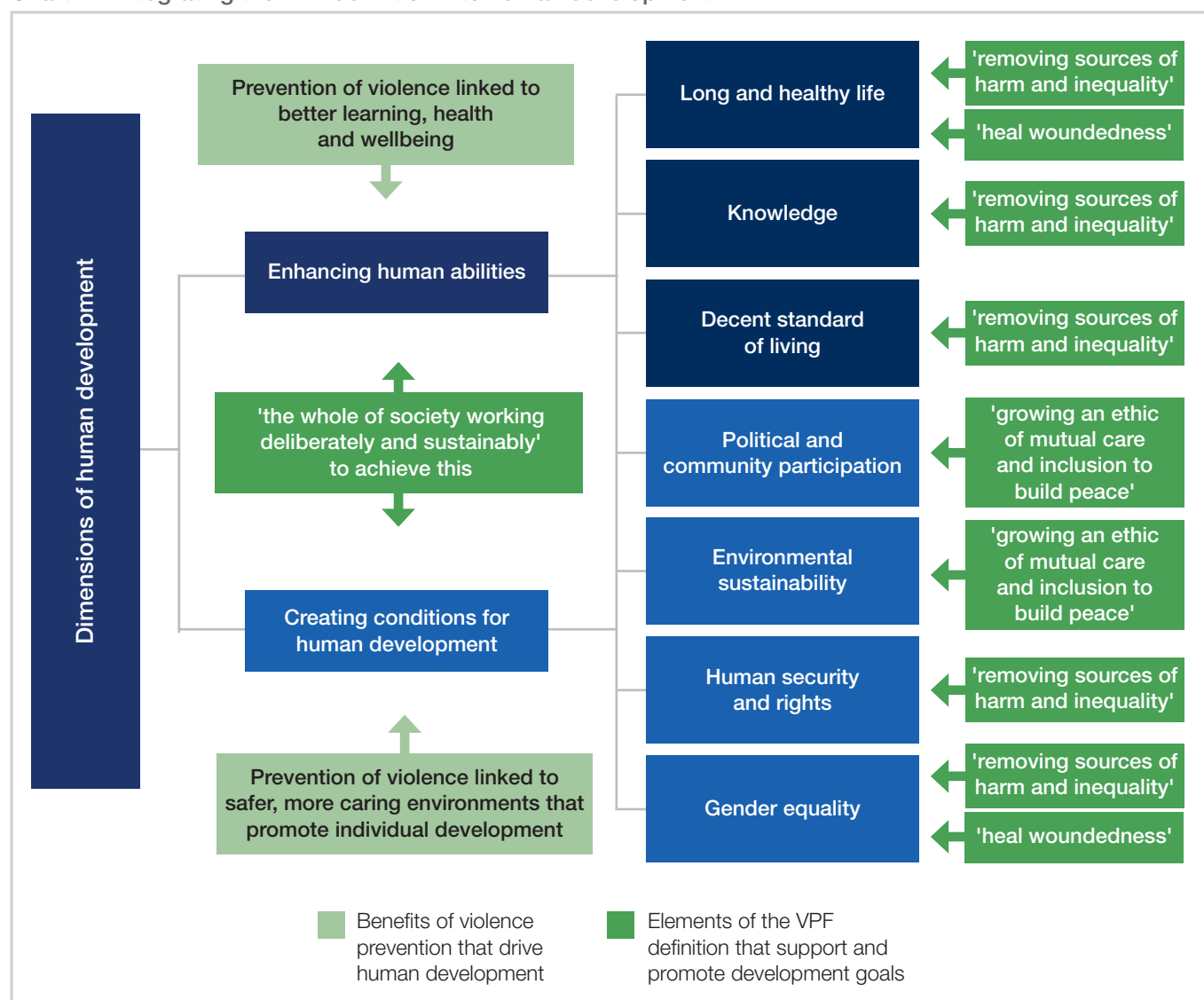
When the VPF definition is applied to a human development framework (Chart 11), the ways in which preventing violence can contribute directly and indirectly to progress in human development are evident. The elements of the VPF definition of violence prevention directly support and promote the goals of development, from a long and healthy life to gender equality.

At the same time, the benefits reaped from the prevention of violence – through the protection of health, education and wellbeing and the creation of safer and caring environments – feed into the dimensions of human

67%

OF THEIR POTENTIAL FUTURE
PRODUCTIVITY IS LOST DUE
TO DEFICITS IN HEALTH AND
EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN
BORN IN SA TODAY

Chart 11: Integrating the VPF definition into human development



Source: Adapted by author from Volunteering and Measures of Human Development, BJ Lough

development. They enhance human abilities and enrich the environment for human development. At the core is the understanding that both violence prevention and human development require that all of us, as whole societies, work together in deliberate and sustainable ways to achieve this.

Conclusion

Adversity in childhood can have long-lasting impacts on our health and wellbeing. Violence in all its forms is independently linked to poorer outcomes, and when combined with multiple other adversities, it exacerbates these outcomes. The findings from

Bt30 show how violence impacts human beings' potential intergenerationally.

Violence and ACEs are preventable; and their prevention is far less costly than paying the price for poorer health, unemployment, social exclusion, and crime. South Africa can ill-afford the misallocation or waste of public funds intended for public good.

A human development approach can help streamline the country's efforts to intervene by recognising the interconnectedness of many of the problems people face, and the pervasiveness of violence and its effects. Integrating the VPF definition of violence prevention into this work can support and promote development.

Notes

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