

The perceptions of safety and police visibility among secondary victims of gender-based violence in Soweto Township, Gauteng Province, South Africa

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Abstract

Traditional African communities are known for their social proximity which entails co-existence fostered by trust based on friendship, kinship, and experience. The wellbeing of residence in townships was protected through collective efficiency. However, in the past five years, South Africa was ranked amongst countries with the highest level of gender-based violence (GBV) in the world. Various police units are dispatched across South Africa, yet there are high levels of fear of crime across urban, rural and township communities which necessitated the study. Previous studies reported that most victims of crime display lower levels of trust in the police, however the categories of victims were not specified. This study only focused on indirect victims of GBV. The objective of the study was to interview secondary victims of GBV to explore their perceptions of safety and police visibility in Soweto Township. This is a qualitative study with a phenomenological design. Purposive sampling technique was used to select forty-five participants, and interviews were conducted to collect primary data from consenting participants. Thematic content analysis was conducted, and the dominant themes were “proximity” and “unsafe”. Results showed that most participants did not feel safe despite residing within two kilometers of a Community Service Centre (CSC) in Soweto Township. The study recommended mandatory police-foot patrols in nearby communities to maintain positive police-public relations. Based on Mere Exposure Effect, this strategy may address residents’ negative perceptions of police visibility. The study contributes to growing literature on the safety perception of indirect victims of crime in South Africa.

Keywords: *gender-based violence, police visibility, proximity, safety, social control*

Article History:

Received: September 5, 2025
Accepted: November 23, 2025

Revised: November 22, 2025
Published online: December 6, 2025

Suggested Citation:

Zikalala, N.I. (2025). The perceptions of safety and police visibility among secondary victims of gender-based violence in Soweto Township, Gauteng Province, South Africa. *International Review of Social Sciences Research*, 5(4), 157-177. <https://doi.org/10.53378/irssr.353292>

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1. Introduction

Globally, approximately 736 million women aged 15 and older have experienced gender-based violence (GBV) at least once in their lifetime (United Nations Women, 2024). Vulnerability increases when individuals face a high risk of victimization (Okunola & Amole, 2012). The social environment plays an important role in shaping residents' perceived safety (Zeng et al., 2023), with factors such as collective efficiency, social cohesion, and social disorganization influencing how safe communities feel (Okunola & Amole, 2012). Experiences and encounters with police also influence confidence in law enforcement. The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) found that victims of crime show significantly lower levels of trust in the police, and fear of crime is strongly associated with reduced trust (Robert & Gordon, 2022). Poor police-public relations further discourage crime reporting and worsen the challenges faced by victims (Mbewu et al., 2021).

Safety is a basic human need, and several social factors shape individuals' perceptions of safety (Eller & Frey, 2019). Police visibility is one of the interventions that help satisfy this need. Police presence in neighborhoods predicts trust in police and more positive views of officer behavior, which are in turn associated with collective efficiency within communities. Collective efficiency refers to the combination of social cohesion, trust among residents, and shared expectations for maintaining social control. This construct is a neighborhood-level attribute that helps explain why some areas with structural disadvantages, such as concentrated poverty, ethnic diversity, and residential mobility, experience higher crime rates than others (Yesberg et al., 2023). Importantly, the effects of crime extend beyond the direct victim: family members, friends, colleagues, and communities also experience stress, fear, and heightened vulnerability (Dinisman & Moroz, 2017).

Section 205(3) of the South African Constitution (No. 108 of 1996) mandates state protective mechanisms to ensure the safety of inhabitants. According to the SAPS sector policing guidelines, increased police visibility serves as a general deterrent, raising the perceived risk of arrest and reducing fear of crime (ACJR, 2019). Although the Crime Prevention Unit (CPU) is deployed in many high-crime areas, police coverage is not evenly distributed, and many communities remain under-policed. Furthermore, visible policing on its own is insufficient to curb violent crimes in South Africa (ISS, 2023). Limited resources and police absenteeism further undermine police efficiency (Dhlewayo et al., 2021).

The study aimed to examine the perceptions of secondary victims of GBV, drawing on participants' accounts to address the research questions. Qualitative inquiry was used, with open-ended, evolving, and non-directional questions (Venkatesh et al., 2016). The two primary research questions were:

1. Do you feel safe residing near a Community Service Centre?
2. How do you perceive police visibility?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) serves as a legislative framework that supports the concept of an ideal society. However, the implementation of the Constitution has not completely transformed South Africa into an ideal equal society. To create an ideal equal society, the urgent transformation of the country's social, political, and economic structures could eliminate gender inequalities. Section 24(a) of the Constitution provides that *"everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or wellbeing"*. Furthermore, constitutional institutions such as the police service should eliminate gender inequality through formal social control. The main goal of social control is to curb undesirable behaviour or deviance and maintain social order. There are two categories of crime control, and these are formal social control and informal social control. Formal social control refers to legal control imposed by law or implemented by state officials and government institutions, departments, or organizations. Forms of formal social control mechanisms include courts, the police, and prisons. Informal social control refers to control imposed by unofficial controlling groups or individuals based on moral rules or norms. Forms of informal control mechanisms include family, neighbours, neighbourhoods, and peers (Lambert et al., 2011). Religious institutions also impose informal social control (Marshall et al., 2021).

Diverse cultures vary in how much they value formal and informal social control as evident in the varied legislative frameworks (Lambert et al., 2011). Section 205(3) of the South African Constitution provides that *"the objectives of the police service are to prevent, combat and investigate crime, to maintain public order, to protect and secure the inhabitants of the Republic and their property, and to uphold and enforce the law"*. In addition to this, the South African Police Service Act (No. 68 of 1995) outlines the various police structures responsible for maintaining social control (Modise, 2023). Section 18(1) of the Act compels the police

service to collaborate with communities through Community Police forums (CPF) to achieve social control. The National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) of 1996 also emphasizes the value of police-community partnerships as a feasible strategy for combating crime and providing safety (Dlamini, 2023).

CPFs are a component of community policing which “seek to refocus attention away from the traditional reactionary approach to police, which focuses on aggressive crime suppression, law enforcement, and minimal public-engagement” (Modise, 2023). CPFs are legally recognized entities that represent the policing interests of the local community, established to exert civilian oversight by the police at various levels, especially at the local police stations in South Africa (Dlamini, 2023). There is evidence that the legitimacy of CPFs faced criminal threats and structural strains. The South African Police Service (SAPS) arrested a foreign national in connection to the murder of six (6) night patrollers at the Marry Me Informal Settlement, in Soshanguve (Nkonki, 2025). The violent attack of community night patrollers was inevitable. The tragic events at Marry Me Informal Settlement indicate that police visibility was poor in informal settlements. In 2024, suspects shot a CPF member during an attempted robbery and hijacking in Cape Town (Swartz, 2024). Police visibility is a more formal alternative to the CPFs used to combat crime in communities.

The SAPS Visible Policing is another strategy used to achieve social control in South Africa, as outlined:

Police visibility and proximity. Police visibility symbolizes proximity. However, the concept “proximity” is complex and multi-dimensional. The five types of proximity include cognitive, social, institutional, cultural, and geographic proximity. Cognitive proximity is related to how a person perceived, interprets and evaluates the world according to mental models and categories. Social proximity refers to the degree to which a person shares personal relationships, often by means of past collaboration. Institutional proximity relates to the existence of a common institutional framework at the macro level. Cultural proximity refers to shared language, codes, and norms of communication and exchange between persons. Geographic proximity refers to the physical distance between persons and is the basis of studies, regions, and clusters. Proximity dimensions are interrelated and often mutually reinforcing. Studies show that collocated persons are more likely to interact, and the nature of interpersonal interaction is different in that there is greater chance for face-to-face communication. For example, geographic proximity is conducive for gradual trust formation.

Gradual interpersonal and inter-organizational trust is based on experiences formed during frequent interaction, and face-to-face exchange that happen in a high social and relational content. Therefore, geographic proximity is related to the formation of social ties, or rather social proximity, which over time leads to the formation of gradual trust or distrust (Nilsson, 2019).

Police visibility in South Africa. ‘Visibility Police’ is one of five organizational programmes in the SAPS, yet most South Africans use the term to refer to the work of ordinary uniformed police. The five SAPS programmes include Administration, Visibility Policing, Detectives, Proactive and Security Services, and Crime Intelligence. South Africa is a developing country with 1,165 police stations nationwide. Police stations are termed Community Service Centres (CSCs) in South Africa, and these have the highest number of SAPS staff. “Generally visible” or regular patrols are a role that can only be assigned to police in developed countries where the police-to-population ratios are comparatively high, and the cost of police vehicles, fuel, and human resources to perform the foot patrols can be paid by the state. Studies show that no African country has state police that can adequately perform this function.

In 2018, the SAPs established the ‘Community in Blue project’ to enhance police visibility by mobilizing communities to collaborate with the police. In turn CPFs maximized general visibility or rather the police footprint without relying on police personnel. The latest SAPS annual report shows that there were 32, 112 Community in Blue foot patrollers across South Africa. The presence of trusted CPF members and security guards in social settings such as shopping areas, townships and suburbs makes the public feel safer from crimes such as robbery (Bruce, 2025).

2.2. The Impact of Social Factors on GBV Crimes

High unemployment in a community, cultural values, and geographic location are social factors that negatively impact on effective policing of GBV in South Africa (Mudimelim & Khosa-Nkatini, 2024). Statistics South Africa’s Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) indicates that South Africa’s unemployment rate has slightly decreased, as 31.9% of South Africans are unemployed. Data shows that in the fourth quarter of 2024; there was an increase of 132,000 in the number of employed persons in South Africa to 17.1 million. The number of unemployed persons decreased by 20,000 to 8.0 million, which is an increase of 112,000

(0.4%) in the labour force during the same period. The number of discouraged work-seekers increased by 111,000 (3.3%). The number of persons who were not economically active for reasons other than discouragement decreased by 93,000 (0.7%), which contributes to an increase of 18,000 in the number of the net economically active population to 16.5 million (Fraser, 2025).

On International Women's Day, President Cyril Ramaphosa said that the economic gap between men and women was huge, and half of the female population in the country was unemployed (BusinessTech, 2023). This concern is of consequence. The United Nations advocates for equality. Equality is the cornerstone of every democratic society that aspires to social justice and human rights. It often means women having the same opportunity in life as men. For instance, equal access to education and employment, which does not necessarily lead to equality of outcome (Sinden, 2017).

Jobs are the key to the future eradication of inequality and poverty. In most African countries, poverty estimates are based on consumption. The biggest contributors of inequality in consumption includes race, household, size, education, and location (Orkin, 2018). The structural socioeconomic differentials in South Africa create and perpetuate the vulnerability of women to gender-based violence. Although an increased number of women participate in the South African economy, female participants find it harder to find a job and tend to earn less than men in employment (Stats SA, 2018). The 2017-2022 Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) showed that the median monthly earnings for women in the working-age population increased by R1 000, and the increase was similar men. However, it is important to note that the median monthly earnings for men have always been higher than that of women. Race differences in income persist in South Africa. The White population group had the highest median monthly income, followed by the Indians/Asians population groups. The median monthly earnings across provinces also differed (Maluleke, 2024).

The geographic location is another social factor that impacts on GBV crimes. The geographic location of a family or community has a bearing on GBV incidence and prevalence. Ethnographic research in rural communities shows how cultural practices such as the payment of lobola promotes power imbalance within marriages and contribute to GBV in marriages. A study conducted in South Africa showed that most rural women are not adequately familiar with laws that protect them from domestic violence. Resources determine the accessibility of services. Often, when domestic violence occurs in rural areas, the victims are vulnerable due

to a lack of facilities such as health services and a counselling centre in the neighbourhood. The absence of affordable transportation in rural communities means that victims of domestic violence remain trapped in the relationship and the cycle of abuse. In addition to resource barriers in rural communities, fear of stigmatization and shame, and prevailing customary laws contribute to underreporting of GBV (Aphane & Mofokeng, 2018). Resource barriers do negatively impact on the safety perceptions of secondary victims of GBV.

Social factors such as culture and religion impact on GBV crimes across the globe. Cultural practices and family structures are often suspect in gender-based discrimination and gender-based inequality. Men have disproportionate power and privilege in patriarchal societies, which results in structural gender inequality. Gender inequality is rooted in certain religious and cultural practices, which harm women's livelihood, safety, and health. South African law, notably the Recognition of Common Law Marriage Act protects Indigenous customs such as polygamy and traditional practices that perpetuate the maltreatment of women. Traditional cultural norms dictate that a traditional wife or wives should not work and must depend on the husband. In African societies, especially in patriarchal homes, women must assume the role of caregivers and men must assume the role of economic providers (Mudimeli & Khosa-Nkatini, 2024). Gender attitudes and roles are socialized at an early age. Patriarchal gender norms and values reinforce and sustain the low status of girls and women in society, and this increases the likelihood that boys and men will perpetrate violence against girls and women. A change of attitude could drastically reduce GBV in patriarchal homes (Enaifoghe & Idowu).

Religious involvement in humanitarian aid and development takes countless forms, and may also vary by country, tradition, and sector. Religious actors have been strategically involved in collaborative efforts on women's empowerment and addressing issues like GBV. Some religious institutions are known for having played leading roles as educators, advocates, intermediaries, and experts working towards peace building and maintaining peace (Marshal et al., 2021).

Collective efficiency is important for combating GBV in communities. Collective efficiency is a combination of social cohesion and trust among neighbourhood residents, along with shared expectations for social control (Yesberg et al., 2023). Police community cooperation is central to the effective and equitable day-to-day functioning of the criminal justice system. Most criminal offences become known to the police through members of the

public, who are the first to identify the crime. Thus, cooperation from citizens, whether as witnesses or jurors, is necessary throughout the criminal justice process. Importantly, an absence of cooperation impairs the efficiency of the police and other criminal justice agencies and erodes the fairness of their operations. If crimes are less likely to be reported by people living in certain areas, then the allocation of police resources will not reflect the 'true' distribution of crime, and this mismatch will favour areas where people tend to report crime regardless of the severity of the crime (Brandford & Jackson, 2010).

A study examining the association between area-level characteristics and crime reporting shows that high social cohesion, measured at the aggregated level, was associated with high chances of reporting crime victimization at the individual level. Similarly, another study found a strong association between aggregate social cohesion, trust, and individual propensities to engage in 'direct' social control (Brandford & Jackson, 2010). Social cohesion is part of sustainable development processes that involve ensuring that certain needs are met, and such needs are traditionally associated with state welfare (Atkinson, 2019). State welfare can be secured through territorial cohesion, as done by United Nations member states that strive to fulfil sustainable developmental goals (SDGs). United Nations member states are accountable through the Voluntary National Review (VNR). The 2024 VNR for South Africa report on SDG 16 indicates high corruption. SDG 16 focuses on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, ensuring access to justice, and building effective institutions that promote inclusivity and equal access to justice, as well as promote accountability of institutions at all levels. SDG 16 aims to reduce violence, prevent conflict, and strengthen the rule of law, which in turn serves as a foundation for sustainable and equitable development (Global Impact, 2024). SDG 16 articulates issues such as safety and peace.

Victims' perceptions of safety are a good indicator of social cohesion, peace, and stability in a community. Safety perception relates to the motivation to avoid losses because it describes a state of protection from harm experienced in the present and harm anticipated in the future (Eller & Frey, 2019). Maslow's concept of safety refers to threats of personal security, health, and financial security, such as crime, murder, extreme weather conditions, severe illness, and unemployment. Maslow's theory classifies safety needs as the second-highest order of needs. The theory postulates that it is especially important for humans to feel safe and also have a strong motivation to attain a state of perceived safety. In terms of the

theory, physiological needs must be satisfied first, but it is easy to ignore them when safety needs are not satisfied. Therefore, a man in this state, if it is chronic enough, may be characterised as living strictly for safety alone (Eller & Frey, 2019).

Statistics South Africa's Governance, Public Safety, and Justice Survey (GPSJS) 2023/2024 painted a bleak picture of safety in South Africa. The GPSJS indicates a decline in the sense of safety among individuals walking in their neighbourhood during the day and at night since 2019/2020. The survey explored people's safety perceptions, or rather 'sense of safety' and respondents had to indicate how safe they felt walking in their neighbourhood alone during the day and at night. The sense of safety among individuals aged sixteen (16) years and older declined, dropping from 41, 8% in 2019/2020 to 34, 9% in 2023/2024. A high number of females reported feeling less safe walking in their neighbourhood at night in comparison to men. Furthermore, most people felt unsafe walking alone during the day; the percentage dropped from 86.6% in 2019/2020 to 84,8% in 2020/2021 and continued to decline to 80,4% in 2023/2024 (Stats SA, 2024).

The continuing decline in positive perceptions implies fragmentation in social cohesion as well as failure of social control. The continuum of victimhood is devastating. About 47, 000 households experience sexual offence, and 650,000 individuals aged 16 years and older experienced assault during the past five (5) years in South Africa (Maluleke, 2024). Assaults are potentially traumatic to the victim and secondary victims. Traumatic experiences account for most women's deviances worldwide (Kiconco, 2024). The population of secondary victims tends to be high in communities with poor social cohesion. A 'victim' is any person who has suffered harm, including physical or mental injury; emotional suffering; economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions contravening the criminal laws. The term 'victim' refers to indirect victims such as the immediate family members, dependents, neighbours, or colleagues of a direct victim (Mhlongo & Dube, 2020).

Trauma is a necessary requirement for a person to be a secondary victim. The Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorder (DMS-IV-TR), 4th edition, Text Revision (DMS-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000) defines trauma as: *Direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other*

close associate (Criterion A1). The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children, the response must involve disorganization or agitated behaviour) (Criteria A2).

Secondary victims result from association or identification with the direct victim, as conferred in the definition of the term 'victim' (Mhlongo & Dube, 2020). 'Secondary victims' is a term used to define a person or persons who suffer psychological injury not because of direct involvement in the incident but by witnessing it, or seeing the primary victim sustain injury, or fearing injury to a primary victim (LexisNexis, 2025). Secondary victims tend to be common in households that experience crime.

Households that experience GBV or a sexual offence must often grapple with trauma and possible intergenerational trauma. DMS-IV-TR outline types of incidents classified as potentially traumatic: *Combat, sexual and physical assault, robbery, being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, disaster, severe automobile accident, and life-threatening illness, as well as witnessing death or serious injury by violent assault, accidents, war, or disaster. Childhood sexual abuse is included even if it does not involve threatened or actual violence or injury* (Sage Publications, 2006). The three most common traumatic incidents experienced by households in South Africa include assault, murder, and sexual violence. Stats-SA reported that 67,000 households experienced murder and around 257,000 households experienced assaults during the past five (5) years (Maluleke, 2024).

South Africa has criminalized most traumatic incidences listed in the DSM-IV-TR. The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act (No. 13 of 2021) lists sexual acts that constitute sexual offences, and these include incest, sexual intimidation, sexual exploitation, and non-consensual penetration (South Africa, 2021). The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2014) defines sexual violence as: *A form of gender-based violence that encompasses any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting.*

Sexual violence takes multiple forms and includes rape, sexual abuse, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, forced prostitution, trafficking, sexual enslavement, force circumcision, castration and forced nudity. Rape is the most common sexual violence or rather offense committed in South Africa. GBV is a pandemic in most sub-

Saharan countries including South Africa. GBV is any harmful act committed to an individuals or groups of individuals, and the act may include sexual violence, domestic violence, human trafficking, forced marriage or marriage to a minor, and any harmful traditional practices regardless of setting (OHCHR, 2014).

3. Methodology

Methodological assumptions inform the research methods, procedures, and the collection and analysis techniques used to gather data. Methodological assumptions of research include the research strategy, research methods, sampling technique, the selected sample size, and collection and analysis techniques used (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019).

3.1. Research Design

The study used a phenomenological qualitative design because this approach was suitable for study context and also gave participants the liberty to express their opinions and share their experiences. Phenomenology is concerned with people's subjective interpretations of experiences, so participants were allowed to free elaborate on their answers during the interviews. The research approach permitted observations on participants' behaviour and facial expression when responding to questions. In this engagement, participants expressed their values and meaning on lived experiences to create rich data on the studied phenomenon (Oranga & Matere, 2023).

The study was qualitative, and it used a phenomenological research design and an interpretive paradigm. This means that the study bracketed the world view of the principal and used the participants worldviews as a lens to analyse statements, gestures, and expressions about their lived experiences. The interpretive approach does not rely on numerical or statistical analysis of data provide by participants. Interpretivists acknowledge that the phenomenon studied was a product of human construction with attributes that are unquantifiable. Meaning derived from participants' facial gestures, body language and pauses or gest constated a reality that is accessible through social constructions using language, consciousness, and shared meanings. Participants had the opportunity to clarify non-verbal expressions to elaborate on their responses to questions because interpretive research does not predetermine dependent and independent variables but rather focuses on the involvedness of human sense-making as the circumstances emerge. Not asking for clarify could constitute

failure to acknowledge expressions which embody meaning. This methodology endeavours to understand the phenomena through the meanings that participants assign to them through social contextualization (Gichuru, 2017).

Most research methods have limitations, and the study anticipated the limitations of the applied research methodology. The limitations of the study are determined by the theoretical background, objectives, research questions, and study sample (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). To elaborate on this, the study was context specific to the boundaries of Soweto Township, in South Africa. The study neither measured chronic fears nor required participants to self-report on anxiety resulting from GVB and gender-based crimes.

3.2. Participants of the Study

Sampling requires an understanding of the population of interest. The target population was secondary victims of GBV in Soweto Township, who reside in the precinct of nine CSCs, which included SAPS Moroka, Meadowlands SAPS, Jabulani SAPS, Dobsonville SAPS, Diepkloof Zone 1 SAPS, SAPS Kliptown, Orlando SAPS, SAPS Protea Glen, and Naledi SAPS. The research sample was based on the convenience of the researcher. The prospective participants were at the right place, at the right time, during the sampling process. The general rule is that studies that use convenient sampling, otherwise known as purposive, cannot generalize findings beyond the sample (Acharya et al., 2013).

Participants recruited from Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg municipalities were suitable for the study because of their availability and compatibility with the selection criteria of the study. The participation criteria included being a South African, resident in Soweto, adults between 18 and 65 years, and being a secondary victim of GBV. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit forty-five (45) participants. The sample consisted of Black South Africans with seventeen (17) females and twenty-eight (28) males, who were between 19-64 years old. 17 participants did not have tertiary qualifications. The university ethical approval permitted a limited sample of forty-five participants for the study, and 45 participants contributed to the study.

3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

The data collection instrument was an interview schedule with semi-structured questions. Interview schedules were administered in Soweto Township to collect primary data

from participants. An interview schedule is a formal document, or rather a “*proforma*” that contains a set of questions. The person recruited should first sign a consent form before completing the interview schedule. A researcher physically carries the interview schedules to the participants, administers the questions in a sequence-wise manner, and then notes down the responses in the spaces provided in the “*proforma*”. This process tends to be exclusive. In other words, the interview takes place between two individuals, one person is the interviewer, and the other person is the interviewee or participant. An interview entails a process that involves the presentation of oral-verbal stimuli and replies in terms of oral-verbal responses (Mazhar et al., 2021).

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), otherwise known as Thematic analysis, was used to analyse the primary data obtained from the participants. This involves the search for and identification of common threads that extend across an entire interview or set of interviews (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Atlas.ti programme facilitated the use of TCA. Atlas.ti is a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), with extensive functionalities suited for analysing and reporting on descriptive qualitative data (Ronzani, 2020).

3.5. Research Ethics

Ethical considerations were applied by informing all participants of their rights to remain anonymous, voluntarily participate, withdraw at any stage of the study, not to be harmed or experience discomfort, and assurance of data protection. Written consent was obtained from all 45 participants.

3.6. Mere Exposure Effect

The term ‘mere exposure effect’ (MEE) was coined by Zajonc in 1968. The mere exposure effect is a phenomenon where repeated stimuli is more positively evaluated than novel stimuli (Inoue et al., 2018). The argument is that repeated unreinforced exposure to a stimulus is sufficient to enhance its effective standing. Thus, repeated exposure to a stimulus leads to familiarity with that stimulus, which in turn leads to liking (Hekkert et al., 2013).

MEE is based on the following three accounts: An account based on classical conditioning, the uncertainty reduction account that hinges on a combination of habituation and satiation reduction of uncertainty, and the perceptual fluency account that hypothesizes an inherent relationship between fluency and liking (Molet et al., 2021). The study used MEE to interpret findings. The rationale for applying MEE is that it highlights the role of proximity in social relations.

3.5. Measures of Trustworthiness

The measures of trustworthiness applied to the study include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024). This is the most widely used criterion for evaluating content analysis, and it was developed by Lincoln and Guba in 1985 (Elo et al., 2014).

4. Findings and Discussion

The data showed that all participants indicated that they reside within two (2) kilometers of a CSC. Furthermore, most participants reported feeling unsafe despite residing near a CSC in Soweto Township. The two dominant themes identified from the data include “proximity” and “unsafe.”

Proximity. Proximity refers to geographic closeness. All participants indicated that they resided within 2 kilometers of a CSC in Soweto Township. Space, or rather distance, creates proximity. Distance is one of human geography’s key concepts. Spatial proximity in human geography is synonymous with related spatial concepts such as space, place, region, territory, environment, landscape, scale, location, diffusion, and distance. Spatial distance is only one of the four entangled dimensions of subjective distance; the other three include social distance, temporal distance, and hypotheticality (Simandan, 2020). Social distance, also termed social proximity, measures how strong or weak individuals’ social ties are and, therefore, how close they perceive other people to be in terms of identity (Nilsson, 2019; Simandan, 2020). Temporal distance measures the time elapsed in relation to individuals situated in the here and now. One may speak of the recent past and the near future, as opposed to the distant past or distant future. Hypotheticality measures how probable various imagined worlds and scenarios appear. It is in this regard that individuals tend to estimate how the future will unfold. Thus, a given course of events may be described as a “distant” possibility

(Simandan, 2020). The study's findings support previous research on the role of proximity, which argued that frequent exposure to a stimulus promotes familiarity and positive perceptions of that stimulus (Hekkert et al., 2013).

Unsafe. The concept of unsafe implies experiences or perceptions of fear. Fear is one of the most important human emotions. It is common among mammals, as it functions as a signal of an impending threat. The developmental trajectory of fears and anxieties is similar among humans from infancy through adulthood. Researchers have identified multiple pathways of acquiring fear, which involve general learning mechanisms. Developmental researchers have found that visual attention plays a significant role in learning fear by directing individuals' attention selectively toward threatening stimuli in the environment. Other researchers have established that negative experiences may reciprocally drive attention, leading individuals to selectively focus on stimuli that already provoke anxiety (LoBue, 2013). The findings of the study also support previous research establishing that social cohesion contributes to positive safety perceptions (Eller & Frey, 2019).

The dominant themes are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1

Theme - Proximity

Sub-themes	Direct quote	Participants
Near	"Naledi SAPS is near"	P4
Close	"Meadowlands is close"	P18
Walking distance	"I can walk to SAPS Moroka"	P23

Table 2

Theme - Unsafe

Sub-themes	Direct quote	Participants
No	"No."	P28
Yes	"I feel free."	P18
Maybe	"Yes, but not hundred percent."	P16

The results show that 24 participants said "no", 19 participants said "yes", and 2 participants said "maybe" when asked, "*Do you feel that you are safe by residing near the CSC?*" Results also show that 45 participants reported residing within 2 kilometers of a CSC, when asked, "*How do you perceive police visibility?*" In summation, all participants indicated

that they reside within 2 kilometers of a CSC when articulating their perception of police visibility. None of the participants referred to crime prevention activities or services in the neighborhood, which are a form of police visibility. Furthermore, most of the participants felt unsafe despite residing in proximity to a CSC in Soweto Township.

Data showed that most (24) participants did not feel safe despite residing in proximity to a CSC. Participants' responses to the research questions on police visibility articulated spatial proximity rather than social proximity. Previous research established that residents are more likely to feel unsafe in communities with compromised social efficacy, where deviance is common. In terms of the MEE account based on classical conditioning, poor police visibility could account for the poor social efficacy in Soweto Township. The results also highlighted the continuum of victimhood in the Soweto Township. All (45) participants mentioned the geographic location or distance of the CSC rather than mentioning a service that the CSC provided. Ideally, police patrols and the presence of CPFs entail collaboration that should be disclosed when discussing issues of proximity.

Qualitative research studies that investigate a phenomenon in a certain population or ethnic groups tend to be localised hence the findings are ungeneralizable (Leung, 2015). The research design, funding constraints, and research theory used to interpret the findings imposes limitations on how findings are ungeneralizable (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). The findings of the study are ungeneralizable.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that most secondary victims said that they felt unsafe despite reporting that they resided within proximity of a CSC. In terms of the "MEE" most participants are aware of the proximity of the CSCs but do not have positive perceptions of police visibility because their views are informed by their interaction with the police. The proximity of the CSCs in Soweto Township does not mean that the police interact frequently with the neighboring residents. Social proximity, such as proactive forms of police visibility, was not discussed by participants, which indicates participants' perceptions of the police serving their communities.

In terms of MEE, most participants either do not interact or rarely interact with the police officials working in the neighboring CSCs in Soweto Township. The research setting and the people involved in the study were considered when formulating recommendations. The

recommendations of the study span practice, policy, and research. From a practice perspective, the South African Police Service (SAPS) should intensify physical contact with residents through regular foot patrols to strengthen social cohesion and improve safety perceptions among community members who feel unsafe. Deploying police cadets to conduct weekly foot patrols in the communities they serve would further increase the frequency of police–resident interactions and reinforce collective efficacy. At the policy level, Community Service Centres (CSCs) are encouraged to reimagine and revise policies that promote positive police–public relations, ensuring that police officials are mandated to physically engage with community members on a weekly basis. Finally, from a research perspective, CSCs in Soweto Township should schedule regular surveys to monitor and better understand the evolving safety perceptions of the communities they serve.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the University of South Africa (UNISA). The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance by the College of Law Research Ethics Committee (CLAW_RERC): Ref#3328. The study also adhered to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) (No.4 of 2013) which regulates the sharing of personal information. The data is accessible on an open-source platform called Figshare.

AI Declaration

The author declares the use of Grammarly, an online grammar and spell checker software, to improve the quality of sentences.

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