

Vimba helpline Diepsloot: What we learned after 20 months of running an SMS-based service for victims of gender-based violence

Two years ago, at the start of the 16 days of activism against violence against women and children in 2016, the Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism launched the [Vimba helpline in Diepsloot](#). It was conceived as a way to help people in the township in northern Johannesburg who were victims of gender-based violence gain access to the support services available in the area. It was also a data journalism project.

The helpline closed at the end of July 2018 when the funding ran out.

What did we collect data for?

We wanted to see if the data would tell us a bit about gender-based violence in Diepsloot, and answer questions such as:

1. Are there parts of Diepsloot where more people are looking for help than others?
2. What sort of assistance are people looking following rape or violence and abuse?
3. Are people looking to help themselves or somebody else?
4. Are there times of the day, week or month when more people are likely to call the Vimba service?

All the calls were anonymous, so we cannot identify individuals. We asked people to tell us which extension of Diepsloot they were in rather than, for instance, tracking GPS coordinates of callers' phones.

Here's what we learned

- **7,811** calls were made to the Vimba helpline.
- **2,628 of those calls were sent SMSes** with information on where to get help in Diepsloot.

These were the calls where the three questions we asked were answered, and they were a third (33%) of the total number of calls to the helpline in the 20 months between 1 December 2016 and 31 July 2018.

Each SMS contained information about the organisations that provide help to gender violence victims in Diepsloot, their physical addresses and phone numbers, as well as 24-hour helplines for the South African Depression and Anxiety Group and Childline, as well as the police and emergency services numbers.

- It took about a year for the helpline to really get going, but by November 2017 it was sending out an average of **190 SMSes a month**. (see Figure 1)

Murals with the helpline's number painted on walls around Diepsloot during 2017 played an important role in promoting the service in the community.

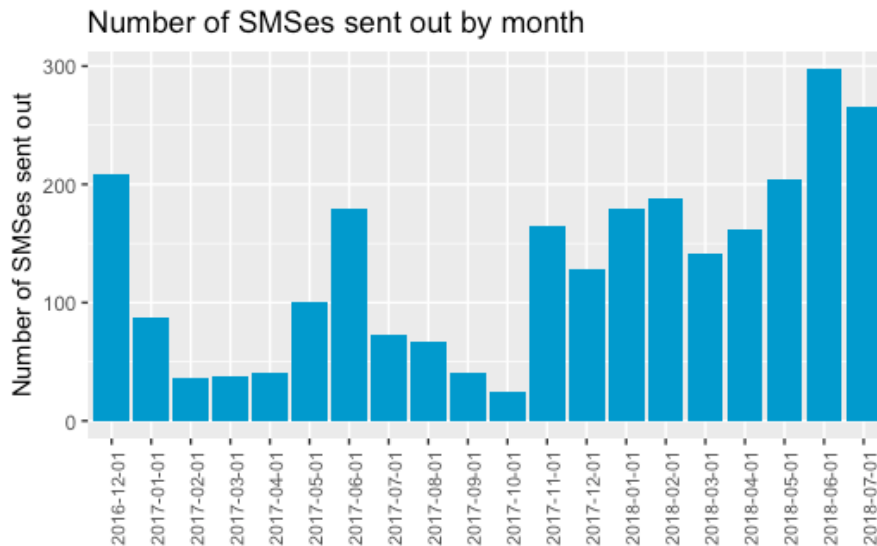


Figure 1: SMSes sent by month from December 2016 to July 2018

- **70% of the SMSes were sent to people who said they were in Diepsloot**

We asked people to tell us which extension of Diepsloot they were in – there are 13 extensions – and if they weren't in Diepsloot, they could choose option 0. Of the 2,628 calls that received an SMS, 71% of them chose one of the Diepsloot extensions 1 – 13 and 29% chose option 0.

- **Roughly one in every three of the Diepsloot calls was from extension 1**

766 SMSes (29%) were sent to people who said they were in extension 1 and 283 (11%) to people who said they were in extension 13 – both are among the poorest, most densely populated parts of Diepsloot. 760 (29%) were sent to people who chose option 0, which was for people who are not in Diepsloot (see Figure 2).

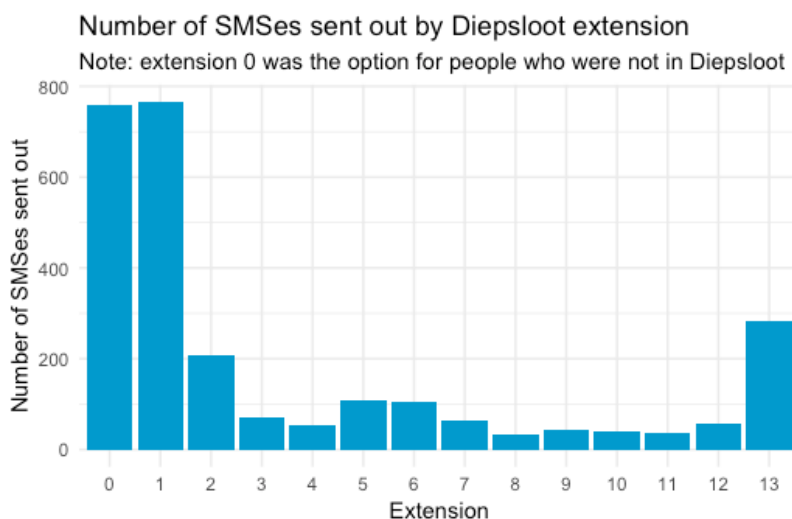


Figure 2: Number of SMSes sent out to calls from extension, December 2016 to July 2018

We can't be sure that people really were calling from the extension they chose; we have to take their word for it. But we did a test with 88 callers who typed an invalid answer for the extension question the first time around. Generally, these callers, instead of typing in a

number between 0 and 13, typed in places, such as “Polokwane”, “Mokopane”, “Shoshanguve”, “Nelspruit”, “Hlabisa” or “Richmond”, which is presumably where they were actually calling from. About one in four (24%) of the callers who typed in an incorrect option the first time, chose extension one the second time, rather than choosing option 0. And 15% chose extension 13 the second time.

Based on that, if we assume that about a quarter of the calls reported to be from extension one were not actually made by people in extension one, but they simply chose that number randomly. The number of calls from extension one would be 582. And if we assume that around 15% of the calls from extension 13 were made by people randomly selecting that number, we get 40 fewer calls from that extension. Also, the number from option 0 would increase to 987. Even so, extensions one and 13 still received many more calls than the other 11 extensions. And 62% of the total calls still originated from Diepsloot.

- **Help isn't that near to some of the callers**

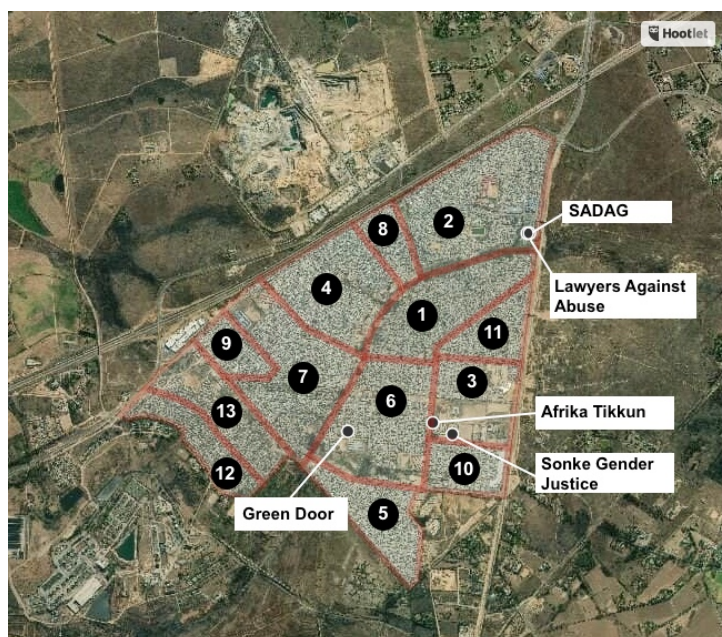


Figure 3: Google map of Diepsloot showing the 13 extensions and the location of the GBV service providers

The organisations that provide help to victims are shown on the map: Green Door, Afrika Tikkun and Sonke Gender Justice are relatively close to each other in extensions six and three; the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) and Lawyers Against Abuse are next door to each other in extension two, near the police and fire stations. Green Door is the only shelter in the township. It is also the only service provider that is open all the time, the others all keep office hours and are closed at the weekend.

- **Callers mostly wanted to help someone who had been beaten or abused**

Callers to the helpline were given four options in three languages. “I want to help someone who has been beaten/abused” was chosen by just over a third of the callers (37%). The other three options – “I have been beaten/abused”, “I have been raped”, “I want to help someone who has been raped” – all got roughly the same number of calls, between 20 and 22% each (see Table 1).

Help option	Total	Percent
I want to help someone who has been beaten/abused	977	37%
I have been beaten/abused	572	22%
I have been raped	564	21.5%
I want to help someone who has been raped	516	20%

Table 1: The total number of times each of the three help options were selected by the callers who received an SMS.

“I want to help someone who has been beaten/abused” was the option most chosen by English and Sepedi language users, but among the callers who chose the IsiZulu language option “Ngishayiwe noma ngihlukumeziwe”, (I have been beaten or abused) was the most-chosen option followed by “Ngidlengulwe” (I have been raped).

- **Type of help sought by Diepsloot extension**

In all but one extension, “I want to help someone who has been beaten or abused” was the most selected help option, ranging from 32% to 54% of the callers. However, the largest portion of callers from extension one chose “I have been raped” – one in three chose this option (see Figure 4).

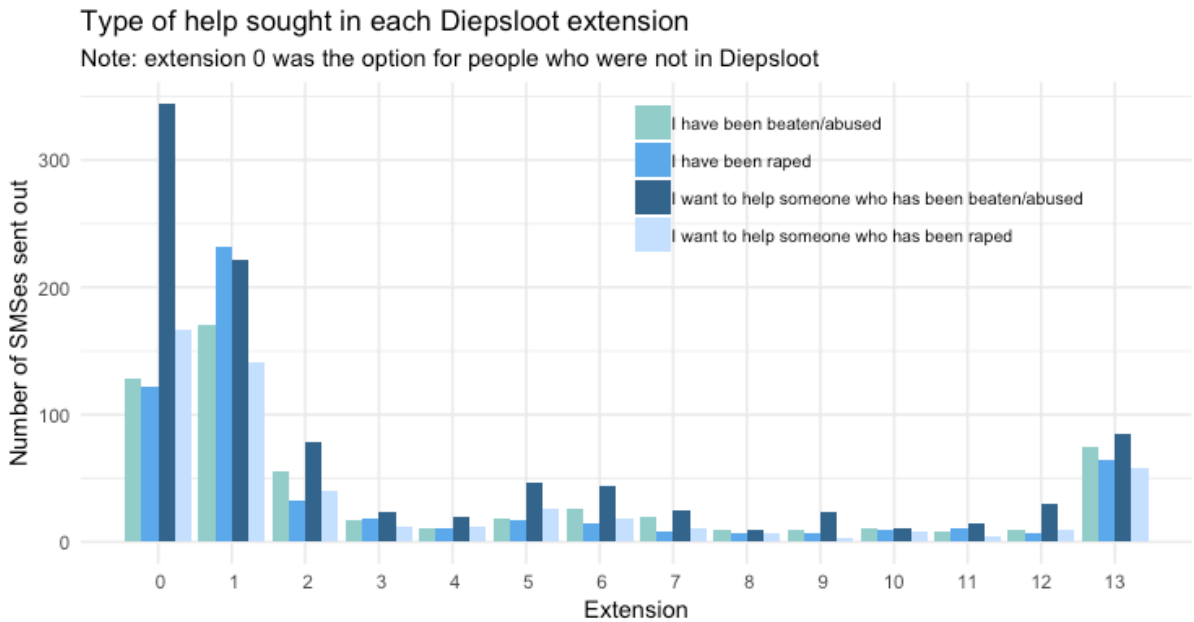


Figure 4: Type of help sought by callers who received SMSes broken down by extension.

- **Most calls to the helpline were made on week days?**

A third of the callers who received SMSes (34%) used the helpline on the weekend – Friday, Saturday or Sunday. Most of the calls were made on Wednesday and Thursday (see Figure 5).

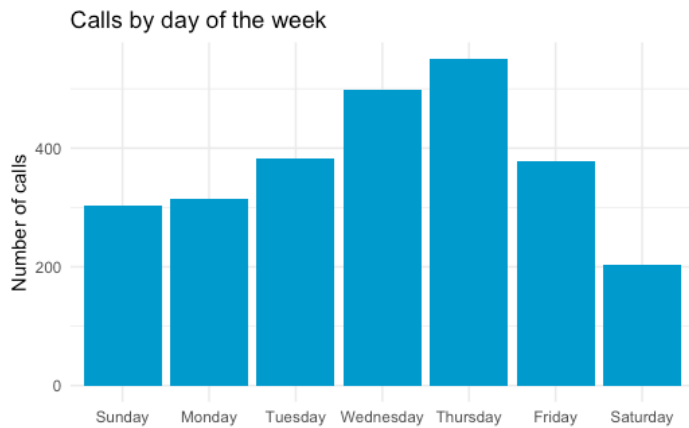


Figure 5: Calls to the helpline broken down by day of the week

- **People didn't call more often at the end of the month**

Come pay day at the end of the month, people have money to spend at shebeens. Increased alcohol consumption is linked to an increase in violence against women and children. The Vimba helpline data didn't register a noticeable increase in calls towards the end of the month, except on the 27th day of the month, which got the second highest number of calls. In fact, the helpline tended to get more calls at the beginning of the month (See Figure 6).

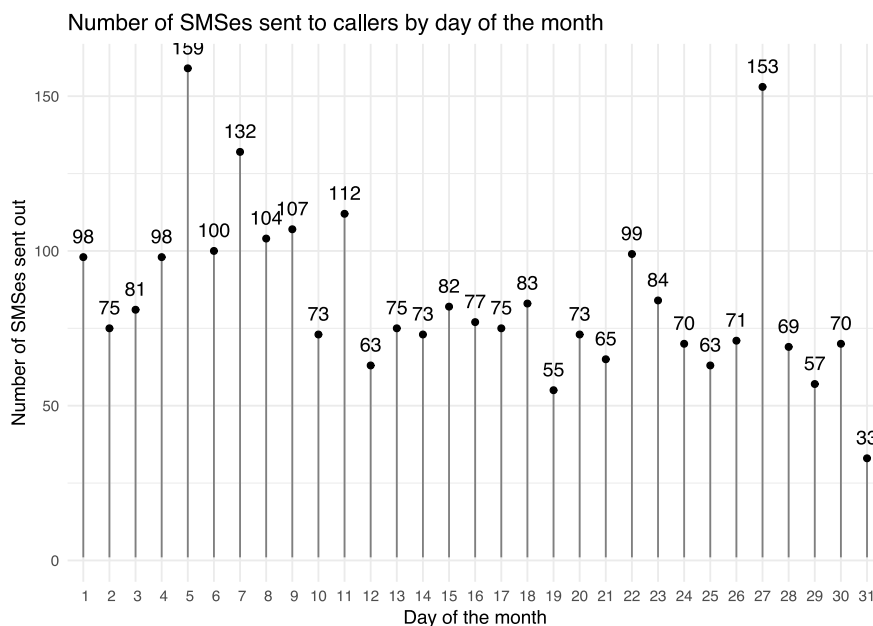


Figure 6: Calls to the helpline broken down by day of the month

- **One in four calls were made at night**

Three out four (74%) of the calls to helpline were between 6am and 6pm. One in four calls (23%) were made between 6pm and midnight (See Figure 7).

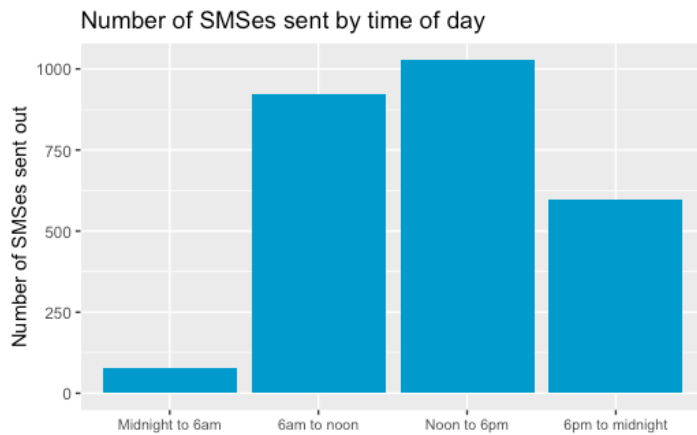


Figure 7: Calls to the helpline broken down by time of day

- **Two-thirds of the callers chose the English option**

The helpline had three language options callers could choose from. Sepedi, isiZulu and English. 62% chose English. Just over 40% of the people living in Diepsloot speak either Sepedi or isiZulu at home, according to StatsSA's last census in 2011.

* Only English was available during December 2016.

Did the service providers see an uptick in clients?

Bhekisisa partnered with five non-profit organisations that operate in Diepsloot for the Vimba Helpline.

1. • Green Door, a temporary shelter that also provides counselling and assistance to victims of rape and abuse,
2. Lawyers Against Abuse (LVA), which provides free legal support for victims of gender-based violence,
3. The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), which offers psychological support and counselling in Diepsloot as well as a 24-hour national helpline,
4. Afrika Tikkun, which has social workers and provides support for children and is associated with Childline, which has a 24-hour national helpline,
5. Sonke Gender Justice, which conducted a research project on gender-based violence among men in Diepsloot when the helpline was launched.

We asked these organisations to keep track of any new clients who came to them via the Vimba helpline.

SADAG reported the most, with about 30 clients over the 20 months the service was in operation

Green Door received about 11 new clients; however, Brown Lekekela, who runs the shelter said he received many “please call me” messages, which he believes were sent by people who got his number from the helpline. The Green Door does not have the funds to reply to these messages and Lekekela suggested that a helpline that would connect people to a real person, particularly after hours and on weekends, would be useful.

Lawyers Against Abuse received one new client – a woman seeking a protection order from her partner.

Given that just over 2,600 SMSes were sent out, the number of people who went to the Diepsloot services for help was disappointing. However:

- Not every person who decides to seek help will go and get it straight away.
- Over half of the callers (57%) said they wanted to help someone who has been raped beaten or abused, rather than that they needed help for themselves.
- It is not known how many people contacted the national 24-hour helplines whose numbers were included in the SMSes, eg, SADAG and Childline. Nor is it known how many people phoned the police or emergency services.

The good thing is that at least 1,500 callers who said they were in Diepsloot received information on where to get help if they need it.

Why did the Vimba helpline focus on Diepsloot?

Three reasons:

1. Bhekisa has reported on gender-based violence in the Diepsloot and wanted to give something back to the community.
2. To help the service providers in the community reach potential clients.
3. A wider-reaching SMS-based helpline for gender-violence victims run by an NGO called Tears already existed. But that service did not contain information specific to Diepsloot, which is not surprising given the magnitude of the task of maintaining a national dataset of services. Diepsloot is a poor community and many people who need help do not have access to money or transport, so they need services that are within walking distance. For example, the nearest Thuthuzela Care Centre, a government-run one-stop facility for gender-based violence victims, is 30km away in Tembisa. We wanted through the helpline to provide Diepsloot residents with information about the services that operate in Diepsloot itself.

Why an SMS-based service?

We wanted the service to be accessible to as many people as possible. We chose a USSD service because it can be accessed by any type of mobile phone without airtime, data or internet access. The service was free. The cost of the SMSes was reverse-charged to Bhekisa. Once a caller received an SMS they could keep it on their phone until they needed it.

Before they received an SMS, callers to the Vimba service had to answer three questions:

1. Choose a language (English, isiZulu or Sepedi)
2. In which extension of Diepsloot are you, 1 to 13? Or 0 if you're not in Diepsloot.
3. What sort of help do you need?:
 - I have been raped
 - I want to help someone who has been raped
 - I have been beaten/abused
 - I want to help someone who has been beaten/abused.

If a caller chose one of the rape options, an additional SMS with advice on what to do if you have been raped was sent.

22% of the callers who said they had been raped and other 20% who said they wanted to help someone who had been raped received these SMSes – just over 1,000 callers in total.