



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

SOUTH AFRICA IS GETTING SAFE? The divide between perception and data-driven evidence

By Daryl Swanepoel

Ask any South African whether they believe that crime is being adequately addressed by the authorities, and the answer will be a hard no. And, of course, they are right.

Considering the 2023 Crime Index by country, South Africa is in the top ten countries with the highest crime rates. This is confirmed in a 2023 report by the **Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime**. According to the index contained in the report, South Africa, with an index score of 7.18, is ranked seventh highest globally in terms of its crime rates.

It is fair to say that South Africans are not at all pleased with government's current performance as it relates to managing crime in the country. In fact, it riles them. Ipsos' Government Performance Barometer for 2023 found that 78% of South Africans believed that government was not doing enough to reduce crime. And in polling done by Ipsos for the Inclusive Society Institute (ISI), 72% of South Africans did not agree that crime was being brought under control.

When people feel unsafe, they start to look to settle elsewhere – and it's normally those with skills and capital who can carve out a future for themselves in safer and more stable societies doing the looking. This in turn has a negative impact on the economy, which needs skills and capital to prosper. In the same ISI poll above, 11% of South Africans with higher education and with high earning potential indicated they were seriously considering emigrating.

But crime being too high and not being adequately addressed does not equate to it being out of control and/or worsening because of South Africa being a failing state. In this regard, there is a divide between what people perceive and what data tells us.

So, what does the data say?

It tells us that since the advent of the new democratic order in 1994, there have been improvements in the crime management system, demonstrated by the reduction of crime incidents, and improvement in the resources made available to combat crime. And both show that the country has systematically become a safer place to live in. Still not safe, but safer.

While the actual number of crimes has gone up, the ratio of crimes per one hundred thousand of the population has across the range of crime categories come down, in some cases quite dramatically.

For example, the actual number of murder cases as per official South African Police Services (SAPS) statistics has increased by 5,9% from 1994/5 to 2022/3. However, the population has, according to Statistics South Africa, increased over the same period by 54%. A more objective test is the ratio of

murders to the size of the population. Applied to the murder rate in South Africa, it shows a significant 31,8% decrease over the same period.

Furthermore, since 1994/5, the overall contact-related (against the person, arson and malicious damage to property) and property-related crime (residential, business or out of vehicle burglaries) ratios have improved considerably, by 33% and 40% respectively.

One category of crime that seems to have the upper hand over the South African Police Services (SAPS) is drug-related crime, which has more than doubled since 1994/5, with an increase of over 120%.

Without the necessary resources, no law enforcement agency will be able to beat the perpetrators of crime. They need to have sufficient manpower, infrastructure and equipment. For that, the fiscus needs to provide the necessary finances.

In terms of personnel, the SAPS have increased their numbers by around 21% from 1994/5 to 2024/5. However, South Africa's population has grown by around 53%, therefore, the ratio of police officials has actually worsened by around 17%.

That said, the figure of 303 officials per one hundred thousand of the population, is not, for example, that far off from the European average of 328. And, according to Gareth Newham, head of justice and violence prevention at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), "there's a limit to how much numbers and ratios can tell us". He says that: "It's not about numbers, it's about strategy; it's about having a clear crime plan."

So, with that in mind, it appears that an evaluation of how the SAPS is achieving its staffing objective in terms of the planned number of staff they need to carry out that strategy, will make sense. And in this regard, over the last decade the employment vacancy rates have declined considerably.

Regarding budget and infrastructure, there has been a huge increase in the financial resources made available to the SAPS to combat crime in South Africa. In current day value the SAPS spent around R1,064 per citizen in 1996 in keeping them safe, and this grew to R1,818 per citizen in 2024. Also included in the budget have been provisions for the steady increase in the number of police stations to better service the needs of the people, by ensuring that facilities are provided closer to the community. In the recent decade, 2011-2021, 35 new police stations were built.

Although there remain some categories of crime – the drug crime statistics are particularly acute – that have not yet been curbed, the positive is that the fiscus has to a large degree been responsive in providing the necessary financial resources for the SAPS to function effectively. Also, in terms of the number of personnel, there no longer appears, measured in terms of SAPS' own strategic plans and when compared to other jurisdictions, a justification to attribute non-performance to the lack of funds. It is now up to SAPS to improve their operational efficacy.

This is a real, and not perceived, trajectory of crime trends in the country. It aims to assist policymakers in their planning going forward. And it should, if effectively communicated to the broader public, enable them to understand that the fight against crime is systematically being stemmed.

While this doesn't provide comfort – and it certainly doesn't suggest that crime is under control in South Africa; it is not! – it does provide hope. In general, crime levels have been arrested and the tide has slowly started to turn.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws from the content of the Institute's recently released report "South Africa is getting safer? The divide between perception and data-driven evidence"