

# PARALYSED BY FEAR

## Perceptions of crime and violence in South Africa

Mari Harris, Director and Political Analyst, Markinor  
marih@markinor.co.za

Stephano Radaelli, Research Executive, Markinor  
stephanor@markinor.co.za

The findings of the latest Markinor opinion poll on government performance indicate that two thirds of all South Africans believe that government's ability to fight crime is at its lowest level since 2003 – despite the fact that official crime statistics are going down. But the survey also shows that many people are passive bystanders in the fight against crime and expect government to take full responsibility for bringing down the crime rate. It is argued that it will require a huge concerted and joint effort by government *and* the public to change the perception of South Africa as one of the crime hot spots of the world.

**R**esearch on crime in South Africa has proliferated over the past decade. Aspects that have been researched range from victimisation and the sociological causes of crime, to strategies for fighting crime. As government is integral to the fight against crime, its role is also often the focus of studies.

Markinor has been involved in public opinion studies on government performance since 1994, and various issues of delivery are probed twice a year. Currently a list of 23 'delivery areas' are probed every six months and respondents have to indicate whether government is handling the issue 'very well', 'fairly well', 'not very well' or 'not at all well'. These studies have consistently found that government's performance in terms of handling crime, as well as its handling of job creation and unemployment, are rated worse than other aspects by South Africans.

### Survey methods

As in the past, the questions for the latest study (April/May 2007) were carried in the biannual Markinor KhayaBus – an Omnibus project involving a total of 3 500 respondents countrywide. A KhayaBus study is based on the internationally used omnibus methodology, where a number of smaller questionnaires are put together into one comprehensive questionnaire. The complete omnibus offering ensures that fatigue is limited, as the topics under discussion vary with regular interval. Respondents are interviewed in their homes, meaning that they are interviewed in a comfortable environment with as few distractions as possible.

The sample is selected on a probability basis, stratified according to the country's demographic information. The stratification is firstly done by province, and then within province by 'type of settlement' (metropolitan area, city, large town, small

town, village and rural area). By applying a process of cumulation to available demographic data, sampling points are chosen at random. These sampling points are then taken as starting points and four or six interviews are conducted in the vicinity of the sampling point.

Households are chosen randomly according to instructions. Within each chosen household, all qualifying respondents (adults 16 years and older) are listed and one is chosen, according to certain instructions on the questionnaire. Three efforts should be made (on different days and at different times of the day) to interview this chosen respondent. Substitution of the interview is only allowed if this proves to be impossible to interview the chosen individual. The substitution is also done according to strict rules – and nothing is left to chance. An equal number of males and females are interviewed. This procedure ensures that:

- The interviewer has no influence over the choice of respondent
- There is a random selection of respondents
- The findings are representative

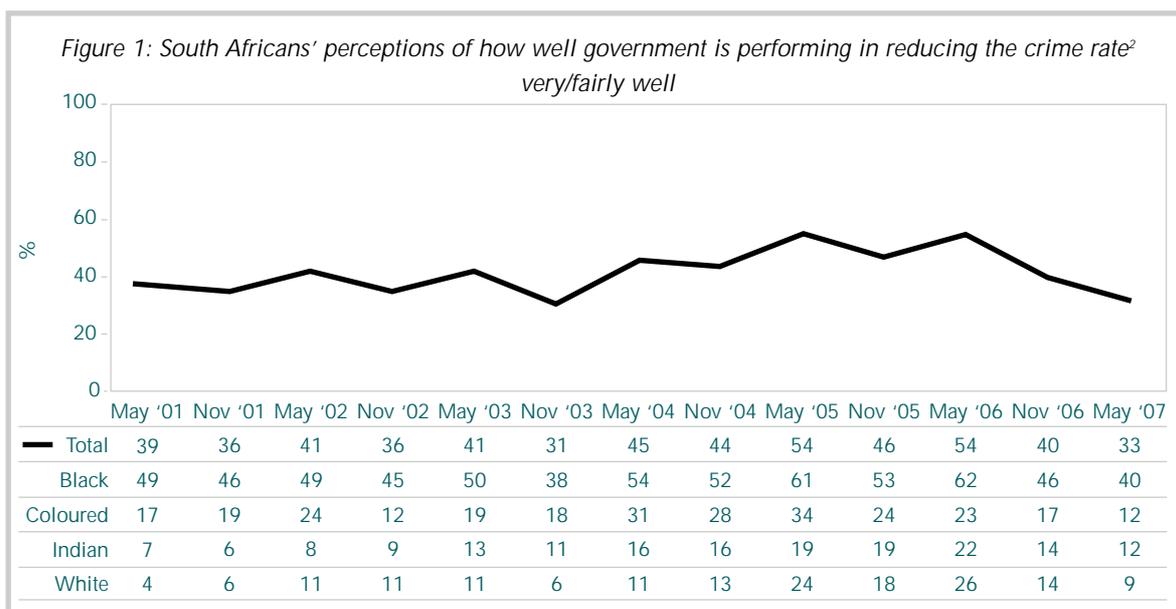
In the final analysis results are weighted and projected to the universe, i.e. the adult South African population.

This article looks at the issue of government performance in the area of handling crime over the

last six years (since April/May 2001) and then focuses on some pertinent issues regarding views on crime in general and on certain crimes in particular, and probes experiences with crime. This is the first time that these questions were addressed in so much detail in the questionnaire. Although the question was pertinently asked whether respondents experienced crime first-hand, it is very important to remember that the issues probed mainly deal with perceptions and views. However, it is important to keep in mind that the perceptions of people constitute the reality of daily life.

#### Government's ability to handle crime

Currently only one third of the adult South African population (33%) believes that government is handling the issue of fighting crime well. South Africans of all population groups view government's ability to fight crime considerably more negatively since the last poll in November last year. Only one in every ten from minority groups (whites, coloureds and Indians) believes that government is doing very or fairly well in handling crime. The graph below shows the perceptions of different population groups regarding this issue. Indeed, in May 2007 the public's view on government's performance in reducing crime reached its lowest level since November 2003.<sup>1</sup>



It is interesting to note that an inverse relationship exists between the respondents' level of education and their rating of government's performance in reducing crime: the more educated the respondent, the less likely s/he is to think that government handles crime effectively. Education allows an individual the opportunity to perceive the extent of crime, as s/he will be more exposed to scholarly journal results, newspaper articles and crime statistics. As a result the person will have a heightened awareness of crime. Education also allows people to get higher paying jobs, which may make them more vulnerable as a target of crime. Results commented on later in this article reveal that a personal experience of crime causes a person to believe that crime is more prevalent and out of control. Looking at the ratings of other delivery areas it is clear that better educated South Africans are also the most critical about various other aspects of government performance.

#### Is crime on the increase?

When asking South Africans whether they perceive the crime rate to be on the increase, about three in every five South African adults (59%) believe that this is indeed the case; the remainder believe that it has either decreased (15%) or remained the same (24%). A very small minority (2%) did not venture an opinion at all.

A correlation could also be found between respondents' age and their perceptions of the crime rate. The older the person, the more likely s/he is to believe that crime is indeed on the increase. Older people possibly feel more vulnerable and more exposed to crimes. In many cases they might feel

*Table 1: South Africans' perceptions of crime*

	Total %	16-24 years %	25-34 years %	35-49 years %	50+ years %
<b>Increased</b>	59	55	58	60	62
<b>Stayed the same</b>	24	24	25	26	23
<b>Decreased</b>	15	20	15	13	12
<b>Don't know</b>	2	1	2	2	4

responsible for the younger people or children in their care; they might also have more possessions that could possibly attract criminals.

Similarly, when looking at the perceptions by population group, it emerges that nearly four in every five Indian South Africans (79%) and more than three quarters of white South Africans (77%) believe that crime is on the increase. This by far exceeds the scores attained among coloured and black South African adults: two thirds of the coloured adult population (67%) and just over half of the black adult population (54%) share the view that crime is on the increase. (It is interesting to keep in mind that the minority population groups were more critical of the government's handling of crime – as discussed earlier.)

#### Victims

Following up this perceptual probe with a question about whether the respondent knows anybody who had been a victim of any kind of crime in the last six months, more than a third (36%) answered in the affirmative. Alarming, it seems as if more Indian South African adults knew someone who had been a victim of crime than respondents of any other race group did. It might, therefore, be construed that this minority group bears the brunt of criminal activities – a perception that might leave them feel disempowered or disregarded. This should also be seen against the background of their perception that crime is on the increase, as discussed earlier.

*Table 2: The impact of crime on the community: Victims of crime in intimate circle*

	Total %	Black %	White %	Coloured %	Indian %
<b>Yes</b>	36	32	56	31	66
<b>No</b>	64	68	44	69	34

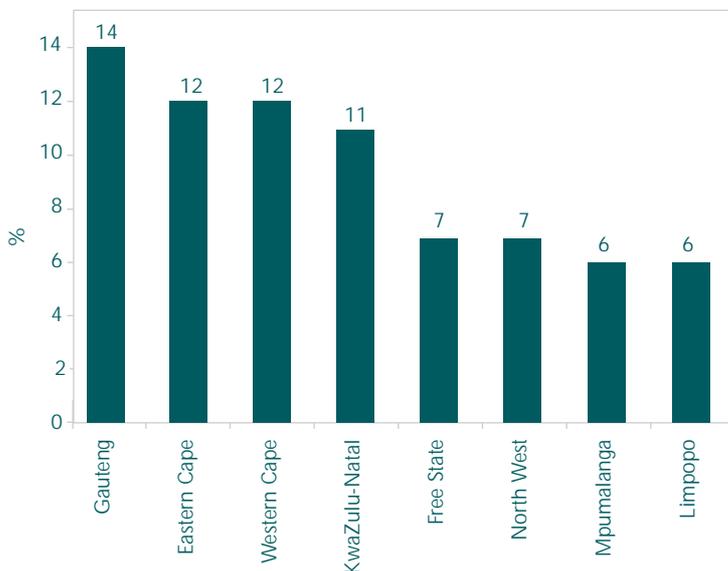
Taking this further, one in every ten South African adults (11%) indicated that they themselves have been victims of crime in the last six months. Again, the Indian minority seems the most affected by crime, closely followed by whites.

Table 3: The impact of crime on the community:  
Personally been a victim of crime

	Total %	Black %	White %	Coloured %	Indian %
Yes	11	9	20	9	22
No	89	91	80	91	78

When looking at those people who have been victims of crime themselves, more Gauteng residents were victims of crime than residents elsewhere in the country – confirming that Gauteng is indeed the worst hit by crime, as reflected in the official crime statistics. The Eastern and Western Cape follow closely behind, with residents from the largely rural provinces of Limpopo and Mpumalanga the least likely to have fallen victim to crime in the last six months. The figures per province are illustrated in the graph below:

Figure 2: The impact of crime on the community:  
Victims of crime – self



A significant finding that emerges is that South Africans would be more likely to believe crime to be on the increase if they had been personally affected by crime – if they knew somebody who was a victim, or had been a victim themselves. It is clear that a personal experience of crime does

make one more sensitive to crime and more likely to feel vulnerable.

#### What is being done about crime?

Although South Africans seem to complain incessantly about government's effectiveness in tackling crime, what is being done to address crime in our communities?

Almost two-thirds (63%) of South Africans have done *nothing* to address crime in their communities, even though only 5% think it is government's prerogative to look after its citizens. Just more than a quarter of white South Africans (28%) have done nothing about crime, compared to the majority of black, coloured and Indian South Africans who have done nothing about this problem.

The province in which people are doing most about crime is Gauteng. (This is understandable, as the crime rate is also the highest in Gauteng.) Of those provinces where residents are doing the least or nothing at all, Limpopo tops the list (78%), followed by the North West province (73%), KwaZulu-Natal (71%) and the Eastern Cape (71%). The most common way in which communities address crime is by taking charge of their own safety by burglar proofing houses and using private security services. The next best way to address crime – according to South Africans – is to be knowledgeable of one's surroundings and by avoiding dangerous areas.

Only 4% of adult South Africans have taken an active role against

crime, by either becoming a police reservist or by taking part in community policing forums. There should thus be a huge opportunity for these organisations to propagate the role they can play in curbing crime amongst the South African population.

Table 4: What are you, as an individual, doing to address crime in your community?

	Total %	Black %	White %	Coloured %	Indian %
<b>Nothing</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>61</b>
Only looking after myself and my family – burglar proofed house/use security services	16	11	47	17	19
I am vigilant/very aware of surroundings/avoid dangerous situations	8	5	18	15	9
Joined community watch groups	4	4	6	2	3
Joined as a police reservist/involved in a Community Policing Forum	4	4	6	2	3
I help the poor/work through my church or community organisation to try and do something to alleviate poverty	2	1	4	3	2
Did a self-defence course	2	1	4	0	5
Have a gun to defend myself/bought a gun	1	1	4	1	1
It is the government's job to look after its citizens	5	5	6	4	8
Other	4	4	3	5	2

It is also an interesting finding that such a low percentage of respondents in all population groups have sought to arm themselves. However, this can possibly be attributed to the stricter laws in terms of the ownership of firearms.

Just under half of South Africans believe that the police are doing enough to combat crime. Black South Africans were most positive about policing efforts, with 54% believing that the police do enough to combat crime. The minority groups are more critical of policing. Only a third of white South Africans (33%), just over a third of coloured South Africans (35%) and fewer than a quarter of Indian South Africans (23%) believe that the police are doing enough to combat crime. Northern Cape residents rated the police's efforts highest at 78%, followed by Limpopo (72%) and North West province (66%). Inhabitants of the Western Cape (31%) and Gauteng (39%) are least likely to believe that policing efforts are effective. These two provinces are also those with the highest crime rate, thus the efforts made by the police to combat crime are far more closely observed than in other areas.

What would we do if we knew or come across someone who is involved in crime? Nine out of every ten South African adults (92%) said that they would be very or quite likely to report such a person to the police, and, of the 8% who would not, almost three quarters would refrain from such action because they believe they are not adequately protected and might fall victim to such a criminal themselves, or might risk their lives and those of their families.

#### **Pulling the strings together**

From these findings it is clear that South Africans expect their government to address the crime situation in the country more effectively – the government rating on the handling of crime is very low and on a downward trend. Although official crime statistics show that the number of crime cases is lower than a few years ago, it is still perceived as a huge issue by South African citizens.

However, as almost two thirds of adult South Africans indicated that they don't do anything to protect themselves from crime, there must be an

opportunity to engage the public in addressing this situation. Only by involving government's best efforts *and* the public, will it be possible to change the perception of South Africa as the crime capital of the world.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 The November 2003 poll was conducted just a few months before the national election in April 2004 and delivery in all areas was rated rather poorly at that stage – the handling of crime was no exception. Fieldwork was done before the start of the election campaign for the 2004 election and government's huge effort to bring 'government closer to the people' was a characteristic of that campaign.
- 2 All graphs and tables taken from Markinor's *Government Performance Barometer* and a public opinion poll on crime-related issues, April/May 2007.