

THE START OF A 'CRIME WAVE'?

The 2005/06 official crime statistics in context

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Despite growing fears of a new 'crime wave', the public have access to official crime statistics only up to March 2006. Although much of the news up to this point was positive, perceptions of the statistics and of government's position on crime in the last six months have been characterised by scepticism and alarm. The Minister of Safety and Security assured us that next year the statistics will be released soon after the end of the financial year. This, together with a much clearer strategy and commitment from government as a whole for dealing with crime, may help to assuage public anxiety.

The release of the official crime statistics by the South African Police Service (SAPS) for the last financial year (April 2005–March 2006) on 27 September this year was bound to be controversial. The past six months have seen public fears growing about the development of a new crime wave. Widespread media coverage particularly of violent robberies (some of which resulted in rape and murder) in Western Cape and Gauteng, together with the infamous Jeppestown (Johannesburg) shootout between police and about 24 gangsters in June in which 12 people died (including four police officers killed execution-style), have fuelled concerns about an upsurge in crime.

These concerns were confirmed by the Minister of Safety and Security who stated soon after the Jeppestown incident¹ and again at the press conference at which the statistics were released, that some crimes have indeed increased in the past six months. Together with the uncharacteristically candid revelations from leading members of the short-term insurance industry about a 30-40% surge in claims for car hijackings between March and

June 2006 compared to the same period last year, there is now little doubt that in some parts of the country, crimes like robbery have increased markedly this year.

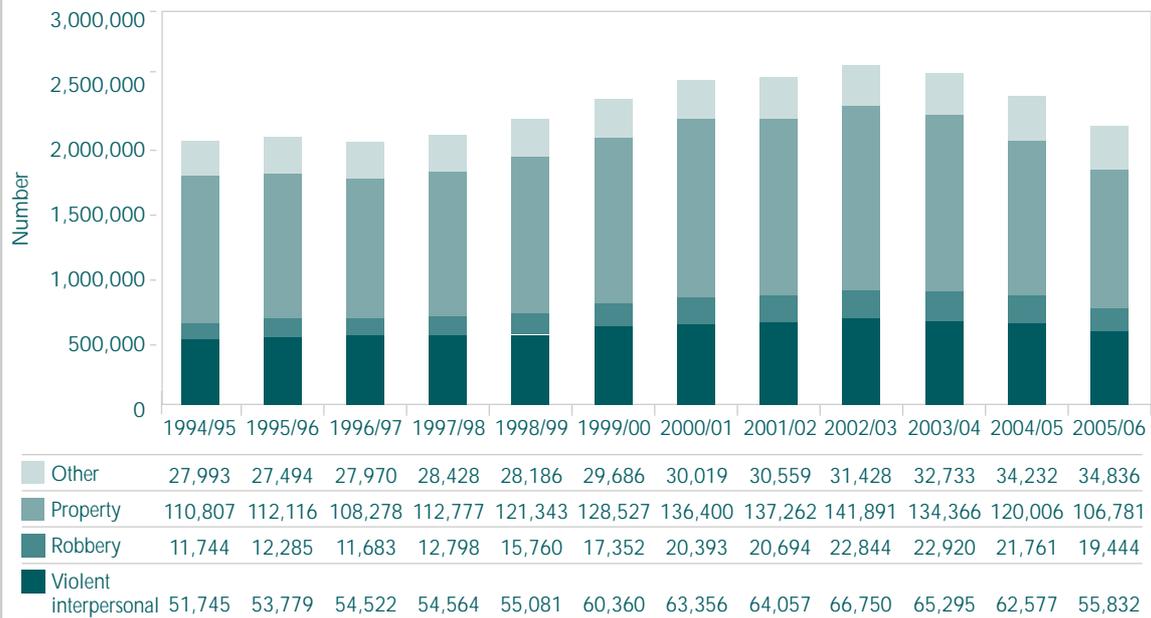
Bearing in mind that the latest release of official data only covered the 12-month period up to March 2006, and the limitations inherent in official recorded crime data,² what did the statistics show?

The overall crime picture

In brief, total crime levels continued their downward trend of the past three years, with several serious crimes following suit. The trends that are of concern relate to crimes that are usually highly organised, such as cash-in-transit robbery, car hijacking and car theft.

Figure 1 below shows the total number of crimes recorded by the SAPS between 1994/95 and 2005/06. Over this 12-year period, the total for the 21 most serious crimes in South Africa increased by 7%, from 2,022,899 to 2,168,952 offences. Crime levels peaked in 2002/03 when 2,629,137 crimes

Figure 1: Total crime in SA (21 most serious crimes)



Source: Annual Report of the SAPS for 2005/2006, Pretoria, 27 Sept 2006.

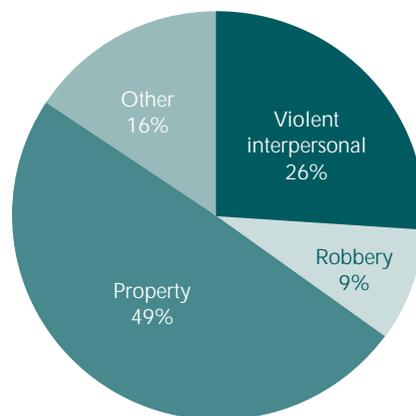
were recorded. Since then, however, overall crime levels have dropped steadily (by an average of 6% per year), and between 2002/03 and 2005/06 crime in the country decreased by 18%.

The majority of offences recorded in South Africa are property crimes. Over a third (35%) are violent (9% of which are robberies, and the remaining 26% interpersonal violence like murder, rape and assault) (Figure 2). The 16% of crimes categorised as 'other' in Figures 1 and 2 constitute arson, malicious damage to property, the illegal possession of firearms, drug related crimes, driving under the influence of alcohol, and commercial crime. Over the past 12 years, the proportion of property crime has decreased slightly while that of robbery has increased slightly.

The proportion of violent crime recorded in this country is high, and there can be little doubt that the nature and extent of violence is what sets South Africa apart from other countries.

The overall crime picture sketched above presents some good news considering the steady decrease since 2002/03. This also holds true for several types of serious crime, notably burglary, robbery and

Figure 2: Categories of crime in 2005/06



Source: Annual Report of the SAPS for 2005/2006, Pretoria, 27 Sept 2006.

murder (which has declined steadily over the past 12 years).

Burglary

Between 1994/95 and 2005/06, the rate of burglary of residential premises (measured per 100,000 of

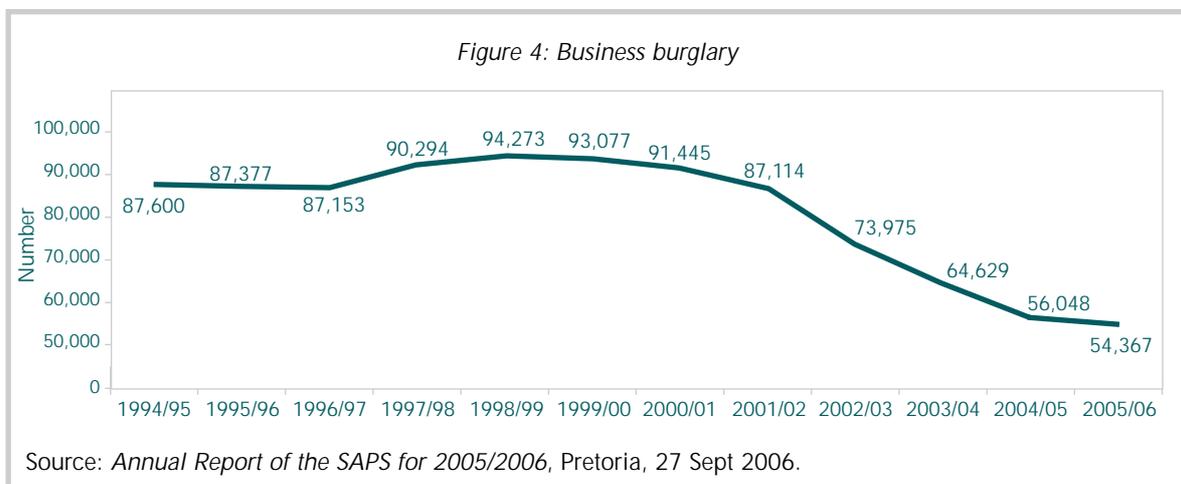
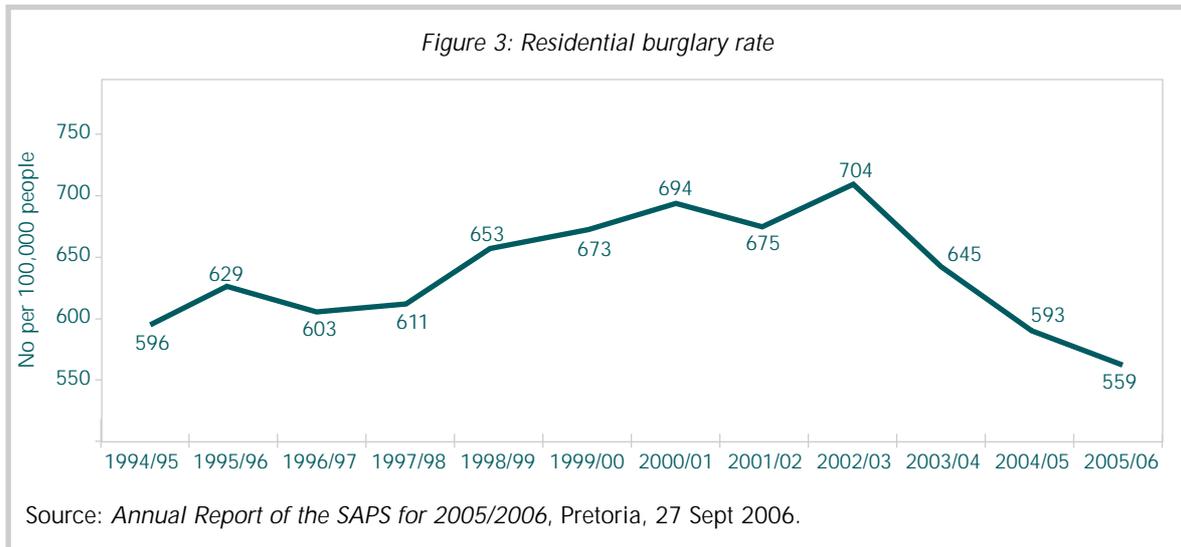
the population) decreased by 6% in the country. Like many other major crime types, the trend over the 12-year period shows that residential burglaries increased up to 2002/03, after which a steady decline has been recorded. In 2002/03 the rate of burglary was 704 per 100,000; by 2005/06 this had dropped to 559 (Figure 3).

The trend for burglaries of business premises is similar, although these burglaries peaked earlier than residential burglary (in 1998/99), and have since decreased dramatically (Figure 4). Significantly, the number of business burglaries recorded by police in 2005/06 was 38% less than that recorded in 1994/95. This represents either a significant improvement in the protection of business premises, or substantial under-reporting by the sector.

The former seems plausible given that businesses are likely to insure their property which in turn inclines them to report burglaries to the police. However, without more data on the size and nature of the businesses concerned, it is difficult to assume that most of them would have had insurance.

Robbery overall

The rate of robbery overall (both 'aggravated' and 'common') is significantly higher now than 12 years ago. The rates for common robbery and aggravated robbery increased by 89% and 16% respectively between 1994/95 and 2005/06. But in both cases, rates peaked around 2003, and have since dropped fairly steadily. Aggravated robbery for example, declined from 288 per 100,000 in 2003/04 to 255 in



2005/06 (Figure 5), while common robbery decreased from 223 in 2002/03 to 159 per 100,000 in 2005/06.

While the declines in the robbery rate in recent years are encouraging, robbery remains one of the most problematic crimes in terms of both the trends and the problems it poses for analysis.

As far as analysis goes, the 2003 National Victims of Crime survey conducted by the ISS found that robbery was least likely to be reported to the police of the nine major crime types covered in the survey.³ Only 29% of victims reported robbery – something which cannot be attributed to their being ‘less serious’ robberies since detailed analysis showed that most of the robberies discussed in the survey were of a serious nature (ie. they were committed with a weapon). Complicating the analysis further is that while a large chunk of robberies are believed to be of cell phones,⁴ neither the police nor the industry have provided clear figures to verify the claim and its impact on the trends.

Aside from the problems with the robbery data, there can be no denying that robbery is one of South Africa’s most serious crime challenges. Aggravated robbery in particular, which includes incidents ranging from muggings at knifepoint, to car hijackings, home robberies, bank robberies, robberies at shopping malls and cash-in-transit (CIT) heists, create widespread fear for individuals, tourists, local businesses and foreign investors.

These incidents are violent, targeted at people (in order to get their property), carry the threat of rape and murder, and are often committed by large groups of offenders. Compared to equally serious violent crimes like rape, domestic violence and child abuse, most of these robberies are committed in public, and at times when people are most likely to be present. As such, their confrontational nature symbolises the lack of fear and apparent disregard that many criminals have of being apprehended. All these factors are what make robbery the key crime problem for South Africa.

It is also notable that several types of aggravated robbery, such as car hijacking and cash-in-transit heists, have increased in the last reporting period, contrary to the trend for robbery overall. These are discussed in more detail below.

Murder

Between 1994/95 and 2005/06, the murder rate decreased by 41% from 67 murders per 100,000 people to 39.5 (Figure 6). This is a particularly positive trend for the country because murder statistics are the most accurate on record, and also provide the only reliable quantitative indicator of the extent of violence in the society.

The murder rate has decreased steadily since 1995/96 by an average of 5% per year. The 2% drop in the most recent financial year might suggest a slow-down in the rate of decrease, although a

Figure 5: Aggravated robbery rate



Source: Annual Report of the SAPS for 2005/2006, Pretoria, 27 Sept 2006.

similar percentage decrease was recorded once before (in 2002/03). It would be of concern if the latest trend signifies the start of a levelling off of the murder rate at the comparatively high rate of nearly 40 per 100,000 people.⁵

Key crimes that increased in the last financial year

Increases in three types of serious crime – car hijacking, car theft and cash-in-transit robbery – between 2004/05 and 2005/06 are noteworthy.

Car theft and car hijacking

Both categories of 'car crime' had, like the crimes discussed above, been decreasing for some time up to 2005/06 (Figure 7). After peaking in 1998/99 at 107,448 recorded incidents, car theft dropped steadily until 2004/05 when 83,857 thefts were recorded. Between 2004/05 and 2005/06, the number of car thefts increased by 2.5%, to 85,964.

Car hijacking peaked a little later than car theft – in 2001/02 when 15,846 robberies were recorded by police (Figure 8). Since then the number of hijackings had declined steadily, reaching 12,434 in 2004/05. The last financial year however saw a reversal of this trend, with a 3% increase noted between 2004/05 and 2005/06.

One explanation for the recent increases may be that more vehicles are being registered in the country. It is also likely, given that it is largely crimes that are typically organised that are rising,

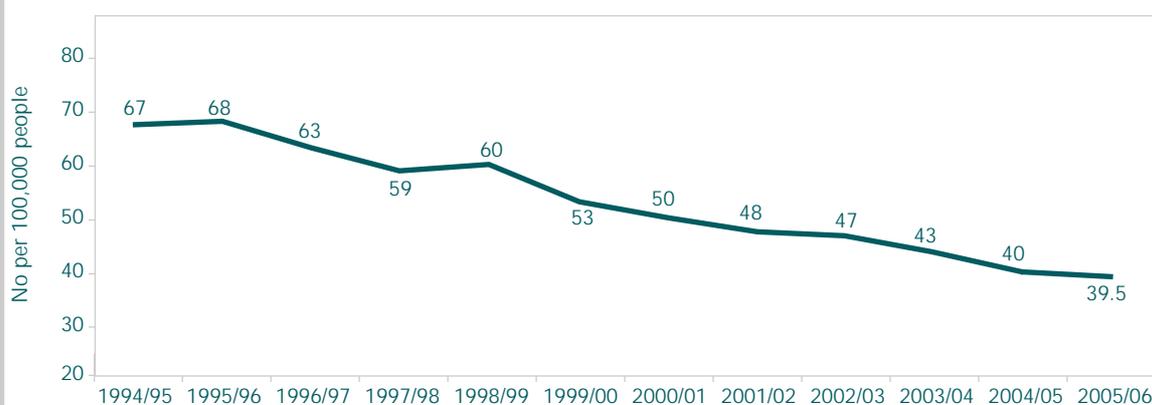
that car theft and hijacking have increased together with syndicated crime in general.

Cash-in-transit robbery

The trend for cash-in-transit (CIT) robberies drew much attention when the crime statistics were released a few months ago. Police reported that these violent and highly organised attacks had increased by 74% between 2004/05 and 2005/06 – from 220 to 383 incidents (Figure 9). The increase is certainly cause for concern especially considering that only two years before, in 2003/04, the lowest number of heists was recorded since 1996/97. However, the CIT robbery trend has been erratic since police started recording these crimes separately in 1996/97, and it's not the first time that such high levels have been recorded: more than 300 incidents were recorded in 1996/97 (359) and again in 2002/03 (374).

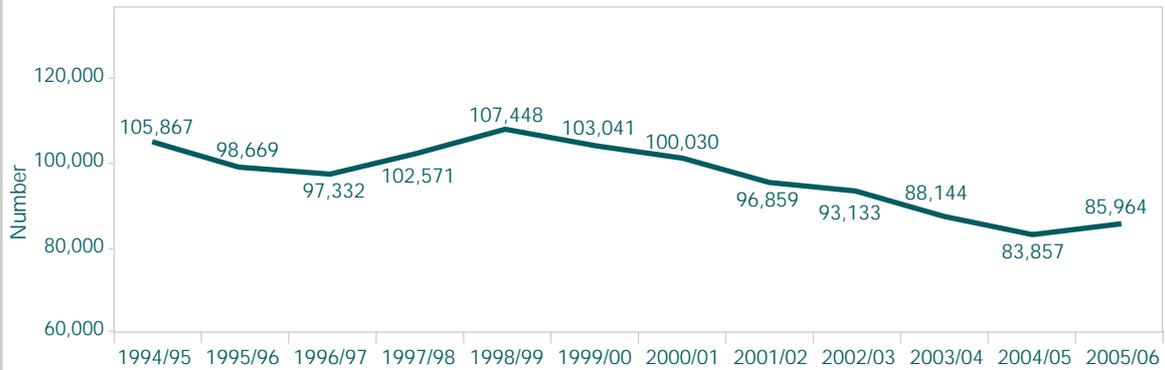
The substantial increase in CIT heists in the last financial year may be partially attributable to a change in the way the police define these robberies. The South African Banking Risk Information Centre's (SABRIC) figures for CIT heists for the same period show an increase of 28% (admittedly still a significant percentage for one year).⁶ The discrepancy could be the result of the police now including what SABRIC call 'cross-pavement incidents',⁷ which police had previously categorised as general aggravated robbery rather than specific CIT robbery. Given that SABRIC estimate that cross-

Figure 6: Murder rate



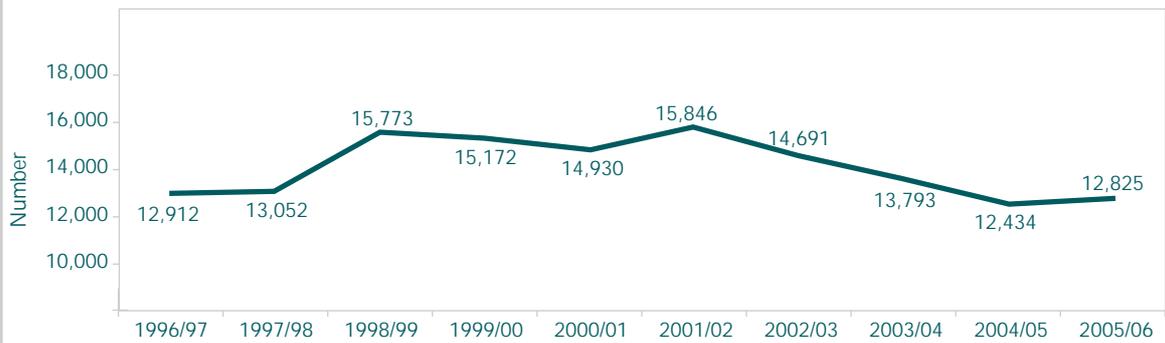
Source: Annual Report of the SAPS for 2005/2006, Pretoria, 27 Sept 2006.

Figure 7: Vehicle theft



Source: Annual Report of the SAPS for 2005/2006, Pretoria, 27 Sept 2006.

Figure 8: Carhijacking



Source: Annual Report of the SAPS for 2005/2006, Pretoria, 27 Sept 2006.

pavement robberies made up about 60% of CIT heists in the last financial year, these incidents would have a significant influence on the trends.

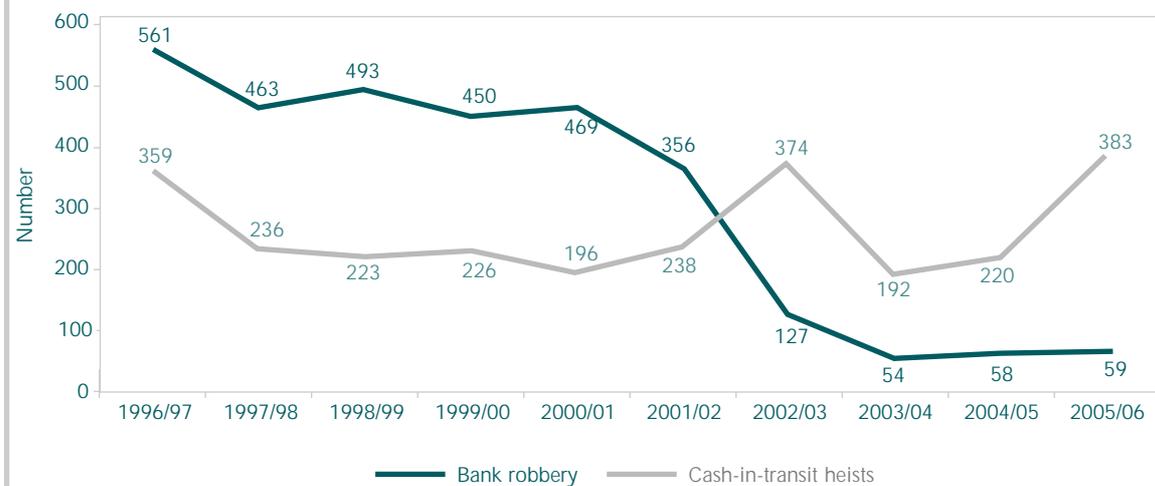
The increase in CIT robberies has been attributed to various factors among which the following are notable:

- the increase in cash in circulation;
- inadequate cash management processes;
- ineffective information sharing between affected parties;
- the absence of minimum standards for vehicles, training, vetting, etc. among the companies that move cash;
- the fact that CIT guards are generally outnumbered both in terms of personnel and firepower during attacks;

- the limited use or availability of SAPS and backup vehicles; and
- inadequate environmental design which results in, for example, areas for cash pick-ups and drops at shopping malls being the same as the areas commonly used by the public.⁸

It is also interesting to note that the most dramatic increases in CIT robberies occurred at the time when the number of bank robberies started falling in 2001 (Figure 9). It is possible that the two trends are related, with syndicates turning their attention to the more vulnerable cash movement industry as banks became higher risk targets. Even if the trends are not related, the fact that the banking industry, together with government, managed to secure an 89% decrease in the number of bank robberies between

Figure 9: Bank robbery and cash-in-transit heists



Source: *Annual Report of the SAPS for 2005/2006*, Pretoria, 27 Sept 2006.

1996/97 and 2005/06 is highly significant, and illustrates that solutions can be found.

Official crime trends vs. public perceptions

Considering that the good news outweighed the bad when the figures were released, why the heightened interest in the 2005/06 crime statistics? The surge in especially violent robberies over the past six months noted above (which are not included in the latest statistics) provide one answer. But current negative sentiments about crime and safety are about more than the media coverage of horrible incidents and admissions from reliable sources about what the statistics show.

SAPS policy on release of crime statistics

The SAPS release policy is partly to blame. Crime statistics are released annually by the police, usually at the end of September, to coincide with the release of the SAPS annual report. The figures cover the financial year, i.e. April – March. While an annual release of crime figures is not theoretically a problem (although more frequent releases are both possible and desirable), the SAPS brings unnecessary attention and pressure to bear on itself by releasing the crime data six months after the end of the financial year.

This means that no figures are available for the six month period between March and September, and as events this year demonstrated, when public

experiences of crime during these six months differ markedly from what the trends for the preceding financial year show, the police run into a public relations nightmare. To make matters worse, by the time the figures are released, the public would have been waiting a year and a half for the 'latest' statistics.

Responding to complaints about the release policy, the Minister of Safety Security has said that next year "the statistics will be published soon after the end of the financial year and will be separated from the SAPS annual report."⁹ This is good news, as long as the figures are made available no later than early May of each year.

Police leadership's response to the 'crime wave'

The response of police leadership has left the public with the sense that government – and the police in particular – don't care enough about the problem or its consequences. The Minister of Safety and Security's remarks in parliament in June that those who just "whinge" about crime (as opposed to doing something about it) should leave the country, were met with outrage from a cross-section of South Africans – wealthy and poor, black and white.

In the wake of the Jeppestown incident and the other violent robberies that followed, the police leadership's communication with the public was sporadic at best. Occasional statements and media appearances were

made by the Minister, but given the 'whinging saga', he was probably not best placed to calm fears and boost public confidence.

Throughout the 2006 'crime wave', (with the exception of media briefings to defend himself against allegations of his links to murder-accused Glen Agliotti) little has been heard from the national commissioner of police. As leader of the SAPS – and with the ability to control strategy, operations and resources – Jackie Selebi holds the position which, rightly or wrongly, symbolises government's response to crime.

What would help is a sincere and informed acknowledgement of the current problem, followed by a clear outline of specific responses to specific crime problems and how these will be dealt with in various parts of the country. Instead we have (from the Minister) a brief two-page statement about a 'strategy' that covers generalised responses which sound more like the day-to-day activities of the police (and others) than a considered initiative to deal with a crime wave.¹⁰ Silence from the national commissioner on these issues is bound to raise doubts about the police's intentions and abilities, if for no other reason than the absence of clear information to the contrary.

Of the information that has been provided to the public, it is encouraging that organised crime has been identified as a priority, and that, as a result, intelligence capacity will be improved along with border control. And although we still know little about the precise nature of the SAPS restructuring aimed at dismantling the Area level offices in order to boost station level capacity, it is a relief that the SAPS' specialised organised crime units won't be affected. It is also positive that the Minister has identified the need to better understand violence in the country, and has appointed the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) to assist in this regard.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that when the official statistics were released by the Minister and the commissioner, they were received with a mixture of scepticism and alarm. The scepticism can be attributed to the fact that the SAPS policy on the release of data meant that the figures didn't cover events over the preceding six months that South

Africans were most concerned about. Even though the release policy has been in place for some years now, the timing of events encouraged general public doubts about the accuracy of police crime figures. The sense of alarm came in response to the police leadership's insistence that the news was overwhelmingly good.

While there may well be merit in both the SAPS release policy and the claim that the trends were good news, the handling of public communications by the police about crime information and policing strategy is clearly out of sync with public sentiment on the issues.

This is the context within which the latest crime trends must be considered. And this is why – when the overall analysis is that, up to March 2006, much of the news is indeed good – anyone who has been in the country over the past six months will remain doubtful.

Endnotes

- 1 *Sunday Times* 2/7/06.
- 2 See A Altbeker, Positive trends: The 2004/05 crime statistics, *SA Crime Quarterly* No 14, Institute for Security Studies, 2005.
- 3 P Burton, A du Plessis, T Leggett, A Louw, D Mistry and H van Vuuren, *National Victims of Crime Survey: South Africa 2003*, ISS Monograph No 101, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, July 2004, p 107.
- 4 See A du Plessis and A Louw, The tide is turning: The 2003/04 SAPS crime statistics, *SA Crime Quarterly* No 12, Institute for Security Studies, 2005.
- 5 For more on international comparisons of crime rates, see A Altbeker, Puzzling statistics: Is South Africa really the world's crime capital?, in *SA Crime Quarterly* No 11, Institute for Security Studies, 2005.
- 6 CIT Robberies, SABRIC media release, undated, 2006.
- 7 The cross pavement definition refers to all incidents that take place when guards are accosted outside their vehicles – typically whilst replenishing ATMs, or picking up money from a merchant, cited in IJ van Vuuren, Cash-in-transit robberies: A sudden escalation?, paper presented at Institute for Strategic Studies conference, May 2006.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Sapa and Carol Hills, Crime: 'Major cause for concern', *Mail & Guardian Online*, 27 September 2006, <http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=285184&area=/breaking_news/breaking_news__national/>
- 10 For details on the 'strategy', see <http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=vn20060802020825765C630985>