

FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE

South African crime trends in 2002

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National and provincial police crime figures indicate that crime has, to a certain extent, levelled off in the course of 2002. Murder continues to decline, as does vehicle theft. However, the trends for car hijacking are less positive. Of all the provinces, Western Cape, Northern Cape and Gauteng featured prominently in most of the crime categories. The volume of interpersonal violent crime remains a cause for concern, which suggests that government intervention should expand its focus on crime prevention through social development.

The recent South African Police Service (SAPS) national and provincial crime statistics are contained in the SAPS 2001/02 annual report released towards the end of 2002.¹ It is important to note that these crime statistics are structured according to government's financial period (1 April to 31 March), rather than January to December, as was previously the case. This structure does not greatly affect the recording of crime figures, but could impact on SAPS planning and operations.

The year 1994 is used as a base year, as detailed and accurate crime statistics from station to national level were first made publicly available by the SAPS in that year.

When analysing the following police crime figures, caution must be exercised, since these figures do not accurately present all crimes that were committed in the given period. Police statistics rely heavily on public reporting and police recording of crimes. Under-reported and poorly recorded crimes do not accurately reflect the reality out there. But despite these problems – which occur all over the world – South African crime figures are generally regarded as comprehensive, and largely reliable.²

Good news in latest overall crime trends

The SAPS crime statistics cover the 20 most serious and prevalent crimes. These crimes account for over

99% of the volume of all serious crimes recorded by the police.

The total number of crimes recorded by the police between 1 April 2001 and 31 March 2002 was 2,515,808, representing a marginal increase of only one per cent over the previous 12 months. When comparing crime figures of April 2001 to March 2002 with that of the same period in 1994/95, the number of crimes increased by 20%. The one per cent annual increase in crime in 2001/02 is the smallest year-on-year increase over the past seven years, compared to the more pronounced increase in crime that occurred after 1998/99 (Figure 1).

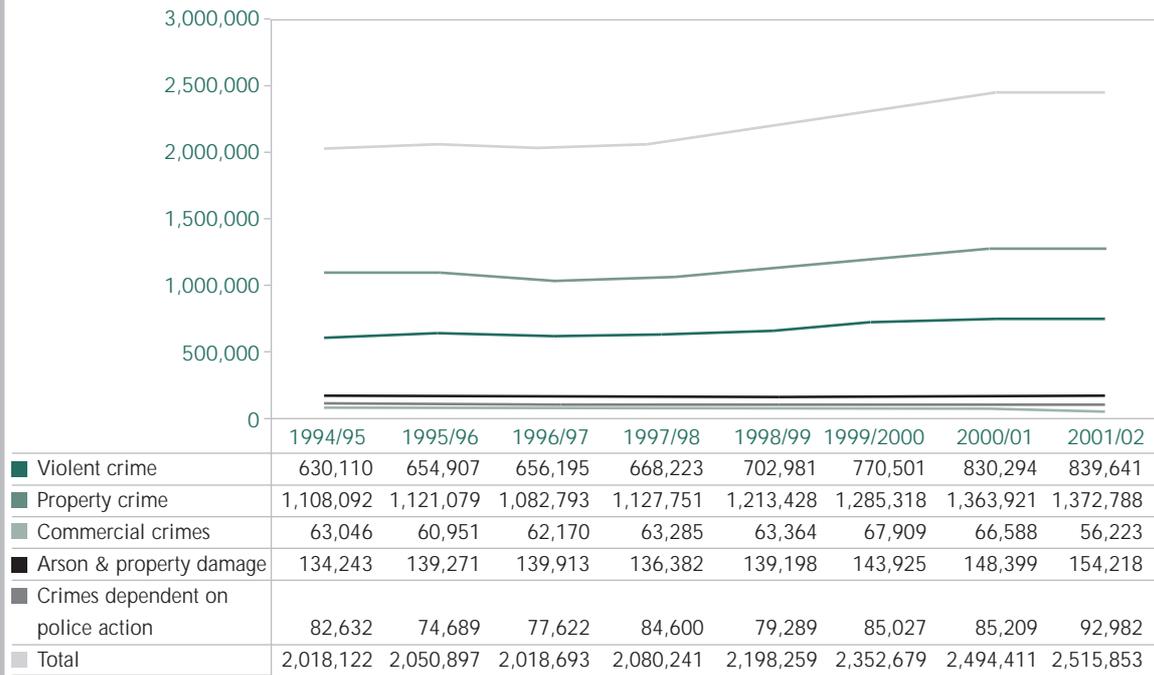
When measured on a per capita basis (per 100,000 of the population) for the same period, crime rates were at their lowest between 1996 and 1997. They began to increase moderately but consistently from 1998 to 1999, and were at their highest in 1999/2000 and 2000/01. A slight decrease occurred in 2001/02 (Figure 2).

The small increase in the number of crimes and the decrease in the crime rate in 2001/02, support the SAPS claim that crime is beginning to 'stabilise', or level off. While this may be a fair observation, it is worth noting that overall crime rates remain very high.

The only crime category that shows a substantial decline is commercial crime, which decreased by 11% between 1994/95 and 2001/02, and by 16% between 2000/01 and 2001/02 (Figure 3). In the past seven years (1994/95 to 2000/01), violent crime increased by 33%, the highest increase in any

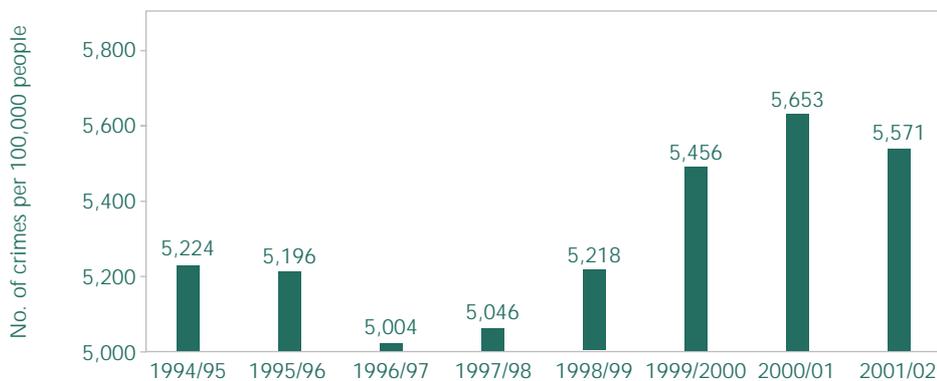
crime category. However, in the past 12 months violent crime increased by only one per cent. Trends for property crimes were similar, whereas violence against property (arson and malicious damage to property) and crimes dependent on police action (illegal possession of firearms, drug-

Figure 1: Number of recorded crimes, March 1994 - March 2002



Source: SAPS 2001/02 Annual Report

Figure 2: Total recorded crime rate, March 1994 - March 2002



Source: SAPS 2001/02 Annual Report

related crimes and drunken driving) increased to a greater extent (Figure 3). This is a good performance indicator for the police, since increases in these latter crime categories suggest that the police have succeeded in proactively detecting and recording so-called 'victimless' crimes, which would otherwise probably not be reported to the authorities.

The small increase in the number of violent and property crimes in 2001/02 is a most remarkable improvement, particularly when compared to the rapid increase in these categories of crime between 1997 and 2000. These trends are largely responsible for the small increase in the total number of crimes in 2002. It appears that there was a concerted effort by the SAPS to reduce these types of crime. It is possible that the ongoing high-density police operations in high crime areas could have contributed to the low increase in violent and property crimes. However, one cannot be certain about this, since in the absence of detailed monthly statistics for specific geographic areas, it is difficult to directly correlate police operations with the reduction of certain crimes. The increase in drug-related crimes and firearm-related crimes come as no surprise, since these are a few of the crime types that can be directly linked to police operations.

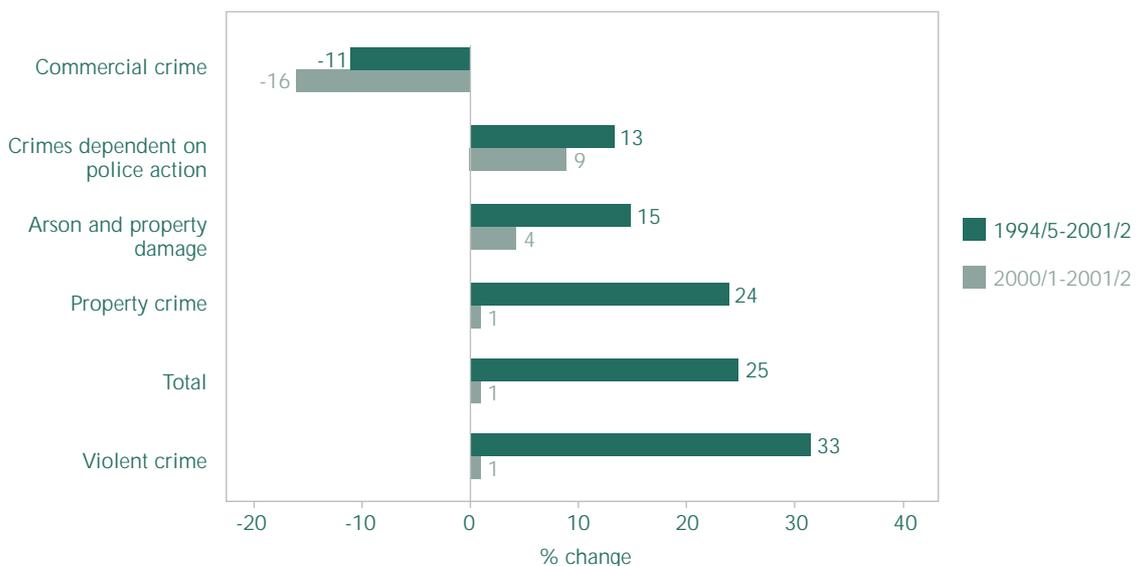
The number of crimes in each category, as a proportion of the total, remained the same in 2001/02 compared to previous years. This was particularly the case for violent and property crime. Property crime (home and business burglary and all forms of theft) accounted for 55%, and violent crime (including inter-personal violence and all forms of robberies) comprised 33% of all crimes reported from 1st April 2001 to 31st March 2002.³

Changes in specific crime types

Murder and theft of vehicles are the only serious crimes that are clearly showing declining trends in both the long and short term. Murder decreased by 18% in the past seven years and by 2% in the past 12 months (Figure 4). Although murder is decreasing, it must be noted that South African murder rates remain exceptionally high. Between April 2001 and March 2002 over 21,000 people were killed in South Africa. That is equivalent to ten schools with an average population of 2,000 per school. According to Interpol, South Africa had higher murder rates (59 per 100,000 of the population) in 1998 than any other country that submitted their crime statistics to the organisation.⁴

Murder is one of those crimes where many perpetrators tend to be known by community

Figure 3: Percentage change in recorded crime categories, 1994/5 - 2001/2



Source: SAPS 2001/02 Annual Report

members and sometimes by the police. But despite this, only half of all murder cases are sent to court. In 2000 only 49% of murder cases were sent to court.⁵ The number of murder cases sent to court, and those resulting in successful convictions, are also low. For instance, between January and December 2000, the police recorded 21,995 murders. That year, nearly half (10,696) of murder cases were referred to court, but only 4,007 resulted in a guilty verdict.⁶ There were more cases that could not be traced by police, than there were cases sent to court. And in court there were more cases that were withdrawn, than cases with a not guilty verdict (Figure 5).

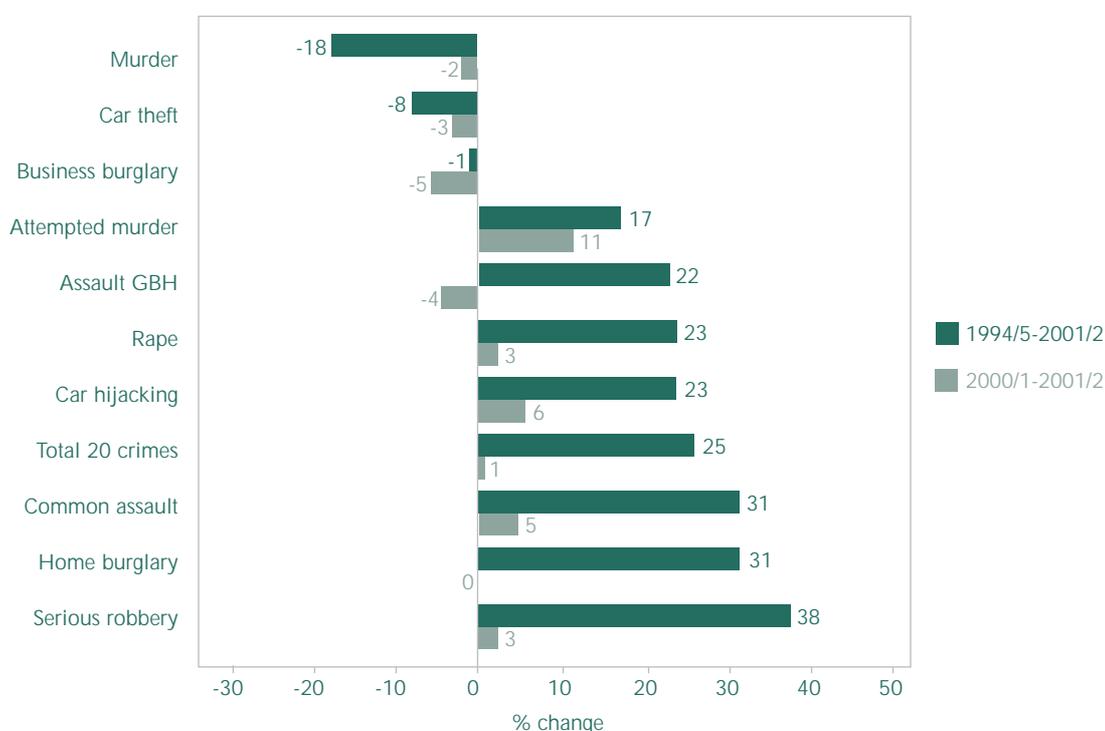
This raises questions not only about the quality of investigations by the SAPS, but also about the quality of the court prosecution. Given the seriousness of murder, it is suggested that government institutes a national murder monitoring project, to better understand the circumstances in which murders are occurring, and to gather thorough information about murders from the time cases are reported to and investigated by the police,

and throughout the court proceedings.

Theft of vehicles decreased by eight per cent in the past seven years and by three per cent in the past 12 months (Figure 4). This may to some extent be influenced by an improvement in car security. Whilst theft of vehicles decreased, thefts out of vehicles increased moderately between 1998/89 and 2000/01, remaining stable in 2001/02.

Robbery increased faster than any other crime type between 1994/95 and 2001/02. Although the number of common robberies (including muggings without dangerous weapons) remained the same in the past 12 months, it increased over 100% between 1994/95 and 2001/02. This huge increase can be considered a statistical 'outlier' and should be investigated by the police to test for recording anomalies. Serious robberies increased by three per cent in the previous 12 months and by 38% in the past seven years. Trends for car hijacking are of concern: hijackings increased by 23% since 1994/95, and by six per cent between 2001/02 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage change in selected recorded crime types, 1994/5 - 2001/2



Source: SAPS 2001/02 Annual Report

Home and business burglaries, taken together, were the second most prevalent crimes recorded by the police, after general theft. These crimes accounted for 16% of all crimes recorded in 2001/02. Home burglary has been steadily increasing since 1994/95, whereas business burglary has remained more or less the same in the past seven years, even decreasing slightly in some years (Figure 6). It is nevertheless encouraging that home burglary, while growing by 31% between 1994/95 and 2001/02, remained stable in the previous 12 months (Figure 4).

The stabilisation of business burglaries does not come as a surprise, since South African businesses have been investing millions of rands in target hardening and private security. The installation and management of close-circuit television cameras (CCTV) in a number of crime hotspots around some cities may also have contributed to this stabilisation.

With regard to residential burglaries, people living in wealthier suburbs have also been spending a considerable amount of money on private security and target hardening. However, there is still insufficient evidence regarding the impact of these measures on residential burglary. It should also be taken into account that people living in poor suburbs and informal settlements are more

vulnerable, and often do not have sufficient money to spend on target hardening and private security. In other instances the nature of some houses and physical community structures facilitate these crimes. These variables and other factors need to be thoroughly assessed in order to develop effective strategies to combat home burglaries.

Provincial figures

The impact and volume of crime in the country is not uniform; some provinces experience high levels of crime while others have relatively low levels of crime. However, during the 2001/02 period, the provincial crime rates were in line with the national recorded crime rate. In all provinces, crime rates are either slowly declining or levelling off.

The Western Cape, Gauteng and Northern Cape continue to lead the pack with crime rates far above the national average in all crime categories. Whilst Western Cape crime rates remained the same in the past 12 months, Gauteng and Northern Cape recorded a three and four per cent decrease respectively in their crime rates. Limpopo Province continues to register lower crime rates than all other provinces (Figure 7).

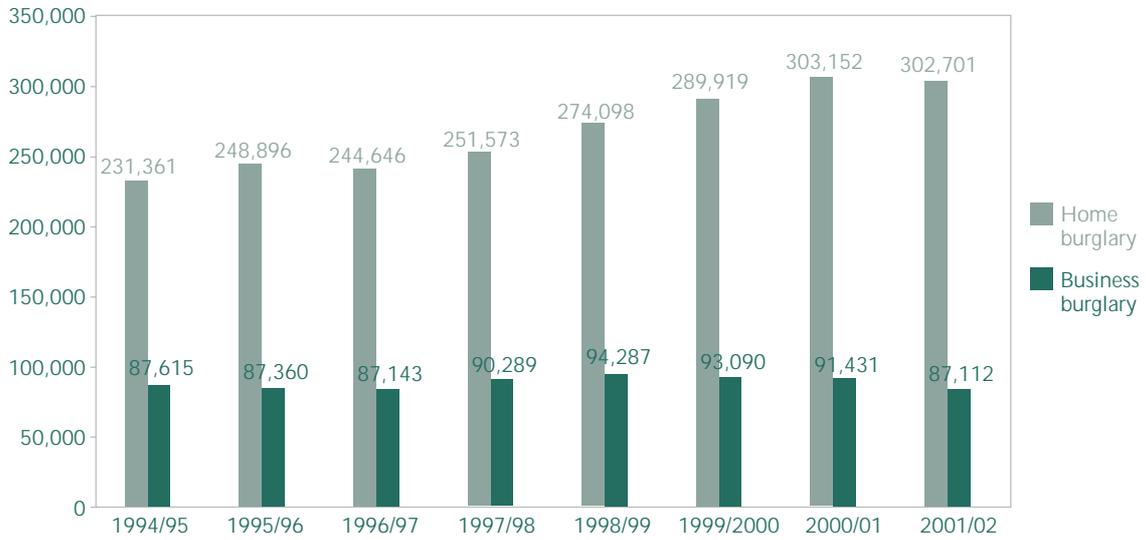
In the past two years the Western Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal have had the highest murder

Figure 5: Number of murder cases handled by police and courts, January - December 2000



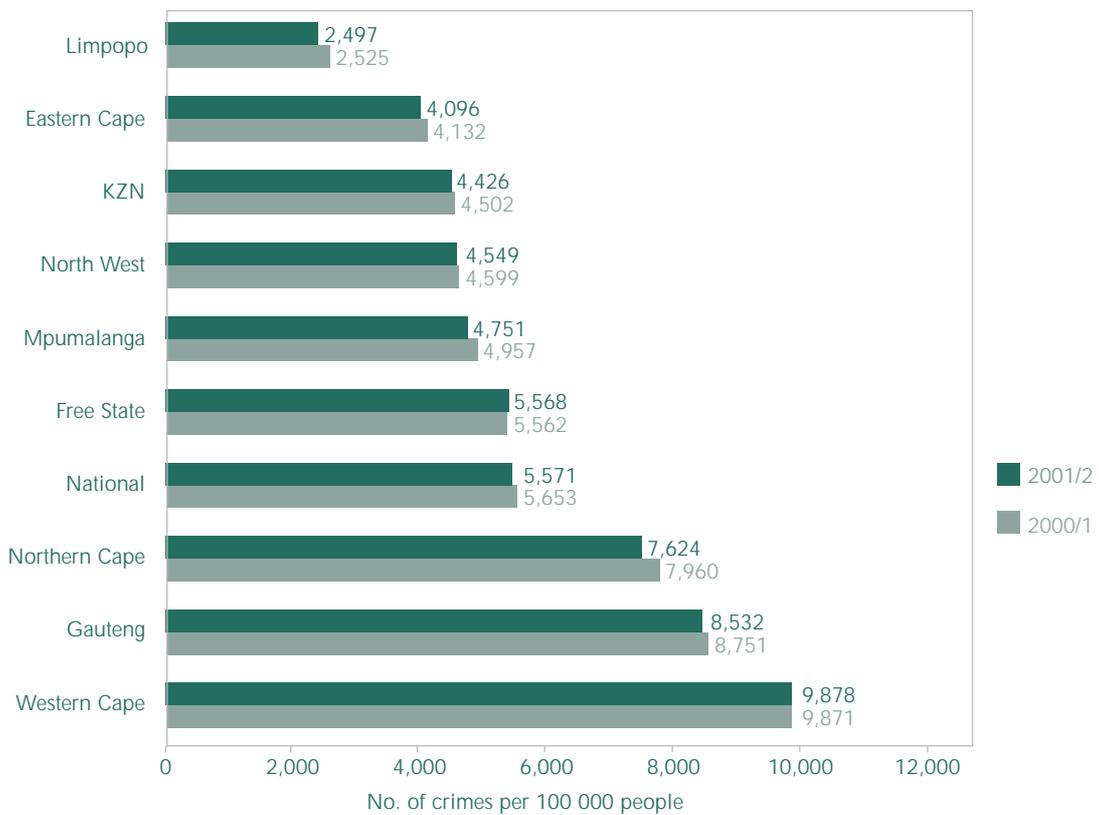
Source: SAPS Crime Information Analysis Centre, 2001

Figure 6: Number of burglaries recorded by police, March 1994 - March 2002



Source: SAPS 2001/02 Annual Report

Figure 7: Total provincial crime rates, 2000/1 and 2001/2



Source: SAPS 2001/02 Annual Report

and attempted murder rates of all the provinces, far above the national average of 47 per 100,000. However, on a more positive note, murder rates are on the decline in all provinces (Table 1).

On the other hand, attempted murder has increased in five provinces, remained the same in two provinces and decreased in the other two provinces. The Northern Cape registered unbelievably high attempted murder rates in the past 12 months.

Serious and common assault rates recorded in the Northern Cape were far above the rates registered in other provinces, followed closely by the Western Cape. As with murder rates, serious assault figures have decreased in all provinces, but common assault increased in most provinces except the Western Cape, Northern Cape and Free State.

The Northern Cape, Western Cape and Gauteng also lead other provinces with regard to rates of

rape; however, rape figures registered in all provinces have remained the same in the previous 12 months.

By far, the highest number of serious robberies was recorded in Gauteng, followed at much lower levels by Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Gauteng also led with regard to common robberies, followed by Western Cape and Northern Cape. Serious robbery increased slightly in many provinces, except in KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, North West, and Limpopo. In line with serious robbery, common robbery also increased slightly in many provinces except in Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape and North West.

Residential and business burglaries are generally stabilising in all provinces. The Western Cape, Gauteng and Northern Cape had the highest recorded residential burglary rates of all the provinces. These three provinces also registered high rates of burglaries of businesses.

Table 1: Provincial crime rates per 100,000 of the population 2000/01 and 2001/02

Year	Western Cape		Gauteng		Northern Cape		Free State		Mpumalanga		North West		KwaZulu-Natal		Eastern Cape		Limpopo	
	00/01	01/02	00/01	01/02	00/01	01/02	00/01	01/02	00/01	01/02	00/01	01/02	00/01	01/02	00/01	01/02	00/01	01/02
Murder	83	79	62	59	55	50	33	32	32	29	30	30	60	58	51	52	15	15
Attempted murder	97	92	90	91	41	183	34	51	54	51	54	64	78	77	46	55	29	30
Assault GBH	872	840	744	672	1565	1327	663	605	651	623	688	643	375	361	616	603	450	423
Common assault	1136	1099	675	740	1029	996	878	876	392	405	486	516	361	381	444	432	356	381
Rape	157	154	153	153	169	160	123	131	115	116	128	133	100	100	100	97	79	84
Serious robbery	270	283	674	662	49	50	73	88	173	177	157	154	262	258	112	124	59	58
Other robbery	326	331	382	349	249	249	147	154	124	120	193	189	154	157	148	150	82	83
Residential burglary	1250	1243	1062	1005	748	714	661	660	684	664	538	519	529	520	503	521	301	280
Business burglary	326	331	245	236	386	327	230	218	215	186	193	179	164	150	147	138	125	117
Car theft	280	292	638	575	57	49	105	103	132	122	111	112	190	192	91	85	37	33
Theft out of vehicle	1154	1167	749	733	283	444	315	337	335	283	273	247	376	356	250	240	130	121
Drug crimes	305	309	75	107	203	212	125	158	58	54	63	84	102	110	85	106	27	31
Firearm crimes	51	49	44	45	18	19	18	20	26	26	21	23	102	110	32	31	11	13

Source: SAPS 2001/02 Annual Report

Theft of motor vehicles was highest by far in Gauteng, followed at much lower levels by Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Theft out of motor vehicles was highest by far in the Western Cape, followed by Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal.

It is difficult to interpret these property rate figures, since they do not give a true reflection of the extent of crime in different provinces. The per capita ratio measurement for property crime is misleading. A better way of measuring property crimes is to use the number of business ownership or number of property units, rather than units of population.⁷

Conclusion

National and provincial crime figures indicate that crime has to a certain extent stabilised over the past 12 months. However, this stabilisation is occurring at a high level, particularly for violent and property crimes. Given that stabilisation has only happened in the last year, it might be too soon to claim victory. Year-on-year crime trends need to be monitored for some time before concluding that crime is no longer on the increase.

The high volume of violent crimes, in particular interpersonal violent crime, is worrying. The SAPS has classified most of these crimes as social fabric crimes, to highlight the little control police have over these crimes. These crime types disproportionately affect poor communities, but this does not suggest that there is a direct link between crime and poverty. It is not just about poverty, but about many factors associated with socio-economic development. These include a low standard of education, a lack of social and vocational skills, poor housing and living conditions, a lack of parenting skills, and so forth. Therefore strategies aimed at reducing these crimes are heavily dependent on serious investment in the social and economic development of the country's poor.

The Western Cape, Northern Cape and Gauteng featured prominently in most of the crime categories. Western Cape and Northern Cape continue to be notorious with high records of interpersonal violent crime, while Gauteng leads in the category of serious robbery. Crime reduction strategies therefore need to be problem- and area-

specific. Interpersonal violent crime, particularly in poor communities, will require crime prevention through social development as well as consistent law enforcement. On the other hand, crimes such as robbery will heavily depend on various government agencies' control of public spaces, and police investigation and intelligence.

Endnotes

- 1 Annual report of the South African Police Service, 2001/02.
- 2 M Schönteich, 2001 Crime Trends: A turning point. *South African Crime Quarterly* 1 (1), July 2002, pp 1-5.
- 3 For a more detailed discussion on violent crime trends see, S Masuku, Prevention is better than cure: Addressing violent crime in South Africa, *South African Crime Quarterly* 2 (1), November 2002, pp 5-12.
- 4 International Crime Statistics, INTERPOL, *International crime statistics: 1998*, Lyons, 2001.
- 5 M Schönteich, *Tough choices: Prioritising criminal justice policies*, ISS Paper 56, May 2002.
- 6 Caution needs to be exercised when comparing the annual number of cases recorded with the annual number of cases withdrawn, sent to court, and prosecuted and convicted. Cases recorded during one year are often investigated and prosecuted in the following year.
- 7 A Louw and M Shaw, *Stolen opportunities: the impact of crime on South Africa's poor*, ISS Monograph Series, no.14, 1997.