Is crime in South Africa really on the increase, or is the spiralling crime rate a product of improved reporting? It was not unexpected that the arrival, in 1994, of a democratic government should lead to a dramatic increase in crime reporting. Police statistics show that commonly underreported crimes have been going up, while those most likely to be reported (murder, car theft, and business burglary) are in decline. This suggests that improved performance by the police (which encourages reporting by the public) may be responsible for the 'increase' in crime in recent years..

The South African Police Service (SAPS) claims that it has stabilised crime far in advance of targeted dates, but uses a very weak line of argument in support of this contention. Comparing old 'unreliable' statistics with new, 'still unreliable' statistics, the state uses recorded crime rates to make its case, sidestepping the fact that, in terms of raw numbers:

- Overall crime levels are still on the increase.

- Recorded crime in many significant categories, such as robbery, is still increasing dramatically.

- Recorded crime in some regions – the Western Cape in particular – is soaring. (See 2001 Crime Trends, this issue.)

Furthermore, in refuting claims that South Africa is the 'crime capital of the world', the SAPS trots out a range of spurious comparisons in their most recent quarterly statistical report:

- Murder rates are compared between Washington, D.C., the city with the highest murder rates in the US, and Pretoria, which has the lowest murder rates of any major city in South Africa – presumably on the basis that they are both capitals.

- Johannesburg is compared to Diadema, Sao Paolo, Brazil in 1999, not on the basis that the two areas are in any way comparable, but because Diadema is one sliver of the world that once had a higher murder rate.

- 'Very serious violent crimes' make up just over 10% of overall crime, with the bizarre conclusion that the 'chances of becoming a victim of serious violent crime are just over one out of ten crimes reported to the police'.

However, just because the SAPS makes some questionable arguments, it does not mean that their central contention – that crime is not as bad as the numbers make it seem – is wrong. The greatest problem with claims that crime has stabilised is not the argument, but the subject matter.

What crime rates tell us – or not

Crime rates, or the number of crimes recorded by the police, are notoriously unreliable as a reflection of the real crime situation, and even worse as an indicator of police performance. This is because crime rates rely on members of the public reporting crime, and the police recording it. The way in which this is done varies between regions and over time.

The extent to which reporting rates can affect crime rates is illustrated in the following counterintuitive examples from the United Nations Development Programme statistics:

- Canada has the second highest rate of recorded rape in the world (267 per 100 000), second only to Estonia in the UNDP statistics.

- The rate of drug crimes in Switzerland (574 per 100 000) is more than 10 times that of Colombia (40 per 100 000).

- The rate of total crimes in Denmark (10 508 per 100 000) is more than five times that of the Russian Federation (1 779 per 100 000) and more than 100 times that of Indonesia (80 per 100 000).

The fact that declining crime rates are not an indicator of the real crime situation raises questions about the manner in which the SAPS has benchmarked declines in recorded crime.

Crime rates: a measure of police performance?

Good police performance could conceivably impact on the crime rate in a variety of ways, one being an increase in the number of crimes recorded – the basis on which crime rates are determined. This is obvious in areas such as drug offences, where the number of crimes recorded is almost exclusively reliant on proactive police work, but it is also true for a range of other types of crime that may be picked up on patrol and which would otherwise go unreported.

The use of recorded crime as a performance measure in the current South African context is especially problematic, as research in this country has shown that upwards of 50% of crime in many important

categories goes unreported (Table 1). Historic distrust between the police and the public has led to the failure of many communities to report crime, and as this situation improves (partly due to successful police outreach and performance), it will affect the crime rate. This is particularly true for interpersonal crimes such as domestic violence and rape, where growing consciousness of human rights, teamed with a more victim-friendly legal and procedural framework, should enhance reporting.
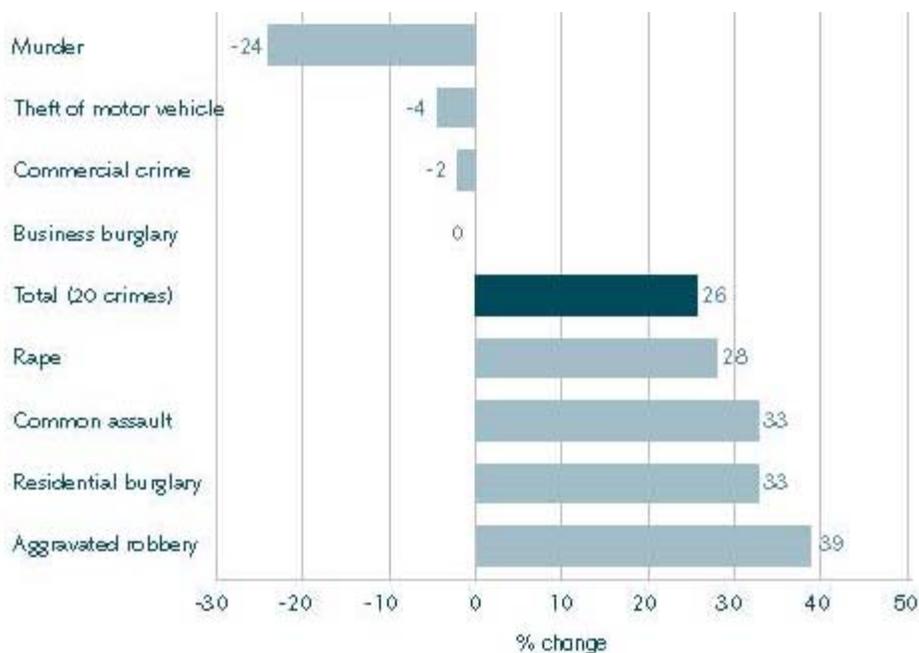
Table 1: Reporting rates of crime according to victimisation surveys, 1997/98

	Durban	Pretoria	Cape Town	National	Africa average
Murder	90%	88%	93%	-	-
Robbery	45%	48%	48%	41%	41%
Burglary	72%	80%	80%	59%	59%
Car theft	81%	89%	93%	95%	89%
Assault	39%	48%	42%	38%	34%
Sexual offences	54%	57%	36%	47%	25%

The increase in reported crime since 1994 may well be due in part to the progressive enfranchisement of the majority of the population, including greater access to commodities that are known to boost reporting, such as vehicles, telephones and property insurance.

But, while commonly underreported crimes have been on the increase since 1994, crime rates that both internationally and locally show the highest levels of reporting (murder, business burglary, and car theft) have actually been in decline in South Africa (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage change in total recorded crime, January-September, 1994-2001

Source: SAPS Crime Information Analysis Centre

The impact of new patterns of reporting

It is unusual for murder rates to decline while other forms of violent crime are increasing, and this trend is particularly striking because the percentage of murders committed with a firearm has increased. Thus it appears that the number of non-firearm assaults that resulted in death has decreased dramatically, while at the same time non-lethal assaults have allegedly increased.

A similar paradox is seen with the divergent trends in residential burglary (up by a third since 1994) and business burglary (stable). This incongruity suggests that much of South Africa's post democracy crime wave could simply be the recording of crimes that had been hidden in the past.

Good police work in South Africa means finding those hidden crimes, and, as police succeed in fulfilling this function, crime rates will necessarily go up. The operational policing strategy adopted under national commissioner Jackie Selebi is largely based on high density operations in high crime areas, such as roadblocks and raids, which can be expected to turn up much unreported crime, for instance possession of contraband, firearms offences, and violations of immigration laws. This effect is further enhanced when legislation (such as the recent Domestic Violence Act) requires the recording of incidents that might have otherwise been left undocumented.

This last example calls to mind the ways that using recorded crime as the primary performance indicator creates a perverse incentive for the police to hide the real crime situation.

Manipulation of crime rates

If the police are told to show a reduction in the crime rate, it is easy to simply avoid recording a range of crimes they encounter, and domestic violence provides a good example of the way that using the crime rate as a performance measure can backfire. In many domestic violence situations, the complainant can easily be discouraged from filing a complaint, and international studies have shown that most domestic violence calls are resolved without a case being opened. This is particularly true in South Africa, where consciousness of civil rights and gender equality is only now developing. The easiest way for the police to reduce the crime rate is simply to do nothing but record only those crimes where a case number is absolutely mandatory, such as cases involving deaths or insured property.

Conclusion

This, clearly, is not an objective we would like the police to pursue. To avoid such a trend, we need to come up with other indicators of good police performance, and reduce the hype that surrounds crime figures. They do not reflect reality and they certainly do not reflect police performance. An international policing expert, Bayley (1994) clearly demonstrates that no matter what the police do, no matter how many uniforms flood the streets, they cannot reduce recorded crime. We need to look beyond simplistic notions of the functioning of the police and realise that numbers often conceal more than they reveal.

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