

EVERYONE'S AN INSPECTOR:

The crisis of rank inflation and the decline of visible policing

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South Africa currently has five and a half times more police inspectors than constables. This has resulted in a classic demonstration of the adage 'too many chiefs and not enough Indians' and has contributed to the collapse of field supervision in the South African Police Service. Recent moves to laterally transfer 7 000 senior military personnel will not help the situation, and present training plans, though ambitious, will not assist much. A radical rethink of the organisation is needed to optimise member strength on the streets.

The South African Police Service (SAPS) suffers under a glut of management unparalleled in the world. Rank has become virtually meaningless among non-commissioned officers, and this has resulted in a near collapse of field supervision in some areas.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the SAPS has five and a half times more inspectors and nearly four times as many sergeants than constables. This distribution is absurd in terms of the functional responsibilities associated with these ranks internationally. Sergeants are generally assigned to supervise teams of constables, while inspectors are responsible for shifts of sergeants. Figure 2 shows the typical chain of command found in American police departments.

Figure 1: Rank distribution in the SAPS, Dec 2001

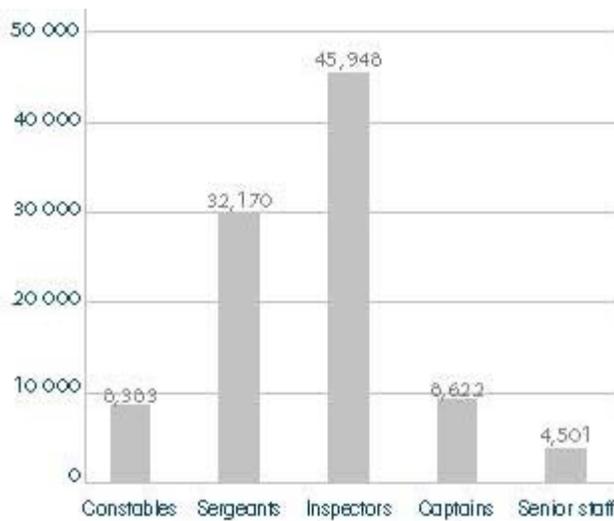
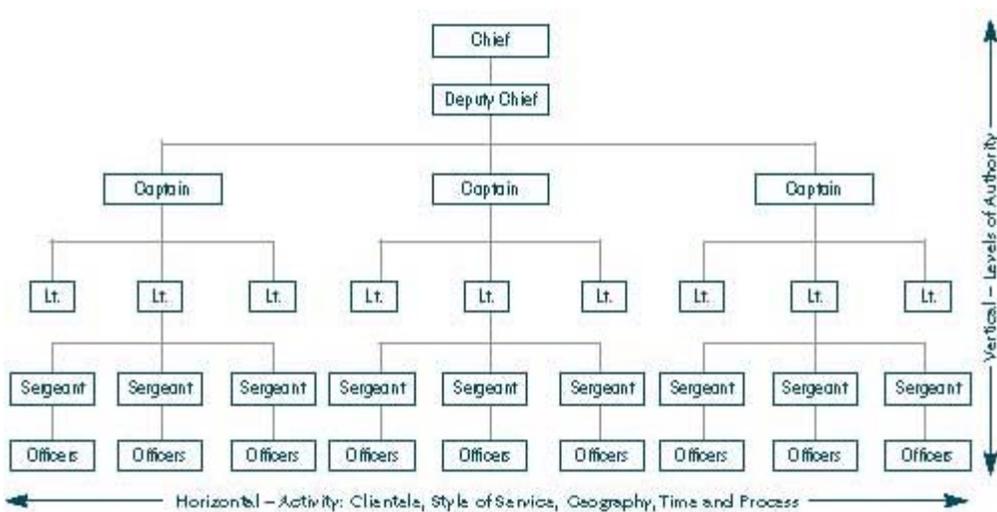


Figure 2: Typical US rank hierarchy



Source: C Swanson et al, Police administration structure, processes and behaviour, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 2001

The South African distribution of rank jars sharply with international norms. The ratio of sergeants to

constables is 1 to 4.5 in Australia, 1 to 5 in Britain, 1 to 4 in Canada, and 1 to 6.4 in the US. This situation is completely inverted in South Africa. Sergeants and constables comprise 94.5% of all members in Australia and 91% in Britain. In South Africa, they comprise only about a third of total staff. The result is that there is no real differentiation of function between non-commissioned officers, with inspectors commanding whole squads of other inspectors, some senior in experience to their supervisors.

Too many chiefs

At the bottom end, rank seems to be more a designation of pay scale than function. This would not be a problem if authority were associated with job title rather than rank, but this does not seem to be the case either. The blurring of rank on the bottom end stands in contrast to the situation among the higher ranks, where 'rank grading' (the association of a particular job with a particular rank) is maintained. Once they achieve the rank of captain, members are essentially promoted out of field duty. This means that new management positions have to be created to accommodate an ever growing pool of commissioned members, whether these desk posts are needed or not.

Aside from creating a great deal of unnecessary bureaucracy, the loss of the meaning of rank has practical consequences in the field. The virtue of a military-type structure is that every incident has a clear line of responsibility associated with it:

- Constables are dispatched to calls for assistance. As the responding members, they are responsible for the incident until relieved by a superior officer.
- More serious calls require the response of the constable's supervisor, a sergeant. The sergeant is responsible for all activities of his constables, and will be held to answer for any failure to supervise.
- Any situations that require higher-level discretion are referred to the inspector in charge. The inspector is ultimately responsible for the activities of the sergeants and their constables.

If a constable makes a mistake, fails to perform, or is involved in misconduct, the whole operational chain of command is ultimately held to answer. This dynamic assures vigilant monitoring of each and every member, monitoring that is currently lacking in the SAPS. It also ensures a co-ordinated response to emergencies, something that only becomes possible with a clear distribution of authority.

Top-heavy and costly

The ratio of supervisors to workers also has cost implications because senior staff cost more. According to the British Audit Commission, costs of ranks above constable absorbed 43% of the budget for personnel, and just a 2% reduction in salaries for these members would allow 1 000 more constables to be hired. While precise figures are not available, the situation is much more extreme in South Africa, where top ranks earn ten times what starting constables earn, and 93% of the service has a rank higher than constable.

The bloating of supervisory ranks is the result of at least four distinct processes:

- Mass retirements and restructuring.
- Lateral transfers.
- Union pressures.
- Affirmative action.

Once democracy became imminent, many ideologically committed members left the service, particularly those whose rank and training made them marketable in the private sector. They were joined by those who felt that it was in their best career interest to retire from the service, given anticipated affirmative action, the uncertain future of the police, the projected expansion of the private security market, and attractive 'golden handshakes' intended to make room for lateral transfers.

Paradoxically, the loss of these members contributed to the present bloating, as it allowed a redistribution of responsibilities to an even greater body of transferred personnel. Ideological transformation also created more jobs for planners and administrators, many of whom were of rank. The final result of restructuring was the creation of four fully staffed levels of management – national, provincial, area, and station – despite that fact that most real authority remained highly centralised.

Aside from the loss of experienced staff, another problem confronting the police post-apartheid was integrating 11 separate police departments. Members of former homeland police departments were not required to have the same level of training or skill as the regular police, but they were transferred laterally when the 11 departments merged. In other bids to bolster numbers, subsequent waves of integration occurred, making thousands of under-trained and inexperienced 'kitskonstables' and security guards ranking members of the SAPS.

In terms of the present promotion policy, members are led to expect promotions at regular intervals among the lower ranks. Promotion is seen as a right, not a privilege. Strong police unions make firing of under-performing members very difficult, and station managers are not allowed to dismiss personnel on their own authority. Thus, any member willing to wait out the years is likely to find him- or herself an inspector before long, regardless of performance.

Affirmative action also feeds into the management glut. In 1999 the late Minister Tshwete proclaimed that 50% of staff in key management positions would be black by the end of the year. Clearly, this kind of agenda requires the rapid promotion of black members, even if there are no vacant positions into which they can be promoted.

Short of strength on the ground

The problem has been exacerbated by the lack of new intake on the bottom end. The size of the South African police has been in decline since 1994. A 1996 assessment suggested full police strength for the

country should be 161 755 – present staffing levels are about 25% less than that. Ambitious plans to train 16 000 members in three years have been given budgetary approval. But the capacity of the police to train this number of new members is dubious. Instructors are scarce and many of the college buildings are in such a poor state of repair that it is unlikely they could be used. Training even a thousand members a year would be a stretch without compromising standards, but management is committed to passing five to seven times this number through the system. The consequence will be, once again, an expansion of raw numbers at the expense of quality.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that even if things go off as planned that police visibility will be expanded appreciably. Natural attrition at this stage is about 5 000 members a year. This means that even with the training blitz, the SAPS will only achieve the desired 1997 staffing levels by 2005.

Furthermore, it takes a massive growth of uniformed numbers to create an enhanced street presence. Bayley (1994) applies the 'ten-for-one' rule to estimate the number of members needed to increase visible policing strength. Taking into account that only a fraction of members engage in visible patrol and that only a fraction of those are on the streets during any given shift, Bayley estimates that 10 new members need to be trained to increase visible policing presence by one member.

This situation is likely to be far less favourable in South Africa, where the proportion of the police assigned to street work is relatively small. Bayley builds his estimate on the assumption that 70% of police personnel is assigned to patrolling the streets. However, in South Africa, detectives comprise 18% of the service and civilians 17%, and about 8% of the total staff is assigned to head office functions in Pretoria. None of the aforementioned perform visible patrols. In addition, a sizeable proportion of station-level uniformed staff are assigned to other duties, such as the client service centre, guarding holding cells or public buildings, and administrative tasks.

Thus, assuming no one retires in the next three years, the recruitment drive of 16 000 members will result in an increased visible policing strength of only 1 600 members, spread among over 1 200 station areas. But factoring in attrition, it is likely that only 1 000 new members will be gained. Each station area may then experience an enhanced field presence of less than one new member apiece.

In yet another bid for a quick-fix solution, Defence Minister Mosiuoa Lekota recently announced the lateral transfer of 7 700 members of the South African Defence Force to the police. These members are no longer 'combat ready' because they are older than 30 years of age, which also suggests that they are senior members holding rank. Clearly, this is the last thing the SAPS needs at this point – more under-trained, inexperienced managers to command a diminishing pool of operational staff. While such a transfer may suit the ends of the SANDF, releasing it from its responsibility for a large pool of inactive members, it would spell disaster for the SAPS.

Conclusion

Restoring order to the rank chaos will require a reassessment of the current ranking structure. Either the lower ranks need to be consolidated and captains assigned to the field, or a new rank, perhaps that of lieutenant, needs to be created to provide field supervision. While pay raises should not be rescinded, it is essential that some order be made of the rank structure as soon as possible.

Source documents

D Bayley, *Police for the Future*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994.

