

# THE SAPS CRIME STATISTICS

## What they tell us – and what they don't

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*Every year, the South African Minister of Police releases the crime statistics in September and the SAPS Annual Report shortly thereafter. In this article we draw on an earlier analysis by David Bruce (SACQ 31) that questioned the veracity of the SAPS statistics for inter-personal violence. We show that there remains reason to question the veracity of the assault statistics, and point to other weaknesses in the way in which the statistics are reported. We argue that greater value would be obtained from the crime statistics if reported more frequently than once a year, and if they were disaggregated to a greater degree. The SAPS has a sophisticated and up-to-date system for recording and analysing crime data. This could prove an invaluable source of information for those who seek to better understand and respond to crime in South Africa. However, a long-overdue policy change is needed to ensure that South Africa can make better use of its crime statistics.*

The annual press conference at which the Minister of Police and the National Commissioner of the South African Police Service (SAPS) present the previous financial year's crime statistics reflects the government's attitude towards dealing with crime since the late 1990s; which is to place the responsibility for reducing crime squarely on the shoulders of the SAPS. For a number of years now, reducing crime has been one of the government's top five priorities.<sup>1</sup> An inter-ministerial structure called the Justice Crime Prevention and Security Cluster (JCPS) was established to achieve this objective. While the inclusion of the Department of Social Development in the JCPS may suggest a recognition that addressing social risk factors could contribute to a reduction in crime, this is not reflected in statements by political figures, who remain focused on presenting policing as the primary response to crime.<sup>2,3</sup>

Interestingly, the top police leadership appears willing to accept the responsibility of reducing all crime, despite acknowledging that 'crimes such as assault are not responsive to policing crime prevention strategies.'<sup>4,5</sup> Given that most crime categories have been decreasing since crime peaked in 2002/03, it may indeed serve the interests of police leadership to have their performance assessed in this way. Yet, the long-term negative consequences of this policy approach far outweigh any short-term political benefit that may be derived by pretending that the police are solely responsible for declining crime rates.

David Bruce has argued that the 2004 policy to set the target of reducing crime by seven to ten percent per annum as a key performance indicator of the SAPS resulted in a 'perverse incentive' to under record violent crime, particularly the various forms of assault.<sup>6</sup> In effect this has rendered the SAPS statistics for inter-personal

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violent crime useless for the purposes of monitoring and understanding these crime trends. In this article we reflect on whether this assessment holds for the latest statistics released by the SAPS.

The article begins by briefly describing the 2011/12 murder statistics and then offers a discussion about why the reliability of the statistics for all categories of assault remains in question. We argue that there appears to be a link between the way in which police performance is measured and the disproportionate reduction in all categories of assault. The article then considers shortcomings in current and past reporting practices in relation to gender-based violence and sexual offences, including inconsistency in what is reported and the inadequacy of the level of disaggregation. The article also considers SAPS reporting and recording of public violence. It argues that clarity on the categories of public violence is needed, along with more detailed and frequent statistics.

We conclude by arguing for the crime statistics to be released more than once a year; for consistency in SAPS reporting formats; for further disaggregation of the statistics in various crime categories, particularly with regard to gender; and for a change in the way in which police performance is measured.

## VIOLENT CRIME

In general there was little change in overall crime trends over the past two financial years. Total crime increased slightly by 0,7% from 2 071 487 cases in 2010/11 to 2 085 757 in the 2011/12 financial year. Total property-related crime increased by 0,3%, while total violent crime decreased by 2,3%. The murder rate remains high with 30,9 South Africans in every 100 000 the victims of homicide, despite a 54% decrease in the number of murders since 1994. This means that the murder rate in South Africa is four and a half times higher than the world average of 6,9 murders per 100 000 people.<sup>7</sup> In the 2011/12 financial year the police recorded a total of 15 609 murders (a daily average of almost 43 murders), representing a decline of 3,1% from the previous financial year.

According to the SAPS Annual Report 2011/12, 65% of murders result from assaults.<sup>8</sup>

How sure can we be that the murder rate is reliable? This question is pertinent because there have been cases where the police have been found to record murders as inquests or culpable homicide so as to be able to present lower crime statistics.<sup>9</sup> While Figure 1 (below) shows the gap between murder and culpable homicide rates narrowing between 2004/5 and 2011/12, and the increase in culpable homicides between 2004/05 and 2007/08 may be an indication of statistical manipulation, there is no marked shift in the trends after 2004/5, as is evident for other categories of violent interpersonal crime.

**Figure 1:** Culpable homicide vs murder rates 2004/5 – 2011/12



The Medical Research Council (MRC) recently released the results of a study of female homicides (femicide) which provides a basis for assessing the veracity of the trends in murder. This study undertook an analysis of a representative sample of cases at mortuaries in 2009 and offered a comparison with the number of femicides in 1999. The study showed that over ten years, the female homicide rate declined from 24,7 per 100 000 in 1999 to 12,9 per 100 000 in 2009 (a reduction of 47,7%). Since the police statistics are reported for financial years rather than calendar years it is not

possible to accurately compare the national murder rates to the femicide rates for this time period. However, during a similar period the SAPS recorded a 35% decrease in the total murder rate (from 52,5 to 34,1 per 100 000). This suggests that there has likely not been a manipulation of the murder statistics to show a lower rate than is in fact the case. The MRC study supports the SAPS statistics as a reasonably reliable indicator of the overall trend in murder.

While the SAPS statistics for murder may accurately reflect the reality, there is ample reason to question the veracity of police data for other forms of inter-personal violence, as reflected in the various categories of assault.

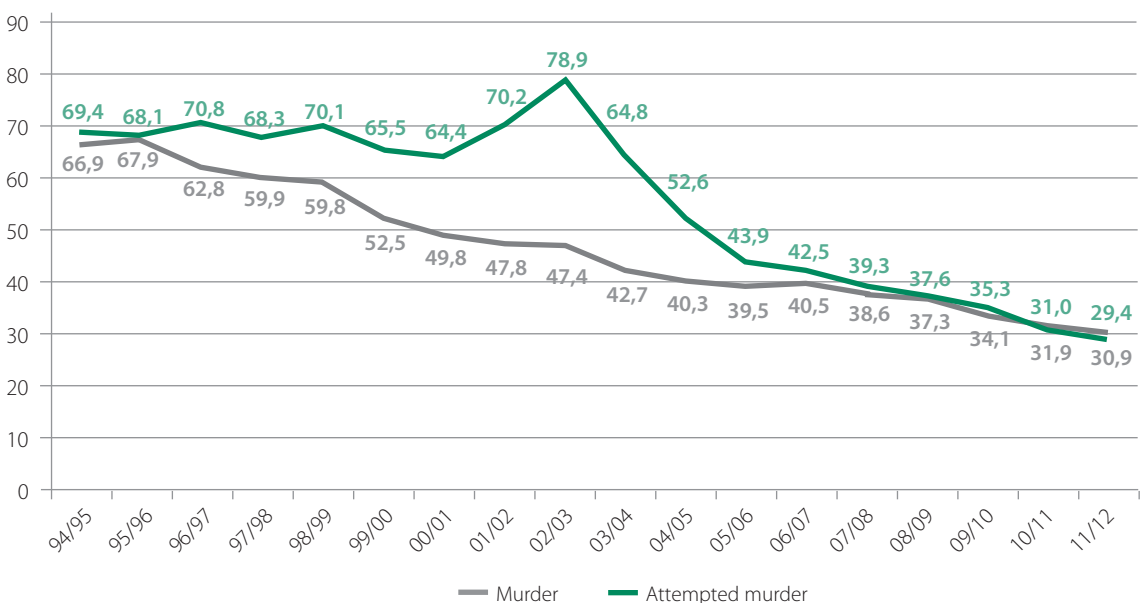
Figure 2 compares the rate of murder and attempted murder between 1994/5 and 2011/12. What is immediately striking is that while the murder rate showed a consistent decrease, there was a significant increase in attempted murder from 2000/01. The attempted murder rate increased substantially until 2002/03 and then inexplicably dropped sharply in 2003/04 until 2005/06, when it closely followed the murder rate trend. While it is more difficult to manipulate or incorrectly record murder statistics, it is relatively easy to do so for attempted murder. Thus the spike

in attempted murder between 2000/01 and 2002/3 was very likely the consequence of a change in recording practices rather than an accurate reflection of attempted murder trends. The sudden decline in the attempted murder rate after 2002/3, without similar changes in other inter-personal violence categories, suggests that there was again a change in recording practices. Bruce has argued that the introduction in 2004 of police performance targets for reducing crime provided an incentive for the police to reduce the numbers of cases they recorded.<sup>10</sup>

High rates of inter-personal violence (including domestic and youth violence) have been identified as having a significant negative impact on a country's development.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore crucially important that there is accurate recording of these types of violence if we are to better understand and respond to this phenomenon. Only once we clearly understand the social risk factors for violence and aggression will we be in a position to implement interventions that will effectively reduce inter-personal violence.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 3 presents the rates of assault with the intention to commit grievous bodily harm (assault GBH), and common assault between

Figure 2: Murder and attempted murder rates, trends 1994/95–2011/12



**Figure 3:** Assault GBH and common assault trends 1994/95–2011/12



1994/5 and 2011/12. There was a marked decrease in the rates of these types of crime since 2003/04, following the adoption of the crime rate as a measure of police performance. While there may be other reasons for the sudden and consistent declines in these crime categories, particular attention must be given to their veracity, especially since they coincide with the adoption of the policy of using these data to measure police performance.<sup>13</sup>

Consideration of the assault statistics disaggregated by gender and measured against other indicators provides additional reason to question the veracity of the SAPS assault statistics since 2004/5. In 2011/12 the SAPS recorded a total of 144 536 cases of assault against women (including both assault GBH and common assault).<sup>14</sup> Within a similar timeframe the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development recorded the lodging of 217 989 protection orders, mostly by women (against their partners).<sup>15</sup>

While not all protection orders will have been sought by women who have been assaulted, we do know that the police are usually the first point of contact for women who experience abuse,

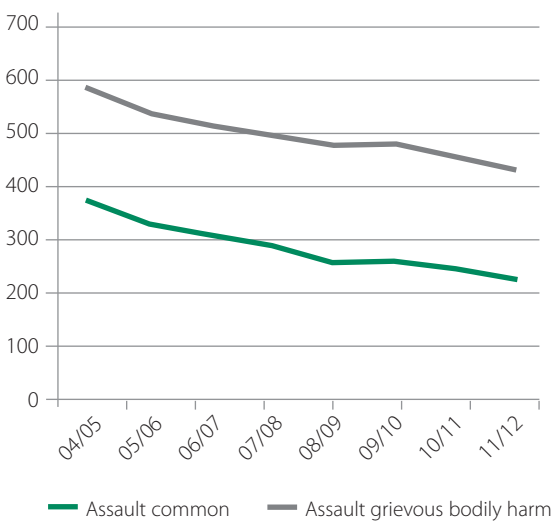
particularly intimate partner abuse; and that women who apply for protection orders have, on average, been in an abusive relationship for four years.<sup>16</sup> Thus, if the police assault statistics really reflected the actual number of cases of assault reported to them, we would see a much higher figure, likely higher than the number of protection orders issued.

Research conducted by Tshwaranang Legal and Advocacy Centre in Acornhoek (Mpumalanga) found that of the 942 cases of domestic violence collated from police, court and hospital records, only 6,7% ‘will ever have made their way into official statistics, as only 63 women pressed charges.’<sup>17</sup> It was for this very reason that the Domestic Violence Act requires police to complete an incident report for every case of domestic violence reported to them. Yet these data are not made available. In short, the police assault figures are inaccurate indicators of actual levels of interpersonal violence in South Africa. This points both to the problems that may result from measuring police performance through reductions or increases in crime, and to the need for the disaggregation of domestic violence from general assault figures.

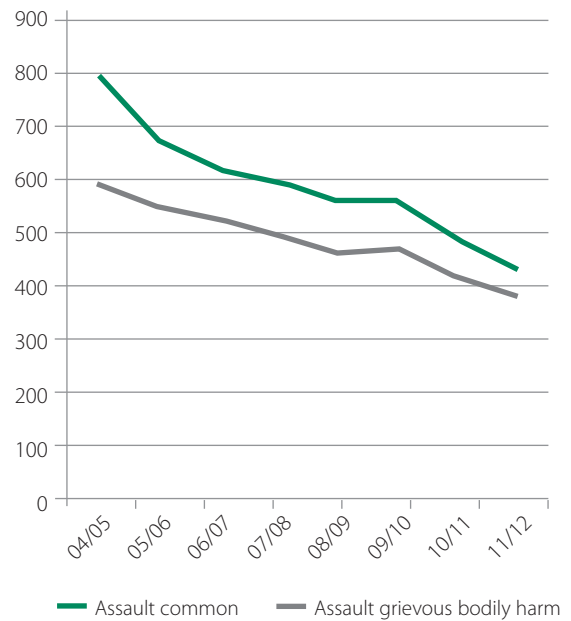
Another anomaly in the assault figures is evident in the provincial reporting trends. In this case we consider the reporting of the different categories of assault in Gauteng and the Eastern Cape. The rate of serious assault (assault GBH) is similar both in the Eastern Cape and in Gauteng. However, the rate of assault GBH is significantly higher than the rate of common assault in the Eastern Cape, while the opposite is true in Gauteng. Does this mean that there are almost a third more common assaults in Gauteng as compared to the Eastern Cape? Or are victims of common assault less likely to report the incident in the Eastern Cape than in Gauteng? Or, are the police in the Eastern Cape less likely to record cases of common assault than serious assault? Similarly, in the Western Cape the rate of common assault is much higher than serious assault, whereas the opposite is true in the Northern Cape. Explaining these peculiarities would require a greater level of insight into the recording and reporting practices of the police and victims. These anomalies support the contention that the police statistics for attempted murder, assault GBH and common assault may not be reliable measures of inter-personal violence in South Africa.

Since assaults often occur in private settings, the police have little influence over whether or when

**Figure 4:** Eastern Cape assault rate trends 2004/5–2011/12



**Figure 5:** Gauteng assault rate trends 2004/5–2011/12



such assaults occur. It is thus not only counter-productive to measure police performance by reductions in crime types over which they have little control, but also creates the perverse incentive to under-record these types of crime. This is because such crimes don't involve insurance claims and many of the victims have a low social or economic status.

Rather, the police should be encouraged to record these types of crimes so that police crime records can provide a more accurate indicator of inter-personal violence. The consequence of encouraging police recording is likely to result in an apparent increase in inter-personal violent crime in the short term, but would allow for more appropriate and effective responses to this problem. Better indicators of police performance could include the length of time it takes for the police to respond to reported instances of assault, and the detection rates of these crimes.<sup>18</sup> This should also enable us to develop a better understanding of the problem, the types of interventions required and who, in addition to the police, should be held accountable for addressing the social drivers of violence.

## SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The preceding discussion raised questions about the recording practices of inter-personal violent crime and thus the veracity of the available data. It touched on the gendered dimension of crime by referring to domestic violence. In this section of the article we consider the shortcomings of current police reporting practices (i.e. what information is made available to the public each year by the police).

The 2011 State of the Nation address by the President 'stipulated that government would continue to prioritise crimes against women and children.'<sup>19</sup> Yet, in their assessment of the extent to which advances were made with regard to priorities set in 2009, the Women's Legal Centre states that

We found the lack of gender-disaggregated data a severe obstacle in measuring government performance. This persistent unavailability of gender-disaggregated information makes a mockery of government's declared commitment to gender equality, as it is impossible for government programmes to target the multiple challenges women face if no data are available to inform those programmes.<sup>20</sup>

Research conducted by the MRC points to extremely high rates of rape perpetration in South Africa, with between 28% and 37% of men having raped once, and between 7% and 9% having committed multiple perpetrator rape.<sup>21</sup> It is thus important that the SAPS make every effort to accurately record every rape reported to them so that we are able to monitor trends over time. While rape reported to the police will only ever reflect a small proportion of the actual rape being perpetrated (estimated to be one out of nine cases that are reported),<sup>22</sup> police data are essential for monitoring the extent to which any rape prevention initiatives are effective or not.

Indeed, the failure of the SAPS to consistently provide gender disaggregated data for rape and violent sexual offences has been a significant obstacle to the effective assessment of efforts to

reduce sexual violence. The most serious shortcoming is the inaccessibility of consistent (year-on-year) data about sexual violence disaggregated by gender. In this regard, consider the data presented in the SAPS annual reports over the past three years.

In 2009/10 the annual report offered no statistics for the numbers of rapes committed during that financial year; however, the total number of rapes and indecent assaults for that period was provided.<sup>23</sup> In 2010/11 the SAPS annual report provided data on sexual offences disaggregated into 'contact sexual offences' and 'sexual offences detected by police action'. Also provided were the combined numbers of rapes and sexual assaults for 2008/9-2010/11.<sup>24</sup> No provincial breakdown of the statistics was offered, nor a gender disaggregation for rape and sexual assault. The SAPS annual report of 2011/12 goes further than either of the two preceding years by providing rape statistics disaggregated by province for 2010/11 and 2011/12, and by separating rape from sexual assault and 'other contact sexual offences'. However, it is still not possible to determine the gender of the victims of rape and sexual assault. Thus, while more information has been provided each year, the inconsistency in what is reported and what not, and inconsistencies in how data are reported means that it is difficult to predict what information will be made available in future; and thus whether it will be possible to ultimately monitor trends over time.

In each of those three years a gendered breakdown for five categories of crime is offered for adult victims, that is, for murder, attempted murder, assault GBH, common assault and the broad category of sexual offences. However, in 2009/10 and 2010/11 only the number of cases in which the victims were women over the age of 18 was provided, offering no comparison between the number of cases where men were victims. In 2011/12 this was addressed, and the number of cases of men and women in each of these categories of crime have been provided. However, the broad SAPS category of 'sexual offences' includes numerous different types of crimes, and thus offers little in the way of useful information

about the gendered nature of rape and other forms of sexual assault. Another shortcoming is that to date no gender breakdown of crimes against children has been provided in the successive annual reports of the police.

The 2011/12 data show that while 80,3% of murder victims are men and 64,7% of serious assault victims are also men, 48% of common assaults are committed against women. Yet, the data are not disaggregated by gender and province, nor is it possible to determine how many of the assault cases against men and women are domestic disputes. This level of disaggregation would be a valuable addition to the 2012/13 report.

## PUBLIC VIOLENCE

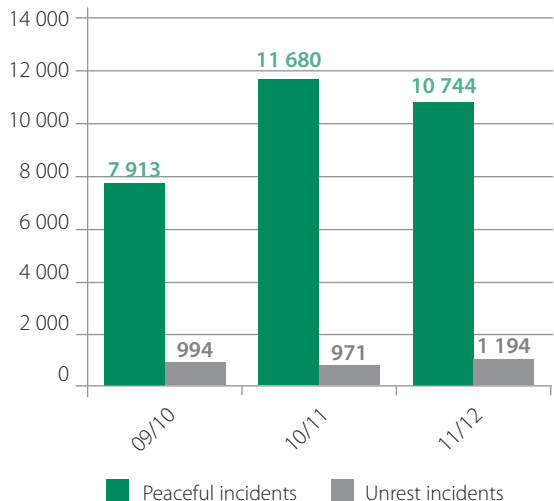
Public violence manifests in a number of ways, including demonstrations, protest actions, strikes, vigilantism and xenophobic attacks. While there are indications that public violence is on the increase, accurate information about the types and causes of public violence are not available. In addition, the way in which the police report on public violence is somewhat confusing and does not allow for the development of an accurate picture of the nature and extent of the phenomenon.

The SAPS Annual Report 2011/12 provides a short summary of what are referred to as ‘crowd-related incidents’. The report distinguishes between ‘peaceful incidents’ and ‘unrest-related incidents’.<sup>25</sup> According to the report, ‘peaceful incidents’ are non-violent public assemblies, gatherings and meetings where the police had a presence. On the other hand, ‘unrest-related incidents’ refer to ‘incidents such as labour disputes and dissatisfaction with service delivery in which violence erupted and SAPS action was required to restore peace and order’.<sup>26</sup>

It is apparent from both the SAPS statistics and those provided by the Municipal IQ Hotspots Monitor, that public protests and gatherings are becoming increasingly violent. Figure 6 shows that peaceful public gatherings increased by 47,6%

from 7,913 in 2009/10 to 11 680 in 2010/11, and then decreased slightly by 8% to 10 744 in 2011/12. Unrest incidents, however, increased substantially by 23% to 1 194 in 2011/12 compared to the previous year.

**Figure 6:** SAPS data about public protest incidents

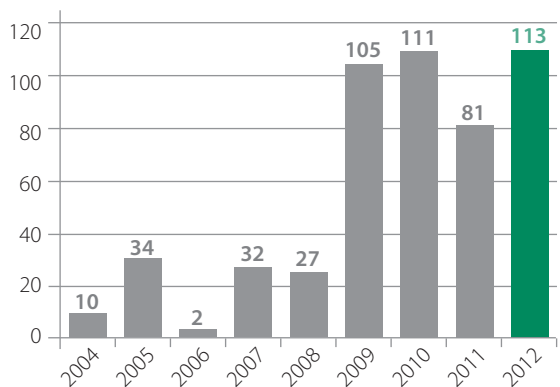


Source: SAPS Annual Report 2011/12, 85.

Figure 7 provides a breakdown of the number of ‘service delivery’ protests aimed at local government, as recorded by Municipal IQ between January 2004 and July 2012.<sup>27</sup> The Municipal IQ figures are based on an analysis of press reports.

According to Municipal IQ the first seven months of 2012 accounted for 22% of all protests recorded

**Figure 7:** Service delivery protests as recorded by Municipal IQ



since January 2004.<sup>28</sup> A vast majority (88%) of the 113 incidents in 2012 turned violent. A little under half (46%) of these happened in informal settlements, likely reflecting the level of desperation and frustration in these communities.<sup>28</sup>

There are indications that the situation has worsened since the release of the SAPS statistics for the 2011/12 reporting period. Gang violence, vigilantism and farm worker violence flared up in the Western Cape, and striking truck drivers set fire to over 70 vehicles. The widespread mining strikes following the Marikana killings, during which 44 people died, are further examples of incidents that will only be reported in the 2012/13 financial year figures.

In the SAPS Annual Report 2011/12 expressed concern that the increasing number of public violence incidents resulted in a diversion of police resources away from crime combating activities to public order policing. The SAPS stated that they expect government and business to 'invest more in the investigation of the causes of public unrest-related incidences and to consider softer solutions that could be implemented to reduce public unrest and to build greater responsibility, social and economic resilience in communities.'<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the police are expected to 'manage' an increasing number of violent situations, which they did not create and cannot resolve. As a consequence they become the visible face of an absent or failing government at which frustrated groups can direct their anger. When the police react with force in an attempt to 'manage' these incidents, the danger of police brutality appears to increase.

This confrontational relationship has serious implications. It threatens to further undermine police legitimacy, and could lead to increasing levels of polarisation between communities and the police, which in turn could lead to more public violence. Indeed, two of the nine 'objectives of democratic policing' in the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Guidebook on Democratic Policing relate to police legitimacy:<sup>31</sup>

- Public trust and confidence in the police are prerequisites for effective policing. Without this trust the public will not be willing to report crimes and provide the police with the information needed to work successfully.
- Furthermore, democratic policing requires that the police simultaneously stand outside of politics and protect democratic political activities and processes (e.g. freedom of speech, public gatherings, and demonstrations).

Violent public protest action also has the effect of creating an impression of instability. It reflects the frustrations and anger of citizens whose expectations are not met. While the crime statistics are by no means the only source of information that informs perceptions of safety and political instability, it is important for accurate information to be made available on a regular basis so that citizens can make an informed assessment about the scale and nature of these protests. In addition, public violence, if not addressed, may have the effect of increasing risk factors for crime.

Given the apparent increase in citizen frustration and willingness to resort to violence, it is essential that accurate, disaggregated data are made available. It is not sufficient to rely only on press reports in order to develop a complete picture of the extent of public violence. Not only are more up-to-date data necessary, but it is important that the data be disaggregated to allow for a better understanding of the nature of public protests. It would be useful, for example, to be able to distinguish between public protests aimed at local government and other forms of public violence such as vigilantism; which is not possible from the information currently available.

Other categories of crimes that are important to monitor on a consistent and regular basis include politically motivated killings, taxi violence, xenophobic attacks, gangsterism and vigilantism. Currently the only reference to some of these forms of public violence is to be found in the Addendum to the Annual Report 2011/2012: *An Analysis of the National Crime Statistics*. In the



section of this report a discussion of murder is presented, as well as a breakdown of the different causes of murder in South Africa. From this it can be gleaned that 4,8% of murders result from vigilante activity; 1,2% from gangsterism; and 0,9% from taxi violence.<sup>32</sup> Since there were 15 609 murders in 2001/12, it means that the police recorded 749 murders as a result of vigilantism, 187 murders as a result of gangsterism and 140 murders stemming from taxi violence. However, these data are not disaggregated by province and have not consistently been made available over the past few years. In other words, it is not possible, on the basis of this information, for civil society researchers or institutions to know whether we will be able to track and monitor changes over time.

## CONCLUSION

This article has drawn attention to several shortcomings of the police crime statistics. In relation to inter-personal violent crime, the article has argued that the police performance measures have likely had a negative impact on the veracity of the statistics for the various forms of assault. It also argues that consistent disaggregation of the figures by both province and gender would assist researchers to monitor trends and identify the relative effectiveness of efforts to reduce gender violence. The article also argues that the time lag between the recording of crimes and the annual reporting by the SAPS negatively influences our ability to monitor public violence. There seems to be no clear and cogent reason why these data should not be made available more regularly and disaggregated to a greater degree.

In summary the article argues for (i) the crime statistics to be made available more frequently than is currently the practice; (ii) consistency in reporting formats; (iii) additional disaggregation of the statistics by gender and province; (iv) more detailed reporting on public violence, and (v) for a change in the measures of police performance.



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## NOTES

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2. For example, in 2009 in response to a parliamentary question about whether the government would add crime to its list of obstacles to economic growth, Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe responded saying that:  
 The fight against crime is receiving intense and sustained attention. Apart from the fact that we have increased our real spending to fight crime and that we are increasing the number of police officers, we are also seeking ways to improve the effectiveness of our crime fighting efforts. We have made it quite clear that fighting crime is a top priority of this government. The Minister of Police and the Commissioner have addressed this, and will continue to update Parliament regarding our strategy and its outcomes...  
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