

2001 CRIME TRENDS:

A turning point?

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Between 1997 and 2000 there was a steady increase in the annual number of recorded crimes. The first nine months of 2001 saw an end to this trend. During 2001 the rate of increase in recorded crime diminished markedly. Moreover, for the first time in years, violent crime increased at a lower rate than most other crime categories. Given these encouraging figures, is South Africa beginning to win the war against crime? While the latest numbers look promising, talk of a victory is premature. There has to be a sustained decline in the levels of most serious crimes to reduce the country's crime levels to acceptable levels.

At the time of writing, statistics reflecting crimes recorded by the South African Police Service (SAPS) have been released covering the period up to the end of September 2001.

The most recent set of crime statistics, covering the July-September 2001 period, was released at the end of 2001. These third quarter figures for 2001 are significant as they are the first set of crime statistics collected by the police's Crime Information Analysis Centre (CIAC), making use of a new but undisclosed methodology, whereby crime statistics are said to be collected in a more accurate manner. Readers will recall that a moratorium on the release of crime statistics was imposed by the late Safety and Security minister Steve Tshwete in July 2000, and only lifted almost a year later.

The July-September 2001 figures were released as part of the statistics for the first three quarters of 2001. This does not allow for a comparison of only the third quarter 2001 figures with the same three-month period during previous years. Nevertheless, it would appear that the moratorium has not resulted in unexpected changes to crime figures. The available 2001 crime statistics do not contain any surprises or significant changes to long term trends in individual crimes.

South Africa's official crime statistics are widely regarded as comprehensive and certainly as the most detailed and reliable of all countries on the African continent. Statistics on the number of crimes recorded by the SAPS at national level right down to station level have been publicly available since 1994. A remarkable achievement, considering the history of policing in the country.

Interpreting crime statistics

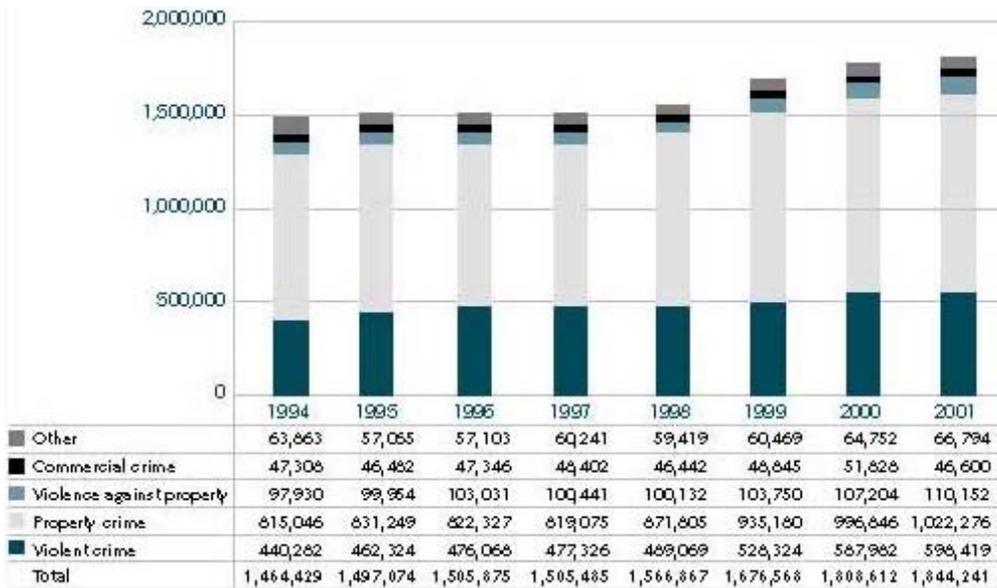
When analysing the crime statistics that follow below, it is important to remember that recorded crime levels undercount the real levels of crime, as unrecorded crimes are not reflected. For crime to make it on to the official police records two things need to happen. Firstly, victims or witnesses must report it to the police. Secondly, the police must record the crime in their records.

According to Statistics South Africa's 1997 national Victims of Crime Survey, crimes involving valuable and insured property are mostly reported. For example, 95% of vehicle thefts, 60% of vehicle hijackings and 59% of burglaries are reported. Less serious property crimes and interpersonal violent crimes are more often not reported than reported. Thus, only 41% of robberies, 38% of assaults and 28% of theft of personal property are reported (see Improved crime reporting, in this issue, for comments about how reporting affects police crime statistics).

National picture

During the first nine months of 2001, 1 844 000 crimes were recorded by the SAPS; up from 1 464 000 over the same nine month period in 1994 (Figure 1). If the January-September period for 2001 is compared with that of 1994, the number of recorded crimes increased by 26%.

Figure 1: Number of crimes recorded by the police, Jan-Sept 1994-2001

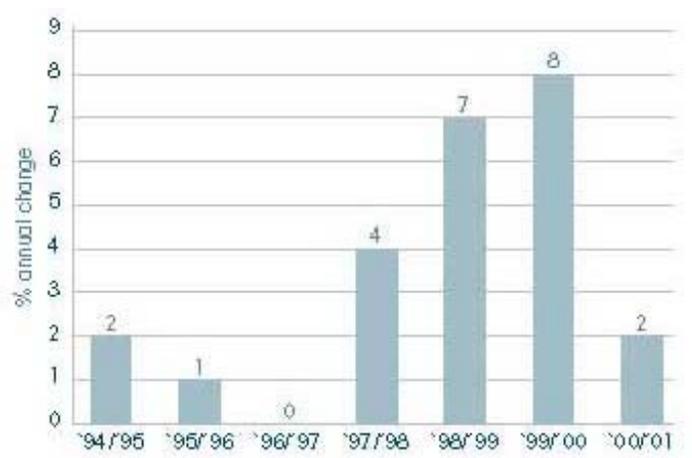


While the number of recorded crimes has increased since 1994, there has been little change in the relative proportions of the different crime categories. For example, in the period January-September 1994, violent crimes comprised 30.1% of all crimes recorded. During the January-September 2001 period this had increased to 32.5%. All other crime categories experienced a slight decline as a proportion of the overall number of recorded crimes. Property crimes make up the largest proportion of recorded crimes – approximately 55% of the total.

Change over time

While recorded crime increased between 2000 and 2001, the rate of increase is slowing down. If the first nine months of 1997 are compared with 1998, recorded crime increased by 4%. Thereafter, recorded crime increased by 7% (1998/99) and 8% (1999/00). The January-September 2001 period experienced a 2% increase compared to the same period in 2000 – the lowest year-on-year increase since 1996/97 (Figure 2).

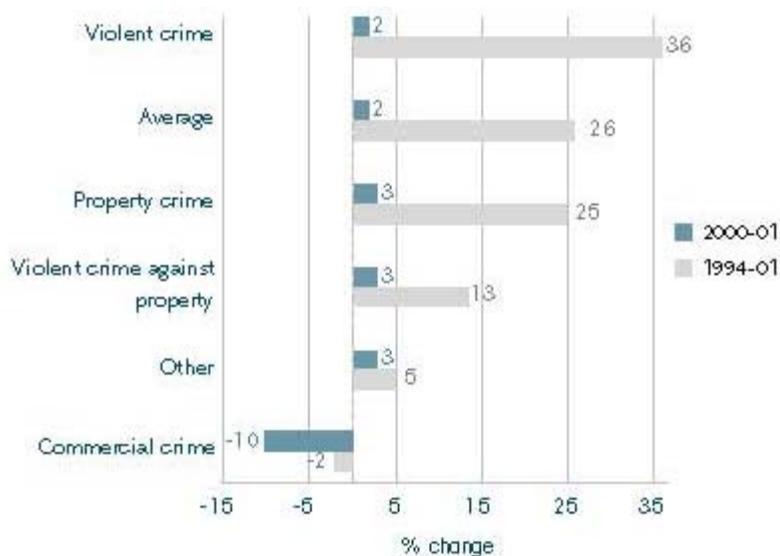
Figure 2: % change in number of crimes recorded, Jan-Sept 1994-2001



While the figures indicate a slowing down in the rate of increase of recorded crime in 2000/01, it needs to be remembered that this is occurring at a point where recorded levels of violent crime are extraordinarily high. The time period is too short, moreover, to draw a firm conclusion whether the trend will continue to the extent that recorded crime levels will enter a sustained period of decline.

In the January-September period between 1994 and 2001 the number of recorded violent crimes increased by 36%, more than any other crime category (Figure 3).

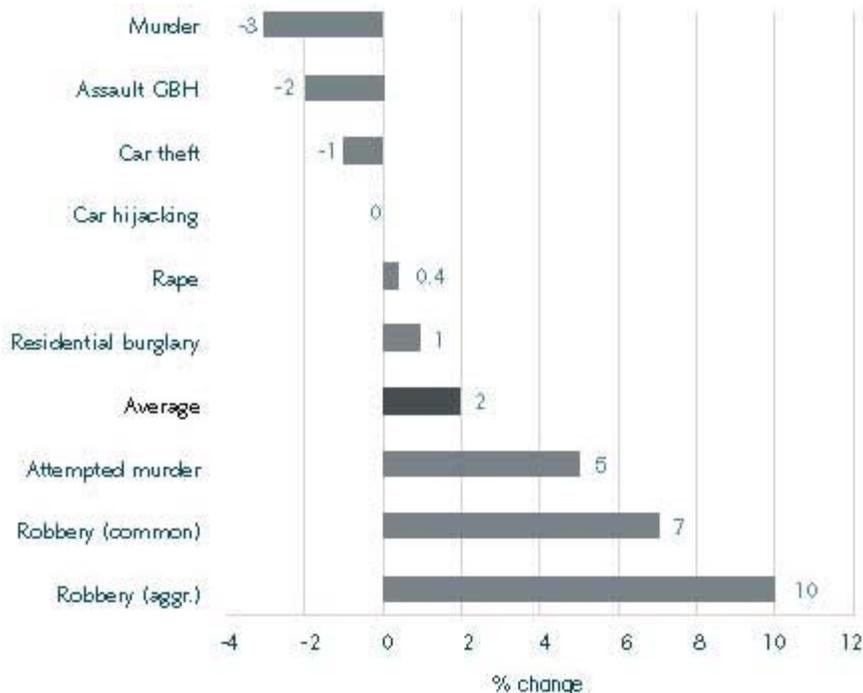
Figure 3: % change in the number of crimes recorded, Jan-Sept 1994-01 and 200-01



However, between 2000 and 2001 (again, for the period January-September) violent crime increased by 2%. Both the number of property crimes and violent crimes against property such as arson and malicious injury to property, increased to a greater extent (3%). Drunk driving offences, and drug and firearm related offences – categorised as ‘other’ also increased by 3%, while commercial crimes (primarily fraud) decreased by 10%.

Not all crimes increased or decreased at the same rate for the January-September period between 2000 and 2001. Robbery with aggravating circumstances and common robbery experienced the greatest increase of 10% and 7% respectively (Figure 4). Robberies with aggravating circumstances are robberies involving a dangerous weapon, including bank robberies, cash-in-transit heists and vehicle hijackings. Common robberies involve mainly muggings, as well as the snatching of handbags, jewellery and cell phones.

Figure 4: % change in selected crimes recorded, Jan-Sept 2000-2001

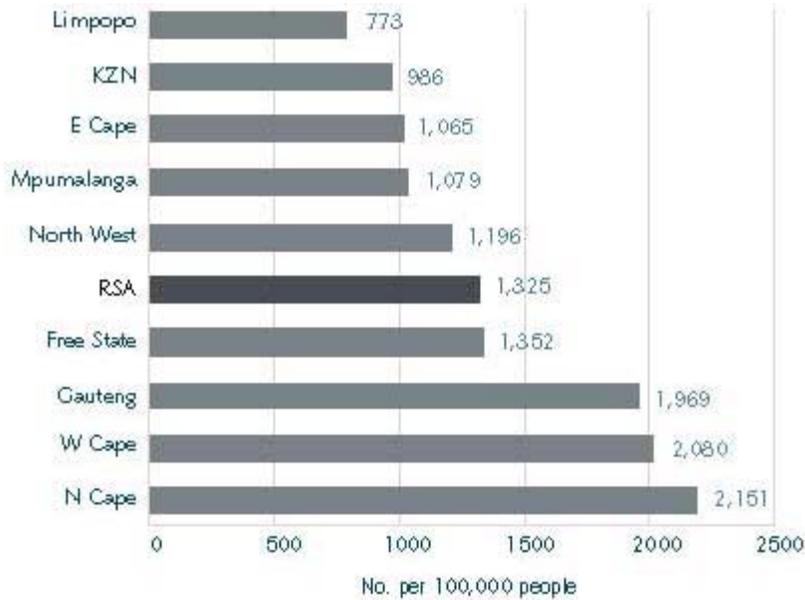


Recorded murders decreased by 3%. This is a continuation of a trend whereby the yearly number of murders has been declining since 1994. Disconcertingly, however, recorded attempted murders are up by 5%. Assault with the intent to inflict grievous bodily harm (assault GBH) decreased by 2% and car theft by 1%. Encouragingly, vehicle hijackings – a crime that instills a high level of fear amongst the public – did not increase over this period.

Violent crime in the provinces

Measured on a per capita basis, the violent crime rate for the January-September 2001 period is highest in the Northern Cape. In that province 2 151 violent crimes were recorded for every 100 000 people resident (Figure 5). In other words, the average resident of the Northern Cape stood a 2.15% chance of becoming a victim of a recorded violent crime during the first nine months of 2001. By comparison, the average South African faced a 1.3% chance of becoming a violent crime victim.

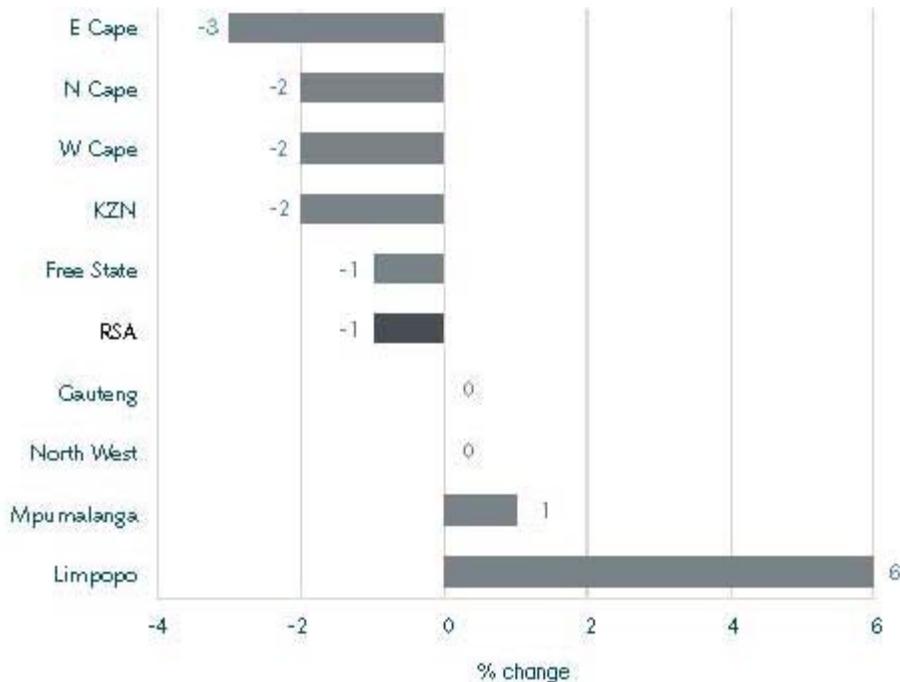
Figure 5: Violent crime rate in the provinces, Jan-Sept 2001



Recorded violent crime is spread unevenly over the country's nine provinces. Residents of the Northern Cape, Western Cape and Gauteng, for example, were more than two-and-a-half times as likely to become a victim of a recorded violent crime during the first nine months of 2001 than Limpopo residents.

However, this provincial disparity might slowly be changing. While the violent crime rate was lowest in Limpopo, the province experienced the greatest increase (6%) in the rate of recorded violent crime during January-September 2001, compared to the same period in 2000 (Figure 6). Mpumalanga, another province with a low violent crime rate, was the only other province that experienced an increase (1%) in the rate of recorded violent crime over the abovementioned period.

Figure 6: % change in violent crime rate, Jan-Sept 200-2001

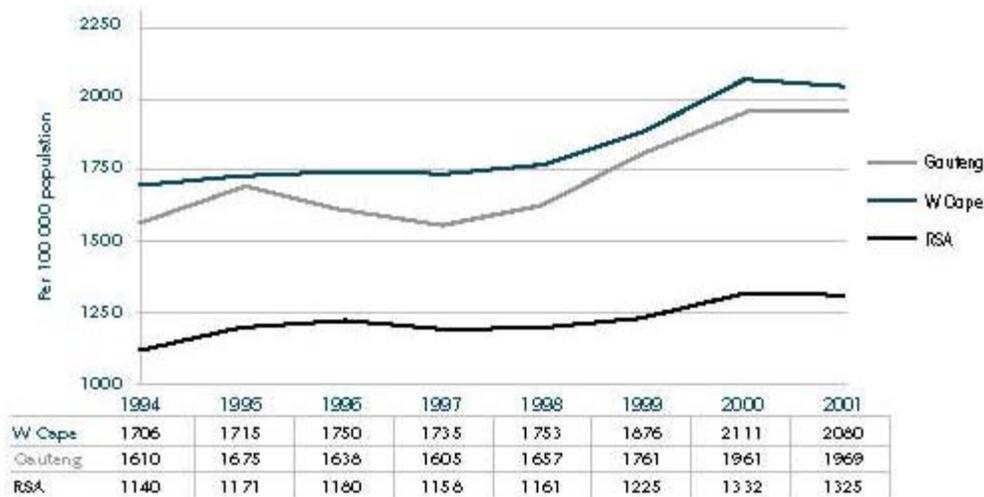


The Eastern Cape recorded a 3% decrease in its violent crime rate, followed by the Northern Cape, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal (all 2%).

Violence in the Western Cape

Contrary to popular belief, the per capita rate of violent crime has since 1994 been consistently higher in the Western Cape than in Gauteng. That is, since 1994 the average resident of the Western Cape has been at greater risk of becoming a victim of a recorded violent crime than the average Gauteng resident (Figure 7).

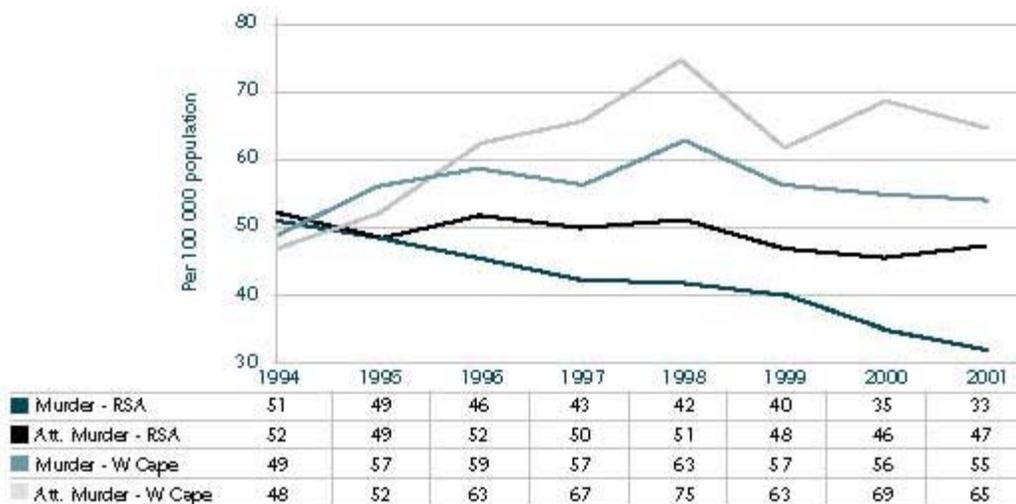
Figure 7: Violent crime rate in Western Cape and Gauteng, Jan-Sept 1994-2001



The changing levels of the violent crime rate in the Western Cape between 1994 and 2001, January-September period, are closely paralleled with those in Gauteng and the country as a whole. The late 1990s experienced a significant increase in violent crime rates in all three geographical areas, followed by a stabilisation or decline in the 2000/2001 period.

While national murder and attempted murder rates have declined since 1994, the opposite has been the case in the Western Cape. For the period January-September 1994 the Western Cape had lower rates of murder and attempted murder than the country as a whole (Figure 8).

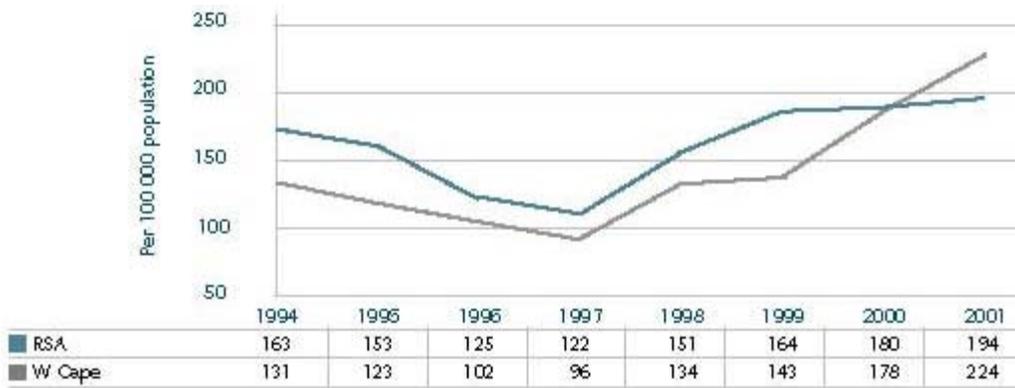
Figure 8: Murder and attempted murder rate in South Africa and Western Cape, Jan-Sept 1994-2001



However, in 2001 (January-September) the Western Cape's murder rate was 67% above the national average, while the province's attempted murder rate was 38% higher than the national average.

The Western Cape has experienced a significant increase in the rate of robberies with aggravating circumstances. During January-September 1994 the Western Cape's rate of aggravated robberies was 24% lower than the national average. In 2000 the province's aggravated robbery rate was roughly the same as that of the country as a whole. In 2001, the aggravated robbery rate in the Western Cape was 16% higher than in the country as a whole (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Aggravated robbery rate in South Africa and Western Cape, Jan-Sept 1994-2001



Similarly, the recorded vehicle hijacking rate in the Western Cape has more than doubled between 1994 and 2001, January-September, from six incidents per 100 000 residents to 13 incidents. Nationally, vehicle hijacking rates are higher but much more stable. The national vehicle hijacking rate increased marginally between 1994 and 2001, from 24 to 25 incidents per 100 000 of the population.

Conclusion

The recorded crime figures for the first three quarters of 2001 contain good news. Recorded crime is increasing at its lowest rate in years. When measured on a per capita basis violent crime – long a trademark of crime in South Africa – decreased between 2000 and 2001.

While the country needs good news about crime, South Africans should not be fooled into believing that the country is about to enter an era of low crime levels. The first nine months of 2001 witnessed an average of 55 murders, 137 rapes, 558 robberies and 1 350 assaults a day – and that is before unrecorded crime is taken into account.

Clearly crime levels have to actually decrease – and decrease for sustained periods of time – before the country reaches acceptable levels of crime. Moreover, levels of serious violent crime in the Western Cape are showing disturbing trends.

Source documents

All statistics in the graphs are provided by the SAPS CIAC, see www.saps.gov.za

