FACT SHEET: What the crime stats tell us, and what they don’t
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Total Crime Levels
Looking at crime trends over time at a national level can provide an interesting picture – but it does not help us to understand what causes the increases and decreases in the levels of crime. Unless one disaggregates the crime statistics by crime type at provincial or local level, the statistics can raise more questions than they answer.

For example, the graph below shows quite clearly that crime levels peaked in 2002/03, and yet there is no clear explanation for why this was the case. After the high of 2002/03 we saw a downward trend in overall levels of crime resulting in a reduction of 24% over four years and yet the reasons for this also remain speculative. Over the past two years we have seen a reversal of the downward trend. Crime is on the rise again but there is no quick or easy answer for why this is the case.

Total national crime levels
1994/05 - 2009/10
What these statistics do however make very clear is that merely increasing the numbers of police and the police budget is not going to show quick results. In part this is because there are many crimes which policing can do little to prevent. These crimes include murder, assault, sexual offences and domestic violence. These are the crimes the police usually refer to as ‘social fabric’ or ‘contact’ crimes because they largely occur between people who know each other in private spaces. As a result they don’t respond to traditional forms of visible policing such as patrols, roadblocks or ‘crackdown’ operations. Nevertheless, over the past nine years these types of crimes have either reduced or stabilised, which is of course very good news.

**Murder & Attempted Murder**

*1994/95 – 2009/10 (rates per 100 000)*

The reduction in murder is particularly good news given that this is the most accurate statistic for interpersonal violent crime. The decrease of 7.2% in the absolute numbers of murders is the third largest year-on-year decline since 1995. It is not clear why this is the case. Since most murders occur between people who know each other it is likely that the decrease is as the result of social factors. However, the large 10% decrease in street robberies may have also contributed to the decline.
While murder has decreased significantly, there hasn’t been a notable change in the trends for assault. Although incidents of assault decreased by well over 20% between 2002/3 and 2009/10 the figures have now stabilised, showing slight increases over the past year. Research is necessary to understand why, when both murder and attempted murder have decreased, we have not seen a corresponding decrease in assault, since both murder and attempted murder often start out as an assault,
The graph above demonstrates the trends in each of the three so-called ‘Trio crimes’, namely residential robberies, business robberies and vehicle hijacking. The latest crime statistics seem to suggest that we may have turned a corner with these crimes which we have seen increase substantially over the past six years. In 2009/10 vehicle hijacking decreased by 6.8% which is very positive. There has also been a significant decrease in vehicle theft which suggests that technology to reduce vehicle theft and hijacking is improving along with the ability of the police to address stolen vehicle syndicates. Residential robbery, which has increased by 100% since 2003/04, can be considered to have stabilised with a small 1.9% increase in 2009/10.

The trend in business robbery is the most stark. This crime increased by 295.3% between 2003/04 and 2009/10. The good news is that the rate of increase seems to have slowed – to 4.4% in the past year. This change in trend is likely to be as a result of improved policing in the areas of intelligence and investigations targeting the perpetrators of these crimes. Nevertheless, it is too soon to tell whether the police have managed to get on top of these crimes; we will only know if they have succeeded with the release of the crime statistics in 2011.

Whereas violent crime has generally decreased, commercial crime or so-called ‘white collar’ crime increased by 9%. This may be a sign of increasing financial pressure on the middle-class as a result of the weaker economy over the past three years.
Shoplifting and Commercial Crime
2002/3 – 2009/10

To assess the impact of policing against these crimes, it is worth looking at the changes in the police personnel figures and budget over this period. The graph below demonstrates the extent to which police numbers and budget have increased steadily.

**Police personnel**
2002/03 – 2010/11

Between 2002/03 and 2009/10, an additional 61 000 personnel were recruited into the South African Police Service (SAPS). This represents an increase of 44.4%. 
In the six year period between 2004 and 2010, the budget of SAPS increased by almost 132% from R22.7 billion to R52.6 billion. A large proportion of this budget went to recruiting additional personnel but large investments have also been made in technology and training.

Despite this being a substantial increase, it has not yet translated into positive results in relation to public trust in the police. Various opinion polls have demonstrated that the police are the least trusted of all government agencies. It is critical that this is addressed if the public are to work more closely with the police to improve public safety.

In addition, although the numbers of police has increased, they are still not being effectively utilised to the extent that they should be. Weak internal accountability and discipline has contributed to public experiences and perceptions of poor service delivery, misconduct and corruption, all of which have contributed to low morale within the organisation and undermined police effectiveness.

The 2009/10 statistics provide the clearest picture to date; it is not more policing but smarter and accountable policing that is needed if we are to achieve the levels of safety that all South Africans desire. We welcome the Minister of Police’s statement that there is a move to improve partnerships between the police, business, civil society and communities. However effective partnerships require trust and sharing of information. The refusal to release local crime statistics on a monthly basis continues to undermine the extent to which there can be collective action against crime.
Policing in South Africa can be substantially improved and crime can be significantly reduced if we are willing to learn from the lessons of the past, study examples of international best practice in policing and make use of the collective expertise, skills and wisdom available across South African society. It is now clear more than ever, that a new approach to police management and partnerships is needed.

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