FACT SHEET:

Explaining the official crime statistics for 2011/12

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Total crime levels in South Africa

Overall, South Africa’s crime situation has improved steadily over the past decade. Since the 2002/03 financial year, when total crime levels peaked in South Africa, the overall crime rate has decreased by 21%. However, this trend changed recently when a 3% increase in total crime levels was recorded in the two-year period between 2007/08 and 2009/10, caused largely by increases in property-related crimes such as theft and commercial crimes. However, total crime rates decreased again between 2009/10 and 2010/11 by a marginal 2,4%. In the latest figures we see total crime again decreasing slightly by 2,6% from 2 071 487 cases last year to 2 016 316. Overall, property-related crime increased by 0,3%, while overall violent crime decreased by 2,3%.

It is important to remember though that the most recent crime statistics released for 2011/12 do not provide any insight into the current crime trends or rates. They only tell us about crimes that were recorded by the South African Police Service (SAPS) between 31 March 2011 and 1 April 2012. This means that the most recent figures available are already six months out of date. When it comes to the local precinct-level crime statistics, the crime situation could be very different to that presented by these statistics.

At the end of 2011, Statistics South Africa released the findings of the most recent National Victims of Crime Survey (NVCS). This survey offers data from which to independently assess public experiences and perceptions of crime and the criminal
justice system. This survey provides an opportunity to assess whether crime trends being released by the SAPS can be independently verified at a national and provincial level.

The survey found that South Africans’ perception of crime supported the trend in the crime statistics with most responses, just over 41%, perceiving that both violent and property crime had decreased in their areas over the past two years. Just over a quarter (26%) believed that crime had stayed the same while fewer than one in three (32%) of those surveyed thought that crime had increased in their areas. As expected, perceptions that crime is decreasing lead to people feeling safer. The NVCS found that the proportion of people who felt safe walking in their areas after dark increased from a national average of 22% in 2007 to 37% in 2011. These findings support the trend reflected in the SAPS statistics that crime rates overall are decreasing.

Figure 1: Total national crime levels 1994/95 – 2011/12

The table above shows that overall serious crime levels have decreased dramatically since the 2002/2003 financial year by 21%. The current overall levels of crime are actually quite comparable with the levels recorded in 1994/1995. While the overall crime rate is a useful indication of how we are faring overall, it doesn’t tell us much about which crimes are increasing and which are decreasing. It also doesn’t tell us where in
South Africa crime is decreasing or increasing, nor does it help us understand the reasons for the changes in specific crime rates. For that we need to take a closer look at the different crime types as well as the provincial trends.

**Murder and attempted murder**

Unfortunately it remains the case that our murder and violent crime rates are far higher than they should be, with 30,9 South Africans in every 100 000 the victims of homicide. This means in the 2011/12 financial year a total of 15 609 murders were recorded by the police, an average of a little under 43 per day.

Fortunately, however, this reflected a 3,1% decline in murder in 2011/12 when compared with the previous rate of 31,9 murders per 100 000 in 2010/11. This means that since 1994 the murder rate has decreased by almost 54%, when it stood at 66,9 per 100 000 people. Attempted murder also continued with its downward trend, decreasing by 5,2% compared to 2010/11. This is smaller than the 12,2% decrease recorded in the previous year. The 2011/12 national attempted murder rate stands at 29,4 per 100 000. This means that there were 14 859 attempted murders in 2011/12.

According to data gathered by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), this ranks us as having one of the highest homicide rates in Africa and the world. Our murder rate is just under twice that of the average for Africa, which is 17 murders per 100 000, and four and a half times more than the global average of 6,9 murders per 100 000.

The most recent UNODC study on global murder rates now shows that South Africa has the 16th highest murder rate of those countries measured. At least five other African countries have higher murder rates, including the Ivory Coast (56,9), Zambia (38), Uganda (36,3), Malawi (36) and Lesotho (35,2). The country with the highest murder rate in the world as of 2012 is Honduras, with 91,6 murders per 100 000.
Assault common and assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm (GBH)

Assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm (GBH) is assault that is intended to result in serious injury that would typically require medical attention. This is an important crime category as it makes up 31% of the total violent crime category. This crime has maintained the downward trend of the last eight years. This year serious assault decreased by 4.2% to a rate of 380.8 per 100 000 or 192 651 incidents. This is a reduction of 37% compared to the high of 605.7 per 100 000 people recorded in 2003/4. During 2009/10 we saw a slight increase (1%) in the incidence of common assault, the second largest violent crime category, but the decreasing trend continued this year by 3.4% so that the serious assault rate now stands at 359.1 per 100 000, according to SAPS figures. This means that 192 651 cases of assault GBH were opened this year, an average of 529 cases per day.

There are questions about the extent to which the police figures on assault accurately reflect the real extent of this crime in South Africa. The Department of Justice reported to parliament this year that 217 989 cases of protection orders were opened mostly by women against their partners. This suggests that many criminal cases of assault are not opened with the police and that people prefer other ways of dealing with this problem. In fact, the NVCS found that assault is one of the most common types of crime both experienced and feared by just over one in five (21%) of all adult South Africans.
Sexual offences

The new Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, No. 32 of 2007, came into effect in December 2007 and created a number of ‘new’ sexual offences other than ‘conventional’ rape. This makes it impossible to compare the statistics on sexual offences before December 2007 with more recent figures. More importantly, because the new category called ‘total sexual crimes’ contains 59 separate offences ranging from sex-work related offences to rape, it is not a useful way to assess serious forms of sexual abuse.

Nevertheless, this relatively new crime category has decreased by 8,5% since it was first introduced in 2008/9, when 70 514 cases were recorded, until 2011/12 with 64 514 cases. It is important to remember that sexual offences suffer from low reporting rates and the crime statistics are thus not a good indication of the actual number of cases. From the previous statistics it is clear that the reduction in overall sexual offences has largely been driven by a reduction in crimes that require police detection because no one reports them (e.g. sex-work) rather than those that require victims reporting (e.g. rape or sexual abuse).

Last year, for the first time since 2005, the Minister of Police provided the statistics for the particular crime of rape. Rape has consistently increased since 2008/9, and while this may indicate higher levels of reporting, research conducted by the Medical Research Council over the past two years has shown that the levels of rape perpetration in South Africa are unusually high. In 2008/09 the police recorded 54 126
cases of rape, this increased to 55,097 in 2009/10 and increased again in 2010/11 to 56,272 (representing a 3% overall increase for this time period). For 2011/2012 reported rape decreased for the first time by 1.9%.

Figure 4: Sexual offences 2008/09 – 2011/12

Aggravated robbery

Aggravated robbery refers to a broad category of violent crime whereby the perpetrator, usually armed, uses or threatens force to steal the property of a victim. This category comprises seven sub-categories, including street robbery, robbery at residential premises (house robbery), robbery at non-residential premises (business robbery), carjacking, truck-hijacking, cash-in-transit (CIT) robbery and bank robbery.

This form of robbery has a serious impact on perceptions of general public safety because of its violent nature and the oft-reported brutality of the robbers. The economic impact of aggravated robbery is both direct (cash and property) and indirect (emotional trauma, cost of increasing security and insurance while hindering investment).

With 101,203 aggregated robberies recorded in 2011/12, a marginal decrease of 0.3% was apparent compared to the year before. This is a notable shift when compared to the large 16.4% decrease over the preceding two years. Street robberies, of which 58,190 were recorded in the recent figures, make up the bulk (57%) of the total aggravated robbery figure in South Africa. To date, reductions in total aggravated robberies have been largely driven by decreases in this specific sub-category. This crime may be decreasing over the years due to the substantial increase in visible policing given that the ranks of the SAPS have swelled by almost 70,000 people since 2002/03. It is
therefore concerning that we see a change in this trend with the slight 0,5% increase in street robberies recorded during 2011/12.

*Figure 5: Aggravated robbery 2003/04 – 2011/12*

Within the category of aggravated robbery it is the so-called ‘trio crimes’, including residential robbery, business robbery and car hijacking, that catch the popular imagination and impact negatively on public perceptions of safety.

The fact that vehicle hijackings have declined by 10,8% this year is very good news. This means that since 2009/10, this crime has decreased by a remarkable 34,4%. The consequence is that 4 427 fewer vehicles were hijacked in 2011/12 than was the case two years before.

At 16 766 cases recorded on 2011/12, residential robbery decreased by a marginal 0,7%, which signals a notable change in the trend from the previous two years when this crime declined a substantial 10,1%. Residential robberies have been of serious concern for some time now given that they increased by 100% between 2003/04 and 2009/10. The NVCS reveals that more people (50,4%) were scared of this crime happening to them than any other crime category.

With 15 951 cases recorded, business robbery continued to rise with an 8,8% increase compared to the previous year. That means that since 2004/05 this crime has increased by a substantial 380%. There was hope over the past two years that this crime could start to decrease after the rate of increase was 0,9% in 2010/11.
Figure 6: Trio crimes 2003/04 – 2011/12

Commercial crime and shoplifting

The broad category ‘commercial crime’, which includes all kinds of corruption, fraud, money laundering, embezzlement, forgery and so forth, has increased consistently by a substantial 63% between 2004/05 and 2010/11. With 88 050 cases recorded in 2011/12, this trend has changed somewhat given that it reflects a very small decrease of 0.4% or 338 cases compared with the previous year. The recent decrease is unlikely to represent a significant change in this broad crime category given that both public and private sectors are notoriously bad at reporting these crimes to the police and the actual incidence of fraud is generally understood to be far greater than that recorded in the official crime statistics.

Shoplifting decreased by 8.3% with 71 848 cases recorded in 2011/12. This follows an 11.6% decrease in the previous year. These large decreases have happened despite the economic recession and continued high rates of unemployment and poverty in South Africa. It is not clear why this crime continues to decrease but it may be due to increased security measures at larger shops and a reluctance to report this crime at smaller establishments.
Can we trust the crime statistics?

At the Institute for Security Studies we are often asked to comment on whether the statistics are reliable. This is a fair question and we have to explain that the reliability and validity of crime statistics depends on many factors. First, it depends on the extent to which the public reports crime incidents to the police. Whether this happens or not is determined by factors such as the extent to which the public thinks the police will be able to arrest the perpetrator, whether people are insured and whether they trust the police. All this differs substantially from one community to the next. Second, if crimes are reported, statistical accuracy depends on the capabilities of the tens of thousands of police officers at the 1122 police stations all over the country, before the figures are compiled by police Head Office in Pretoria.

All countries that produce crime statistics face the same problems and it is therefore important to acknowledge that nowhere in the world are crime statistics a scientific measure of a crime challenge. Rather, we use them as indicators to track the trend of broad crime categories over time. While the police statistics are the most comprehensive measure of crime in South Africa, we don’t only rely on them to determine crime trends. This is because we are able to use other independent sources of information to verify the trends in specific crime categories.
One source of alternative data are the ‘National Victims of Crime’ surveys conducted in 1997, 2003, 2007 and 2011. In addition, data released by the Medical Science Research Council recently, which compares female homicides in 1999 and 2009, confirms the downward trend in homicide generally; and while the murder of women is not decreasing at nearly the same rate as overall homicide, it does confirm the trend.

We can assess the trends in crimes such as residential robbery, burglary, vehicle hijacking and theft with statistics on claims received annually for these types of crimes by members of the South African Insurance Association (SAIA). We can also assess trends in business-related crime from data collected by private bodies such as the South African Banking Risk and Information Centre (SABRIC), the Consumer Goods Council of South Africa and the annual Grant Thornton International Business Report, which measures victimisation trends among business owners, their immediate families and employees. These various independent data sets allow us to make a reasonable assessment of the trends for different crimes in South Africa.

To date, there has always been consistency in the trends shown by independent sources and the police statistics. So although there has been evidence that at some police stations crime statistics have been manipulated, at a national and provincial level the effect is not detrimental for assessing crime trends.

There are certain categories of crime for which it is very difficult to obtain comparative information. This is particularly the case for rape and other sexual offences. The lack of comparative information for sexual offences is, however, only one of the problems we face since these crimes also suffer from particularly low reporting rates.

**To what extent is policing causing crime to go down?**

Research has shown that crime statistics alone are not an appropriate measure of police performance. Crime is a complex phenomenon with a range of social, economic and other contributory factors. The interventions that could have an impact on reductions in crime would be equally complex and diverse. Policing therefore can play a bigger role in reducing some crimes such as robbery and corruption, but is unlikely to adequately bring down high rates of inter-personal violence.

We know, for example, that crimes associated with interpersonal violence such as murder, attempted murder, assault and rape largely happen between people who know each other (between 60-80% of cases) and with specific reference to murder, police docket analysis has shown that approximately 65% of these incidents were motivated by ‘social situations’ involving arguments, jealousy and other domestic issues and were
often associated with alcohol abuse. A much smaller proportion of murder (16%) occurs as a result of another crime such as robbery. It is obvious that there is very little that the police can do to address the social, economic and other conditions that lead to many interpersonal violent incidents and therefore changes in these crimes are often as a result of factors independent of what the police do.

There are policing policies and strategies that can have a positive impact on crime reduction. For example, the efficiency with which the police enforce legislation such as the Firearms Control Act to restrict firearm ownership and the removal of large numbers of illegal firearms has shown to contribute to the reduction in the murder rate in South Africa. There are, however, crimes relating to the activities of organised criminal groups, including property and violent property-related crimes, where the police can have a very direct impact. Typical police actions in these instances would be, for example, deterrence through high visibility in the right areas based on good intelligence and through thorough investigations.

Nevertheless, it is high time that we collectively re-think our approach to safety to better reflect on what causes many of our crimes and how we can reduce them without an over-reliance on the criminal justice system.

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For more information including detailed crime maps for all policing precincts in South Africa please visit the Crime and Justice Information and Analysis Hub at www.issafrica.org/crimehub

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