

Understanding violent crime in South Africa

Some thoughts

South Africa suffers from an unusually high violent crime rate. **Vanessa Barolsky** compares violent crime with other countries, examines possible causes and suggests an approach to tackling the issue.

Everyday when South Africans open their newspapers, listen to their radios or turn on their televisions they are confronted with gruesome images of violent crime. Newscasts carry stories of children who have been killed by their parents in horrific circumstances, or children who kill their parents, stories of young girls who are violently raped as they walk to school, school pupils who stab each other over small change, and people who are shot and tortured during armed robberies or murdered for their cell phones. Are the media reports alarmist? Do they reflect the reality of people's daily lives?

LEVELS OF CRIME

The promise offered by South

Africa's first democratic elections in 1994 was that with the end of apartheid levels of violence in South African society would drop significantly. However, various forms of social violence at all levels of society have remained at extremely high levels.

Although the murder rate has declined from a total of over 26 000 in 1994 to just over 19 000 murders recorded in the latest crime statistics, South Africa still has one of the highest per capita murder rates in the world.

It is difficult to compare crime statistics between countries because different countries classify crime in different ways. However, we can reliably compare murder statistics because it is the crime worldwide and is most often reported. This comparison indicates that South Africa, which has a murder rate of approximately 40 people per 100 000 population, may have one of the highest murder rates in the world after Columbia in South America. In comparison the US has a murder rate of approximately five murders per 100 000 population.

In addition, surveys which ask people about their personal experience of crime in South Africa have consistently indicated that crime rates are significantly higher than reflected in police statistics. Many crimes are not reported to the police. This is a worldwide trend. Many people who have been victimised, particularly those who are victims of rape, are unwilling to

come forward to report crimes for fear of public exposure or because they do not think the crime is important enough to report.

EFFECT OF HIGH CRIME

Therefore the actual crime rate may be higher than recorded crime statistics. These continuing high levels of violent crime have led to a struggle to understand the nature of the problem among the South African public, intellectual commentators, and even the government's criminal justice sector – the police, courts and prisons, which have the authority to address the problem.

Minister of Safety and Security, Charles Nqakula, also acknowledged this when the South African Police Service (SAPS) released its crime statistics in July. While these statistics reflected a decline in overall crime, Nqakula nevertheless stated, "We are deeply concerned that crime continues to be rife and that the crime rate continues to be high. The fact that instances of serious and violent crime are very high is disconcerting and unacceptable".

Violent crime, as defined by the South African Police Services, includes murder, attempted murder, assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm (assault GBH), common assault, and rape. These crimes, which the police call "contact crimes", account for 33% of South Africa's recorded serious crime. These crimes involve physical contact between the victims and

perpetrators and such contact is usually of a violent nature.

The minister's admission that levels of violent crime are still unacceptably high is significant because the capacity of a democratic state to govern is based on its ability to provide its citizens with a minimum level of security. It must guarantee their constitutional right to life and to provide an enabling environment for them to exercise all their constitutional rights.

We know that the level of security that citizens feel is an important index of their feelings toward the efficiency of governance in a society. Violent crime is hence fundamentally an issue of democratic governance in the broadest sense of the word. A recent survey indicated that although South Africans' trust in public institutions has been steadily improving since 2000, the police are seen as one of the least trustworthy institutions in the country.

The government itself recognised the harmful effects of violent crime on society and on people's perceptions of government's effectiveness, when in 2004 it concluded that it needed to reduce "contact crimes" by between 7 to 10% a year for the next ten years. This would bring South Africa to the same level of contact crime as other countries who are members of the international police organisation, Interpol. While some contact crimes have fallen, the decrease in levels of particularly murder, aggravated robbery, rape and indecent assault, fall far short of the 7 to 10% reduction needed.

South African society is therefore challenged by behaviour which undermines the bonds of solidarity, community and trust between citizens. If citizens are afraid, are engaged in or are victims of criminal activities, the bonds of solidarity and community are undermined. This

weakens the fabric which holds a society together. This is particularly significant in South Africa where at least two thirds of violent crime takes place, not between strangers as we often assume, but between people who know each other – lovers, friends or neighbours. Docket analysis conducted by the SAPS indicates that 89% of assault GBH and common assault cases, 82% of murders and 76% of rapes involved people known to one another.

Crimes happen largely in poorer communities where social conditions are the most difficult. They happen in informal settlements where people are new to an area, have not formed connections with each other and where social infrastructure and policing is bad. These problems are made worse by drug and alcohol abuse. Therefore homes and neighbourhoods, which should be places where people build intimacy and connection, are often the sites where the most violence takes place.

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENT CRIME

Researchers agree that there are a common set of risk factors relating to violent crime which characterise South Africa and other developing countries. These have to do with social dislocation, economic inequality, poverty and unemployment, and histories of authoritarian rule.

Critical factors include questions of gender inequality and ideas about masculinity within the community and family. This includes acceptance of violence by men against women as a way for men to assert their authority; the breakdown of family structures inherited from apartheid which deliberately separated families; the educational environment where children are exposed to violence from their peers and teachers; inequality between the very rich and poor;

rapid migration and urbanisation that may result in a lack of community bonding; questions of identity and citizenship which effect the extent to which people feel obliged to obey the law; as well as the impact of HIV/AIDS especially in gender violence or in the rape of young children.

Yet, all these factors do not provide a complete explanation for violent crime. Amartya Sen, a Nobel Prize winner in economics and author of *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* who recently came to South Africa, spoke of the need to avoid easy answers and rushed solutions to the problem of violence. Rushed approaches tend to assume rather than question the causes of violence. Two examples of such assumptions will demonstrate this point. Firstly, the assumption that there is an inevitable link between poverty and violence or that here is a link between the high number of guns and violence.

However, as Sen pointed out, Calcutta, one of the poorest cities in India, has one of the lowest crime levels in the country. On the other hand while Canadians have more guns than Americans, their murder rates are much lower than in the US. This does not mean that in some instances violence is linked to poverty or easily available firearms.

In South Africa there is no doubt that poor social conditions create the context for much violent crime. Recent police statistics reveal that murders in the last quarter of the year happened in only 8.5% of police precincts, while sexual offences were recorded in 10.3% of station areas. By far the majority of these crimes occur in 'megatownships' in metropolitan areas. These precincts usually include large and growing informal settlements. All of these areas are characterised by poor socioeconomic conditions.



While socioeconomic conditions and the availability of firearms, which are used in 46% of violent offences, may have a significant impact on levels of crime, consensus amongst scholars internationally is that violent crime is multifaceted. It is not possible to link a single cause, such as alcohol abuse, to violent crime whether it is assault, murder, robbery or rape. Violent crime is a result of a complex mixture of factors that occur within a particular context or environment.

This thinking is borne out in South Africa, for example, by significant regional variations in the types of violence. These variations sometimes challenge the causal connections we assume such as between violent crime and high levels of social inequality. For instance, the Western Cape has the highest rate of murder in the country. However, of all the provinces it is characterised by the lowest levels of inequality. But a closer look at the Western Cape reveals that it is experiencing the highest rate of population growth in the country and that violent crime is largely concentrated in areas like Nyanga, Crossroads and Khayelitsha, which is where large numbers of young men are settling.

Therefore it is clear that despite what government officials and politicians attempt to claim, there are no 'quick fix' solutions to the problem. It is only when we begin to acknowledge and understand the complexity of the problem that we will be able to build a basis to imagine creative and innovative responses to freeing South Africa from the constant fear of violence. ¹⁵

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