



RESPONSE

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Crime Statistics 2014

The national crime statistics released on Friday 19th September, covering the period 2013-2014 makes for very dispiriting reading. Oliver Goldsmith's words come to mind 'ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey.'

The total number of crimes for the period totalled 2 218 638 slightly up from the 2 126 537 from the year before. Taken by categories there were various indications of a decrease in some important areas. Amongst these was a decrease in total sexual crimes (62,649), assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm (183,173), common assault (167, 157), kidnapping (4,158) and crimes linked to the neglect and ill treatment of children (2630).

By contrast a number of areas linked to violent crimes and aggravated robbery showed marked increases. Murder and attempted murder were up at 17, 068 and 17,110 respectively. This totals at 174,855 murders in South Africa over the past decade, 2004-2014. This does not include the 121, 736 people killed in what is classified by SAPS to be culpable homicide. Also 68 police officers were killed in the exercise of their duties in the period under review. Most analysis of the murder statistics confirms that most murders are carried out by people whom the victims know to some degree. It has been pointed out that this being the case, it is hardly a good gauge for police performance since it makes police prevention of these crimes difficult if not impossible.

Also on the increase were common robbery (53 858), bank robbery (21), aggravated robberies at residential premises (19, 284), non-residential properties (18,615), carjacking (11 221), truck hijacking (11 221) and drug related crime (260 732). In this category it is possible to criticise police performance since judicious use of intelligence, visible policing and operational coordination and cooperation will have an effect on the criminal landscape.

Each statistic represents a human life and every crime involves not just the victim but a myriad of others. It also represents incalculable costs ranging from monetary expenses to the mental anguish and leaves behind deep psychological scars. An example from outside of South Africa, makes the point well. In a study from the USA, Iowa State University research showed that the overall cost of every car break in costs about \$41,288 including all hidden expenses, armed robberies tallied \$335,733. The study, reported on by Annie Lowrey in 'True Crime Costs' in October 2010, reckons that the cost of crime borne by the Federal Government in the USA, exceeded the amount spent on MEDICAID in 2009. She argues that the investment, no matter how seemingly high, in saving high risk youths from situations that would lead them into a criminal environment, is a worthwhile investment.

The dismal situation regarding crime in South Africa forces us to raise again, very serious concerns. There are many concerns around the SAPS. These range from political meddling in appointments and promotion that has led to demoralisation in the professional force, to increased complaints with regard to police brutality. Several very public cases over the past years have tarnished the police's reputation. Lack of skills has also been cited as a problem as has been the fact that police have been used extensively in quelling public protests, often without the necessary skills. There were strong appeals by the panel revealing the statistics, for trust in and support for the police force which is right in itself. This however must be matched with a commitment to the ongoing and rapid professionalising of the police force. The national policing board suggested in the National Development Plan should also be implemented forthwith. It has been noted that recently higher number arrests have been made by the police, but the numbers of the convictions have remained static, pointing to the fact that aspects of the criminal justice system remain problematic and as such are a hindrance to crime reduction.

It is clear that the prevention of crime and the reduction of criminal activities cannot be laid solely at the police's door. The roots of crime lay in diverse social conditions and these causes such as poverty, poor social attitudes and the like must be countered with vigour. The Deputy Minister was correct to point out that given the complex social origins of crime, there is indeed a shared responsibility to combat crime and to eradicate its causes. There is also a need to develop or strengthen public/private partnerships in this regard. Nonetheless proper policing is a right that the public can expect and is entitled to in any democratic country.

Despite the downward trend in crimes concerning children, many NGO's have called again this year for the disaggregation of these figures so that a truer picture can be formed of the individual categories of crime. In this report for example 50 different types of sexual crimes are grouped together. There is an indication that these statistics might be differentiated in future. There needs to be more advocacy by NGO's to ensure that this happens.

There remains a good deal of discussion around the frequency with which these statistics are published. The Commissioner emphasised that the annual publication allows for trends to be verified and so forth. This might well be true, but it is also true that there are differing opinions on this score and that it might be worth pursuing more frequent reporting to assess the best possible practise. Given the dire situation every possible approach should be followed in the hope of establishing better practises.

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