

CHAPTER 6

CRIME LEVELS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Key points

- Crime, as measured by the victim surveys, dropped slightly between 1998 and 2003: 22.9% of South Africans were victims in the 12-month period between September 2002 and August 2003—down 1.6% from 24.5% in 1998.
- The only type of crime where the share of victims increased during the past five years was housebreaking.
- Property crimes occurred more frequently than violent crimes, with the five most prevalent crimes being non-violent.
- Housebreaking, followed by corruption and then theft of personal property were the most prevalent crimes in the country.
- A victimisation rate of less than 1% was recorded for serious crimes such as murder, sexual assault and car hijacking.
- Almost all the victims of car theft and hijacking reported the crime to the police. However, reporting rates for other serious crimes like housebreaking, assault and particularly robbery were low. The main reason for not reporting was that it was regarded as unnecessary or that the crime was not important enough—even in the case of violent offences like assault and robbery.

This chapter discusses crime rates in South Africa as reported to the survey by members of the public. The 'victimisation rate' as it is called, is established by asking a representative sample of South Africans over the age of 16, whether or not they (or in some cases their household) had been a victim of any crime in the 12 month period preceding the survey date—in other words between September 2002 and August 2003. The victimisation rate for this period (referred to below as the '2003' rate) was compared with that recorded in the 1998 national victim survey.

This chapter also discusses the extent to which victims reported their experiences of crime to the police. The 'reporting rate' does to some extent reflect levels of public confidence in the police. However, reporting rates are also useful for considering whether the police crime statistics provide an accurate picture of the levels of crime in the country.

It is important to note, as was pointed out in chapter two, that this discussion of crime levels in South Africa covers only those crime types that are recorded by victim surveys. The crimes that were not recorded by this survey are: crimes against businesses, crimes against children, and drug and firearm related offences. Crimes that were included, but which traditionally are poorly recorded by victim surveys are domestic violence, rape and sexual offences, and fraud. Corruption is covered in this chapter, although it was treated differently to the other crime types in the questionnaire.

Victimisation rates in 2003

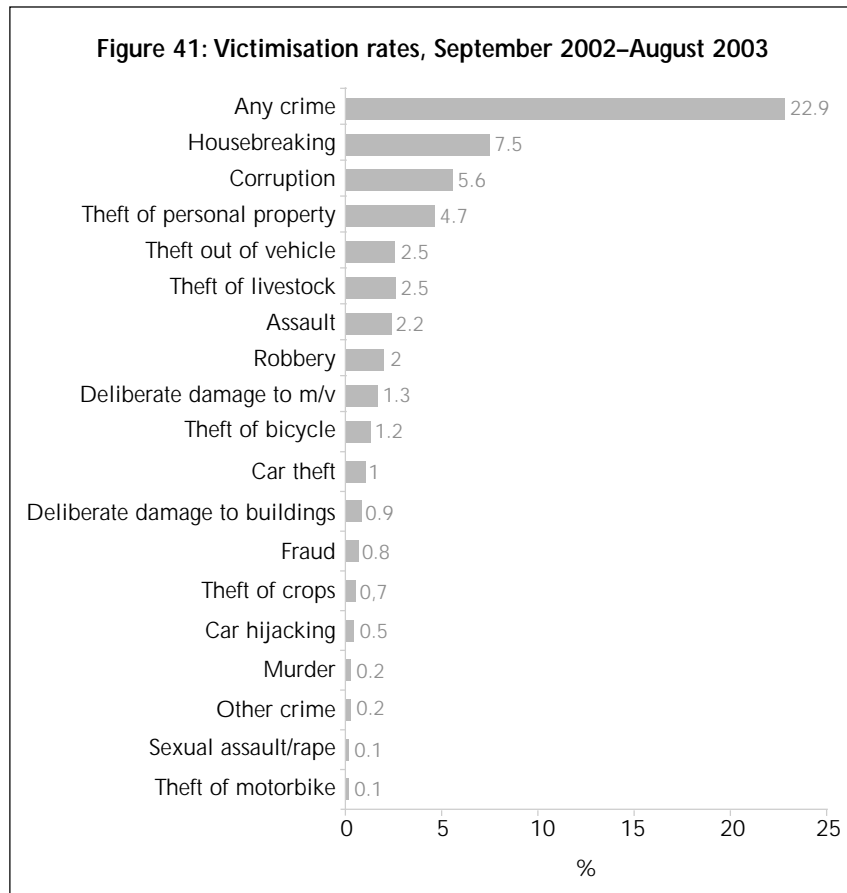
In the 12 months between September 2002 and August 2003, nearly one quarter of all South Africans (22.9%) had been a victim of crime. In most cases, these were property crimes, with the five most prevalent crimes being non-violent.

Housebreaking, followed by corruption and then theft of personal property were the most common crimes experienced by South Africans (Figure 41). In total, 7.5% of respondents experienced housebreaking, while 5.6% reported experiences of corruption and 4.7% said personal property was stolen from them (including incidents such as pick pocketing and bag-snatching). These are all non-violent crimes, as are the fourth and fifth most common crimes, namely theft out of a vehicle and theft of livestock (both experienced by 2.5% of respondents). Only two types of violent crime featured in the top ten most prevalent categories: assault (reported by 2.2% of respondents) and robbery (reported by 2% of respondents).

A comparison between the actual levels of crime and perceptions about which crimes are most common (see Figure 13, Chapter 4) reveals that three of the five crimes believed to be most common were in fact among the most frequently experienced crimes (namely housebreaking, theft of personal property and theft of livestock). This suggests that public perceptions about the extent of crime in South Africa are not far off the reality. Two of the crimes that people said they were most afraid of (namely housebreaking and assault) were also among the six most common crimes actually experienced (see Figure 14, Chapter 4).

1998 and 2003 rates compared

A comparison of the overall victimisation rate shows that crime, as measured by the victim surveys, declined slightly between 1998 and 2003 (Table 11). In 1998, 24.5% of South Africans had been victimised in the preceding 12-month period, compared to 22.9% in 2003. Bearing in mind that the



victim surveys do not cover all types of crime, the results suggest that claims by the police that crime has “stabilised” in recent years are probably accurate.

The general distribution, or ranking, of the various crime types was similar in 1998 to 2003, with the exception of stock theft, assault and fraud which had much higher rates in 1998 than in 2003. In both years, housebreaking followed by theft of personal property were the most common crimes experienced by South Africans.

Housebreaking was the only crime that increased in the past five years, from 7.2% in 1998 to 7.5% in 2003. Rates of theft from a vehicle and deliberate

Table 11: Comparative victimisation rates, 1998 and 2003 (%)

	1998	2003
Any crime	24.5	22.9
Housebreaking	7.2	7.5
Corruption*	-	5.6
Theft of personal property	4.8	4.7
Stock theft	4.9	2.5
Theft out of vehicle	2.5	2.5
Assault	4.2	2.2
Robbery	2.4	2.0
Deliberate damage to vehicle	1.3	1.3
Bicycle theft*	-	1.2
Car theft	1.2	1.0
Deliberate damage to buildings	1.1	0.9
Fraud	3.0	0.8
Crop theft*	-	0.7
Car hijacking**	1.4	0.5
Other crime	1.6	0.2
Murder	0.5	0.2
Theft of motorbike	0.0	0.1
Sexual assault/rape	0.4	0.1

* crime types not covered in the 1998 survey
 ** In the 1998 survey the category ‘car hijackings’ included attempted and ‘successful’ hijackings, while in the 2003 survey only successful hijackings were recorded. This probably accounts for the decrease in the hijacking rate between 1998 and 2003 reflected here.

damage to vehicles remained the same and all the other crimes decreased over the past five years. The changes in rates of the main crimes are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Rates of reporting to the police

All those who said they had experienced a crime over the previous year were asked whether they reported it to the police and if not, why. They were also asked whether they reported the crime to an organisation other than the police.

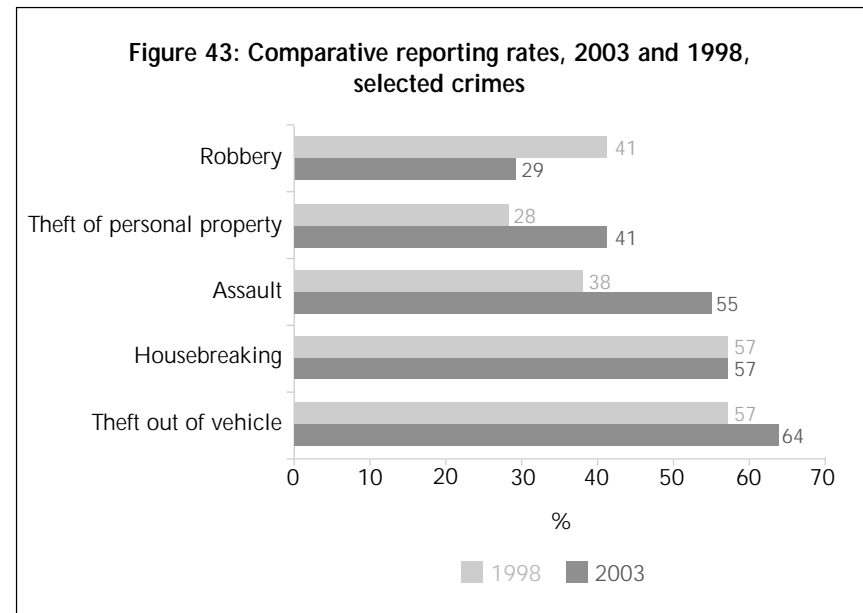
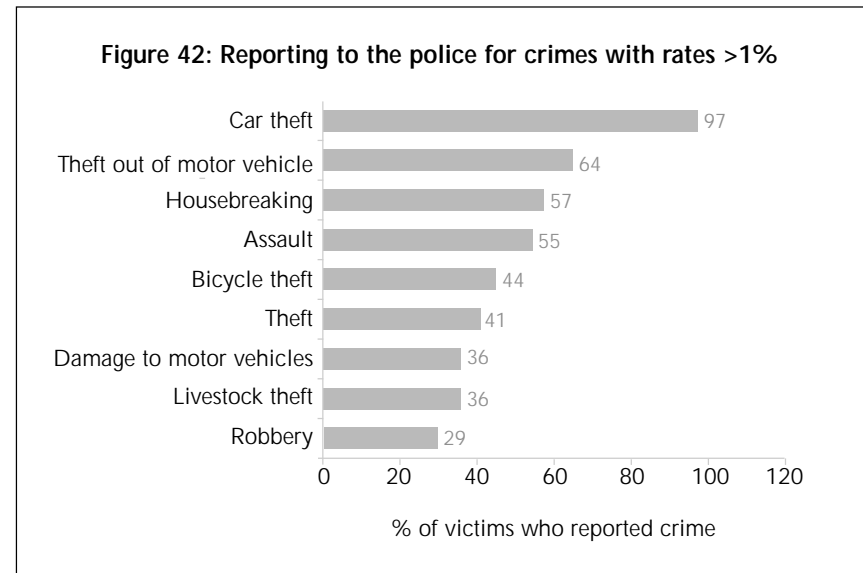
A victim's decision about whether or not to report to the police is based on a range of factors, many of which have nothing to do with the police or justice system. So despite the tendency to see reporting rates as a reflection of public confidence or trust in the police, this is not always a fair assessment. Indeed the survey results show that the most common reason for not reporting was that it was deemed unnecessary or that the crime was not important enough—a judgement that is highly personal and one for which the police cannot be held responsible.

There are nevertheless distinct trends in reporting rates, and these often vary according to the nature of the crime experienced. For example, murder tends to be highly reported, not only because it is a serious crime, but because there is always evidence that the crime has been committed in the form of a dead body.³¹ Serious property crimes such as car theft, car hijacking and housebreaking are usually well reported, often in order to make an insurance claim on the stolen goods. This trend is however premised on people being able to afford vehicle and household insurance.

Less serious property crimes such as theft of personal property are seldom reported to the police because the stolen goods are hard to recover, are rarely insured, and the crime is regarded as 'petty'. Victims see little point in going through the bureaucratic motions of reporting when there is little chance of either an arrest or of recovering the stolen goods.³² Finally, crimes like assault and domestic violence are also seldom reported because the offences are regarded as too personal, and as a matter to be dealt with between the parties concerned rather than the formal justice system.

Figure 42 illustrates the reporting rates for those crime types where the victimisation rate was greater than 1%. The high reporting rate for car theft is to be expected, given the issues affecting reporting discussed above. Given the serious nature of robbery however, a worrying trend is that only 29% of victims reported the offence to the police. Similarly, housebreaking is the most prevalent crime in the country, and also a major cause of concern among the public, and yet only 57% of victims reported it to the police.

A comparison of reporting in 1998 with that in 2003 is encouraging, because the rate of reporting for some of the most common crimes has increased. As Figure 43 reveals, reporting of crimes such as theft out of motor vehicles, assault and theft of personal property has increased, while reporting rates for housebreaking remained the same.



Reasons for not reporting to police

An important consideration when discussing reporting rates is the reasons given by victims for not reporting crime to the police. These provide an insight into perceptions of the police and criminal justice system, but also into the way victims view different crimes, and how serious they consider them to be. The latter is significant when considering the degree to which crime has become accepted by society.

Table 12 shows that for the most prevalent crime types, the most common reason for not reporting was that it was not necessary or that the crime was not important enough. Another common reason for not reporting was that "other means" were used to resolve the crime. These other means could include calling a private security company, reporting to a traditional authority or resolving the matter between the parties concerned. It could also refer to vigilantism.

Table 12: Victims' reasons for not reporting crime to the police, selected crimes (%)						
	Theft from vehicle	House-breaking	Stock theft	Robbery	Property theft	Assault
Not necessary or important enough	70.4	34.8	30.2	35.5	56.1	37.7
No chance of recovering property	–	–	31.8	–	–	–
Other means used to resolve	3.8	14.7	11.8	13.5	12.3	18.1
No evidence	–	17.6	–	–	–	–
Don't trust the police	2.5	20.2	–	4.5	6.1	2.5
Police not available	2.2	–	8.8	16.2	8.6	17

Implications of the survey results

- This survey supports the claims of the South African Police Service that crime has stabilised since 1998. It cannot however, determine whether this stabilisation is due to police action, or other social factors.
- Despite this progress, each year South Africans face nearly a 25% chance of becoming a victim of crime.
- It appears that less than half of all crime committed in South Africa gets reported to the police. This means that the official police statistics are an inaccurate reflection of the crime situation, and should not be used exclusively in any decision-making or evaluative process.
- In order to assess crime trends, both the official statistics and victim survey data are essential. Given the importance of the issue in South Africa, regular crime surveys should be undertaken by the government.