

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2003, the Institute for Security Studies undertook the second national victims of crime survey in South Africa. The survey was designed to ensure comparability with the 1998 national Victims of Crime survey conducted by Statistics South Africa for the Department of Safety and Security and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI). The ISS was assisted throughout the study by a group of stakeholders from government and civil society, many of whom participated in the 1998 survey.

The survey was conducted between September and October 2003. Households were randomly selected across the country based on the census data. A national sample of 4,860 was realised. The sample was stratified by province and urban/rural areas, and the data was weighted to reflect the actual composition of the population.

Public perceptions about crime and safety

Feelings of safety have declined markedly since 1998: the number feeling very unsafe at night more than doubled from 25% in 1998 to 58% in 2003. Feelings of safety are also low compared to other countries. Despite this, it is encouraging that nearly half of South Africans (46%) did not believe crime has increased in past three years in their areas of residence. A small majority (53%) said crime had gone up.

Perceptions about crime and safety differed markedly according to race and area of residence. Those most concerned were people living in the metropolitan areas followed by urban areas, and Indian followed by white South Africans. South Africans living in metropolitan (61%) and urban areas (54%) were much more likely to say crime has increased than those in traditional rural (48%) or farming (43%) areas. Indians were much more likely (78%) to believe crime has gone up than whites (61%), blacks (51%) and coloureds (48%). In terms of feelings of safety, those living in rural areas were much more likely to feel safe walking in their neighbourhoods than those in urban areas. Black (64%) and coloured (62%) South Africans were much more likely to feel very safe during the day than whites (35%) and Indians (11%).

Many South Africans (29%) personally know someone who makes a living from crime in their area. Given this intimate knowledge of criminals, it is notable that respondents were more likely to think that criminals are motivated by “greed” and “non-financial motives” than by “real need”. In other words, committing crime is largely believed to be a matter of choice. Most South Africans also said that crime is committed by people from within their community, rather than outsiders, and very few (4%) thought foreigners are responsible for most crime.

Many South Africans have personal experience of the most extreme form of violence: 14% have witnessed a murder, and more than half of these people (53%) were between 16 and 25 years at the time. This is a serious matter given the potential impact of witnessing violence at a young age on the risk of offending later in life.

Public perceptions about crime prevention and criminal justice

South Africans rely extensively on the state for protection against crime and for victim support: few take additional measures to protect themselves or their property, a minority participate in community anti-crime initiatives, and the police and hospitals are seen as the main sources of help for victims of violence.

Blacks (30%) and coloureds (45%) were significantly less likely to take self-protection measures than Indians (89%) and whites (95%). Such measures need to be encouraged and made available where possible, given that most of those who did use them (75%) felt safer as a result.

One quarter of those who knew of a community protection group in their area said this group physically punishes criminal suspects. Estimates are that nearly 1,5 million South Africans have witnessed violent punishments by such vigilante groups.

Less than half of respondents (45%) knew what a community police forum is, and few of these participated in its activities. Those living in urban and rural areas were however more likely to be involved in CPFs than those in the metros.

Physical access to the police and courts is generally good, but remains a problem in rural areas and for black South Africans. Only a small majority (52%) thought the police are doing a good job, but these views are influenced by a range of factors, not all of which are about policing. One factor that is

clearly within the ambit of the police is response time: this was the key issue influencing both positive and negative perceptions of the police.

As other studies have shown, views of court performance were much more favourable among those who have been to court than among the general public. And although access to courts was better in metro and urban provinces, satisfaction was lowest in these areas. Sentencing was the key issue about which the public formed their opinions of the way courts deal with suspects.

Crime levels in South Africa

Crime, as measured by the victim surveys, dropped slightly between 1998 and 2003: 23% of South Africans were victims in the 12-month period between September 2002 and August 2003—down almost 2% from 24.5% in 1998. The only type of crime explored in this survey that 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 the crime was not important enough—even in the case of violent offences like assault and robbery.

Overview of selected crime types

Corruption

Although both instances and allegations of ‘grand corruption’ receive much media attention, the survey results show that ordinary citizens are vulnerable to petty corruption. In total, 5.6% of South Africans had been asked to pay a bribe in the past year. Cash bribes were by far the most common form of currency in these corrupt transactions.

Traffic officials were most likely to demand bribes and in turn every request for a bribe was met by payment from members of the public surveyed. The other

most common services for which bribes were demanded include policing, employment in the public sector, pensions/social welfare grants, and public utilities. The vulnerability of the poor to non-delivery of services due to corruption in all these categories is a cause for concern.

The pool of whistleblowers in South Africa is tiny. Only 2% of all respondents surveyed had ever attempted to report a corrupt official. The most common reasons for not reporting were the belief that it would not have changed anything, followed by a lack of knowledge about where or who to report to.

Housebreaking

Survey respondents thought housebreaking was both the most commonly discussed crime and the most prevalent crime in their neighbourhoods. These opinions are backed up by the broader survey findings, as more survey respondents said their household had been the victim of housebreaking (7.5%) than any other crime type, and housebreaking is the only crime type whose prevalence increased since 1998. The only crime feared more than housebreaking is murder.

It appears that less than two thirds of the housebreakings that occur are reported to the police, and that of those that are reported, nearly a fifth are not recorded by the police; the official figures are substantial underestimates.

Assault and sexual assault

Assault and sexual assault are almost as difficult to capture in a household survey as they are for the police to detect; as a result, there were too few sexual assaults to be analysed in detail.

Assault is not a single crime, but a variety of offences encompassing, among other things, domestic violence, bar room brawls, and street attacks. The survey captured only the most serious assaults, suggesting that the public has become hardened to the point that minor incidents are no longer reported to fieldworkers. This notion is supported by the fact that few respondents felt that assault was particularly common, feared, or talked about.

Robbery

Unlike housebreaking, public perceptions about robbery do not correlate with reality. South Africans were very concerned about robbery: it is the second most commonly discussed crime, believed to be the second “most common crime” in respondents’ areas, and the fourth most feared crime. However,

according to both the survey and official crime statistics, the chances of any South African being robbed in any given year are about two out of a hundred.

Largely as a result of the methodology used, most robberies recorded in the survey were serious, or what the police would call “aggravated robberies”—those that are committed with a weapon. The number of serious robberies in the survey corresponds fairly closely with the number of aggravated robberies recorded by the police.

It is a matter of concern that the second most likely place for a robbery to take place, after streets in residential areas, was in the home. Based on survey projections, nearly 90,000 ‘home robberies’ occurred nationwide over the 12-month survey period.

Few victims reported robberies to the police, especially when they were committed on the street (as opposed to in the home).

Trends for street versus home robberies were quite different: guns were more common in home robberies, as was the likelihood of injury. Street robbers were much more likely to operate in groups than home robbers, and victims in the home were more likely to know the perpetrator than those robbed in the streets.

Stock theft

Black and white South Africans in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal were most likely to have been victimised. Most victims were poor, which suggests that the impact of stock theft on a household is likely to be severe.

Few victims reported theft of stock to the police, largely because they did not think the crime was important enough, or that their property would be recovered. This perception is understandable given that of the few victims who did report, only 4% were aware that an arrest was made, and 4% said their stock was recovered. Stock theft does not go unnoticed however. Over half the respondents reported the crime to an organisation other than the police, with traditional authorities being the most likely source of assistance.