

The impact of victimisation on the daily activities of South Africans – A case study of the 2011 Victims of Crime Survey

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Abstract

During the 1990s, National Statistical Agencies (NSAs) experienced significant and rapid evolution in the collection, coordination and dissemination of statistics. In this regard, the field of crime statistics is regarded as one of the statistical areas where NSAs have to increasingly play a leading role in coordinating the scope and quality of statistical collection and dissemination. In South Africa, safety and security has been identified as one of the strategic priorities. Consequently this increases the importance of and need for more comprehensive statistics on the patterns of crime and victimisation in the country. The South African National Development Plan 2030 also states that by 2030, people living in South Africa should feel safe and have no fear of crime. This paper examines the relationship between crime and victimisation statistics, and the impact it has on the daily activities of South Africans. Policies related to safety and security can only begin to improve the living conditions of ordinary citizens if they are based on evidence in this regard, comprehensive statistical databases that include information not only from administrative sources, but also from victimisation surveys play a pivotal role. The results of the Victims of Crime Survey (VOCS) 2011 revealed that most South Africans fear becoming victims of housebreaking and robbery. Furthermore, many South Africans do not feel safe walking alone in their neighbourhood, and a significant proportion modify their daily activities as a result of a fear of victimisation. The paper explores how these statistics inform crime prevention policies and strategies and also establishes performance targets and indicators for the assessment of interventions and progress in relation to safety and security.

Key Words: Victimisation, national statistical agency, safety and security

1. What are the emerging issues?

During the 1990s, a significant and rapid evolution started in relation to the role the National Statistical Agencies (NSAs) play in the collection and dissemination of statistics. Currently the field of crime statistics is regarded as one of the statistical areas where NSAs have to increasingly play a leading coordination role as regards the scope and quality of statistical collection and dissemination. This is not only true of crime statistics, but also of governance statistics in general. Internationally, the emerging issues are an increased emphasis on developing new methods for the measurement of crimes that have traditionally not been measured or are difficult to measure with existing tools. A need has also been identified for a certain degree of standardisation of measurement systems, definitions and terminology across countries in order to allow for greater comparability. Crime against business and its association with economic growth, job creation and investment has generally been poorly measured and its inclusion in the statistical measurement process is high on the agenda of many countries.

Fighting crime has been a major challenge over the decades, especially amongst people living in the developing world, such as South Africa. The Constitution of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996) acknowledges that people should be free from all forms of violence from either the public or private source. Survey evidence reflect that a sizeable proportion of the citizens are scared and worried about the culture of violence. The paper by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) (2007) indicated that no single factor in South Africa can be used to explain violence. The incidents of violence can be seen as emerging from interaction between different factors such as family history, social context, environmental factors or economic factors. Crime is a complex phenomenon that plays an increasing role in the structure of societies and communities. Cartwright (2012) suggested that even the best functional state cannot bring an ideal state of safety within the community. Building safe communities requires a flexible and future-oriented attitude that looks at root causes in our cultural diversity as an essential resource for practical problem solving.

The South African government has recognised the need for an intervention, and safety and security has been identified as one of the strategic priorities of the government. As such, the National Development Plan (NDP) highlights the reduction of crime by strengthening the criminal justice system and improving community environments as one of its strategic priorities. The NDP further stated that by 2030, people living in South Africa

should have no fear of crime. Women, children and those who are vulnerable should feel protected. Fighting crime effectively requires comprehensive statistics on patterns of crime and victimisation in SA. Historically, administrative data collected by the South African Police Service (SAPS) were used as the only source of crime statistics. However, questions about the quality of crime data and its credibility have always been a topic in the public domain. The main point of debate is the perceived lack of statistical quality, which leads to a perceived lack of trust in the statistics in the Safety and Security Cluster and as early as 1998 attempts at bedding a credible information value chain gleaned from societal and institution based safety and security systems was initiated. This initiative was dogged with several problems of coordination and ebbed. The public continued to express quality concerns on the statistics and subsequently the police ministry took an initiative to establish public trust in their crime statistics by acknowledging that crime statistics should be in accordance with the provisions of the South African Statistical Quality Assessment Framework (SASQAF). SASQAF is a framework developed by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) under the umbrella of the National Statistics System (NSS), in accordance with the requirements of the Statistics Act (Act No. 6 of 1999) as a set of quality criteria for certifying statistics as official.

This paper examines the relationship between crime and victimisation statistics, and the impact it has on the daily activities of South Africans.

2. Fear of crime and evidence from crime statistics

Ferraro (1995:4) defined fear of crime as 'an emotional response of dread or anxiety to crime or symbols that a person associates with crime' and perceived risk as 'recognition of a situation possessing at least potential danger, real or imagined'. Figgie (1980) distinguishes two classes of fear: 'concrete fear' – a fear of being a victim of a specific crime, and 'formless fear' – a general feeling of being unsafe. The reality is that everyone is affected by fear, whether it is induced by actual crime experiences, negative neighbourhood characteristics or even knowledge of the local crime situation. Fear of crime in a community is normally associated with rapid population growth as well as deteriorated community cohesion (Weinrath et al., 2007). The results of the population census conducted in 2011 in South Africa showed an increasing number of people migrating into metropolitan cities. The victimisation survey of 2011 also indicated that provinces with metropolitan cities contributed to an upward trend of violent crimes. People's perception about crime emanates not only from their experiences, but also from what they have read, heard, or seen in the media or from friends.

2.1 Crime statistics

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report in 2011, the broad trends of property related crime and violent crime showed a decrease amongst different countries, while there was an upward trend in drug-related crime. Results from most African countries showed that victimisation levels were significantly higher as compared to many developed countries. The UNODC report further highlighted that serious crimes, such as murder or serious armed robbery, are likely to be reported to the police. However, serious crimes such as rape, where reporting may be difficult for the victim given the context of the crime, are largely not reported to the police. Property related crimes are generally underreported from country to country. The victims perceive these crimes as not being serious enough to involve the police. Incidents which are not reported by victims often lead to uncertainty with regard to the extent and impact of crime.

The latest Victims of Crime Survey (VOCS) 2011 conducted by Statistics South Africa shows that the most dreaded crime is housebreaking. The survey focuses on the public's perceptions and experiences of crime. Perceptions about crime and safety differed according to several factors, such as employment status, population group and area of residence. The survey revealed that approximately 37% of households believed that the level of both violent and non-violent crime had decreased in their area of residence during the period 2009 to 2011. An estimated 35% of households had the perception that crime had increased, while less than 30% of the households felt that crime had stayed the same. About six in ten (59,3%) households perceived housebreaking/burglary to be one of the most common types of crime, followed by home robbery (46,2%), street robbery (41,4%) and pick-pocketing (32,1%). The crimes perceived to be the most feared in the households' area of residence were housebreaking/burglary (57,4%), home robbery (49,8%), street robbery (39,6%) and murder (38,8%) (Figure 1). The study also found that the most prevalent crimes in 2011 were housebreaking (5,4%), theft of personal property (2,5%) and home robbery (1,5%). Street robbery was found to be the seventh most prevalent crime in South Africa,

experienced by (0,7%) of individuals. This initial observation validates the view that concrete fear of crime is related to the victims' experience of crime. A lack of standardisation of crime statistics definitions across data sources can create problems of incomparability, and the potential value of underreporting rates found in, for example, a victimisation survey, can be reduced if the definitions used in a survey do not correspond with administrative sources. Sensitive and difficult-to-measure crimes (such as sexual assault) require new and specialised methods to measure. For example, the VOCS 2011 indicated that the underreporting rates for sexual offences was 9,4%, whilst common parlance suggests that under reporting is generally very high. Based on a comparison with the administrative data, it appears as if it is primarily the sexual assault cases that were reported to police that were acknowledged by respondents to the survey.

Figure 1: Most common/feared crime and crime prevalence rate, VOCS 2011

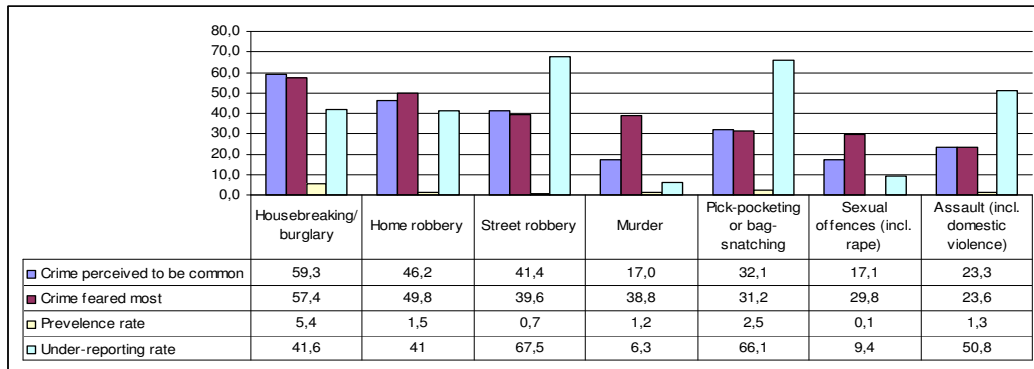


Figure 2 depicts how safe households felt when walking alone in their area during the day and when it was dark. More than half (57%) of households in South Africa felt very safe when walking alone in their area during the day, but only 14% said that they felt very safe when it was dark. Only 5% of households indicated feeling very unsafe during the day, while 42,9% of households said they felt very unsafe when it was dark. From the results of the survey, it is evident that people feel safer during the day than when it is dark. Although the state of darkness on its own does not present a real threat or danger, people tend to associate it with aspects that make them feel vulnerable. Perception or the state of feeling vulnerable may not necessarily reflect reality and may lag behind the real state of affairs.

Figure 2: Percentage of households' feeling of safety when walking alone in their area during the day and when it is dark, VOCS 2011

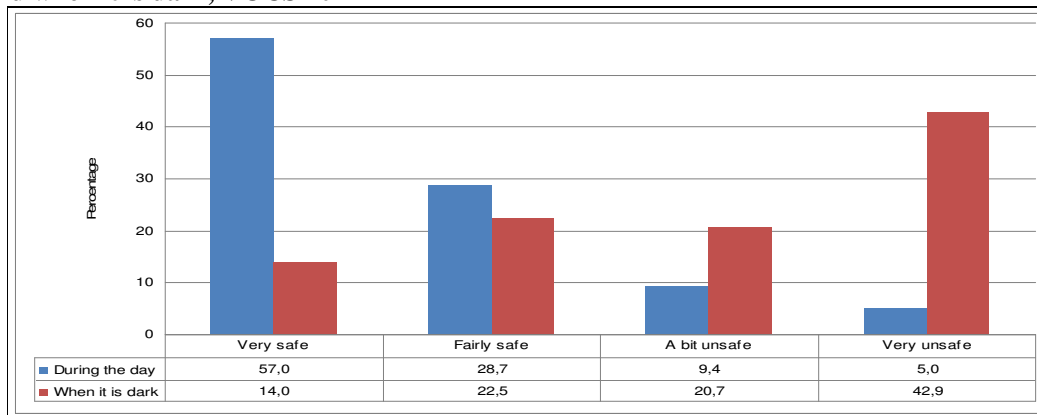


Figure 3a and Figure 3b show four quadrants that depict incidents of crime and households' feeling of safety from 2003 to 2011. Households' attitude towards walking alone when it is dark was measured in order to determine their general feeling of safety (Figure 3a). The four contact crimes (robbery, murder, assault and sexual offences), as reported by the South African Police Service (SAPS), show a general decrease through the years, while the victimisation survey indicated that people's feeling of safety has generally improved over the same period. This once again underscores the complementarity of victimisation surveys and administrative sources of crime, and the importance of using both. Another interesting phenomenon which emerges from the graphs below is how

victimisation surveys that are conducted with large time intervals between them can generate inexplicable (Figure 3b) peaks and troughs, and without a time series with closer data points it becomes difficult to judge whether a specific data point is suspect or part of a trend that emerged from year to year during a five-year period.

Figure 3a: Households' feeling of safety when walking alone in their area when it is dark and selected crimes from SAPS, 2003–2011

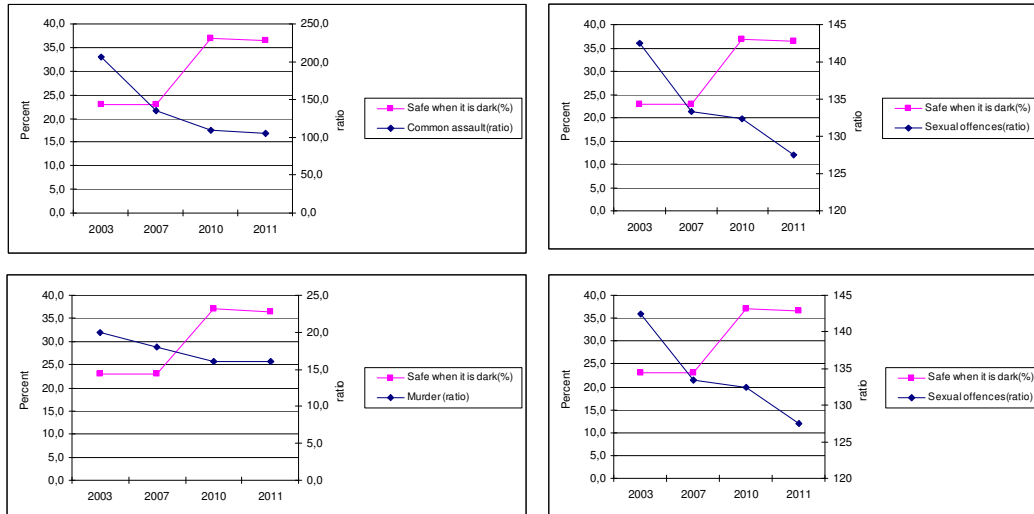
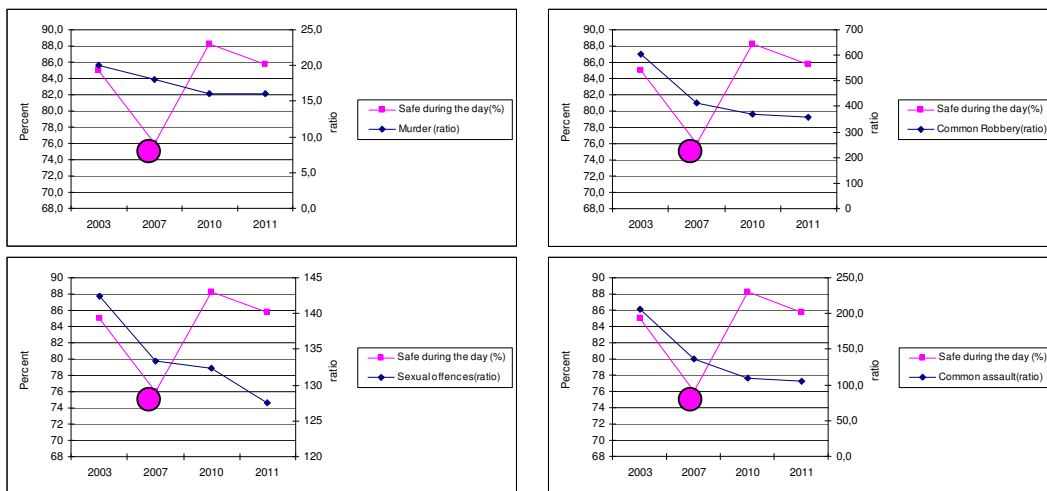
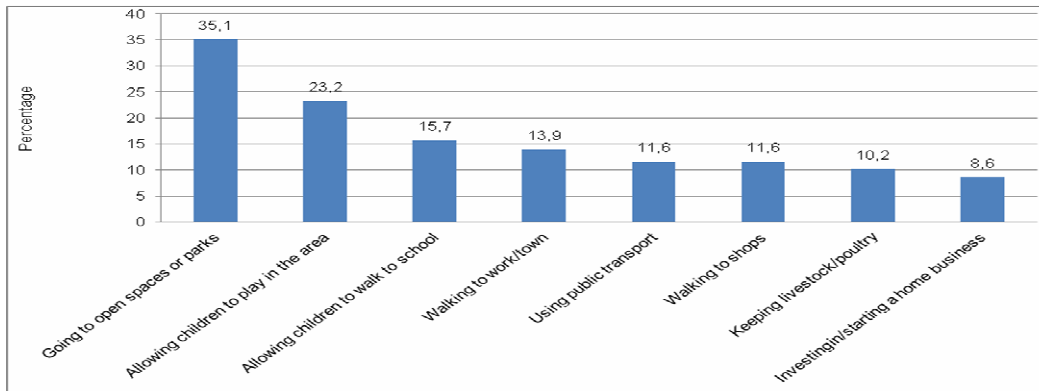


Figure 3b: Households' feeling of safety when walking alone in their area during the day and selected crimes from SAPS, 2003–2011



The Victims of Crime Survey also indicated that about 63% of male-headed households felt safe walking alone in their area during the day, while only 37,2% of female-headed households indicated feeling safe during the day. More than six in ten male-headed households felt safe walking alone in their area when it was dark as compared to 35,9% of female-headed households. The perceptions associated with becoming a victim of crime usually increase fear amongst South Africans. This may lead to behavioural changes that hold back day-to-day activities. People are affected by crime in different ways, and therefore their perceptions about crime also differ. In 2011, more than a third of households (35,1%) avoided going to open spaces unaccompanied because of their fear of crime, followed by 23,2% of households who would not allow their children to move around unsupervised by an older person or to play freely in their area. A further 15,7% of households would not permit their children to walk to school alone (Figure 4).

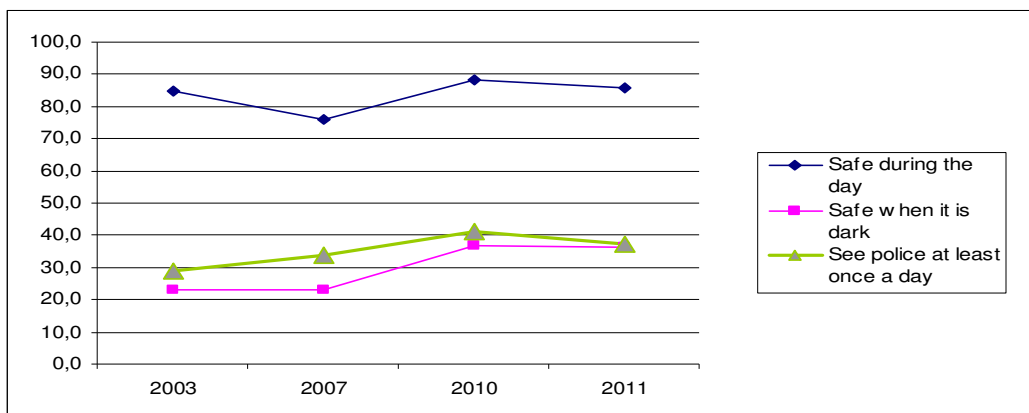
Figure 4: Percentage of households who were prevented from engaging in day-to-day activities, VOCS 2011



The thought of victimisation has a negative impact on people’s wellbeing, and a fear of victimisation can exist without necessarily a high likelihood of being victimised. It limits people’s freedom of movement and encourages cautious and fearful behaviour amongst citizens within the community. McEntire (2010) asserts that 'a lack of law enforcement presence, an unsavory neighborhood environment, and knowledge of neighborhood crime are all positively associated with fear'. This fear leads to loss of social cohesion, free movement, reduced economic activities and an outflow of residents in that residential area, ultimately resulting in reduced property prices. Without comprehensive statistics from a number of sources, and using a variety of methodologies, it becomes impossible to generate a good understanding of the nature and extent of victimisation and to communicate that to the public in order to create more realistic perceptions of the probability of being victimised and to adopt habits and precautionary measures that will reduce the chances of victimisation.

Figure 5 below depicts households’ perceptions on safety and their views on police visibility. The number of households who saw police on duty in their area increased from 29% in 2003 to 41% in 2010. This increase in police visibility, particularly in 2010, may be attributed to police operations when South Africa hosted the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup. The association between police visibility and the general feeling of safety is exhibited by the 2010 VOCS where more South Africans indicated feeling safe in their neighbourhood as compared to the previous years. As much as Statistics South Africa is producing statistics in partnership with other government institutions, such as the South African Police Service, that partnership should always be characterised by the inclusion of independent measurements such as victimisation surveys and a continued adherence and testing of administrative and governance statistics against the South African Statistical Quality Assurance Framework. Given the close relationship between policing presence, victimisation rates and feelings of safety, it is not enough to rely on police reports for the number of officers, patrolling etc. but it is essential that an independent measurement from the public is available to test the robustness of statistics received from the police.

Figure 5: Percentage of households’ perceptions on safety and police visibility in their area of residence, VOCS 2003–2011



3. Conclusions – Future direction

Most crime statistics are generated within the criminal justice system, which is designed mainly to monitor the components of various systems. As a result, these statistics do not always contain the kind of information necessary to measure the incidents of crime. They do not provide sufficient information to obtain a comprehensive overview of the scope, trends and patterns of crime in society in the context of demographic, social and economic realities. This assessment will assist key players working in crime reduction to target their approaches more effectively to reduce fear of crime. Policies related to safety and security can only begin to improve the living conditions of ordinary citizens if they are based on comprehensive statistical databases that include information not only from administrative sources, but also from victimisation surveys. Given the importance of the issue globally, countries should be encouraged to undertake regular crime surveys.

Although citizens are flooded with information, there is still a long way to go from being fully informed in the decision-making value chain. We have the responsibility to change this. There is a need to design the right messages to capacitate ourselves, which will lead us to finding the right solutions that stem from the right and relevant statistical and spatial basis. A vigorous way to analyse crime patterns would be to identify and examine crime hotspots. Further studies are needed to investigate the spatial dimension of crime in South Africa. The use of a Geographic Information System (GIS) to locate the attributes of crime will go a long way in understanding crime hotspots and its occurrences. The behaviour and attitudes of citizens pertaining to the reporting of criminal victimisation, as well as the reasons that discourage victims from reporting, should receive attention. It is further recommended that a strategy be developed by different role players responsible for safety and security to encourage the public to report incidents of crime to the police. This will ultimately reduce the extent of crime.

Stats SA had a broader vision, which is one of assisting its partner agencies within the Safety and Security Cluster to develop an integrated and comprehensive crime statistics system that meets SASQAF criteria and provides relevant and quality data for the purposes of policy and strategy formulation as well as programme monitoring and evaluation. Stats SA is currently playing a coordination role to ensure that there is a coherent and comparable set of statistics within the Safety and Security Cluster in South Africa. This can be the start of a debate on whether crime data reflect reality in the alternative sources of information and on the level of crime in South Africa. Furthermore, we fully support the agenda of the United Nations Statistical Commission in relation to ensuring the improved quality and increased independence of the measurement of crime and governance statistics. This also includes the standardisation of definitions and terminologies and the expansion of crime statistics measurement to include crimes previously not measured and crimes that are difficult to measure.

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