



The IRR's Blueprint for Growth: Solutions to SA's crime crisis to boost growth

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Executive Summary

South Africa endures one of the highest violent-crime burdens in the world. The latest 2025/26 second-quarter crime statistics show a rare and noteworthy decline in murder. Nationally, murder fell to 5 794, a 16.6% year-on-year reduction and an 11.5% quarter-on-quarter drop. Attempted murder tells a different story. That figure rose to 7 255, reflecting a 5% year-on-year increase and a 2.7% rise quarter on quarter. Fewer people are being killed, yet the overall level of violent confrontation remains high.

New evidence from Statistics South Africa's Governance, Public Safety and Justice Survey (GPSJS) 2024/25 confirms that only 31.1% of adults feel safe walking alone in their neighbourhood at night. This represents a multi-year decline in perceived safety. Only 48.6% say they have confidence that police would respond promptly to an emergency. Reporting rates remain low, with less than half of victims reporting crimes, citing mistrust in law enforcement, fear of retaliation, and the belief that police cannot or will not act.¹

Afrobarometer's 2024 findings reinforce this picture of erosion in institutional legitimacy.² Only 32% of South Africans trust the police. Some 61% believe that most officers are corrupt, and only 26% believe police manage crime effectively. These indicators confirm a near-crisis of confidence that undermines reporting, cooperation, and community safety.

Globally, South Africa remains an outlier. The Global Organized Crime Index 2025 ranks the country as the 7th most criminalised state in the world, with exceptionally high criminal-market scores in extortion, environmental crimes, human trafficking, synthetic drug production, illicit mining and protection rackets. Criminal actors exhibit exceptionally high levels of influence, both in the underworld and within political or state-linked structures.³

Operationally, policing is active, but strained. Lieutenant General Tebello Mosikili's briefing on 28 November 2025 indicates that between April and September 2025 police arrested 413 583 suspects, seized 3 442 firearms, shut down 11 975 unlicensed liquor premises, arrested 64 356 suspects for drug possession, and recovered 1 686 stolen or hijacked vehicles. Courts imposed 7 415 prison sentences, including 477 life terms, and convicted 1 550 perpetrators linked to gender-based violence and femicide.⁴

These numbers demonstrate effort rather than recovery. Crime continues to cost the South African economy between 10% and 15% of GDP, suppressing investment and driving up operating costs. Institutional weaknesses highlighted by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) remain largely intact: political interference in policing, compromised leadership, weak crime intelligence, inadequate investigative capacity and a crime-statistics system still controlled by SAPS.

At the same time, opportunities for reform are emerging. The Madlanga Commission of Inquiry and Parliament's Ad Hoc Committee on the Mkhwanazi allegations have placed law-enforcement governance under scrutiny. SAPS has formally adopted evidence-based policing (EBP) in its 2025/26 Annual Performance Plan, following successful hotspot trials in the Western Cape. Calls continue for a shift of crime-statistics governance to Statistics South Africa, which would significantly improve transparency and credibility.



South Africa is moving, but not yet turning. Tactical successes alone will not change long-term trajectories. Deep, structural reform of the security sector remains essential for restoring public safety and enabling economic recovery.

Introduction

Crime is the single most persistent constraint on South Africa's economic prospects. High levels of violence undermine investment, reduce competitiveness, stifle job creation and heighten inequality. Chronic insecurity erodes trust, fuels emigration of skills and capital, and shackles economic growth. The World Bank estimates that crime costs South Africa as much as 10% of GDP annually once direct, indirect and opportunity costs are considered.⁵

This burden is compounded by a decade of weakened police leadership, political interference, internal corruption and declining investigative capacity. Public trust in law enforcement remains extremely low, and fear of crime continues to rise, according to both Stats SA's Governance, Public Safety and Justice Survey (GPSJS)⁶ and Afrobarometer's 2022 survey.⁷

Against this backdrop, three developments define the 2025/26 period. First, murder rates are declining in measurable ways. Second, policing operations have intensified, producing large numbers of arrests and seizures. Third, structural debates involving evidence-based policing, independent crime statistics and political interference have entered the centre of public-policy discourse.

The critical question to ask is whether South Africa can convert operational momentum into institutional reform?

Crime Trends in 2025/26

National Murder and Attempted-Murder Trends

The 2025/26⁸ second-quarter crime statistics⁹ reveal a striking divergence between the crimes of murder and attempted murder. This contrast provides important clues about the underlying dynamics of violence.

The murder rate fell to 5 794 cases, down from 6 545 in the previous quarter and from 6 945 in the same quarter of the previous year. This represents an 11.5% quarter-on-quarter decrease and a 16.6% year-on-year decrease, marking one of the most significant reductions in homicide observed in the past decade. In a South African context—where murder rates have risen steadily since 2012 — this decline is significant and may reflect tactical improvements, targeted deployments, and intensified firearms and alcohol enforcement.



Attempted murder, however, rose to 7 255 cases, up from 7 061 in the previous quarter and from 6 911 in the same period last year. This increase underscores a troubling trend: violent confrontations remain widespread, but fewer incidents are resulting in fatalities. Multiple factors may why fewer violent incidents are resulting in death, even as attempted murder rises. These include the greater availability of trauma and emergency services in urban centres, elements of luck and circumstance in the trajectory of bullets or weapons, higher police visibility in certain hotspots, disrupting lethal outcomes without preventing violent encounters, rapid emergency response by private-security providers in wealthier areas and an increased use of intermediate weapon types that cause severe injury without resulting in death.

The rise in attempted murder indicates that systemic pressures behind violence remain unrelenting. Driving factors include high levels of illegal firearms circulation, intensifying gang rivalries and territorial battles, domestic conflict exacerbated by alcohol misuse, unemployment and household stress, organised crime violence linked to extortion, illicit mining and drug markets. These divergent trends show a central reality: South Africa is experiencing fewer successful killings, but not fewer violent confrontations. The underlying problem is structural and deeply embedded within the country's criminal markets and socio-economic conditions.

Operational Context: SAPS Enforcement Efforts

SAPS reported substantial enforcement activity between April and September 2025:

- 413 583 arrests;
- 3 442 firearms seized;
- 11 975 unlicensed liquor premises shut down;
- 18 656 arrests for selling liquor unlawfully;
- 64 356 drug-possession arrests;
- 8 552 drug-dealing arrests;
- 1 686 stolen or hijacked vehicles recovered;
- R208 million worth of contraband seized; and
- R5 million in illicit cash confiscated.

Additionally, courts imposed 7 415 prison sentences, including 477 life sentences, and secured 1 550 convictions related to gender-based violence and femicide across the first two quarters of the reporting year.

These figures demonstrate significant operational pressure applied across key crime drivers. The focus on firearms, liquor enforcement, and drug markets aligns with evidence from the Institute of Security Studies (ISS), indicating that these sectors are closely linked to interpersonal and gang-based violence.

However, these operational achievements must be interpreted with caution, as high arrest volumes have not resulted in proportional declines in violent crime categories. This mismatch reflects structural weaknesses in investigative capacity, crime intelligence, case follow-through, court backlogs and conviction rates for violent offences. Arrests alone are not a reliable indicator of public safety and without effective prosecution, sustained disruption of criminal networks, or the consistent removal of illegal firearms, enforcement surges risk becoming short-lived and unable to produce lasting reductions in violence.

Statistical Anomalies

The 2025/26 data presents several anomalies that require close policy attention. Murder rates have declined while attempted murder rates continue to rise.

This divergence suggests that interventions may be reducing lethality but are not addressing the root causes of violence. Firearms remain readily available, gang conflict persists, and extortion networks continue to operate with impunity.

I. Arrest volumes do not correlate with declines in violent crime

More than 413 000 arrests represent a substantial enforcement footprint, yet robbery, attempted murder, and assault remain high. This indicates that many arrests may be for low-level offences such as drug possession, public disorder or administrative violations, rather than the strategic targeting of violent offenders.

II. Firearm seizures and liquor-outlet closures expose structural risk factors

The seizure of 3 442 firearms and the closure of nearly 12 000 unlicensed liquor outlets highlight ongoing vulnerabilities in both illegal firearms markets and unregulated alcohol consumption. Both are well-established drivers of violent crime in the Western Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal.

III. Public trust indicators remain weak

Despite operational visibility, the *GPSJS 2024/25* shows that less than half of South Africans believe police will respond promptly, and only 31.1% feel safe walking alone at night. Public trust remains low even when enforcement efforts increase.

IV. Crime statistics remain under SAPS control

SAPS control of crime statistics represents a persistent institutional flaw. ISS research stresses that crime statistics compiled by the agency being measured are inherently vulnerable to error, manipulation or selective reporting.¹⁰

In other jurisdictions, independent statistical agencies manage crime data to reduce conflicts of interest and ensure public credibility.

Interpreting the Trends

The 2025/26 patterns lead to several conclusions.

I. South Africa is experiencing tactical improvements, but not structural recovery

Reductions in murder rates may reflect short-term operations such as Operation Shanela, increased patrols or targeted raids. These are necessary but not sufficient.

II. Attempted murder rates show that underlying violence remains deeply embedded within South African society

Gang violence, extortion, gender-based domestic violence, and organised crime continue to drive serious harm.

III. Enforcement-heavy approaches cannot substitute for institutional reform

Without strong investigative capacity, stable leadership, independent crime data and depoliticised intelligence structures, operational gains cannot be sustained.

IV. Public trust remains the decisive missing ingredient

High levels of fear and low levels of trust impact the rate at which crimes are reported, as well as cooperation with law enforcement and a sense of police legitimacy. Without trust, enforcement cannot achieve long-term outcomes.



Concentration of Lethal Violence

The latest crime statistics confirm that homicide in South Africa is not evenly distributed but highly spatially concentrated, with a small number of police stations carrying an outsized portion of the national murder burden. This concentration reflects entrenched structural drivers such as gang activity, informal alcohol economies, illicit firearms circulation, settlement density and weak local governance systems.

The top 30 stations for murder collectively accounted for a disproportionate share of national homicides during the period July–September 2025. The list below shows the ten highest-burden stations for the quarter, along with the rates per 100 000:

- Mfuleni, Cape Town – 84
- Kraaifontein, Cape Town – 64
- Delft, Cape Town – 60
- Jeppe, Johannesburg – 57
- Gugulethu, Cape Town – 56
- Nyanga, Cape Town – 55
- Khayelitsha, Cape Town – 54
- Mitchells Plain, Cape Town – 53
- Pinetown, eThekweni – 47
- Lwandle, Cape Town – 46

The Cape Flats as South Africa's Lethal Epicentre

The City of Cape Town dominates the list, with eight of the top ten stations and more than half of the top 30 overall, reflecting a persistent concentration of lethal violence. Homicide in these areas is driven by a combination of gang rivalries and territorial battles, the widespread availability of illegal firearms, dense informal settlements with poor lighting and weak environmental design, clusters of unregulated liquor outlets and entrenched drug markets that sustain extortion and protection rackets.

ISS research shows that homicide rates in these communities often correlate with shifts in gang alliances, the circulation of high-calibre firearms and disruptions to drug distribution networks. Many of these stations have seen periods of fluctuating violence depending on gang fragmentation or the entry of new criminal groups.

Mfuleni, which records the highest rate of murder (84), shows the clearest example of rapid expansion in informal land occupation, the growth of informal alcohol outlets and rising gang infiltration, creating a volatile environment for lethal confrontations.

Urban Nodes in Gauteng: Consolidated High-Risk Zones

Gauteng stations such as Jeppe, Booyssens, Alexandra, Tembisa and Rietgat appear consistently in SAPS top 30 crime rankings. The dynamics here differ from the Cape Flats, with a more complex mix of migrant-settlement pressure, competition between foreign and local criminal networks, targeted killings linked to extortion and protection markets, spill-over violence from illicit mining, cash-in-transit and kidnapping networks, and the challenges of densely populated inner-city environments with extensive informal trading, all of which contribute to heightened levels of instability and violent crime.

Jeppe's 57 murders in a single quarter reflects the convergence of gang structures, extortion groups and criminal networks operating in the Johannesburg CBD, particularly in areas dominated by hijacked buildings and unregulated rental markets.

These areas also experience severe pressure from protection rackets that target informal businesses and use violence as a method of territorial control.

KwaZulu-Natal: Assassination Dynamics and Hostel Violence

Pinetown, with 47 murders, represents KwaZulu-Natal's contribution to the top 10 and reflects the province's distinct murder profile, characterised by politically linked assassinations, taxi-industry rivalries, hostel-based group conflicts and gang-related street executions and revenge killings. ISS and Global Initiative on Transnational Organised Crime reporting show that KwaZulu-Natal has one of the highest rates of contract killings in the country, frequently associated with the transport sector, local political disputes and tensions involving traditional authorities. Although the violence is often targeted rather than random, its frequency creates persistent community insecurity and contributes to unstable local economies.

Underlying Structural Drivers Across Hotspots

Although each hotspot reflects its own local dynamics, several underlying structural factors recur across the top 30 stations.

I. Illegal Firearms

SAPS operations between April and September 2025 seized more than 3 442 firearms nationally, including 1 565 in the Western Cape alone. Firearms recovered from gang hotspots often include high-calibre rifles and semi-automatic pistols linked to organised-crime supply chains and corrupt state armouries.

II. Informal Alcohol Markets

Nearly 12 000 unlicensed liquor outlets were closed in the first half of 2025/26. Hotspot areas contain dense concentrations of illegal taverns and shebeens, which serve as hotspots for interpersonal violence and gang extortion.

III. Extortion and Protection Rackets

Extortion has become a dominant criminal market in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban. Construction sites, transport routes and informal businesses are frequent targets. Extortion groups enforce compliance through intimidation, robberies and targeted killings.



IV. Limited State Presence and Environmental Factors

Many of the above precincts show long-standing deficits in urban planning, lighting, street infrastructure and police visibility. Weak municipal services and limited social infrastructure compound structural risk and community vulnerabilities.

V. Settlement Patterns and Social Fragmentation

Rapid informal settlement growth creates policing blind spots where state authority is weak. These areas provide cover for gang movement, firearm storage and illicit-trade operations.

Implications for Policing Strategy

The concentration of violence within a relatively small number of police precincts makes hotspot-focused interventions both feasible and necessary, with ISS evaluations showing that evidence-based deployments, improvements to environmental design and targeted alcohol-enforcement operations can reduce violent crime by more than 30% when applied consistently. For these interventions to succeed, they require reliable crime data and analytics, stable and competent station leadership, close cooperation between SAPS, metropolitan authorities and private security providers, credible strategies to disrupt gangs and extortion networks, and genuine community trust, which remains extremely low in many high-violence areas.

Public Trust and Safety: New Evidence from GPSJS 2024/25

The GPSJS 2024/25 provides the most authoritative national dataset on public perceptions of crime, safety and policing. The results reveal a deepening crisis of confidence that aligns closely with ISS research, IRR analysis and global indicators of institutional legitimacy.¹¹

Across almost every measure, public sentiment has deteriorated. Fear of crime has intensified, trust in the police continues to decline and the gap between public expectations and lived experience has widened.

Declining Perceptions of Personal Safety

The multiyear decline to 31.1% confirms that most South Africans perceive their environments as unsafe, even in locations where reported crime has stabilised. Fear of crime is also not evenly distributed. Women, young adults and low-income residents report significantly higher levels of vulnerability, reflecting the intersection of crime with gendered and socio-economic risks.

The persistent lack of perceived safety restricts mobility, limits participation in economic activity after dark, reduces social cohesion and weakens community confidence in state institutions.



Increasing Perceptions of Local Crime

Almost 57% of respondents believe crime has increased in their area over the past year. This perception persists in both high-crime and moderate-crime zones, indicating not only rising incidents, but rising anxiety. The divergence between recorded crime and perceived crime underscores the impact of trauma, community narratives and visible disorder on public sentiment.

Perceived increases in crime often correlate with social and environmental cues such as abandoned buildings, unregulated liquor outlets, informal settlements and lack of visible policing. These perceptions matter because they drive behavioural changes, including withdrawal from public spaces, reduced trust in neighbours and reluctance to cooperate with police.

Poor Confidence in Police Responsiveness

Only 48.9% of adults believe that police would respond quickly in an emergency. In practice, delayed or non-existent response is a core driver of mistrust, particularly in rural provinces and densely populated informal settlements.

Low confidence in responsiveness undermines willingness to report crime, weakens witness cooperation and reduces the likelihood that residents will seek police assistance even when it is urgently needed. This has direct consequences for case resolution, detection rates and community-police relations.

Low Confidence in Ethical Treatment of Victims

Only 44% of respondents believe police treat victims with respect. This indicator is critical because perceived disrespect or indifference from police is strongly associated with reduced reporting, higher victim withdrawal rates and negative long-term mental-health outcomes.

Reports of dismissive attitudes toward victims of gender-based violence, inconsistent case-handling and slow progress in investigations further exacerbate the legitimacy deficit. These findings align with ISS analyses showing that victims who feel disrespected are significantly less likely to engage with the criminal-justice system again.

Underreporting of Crime

Fewer than half of victims of crimes report incidents to SAPS. The GPSJS identifies several reasons for this non-reporting, including a belief that police will not act, fear of retaliation, the perception that reporting is too time-consuming and a broader lack of trust in the criminal-justice system. This underreporting creates a damaging feedback loop in which low trust leads to fewer cases being reported, widening the gap between experienced and recorded crime and further undermining the credibility of official statistics. These patterns reinforce ISS arguments that crime-statistics governance should be transferred to an independent body to ensure accuracy, transparency and public confidence.

Socio-economic and Urban–Rural Disparities

The GPSJS highlights widening disparities in safety and access to policing. Urban areas, particularly large metros, report higher levels of fear due to the visibility of violent crime, gang activity, extortion and widespread street disorder, while rural areas, though experiencing less visible crime, face vulnerability created by limited police presence and long response times. Wealthy households increasingly rely on private security, surveillance technologies and gated environments to manage risk, whereas low-income households depend on community networks, informal patrols, street committees and forms of social reciprocity rather than formal policing. This divergence contributes to a two-tier security environment, reinforcing inequality, as wealthier households can effectively “exit” the public safety system while poorer communities must negotiate danger with fewer resources.

Implications for Policing and Policy

The GPSJS highlights several systemic issues, showing that public trust in policing is collapsing and eroding the foundations of cooperative law enforcement. Declining perceptions of safety fuel social withdrawal and reduce local economic activity, while low confidence in police responsiveness undermines deterrence. Many victims are left dissatisfied with police handling of their cases, which accelerates case attrition and reduces reporting rates, and inequality in security provision creates structural injustice by leaving millions reliant on inadequate public policing while wealthier households turn to private protection. Urban hotspots experience concentrated levels of fear and violence that demand targeted, data-driven interventions. Overall, the GPSJS provides a clear warning that without substantial institutional reform, public trust will continue to deteriorate, weakening both day-to-day enforcement and the long-term prospects for sustainable crime reduction.

South Africa in the Global Organized Crime Index 2025

The Global Organized Crime Index 2025 ranks South Africa as the 7th most criminalised country in the world, placing it among a small cluster of states where organised crime is not merely present, but deeply interwoven into political, economic and social systems.¹²

This ranking reflects a broad and interconnected criminal ecosystem marked by diversified criminal markets, powerful criminal actors, weak enforcement mechanisms and compromised governance institutions. The Index highlights a long-standing structural reality: South Africa faces not only high levels of everyday violent crime, but also a pervasive and institutionalised criminal economy that rivals some of the world’s most notorious organised-crime environments.



High-Intensity Criminal Markets

The Index identifies several criminal markets where South Africa scores at the most severe levels. Each of these markets is not only large in economic value, but also highly violent and structurally embedded.

I. Synthetic Drugs

South Africa is a major regional hub for synthetic-drug production, trafficking and distribution, including methamphetamine, MDMA and precursor chemicals. Production facilities have expanded in sophistication, often run by foreign criminal groups working with local networks. SAPS data from 2025, including the shutdown of a R350-million meth lab in Mpumalanga, illustrates the scale of this market.

II. Illicit Mining

The illicit extraction of gold, chrome and platinum is one of the most entrenched criminal economies in the country. Organised groups, often heavily armed, infiltrate out-of-use or poorly secured mines, sometimes operating with the complicity of officials. The Index notes that illicit mining networks have become highly militarised and deeply politically protected.

III. Human Trafficking

South Africa is identified as both a source and destination country for human trafficking, driven by sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude and trafficking into criminal enterprises. The Index emphasises the growing sophistication of these networks, often linked to foreign criminal groups who exploit weak border controls.

IV. Extortion

Extortion has expanded rapidly, especially in construction, logistics, retail and migrant-owned businesses. Extortion rackets have evolved from localised protection schemes into structured criminal markets, with violence used to enforce compliance. The influence of extortion groups in townships and transport corridors has become a major barrier to small-business growth.

V. Wildlife Crime

Illegal trade in rhino horn, abalone, pangolins and other wildlife commodities continues to escalate. Organised poaching groups often cooperate with transnational networks, exploiting weak enforcement and corruption within environmental and border agencies.

VI. Protection Rackets

Protection rackets are particularly prevalent in the construction and public-transport sectors, where criminal groups insert themselves into procurement processes and local development projects. The Index notes increasing evidence of overlap between these networks and municipal patronage systems.



Powerful and Diverse Criminal Actors

South Africa's ecosystem of criminal actors is exceptionally varied and deeply embedded in society, with some attempting to appear as legitimate “business forums”, operating in areas such as construction, logistics and private security.

I. Mafia-Style Groups

The Index identifies several large syndicates, some local, others transnational, characterised by territorial control, long-term economic planning, hierarchical leadership structures and the routine use of violence. These groups dominate illicit mining, drug distribution, extortion and cross-border smuggling routes.

II. State-Embedded Actors

South Africa scores among the highest globally for criminal penetration of the state. State-embedded actors include officials in policing, procurement, border management, customs and municipal governance who collaborate with or actively protect criminal networks. This mirrors evidence presented before the Madlanga Commission and the Ad Hoc Committee on the Mkhwanazi allegations, which highlighted political interference in investigations and disbandment of anti-corruption task teams.

III. Foreign Criminal Networks

The Index highlights the presence of well-established foreign criminal groups, including Nigerian, Pakistani, Chinese and Balkan networks. These groups operate in drug markets, financial crimes, cybercrime, counterfeit goods and human trafficking, often collaborating with local syndicates.

IV. Corruption in Procurement, Policing and Municipalities

Corruption remains the central enabler of organised crime. Criminal networks operate with relative impunity where procurement systems are weak, tenders are manipulated, or policing is compromised. Corrupt officials assist with access to sensitive information, protection from investigations, manipulation of licensing processes and freedom of movement across borders. Corruption is not episodic but systemic, generating a cycle in which political power, criminal activity and economic gain become intertwined.

A Criminal Ecosystem Where State and Crime Intersect

The Index describes South Africa as an “ecosystem where state and criminal interests intersect”, and this is not a metaphor but an observable pattern. Recent findings before the Madlanga Commission illustrate this clearly, with evidence showing that criminal groups have maintained ties with former and current government officials. These connections have included interference in investigations, political shielding of suspects, and the manipulation of police structures to protect criminal interests, reinforcing the Index's assessment that organised crime and elements of the state increasingly operate in overlapping spheres.

I. Weak Border Governance

South Africa's borders remain porous. Weak surveillance systems, under-resourced border posts, corruption among officials and the sheer complexity of cross-border trade routes enable large-scale movement of illicit goods including drugs, wildlife products, counterfeit goods and illegal firearms.



II. Compromised Intelligence Capacities

Crime Intelligence has been repeatedly weakened by political interference, corruption scandals and inter-factional battles. This has diminished its ability to track syndicates, anticipate organised criminal activity and disrupt transnational networks. The failure of Crime Intelligence is directly referenced in the Index as a factor enabling criminal expansion.

III. Political Protection of Criminal Figures

One of the clearest findings in the Index is the extent of political protection afforded to criminal leaders and syndicates, who often maintain relationships with political actors who shield them from investigations, influence the appointment or transfer of SAPS officers, interfere with specialised task-team operations, divert intelligence resources for factional purposes and facilitate access to procurement systems or municipal contracts. This political-criminal nexus strengthens organised crime, weakens accountability and undermines the state's ability to respond effectively to serious and organised offences.

The Global Organized Crime Index and ISS research both note that political-criminal alliances are a defining feature of South Africa's organised-crime landscape. These alliances weaken accountability mechanisms, obstruct investigations and allow criminal markets to flourish.

Consequences for Public Safety and Economic Growth

The Index makes clear that organised crime in South Africa is not merely a criminal-justice issue but a profound structural economic risk. Organised criminal networks undermine investor confidence in key sectors such as mining, logistics, tourism and construction, while raising costs across the economy through theft, extortion, smuggling and sabotage. These networks intensify violence in hotspots linked to drug markets, illicit mining and protection rackets, and fuel corruption that deepens public distrust in government institutions. In many affected communities, organised crime also establishes parallel governance systems that operate through intimidation and patronage, further weakening state legitimacy and eroding the foundations of lawful authority. No society can achieve sustained economic progress or institutional stability while criminal networks exercise significant influence within the state.

What the Index Tells Policymakers

The Global Organized Crime Index offers several conclusions that are critical for policy reform. It shows that South Africa's organised-crime problem is systemic rather than episodic, driven by diversified and resilient criminal markets that are deeply embedded in political and economic systems. State institutions remain compromised by corruption and internal interference, which means that policing alone cannot disrupt these entrenched criminal ecosystems without broader structural change. Effective reform therefore requires urgent intervention in political leadership, procurement processes and border governance. Without such systemic improvements, organised-crime networks will continue to expand, even when confronted with intensified policing operations.



Economic Impact of Crime

Crime is one of South Africa's most powerful structural brakes on economic growth. The World Bank's 2025 country diagnostics identify violent crime and organised criminality as a core macroeconomic constraint that limits investment, suppresses productivity and inhibits job creation.

Crime as a Direct Brake on GDP Growth

According to the World Bank, violent crime reduces South Africa's GDP growth by between 1.3 and 3 percentage points annually, depending on the severity of violent offences, disruption to economic activity and the cost of private-security measures. This represents a long-term drag that compounds each year, contributing significantly to the country's divergence from peer economies.

The IRR's modelling reinforces this, noting that crime acts as a systemic tax on economic activity, raising the cost of conducting business and pushing South Africa's risk profile closer to fragile-state levels rather than an upper-middle-income economy.

Increased Business Operating Costs

The World Bank estimates that as a result of crime, businesses incur operating costs in the region of 6% to 9% higher than would otherwise be the case in the absence of the crime crisis, including expenditure on:

- private security;
- surveillance systems;
- insurance premiums;
- transport rerouting;
- protective infrastructure; and
- delayed or disrupted logistics.

These costs are especially high for logistics firms, retailers, manufacturers, energy providers and construction companies. Copper theft, extortion rackets targeting construction sites, and hijacking along major transport corridors are among the most damaging factors for the business sector.

Depressed Foreign and Domestic Investment

Violence and insecurity consistently undermine investor confidence. The 2025 Global Organized Crime Index places South Africa among the top criminalised economies in the world, noting that extortion, illicit mining, protection rackets and kidnapping-for-ransom have reached levels that materially influence investment decisions.¹³

High crime risk increases the cost of capital, deters greenfield investment and redirects domestic capital into defensive or offshore investments. Sectors such as tourism, hospitality and retail remain acutely exposed, with criminal incidents affecting both domestic and international investor sentiment.

Disproportionate Impact on Townships and Small Businesses

Crime imposes unequal economic burdens, with small businesses, informal traders and township enterprises often lacking the financial capacity to absorb rising security costs. As a result, many are forced to close prematurely, others reduce operating hours to avoid risk, entrepreneurship declines due to fear and uncertainty, and local job creation collapses. Consumers in affected areas increasingly shift their spending to safer, but often more expensive, formal markets, further weakening township economies and deepening existing inequalities.

The *GPSJS 2024/25* reveals that township residents report significantly higher fear of crime, reduced economic participation after dark and greater reliance on informal security arrangements.¹⁴

Criminal extortion, especially in the construction and transport sectors, imposes direct financial losses while deterring the formation of new businesses.

Crime and Unemployment

Violence contributes directly to unemployment by harming labour-market participation. Job seekers avoid unsafe areas, businesses reduce night shifts, and some sectors relocate operations or shrink staff due to safety concerns. Women and young people are disproportionately affected, with Stats SA's surveys showing higher levels of fear and reduced mobility among these groups. The IRR notes that crime damages human-capital development by discouraging evening study, travel to work or training, and participation in community economic activities.

Crime generates heavy costs both for the state and for individuals. For the state, it drives up public expenditure on policing, courts, prosecution and correctional services, while repeated vandalism and theft of infrastructure force costly repair and replacement cycles. Healthcare systems absorb substantial trauma and emergency-care costs arising from violent incidents, and municipalities lose revenue in high-crime zones as businesses close or relocate. These fiscal burdens crowd out spending on infrastructure, education and developmental programmes, weakening the state's ability to invest in long-term growth and social stability.



Crime therefore undermines every major macroeconomic objective, including investment, employment, competitiveness and fiscal sustainability.

For individuals, crime erodes financial security, quality of life and future prospects. Households bear the direct costs of medical treatment, funerals, property loss and the replacement of stolen or damaged goods. They also face ongoing expenses for private security, insurance and transport rerouting, while lost working days, income interruptions and job losses reduce household resilience. Victims and their families often suffer long-term psychological harm that affects productivity, educational outcomes and social participation. In poorer communities, these individual costs **accumulate, deepening poverty, widening** inequality and limiting upward mobility across generations.

The Rise of Private Security and Decline of State Capacity

The proliferation of private security is one of the clearest indicators of declining confidence in the state's ability to ensure safety. According to the Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority's (PSiRA) *Annual Report 2024/25*, South Africa now has:

- 2.7 million registered private-security officers;
- 650 000 active officers;
- More private-security personnel than police officers by a ratio of at least 3:1; and
- Rapid expansion of armed-response vehicles, tactical teams and corporate-protection services.¹⁵

A De Facto Parallel Policing System

Given the sheer size of the private-security industry, South Africa now has two policing systems operating in parallel. Private security increasingly performs functions once associated with public policing, including:

- incident first response;
- neighbourhood patrols;
- investigative assistance;
- armed escort of goods;
- protection of victims or witnesses; and
- public-space monitoring in malls, transport hubs and business districts.

This parallel system has emerged because SAPS has struggled to keep up with population growth, urbanisation and the expanding footprint of organised crime. The IRR emphasises that private security fills gaps left by state failure but, in doing so, creates new problems.

I. Unequal Access to Safety

Private security is highly unevenly distributed. Wealthy neighbourhoods, businesses and gated estates can afford comprehensive protection, including armed response, surveillance networks and tactical teams. Low-income communities cannot. The IRR highlights that this asymmetry reinforces socio-economic divides in access to safety and deepens inequality in social outcomes.



Township and informal-settlement residents face the highest levels of crime, and yet have the least protection. As a result, self-policing networks and informal justice systems have proliferated, sometimes leading to vigilantism and community-level instability.

II. Fragmented Security Governance

The coexistence of SAPS and private security without formal coordination generates a fragmented security environment. Intelligence sharing is inconsistent, operational protocols vary widely and there is no unified command structure during incidents. Crime scenes are often compromised due to overlapping responses, and the absence of common communication systems limits operational efficiency. International examples show that large private-security sectors require structured integration to avoid duplication and gaps in coverage. South Africa has not yet established such frameworks.

III. Economic and Social Implications

While private security helps stabilise parts of the economy, it also carries significant hidden costs. Households and businesses face additional financial burdens, investment is diverted into security rather than productive activity, and exclusionary safety practices become normalised as wealthier areas secure themselves while poorer communities remain exposed. At the same time, reliance on private protection erodes public trust in state policing and reduces overall accountability, as regulatory gaps allow inconsistent standards, limited oversight and uneven enforcement across the sector. Moreover, the dominance of private security creates a false sense of safety for protected areas while leaving high-crime environments even more vulnerable.

IV. The Reform Imperative

To prevent permanent bifurcation of the country's security system, South Africa must develop a coherent model for regulating, integrating and coordinating private security with SAPS. This requires establishing shared communication channels, coordinated operational planning, consistent minimum standards of training and professionalism, formalised data-sharing agreements with appropriate safeguards, and a clarified legal framework that clearly defines the respective roles, limits and responsibilities of all participating security actors.

Institutional Weakness and Political Interference

South Africa's policing system continues to suffer from chronic institutional vulnerabilities, many of which stem from blurred boundaries between legitimate political oversight and improper interference in operational decision-making. ISS research has repeatedly shown that the absence of clear, enforceable governance standards allows political actors, senior officials and factional interests to exert influence over investigations, internal promotions, resource allocation and the functioning of specialised units.¹⁶

The Problem of Improper Directives

Operational policing in South Africa is meant to be insulated from political instruction. In practice, senior SAPS leaders frequently receive informal directives from political figures, either encouraging or discouraging specific investigations, or signalling which individuals or factions should be protected. These pressures can take several forms:

- Requests to halt or delay investigations involving politically connected individuals;



- Instructions to divert investigative capacity toward politically advantageous targets; and
- Subtle disincentives for officers who pursue corruption or organised-crime cases linked to influential networks.

Such interference not only undermines specific investigations but also erodes the perceived neutrality of the police, discouraging whistle-blowers and weakening morale among skilled investigators.

Politicised Restructuring of Specialised Units

ISS research highlights recurring political interference in the restructuring of specialised units, including Crime Intelligence, the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (the Hawks), Tactical Response Teams, Public Order Policing units and provincial anti-gang task teams. These restructurings are often justified as efficiency measures, yet they frequently coincide with changes in political factional alignment, high-profile investigations, or internal disputes over resource control.

Several high-impact restructurings have resulted in the disbanding or weakening of units that were succeeding in tackling organised crime or political corruption. This contributes to operational fragmentation, loss of institutional memory and a reduction in specialised expertise that cannot be replaced quickly.

Manipulation of Crime Intelligence

Crime Intelligence remains one of the most vulnerable divisions within SAPS. ISS, the IRR and the Global Organized Crime Index 2025 all note that South Africa's intelligence environment is highly politicised and, in some cases, penetrated by criminal networks.¹⁷

Weak vetting, internal factionalism and compromised procurement processes have enabled the misuse of intelligence funds and the deployment of intelligence operations for political aims rather than public safety. Several inquiries, including evidence before the Madlanga Commission, have highlighted:

- Misuse of covert funds for factional or personal benefit;
- Deployment of surveillance capacities against political rivals rather than criminal
- Networks;
- Obstruction of investigations into organised-crime groups with political connections; and
- Loss or theft of firearms, equipment and confidential documents.

These failures have had direct consequences for crime trends, given that organised-crime groups are quick to exploit intelligence weaknesses.



Factional Appointments and Leadership Instability

The politicisation of senior appointments has long undermined SAPS governance, with promotions and leadership placements often shaped by political loyalty rather than proven competence or integrity. This practice has entrenched a leadership culture that prioritises factional alignment over professional standards, weakening the institution's ability to operate independently and eroding public and internal trust. When key roles are filled on the basis of political affiliations or personal loyalties, the organisational mission becomes distorted, and the operational focus shifts away from crime reduction and public safety toward the protection of political interests. This pattern produces cascading institutional harm. Experienced investigators and operational specialists are regularly overlooked for advancement, depriving SAPS of technical expertise at the highest levels. Frequent leadership changes create instability, disrupt long-term planning and fracture institutional memory. As the chain of command loses credibility, discipline erodes, enabling corruption, absenteeism and defiance of lawful instructions at lower ranks. Internal performance systems also become vulnerable to manipulation, with targets selectively enforced or ignored depending on political pressures.

ISS research underscores that leadership instability is one of the strongest predictors of collapsing investigative capacity and weakening internal discipline. When senior posts are politicised, strategic units lose direction, skilled personnel exit the organisation, and corruption networks flourish within the vacuum. Over time, this undermines both operational effectiveness and institutional legitimacy, making it impossible for SAPS to deliver consistent, credible and professional policing.

Evidence from the Madlanga Commission of Inquiry

The Judicial Commission into Criminality, Political Interference and Corruption in the Criminal Justice System (the “Madlanga Commission”) was established to probe claims by KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Commissioner, Lieutenant General Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi that the Minister of Police, Senzo Mchunu interfered with police investigations by disbanding the Political Killings Task Team and that a Gauteng task team uncovered a politically connected drug cartel/syndicated involving law enforcement, members of the judiciary, business people and prosecutors. Testimony before the commission has included claims of relationships between underworld figures and politicians; the infiltration of law enforcement structures by organised crime groups; access secured by criminals to police intelligence; and the awarding of large contracts to compromised individuals. Senior police officers were said to have received kickbacks for their complicity, and politicians, including Mchunu, support for their political ambitions.¹⁸ While much of this remains to be tested – and it remains to be seen what remedial action might be taken – the commission (and parallel hearings in Parliament) has focused attention on the depth of crisis in South Africa's criminal justice ecosystem, underlining that for many South Africans, the country's law enforcement agencies are deeply complicit in the malfeasance they are meant to counter.

Systemic Consequences of Interference

Political interference damages the police in ways that extend well beyond individual cases. Firstly, it undermines trust. The *GPSJS 2024/25* shows that only 48.9% of adults believe police act in the best interests of the community, and only half of crime victims report incidents to SAPS because they do not expect fair or effective treatment.

Secondly, it enables organised crime. The Global Organized Crime Index shows that South Africa's criminal networks thrive where policing institutions are compromised by political influence or corruption.

Thirdly, it weakens investigative capacity. Skilled detectives leave, internal discipline collapses and task teams become unstable.

Fourthly, it blocks reform. Evidence-based policing, integrity systems and decentralised safety strategies cannot operate effectively where senior leadership is subject to political pressure.

The Reform Imperative

Unless these governance issues are resolved, SAPS will continue to experience short-term operational gains alongside long-term institutional deterioration, as enforcement surges cannot compensate for deeper structural dysfunction. South Africa requires clear and enforceable statutory boundaries that define the limits of ministerial oversight, while senior appointments must be subjected to transparent competency assessments. Crime Intelligence needs independent reform with strengthened vetting, oversight and internal controls, and specialised units must be shielded from political interference. At the same time, whistle-blowers must receive robust legal protection and sustained institutional support to ensure accountability can function effectively.

Without these reforms, no volume of arrests, seizures or tactical operations can translate into sustained crime reduction.

Reform Direction

South Africa's crime crisis cannot be resolved through enforcement alone. The 2025/26 statistics show that while policing operations have intensified, structural weaknesses continue to limit long-term gains. The following reform directions represent the most realistic and high-impact avenues for transforming the security environment. Each reform area aligns with evidence from the ISS, IRR, Global Organized Crime Index, Stats SA surveys and international best practice.



Evidence-Based Policing (EBP)

Evidence-based policing is now one of the most significant reform opportunities available to South Africa. ISS research demonstrates that properly implemented hotspot policing, guided by real-time data and problem-oriented analysis, can meaningfully reduce crime. The ISS evaluation of the Western Cape pilot showed a 31% reduction in contact crime at targeted precincts when police deployment, alcohol-enforcement checks and street-level operations were guided by empirical analysis rather than routine patrols.¹⁹

This approach relies on four pillars: accurate and timely crime data; analysis that identifies repeat locations, repeat offenders and repeat victims; interventions designed to address the specific underlying drivers of violence in each hotspot; and continuous monitoring to determine whether these interventions are achieving the desired impact.

SAPS has formally incorporated EBP into its 2025/26 Annual Performance Plan, but institutional adoption remains uneven. For EBP to become a routine national standard, South Africa requires a professional cadre of crime analysts, digital reporting systems, and station commanders who are trained to use data as a management tool rather than an administrative formality. Without accurate, credible crime data and appropriate leadership, EBP risks becoming a symbolic rather than a practical reform.

Successful EBP scaling would reduce the reliance on large, unfocused operations, shift SAPS resources to the highest-impact areas, and create a policing system driven by intelligence rather than volume-based activity.

Independent Crime-Statistics Governance

One of the most consistent findings across the various streams of research is that crime statistics cannot be governed by the same institution they are meant to assess. ISS argues that entrusting SAPS with sole responsibility for collecting, processing and releasing crime statistics creates inherent conflicts of interest and opportunities for manipulation, both deliberate and unintentional.²⁰

Moving crime statistics to Stats SA would accomplish three goals.

Firstly, it would restore credibility, as Stats SA is an internationally accredited statistical agency with rigorous methodological oversight and independence from political authority.

Secondly, it would enable the integration of police data with the GPSJS survey findings, closing gaps between recorded crime and experienced crime.

Thirdly, it would allow EBP to function effectively, as analysts and policymakers would have access to transparent, validated and comparable data. International examples such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand and parts of Canada show that independent statistical governance improves public trust, strengthens accountability, and prevents institutional pressure from distorting operational priorities.

Without independent statistics, South Africa cannot reliably evaluate progress or design policy based on accurate measurement.

Internal Integrity and Accountability

SAPS faces a chronic internal integrity crisis. Years of politicised appointments, collapsed disciplinary systems and weak internal anti-corruption capacity have allowed criminal networks and corrupt officers to operate with impunity. The ISS highlights that officers often fear retaliation for reporting misconduct, while whistle-blower protections are inconsistent and ineffective.²¹

Comprehensive integrity reform requires an independent, well-resourced anti-corruption unit with the authority to investigate high-risk officers, procurement irregularities and organised-crime penetration, supported by a disciplined and timely internal disciplinary system with transparent outcomes and statutory deadlines. It also demands strong whistle-blower protections that ensure anonymity, aftercare and relocation where necessary; enhanced vetting procedures for senior management, including lifestyle audits and conflict-of-interest assessments; and the establishment of clear professional standards enforced by an independent body rather than by the SAPS hierarchy itself.

Integrity reform is foundational to all other reforms. Without institutional credibility, public trust cannot recover, community cooperation will remain low and policing reforms such as EBP cannot be implemented effectively.

Decentralisation

South Africa's policing model remains overly centralised, despite Section 206 of the Constitution granting provinces oversight powers and a mandate to monitor police performance. Large metropolitan municipalities are increasingly bearing the brunt of violent crime, yet their authority remains limited largely to by-law enforcement and traffic regulation. Decentralisation would allow capable provinces and metros to set local policing priorities, assume responsibility for specific functions, and integrate provincial safety strategies with municipal enforcement, private security and social-development programmes. The ISS argues that decentralisation must include clear statutory guardrails to prevent political interference or fragmented operational control, but that the current centralised model is demonstrably failing high-risk urban areas.

Cities such as Cape Town, Johannesburg and eThekweni possess greater administrative and fiscal capacity than many national departments and are better positioned to monitor hotspots, manage local crime-prevention systems and apply EBP at scale. This aligns with international evidence showing that policing becomes more responsive when accountability structures shift closer to affected communities.

Public–Private Security Integration

South Africa's private-security sector is now one of the largest in the world, with more than 2.7 million registered practitioners and approximately 650 000 active officers. The size of the industry means that private security has become a parallel policing system, particularly in metropolitan and suburban areas.

Cooperation between SAPS and private security is inconsistent and largely informal. Without structured frameworks, this results in duplication of effort, fragmented intelligence, inconsistent standards and unequal access to safety. Given the size and operational reach of the private-security sector, integration is no longer optional.

A coherent model would require:

- Shared communication channels for crime intelligence and emergency response. Joint operational protocols and defined areas of responsibility;
- Transparent regulatory standards ensuring accountability and professional conduct. Data-sharing agreements with appropriate protections; and
- Clear boundaries preventing private actors from assuming coercive or investigative powers reserved for the state.

Such integration would free SAPS resources for priority crimes, improve intelligence flows and expand the reach of safety operations without increasing SAPS personnel.

Strategic Recommendations

The focus now turns to the IRR solutions framework and integrates the latest evidence across crime, policing, public trust and organised-crime research. The focus remains on interventions with measurable impact and structural reforms that can be implemented within existing constitutional arrangements.

Professionalising the Police: Merit, Integrity and Leadership Stability

South Africa's policing problems are rooted in long-standing weaknesses in leadership, meritocracy and internal accountability.²² Senior appointments have been politicised for more than a decade, with promotions frequently influenced by political loyalty rather than competence.²³ This pattern undermines professionalism and weakens operational leadership.

ISS research shows that leadership instability is one of the strongest predictors of declining investigative capacity and weakening internal discipline.²⁴ Evidence presented to the Madlanga Commission and the Ad Hoc Committee on the Mkhwanazi allegations confirms that political interference has shaped senior appointments and obstructed key investigations.²⁵

Professionalisation requires that competency requirements, integrity histories and operational experience outweigh political alignment during senior appointments. Stronger vetting, including lifestyle audits and conflict-of-interest screening, is necessary to ensure credible candidates. Fixed-term leadership contracts protected from arbitrary dismissal would enhance organisational stability.

An independent, technically qualified appointments body reporting directly to Parliament is essential to protect SAPS leadership from political manipulation.²⁶

Evidence-Based Policing: Targeting Hotspots, Offenders and Repeat Victims

Evidence-based policing is a proven approach supported by robust international research and successful local pilot programmes. ISS evaluations of Western Cape hotspot trials show that focused deployments reduced contact crime by more than 30% in targeted areas.²⁷ SAPS has now formally included evidence-based policing in its 2025/26 Annual Performance Plan.²⁸

Violence in South Africa is highly concentrated. The Top 30 murder stations, including Mfuleni, Delft, Kraaifontein, Gugulethu, Nyanga and Khayelitsha, account for a disproportionate share of national homicides. Evidence-based policing requires accurate crime data, analytical capacity, focused interventions and regular monitoring of outcomes. SAPS must build analytical units at station level, strengthen crime-data quality and develop hotspot-specific intervention plans.

Evidence-based policing is most effective when combined with environmental improvements, targeted alcohol enforcement and firearm-reduction initiatives. In high-risk stations, hotspot deployments must be integrated with anti-gang and anti-extortion task teams for sustained impact.

Integrity, Anti-Corruption and Internal Discipline

Corruption is a core enabler of both violent and organised crime. The Global Organized Crime Index describes South Africa as an ecosystem where state and criminal interests intersect. This includes protection of criminal actors, manipulation of intelligence structures and interference in investigations.

A credible integrity system requires an independent and well-resourced anti-corruption unit empowered to investigate high-risk officers and procurement irregularities.²⁹ Internal disciplinary systems must move faster, with statutory deadlines and transparent publication of outcomes to reduce impunity.

Officers accused of serious corruption or violent offences should be suspended pending investigation. South Africa must improve whistle-blower protection through anonymity guarantees, aftercare support and emergency relocation mechanisms.

Senior-management vetting must be strengthened through lifestyle audits, conflict-of-interest checks and stricter controls on secondary business interests.

Depoliticising SAPS and Clarifying Oversight Boundaries

Political interference remains a major obstacle to effective policing. ISS research highlights the absence of clear boundaries between legitimate ministerial oversight and improper political interference.³⁰ This has allowed political actors to influence investigations, direct operational deployments and disrupt specialist units.

Statutory boundaries are necessary to define the limits of political authority. Investigations, operational decisions, resource allocation and specialist-unit deployment must be insulated from political directives.

Crime Intelligence requires independent reform to remove political influence, enhance internal controls and strengthen vetting. Specialised units, particularly anti-gang and anti-corruption task teams, must be protected from politically motivated restructuring.

Whistle-blowers who expose political interference must receive robust legal protection and institutional support.³¹

Independent Crime-Statistics Governance

Reliable crime data is essential for planning and accountability. South Africa's statistics remain under SAPS control, which creates an inherent conflict of interest. The Governance, Public Safety and Justice Survey shows that fewer than 50% of victims report crime, which means official crime levels significantly underrepresent reality.³²

Crime statistics should be transferred to Statistics South Africa to ensure independent oversight and public credibility. SAPS should provide daily raw data to a dedicated Stats SA crime-statistics unit, which would validate, standardise and publish quarterly reports.

Strengthening Investigations and Case Outcomes

Arrest volumes remain extraordinarily high. SAPS reported 413 583 arrests between April and September 2025. Yet conviction rates for violent crime remain low and attempted murder increased over the same period. This indicates reactive rather than strategic policing.

South Africa must rebuild specialised detective units, reinstate multidisciplinary task teams and reduce forensic backlogs.³³ Detective workloads should be capped to ensure quality investigations. The National Prosecuting Authority requires consistent funding for specialist prosecutors. Digital case-management systems shared between SAPS and the NPA would improve docket tracking, increase accountability and reduce case attrition.

Firearm and Alcohol Harm-Reduction Strategies

Firearms and alcohol are two of the strongest predictors of violent crime. SAPS seized 3 442 firearms between April and September 2025 and closed 11 975 unlicensed liquor outlets. These figures highlight the scale of both illegal firearms circulation and unregulated alcohol trade.

South Africa must strengthen firearm tracing, increase ballistic testing efficiency, expand firearm amnesty programmes and accelerate destruction of recovered firearms.³⁴

Targeted enforcement against high-risk alcohol outlets is necessary in hotspots with high densities of unlicensed premises. Local governments should regulate alcohol-outlet density more effectively and enforce compliance.

Private Security Integration and Regulation

South Africa's private-security industry is the largest in Africa, with more than 650 000 active officers.³⁵ The sector plays a major role in stabilising certain areas but remains only partially regulated.

South Africa requires a structured framework for integration between SAPS and private security. This includes shared communication channels, joint operational planning, data-sharing agreements with safeguards and a clarified legal framework defining roles and limits. Professional standards, personnel vetting and oversight measures must be strengthened to prevent misuse of weapons and vehicles.

Decentralising Policing Powers within Constitutional Limits

Section 206 of the Constitution already grants provinces significant oversight authority. These powers can be used more effectively to monitor station performance, assess crime-prevention plans and drive accountability.

Large metropolitan municipalities, such as Cape Town, Johannesburg, eThekweni and Tshwane, should receive greater operational responsibility consistent with international metropolitan policing models. Metro police services can manage traffic enforcement, by-law policing and targeted hotspot interventions, allowing SAPS to focus on serious and organised crime.

Tackling Organised Crime as a Core Strategic Priority

Organised crime in South Africa is systemic rather than episodic. The Global Organized Crime Index ranks the country seventh globally for criminalisation and highlights entrenched criminal markets including extortion, illicit mining, synthetic drugs and human trafficking. Organised networks exploit weak procurement systems, compromised policing and poor border controls.

A coordinated national strategy must integrate SAPS specialised units, the NPA's Investigating Directorate, SARS Customs, the Border Management Authority and the Financial Intelligence Centre. A central intelligence-coordination hub with statutory authority is required to direct operations.

Procurement reform is essential to prevent criminal networks from accessing public funds. Transparent procurement platforms and automated risk-screening tools would help detect irregularities and disrupt criminal infiltration.³⁶

Border Governance and Illegal Trade Disruption

Porous borders contribute significantly to violent and organised crime. Firearms, narcotics, counterfeit goods and wildlife products flow across South Africa's borders with limited detection

Modernised border posts using integrated surveillance, biometric systems and enhanced canine units are necessary. Anti-corruption interventions targeting customs and border personnel are essential due to high levels of internal compromise.

The Border Management Authority should prioritise high-risk border points linked to organised networks and publish regular progress reports to strengthen accountability.

Strengthening Community Safety and Social Prevention

Community safety requires more than enforcement alone. High-risk communities need long-term prevention programmes, including after-school activities, early-childhood development, youth employment pathways and trauma support initiatives.

Local governments should focus on environmental improvements in high-risk areas. Evidence shows that well-lit streets, safe walkways and clean public spaces reduce crime opportunities by increasing visibility and community presence.³⁷

Community structures, NGOs and faith-based organisations should be integrated into formal community-safety planning. Community knowledge plays a critical role in identifying risks and building legitimacy.

Restoring Public Trust and Legitimacy

The Governance, Public Safety and Justice Survey reveals collapsing public trust in policing. Only 31.1% of adults feel safe walking alone at night and fewer than half believe police would respond quickly in an emergency³⁸. Victim dissatisfaction reduces reporting, fuels case attrition and undermines the credibility of the criminal-justice system.

Restoring trust requires more than just a cultural shift within SAPS. Officers must be trained in procedural justice, which prioritises fair treatment, respectful communication and transparency.³⁹ Community policing should form a central pillar of SAPS practice rather than a peripheral function.

Public-feedback mechanisms, transparent performance dashboards and professional victim-support units are necessary to rebuild trust. Without trust, policing efforts cannot succeed.

Conclusion

There is a significant amount of research that highlights the costs and consequences of crime: its dire impact on economic prospects, its corrosive impact on democratic institutions, and its potentially deleterious workings on a society's psyche and sense of cohesion. Each of these has long been evident in South Africa.

The damage that crime is inflicting on South Africa is now universally acknowledged – a contrast of sorts from the early years of democracy, where the country's authorities at times attempted to deny the problem or to craft narratives to avoid facing its full implications.

Unfortunately, the scale of the pathologies makes a resetting and recovery in the crime-fighting sphere a difficult proposition; but it is not impossible. This discussion has attempted to show that a great deal is possible with enhanced professionalism, with tailoring solutions to local challenges and through a suitable use of information.

Longer term, South Africa will need to confront a hard reality: the fight against crime has been hamstrung by a failure adequately to maintain the institutions tasked with undertaking it. This has been accompanied by a loss of faith on the part of South Africa's people in the capacity of its policing agencies – especially SAPS – to fulfil this role.

Ultimately, given the public's view of SAPS, and that the institution has for many become synonymous with corruption, serious thought will need to be a complete institutional overhaul. The very name, image and strategy will have to change. From the badges and uniforms worn by officers, to the design and location of police stations, a complete turnaround may be needed to earn the trust of the public, and to reset SAPS for its future role.

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