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Op-ed

WHY SOUTH AFRICANS FEEL LESS SAFE THAN THE DATA SUGGESTS
True South Africa: Data. Context. Perspective.

By Daryl Swanepoel

If you tell South Africans that some crime trends have improved over the past three decades, many will react with disbelief.

Some will laugh. Others will point to a neighbour who was robbed, a relative who was assaulted or a friend who recently installed another security gate. And they would not be wrong.

Crime is deeply personal. Unlike economic growth rates, inflation figures or budget deficits, crime is experienced in ways that leave emotional scars. A burglary is not just a statistic. A hijacking is not just a data point. A murder is not just a number in a government report. Crime leaves people frightened, angry and often traumatised.

That reality matters. But there is another reality that also matters: our perception of risk is not always the same thing as the actual level of risk.

Human beings are wired to pay attention to danger. It is one of the reasons our species survived. We remember threats more vividly than successes. We remember tragedies more clearly than ordinary days. We instinctively focus on what can go wrong. As a result, perceptions of crime are often shaped less by the overall trend and more by the most recent, most shocking or most emotionally powerful incident.

This is not unique to South Africa. It happens everywhere.

If a commercial aircraft crashes, many people become more anxious about flying, even though flying remains one of the safest forms of transport. If a shark attack makes headlines, beachgoers become more fearful of the ocean, even though the statistical risk remains extremely low. Crime works in much the same way.

Most South Africans do not experience crime through crime statistics. They experience it through news reports, social media posts, WhatsApp groups and conversations with family and friends. Each incident reinforces a broader narrative of danger. The result is that perception can sometimes move in a different direction from the underlying data.

Consider just a few examples. Since the mid-1990s, South Africa's murder rate has fallen from approximately 67 murders per 100,000 people to around 44 today. Serious assault has declined from roughly 556 cases per 100,000 people to around 288. Residential burglary has fallen from approximately 596 incidents per 100,000 people to around 247. Theft out of motor vehicles has dropped from roughly 473 incidents per 100,000 people to around 139. These are not the statistics of a country that has solved its crime problem. They are, however, statistics that challenge the popular belief that crime has become uniformly worse in every respect.

This does not mean the fear is irrational. It means fear and evidence are not always measuring the same thing.

The challenge is particularly acute in South Africa, because violent crime remains highly visible. Aggravated robberies, hijackings, house invasions and murders generate enormous public attention. They dominate headlines because they are shocking, and they are shocking because they violate our most basic expectations of safety.

One violent incident can affect the behaviour of an entire community. People change their travel patterns. They install alarms. They avoid certain streets. They warn their children. They share security footage. They tell friends and neighbours. The emotional impact spreads far beyond the direct victims. This helps explain an apparent contradiction in South African public life.

Many crime indicators are significantly better than they were at the dawn of democracy. Murder rates remain far too high, but they are materially lower than they were in the mid-1990s. Serious assault, residential burglary and theft out of motor vehicles have all declined substantially over the long term. But public anxiety about crime remains extremely high.

The reason is that people do not experience crime as averages. They experience crime as possibility. A person who has never been robbed may still feel unsafe, because somebody in their social circle has been robbed. A community may feel insecure, because of a highly publicised incident that occurred nearby. Fear often reflects vulnerability as much as actual victimisation.

South Africa's unequal landscape intensifies this dynamic.

Many citizens live in communities where private security companies patrol the streets, where electric fences surround homes and where access control has become part of everyday life. Others live in communities where policing is stretched, response times are inconsistent and criminal activity is more visible. The very measures people take to protect themselves can also reinforce the perception that danger is everywhere. When security becomes normal, insecurity often feels normal too.

There is another irony. South Africa now employs more private security personnel than public police officers. For many citizens, their daily experience of safety is shaped less by visible policing than by alarms, armed response vehicles, access control and private guards. The growth of private security reflects real concerns about crime, but it also reinforces a constant visual reminder that danger may be nearby, even when long-term crime trends are moving in a more positive direction.

Public perceptions themselves tell an interesting story. According to Statistics South Africa's General Household Survey, approximately 80 per cent of South Africans report feeling safe walking alone in their neighbourhoods during the day. At night, however, that figure falls to around 34,9 per cent. This suggests that South Africans are not irrationally fearful; they are making practical distinctions about risk based on time, place and circumstance. Even public perceptions are therefore more nuanced than the simple narrative of a country in free fall often suggests. South Africans are not saying that nowhere is safe. They are saying that some places and sometimes feel considerably less safe than others. That is an important distinction, because it points to a society grappling with real security challenges, rather than one consumed by indiscriminate fear.

This brings us to an important point, namely that the acknowledgement that perceptions and reality can differ does not mean dismissing people's concerns. Far from it.

South Africans have every right to demand safer communities. Crime remains one of the country's most serious challenges. Tens of thousands of people continue to fall victim to violent crime every year. No statistical trend can erase that reality. But neither should fear become a substitute for analysis.

If we exaggerate the scale of the problem, we risk convincing ourselves that improvement is impossible. And if we convince ourselves that improvement is impossible, we stop demanding the practical reforms that can actually make a difference.

The truth is that South Africa's crime story is neither one of success nor one of collapse. It is the story of a country under strain: a country that has made progress, lost ground and retained the capacity to improve again.

That may sound less dramatic than the headlines we encounter every day. But it is also closer to the truth. And truth matters because effective solutions begin with an accurate diagnosis.

The purpose of evidence is not to make us feel better. It is to help us see more clearly. When it comes to crime, South Africans deserve nothing less.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article forms part of the True South Africa Evidence Series, which seeks to examine South Africa's challenges and achievements through data, context and perspective.