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Africa Criminal Justice Reform
Organisation pour la Réforme de la Justice Pénale en Afrique
Organização para a Reforma da Justiça Criminal em África

VISIBLE POLICING -
CLARIFYING CONCEPTS AND EXPECTATIONS

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Introduction

In October 2018, Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Police called for the South African Police Service (SAPS) to 'intensify the visibility of police units throughout the country.'[1] Similarly, the Khayelitsha Commission of Inquiry recommended in 2014 that the SAPS develop guidelines for the 'visible policing' of informal neighbourhoods.[2]

Calls for 'visible policing' appear at face value to be common-sensical. They infer that where police are visible there will be less crime. But stated alone, 'visible policing' is not a clearly defined, widely accepted, or evidence-based concept. The ambiguity is more pronounced because the phrase can be used as both a noun and verb.

This fact sheet unpacks the idea of visible policing in South Africa. In so doing, it highlights that the concept should be engaged with critically. It suggests that the SAPS sector policing philosophy, which is problem-oriented and data-led, should be the focus of the Visible Policing programme.

Visible Policing

The 2008 *Dictionary of Policing*, which claims to contain the 'key ideas and concepts of policing', makes no mention of 'visible policing'.[3] Similarly, one of the great classics of police sociology, Robert Reiner's *The Politics of the Police*, does not refer to the concept.[4] This does not mean South Africans are confused, only that they use different language. For example, both the aforementioned texts describe 'neighbourhood policing' in ways that echo what in South Africa is called 'sector policing'.

One of the reasons the phrase 'visible policing' is so common in South Africa, is that it can be used as both noun and verb. One can 'do' visible policing, e.g. 'We want more visible policing from the shifts tonight' or one can deliver it, e.g. 'Tonight's operation will deliver visible policing to the community'. Visible Policing, or VISPOL, is also the name of the largest programme in the SAPS, e.g. 'I am a Visible Policing official'.

As shown in Figure 1, VISPOL receives 50% of all SAPS funding, followed by Detective Services, which receives only 21% of funds. Similarly, Table 1 shows that half of all SAPS employees are employed in the VISPOL programme.

VISPOL is made up of three sub-programmes (Crime Prevention; Border Security; Specialised Interventions) and four components (Proactive Policing Services; Firearms, Liquor and Second-Hand Goods Services; Rapid Rail and Police Emergency Response Services, and; Social Crime Prevention).[9]
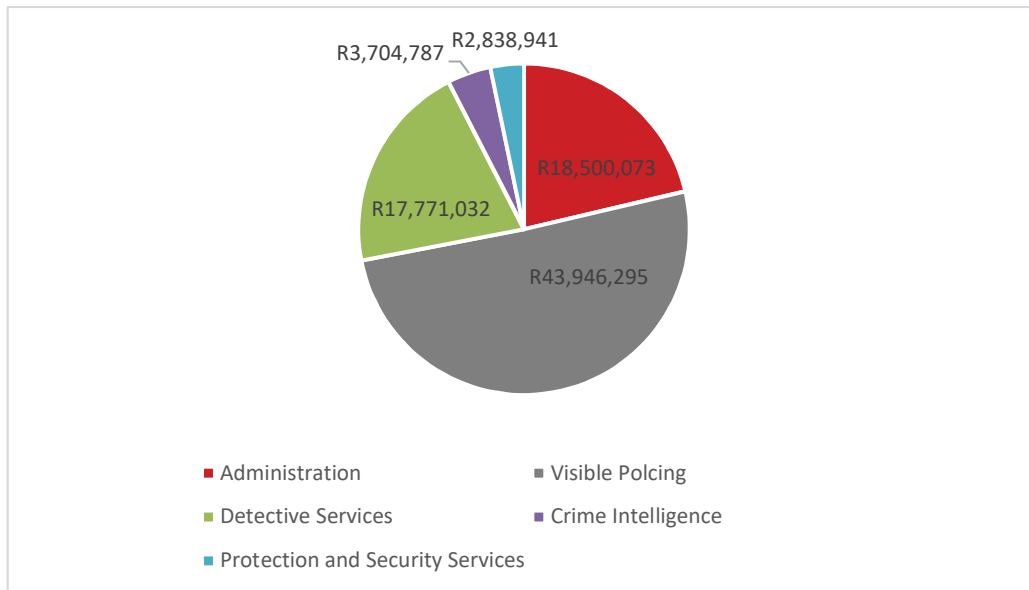
Figure 1 SAPS budget per programme (billion)[5]

R3,704,787   R2,838,941

R18,500,073

R17,771,032

R43,946,295

■ Administration   ■ Visible Polcing

■ Detective Services   ■ Crime Intelligence

■ Protection and Security Services

Table 1 SAPS employees per programme[6]

Programme	Number of employees	Percentage of employees
Visible Policing	100 877	52%
Detective Services	39 069	20%
Crime Intelligence	9 232	5%
Protection and Security Services	6 585	3%
Administration	37 668	20%
Total	193 431	100%

According to the SAPS, the purpose of VISPOL is to: 'Enable police stations to institute and preserve safety and security and provide for specialised interventions and policing of South Africa's borders.'[7] Its strategic objective is: 'To discourage all crimes by providing a proactive and responsive policing service that will reduce the levels of priority crimes.'[8]

Despite this variety of responsibilities, it is VISPOL's crime prevention programme that is most commonly associated with visible policing in the public mind. This is because VISPOL is responsible for delivering the bulk of the everyday police services to the public. Its members are uniformed and generally work 12-hour shifts (two days followed by two nights and four days rest). They staff Community Service Centres (CSC) where they engage with the public (opening case dockets, certifying documents, filing accident reports, answering questions, etc.), manage the station cells, stores (SAP13), and firearms. They also provide security at courts, ensure firearm compliance, police liquor and second-hand goods; carry out 'crime prevention' duties and sector patrols; manage emergency response services (10111) and embark on crime prevention awareness programmes and partnerships.[10]

Most of these are folded into everyday policing, including the kind commonly thought of as 'visible policing'. According to the SAPS sector policing operational guidelines, increased police visibility is a form of general deterrence and may increase the risk of arrest and lower fear of crime.[11] Does this mean that visible police reduce crime?

More police, less crime

The idea that more police means less crime has a common-sense appeal to it and relates to rational choice theory (RCT). Because of its common-sense appeal, RCT formed the foundations of early criminal justice and the liberal use of violent and lethal punishment in the world's early monarchies and states.[12] It assumed that individuals have free will and that criminality is a choice based on rational cost-benefit analysis in any given situation.[13] If people know they are likely to be caught and severely punished, it was believed, they are less likely to offend. This logic informed the traditional but defunct policing model of random patrol, rapid response and follow up investigation, familiar to most South Africans.[14]

The idea of visible policing is also linked to routine activity theory (RAT). RAT suggests that to prevent crime one should focus on the situation in which crime takes place. For a crime to occur, RAT posits, there must exist: a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of a guardian.[15] This idea that it's not the evil individual, but rather a confluence of environmental and behavioural factors that motivates crime, is supported by more recent scholarship about childhood development and how the brain and human behaviour is shaped by genes, culture, experience and environment.[16]

While there is a clear logic to these theories – we are less likely to break the law if we believe we will be caught and punished – the logic does not seamlessly mean that more police means less crime. City neighbourhoods without any police or security presence can be perfectly peaceful and crime free, while others with plenty of police can suffer daily crime and violence. For instance, consider the following findings, predominantly from the US, UK and Australia:

- Having no police can significantly increase crime, but the effect of increasing police numbers can be weak or marginal;[17]
- Police activity and criminal activity are mutually interactive, so any connection between police numbers and crime is difficult to explain;[18]
- There is no consistent body of evidence to support the notion that increasing police numbers is an effective method of reducing violent crime;[19]
- The most consistent finding across studies is that increasing police numbers has no effect on crime levels but some studies suggest that increased police numbers are associated with reductions in crime rates for specific, non-violent crimes like theft;[20]
- The effects of increased police numbers has been found to vary across a number of factors, including crime types, police activities, organisational structures and environmental demands, and the social characteristics of places. Impact appears to depend on how well police work is focused on specific objectives, tasks, places, times and people – in other words, how police are deployed;[21]
- A marginal reduction in crime is associated with the hiring of additional police officers in large American cities; [22]
- A 10 per cent increase in police should lead to a reduction in crime of around 3 per cent (and vice versa), though no studies come close to proving this relationship. The evidence base is so limited that it can't be said there is a direct causal link between police and crime rates.[23]
- An additional officer per 10,000 residents in US cities reduces crime and reduces victimization costs by about $35 per capita.[24]

South Africa

While the international evidence on the relationship between general police numbers and crime rates is inconclusive, research in South Africa suggests that police numbers may, to a certain extent impact violence.[25] Redpath has shown that between 1995 and 2016, per capita expenditure on the SAPS predicted 85% of the variation in the murder rate. Read one way, the analysis can be interpreted as showing that one murder was prevented for every additional R 3 million spent in the organisation. However, there are too many confounding factors and the data is too general, to make confident pronouncements about the general relationship between police numbers and murder in South Africa.

More importantly, however, and better supported by some of the findings above, is the fact that police visibility in the right place and at the right time has an impact on crime. While the standard model of across-the-board random patrol, rapid response and follow-up investigations has limited impact, the more focused and specific the strategies of the police, the more effective police will be in controlling crime and disorder.[26]

There are two key lessons here regarding 'visible policing' in South Africa: Firstly, it's not about general visibility, but rather about specific visibility. Secondly, it's not simply about being seen, but rather about doing – targeted and intentional problem solving in partnership with communities. Fortunately, the SAPS sector policing model embodies this, but it is not clear that it is being implemented as envisaged. What the SAPS is doing in many high-crime areas is deploying Crime Prevention Units (CPU) in accordance with crime pattern analysis. These patrol officials serve as 'force multipliers' to the standard compliment of sector vehicles (patrol and complaints) deployed on a twenty-four hour basis. CPU vehicles are meant to be deployed when and where crime is most predicted but it is unclear if they are.

The SAPS cannot police all communities equally. As such, policing – whether visible or not – should target communities most vulnerable to violent crime.

In 2017/18, just 2.6% (30) of the country's 1 144 police stations recorded 19% (3 942) of the 20 336 murders countrywide. In 2016/17, 13% of stations (148) recorded 50% of all murders. Almost half of these murders occur over weekend evenings.

Murder is the most reliable crime statistic and best indicator of violence more broadly. It can therefore be inferred that a disproportionate amount of violence is highly localised in such stations and at particular times. These stations tend to be characterised by: high population density; high unemployment rates; significant informal housing; high rates of renting property; higher percentages of orphans in the community; and relative poverty compared to the rest of the municipality.[27] These are variables over which police have limited control. However, if police are intelligently deployed (and visible) in specific areas where crime and violence are most common, and if they effectively collaborate with relevant community and state entities to address broader societal risks, they can have a measurable and life-saving impact where it matters most. This is what should be expected and demanded of South Africa's visible police officials – visibility where and when it matters most, combined with intentional, localised problem solving in partnership with others. This will, however, require recognition that *general* and equally distributed 'visible policing' is not in the country's best interests, and so should not be demanded or pursued.

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