

SHOOTING BLANKS?

South Africa's confidence in police

The recent killing of Andries Tatane by police during protest action in Ficksburg, together with a high incidence of police deaths this year, has begun to raise questions about excessive force and the current policing approach and, by extension, the nature and extent of confidence in the police. Yet, at the same time, a large majority of South Africans believe that the police generally have the 'same sense of right and wrong' as them. In this article, BEN ROBERTS and JARÉ STRUWIG present initial findings from an ongoing collaborative project exploring perceptions about the police.

Data for this study draws from the 2010 round of the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), conducted annually by the HSRC since 2003. The survey series consists of nationally representative probability samples of South African adults aged 16 years and over living in private households. The sample size for the 2010 survey round was 3 183 individual respondents, with interviewing conducted between mid-November and mid-December 2010. The module of questions on police confidence derives from a rotating module currently being fielded in 30 countries as part of the fifth round of the European Social Survey. It has been designed to assess national levels of trust in justice and the legitimacy of legal authorities, as well as to test conceptual models that link trust to legitimacy to compliance/cooperation with legal authorities. The survey data provide a range of indicators with which to better understand and monitor confidence in the police, but will also enable comparison of the views of the South African public on this salient topic against those in a host of other developed and developing nations.

Perceived police performance and effectiveness

Several questions were initially posed to respondents relating to their general analysis of the performance of the police and its effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate to citizens. Taking into account the things the police are expected to do, 43% report that the police are doing a good or very good job, 25% suggest that the police are doing a bad or very bad job, with 30% offering a more neutral evaluation.

If a violent crime or house burglary were to occur near to where you live and the police were called, how slowly or quickly do you think they would arrive at the scene?

Regarding measures of police effectiveness, the survey asked participants the following questions: 'Based on what you have heard, or your own experience, how successful do you think the police are at preventing crimes in South Africa where violence is used or threatened? And how successful do you think the police are at catching people who commit house burglaries in South Africa?'

Answers were captured on a scale ranging from 0 (extremely unsuccessful) to 10 (extremely successful). A third question stated: 'If a violent crime or house burglary were to occur near to where you live and the police were called, how slowly or quickly do you think they would arrive at the scene?' Answers were measured on a scale of 0 (extremely slowly) to 10 (extremely quickly).

The SASAS 2010 results show that South Africans are generally polarised on matters of police effectiveness. Virtually equivalent shares of South Africans placed themselves on the bottom and top halves of the success scale for the crime prevention question (38% and 40% respectively), with 21% opting for the mid-point of the scale.

The same is found for the measure of the catching of perpetrators of house burglary, with 40% and 41% respectively rating the police in the top and bottom halves of the success scale, with 17% choosing the mid-point of the scale.

There is more scepticism in terms of the time police take to respond to incidents of violent

crime or house burglary. Half of South Africans (50%) placed themselves on the bottom half of the responsiveness scale, 15% selected the mid-point of the scale, while a third (33%) expressed some measure of trust in rapid police response by choosing a point on the upper half of the scale.

Trust in police distributive and procedural fairness

A series of questions was included in the module in order to ascertain how confident South Africans are that the police treat victims of crime equally (distributive fairness), as well as how satisfied they are with how the police treat people and make decisions when dealing with crimes like house burglary and physical assault (procedural fairness). In making their evaluations, respondents were asked to think of their own experiences, or alternatively, what they have heard from other sources.

In terms of distributive fairness, 44% of South Africans expressed the opinion that the police treat poor people worse than rich people, 43% believe that all groups are treated equally, 2% feel the rich are treated worse than the poor, while 10% are uncertain. Although those with low living standards are more inclined to feel that the poor receive worse treatment (52%), this view is still firmly entrenched among those with high living standards (41%). In the reporting of crimes, 38% stated that the police treat black South Africans worse than other race groups; 43% believe that all race groups are treated equally; 8% feel that white, Indian and coloured South Africans are treated worse than black South Africans; with the remaining 10% uncertain.

Turning to procedural fairness, half the adult population (50%) feels that the police rarely treat people with respect, with 47% stating that they are often or very often respectful (Figure 1).

A similar critical assessment is evident with regard to the ability of police officers to make fair and impartial decisions, as well as their tendency to explain or not explain their decisions and actions when requested to do so.

Police legitimacy

There appears to be a fairly robust sense of moral identification with the police (Figure 2). More than two-thirds of adult South Africans (69%) agree or strongly agree that the police generally have the 'same sense of right or wrong' as them, compared to only 17% that disagree. Furthermore, 52% of respondents believe that the police 'stand for values that are important to people like me', with a quarter (25%) inclined to disagree with this perspective. However, in spite of this relatively positive message, there is more ambivalence among the public in terms of the manner in which police act. While 42% agree that they support the way the police usually act, 33% disagree with the remaining 25% neutral.

Concluding remarks

The results presented above offer a mere glimpse of the rich data that the HSRC has begun to collect on the public's confidence in the police through SASAS. Taken together, the evidence suggests that South Africans see the police as a legitimate authority that is aligned to their moral values. Nonetheless, for a significant share of the population there remain fundamental questions about the efficacy of the police, the extent to which they uphold distributive and procedural fairness; and the manner in which they generally act.

There also remains much scope for improving the overall assessment of police performance, with less than half the adult population indicating that this authority was doing a good job in late 2010.

These results serve as a useful baseline which, as additional rounds of survey data become available and further analysis undertaken, will enable us to understand the determinants of trust in the police, ascertain the effect that events such as the death of citizen Tatane have on attitudes toward the police, and benchmark our progress against other societies. ◀◀

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Figure 1: Trust in police procedural fairness in treatment and decision-making (%)



Figure 2: Public perceptions on the legitimacy of the police (%)



Figure 3: Perceptions of police performance (%)

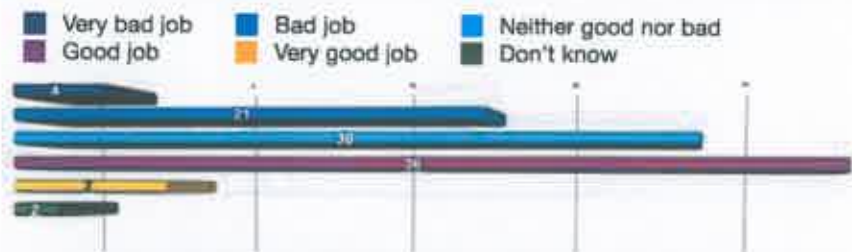


Figure 4: Distributive fairness by living standard measure (%)

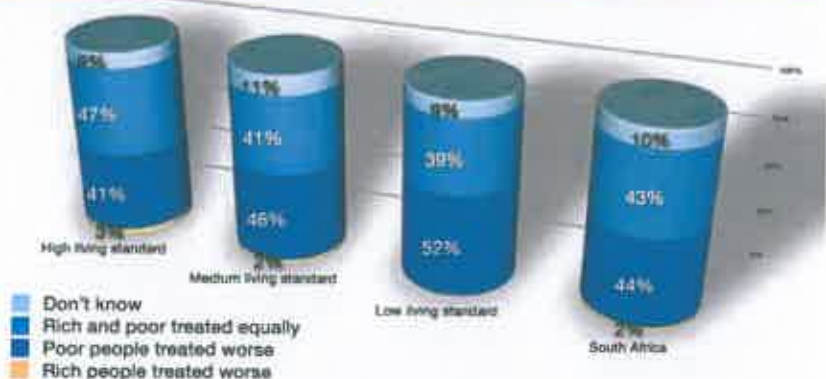
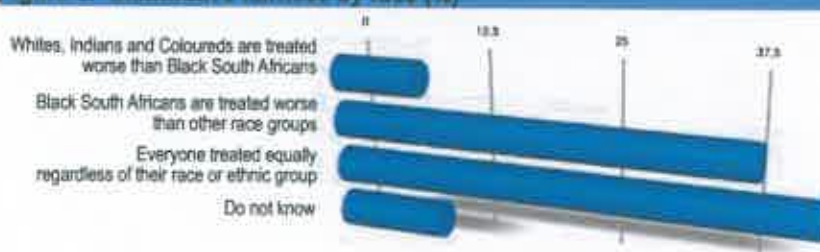


Figure 4: Distributive fairness by race (%)





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**State of
the force**
THE VERDICT IS IN

**Indigenous
Knowledge**
STEALING OUR IK
IS NOT OK

**World
Cup**
Did we
score?

XENOPHOBIA
Stopping the hate

