



Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 96

November 2010

Is Crime Dividing the Rainbow Nation? Fear of Crime in South Africa

Introduction

South Africa has been besieged by high crime levels since the late 1990's. Moller (2005)¹ notes that crime levels began to rise steadily prior to political transition at a time when the police force was focused on quelling political unrest and consequently neglected criminal activity. A lucrative drug trade began seeping into the country along with the smuggling of precious metals and diamonds. The Centre for Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr)² argues that the criminalization of the resistance to apartheid led to a blurring of the lines between political struggle and crime. Consequently, in some communities there appears to be a high tolerance, perhaps even admiration, of criminals³. Other possible causes, which may have roots in the past, include the demise of the family under the migrant labour system, widespread access to firearms emanating from the armed struggle, and the economic and social marginalization of much of the population. More recent problems⁴ such as weaknesses in the justice and education systems may also contribute to high crime levels.

In the 2009 national election, crime featured prominently in the campaign manifestos of the major political parties. The Zuma government promised to bolster the fight against crime and tabled an amendment to the Criminal Procedures Act to give the police more leeway to use lethal force against criminals. In addition to appeasing cross-sections of the electorate who were frustrated with crime, the South African government was also under pressure to assure visitors coming to the 2010 World Cup that the country was a safe destination.

The international profile of South Africa's crime problems was highlighted in late 2009 by the decision of the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board to grant asylum to Brandon Huntly on the grounds that, as a white South African, he was being persecuted by black South African criminals and that the South African government was unable or unwilling to protect him⁵. Huntly submitted newspaper reports of criminal attacks and statements by opposition party leaders as evidence that whites were being targeted by criminals and that the South African government responded with apathy⁶. He contended that attacks on

¹ Moller, Valerie. 2005. Resilient or Resigned? Criminal Victimization and Quality of Life in South Africa. Social Indicators Research. 72. 263-317.

² Centre for Violence and Reconciliation. 2007. The Violent Nature of Crime in South Africa. A concept Paper for the Justice, Crime Prevention and Security Cluster. www.csvr.org.za 10 March 2010.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Centre for Violence and Reconciliation. 2009. Why Does South Africa Have High Rates of Violent Crime? Supplement to the final report of the study on the violent nature of crime in South Africa. www.csvr.org.za 11 November 2010.

⁵ Sunday Times. September 6 2009. P1. SA's White Refugee Faces Deportation.

⁶ www.news24.com 2009.09.01. 8.30am. Refugee Scared to Return to SA

whites were motivated by retribution for apartheid⁷. The South African government was highly displeased with the Board's decision. Media reports of the case sparked a wave of objection from civil society and academia (including an open letter to the Canadian Embassy from 133 academics in South Africa). The Canadian government decided to refer the Board's decision for appeal in the Federal Court of Canada.

There is much evidence to refute Huntly's claims such as the large number of black victims of crime and high crime rates in black residential areas. However, in March 2010 African National Congress Youth League President Julius Malema ignited racial tensions by singing struggle songs which call for the killing of Afrikaners. Some opposition parties have linked these songs to the murder of white farmers, in particular the slaying of a right wing leader, Eugene Terreblanche.

These events raise interesting questions with regard to perceptions of crime in the diverse "rainbow" nation. Do minority ethnic groups feel more victimized than the majority? Is psychological fear of crime influenced by race, gender, social class, prior victimisation or some other factors? Finally, what role, if any, does media exposure play in fear of crime? Finally, does fear of crime affect confidence in the government or the future of South Africa? An Afrobarometer public opinion survey conducted in late 2008 can provide answers to some of these questions. The data also permits comparisons of public opinion on crime across a number of countries in Africa.

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, markets and living conditions. The survey is based on a randomly selected national probability sample of 2400 respondents representing a cross-section of adult South Africans aged 18 years or older. A sample of this size yields a margin of error of ± 2.0 at a 95 percent confidence level. All interviews are conducted face-to-face by trained fieldworkers in the language of the respondent's choice.

The findings do not support arguments that whites are being victimized to a greater extent than other population groups. Fear and experience of crime are greatest among Asians and lowest among whites. Racial and political division on the importance of crime as a national problem may be due to differing priorities among ethnic groups rather than because they experience different levels of victimization. There is broad consensus that the former Mbeki government performed poorly on crime.

Fear of Crime

A sample of 2400 randomly selected participants was asked "Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family feared crime in your own home?". Table 1 indicates that one in three South Africans (34%) feared crime at least several times in the past year. Significantly fewer (21%) whites than blacks (35%) expressed fear of crime always, many or several times in the past year. Coloureds are slightly less likely to fear crime than blacks. Fear of crime is greatest among Asians⁸ with well over half stating that they feared crime often in the past year. The data do not support the contention that whites feel more vulnerable to crime than other population groups.

⁷ Huntly also argued that he was discriminated against by affirmative action policies and was unable to find employment in South Africa. Media reports indicate that the Board did consider these issues in arriving at their decision but the main focus was his personal safety in South Africa. This paper will not discuss perceptions of affirmative action.

⁸ Note that with a sub-sample size of 72 respondents the margin of sampling error for the Asian sub-category is much higher at 12%.

Table 1: Fear of Crime, by Race (percent)

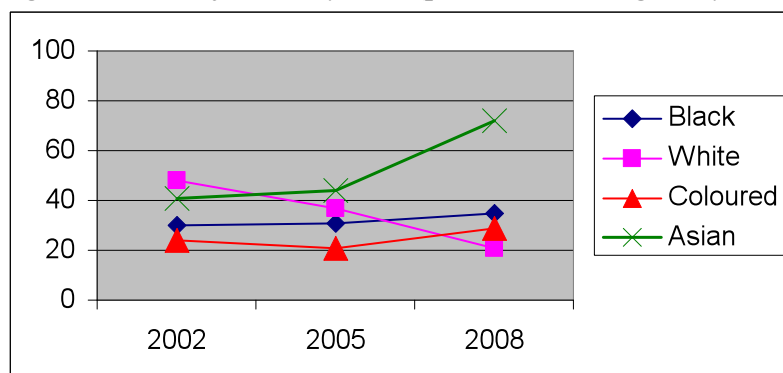
	Black/ African	White/ European	Coloured /Mixed Race	Asian	Total
Never	48	59	56	14	49
Just once or twice	16	19	15	13	16
Several times	15	10	10	14	14
Many times	10	5	12	17	10
Always	10	6	7	41	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	1819	279	230	72	2390

Question: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family feared crime in your own home?*

A gender analysis reveals that females were slightly more afraid of crime than males, but the difference is not as pronounced as ethnic differences.

A comparison of fear of crime over time reveals that fear of crime has increased slightly for blacks (from 30% to 35%) and Coloureds (from 24% to 29%) between 2002 and 2008. Although in 2002 more whites (48%) than non-whites (30%)⁹ expressed fear, there has been a decrease in the number of whites claiming frequent fear, notably in 2008 (21%). Fear of crime increased sharply for Asians between 2005 (41%) and 2008 (72%). In sum, while fear of crime has declined among whites it has increased for other race groups.

Figure 1: Fear of Crime by Race (percent answering always, many and several times)



Question: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family feared crime in your own home?*

Experience of Crime in South Africa

Survey respondents were also asked how often in the past year they had actually been a victim of crime.

Just over 15% of South Africans report that they had something stolen from their home in the past year at least several times. White respondents (11%) were less likely than all other race groups to state that they were frequent victims of theft from the home. One in five (21%) Asians, 16% of blacks and 18% of Coloureds were victims of household theft on a regular basis. These findings contradict suggestions that whites experience more criminal victimization than other groups.

⁹ This figure is the aggregated percentage for blacks, Coloureds and Asians.

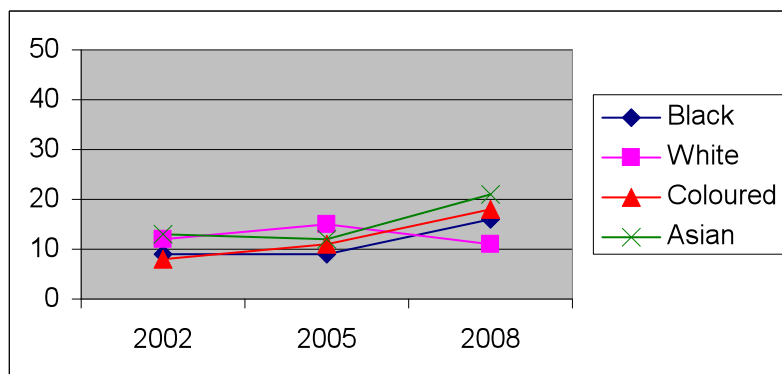
Table 2: Frequency of Theft from Home by Race (percent)

	Black/ African	White/ European	Coloured /Mixed Race	Asian	Total
Never	63	71	55	54	63
Just once or twice	21	18	27	24	21
Several times	10	7	10	16	10
Many times	5	3	7	1	5
Always	1	1	1	4	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	1819	279	230	72	

Question: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family had something stolen from your house?*

Between 2002 and 2005 all groups experienced somewhat more theft from the home and there were no significant differences between whites and Asians. Over the period 2005 to 2008, reported theft from the home remained fairly stable among whites but rose for all non-white groups.

Figure 2: Frequency of Theft from Home by Race 2002-2008 (percent answering always, many and several times)



Question: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family had something stolen from your house.*

One in five South Africans (19%) reported being physically attacked at least once in the past year but only 8% report being attacked regularly. Asians and blacks were more likely than coloureds and whites to be repeatedly victimised. There were no notable gender differences.

Table 3: Frequency of Physical Attack by Race

	Black/ African	White/ European	Coloured /Mixed Race	Asian	Total
Never	81	89	82	81	82
Just once or twice	11	8	12	10	11
Several times	4	2	3	4	4
Many times	3	1	1	3	3
Always	0	0	1	1	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	1819	279	230	72	

Question: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family been physically attacked?*

Levels of frequent physical attack were generally stable over the period 2002 to 2008.

Factors which Influence Fear of Crime

Regression analysis can be used to determine which factors influence fear of crime and the relative importance of each. Thus we can determine the influence of race relative to other demographic factors such as income or education. A multiple regression model was fitted with fear of crime as the dependent variable and race, gender, lived poverty¹⁰, experience of crime (robbery and physical attack), education, residential location, and radio usage as predictors.¹¹ The model aimed to determine if race, gender and level of poverty influence the fear of crime. In addition it was postulated that the experience of crime in the home would heighten fear of crime. Similarly exposure to the media (that is, radio) might raise fear through awareness of crime and by vicarious experience of crime. Education and urban/rural location were included as controls¹².

Table 4 presents the coefficients and standard error of the explanatory variables used in the model¹³. The significance values of each variable in the model indicate whether the variable influences fear of crime at a 95% confidence level. The findings indicate women tend to have slightly greater fear of crime than men. In contrast, whites and coloured respondents experienced less fear of crime in comparison to black respondents. Only Asian respondents appear to have significantly more fear of crime than black respondents. The experience of robbery in the household in particular and attack of a household member contributes to fear of crime more than the demographic variables. Radio exposure did not have a statistically significant impact on fear of crime. It is possible that radio usage is too broad an indicator, which does not accurately assess exposure to media content relating to crime. Poverty has a significant influence on fear of crime with those living in poverty tending to be more fearful. Education has no effect on fear of crime but urban respondents have more fear than those in rural areas¹⁴.

¹⁰ Lived poverty is measured by asking respondents how often they have experienced shortages of food, water, fuel for cooking, medical treatment and a cash income. Results are averaged to create a scale of lived poverty.

¹¹ Radio usage was selected as an indicator of media exposure as this is most ubiquitous form of media in South Africa.

¹² Dummy variables were created for the categorical urban/rural, education, gender and race variables. Lived poverty was measured by a scale variable derived by computing an index from poverty indicators in survey. The experience of crime variables and radio usage were measured on interval scales.

¹³ Tolerance scores indicates that multi-colinearity between the predictor variables is not problematic.

¹⁴ The model was run using only the significant predictor variables in table 5 but there was minimal improvement in the adjusted R squared and the standard error of regression. The value of the partial coefficients did not change much.

Further analysis confirms that overall; the demographic variables are weak predictors of fear of crime¹⁵. The regression test supports the results of the cross tabulations presented earlier, leading to the conclusion that although race does influence fear of crime, Asians rather than whites are more afraid of crime in comparison to other race groups. However, female gender, poverty and urban location also contribute to fear of crime. But the strongest predictors are the experience of robbery in the home or physical attack¹⁶.

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Fear of Crime: South Africa, 2008

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients
	B	Std. Error	Beta
(Constant)	.072	.120	
Female	.156	.050	.056
White	-.197	.085	-.046
Asian	1.350	.152	.163
Coloured	-.224	.088	-.047
Poverty	.259	.030	.172
Robbery in home	.924	.056	.319
Attack in home	.486	.070	.134
Radio usage	.163	.107	.027
Education	-.008	.053	-.003
Urban	.320	.056	.111
Adjusted R Squared = 0.244			

Fear of Crime and Confidence in South Africa

The Huntly case and the response to the murder of Terreblanche in some communities are indications that crime may be polarizing South African society. It is therefore interesting to examine the relationship between fear of crime and overall assessments of the future of the country.

¹⁵ Adjusted R squared for all demographics variables was 0.1 indicating that they only explain 10% of the variance.

¹⁶ A regression with only these two independent variables produced an adjusted R squared of 0.18.

Table 5: Fear of Crime and Overall Direction of the Country

	Fear of Crime					Total
	Never	Once-Twice	Several times	Many times	Always	
Going in the right direction	42	32	31	30	25	36
Going in the wrong direction	49	58	57	60	65	54
Don't know	10	10	11	10	10	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	1182	384	340	235	250	2391
Pearson $\chi^2 = 42.9$ Cramer's V = 0.095						

Question: *What about the overall direction of the country? Would you say that it is going in the right direction or going in the wrong direction?*

Respondents were asked whether South Africa was heading in the right direction or the wrong direction. It is evident from the cross-tabulation results in Table 5 that there is an association between fear of crime and confidence in the future direction of the country¹⁷. Those who fear crime are more likely to think that the country is heading in the wrong direction, whilst those who do not fear crime tend to be more ambivalent about the future.

Importance of Crime as a Social Problem

A popular perception is that crime is a serious issue for white South Africans, while black South Africans are more concerned about unemployment and poverty¹⁸. The Afrobarometer public opinion data can be used to test this perception. Survey participants were asked to list the three most important problems facing the country. The results for the first problem which they mentioned are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Most Important Problem (first mention)

	Black (%)	White (%)	Coloured (%)	Asian (%)
Unemployment	41	14	31	15
Poverty	10	5	10	15
Managing Economy	11	15	15	10
Crime and security	5	22	16	37
Corruption	0	12	2	3
Aids	5	1	2	3
Housing	5	3	7	1
N	1819	279	230	72

Question: *In your opinion what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?*

Table 6 shows that unemployment is regarded as the most important problem by pluralities of black (41%) and Coloured (31%) respondents. In contrast, pluralities of whites (22%) and Asians (37%) raised crime as the most important problem. Although only 5% of blacks mentioned crime as the most important problem, they experience more fear and victimization than other groups except Asians. Thus, it appears that black South Africans may place less emphasis on crime as a priority problem not because they are less affected, but rather because unemployment takes greater precedence.

¹⁷ Chi² and Cramer's V statistics are significant at the 95% confidence level

¹⁸ Moller, Valerie. 2005. Resilient or Resigned? Criminal Victimization and Quality of Life in South Africa. Social Indicators Research. 72. 263-317.

Government Effectiveness in Dealing with Crime

The survey requested participants to rate the performance of the former Mbeki government on a host of service areas, including reducing crime. From Table 7 it is evident that, in comparison to the black majority, minority groups are more likely to give poor ratings for the government's handling of crime.

Table 7: Handling /reducing crime by Ethnic Group

	Black (%)	White (%)	Coloured (%)	Asian (%)
Very Badly	38	53	46	69
Fairly Badly	28	23	36	19
Fairly Well	24	15	14	11
Very Well	9	5	3	1
Don't know/Haven't heard enough	2	3	1	
Mean rating	2.0	1.7	1.7	1.4
N	1819	279	230	72

Question: *How well or badly would you say that the former Mbeki government was handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Reducing crime?*

Statistical tests¹⁹ confirm that there is a significant difference in the mean rating of government performance across ethnic groups. Black respondents²⁰ gave significantly higher mean performance ratings than all other major groups for handling of crime by government. However the mean rating given by black respondents of 2.0 (on a scale of one to four where one is very badly and four is very well) is not impressive. Thus there is consensus across all groups that government's efforts to reduce crime are lackluster at best. And minority groups are especially critical of government performance.

Conclusion

The analysis in this paper has dispelled a number of popular notions concerning crime in South Africa, including some exploited by Huntly and others. In particular, the data does not support the view that white South Africans have either become relatively more vulnerable to or more fearful of criminal behaviour in post-Apartheid South Africa. The findings show that non-white South Africans report more experiences of theft and physical attack than do whites. Asians appear to be most fearful of crime while whites are the least afraid. Regression analysis showed that while race and other demographics do affect fear of crime, prior victimisation has a more robust influence. Radio consumption, an indicator of media exposure, does not have significant impact on fear of crime.

In spite of their fear and victimisation, crime is not rated as the most serious problem in South Africa by black, and to a lesser extent, Coloured respondents because it is overshadowed by other problems more central to their survival. Whites and Asians, who are generally less affected by unemployment and poverty list crime as the most serious problem in the country. Thus differing priorities rather than actual victimisation may account for political divisions on the issue of crime.

There is broad consensus among all population groups in South Africa that the former Mbeki government did not perform well in the fight against crime. The Zuma administration has taken steps to reassure South Africans and the international community, ahead of the 2010 Soccer World Cup, that they regard crime as a serious problem and will take the necessary action to deal with it. The success of their interventions can only be gauged in time.

¹⁹ ANOVA Mean Square = 13.072, F statistic = 14.1 and P=0.

²⁰ Post hoc LSD and Bonferroni tests were used to compare mean ratings across the four ethnic groups.

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The **Afrobarometer** is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 20 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (RDMFA/DANIDA), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for Afrobarometer Round 4 research, capacity building and outreach activities. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org