Why does South Africa have such high rates of violent crime?

Supplement to the final report of the study on the violent nature of crime in South Africa

Produced by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR)

for the Justice, Crime Prevention and Security (JCPS) cluster

Submitted to the Minister of Safety and Security

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Background to this document

In February 2007 the Minister of Safety and Security contracted the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation to carry out a study on the violent nature of crime in South Africa. In terms of an agreement, entered into by the Minister on behalf of the Justice, Crime Prevention and Security (JCPS) cluster of cabinet, CSVR was required to produce six reports:

1. **Component 1:** A concept paper on the violent nature of crime in South Africa (Submitted: June 2007).

2. **Component 2:** A study of murder entitled "Streets of Pain, Streets of Sorrow: The circumstances of the occurrence of murder in six areas with high rates of murder" (Submitted: June 2008).

3. **Component 3:** A study on sexual violence entitled: "A state of sexual tyranny: The prevalence, nature and causes of sexual violence in South Africa" (Submitted: December 2008).

4. **Component 4:** An analysis of the socioeconomic factors that contribute to violence, entitled: "Adding injury to insult: How exclusion and inequality drive South Africa's problem of violence" (Submitted: October 2008).

5. **Component 5:** "Case studies on perpetrators of violent crime" (Submitted: December 2008).

6. **Component 6:** A summary report on key findings and recommendations (Submitted: February 2009).

At a meeting with the Minister of Safety and Security, Mr Nathi Mthethwa on 27 March 2007 at which CSVR presented the final summary report, CSVR was requested to provide a supplementary document addressing the question of what makes levels of violent crime in South Africa so high and why is South Africa different from other countries in this regard. CSVR has therefore provided the following document in response to this question.

Is South Africa unique?

Available evidence indicates that levels of violent crime, as measured by the murder rate, are exceptionally high in South Africa as compared to other countries.

But is South Africa in fact unique or are there other countries with similar rates of violent crime? Data on the murder (homicide) rate is regarded as one of the best and most reliable indicators of violent crime rates due to the fact that murder cases tend to be recorded more consistently than other forms of violent crime in many countries. But even if we rely on data on the murder rate as an indicator of levels of violent crime it is not necessarily a straightforward matter to answer this question. Data on homicide is not consistently and reliably produced and reported in all countries.[1]

South Africa recorded murder at a rate of 60 per 100 000 in the late 1990s but since then rates have steadily declined reaching a low point for the post 1994 period of 39 per 100 000 in 2007-2008. Though murder rates of more than 60 appear to be exceptionally rare, from 2004 to 2006 El Salvador in Central America recorded rates of murder of between 56 and 58 per 100 000. There are at least a handful of other countries in South America and the Caribbean which have had rates similar to, or higher than, South Africa's current murder rate. In 2004 Colombia recorded a rate of 46 per 100 000. Over several years extending from the late 1990s to 2004 Jamaica recorded rates of 33 per 100 000.[2]

What emerges most distinctively from these statistics is that there are several countries, many of them in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world,, which do not systematically record

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[1] See in general CSVR, 2007 pages 51-56 and especially paragraph 5.2 on this point.

[2] The data in this paragraph is drawn from reports provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime including figures from the UN Surveys of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (CTS) and the International Homicide Statistics (IHS). The IHS report for 2004 in fact provides two figures, a 'low estimate' and a 'high estimate' for many countries and the data referred to above makes use of the low estimate for different countries. In South Africa's case the 'low estimate' is the figure provided by the SAPS in its annually released crime statistics. In the HIS report the 'high estimate' is mostly a World Health Organisation (WHO) estimate for 2004 which was 58 for El Salvador, 60 for Colombia, 69 for South Africa, and 55 for Jamaica. After these four countries the next highest WHO estimates were Cote d'Ivoire (46), Lesotho (37), Venezuela (37), Guatemala (36), Angola (36), Burundi (35), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (35). This suggests that the number of countries which suffer comparable rates of violence to those in South Africa is in fact much higher. (Selected statistics from other sources are also cited in the CSVR study referred to above including a reported rate of 140 for Colombia in 1992).

and report information on violence or crime. In the absence of standardised systems for reporting crime, as well as other reliable systems of record keeping, the issue of levels of violence in these countries becomes a matter of speculation.

Surveys of non-fatal violence also do not uniformly indicate that South Africa records rates of violence which are higher than those elsewhere. As reported in the concept paper a survey conducted in 17 African countries during the year 2005–06 indicates that South Africa ranks fifth on responses to questions about whether respondents had been assaulted at least once in the past year, with Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria and Namibia returning higher rankings in relation to this question. As compared to the 16% of South Africans who answered that they had been assaulted, for instance, 27% of Namibians also answered this question affirmatively.[3]

It may also be noted that the comparison made here focuses on contemporary violent crime statistics. During the last 100 years several other countries such as Rwanda, Cambodia, and Germany, have engaged in forms of mass violence or other systematic human rights violations, such as campaigns of genocide, in which rates of killing have far exceeded those in South Africa. In terms of a long term view it may also be noted that levels of violence in some countries which currently suffer relatively low levels of violent crime were far higher a few centuries ago.[4] In some countries forms of violence which are generally concealed, such as the killing of female children in order to ensure a male heir[5], have been widespread but are rarely recorded by the police as crime.

According to this evidence then South Africa is not completely unique, but is one of a relatively small group of countries which currently suffer from exceptionally high rates of violent crime, (though we are not absolutely certain that there are not more countries with similar, or higher, levels of violent crime).

Why then does South Africa suffer such exceptionally high rates of violence?

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[3] Mattes, 2006.
[4] Thornhill (2009) quotes Robert Muchembled's 'Une histoire de la violence (Seuil) to the effect that murders occurred at a rate of 130 per 100 000 in 14th century Europe. See also Stanko et al 2002.
[5] Altbeker, 2005:4.

South Africa then appears to be one of a small number of countries experiencing very high levels of violence. Some of the factors which distinguish South Africa are:

1. **The legacy of apartheid and colonialism** – it is now 15 years after South Africa's transition to democracy. Nevertheless the legacy of apartheid continues to be relevant to understanding violence in South Africa. This can be understood as operating on the following levels:

    a. **Brutalisation and the culture of violence** – it appears that South Africa has been distinguished by high levels of violence for most of the last century. For instance Kynoch has compared written reports on African cities over the last century and indicates that from as early as the 1920s South Africa (Johannesburg) appears to have been affected by a serious problem of violent crime. Kynoch therefore argues that

    > ' This comparison of colonial cities suggests that we need to expand this definition of South African exceptionalism to include the extraordinary levels of urban violence. At the heart of a massive migrant labour nexus, the Witwatersrand industrialised earlier, to a greater extent and more rapidly than any other urban centre in colonial Africa. Successive South African governments devoted significant resources to limiting and regulating the urban African population. These developments require that we move beyond the labour question to consider the ways in which African migrants shaped and adapted to a volatile, and frequently brutalising, mining environment and how mineworkers influenced patterns of violence in the urban locations. We have to take account of state policies that exposed millions of boys and men to humiliating police harassment and a violent prison system. Finally, state sponsorship of township violence further undermined the rule of law. These conditions,

unique to South Africa, nurtured a culture of violence that has reproduced itself ever since.'[6]

b. **The impact of apartheid on families and the education system** – according to Irvin Waller, an international expert on crime prevention 'the children who become persistent offenders tend to grow up with more negative family and school experiences'.[7] As is well known the apartheid system, particularly through the migrant labour system and influx control, had a profoundly undermining effect on African families, an effect which may be seen to have been reinforced by other aspects of the broad social and economic transformation which South Africa has undergone over the last century. Thus many children, particularly amongst the poorer sections of South African society have grown up in single parent families (characterised by an absent father), or in circumstances characterised by the absence of consistent primary caregiver, and plagued by problems such as alcoholism and violence.[8]

c. **Racism** – colonial racial oppression in South Africa dates back over many centuries. However after the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, and particularly after the coming to power of the National Party in 1948, racial domination was institutionalised in South Africa, and legitimised in terms of an explicitly racist ideology. It is reasonable to assume that one of the pervasive consequences of institutionalised racism in South Africa is internalised feelings of inferiority which might also be identified as feelings of low self-worth. Studies of violence which have been carried out in other countries indicate that there appears to be a distinct connection between

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[6] Kynoch, G (2006) Urban violence in colonial Africa: A case for South African exceptionalism. Paper presented at Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, 15 May. Ibid, Ibid p. 32.
[7] Waller, 2006, 23.
[8] .Note the point that 'Nevertheless the impact of apartheid on the family as a socialising institution was not uniform. The family has also been resilient, in many cases serving as a nurturing environment for young children. Single parent families, or care-givers such as grandparents in crisis-ridden families, sometimes succeed in providing emotional nurturance to a child, despite the other challenges which they face'. Bruce, 2006.

feelings of low self worth and the propensity to violence.[9] The psychological legacy of institutionalised racism in the form of internalised feelings of low self-worth is likely therefore to be a contributing factor to the problem of violent crime in South Africa.

d. **Firearms** – white South African culture legitimised the ownership of personal firearms and firearms were easily available to white South Africans who saw them as a personal safety measure. Intensifying violent conflict during the 1980s and 1990s was also associated with an increasing proliferation of firearms with many guns being imported from conflict areas in neighbouring countries and distributed both by the liberation movements and by the apartheid government as part of an agenda of arming their allies in African communities. After democratisation firearm proliferation further increased, through legally sanctioned and illegal means. Though the role of firearms in violent crime appears to be decreasing[10], the easy availability of firearms nevertheless played a central role in the rapid growth of violent crime in South Africa.

e. **Impunity in township areas** – under apartheid the criminal justice system primarily focused on protecting white South Africans against crime, whilst in relation to black South Africans the major focus was on the enforcement of apartheid laws. A major focus of policing was also on suppressing resistance to the apartheid government. Investment in addressing crime in township areas was minimal, contributing to the reliance in township areas on informal mechanisms of justice, though these too were not rigorous in addressing crime. The result was that criminal groups and a criminal culture entrenched itself in some township areas.

2. **Factors in post-apartheid South Africa which reinforce the legacy of apartheid** – while there have been significant changes in South Africa brought about by the

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[9] See for example Bushman and Baumeister, 1998; Levi, 2002; Donnellan et al, 2005.
[10] CSVR, 2008

process of democratisation and the subsequent fifteen years, there are distinctive factors which may be seen to reinforce the legacy of apartheid in contributing to violence. These factors include:

a. **Inequality** – International research indicates that levels of violence have a high correlation with levels of inequality. The high level of inequality in South Africa may be seen as contributing to violence with South Africa being one of the most unequal societies in the world as measured by the Gini coefficient.[11] But while inequality may be seen as a contributing factor, the apparent fact that South Africa suffers from such high levels of violence may be a reflection of the fact that inequality, and in particular increasing levels of inequality in the black community, reinforces the psychological legacy of apartheid. Thus the significance of inequality in contributing to violence appears to lie partly in the fact that it provokes questions about self-worth amongst people who are confronted with the extreme disparities between their own position and that of those who are much better off than them. In this sense inequality may be seen to reinforce the legacy of apartheid racism, which, it was suggested above, may be seen as a important factor contributing to violence.

b. **Other structural economic factors** – closely linked to inequality are the phenomena of high levels of poverty, structural unemployment, and social and political exclusion and marginalisation. These factors are shaped by the legacy of apartheid as well as by the global economic context and domestic economic policies in the post-apartheid period. Alongside inequality these feed into crime and violent crime in various ways including:
    i. In the midst of a large number of people living in serious poverty South Africa has developed a sophisticated capitalist and consumer economy from which a large number of people derive considerable benefit, though some considerable more than others. The strength of the economy on one level means that there are a large number of

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[11] Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2008:22.

high quality consumer goods in circulation creating a large number of potential targets for violent crime. Alcohol is also a mass produced consumer good which is easily available and strongly linked to violence.

ii. This type of economy is also associated with extremely sophisticated means of promoting consumption including not only advertising but also the styling and packaging of all kinds of consumer goods. For a variety of reasons sophisticated consumer goods have come to be seen as virtually synonymous with status. Many people see it as necessary to show that they have these goods in order to be able to acquire social credibility. Violent crime appears to be an easy method of acquiring sophisticated consumer goods and therefore of earning social credibility in a context where people feel that they are otherwise unlikely to be able to obtain such goods, or even sometimes in doubt of being able to survive.

iii. The policies used to address the legacy of apartheid in the post-apartheid period have also seen the fairly rapid enrichment of a black elite. This and other facets of the post-apartheid period have fed into the impression that leaders prioritise the enrichment of themselves and people close to them and that corruption is pervasive. The absence of leaders who distinctively set a good example for people may contribute to them feeling that they have little motivation to invest in the legal framework of the new order contributing to a social environment where involvement in crime, and violent crime, is widely tolerated.

c. **State institutions** - a third key facet of the post-apartheid period that reinforces the legacy of apartheid has been state institutions which perform in a highly uneven manner. This includes not only the criminal justice system but also for instance the education system. This has meant that the state has had limited impact in redressing the legacy of apartheid so that the state is not only ineffective in addressing violent crime but also in supporting

positive youth socialisation further reinforcing the vulnerability of young people to criminality.

3. **Other factors**– There are several other factors which can be identified as contributing to violence though the degree to which they might be regarded as unique varies. One way in which South Africa is unique is in the regional context, which includes poverty, the legacy of war in the region and a continuing problem of unstable and weak states. South Africa's problem of violent crime is essentially a domestic problem but factors to do with the regional context can be seen to further aggravate and compound this problem. Even though they are sometimes harshly treated the opportunities in South Africa attract many people fleeing harsh conditions in their home countries. This includes people seeking legal economic opportunities as well as those seeking non-legal opportunities, some of whom may have relatively easy access to arms, have been brutalised by the experience of war, or have military training.

There is not one single factor which explains the high levels of violence or violent crime in South Africa. Violent crime in South Africa, as in other countries, is therefore the product of a variety of factors. While none of these factors are entirely unique to South Africa, the way in which they interact is shaped by South Africa's apartheid past, specific features of the post-apartheid period, and other factors including in particular South Africa's regional context.

A fuller discussion of the causes of violent crime in South Africa is provided in the concept paper which was the first of the reports completed as part of this study.

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