



Tuesday, 9 November 2010

Why South Africa is so violent and what we should be doing about it

Statement by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

In February 2007 the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation was contracted by government to carry out a study on the violent nature of crime in South Africa. The study resulted in the production of seven reports (see the attached document on 'Background to the Study' for details of the individual reports) completed over the period June 2007 to April 2009.

The study is the subject of a briefing by the Minister of Police to the Portfolio Committee on Police today.

The attached statement articulates the key conclusions of the final report of the study on the causes of violent crime and suggested solutions.

For further comment please contact:

- **Adele Kirsten - 082-853-9776**
- **David Bruce - 082-784-8616**

Why is South Africa so violent?

Our own crime statistics, and the comparison of data on violence in South Africa and other countries, demonstrates convincingly that South Africa is amongst the most violent countries in the world.

South Africa is exposed to these high levels of violence as a result of a number of different factors. They include:

1. **A problem of armed violence linked to a subculture of violence and criminality**

The core of the problem of violent crime in South Africa is a subculture of violence and criminality characterised prominently by:

- Young men who are invested in a criminal identity and engaged in ‘criminal careers’ which involve active criminal lifestyles and often incorporate multiple forms of violent crime.
- The common use of weapons, including firearms as well as knives or other instruments of “sharp force”. The ability to operate and achieve credibility within this subculture is strongly related to one’s readiness to resort to extreme violence using a weapon.

The prominent place given weapons within this subculture is a key driver behind the problem of armed violence in South Africa. Violent offenders who engage in armed violence present the most danger to others, and are what gives the current epidemic of violent crime in South Africa its most malevolent edge.

Those involved in the subculture range from criminals who operate as individual rapists or robbers, to large numbers affiliated to informal groups or more formalised gangs. This subculture is mostly concentrated in South Africa’s metropolitan areas. Though it varies somewhat between different regions of the country (for instance knife violence appears to be far more prevalent in Cape Town than in other metropolitan areas where guns are more significant) the above mentioned are consistent features.

Solution 1: A strategy to reduce armed violence in metropolitan and surrounding areas – A key focus should be a broad ranging criminal justice system based strategy focusing on perpetrators of armed violence particularly in the metropolitan areas. Such a strategy should seek to make a profound difference to levels of murder, aggravated robbery, and stranger rape and contribute to reducing violent crime more generally. The report outlines 9 different components of such a strategy (see pages 11-12 as well as 56-57).

While such a strategy should emphasise issues such as strengthening evidence based crime investigation and prosecution, and improving crime intelligence, it also should incorporate a strong emphasis on child justice measures. In the dockets analysed for the murder report (Report 2) for instance, 21% of suspects in argument type murders and 31% of suspects in crime type murders were 19 years old or younger. This indicates that the problem of violent crime, including serious violent crime, is associated in part with young offenders.

2. Inequality, poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and marginalisation

The high level of inequality in South Africa is well represented by statistics such as:

- In 2008, the richest 10 per cent of households in South Africa earned nearly 40 times more than the poorest 50 per cent.
- The richest 10 percent earned nearly 150 times more than the poorest 10 per cent.¹

International research consistently demonstrates that societies with high levels of inequality tend to have high levels of violence indicating that inequality itself is a key driver of violence (see report 4). Inequality is also inter-related with other intractable social problems such as those of poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and marginalization in South Africa.

Solution 2: Addressing violence in high violence poorer communities – Inequality is not only played out in South Africa at an economic level but through multiple social mechanisms which reinforce the status of some South Africans as 1st class, and others as 2nd class, citizens. Violence impacts far more on poor communities than it does on affluent ones – but policies and media attention focus most on violence as it impacts on the well-to-do contributing to the failure to understand and address violence as it impacts on the poor. The consistent priority given to vehicle hijacking and other ‘trio’ crimes for instance, reflects that these forms of violence have the greatest impact on more affluent South Africans. These are consistently prioritised above other types of violence including male-on--male violence and aggravated street robbery² which are the major drivers of South Africa’s murder rate. Criminal justice policy therefore focuses on protecting communities that are already often relatively well protected by private security whilst violence in poorer communities continues to flourish

By failing to recognise and address the impact of violence on poor communities official policy compounds the hardship which people in these communities face, reinforcing the exclusionary impact of inequality. In so doing, it also fails to engage with the local subcultures of criminality and violence which are most entrenched in poor communities and which feed into the overall problem of violence in South Africa — to the detriment of rich and poor alike.

One way in which government should address this is through focusing on the overall problem of armed violence (see ‘Solutions 1’ above) rather than prioritising aspects of the problem, such as the ‘trio’ robberies, which reflect the concerns of specific interest groups. More generally though, official policy should give far more priority to understanding violence in poorer high-violence communities and to developing localised policies for addressing it. Whilst economic inequality remains a challenge to address, policy measures which are informed by an awareness of the realities of life faced by poorer South Africans will contribute towards counter-acting its exclusionary impact.

¹ Figures are from a recent Centre for Development and Enterprise roundtable report “Poverty and Inequality – Facts, Trends and Hard Choices (August 2010).

² Official statistics indicate that aggravated (armed) street robbery has been one of a number of violent crime categories which have declined precipitously over the last few years. Our understanding is that this is primarily a product of a pattern of systematic non-recording of crime reports by the police rather than an indication that measures have been implemented to address street robbery.

3. Vulnerability of young people linked to inadequate child rearing and poor youth socialisation

The childhood experiences of many children and young people in South Africa involve multiple levels of adversity including poverty, unstable living arrangements, absent, indifferent or violent fathers and alcohol or other substance abusive parents or relatives. In consequence children in South Africa are exposed to many of the 'risk factors' which enhance the chances that they will become involved in criminality and violence. South African research on this issue resonates very strongly with research conducted in other countries. Such research consistently illustrates that "the children who become persistent offenders tend to grow up with more negative family and school experiences." These are characterised, for instance, by being "born into a family in relative poverty and inadequate housing" and "brought up with inconsistent and uncaring parenting including violence".³

Solution 3: Supporting positive and healthy child and youth development – Greater investment needs to be made in supporting children and young people to ensure that they are able to derive the optimum benefit from the educational system and lead healthy and constructive lives. This requires a sustained effort to improve the management and quality of South Africa's schools, including addressing bullying or other forms of violence at schools. The final report (report 6) outlines 10 other types of initiatives, targeted at parents as well as children and young adults which support positive youth development. Some components of government and several NGOs have developed innovative programmes orientated towards addressing risk factors for involvement in crime and supporting positive child and youth development. The knowledge and experience which has been developed in this regard needs to be developed and nurtured in a more purposeful way by government.

4. Perceptions and values related to violence and crime

Alongside ambivalent attitudes regarding crime and the law, the normalisation and widespread tolerance of violence is a critical issue. This reflects widely held norms and beliefs which see violence as a necessary and justified means of resolving conflict or other difficulties. Several factors feed into the perpetuation of the culture of violence. These include exposure to violence in the family and community, the perception by young men that they need to be able to use violence to protect themselves and to obtain the respect of others, and male beliefs that legitimise coercive sexual behaviour against women.

Solution 4: Social mobilisation against violence and creating safety in public and other spaces – South Africa is not only affected by a subculture of violence and criminality but is also characterised by a more general 'culture of violence' based on the pervasive normative acceptance of violence. As in the early-1990s when South Africans mobilised against political violence, there is the potential to use forms of public education, awareness raising, and community level activism to mobilise against the culture of violence. This will help build a common identity and promote the idea of South Africa as a country of people opposed to violence, favouring the non-violent resolution of conflict.

³ Waller, 2006: 23.

In addition the report motivates that there should be a stronger emphasis on establishing 'safe spaces' which are free of violence particularly in high violence areas. These should be established in parks and other public spaces as well as schools, correctional institutions and in society more broadly. Such measures would not only enhance physical safety but also give more tangible expression to the idea of living in a non-violent society and reinforce the message that ours is a society which is opposed to violence.

5. Reliance on the criminal justice system

The strategy to address armed violence referred to above is intended to be located in the criminal justice system (CJS). The potential for this strategy to impact on armed violence ultimately depends on systematic improvements in the performance of the CJS. Current moves to strengthen detective and prosecution services are positive steps. However such a strategy also needs to have other elements to address many other problematic aspects of the CJS including problems of inefficiency and corruption.

Notwithstanding the potential for improved use of Child Justice Act mechanism for young offenders the key instrument for dealing with violent offenders will remain incarceration in South Africa's correctional institutions. While we have also motivated that these (see solutions 4 above) also need to be made into safer places, they will nevertheless continue to reinforce the criminal and violent tendencies of many of their inmates. This dynamic may be moderated by strengthening systems intended to support offenders in rehabilitation and reintegrating them into communities after incarceration. But prison environment are generally not supportive of rehabilitation and often worsen the behaviour of inmates and consolidate their place in criminal networks. The CJS therefore remains a double edged sword which continually reinforces the problem of violence and crime whilst it also mitigates it.

Solution 5: Strengthening the CJS but increasing the use of and reliance on other policy measures – The final report concludes that whilst South Africa 'Of necessity ... must use the instruments of the criminal justice system' to address the problem of armed violence and other violence it 'needs to increasingly place its emphasis on other approaches if it is to be relieved from the burden of massive investment in criminal justice and a continuing cycle of violence'. Addressing violent crime in South Africa therefore does require a strengthening of the CJS but far greater emphasis must be placed on other strategies (such as those put forward under solutions 3 and 4 of this statement) if we are to have a more profound and enduring impact on the problem.