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Dynamics of the fear of crime in  
South Africa**

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# Age of hope or anxiety? Dynamics of the fear of crime in South Africa

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## Executive summary

The fear of crime has a negative impact on quality of life at the individual, community and societal levels. This phenomenon, which tends to rely on racial stereotypes, has the effect of reducing the sense of trust and cohesion within communities, limiting people's mobility and hastening retreat from public spaces. This *Policy Brief* shows that the scope of fear extends beyond a specific minority of the population and that urban, informal settlement dwellers are the most concerned about crime. These insecurities, however, have not tempered the resolute optimism about South Africa's prospects. The brief recommends that reducing the fear of crime should be recognised as a priority alongside that of reducing crime itself.

## The fear of crime in context

Few issues provoke as emotive a response as that of crime. Since the release of official crime statistics in late 2006, South Africa has witnessed a vigorous public debate about the credibility of the emerging statistical trends, as well as the efficacy of the policy and programmatic responses. Crime persistently features as a pressing national priority among citizens in public opinion surveys. In addition, media images of violent criminal acts and mounting public disaffection abound.

This *Policy Brief* is concerned not with the actual levels of victimisation in South Africa, but rather with an important and often-neglected related social phenomenon: the fear of crime.

Why is it important to focus on people's anxieties relating to their personal safety? Should we rather concentrate exclusively on the hard numbers relating to changing levels of violent and property crimes? The answer to such questions lies in the

complex and detrimental effects that fear of criminal violence has on the quality of life of individuals, communities and society as a whole. These include a reliance on racial stereotypes in discussion on crime, constraints on people's mobility and ability to socialise, a hastening retreat from public spaces, the proliferation of gated communities, high walls and fences, and an array of private security measures.

Anxieties over crime may also diminish the sense of trust and cohesion within communities, and can be exploited to provide support for reinstatement of the death penalty or to lend credibility to vigilante violence. These forms of behaviour pose a threat to social cohesion by fuelling cycles of violence, challenging the entrenchment of a culture of human rights and ultimately hindering progress in national reconciliation.

For many of the reasons articulated above, the fear of crime has become a prominent social and political problem internationally. In much of the United States and Europe, it has frequently been seen as a public concern that is at least as pressing as crime itself. Since the 1960s, the fear of crime in its own right has been the focus of increasing attention by researchers and policy-makers. A wide range of studies has shown that such fear takes a toll on the population's wellbeing.

This body of work has also pointed to an unequal distribution of crime and the fear of crime, with some people demonstrating increased risk of victimisation, while others are more acutely and regularly fearful. This finding and recognition of the harm that fear can cause to individuals and communities has led some governments to respond by prioritising the reduction of the fear of crime as a social objective distinct from reducing actual crime and warranting specific government interventions.

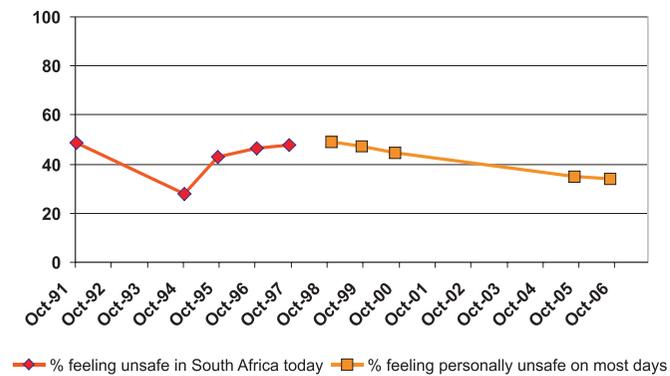
Using data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) and other public opinion surveys conducted by the HSRC, this *Policy Brief* provides an overview of evidence about the nature of fear of crime in South Africa, charting its evolution since the early 1990s.

## **National trends in fear of crime**

Attitudinal surveys conducted by the HSRC reveal that general perceptions of personal safety have shown signs of

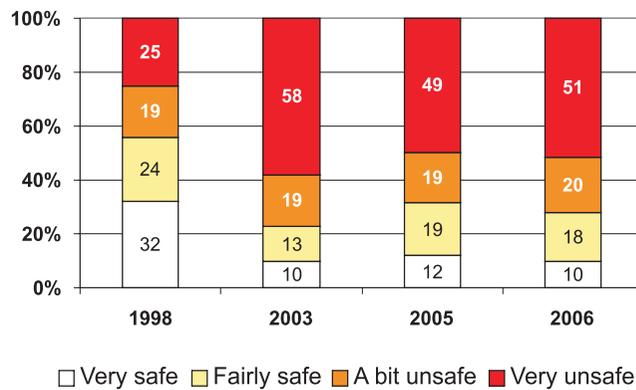
improvement since the late 1990s (Figure 1). The percentage feeling personally unsafe fell from a high of 49% in 1998 to 34% in late 2006. However, the same cannot be said for feelings of neighbourhood or community safety. The 2005 and 2006 rounds of SASAS found that people are substantially more fearful of walking alone in their residential areas during the day and after dark compared to 1998 (71% in 2006 compared to 44% in 1998) (Figure 2). Of particular concern is the worsening level of fear of walking alone in one's area during the day, which increased from 5% in 2003 to 15% in 2006.

**Figure 1: Percentage of South Africans feeling personally unsafe, 1991-2006**



Note: From 1991-1997, the question was phrased "How safe do you feel in South Africa today?", but since 1998 the phrasing has been "How safe or unsafe do you feel personally on most days?". The percentages reported here are a combination of those that reported they felt "unsafe" and "very unsafe".

**Figure 2: Respondents' feelings of safety when walking alone in their area after dark, 1998-2006**



Sources: Statistics South Africa (1999); Burton et al. (2004); HSRC, SASAS (2005)

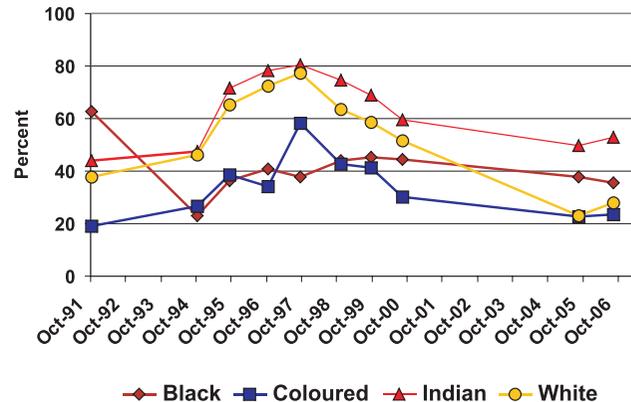
Statistically, South Africans emerge as significantly more fearful than people in most other parts of the world, including the developed countries of Western Europe, as well as countries in the rest of Africa and Latin America.

## Who is more fearful?

In terms of understanding the personal attributes associated with fear of crime, the SASAS results, supported by other national and sub-national surveys,<sup>1</sup> challenge some of the prevailing stereotypes of who is fearful:

- Over the past decade and a half, the level of fear of crime experienced by men has virtually matched, and in a couple of instances surpassed, that of women. This finding was consistently reported, regardless of the survey measures used. Significantly, it draws attention to the vulnerabilities men experience rather than portraying them solely as aggressors and perpetrators. Fear of victimisation can no longer be seen to possess only a female face.
- South African youth appear more fearful than the elderly. This challenges the conventional view that the physical decline associated with aging makes the elderly more fearful of crime than younger people.
- Indian and black African respondents exhibited greater fear of crime than coloured and white respondents in 2005 and 2006 (Figure 3). This pattern has changed somewhat since the late 1990s due to improvements in perceptions of personal safety for all population groups. Since fear levels for black South Africans improved at a slower rate than

**Figure 3: Percentage of respondents feeling personally unsafe by population group, 1991-2006**



*Note: From 1991-1997, the question was phrased "How safe do you feel in South Africa today?", but since 1998 the phrasing has been "How safe or unsafe do you feel personally on most days?". The percentages reported here are a combination of those that reported they felt "unsafe" and "very unsafe".*

1. SASAS 2005, 2006 and 2007

for white South Africans, the gap between the proportion of white and black South Africans who felt unsafe narrowed substantially in the late 1990s, and by 2005 a relative reversal of positions appears to have occurred.

The results demonstrate that the scope of fear extends beyond a specific minority of the population. Consequently, the popular notion of fear of crime in the country as predominantly “white fear” is misleading and neglects the needs of a majority who are less able to voice their concerns.

Finally, although there was some ambiguity with regard to fear and socioeconomic status, the results did provide evidence that fear of crime seems higher among middle-class households, is related to employment status and has an adverse effect on the overall sense of personal wellbeing.

### **The geography of fear**

The data provides support for the relationship between fear and the broader social environment. The character of the place where one lives clearly influences perceptions of safety. While it is unsurprising that people living in rural areas tend to fear crime less than urban dwellers fear crime, a significant finding is that it is in the country’s informal settlements that fear of crime seems most pervasive. This relates most likely to a lack of basic policing, services and infrastructure in such areas, which increases the risk of crime. The level of social integration in one’s neighbourhood or community was also shown to be relevant.

### **Policy implications**

The SASAS enabled the examination of several indicators of the demand for public safety and satisfaction with police effectiveness. Concern over crime has resulted in the demand for publicly provided protective measures such as street lighting and street policing, as well as a number of private security measures considered critical by the majority of South Africans to secure a decent quality of life. The fear of crime is also related to sizeable erosion of confidence in the police and dissatisfaction with crime-reduction efforts at the neighbourhood level.

In the 2006 State of the Nation Address, President Mbeki suggested that the country had entered an “age of hope”. This observation was based on the widespread optimism expressed by South Africans with regard to the future of the country in a number of opinion polls. The SASAS findings raise the obvious question as to whether fear of crime represents a notable threat to this vision of a bright future.

Mattes<sup>2</sup> concludes that perceptions of crime and policing have a nominal effect on South Africans’ support for democracy. He finds that citizens who feel safer from violence and crime than they did in the past are positive about government’s crime-reduction efforts, believe that the police are approachable and trustworthy, and are more likely to express satisfaction with democracy and the future of the country’s democratic system.

Initial analysis of the SASAS results similarly point towards the steadfast nature of the optimism regarding the future of the country. In late 2005, 69% believed that life would improve for most people in South Africa over the next five years and 63% said that life would improve for them personally. Those that said they felt personally “very unsafe” or “unsafe” on most days were not significantly less positive than those who felt “very safe” or “safe”. In contrast, being fearful of victimisation does have a modest dampening effect on levels of satisfaction with the way democracy is working.

## Conclusion

Despite some signs of improvement in feelings of safety and security, deep-seated fears about personal and community safety are shared by many South Africans across the socioeconomic and demographic spectrum.

These insecurities have not tempered the resolute optimism regarding prospects for the nation and its people. Yet the fact that such fears exert an influence on police confidence, the demand for public safety, social cohesion, personal wellbeing and, to a limited extent, satisfaction with the democratic system, means that fear remains an important topic for policy discussion.

2. Mattes R (2006) Good news and bad: Public perceptions of crime, corruption and government. *SA Crime Quarterly* 18: 9-16.

## Recommendations

Identifying, testing out and evaluating strategies for reducing the fear of crime should be recognised as a priority alongside that of reducing crime itself. While this task is likely to be difficult because of the social, economic and political insecurity that underscores the fear of crime, it is only by doing so that South Africa can expect to dislodge the shadow of anxiety that looms over the age of hope.

Benjamin Roberts is a Research Specialist in the HSRC's Urban, Rural and Economic Development research programme. These findings are based on a chapter in a forthcoming HSRC Press book based on the South African Social Attitudes Survey.





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