

A MURDEROUS LEGACY

Coloured homicide trends in South Africa

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South Africa has one of the highest murder rates of all the countries that record crime statistics.

Understanding such high levels of violence should begin with an investigation of who the victims and perpetrators are, and how the homicides are committed – not only now but also in the past. An historical analysis reveals that the coloured population has, as long as accurate records are available, had the highest murder rate of all race groups in the country.

South Africa has a long history of violence. The most accurate way to study violence is to analyse homicides. These are the crimes most likely to be reported to the police, and can therefore be studied accurately over time and compared internationally. Such comparisons show that South Africa's murder problem is undoubtedly more serious than most other countries where the statistics are recorded: in 2002 the homicide rate for the entire population was 48 per 100,000. In comparison Russia's murder rate was 21 per 100,000, Brazil was 19, the USA had a rate of 5.6, and most of Europe was under four homicides per 100,000 people.¹

Explaining South Africa's high murder rate is no easy task. In order to better understand the present situation it is necessary to look at homicide patterns in the past. These trends shed light on the nature of violence and allow for some level of prediction about where South Africa is heading. It is also important to consider who is most at risk from violence and who the perpetrators are, so that both groups can be dealt with through effective policing and social improvements.

Crime analyses have shown that violence does not occur equally across society but is more frequent

within certain gender, age and race groups. As with all other countries, young adult males in South Africa are most likely to be both victims and perpetrators of violence. However, there are clear differences if race is taken into account. The coloured population has the highest homicide rate in South Africa. This is not a recent trend, but has been the case for as long as accurate records are available.²

The majority of homicides in South Africa are intra-racial (between people of the same race) and are committed by someone known to the victim and living within their community. Homicides that are committed by strangers are usually linked to other crimes, such as robbery or – prior to 1994 – politically motivated crimes. Even so, politically motivated acts only accounted for a maximum of 20% of homicides in that period.³

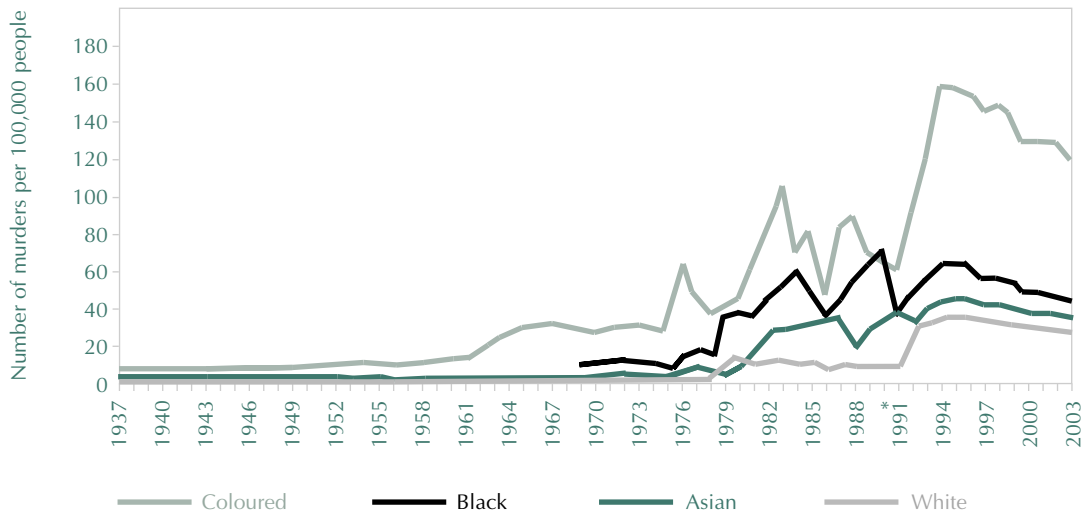
Murder rate: 1938–2003

After 1990 race was no longer officially recorded in the government death records. However, the racial patterns of homicide have remained relatively consistent in the past. By comparing recent data from the National Injury Mortality Surveillance System (NIMSS) with the racial homicide trends prior to 1990, an educated guess can be made

about present and future homicide patterns. Conducted by the Medical Research Council, the NIMSS has analysed mortuary data from across the country since 1999. Their data incorporates 36 urban and rural mortuaries in six provinces, which together account for 34% of all deaths in the country.⁴ This sample, although incomplete, is the most accurate available.

The homicide rate for coloureds has almost always been higher than other race groups, exceeding 60 murders per 100,000 since 1980 (Figure 1). This does not, however, show the full picture. When analysed according to age and gender, the extent of violence within the coloured community becomes clearer. Prior to 1994, the coloured male homicide rate peaked in 1982 at over 160 per 100,000, and has

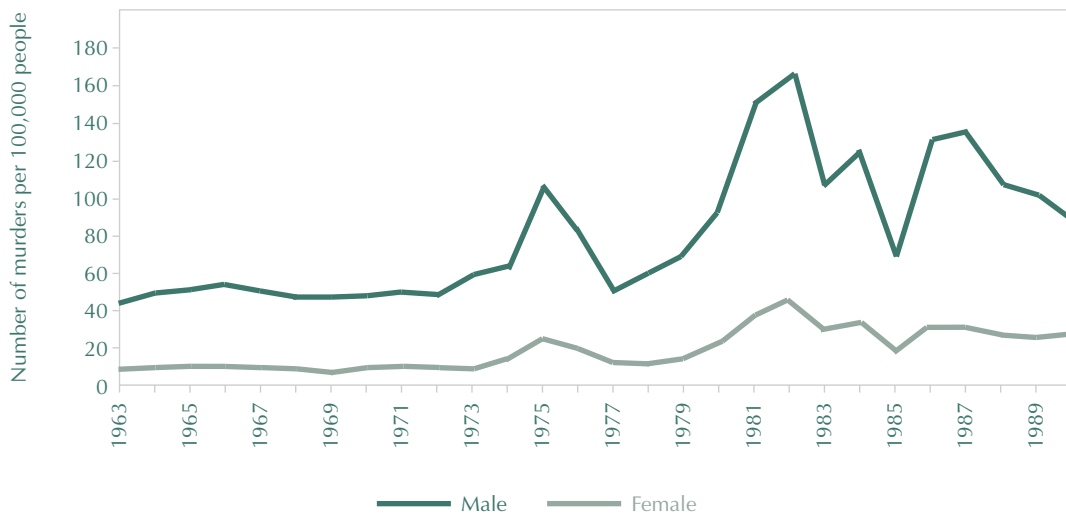
Figure 1: Homicide rate in South Africa, 1938–2003



Source: Stats SA

* Data after 1990 is based on projections using the Stats SA figures and those provided by the National Injury Mortality Surveillance System

Figure 2: Coloured homicide rate, 1963–1990, by gender



Source: Stats SA

remained over 80 per 100,000 since 1980. The female murder rate has been much less at between 20 and 40 per 100,000 (Figure 2). This means that for every coloured female murdered, at least four males were murdered.

In comparison, the homicide rate for black South Africans has fluctuated between 60 and 120 per 100,000 for males, and between five and 20 for females. White and Indian homicide rates are lower than both the coloured and black rates.

How many overall deaths are murders?

The full impact of violence in a community can be better understood by calculating the percentage of all deaths that are caused by violence. Between 1982 and 1990, murder was the cause of nearly half of all deaths of coloured males between the ages of 16 and 30, making it the primary cause of death for this group. More recent data has shown that this proportion has reduced, but this can probably be attributed in part to an increase in AIDS cases, which will affect this age group the most.

The proportion of deaths attributable to homicide is lower for coloured females, but still remains high with over 20% of all deaths being caused by homicide (Figure 3). Other race groups have lower

proportions of homicide deaths for this age group, as shown in Table 1.

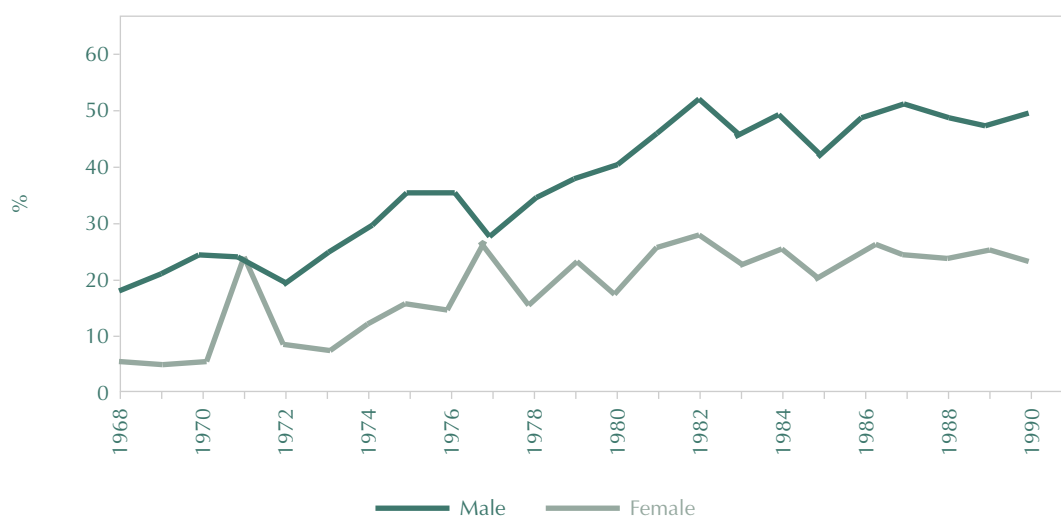
Table 1: Percentage of deaths caused by homicide, 16–30 year age group, 1982–1990

	Male	Female
Coloured	48.2	24.4
Black	47.5	15.6
Asian	29.4	13.8
White	15.4	11.5

Source: Stats SA

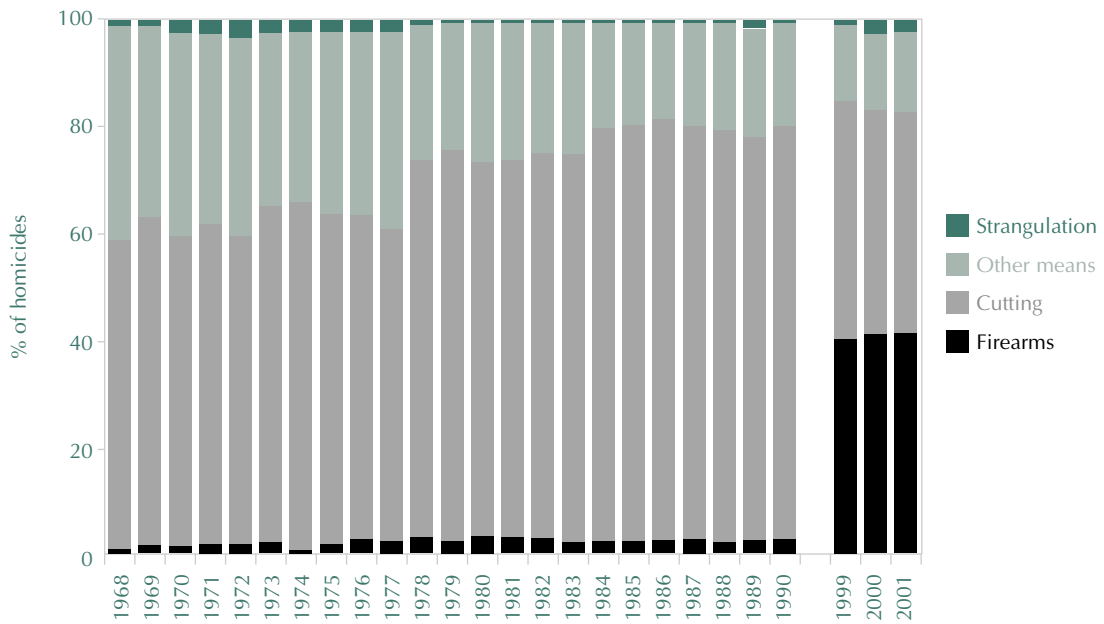
The level of violence that this represents is overwhelming. Only a limited number of assaults end in death, and the number of assaults occurring in the coloured population is likely to be many times greater than the number of homicides. In 2002 the SAPS recorded 21,738 murders compared to 299,411 attempted murders and serious assaults in the country. The Northern and Western Cape – where the coloured population is in the majority – had the highest rates of murder, attempted murder and assault (see the next article in this issue).

Figure 3: Percentage of all coloured deaths caused by homicide, 16–30 year age group



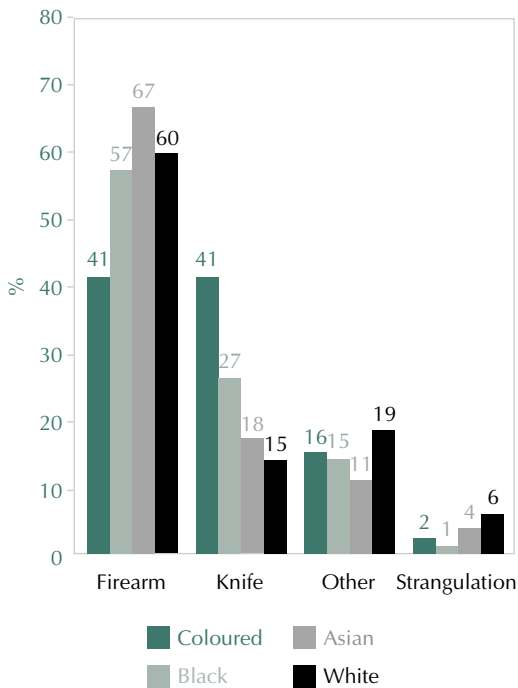
Source: Stats SA

Figure 4: Weapon used in coloured homicides



Source: Stats SA, NIMSS

Figure 5: Weapons use in homicides in 2001, by race



Source: NIMSS

Weapons used in murders

The type of weapon used in a murder shows the availability of the weapon, as well as giving some indication about the type of murder that occurred. The weapons used in coloured murders have been consistent for the period from 1968 to 1990 when these records were available (Figure 4).

For more than two decades, knives or other stabbing weapons were used in the vast majority of murders of coloured people. Firearms were used in less than 5% of murders before 1990, but this has since risen to 41% in the latest mortuary reports, with guns now as likely to be used as knives.⁵ These trends are in stark contrast to those for the other race groups, where firearms are much more likely to be used in homicides than knives (Figure 5).

Many homicides are believed to be assaults that ‘go too far’. An attack with a knife is more likely to result in wounding and less likely to result in death than one with a firearm simply because a gun is a more deadly weapon.⁶ The levels of non-lethal violence reflect this. In the Western and Northern

Cape provinces, the rates of assault with grievous bodily harm in 2002 were 823 and 1,365 respectively – far in excess of the national average of 582.⁷ There are far more assaults that result in injury than in death, suggesting that the use of knives has ironically helped to keep the homicide rate lower than it could be for these provinces.

Although more pronounced in the murder of coloured people, the change in weapon use towards guns has occurred in all race groups, and is concerning as the use of a firearm increases the risk of death. A growth in the availability and ownership of firearms has led to this change, and although it is not necessary to use a firearm to kill someone, research has shown that carrying a gun will increase the likelihood of being killed. And if a gun is used in an assault, the risk of death is also greater.⁸

Why does it happen?

Criminologists have shown that certain communities are affected by high levels of violence.⁹ One explanation is that members of such communities are more willing to use violence in everyday matters. The theory is that these people exist on the fringes of society and create their own set of rules about how to behave. These 'subcultures' see violence as normal and are more willing to use violence in situations where other people would not. They are also more likely to carry a weapon and more willing to fight to protect their 'honour' or 'status'. Young adult males are more likely to engage in this type of behaviour, and thus increase their chances of being both victims and perpetrators of violence.

It has been argued that South Africans have become accepting of violence – that they are part of a 'culture of violence'. If true, the coloured community would seem to represent the extreme of this 'violent culture'. They have a long history of unemployment, inadequate housing and health care, high rates of alcohol use, and family dislocation (see 'Still marginal: Crime in the coloured community' in this issue). The high number of gangs in the Western Cape is a result of this phenomenon.¹⁰ They have filled a gap in the community, giving young males a sense of identity.

Gangs use violence to achieve their goals and have normalised the carrying and use of weapons. The continued high rate of knife use is undoubtedly connected to this behaviour.

The use of alcohol is also a key factor in creating a violent environment. Research confirms that excessive alcohol use will increase the likelihood of violence being committed,¹¹ and South African research has shown that many victims and offenders of violence had high levels of alcohol in their systems.¹² There is a long history of alcohol abuse in the coloured community, encouraged through the 'dop system' of paying wine farm workers in alcohol. It should therefore come as no surprise that this sector of the population suffers from high rates of violence.

In order to reduce levels of violence in the coloured community, dealing with only one of these factors will not be enough. Viable alternatives to the gang structures must be created, the state must improve the conviction rate of those who kill, and individuals have to learn that there are alternatives to using violence.

What does the future hold?

The decline in the national homicide rate since 1994 is positive, even though projections suggest that it will take more than 15 years to reach levels below 20 murders per 100,000 people – a rate that is more in line with other countries in transition.

However, it is difficult to accept that this downward trend will continue. The high rates of non-lethal violence suggest that rather than people becoming less violent, more victims are now surviving. If medical care declines, homicide rates will increase. If firearms are increasingly used, the homicide rate will escalate. The lack of social and economic stability will continue to influence overall crime levels. AIDS could also affect homicide rates by further reducing the ability of the family structure to provide adequate socialisation for young males. Finally it is likely that if unchecked, the continued high rates of drug and alcohol abuse within the coloured community, along with gang activity, will result in continued high levels of violence and homicide.

Endnotes

- 1 All data from United Nations Crime and Justice Information Network, www.uncjin.org.
- 2 Deaths of black South Africans were not recorded prior to 1968, and no data is available for deaths and homicides in the former 'Homeland' areas. Race was not recorded in official death records after 1990. Statistical projections of past race patterns of homicide were used to interpret the post-1990 data.
- 3 For estimates of politically motivated homicides see *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol 1–5, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Cape Town, 1998; and M Coleman (ed), *A Crime against Humanity*, Human Rights Committee of South Africa, David Phillip, Claremont, 1998.
- 4 See the complete *National Injury Mortality Surveillance System*, Medical Research Council, www.mrc.ac.za.
- 5 NIMSS reports, 1999, 2000, 2001.
- 6 The ability of the victim to get to adequate medical care in time will also influence whether a murder or a serious assault occurs.
- 7 Data from the Crime Information Analysis Centre of the SAPS.
- 8 See Kellerman et al, Injuries and deaths due to firearms in the home, *Journal of Trauma*, 45, 1998, pp 263-267; E Hennop, et al, *The Role of Firearms in Crime in South Africa*, ISS Monograph Series No 55, Pretoria, May 2001.
- 9 ME Wolfgang, *Patterns of Criminal Homicide*, Patterson Smith, Montclair, NJ, 1958; MD Smith and Zahn (eds), *Studying and Preventing Homicide*, Sage, London, 1999.
- 10 A Dissel, Youth, Street Gangs and Violence in South Africa, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Johannesburg, 1997; I Kinnes, *From urban street gangs to criminal empires: The changing face of gangs in the Western Cape*, ISS Monograph Series No 48, Pretoria, June 2000.
- 11 N South in M Maguire et al, *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997.
- 12 M Shaw and A Louw, The Violence of Alcohol: Crime in Northern Cape, *Crime and Conflict*, 9, 1997, pp 6–10; M Peden, *Homicides and Violence in South Africa 1999: Provisional Results*, Violence and Injury Surveillance Initiative, 2000.