



**THE STATE AND SAFETY OF POLICE OFFICERS IN THE LINE OF DUTY**  
Public Servants Association

**Introduction**

Police officers in South Africa face one of the most daunting crime fighting environments in the world. South Africa consistently struggles with some of the highest rates of violent crime, including homicide and sexual assault, in the world. These pressing human tragedies compete for police attention alongside a wide variety of theft, carjacking, harassment, and non-criminal challenges such as car accidents.

The scale and scope of crime and restiveness is enough to put immense pressure on South Africa's 194,605 police officers, all of which is complicated by the underlying causes of crime in South Africa, which are embedded in a complex mix of inequality, disenfranchisement and the legacy of apartheid. There is also a gradual erosion of the rule of law which reflects the country's changing value system for the worst. Petty law-breaking, such as skipping red traffick lights, road rage incidents, bribery, and so on, are becoming common place.



It is not just the kind of crime that is rooted in structural inequality that is a source of the country's difficulties with law and order, but also the ease with which citizens of all class disregard rules, social norms, and the law itself. Even in extreme cases of murder, it is suggested that most murders in South Africa occur between people who know each other rather than between strangers. This may have less to do with factors of inequality and more to do with the character of societal values, psychological factors, and weak restraining mechanisms in society. In the end, these challenges rest on the shoulders of a police service that is constrained by strict fiscal constraints and limited time available to the police officers.

Capacity constraints pose serious risks to the wellbeing of police officers. Police officers face any number of risks on the job, ranging from the pressing risks of fighting crime, to the prolonged mental strain of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. The strain on the police wellbeing must be prioritized, precisely because of the importance of protecting officers. While the SAPS has extensive policy documents and procedures in place to support officers, many of these are implemented in a policy environment that is plagued by uncertainty and disrupted by a deeply uncertain political environment, where the collapse of the rule of law is one of the ills bedeviling our political system.

### **What do numbers say?**

The wellbeing of police officers cannot be disconnected from the broader environment in which they operate. In the case of South Africa, this is one of the most difficult operating environments in the world. Crime, including violent crime, is endemic across the country, and has proved stubbornly difficult to combat. The broader trend of criminal activity in South Africa is one in which violence is deeply engrained within a number of social structures, with social marginalisation, including as a result of high levels of unemployment, driving a spiral of violence that is difficult to combat using traditional policing methods.

While crime is said to have declined over the last decade, as shown in figure 1 below, it has nevertheless remained unusually high, with improvements in some areas offsetting deterioration in others. Contact crimes (referring to crimes against an individual, including

assault and murder) and contact-related crimes have experienced the most consistent declines. However, this progress has slowed in recent years, with contact crimes in 2016 reversing years of improvement to fall to just below 2012 levels. Property crimes, on the other hand, have seen a reversal in recent years after years of increases.

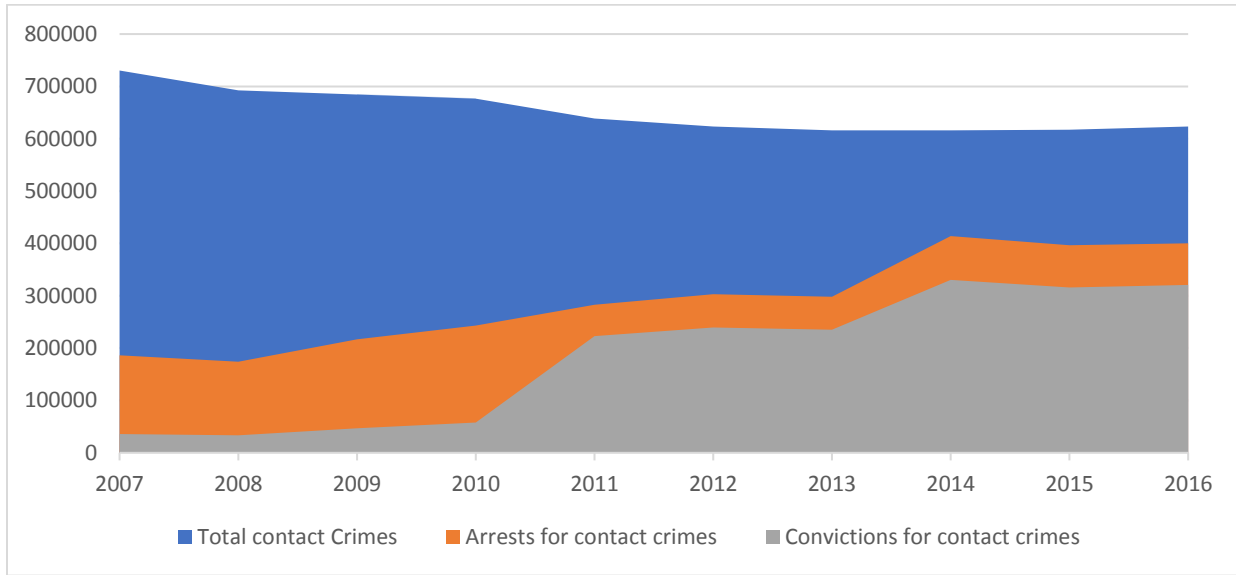
Figure 1: National crime rates for four major crime categories, 2007 - 2016



Source: ISS Africa Crime Hub, Crime Statistics, <https://issafrica.org/crimehub>

Crime statistics are notoriously unreliable, given the different means of classifying crimes, and the fact that they rely on reported crimes. Crime reporting tends to decline as the public loses faith in the police service, and as such statistics might sometimes decline even when things are getting worse. Nevertheless, there are signs of progress. Figure 2 shows this progress in the case of contact crimes, which shows evidence of a triple-move forward, in which the number of crimes decrease, arrests increase, and convictions rates increase. The high variability of these figures should be cause for concern, but nevertheless the results indicate at least a stabilisation of performance, and potentially a slight improvement.

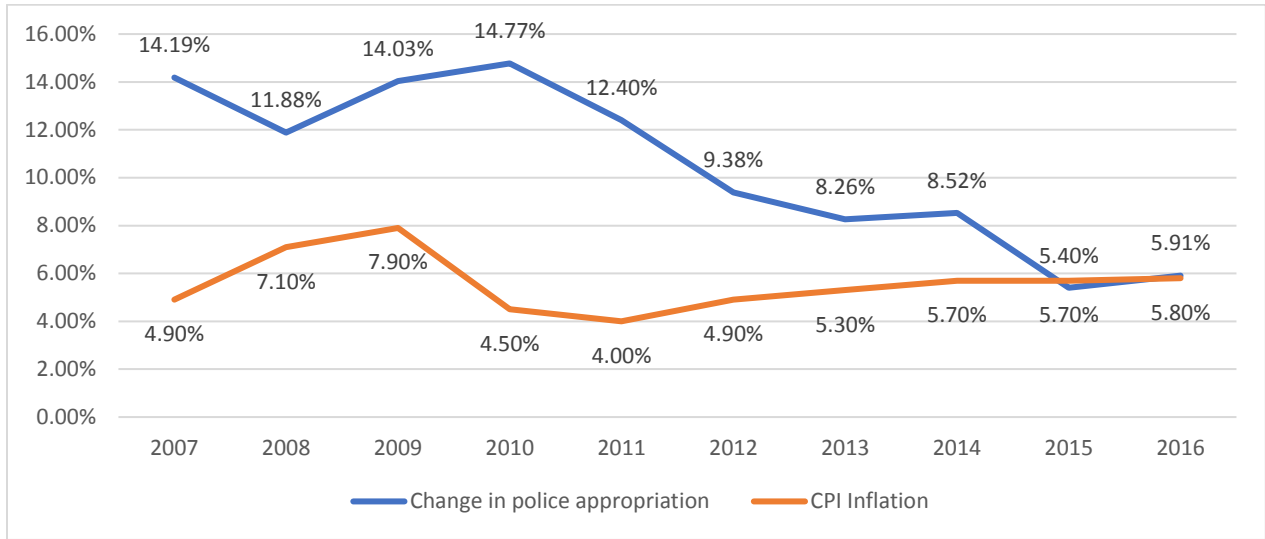
Figure 2: Crime rate, arrests and convictions for contact crimes, 2007 - 2016



Source: ISS Africa Crime Hub, Crime Statistics, <https://issafrica.org/crimehub>

The capacity of the police force to deal with crime is of course limited by the resources available to them. The police service witnessed a rapid expansion in its number during the latter part of the 2000s, with police personnel increasing by 35,929 from 2006/7 to 2011/12. The increase is generally attributed to both growing concerns on crimes and to unique factors, such as the demands by FIFA to increase policing numbers ahead of the 2010 World Cup. Since 2011/12, numbers have remained mostly steady, with a marginal decline to the current personnel level of 194,605. The surge in police officers coincides with rapid growth in the police budget, but this trend has since reversed. As can be seen in Figure 3, the budget for the SAPS grew at below inflation levels for the first time in 2016.

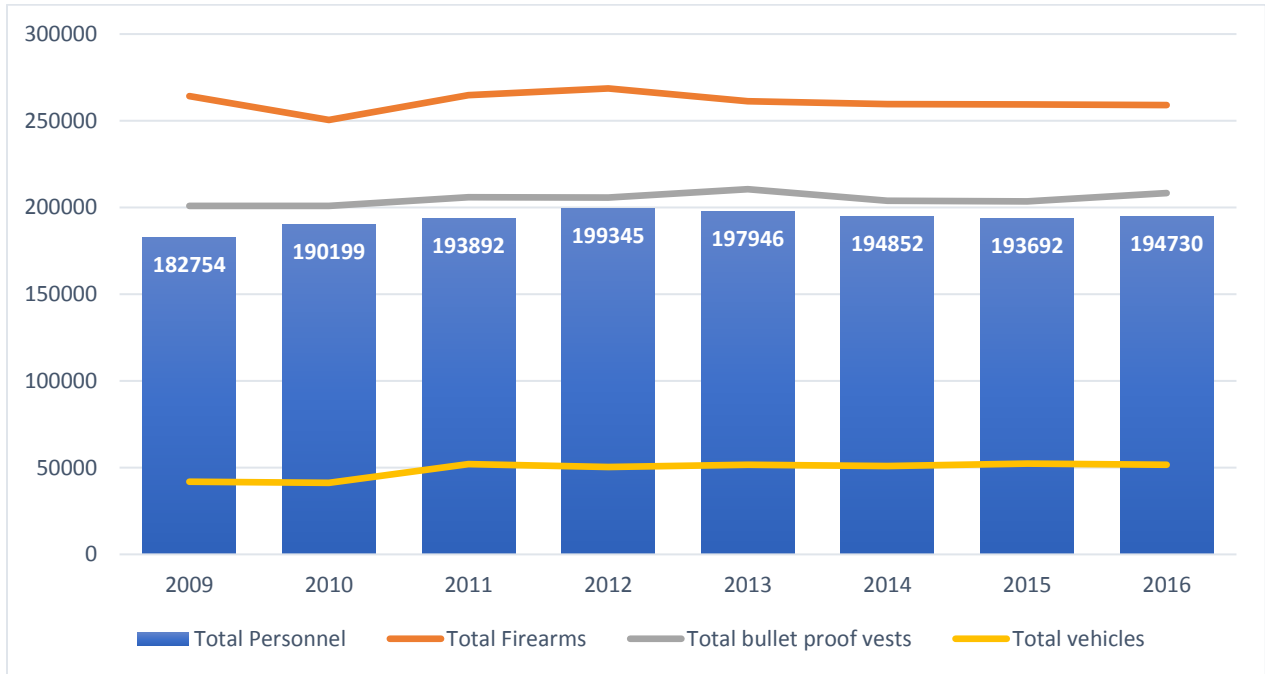
Figure 3: Change in police appropriation versus CPI Inflation, 2007 - 2016



Source: ISS Africa Crime Hub, Crime Statistics, <https://issafrica.org/crimehub>; Reserve Bank data on CPI inflation

If there is assurance that the police service is adequately equipped for the challenges that confront them, the public gains confidence in the police. Effective policing requires both the provision of tools that improve police performance, and the rollout of training that assists police officers in better performing their duties. On the equipment side, Figure 4 paints a healthy picture, with the SAPS having more key tools, such as bullet proof vests, than active personnel. While challenges may sometimes occur in distributing these resources to the places that need them most, and of maintaining them in healthy operational conditions, the overall picture seems to be of a strong basis from which to work.

Figure 4: SAPS Personnel figures and the availability of key equipment, 2009 - 2016



Source: ISS Africa Crime Hub, Crime Statistics, <https://issafrica.org/crimehub>

Beyond physical resources, there is a need to pay attention to additional support and training. While officers are frequently sent on training courses, little evidence is demonstrated on how effective these courses are. Instituting behavioural changes requires a system of follow-up, in which training courses do not just end after a day or two, but result in long-term implementation and monitoring and evaluation. This is particularly important for difficult tasks like community outreach or dealing with vulnerable victims, which require a unique set of skills and a level of personal management that can sometimes be challenging in a very demanding work environment.

While these figures paint a partial picture, there are broader concerns over the stability of police management. The office of the National Police Commissioner has seen immense instability in recent years, as political appointees were frequently wrapped up in scandals or accused of mismanagement. The appointment of Lt-General Khehla Sitole in November 2017 marked the first time in fifteen years that a career police officer was appointed to the position, indicating just how deeply politicised the role has become. The role of National Police

Commissioner is emblematic of the misuse of a system devised to assure stability of technocratic heads of department. While the Minister of Police should be a political appointment, the Commissioner should remain an able technical professional capable of responding to the needs of the minister. The politicisation of this role has led to a blurring of responsibilities between the two, weakening both the management role of the commissioner and the oversight role of the Minister.

### **Personal challenges faced by police officers**

The wellbeing of police officers must be of central importance to any functional police service, both for the simple reason of providing adequate protections to officers, but also because a police service works best when its primary agents feel safe enough to do their job. A police service that feels under threat can find its officers less willing to take on difficult, risky situations; and can also breed mistrust that breaks down essential community relations. Data on the safety and wellbeing of police officers varies greatly, in part because of some data limitations, but also because many of the most serious challenges facing South African police officers - including the mental strain of operating in a very difficult policing environment - do not lend themselves to easy quantification. Nevertheless, the information that is available paints a picture of a police service in need of additional support.

Of primary concern is the extent to which South African police officers are injured or lose their life in the line of duty. Preventing these injuries or loss of life is essential to police wellbeing. Guaranteeing the safety and wellbeing of police can reduce the overall levels of stress in the police force. SAPS reports that for the period from April 2016 to March 2017, 6002 police officers (equivalent to 0.3% of total personnel) faced injury in the line of duty.<sup>1</sup> Of those who faced injury, 2617 required medical attention but did not face temporary disability, while 3251 required medical attention and faced some form of temporary disability. Over the same period, 80 officers were faced with permanent disability, while 54 were fatally injured in the line of duty. Analysis of causes of death both on and off duty indicates that vehicle accidents were

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<sup>1</sup> South African Police Service, "SAPS Annual Report 2016/2017, Part D: Human Resource Management".

consistently the leading cause of death, followed by murder.<sup>2</sup> These unnatural deaths tend to be clustered in provinces with large urban centres that are prone to broader violence, with Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal consistently noted as the most dangerous provinces in which to work.<sup>3</sup> The majority of those killed in the line of duty are visible policing officers responding to incidents.

All injuries in the line of duty must be taken extremely seriously, and each should serve as an opportunity to better assess how to better protect officers in the future. These figures seem to indicate that the South African police force does face a dangerous working environment, but that the rate of police injury is somewhat controlled, given the extremely difficult circumstances in which they operate. Regardless, policy must be consistently attempting to improve this environment, and limit these dangers.

SAPS has developed a Police Safety Strategy as the primary grounding document for its approach to assuring the safety of officers, and implements this strategy through both the Police Safety Implementation Plan and the Tactical Response Plan. An overview of this plan can

#### **Police Safety Strategy**

1. **Situational Analysis and Awareness:** Assessment of environment, profiling of suspects and risk areas, adequate equipment, early warning signs of health concerns, ongoing research.
2. **Skills development and maintenance:** Identification of skills gaps, training and reskilling.
3. **Raising of awareness:** Awareness of personal and operational safety and security.
4. **Contingency planning:** Enforcement of contingency planning for medium and high risk situations.
5. **Investigations and convictions:** Prioritising and centralising investigations, involvement of NPA.
6. **Hosting of multidisciplinary police safety committee meetings:** Quarterly and special meetings to analyse incidents and make proposals on corrective measures.
7. **Risk management:** Identification and analysis of risks and the development of a risk plan.
8. **Reporting of incidents of unnatural deaths on and off duty:** Implementation of information management framework requiring all attacks on police members to be reported within 12 hours and captured in a national database.
9. **Policy safety assessments:** Multi-disciplinary assessment teams conduct on-site assessments to determine level of compliance by members.
10. **Employee health and wellness:** EHW programmes.
11. **Operational compliance:** Compliance inspections, and Compliance board.



Source: ISS Africa Crime Hub, Crime Statistics, <https://issafrica.org/crimehub>

in box 1. While the strategy seems relatively robust and comprehensive, it is extremely difficult to evaluate, because of the lack of information available on the implementation of the policy. Crucial oversight statistics on basic conditions of safety - such as the holding of meetings mentioned in the strategy, or on the extent to which police officers can implement the recommendations on planning and profiling - are all not readily available. The strategy seems to urgently need additional monitoring and evaluation in order to ensure it is operationalised.

No doubt, safety in the line of duty is a pressing concern; however, it is also important for the police service to take a holistic approach to the wellbeing of officers, one that also examines challenges to physical and mental health that go beyond the threat of violence. South African police officers are not immune to many of the most serious challenges facing broader public health, whether they be problems of coping with HIV, infectious diseases like TB, or lifestyle diseases like obesity. Police are often particularly vulnerable to many of these conditions, because of the unique strain of their workplace. Long hours with irregular breaks can result in poor dietary options, and can make managing chronic medication more difficult. Stress and strain at work can aggravate underlying conditions, and can compel officers to coping mechanisms through dangerous habits like alcoholism. These various intersecting feedback loops can mean that challenges are more difficult to deal with, and can spark more serious problems, that continue on in a downward spiral.

While there are, again, limits to data on the health challenges facing police officers, some general statistics are available from a SAPS review in 2016.<sup>4</sup> Outside of mental health issues (discussed below), the largest challenge facing police officers continues to be the prevalence of HIV/Aids. POLMED, the police medical aid programme, reported that 27,246 officers were enrolled in their HIV programme in 2014/15. Of these, 69,72% were the primary medical scheme members, indicating that at least 18,995 active police officers are currently HIV-positive, accounting for just under 10% of all SAPS personnel, versus 11.2% for the general population. HIV is of course entirely manageable with comprehensive antiretroviral treatment, but ARVs need to be considered in the context of broader lifestyle support. Unhealthy working

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<sup>4</sup> SAPS, "SAPS Employee Health and Wellness (EHW)", presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Police, 17 February 2016.

lifestyles or insufficient support for adequate nutrient can make managing HIV more difficult, and may require more attention. Nevertheless, the POLMED HIV programme does seem comprehensive, and the short-term focus should be on maintaining the support offered through the programme, and expanding its reach through the use of targeted marketing and awareness support among officers.

Police officers are also vulnerable to a range of lifestyle issues, including high blood pressure, diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, obesity and substance abuse.<sup>5</sup> However, these are difficult to quantify, as little data is available on those diagnosed, and many others will never be diagnosed with these chronic conditions. This specific cluster of healthcare issues does, however, clearly point to concerns on the lifestyle facing police officers. Police officers often have limited access to healthy food, time for physical training, or training and assistance on health care considerations. All of these can add to the mental strain, wellbeing, and motivation of our police force. While awareness programmes on physical fitness have been rolled by the police, they often fail to take into account the ways in which structural conditions in the workplace make it difficult to meet the demands of a healthy lifestyle. More proactive scheduling that allows time for exercise, and the provision of better dietary options at police stations (where appropriate), may be needed for that message to actually be implementable.

Perhaps the most serious and least well addressed problem facing police officers is that of mental health. SAPS lists the five leading mental health challenges facing officers as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, stress disorders more generally, substance abuse and attempted suicides - although all five may overlap and intersect heavily. In 2014/15, 19,097 cases of psychiatric treatment were examined, with 89% of diagnosed cases suffering from depression, 22% from PTSD, and 5% from substance abuse.<sup>6</sup> These figures are commonly high around the world, with the strain of a job characterised by fear and the constant threat of violence taking a toll. Even aside from the threat of violence, the constant strain of being exposed to people at their most desperate may strain perceptions of the broader world, and lead officers into depression.

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<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> ibid

Comprehensive mental health treatment is an absolute necessity for a police service that both cares for its members, and maintains among its police the capacity to care for the communities they must serve. And yet, what evidence is available seems to suggest that mental health care in the SAPS has a long way to go. This is partly due to simple lack of provision of psychiatric care, which is highly unevenly distributed across the country. POLMED reports that there is less than one clinical psychiatrist for every 4.5 police stations in KZN, with similar poor ratios in the likes of Mpumalanga, and the presence of no physical psychiatrist serving the Northern Cape's 70 police stations.<sup>7</sup> While those ratios are a lot better in the likes of Gauteng, treatment is still often stifled by a broad ranging stigma about seeking mental health support. Stigma of mental health problems does discourage the diagnosis of these challenges, but more seriously, it prevents the establishment of an environment that can assist treatment. A supportive environment characterised by open discussion of mental health challenges is essential to building a police culture that can quickly respond to mental health challenges and work with officers to combat these challenges before they become seriously dangerous.

Finally, while many of these challenges are endemic to the work of police officers, a range of lifestyle and workplace challenges risk making them worse. The National Credit Regulator notes that police/defence personnel make up 20% of public sector debt counselling, with this growing steadily over the last three years.<sup>8</sup> Growing debt levels may be indicative of broader financial strain on officers, and likely doesn't reflect the real growth in unofficial borrowing or those who have not sought debt counselling. Debt and financial strain can easily interact with the mental strain of the broader work of the police, to create a toxic mental health mix. One issue where there is less data but strong anecdotal evidence of a problem is the lack of faith in fellow officers among the police. This is often blamed in particular on the rapid expansion in police hiring that was mandated by FIFA in the run up to the World Cup of 2010. The hiring was reported by some as resulting in a lowering of recruitment standards and reductions in training, both resulting in less faith in fellow officers. Concerns about corruption add to this perception, and together can make for an environment in which stresses cannot be managed by turning to fellow officers, leaving officers feeling isolated and unsafe among their peers.

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<sup>7</sup> Eloff, M., presentation entitled "2017 POLMED Wellness Data", POLMED.

<sup>8</sup> National Credit Regulator, "Statistics on Consumer Over-indebtedness", presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Trade and Industry, <https://www.thedti.gov.za/parliament/2017/NCR-indebtedness.pdf>

## Recommendations

Finding a way forward on police safety and performance is complicated by the fact that many good plans already exist. On paper, the SAPS has a comprehensive set of plans for everything from holistic community engagement to the protection and upliftment of their officers. The challenge is that, as is too often the case, these policies and visions do not reach full implementation. This is so for a wide range of reasons. Many are common to other departments, such as poor planning processes and a disconnect between strategy and the practical situation on the ground. Others are unique to the police. The most pressing here is the extremely dispersed nature of the police. There are 1140 police stations in South Africa, and many different divisions and sets of responsibilities, all of which means that efforts that benefit one part of the system often do not adequately cascade down to other parts, particularly those that have less capacity and are more vulnerable - such as in rural areas or the townships.

As a first step, the police service needs to focus on building a more robust administrative system by which policy can be turned into practise on the ground. This should consider at least two crucial steps.

First is to integrate policies using systems that already exist and are already functional. The police is a rigid hierarchical organisation, and has many such systems that can be used. Take one example: station/duty assignments. Building support for mental health or additional training in every duty station is an extremely daunting challenge. However, if the SAPS were to build dedicated capacity for crucial support services like training and capacity in a handful of central stations, and then require compulsory service in that duty stations for a set period of time, they could facilitate a system whereby offices get better access to a rich array of services, regardless of where they generally operate. While this is an imperfect solution, it would assure that the types of policies that are implemented from above reach all members of the service, even if their actual implementation is relatively shallow, and only reaches a few stations. Effectively, this or a similar system would allow policy from above to reach the bottom, rather than ending halfway down, as seems to currently be the case. This is simply one example of a cross-cutting set of solutions that would need to come from within SAPS, but the crucial step would be to move away from pledges of vague commitments to end states like 'health', and

rather embrace the creation of systems that use what exists now to create real implementation.

Second, would be to then build in more comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems that allow for the evaluation of the actual impact of these interventions. Building M&E systems has become a somewhat overused suggestion across all of government, but it truly is important, particularly for the police. Implementing a policy of training on how to manage victims, for example, is easy to do - you simply organise courses and seminars - but very hard to actually make effective. Some system of evaluation for victims of crime or community members is needed to assure that the training tools offered by the SAPS are actually having an impact. This is particularly important in the case of South Africa, where the majority of (non-violent) crimes will never be solved. The emphasis therefore needs to be on assisting the victims as best as possible, and providing a level of confidence in the police that maintains community investment and encourages important factors like the reporting of crimes.

Beyond the planning procedures, a number of major changes are needed. Core amongst these is to review recruitment and training procedures. This is a difficult challenge. Being a police officer requires gruelling work with high risk and low pay. It is difficult to attract the very best under such conditions, and it then becomes easy to consistently weaken recruitment standards in an effort to fill vacancies and get boots on the ground. In order to attract the right people for policing in a complex environment, the police needs to attempt to use the structures they have to make the work more attractive. This can be done by, first, putting in place clear paths of progression, that sees people move from visible policing into either more investigative capacity or back-office roles. While this is, of course, already a structure that exists, clarifying progression paths and setting clear performance standards needed for promotion could make for an environment in which the initial difficult of the work is more richly rewarded as officers progress through the ranks. Similarly, the offer of additional support - such as the provision of university education for officers who consistently meet standards - could make the police service an attractive path forward, and help it serve the social progress role it has played in many countries around the world.

Finally, the police force desperately needs stability in its leadership. The appointment of Lieutenant-General Sitole as police commissioner must mark an inflection point in which

political meddling stops undermining the incredibly complex administrative task of running a police force. Another important step forward could be taken by Minister Mbalula to position his ministry to perform the oversight role of the police for which they are mandated. This would involve creating a strategic distance between the political head and the SAPS, in order to allow for more impartial assessment and oversight of police performance. Building a system where the political head provides oversight and support, and the technical head carves a clear, practical path forward, could set the police on a far sounder footing to turn the vision of its various policy documents into reality for officers on the ground.