AN EXPLORATION OF THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH PUBLIC TRUST IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICE

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─Abstract─

In order for the criminal justice system to be effective, the public must be able to have trust in the system. The police being the first public contact of the criminal justice system must maintain high public trust if the system is to perform its mission to the fullest. This will enhance police effectiveness and the legitimacy of police actions. Therefore, this study explored the factors associated with public trust in the South African Police. This secondary data analysis involved the 2014/2015 South African Victims of Crime Survey from Statistics South Africa. Sample size was 24,701 HHs (n= 24,024 individuals). Using interviewer-administered questionnaire, information obtained included socio-demographic data, individual and community response to crime, experience of household crime, citizen interaction, satisfaction with police services and trust in the SAPS. Data analysis included descriptive statistics and multivariable logistic regression analysis. Of the households surveyed, 76% (n=18,827) reported having trust in the police and 57.0% (n = 13, 741) reported being satisfied with the police in their areas. A significantly higher proportion of those with lower level of education had trust in the police than those with higher level of education (p<0.001). The proportion of participants who had trust in the police was lower in the employed than the unemployed participants (74.9% vs. 77.2%; p<0.001). Victims of crimes such as car theft (AOR: 0.67; p<0.004), housebreak (AOR: 0.84; p<0.005) and motor vehicle vandalism (AOR: 0.62; p<0.001) in the last 5years were less likely to trust the police. Those who were satisfied with the police services in their areas were more likely to trust the police (AOR: 12.4; p<0.001). Findings indicate among many others; male participants are likely to trust the police more than female. Victims of house breaking, car vandalism in the preceding five years are

not likely to trust the police. Furthermore, the greater the community satisfaction with the South African police performance; the higher the level of public trust. It is recommended that factors negatively affecting public trust in the South African Police as identified in this paper be addressed.

Key Words: *Public trust, crime, South African Police Service, criminal justice system*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of States' criminal justice system is determined (among others), by the level of trust people have in it. The police being the most visible signpost of the criminal justice system must uphold the trust people repose in the system if the criminal justice system intends to carry-out its constitutional duties commendably (Boateng 2012:4). As the public first point of contact with the criminal justice system, the police occupy a strategic position in the entire criminal justice. This makes the public trust in the police an imperative indicator of the legitimacy of the State as a whole (Fleming & McLaughlin, 2010:199). Public trust in the police is fundamental if the criminal justice system is to record huge success. Needless to emphasise that, it is generally expected of the criminal justice system to be fair, trustworthy and professional in the discharge of its constitutional responsibilities, the police as its component are expected to exemplify same when carrying out its duties. Public trust in the police will naturally thrive in an atmosphere of fairness, equity and high level of professionalism (Boateng 2012:4).

Trust is one key concept that reinforces the bond between the police and the public. In modern democracies where rule of law and restorative justice thrive, the sovereignty of the State lies with the people, just as legal authority and approval largely depend on them. The level of trust the public repose in the police will indubitably reflect in the extent to which people will be willing to cooperate or assist the police during criminal investigations and trials. Police legitimacy is earned and built on public trust. This is fundamental as effective social control is 'preponderantly determined' on public cooperation and confidence in the legitimacy of the police. A suitable and trusted relationship with the public is vital to effective police work. Public trust boosts the efficacy and legitimacy of police actions (Lyons, 2002; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Boateng, 2012). Unfortunately, in most transitional societies like South Africa, the legitimacy of the police has often been undermined due to a decline in public trust.

Contemporarily, South Africa seems to be in a state where public trust in the police has deteriorated, while public fear and distrust in the police have increased tremendously (Burger 2011:13). Such distrust is reflected in much of the relationship between the public and the police; where the former perceive the latter as 'an enemy' even when the latter seems to portray itself as 'a friend' (Burger 2011:14). The incessant negative reports of police brutality, misconduct, torture, corruption, to mention a few, in post-apartheid South Africa lend credence

to the above assertions. These factors also have far reaching implications, especially in undermining the credibility and legitimacy of the police.

As all these deleterious factors are deep seated in the system, the leadership of the police more often than not, try to 'cover-up' their institutional atrocities by downplaying most of them, in a bid to shift the attention of the public to other national socio-political nuances (Burger 2011:14) . Nevertheless, the problem continues as the structural factors that contribute to them remains unabated. What are these structural factors? Why have they remained unabated? How can they be addressed? Therefore, the objective of this article is to explore the factors associated with public trust in the South African Police and negotiate for a durable approach, if need be, to address the problem.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The South African Police Service (SAPS): A brief overview

The Republic of South Africa profiles one of the largest police force in the world (Fry, 2013:37). The South African Police Services (SAPS) is the national police force of the Republic of South Africa. It was formed in 1994 through a merger of the former South African Police (SAP) and the ten (10) ethnic "Homelands" police agencies under the apartheid regime to a unified force (Bruce, 2011). Its nomenclature was changed from a 'force' to a 'service' with a corresponding military-like rank style. Bruce (2011) held that SAPS employs above 190,000 persons that span across the entire country's nine (9) Provinces, including over 1, 200 police stations nationwide. The impacts of SAPS are not restricted to the domestic terrain alone, but also felt at the regional level. SAPS have been involved in a number of policing operations in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region (Van der Spuy, 2009).

Concerted efforts have been made over the years by the State to address the problems plaguing the SAPS, especially in post-apartheid era. The leadership of the SAPS had also taken a number of steps to address some of these problems by taking a number of initiatives, including the introduction of the SAPS Code of Conduct. This initiative further birthed the establishment of the Independent Police Investigative Directorate to address the frequent deaths in police custody, including the perennial cases of police corruption, amongst others (Kinnes & Newham, 2012). However, these initiatives have not yielded the much desired results. Public trust in the SAPS in recent times is still staggeringly low. Much of the reasons are not unconnected from the frequent factors that undermine the

credibility of the SAPS in contemporary South Africa, including corruption, police brutality, maladministration, favouritism and nepotism, intimidation, amongst other criminal activities. Methods of recruitment and training of the members of the organisation (Reiner, 2005: 675).

2.2. Factors undermining public trust in the police

It will be very challenging to exhaustively state the factors eroding public trust in the police in a modern world due to its complexities and interconnectedness in a dynamic milieu. Corruption is one factor that has consistently eroded public trust in the SAPS. Sekhonyane (2003:1) argued that the extent of police corruption in South Africa cannot be contested. However, it would be inappropriate to assert that corruption is only peculiar to SAPS, since it is a resonating phenomenon in national police force on a global scale (Carter, 1997, Faull, 2007; Olutola, 2014).

Sayed and Bruce (1998:8) define corruption as 'any illegal conduct or misconduct involving the use of occupational power for personal, group or organisational gain.' Snyman (1999:392) also defines corruption as "the unlawful and intentional giving of an agent, or making an offer or closing a deal with such agent, giving the agent an advantage in return for certain conduct on the part of the agent, either in future or for something in the past, in view of his/her official capacity". From these two definitions one striking issue there has to do with the law – 'illegal' or 'unlawful'. Thus, corrupt acts contravene the law.

Police corruption has been defined in diverse ways, however, most of these definitions capture at least one, if not all the three variables proposed in the work of Baker and Carter (1986) to reflect in attitudes of corrupt officials. These variables include: (1) they are prohibited by some laws, regulations, rules, or ethical standards; (2) they involve the misuse of the officer's position; and (3) they involve some actual or expected material reward or gain (Olutola, 2014:135). Buttressing this position, Lynch (1989) and Boateng (2015:18) opined that any act that places an officer's personal gain ahead of duty violates police procedures and or criminal law – and also constitute police corruption. A more precise definition in relation to this article is captured in the work of Newman (2004:232). He defines police corruption as situation 'when a policeman works for himself rather than his country.'

Since the Republic's transition to democracy in 1994, combating corruption in the SAPS has been a top priority issue to South Africa. In 1996, SAPS established an Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU) with a special mandate to utilise both proactive and reactive measures to combat corruption within the SAPS in all of the country's

nine provinces (Faull 2007:2). The establishment of ACU corresponded with that of the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) which also identified corruption within the criminal justice institutions as the chief threat to the country's safety and security sector (Faull 2007:2). Regrettably, despite the relative successes achieved by the ACU, the unit was shot down by the National Commissioner in 2002. In point of fact, it will be impossible to fully discuss the issue of police corruption in the SAPS in this article; however, the researchers like to assert that corruption in the SAPS is one fundamental factor affecting public trust in the South Africa principal law enforcement institution.

Further, incidences of police brutality in South Africa have often erode public trust in the service. A classic account of police brutality in post-apartheid era was the 'Marikana massacre' of 16 August 2012 - where the SAPS indiscriminately opened fire on a crowd of striking mineworkers at Marikana, some 100km northwest of Johannesburg in the North West Province (South African History Online, 2012). The momentous event left 34 mineworkers dead, 78 wounded and more than 250 people were arrested. The protesting mineworkers were demanding a wage increase at the Lonmin platinum mine. The event was arguably the biggest incident of police brutality since the advent of democracy and it revived memories of the brutality suffered under Apartheid security police. Other factors undermining public trust in SAPS includes maladministration, favouritism and nepotism, intimidation, amongst other criminal and unprofessional conducts.

2.3. Public trust in the police: findings from empirical studies

Empirical studies have been conducted on public trust – police nexus in literatures (Skogan, 2006; Reynolds et al., 2008; Bradford et al., 2009; Kaariainen, 2007, 2008; Boateng, 2012). From many of the studies, two characteristics standout. First, the perception of trust having varying conceptualisations from one study to another, and second, these empirical studies provide explanations for the variation in trust in police work (Kaariainen, 2008:142). The impression is that effective police work in modern societies is reflected in a positive attitude toward the police (Boateng 2012:5). Findings from empirical studies have identified certain factors that influence public trust in the police (Reynolds et al., 2008; Bradford et al., 2009; Boateng, 2012).

The security of lives and properties is of utmost importance to any State, and the police are expected to be effective in achieving this goal. Goldsmith (2003) argued that trust is associated with the capacity of State police to provide basic security to the citizens of such State. When the police are not forthcoming in

providing basic security of the citizens, it will influence their trust in the institution, and vice versa.

Studies have also linked societal equality with police trust (Kääriäinen 2007:415). The level of inequalities in societies could fuel distrust of public institutions (including the police) among citizens (Kääriäinen 2007:415). However, the researchers feel it will be difficult for there to be equality in any society, since human wants vary and are largely insatiable in the face of scare resources. Nevertheless, inequalities could breed class struggle and create structural imbalances in societies, where the police could be perceived to be partial by favouring a particular class (usually the aristocratic class). Some of the criticisms levelled against the police during the apartheid era lend credence to this. The police then was criticised of protecting the interest of the apartheid government, as against the generality of the public.

Public trust in the police can be explored from two broad lenses: from the individual and societal experiences (Kaariainen 2007:411). From the individual standpoint, background factors such as educational level, gender, age, amongst others were found to influence public trust in the police (Kääriäinen 2007:417). It was discovered that variations in these factors often have corresponding impacts in determining public trust in the police. Individual experiences or encounters with the police inform their perception and confidence in the police.

From the societal angle, community satisfaction enhances public trust in the police. This assertion can be buttressed with an inference from the *motive-based theory of institutional trust* as developed by Tyler and Huo in 2002. The theory asserts that community or public trust in an institution largely depends on the perception or believe that their intentions and interests are shared and protected by such institution (Tyler & Huo 2002). This theory follows the assumption that public-police (institution) relationship plays a vital role in public trust in the police. Same conclusions were drawn in a study conducted by Reynolds et al., (2008) on public satisfaction in the Russian police between 1998 and 2005. These researchers found out that trust in the criminal justice system is significantly linked with community satisfaction with the police.

Corruption has negatively affected public rating of police performance. From her studies on the determinants of police performance, Silver (2009) discovered that police solicitation of bribe from people has eroded public confidence in the legitimacy of their duties. Studies have also discovered that corruption in other State's institutions affect public trust in the police negatively (Boateng 2012;

Kääriäinen 2007). A possible explanation to this as exemplified earlier, is that the police do not operate in a vacuum, but interdependently, particularly with other components of the criminal justice system, and State institutions. Hence, an indictment of corruption on other public institutions often affects public trust in the police (Kääriäinen 2007).

Previous studies have also utilised crime indexes, such the impacts of crime, fear of crime, victimisation and crime rates in assessing public trust in the police (Sulton & Farrell 2005; Doran & Lee, 2005; Rader 2004). A number of studies have also been carried out on public fear of crime in the community (Villata 2012; Moore & Shepherd 2007). Findings from most of these studies indicated a nexus between the fear of crime and trust in the police (Kääriäinen 2008; Reynolds et al 2008; Weitzer & Tuch 2005). Findings from these studies have jointly validated that when there is a fear of crime in the neighbourhood, it will fuel negative attitudes towards the police. Such feelings of fear of crime affect public overall confidence in the police. Public fear of crime was however measured in terms of the experiences as victims of crime. Such crimes include: sexual assault, robbery and housebreak. Conversely, previous studies have also argued that a reduction in public fear of crime will in the long run increase public confidence in the police (Zhao et al., 2002). However, there are exceptions to these findings as some researchers have also found out that there is no correlation between public fear of crime and attitudes towards the police as captured in the work of (Zevitz & Rettammel, 1990).

Further, studies have shown that past experiences of crime or victimisation influence public trust in the police. Past studies on the public-police relations found out that victimisation reduces public trust in the police (Merry et al., 2012; Ren et al., 2005). Ren et al., for instance discovered from their findings that respondents who reported to have been 'victimised within the last twelve months prior to the study reported lower confidence in the police'. The negative experience of such victimisation might have arisen from the failure of the police to protect them when being molested, as such perceive the police as incompetent in protecting people against crime.

Studies have also discovered a confluence between crime rates and public trust in the police (Boateng 2015, Blumstein & Wallman, 2000; Hennigan, Maxson, Sloane & Ranney, 2002). Findings from these studies have steadily discovered a negative connection between high crime rates and trust in the police.

3. METHODS

Data were obtained from the 2014/2015 South African Victims of Crime Survey (VOCS) which used a Master Sample (MS) originally designed for the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) as a sampling frame. The multi-stage stratified samples were drawn from the Statistics South Africa's master samples from the enumeration areas established during the 2001 census. The sample for the VOCS 2014/15 used a stratified two-stage design with Probability-Proportional-to-Size (PPS) sampling of PSUs in the first stage, and sampling of Dwelling Units (DUs) with systematic sampling in the second stage.

A self-weighting design at provincial level was used and MS stratification was divided into two levels-Primary and secondary stratifications. Primary stratification was defined by metropolitan and non-metropolitan geographic area type. During secondary stratification, the Census 2001 data were summarised at PSU level. The Master Sample is based on 3 080 PSUs. The sample size for the VOCS 2014/15 had 31 390 dwelling units from 3 052 PSUs.

The detailed methods used in ensuring standardized data collection, interviews and consent procedures for the 2014/2015 VOCS have been previously published (Victims of Crime Survey 2014/15. Statistical release. http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0341/P03412014.pdf).

3.1. Measures

The VOCS used an interviewer-administered questionnaire to obtain the socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, race of the respondents.

3.2. Dependent variable

Respondents were asked: "Do you trust SAPS (South African Police Service)? Responses included (1) Yes and (2) No. Those who responded "Yes" were regarded as those who trusted police.

3.3. Independent variables

Socioeconomic characteristics

Employment: During the last week (Monday to Sunday), did you work for a wage, salary, commission or any payment in kind (including paid domestic work), even if it was for only one hour? (1) Yes and (2) No

Education: Respondents were asked about the highest level of education they successfully completed. Responses were categorised into (a) No schooling (b) Grades 1-11 (c) Grade 12 (d) More than grade 12.

Other variables measured were satisfaction with police services, perception of the levels of property and violent crime, experience of household crime such as car theft, housebreaking, murder, theft out of motor vehicle, deliberate damaging of dwelling, motor vehicle vandalism.

3.4. Statistical analysis

Data were analysed using STATA Release 12 (Stata Corporation, College Station, Texas, USA), with appropriate weighting of selection probabilities and taking into consideration the complex sample design used in the GHS. Group differences were assessed using chi-square statistics. Multi-variable adjusted logistic regression was carried out using a backward deletion approach, starting with a full model of factors significantly associated with public trust in police. Statistical significance was set at 5%.

4. RESULTS

Of the study participants, 76.8% (n=18,827) reported trusting the South African police and 57% (n=13,741) reported having satisfaction in the police. A higher proportion of those with lower level of education had trust in the police than those with higher level of education (p<0.001).

Table 1: Prevalence of trust in the South African police by socio-demographic factors.

Characteristics	Prevalence %(n)	p-value
Gender		<0.001
Male	74.9 (10,610)	
Female	77.7 (8217)	
Race		<0.001
Black African	78.2 (15,052)	
Coloured	70.6 (1843)	
Indian/Asian	64.6 (377)	
White	65.9 (1555)	
Education		<0.001
No schooling	88.6 (44)	
Grades 1-11	78.7 (10,404)	
Grade 12	72.9 (3168)	
>Grade 12	69.4 (2788)	
Employment		<0.001

No	77.2 (10,278)
Yes	74.9 (8,529)

The prevalence of police trust was higher among the unemployed than the employed (77.2% vs 74.9%; p<0.001). However, a lower proportion of male participants had trust in the police than their female counterparts (Table 1).

Table 2:   Prevalence of trust in the South African police by crime and safety factors.

Car theft in households in the past 5 years		<0.001
No	76.4 (18,522)	
Yes	57.5 (237)	
Home robbery in households in the past 5years		<0.001
No	76.4 (18,171)	
Yes	66.3 (581)	
Murder in households in the past 5 years		0.054
No	76.1 (18,627)	
Yes	66.2 (64)	
Theft out of motor vehicle		<0.001
No	76.6 (18,284)	
Yes	56.7 (393)	
Motor vehicle vandalism		<0.001
No	76.3 (18,515)	
Yes	60.6 (141)	
Perception of level of violent crime		<0.001
Increased	70.8 (7919)	
Decreased	81.7 (5535)	
Stayed the same	78.3 (5301)	
Perception of level of property crime		<0.001
Increased	71.1 (8523)	
Decreased	81.7 (5276)	
Stayed the same	78.6 (4945)	
Safety during the day		<0.001
Very safe	79.5 (11481)	
Fairly safe	73.4 (5006)	
A bit unsafe	68.6 (1483)	
Very unsafe	67.2 (752)	
Safety during the night		<0.001
Very safe	82.3 (2389)	
Fairly safe	80.5 (3884)	
A bit unsafe	77.3 (3885)	
Very unsafe	71.9 (8551)	

A lower proportion of those who lived in households that experienced home robbery in the past 5 years reported that they trusted the South African police than

households who did not experience home robbery (66.3% vs. 76.4%; p<0.001). A higher proportion of respondents who reported that their neighbourhoods were very safe/fairly safe either during the day or night trusted the police than those who reported that their neighbourhoods were not safe (A bit unsafe/very unsafe). (Table 2).

Table 3:   Multivariate logistic regression of factors associated with public trust in the South African police

Characteristics	Odds ratio (95% Conf. Interval)
Gender	
Male	1.0
Female	1.17 (1.07-1.27)
Race	
Black African	1.0
Coloured	0.67 (0.59-0.76)
Indian/Asian	0.55 (0.43-0.71)
White	0.36 (0.31-0.42)
Car theft in households in the past 5 years	
No	1.0
Yes	0.66 (0.50-0.88)
House breakings in the past 5 years	
No	1.0
Yes	0.84 (0.75-0.94)
Theft out of motor vehicle	
No	1.0
Yes	0.62 (0.48-0.80)
Satisfaction with police	
No	1.0
Yes	12.36 (11.15-13.70)
Safety during the day	
Very safe	1.0
Fairly safe	0.87 (0.79-0.96)
A bit unsafe	0.82 (0.71-0.95)
Very unsafe	0.84 (0.70-1.01)

Compared to households which have not experienced car theft in the past 5 years, those who have experienced car theft were less likely to trust the South African police (*a*OR; 0.66; 95% Conf. Int: 0.50-0.88). Also, white South Africans were less likely to trust the South African police compared to black Africans (*a*OR: 0.36; 95% Conf. Interval: 0.31-0.42). (Table 3).

5. DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

This article has explored among others the factors associated with public trust vis-à-vis the South African police service; using the secondary data obtained from the South African Statistics in the year 2014/2015. With a sample size of twenty four thousand, seven hundred and one (24,701). A total of twenty four thousand and twenty four returned the questionnaire (24, 024). Some of the questions in the questionnaire include but not limited to the police response to crime; experience of household of crime; satisfaction with police services and trust in the police.

The data analysis included descriptive and multivariable logistic regression analysis. It is important to reiterate that this is a cross-sectional data and not longitudinal study. The result indicates that fifty seven percent (57%) of the respondents are satisfied with the South African police in their respective areas. It is interesting to note that people with higher education has lower trust in the police than people with lesser education. Male respondents also have higher level of trust than the female respondents. The analysis of the data also revealed that people that have been victimised in the last five years are less likely to trust the police. Those that indicated higher level of satisfaction in the South African police are those that expressed trust in the police. In order words, if a person is not satisfied with the South African police for whatever reason, that person is unlikely to trust the police.

It is important that trust level of the South African community towards the police be enhanced as the police is the entrance to the country's criminal justice system. If the level of the public trust in the police is high, it will invariably safeguard public trust in the criminal justice system. The police has a duty to investigate a case, open a docket, record the crime scene without contamination and render various humanitarian services to the community. These are some of the core functions or foundations of the police which determines the success or otherwise of the criminal case and invariably the level of public trust in the police. If the foundations be destroyed, there is nothing or little the other role players in the criminal system can do to mend the situation.

Other issues likely to affect the public trust in the police are bribery and corruption, lack of merit in the recruitment and training, police involvement in partisan politics, non-compliance with rule of law, police brutality, lack of accountability; victimisation of the victims of crime.

In countries where there are lesser police involvement in bribery and corruption, there is likely to be higher level public trust in the police. In the same token, in a

country where there is higher level of compliance with the rule of law, police will be respected and most likely be trusted. Public confidence in the police will also be higher where police are professional (no maximum force; no victimisation of the victims) in their duties to the public.

The researchers in this paper examined public trust vis-a-vis the South African Police Service. Some of the questions in the questionnaire include but not limited to the police response to crime; experience of household of crime; satisfaction with police services and trust in the police. From the responses, issues among others affecting public trust in the police are bribery and corruption, lack of merit in the recruitment and training, police involvement in partisan politics, non-compliance with rule of law, police brutality, lack of accountability; victimisation or and re-victimisation of the victims of crime, leadership issues.

Conclusively, it is important that trust level of the South African community towards the police be enhanced as the police is the entrance to the country's criminal justice system. If the level of the public trust in the police is high, it will invariably safeguard public trust in the criminal justice system. The image of South African police needs general overhauling; in order to be an improvement in the current level of the public trust in the national police. To do this is simple, the police must eradicate all the vitiating factors affecting the public trust in the police. Unfortunately, we need to wait for some time in view of the reality of the present hierarchical situational crises.

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