

## Crime Corrodes but Communities Fight Back

Debbie Milne, Director of *futurefact* with Andy Carolin

The perception amongst some that only white South Africans are concerned about crime is false. This is according to a study recently released by *futurefact* - an entity that examines the changing attitudes of South Africans.

More than 7 out of every 10 South Africans reported being continuously afraid and alert because of crime. However there was only a marginal difference in the relative number of whites (75%) and blacks (70%) that expressed this sentiment. While whites and Indians appear notably more disillusioned by government's attempts to combat crime than their black or coloured counterparts, there exists a consensus as to the need for more community involvement. Lorinda Nel from Business Against Crime argues that the police's function lies not in protecting individuals but rather in investigating crimes once they have been committed. This appears to absolve the police of their primary crime-fighting responsibility. While one would expect this sentiment to be rejected by South Africans, this does not appear to be the case. Nine out of ten South Africans believe that every citizen should take responsibility for addressing crime in their communities, a sentiment expressed by 90% of blacks and 93% of whites. With 53% of respondents identifying themselves primarily as South Africans (and relatively few seeing themselves in terms of race, language or religion) one would expect this strengthening national identity to strengthen communities' resolve. Unfortunately, however, this convergence of sentiment has failed to unite South Africans sufficiently or mobilise them in the war against crime.

There appears to be widespread support for increased salaries and training for the police with 67% and 77% respectively of respondents believing that this would lead to improved crime prevention. The disparity between the sentiments of whites, coloureds and blacks in this regard is negligible with a slightly greater commitment to community policing and increased police support amongst Indians. Although South Africans generally believe in supporting the police in their fight against crime, there appears to be an unwillingness to actually rely on or trust the police. 8 out of 10 South Africans, irrespective of race, believe that a lot of police officials are corrupt. This common distrust of the police is revealed again by the sentiment, held by 60% of respondents, that they are more likely to call a neighbour or private security company than the police.

One may question then how a public that holds such a cynical view of the police is equally willing to support them - with 88% of respondents arguing that it is time that the community stood behind the police. The answers lie in South African's common desire to eradicate crime - transcending both racial and political identities and in the establishment of more inclusive partnerships between government, business and the community at large. Corporations need to give substance to their corporate responsibilities by providing funding and by supporting community-led projects, poverty eradication and visible policing. Individuals and communities need to provide legitimate opportunities to disillusioned youths,

increase access to counselling and drug-related rehabilitation facilities and apply pressure on parents to actively engage with their children. An improvement in people's socio-economic situation results in a definite (and predictable) decline in their reporting that they often feel depressed. This reinforces the need for community-led interventions to improve people's standard of living and eliminate their sense of exclusion.

While there is a global trend that suggests a drastic decline in the number of people participating in civil society organisations, South Africans appear to be opposing this trend. While only 3% of South Africans reported being members of a residents' association in 1999, the number has more than tripled to 10% by 2008. Although this increase is certainly encouraging, it is hardly enough to constitute the community-led intervention that the crisis requires.

The unforgiving attitude among South Africans to corrupt officials, with 86% agreeing that corrupt officials should never be allowed to hold office again, shows that communities cannot rely on political leadership to combat crime. With bitter debates raging about how the police should be structured and a national police commissioner who has been relieved of his duties, crime prevention requires a mobilisation of the people by the people. The willingness of South Africans to take control of their communities and act against crime was revealed by respondents, 63% of whom agreed that they possess an inherent right to take the law into their own hands if government fails to prevent crime. This apparent endorsement of vigilantism transcends racial lines with the proportion of blacks who support this viewpoint almost equalling whites. While this trend presents some concerns, it serves to show the extent to which citizens are willing to take action against crime - and should act as a warning to the government as we approach the tipping point and risk descent into the abyss of lawlessness.

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