

What crime statistics can tell us about the state of citizenship in South Africa

SUREN PILLAY

THE RECENTLY released crime statistics can tell us a number of things, but mostly what they can tell us about is the state of citizenship in South Africa.

To what extent are we becoming a political community of shared rights and shared obligations that cross the race and class divides? What they tell us is that we are in a doubly descending spiral.

First, the statistics, to the extent that they are accurate, tell us each year that there are increasing levels of crime that may affect both our physical safety and our property, which means we will increasingly trust each other less.

Second, the release of the statistics and the response to them produces a predictable set of ineffectual actions and reactions by the Min-

istry of Police and the opposition parties themselves.

The crime statistics are released through the Ministry of Police, and to some extent, this makes sense since the police are closest to the ground when it comes to responding to, and recording violations of the law.

However, we seem to then make the mistake each year of thinking that the police are the only people that have to account for the worrying story the statistics tell.

On their part, the Ministry of Police has accepted this role, which effectively puts them in a defensive position, leads to the police's tendency to make the figures "look good" by manipulating them in various ways, and leads to all kinds of threatening promises, like "shoot to kill".

The political opposition through politicians like the DA's Dianne

Kohler Barnard reinforce this tendency by harping on about the failure of the police, as if the police have the sole responsibility to reduce increasing crime levels in the country.

The high level of crime indicates that there is a very low regard among many citizens to follow certain legal rules.

This is not a problem one can simply solve by increasing deterrence, which is what relying on an increased presence of the police assumes.

The police after all, are the stick-end of the law and are part of administering punishment through force. The argument for more "visible policing" assumes that force and punishment creates deterrence. While this might be so in the short term, is it an enduring solution?

Any first-year student of humanities and social sciences should be

able to tell you, after reading Max Weber, that the state cannot rely only on repression to rule. It has to combine the threat of repression with the willingness of citizens to go along with the rules out of their own volition.

That is why repressive states and dictatorships fail in the long run: they rely too much on repression and fear and less on voluntary cooperation. In other words, they rely too much on deterrence.

Even the apartheid government realised this truism when it dawned on PW Botha that they were unable to eradicate "unrest" in urban areas through force alone.

In the 1980s they switched from the outright brutality of the 1970s to the half-hearted ploy of Winning Hearts and Minds (WHAM) in black townships by nominally upgrading services and creating representa-

tion. In other words, combining the carrot with the stick.

To build a viable political community, where rights and obligations are respected and upheld, we need to foster a willingness to follow the law because it is seen to be in the best interest of living a good life for all.

If we rely only on the police, we will fail to reduce the crime levels. We need to confront an important heritage in South Africa that we have never really lived in a united political community administered by a shared regime of legitimate law.

A practice of common citizenship, with rights and obligations, of rewards and punishments, only pertained to white South Africa.

For the rest, our lives were administered by racial punishment with very little reward, or through ethnic customary laws.

Building a single political com-

munity from these, fragmented histories of citizenship is our challenge. This challenge permeates every government portfolio, from economic affairs to housing, to health, education and social welfare, and not only the police.

It is about showing in practice that all our lives matter equally so that we develop a stake in making a post-apartheid South Africa a reality.

Socially and economically we are clearly not post-apartheid yet.

It is a responsibility that ordinary folk bear too. How are those of us who were the beneficiaries of apartheid behaving in our day to day lives to undo the mindset that comes with a history of privilege and entitlement?

First we must acknowledge that the mindset exists. The second would be to ask: what are our obliga-

tions to a post-apartheid South Africa? Does walling ourselves in, and creating gated communities look good for a future of common citizenship or are we recycling apartheid? We have to be frank: none of us - black nor white - has an exemplary history of being a citizen in South Africa. This is our common divided heritage.

Citizenship is ultimately a process of learning to live in community with one another. Some of us have habits to unlearn, and some of us have habits to learn. What then is the best way to learn? Through the barrel of a gun, or through example?

● *Suren Pillay teaches in the Dept of Political Studies at the University of the Western Cape, and currently conducts research for the Democracy and Governance Programme of the Human Sciences Research Council.*

