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The crisis behind police crime data: Unreported crime and challenges related to crime statistics in South Africa

Masilo Joseph Mulaudzi[1], Radiakga Thabang Molokomme[2*]

[1,2]*Legal Science Department Vaal University of Technology Private Bag X021 Andries Potgieter Blvd, Vanderbijlpark 1911, South Africa.*

Corresponding author: Radiakga Thabang Molokomme (*Email: radiakgam@vut.ac.za*)

Abstract

Every crime not reported is a crime not recorded, and every crime not recorded is a truth concealed". In South Africa, the reliability of crime statistics remains a critical concern, raising questions about whether official data reflect the true extent of crime or merely the efficacy of policing. This study aimed to explore the processes, challenges, and effectiveness of crime statistics within the South African Police Service (SAPS) and their implications for policy and operational decision-making. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study employed a descriptive, case-study design to gain in-depth insights from twelve purposively selected participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic content analysis to identify key patterns and recurring themes. The findings revealed that unreported crimes significantly distort official statistics, that public mistrust and logistical challenges hinder accurate reporting, and that inconsistencies in data classification and recording undermine the utility of crime statistics as a monitoring tool. Participants highlighted the role of complementary systems, such as CAS, GIS, CTA, and CPA, in enhancing crime data accuracy, while international comparisons underscored the benefits of multi-source data integration. The study recommends targeted interventions to improve public trust, standardise data management practices, and establish independent verification mechanisms to enhance the reliability of crime statistics. By bridging theoretical perspectives from Routine Activity Theory and Social Disorganization Theory with empirical insights, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of underreporting dynamics and provides actionable strategies for improving crime monitoring and policy formulation in South Africa.

Keywords: Crime administrative system, Crime monitoring, Crime statistics, Geographic information system, Police crime data. Underreporting.

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1. Introduction

Every crime not reported is a crime not recorded, and every crime not recorded is a truth concealed [1]. In an age where data defines reality, the credibility of crime statistics determines how societies understand safety, allocate resources, and deliver justice [2]. Yet, beneath the polished tables of official police reports lies a haunting question: *Do crime statistics reflect the actual state of crime or merely the state of policing itself?* This paradox underscores one of criminology's most persistent challenges, the vast, often invisible gap between the true incidence of crime and what appears in official records.

Globally, researchers caution that crime statistics are not neutral or objective indicators of social order [3, 4]. Rather, they are socially constructed artifacts, shaped by human behaviour, institutional priorities, and political influence. In the United Kingdom, for instance, studies have shown that recorded crime rates have fluctuated not only with actual crime trends but also with changes in recording rules and performance targets [5]. In the United States, the Bureau of Justice Statistics' victimisation surveys consistently reveal that less than 45% of all crimes are reported to police each year [6]. Similarly, in India and parts of Latin America, high levels of corruption, police inefficiency, and public mistrust have contributed to what scholars describe as "statistical silence," a state where data conceal more than they reveal [7, 8].

In South Africa, this crisis takes on a particularly troubling dimension. Despite the South African Police Service (SAPS) publishing annual statistics to promote transparency, doubts about the accuracy and completeness of these figures persist [9, 10]. Empirical evidence from national victimisation surveys reveals that only about 43% of housebreaking incidents and fewer than 35% of theft cases are ever reported [11]. Such patterns suggest that official statistics reflect only a fraction of the nation's true crime burden. As Moreau, et al. [12] argue, the issue is compounded by inconsistencies in how SAPS classifies and records incidents ranging from administrative neglect to deliberate downgrading of serious crimes to achieve performance targets. This practice, sometimes termed statistical cleansing, creates a facade of progress while concealing the real extent of criminal activity [13].

At the core of this problem lies the phenomenon of unreported crime, often referred to as the "dark figure." Victims may choose not to report crimes due to fear of retaliation, lack of trust in law enforcement, or perceptions that reporting will yield no meaningful action [14, 15]. The consequences are profound, and police lose valuable intelligence for crime prevention, policymakers rely on incomplete data for resource allocation, and the public's trust in institutions deteriorates. This is especially acute in crimes such as domestic violence, sexual offences, and corruption, where stigma and institutional apathy reinforce silence [16].

Yet, the crisis in crime measurement is not simply a technical or statistical issue, it is an ethical one. Miller [17] observes, when citizens perceive that crime data are manipulated or politically motivated, public confidence in law enforcement erodes, perpetuating a self-reinforcing cycle of underreporting and mistrust. In this sense, the reliability of crime statistics is inseparable from questions of legitimacy, accountability, and moral integrity within policing institutions.

Recognising these challenges, scholars advocate for methodological reforms that move beyond reliance on police data alone. Approaches such as triangulating police reports with victimisation surveys, hospital records, and community-based monitoring have proven effective in improving the accuracy and contextual understanding of crime [1, 7, 8]. However, in developing contexts like South Africa, such multi-source integration remains limited, and there is little empirical work assessing its effectiveness in addressing data gaps (Table 1).

Additionally, while previous studies provide essential insights into crime data management and reporting, most have relied predominantly on quantitative methods, offering only a broad overview without the depth needed to understand the underlying challenges. There is a conspicuous lack of qualitative research exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of those who work with crime statistics daily, such as police officers, data analysts, and administrative personnel. This gap is particularly evident in the South African context, where unique institutional, social, and operational factors influence crime reporting and data accuracy.

By adopting a qualitative approach, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the barriers to accurate crime reporting and the reasons behind unreported crime. The findings will add value to the scholarly community by addressing this research scarcity and offering practical benefits for law enforcement agencies, policy-makers, and

community stakeholders. Moreover, by shedding light on the challenges affecting crime statistics, the study seeks to foster public confidence in reporting crime, encouraging victims to come forward without hesitation, ultimately contributing to safer and better-informed communities.

Therefore, this study interrogates the crisis behind police crime data in South Africa by examining the extent and implications of unreported crime, the systemic challenges affecting data accuracy, and the ethical dimensions of crime measurement. It situates South Africa's experience within a broader global framework, exploring how governance quality, institutional culture, and public trust intersect to shape what is recorded as "crime." By doing so, the study contributes to the discourse on data integrity, ethical policing, and evidence-based crime prevention, which are the fundamental pillars for an accountable and democratic criminal justice system.

Table 1.
Empirical Studies on Crime Statistics Reliability and Unreported Crime.

Author(s)	Country / Context	Study Focus	Methodology	Main Data Sources	Key Findings or Contribution
Hart and Rennison [4]	United States	To examine discrepancies between official police data (UCR) and victimisation data (NCVS).	Quantitative comparative analysis of crime data sets.	Uniform Crime Reports (UCR); National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS).	Found that less than half of violent and property crimes are reported; police data underestimate true crime levels.
Loader and Sparks [7]	United Kingdom	To interrogate the social and institutional construction of crime data.	Qualitative institutional analysis; theoretical review.	Home Office crime data; policy documents.	Crime statistics are shaped by political agendas and bureaucratic incentives rather than objective crime realities.
Newman [3]	Global (Comparative)	To explore how crime statistics reflect governance quality in developing vs. developed contexts.	Cross-national comparative study.	UNODC datasets; national police data.	Developing countries show higher discrepancies due to poor institutional oversight and political manipulation.
Coleman and Moynihan [18]	United Kingdom	To explore victims' motivations for non-reporting and barriers to justice.	Qualitative interviews and victimisation survey analysis.	Victim Support datasets; community NGO records.	Identified trauma, distrust, and perceived futility as major factors in non-reporting.
Statistics South Africa [19]	South Africa	To estimate the gap between reported and unreported crimes nationally.	Quantitative national household survey.	Victims of Crime Survey (VoCS).	Showed that about 43% of housebreaking and 35% of theft incidents are reported to SAPS.
Fé [1]	UK	Partial identification of the dark figure of crime with survey data under misreporting errors	Quantitative survey analysis	Survey data	Identified the extent of underreporting and misreporting in crime surveys
Kreigler and Shaw [10]	South Africa	To provide a guide to crime trends for citizens	Descriptive analysis	Official crime statistics	Provided insights into national crime trends and patterns for South African citizens
Strom and Smith [20]	USA	To argue for NIBRS as a primary data source for policy evaluation and crime analysis	Policy and data analysis	National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)	Found NIBRS provides more accurate and detailed crime data for policy evaluation
Maguire and McVie [2]	UK	To critically reflect on crime data and criminal statistics	Literature review	Official criminal statistics; academic literature	Highlighted limitations and challenges in crime data collection and interpretation
Greenland and Cotter [15]	Canada	To examine unfounded criminal incidents	Descriptive statistical analysis	Canadian crime reports	Found a proportion of criminal incidents classified as unfounded, affecting crime rate interpretations
Moreau, et al.	Canada	To report police-	Descriptive	Canadian	Provided national trends

[12]		reported crime statistics	statistical report	police-reported crime data	and patterns in police-reported crime for 2018
Skogan [6]	USA	To investigate the validity of official crime statistics	Empirical quantitative investigation	Official crime statistics	Found discrepancies between reported crime and actual crime, questioning validity of official statistics

2. Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual model for this study integrates Routine Activity Theory (RAT) and Social Disorganization Theory (SDT) to explain the dynamics behind unreported crime and the resulting challenges in South African police crime statistics. At the micro-level, RAT suggests that crime occurs when motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians converge [21, 22]. In the South African context, situational factors such as victim fear of retaliation, limited awareness of reporting mechanisms, or lack of immediate protection from law enforcement contribute to crimes remaining unreported [23]. These micro-level dynamics shape the initial point of contact between crime events and official reporting, highlighting why certain offences do not enter police records despite their occurrence.

At the macro-level, SDT emphasizes the influence of structural and community factors on crime reporting [15, 24, 25]. Communities with weak institutions, low collective efficacy, and high levels of distrust in the police are more likely to experience underreporting [26]. Additional structural barriers, such as remote police stations, administrative inefficiencies, and lack of digital infrastructure, further hinder timely and accurate reporting [3, 27]. These community-level factors compound the effects of micro-level routine activity dynamics, creating a systemic environment in which unreported crime thrives.

The model illustrates that unreported crime acts as the central mechanism linking both micro-level situational factors and macro-level social disorganization to challenges in crime statistics. Hidden crimes lead to incomplete datasets, misclassification of offences, and delays in reporting, which undermine the reliability of SAPS crime statistics [12, 18]. A feedback loop is evident, as unreliable crime statistics erode public trust, which further discourages crime reporting, perpetuating the cycle of hidden crime [23, 28]. This conceptual model contributes theoretically by bridging micro- and macro-level explanations of crime reporting behaviour, while offering a practical framework for SAPS and policymakers to identify targeted interventions, such as community policing initiatives, trust-building programs, and improved data management systems, that can reduce underreporting and enhance the accuracy of crime statistics.

Based on this integration, the researcher developed a conceptual model, named the Integrated Crime Reporting and Statistics Model (ICRSM). The model illustrates the relationships between situational crime factors, community-level disorganisation, unreported crime, and the challenges inherent in compiling accurate crime statistics. It also incorporates a feedback loop, showing how poor data quality can erode public trust, further discouraging crime reporting. This conceptual model provides a theoretical and practical framework that guided the study's data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The ICRSM also contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a structured approach for understanding the underreporting of crime and for designing interventions to improve the accuracy and utility of SAPS crime statistics.
Figure 1 below presents a visual illustration of the ICRSM:

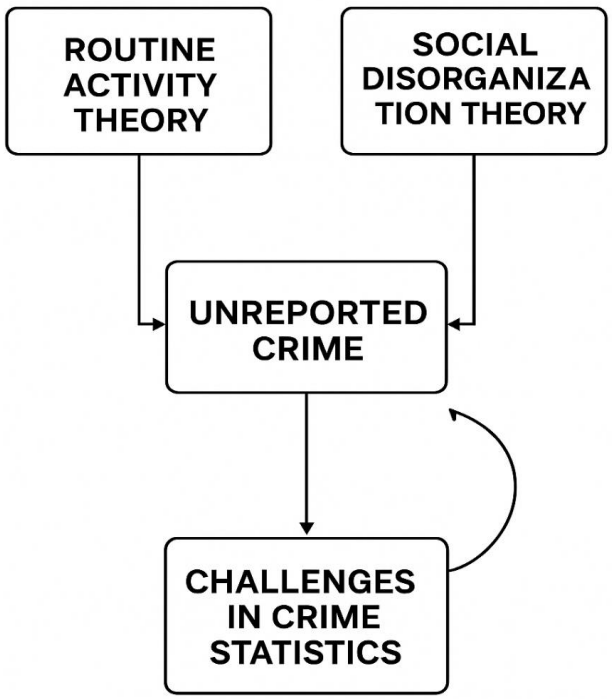


Figure 1.
Integrated Crime Reporting and Statistics Model.

2.1. Crime Statistics in South Africa

Gould, et al. [29] indicate that every year, the South African Minister of Police releases the crime statistics in September and the SAPS Annual Report shortly thereafter. Nevertheless, a revision of this conventional technique for obtaining crime statistics was necessary because of the outcry, mostly from the political and civil society sectors. The Minister of Police now releases crime statistics on a quarterly basis. The study focused on a three-year period (2016/17–2018/19) and used the SAPS (national) report on contact crimes to understand crime (statistics), as shown in Table 2 below. According to the South African Police Service [30] all categories of contact crime experienced an aggregate increase of 2.6%, or 15,844 counts, during the 2018/2019 financial year. The only three contact crimes that increased in the previous fiscal year, 2017–2018, were attempted murder, sexual offences, and murder.

In 2017–2018, this wide category (contact crimes), as shown in Table 2.1 below, saw a 1.1% drop, or 6,995 counts. Within this broad category of contact crime, the incidence of common assault (3.7%), murder (3.4%) and sexual offences (4.6%) showed the biggest rises. The highest increases in terms of reported case differences were in common assault cases, which increased by 5,769 counts, followed by assault with an intent to inflict GBH with 3,627 counts, and sexual offences, which increased by 2,312 counts.

Table 2.
Overview of contact crime.

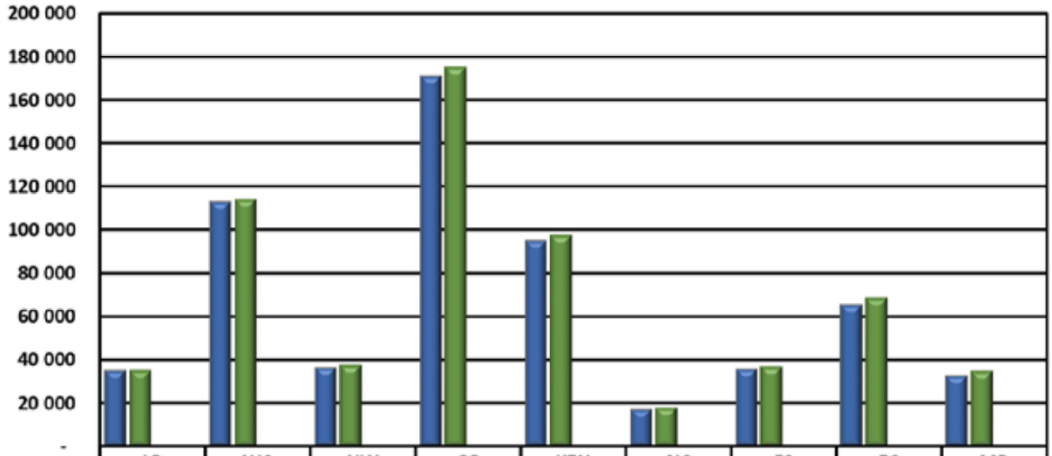
Category	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	Counts Difference	Change
Murder	19016	20336	21022	686	3.4%
Sexual Offences	49660	50108	52420	2312	4.6%
Attempted murder	18205	18233	18980	747	41%
Assault with intent to inflict bodily harm	170616	167352	170979	3627	2.2%
Common Assault	156450	156243	162012	5769	3.7%
Common Robbery	53418	50730	51765	1035	2.0%
Robbery with aggravating circumstances	140956	138364	140032	1668	1.2%
Contact crime	608321	601366	617210	15844	2.6%

Source: South African Police Service [30].

Table 2.1 indicates that 617,210 counts of contact crimes were recorded during 2018/2019, representing an increase of 15,844 counts, or 2.6%, compared to 2017/2018. The increase contrasts with the previous fiscal year, which showed a 1.1% drop of 6,955 counts. Contact crime increased in all of its subcategories in 2018/19 as compared to 2017/18. Among the crimes that recorded over 2,000 counts differences, common assault had the largest increase (5,769 counts), followed by assault GBH (3,627 counts) and sexual offences (2,312 counts). This study makes an argument that the above-indicated crime statistics are a result of those crime categories as reported to the police or discovered by the police, not the actual counts of crime committed during the period. There may have been more crimes committed, but the victims may not have reported them.

According to South African Police Service [30] the causes of contact crime range from criminal, social, and group behaviours to politically driven behaviour, including protest-related violence. It is well known that excessive alcohol and drug usage, gang-related violence, domestic violence, mob justice or vigilantism, taxi violence, illegal mining, and organised crime are some of the factors that frequently lead to contact crimes.

In order to narrow down and illustrate a provincial analysis, Figure 2.1 provides a provincial breakdown for the same period of time as indicated by Table 2.1. With the exception of the North West province, all provinces had an increase in contact crime in 2018/19, which was the opposite of what happened in the previous fiscal year. From 198 counts, or 0.6%, in Limpopo to the largest numerical change of 4,254 counts, or 2.5%, in Gauteng, there were increases in 2018/2019. South African Police Service [30] confirms that Gauteng is one of the provinces with the highest rate of crime, followed by Western Cape Province.



	LP	WC	NW	GP	KZN	NC	FS	EC	MP
2017/2018	35 068	112 996	36 604	170 640	94 914	17 380	35 725	65 393	32 646
2018/2019	35 266	113 987	37 487	174 894	97 505	17 891	36 879	68 416	34 885
Case Diff	198	991	883	4 254	2 591	511	1 154	3 023	2 239
% Change	0.6%	0.9%	2.4%	2.5%	2.7%	2.9%	3.2%	4.6%	6.9%

Figure 2.
Contact crime: Provincial overview.
Source: South African Police Service [31].

Figure 2 shows the total contact crimes and the average crime rate of each province over the period of three years. This shows that the province with the most incidents of contact crime was Gauteng, with 170,640 to 174,894 incidents in 2017/18 and 2018/19. Kwazulu-Natal and the Western Cape came in second and third, with 94 914 and 97 505 for Kwazulu-Natal and for Western Cape with 112 996 and 113 987, respectively. This number also indicates that, with the exception of North West Province, contact crime rose in all provinces in 2018–19 compared to the previous fiscal year. Over the previous five years, the latter province displayed a consistent rising pattern of gains. The increases during 2018/2019 ranged from 198 counts or 0.6% in Limpopo to the highest numerical change of 4,254 counts or 2.5% in Gauteng [30].

The argument made by this study is that, irrespective of the upward or downward trend of the crime figures, the figures remain or depend on crimes that were reported to the police or identified by police during their work. This could not reflect the true picture or represent the total actual number of crime counts committed in a particular area or a country as a whole. This can mainly be associated with the fact that victims choose to report a crime or not. In some instances, false crime can be reported for purposes of insurance. These crimes will end up in police systems and be recorded as crimes committed. Hence, this study sought to investigate their effectiveness as a tool to measure, monitor, and evaluate crime.

2.1.1. Uniform Crime Reporting

According to Coleman and Moynihan [18] the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) programme generates reliable statistics for use in law enforcement. It also provides national information for students of criminal justice, researchers, the media, and the public. Hart and Rennison [4] confirm that UCR is a nationwide cooperative statistical effort of nearly 18,000 city, university and college, county, state, tribal, and federal law enforcement agencies voluntarily reporting data on crimes brought to their attention. Skogan [6] indicate that the programme has been providing crime statistics since 1930. Hart and Rennison [4] argue that the UCR programme began in 1929 and, since then, has become an important source of crime information for law enforcement, policymakers, scholars, and the media.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) compiles official statistics on crime in the USA for publication through the UCR programme. Coleman and Moynihan [18] also mention that the FBI compiles crime statistics from UCR data, which it then publishes yearly in the Crime in the United States series. According to Hart and Rennison [4] the FBI does not gather the information on its own. Instead, the FBI gathers the information from law enforcement organisations around the country and compiles it into the Reports.

The UCR programme, which distributes crime statistics across the country, offers an annual summary of the frequency and percentage of crimes recorded across the country. When the NIBRS actually generates a new baseline that more correctly reflects reported crime in a community, agencies may find that they have greater crime rates than previously thought. To aid with this, the UCR programme has made resources available to assist agencies in addressing the expense of changing [6].

South Africa's crime statistics are widely acknowledged to underrepresent the true extent of criminal activity, primarily because a significant portion of crimes goes unreported. According to Statistics South Africa [19] 69% of personal thefts were not reported to the police, indicating a substantial gap between actual and recorded crime. Moreau, et al. [12] asserts that underreporting is influenced by multiple social and economic factors, including victim distrust of law enforcement and fear of retaliation. Skogan [6] further highlights that communities experiencing high crime rates often perceive reporting as futile, reinforcing the discrepancy between police data and the lived reality of citizens. This underreporting undermines the

accuracy of crime statistics, leading to distorted assessments of crime prevalence and ineffective allocation of resources by law enforcement agencies [15].

Several systemic and procedural factors exacerbate the underreporting problem. Parti and Robinson [32] identified factors such as poor police follow-up, administrative burdens, and victim-blaming as key deterrents to reporting. Similarly, Patrick [33] notes that police record-keeping practices and inconsistent classification of crimes further compromise data reliability. Public trust in SAPS has also declined sharply, Boateng [34] reports that confidence in the police dropped to 22%, which affects victims' willingness to report crimes. These challenges are compounded by infrastructure issues, such as remote police stations and unreliable technology, leading to delayed or incomplete reporting [27]. As Coleman and Moynihan [18] argue, these systemic barriers contribute to a "hidden crime" phenomenon, where unreported offences remain invisible in official statistics despite ongoing social harm.

The consequences of inaccurate and incomplete crime data are significant. Policymaking and strategic planning rely heavily on crime statistics; when these are flawed, resource deployment and preventative interventions are compromised [4]. Additionally, underreporting disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, such as women and children, whose victimization may remain hidden, as highlighted by Newman [3] and Short and Ditton [22]. Strom and Smith [20] contend that integrating multiple data sources, including hospital records, victim surveys, and community feedback, can enhance the accuracy of crime statistics. Internationally, studies show that combining administrative, police, and survey data improves crime measurement and helps policymakers address underreporting [6]. Therefore, enhancing public trust, ensuring transparency, and leveraging multi-source data collection are critical steps toward generating accurate and actionable crime statistics in South Africa.

A significant body of literature confirms that under-reporting remains a major challenge in accurately measuring crime, as highlighted by participants in this study. Maguire and McVie [2] asserts that police-reported crime statistics are inherently limited by the need for incidents to be reported to law enforcement, a point echoed by Stanek, et al. [35] who argue that the social perception of crime affects reporting behaviour. Holtmann [25] adds that crime is multifaceted, influenced by social, economic, and cultural factors, making official statistics an incomplete reflection of actual crime levels. This aligns with Newman [3] and Coleman and Moynihan [18] who demonstrate that crime victim surveys often reveal substantial discrepancies between victimisation and police records, confirming the existence of a "dark figure of crime" that remains unaccounted for in official statistics. These findings support the participants' view that unreported crimes distort the police's understanding of crime patterns, particularly for sensitive crimes such as domestic violence, sexual assault, and gang-related incidents.

Contrastingly, some scholars argue that unreported crimes can still be partially captured through alternative data sources, challenging the assertion that all unreported crimes remain unknown. For instance, Statistics South Africa [11] and Kreigler and Shaw [10] note that hospitals, mortuaries, and administrative records provide valuable supplementary data on violent crimes, including homicides, which are generally considered the most reliably recorded crime statistics. Greenland and Cotter [15] further suggest that certain enforcement practices and resource allocation can influence crime visibility, implying that non-reporting does not entirely preclude detection. Similarly, Hart and Rennison [4] indicate that international practices, such as the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system in the USA, integrate multiple sources of data, including police, courts, and victim surveys, which enhances the accuracy of crime measurement despite under-reporting. These perspectives support participants' arguments that leveraging multiple data sources—including CAS/ICDMS, GIS, and community-based reports—can mitigate the limitations of traditional police-reported statistics.

However, disagreements exist regarding the reliability and interpretation of crime statistics as a performance measure. Participants expressed concern that using crime statistics to evaluate police effectiveness can incentivise misreporting or under-recording of crimes. Skogan [6] corroborate this, highlighting that the classification and recording of crimes are subject to operational pressures, administrative burdens, and inconsistencies across stations. Conversely, some studies argue that standardised systems, such as South Africa's CAS or international platforms like NIBRS (National Incident-Based Reporting System), enhance data consistency and comparability [36]. Nonetheless, the literature remains critical of over-reliance on statistics for performance management, emphasising that crime numbers reflect reporting behaviour and procedural variations rather than solely law enforcement effectiveness [18].

Finally, scholarly debate exists on methodological approaches to measuring and evaluating crime, particularly regarding the integration of international best practices. Strom and Smith [20] and participant accounts indicate that South Africa uses live administrative systems (CAS/ICDMS), GIS mapping, and CTA/CPA methodologies to compile crime statistics, while studies by Hart and Rennison [4] and Skogan [6] note that industrialised countries employ more sophisticated multi-level approaches, including courts and survey data, to provide nuanced insights into crime patterns. This juxtaposition illustrates both convergence and divergence: South Africa's approach aligns with international trends in using technology and multiple data sources, yet resource constraints, under-reporting, and limited data culture create gaps that hinder real-time, fully accurate crime monitoring [10, 15]. Collectively, these perspectives emphasise the necessity of triangulating police, administrative, community, and survey data to improve the validity, reliability, and utility of crime statistics.

3. Methodology

This study adopted qualitative research to explore the processes and effectiveness of crime statistics within the SAPS, as qualitative research allows for in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena and lived experiences [37]. A descriptive, case-study design was employed, focusing on SAPS as the primary consumer of crime statistics to gain detailed insights into the compilation, reporting, and utilisation of crime data [38]. The research strategy involved

collecting primary qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with participants who possess direct experience in crime reporting and statistics. This approach was appropriate because it enables the researcher to obtain rich, nuanced, and context-specific information about operational practices, decision-making processes, and challenges faced in crime data management [36]. The population comprised consumers and users of crime statistics, including SAPS officials (frontline, investigative, and Crime Registrar personnel), research institutions, academia, and ISS personnel [11]. Due to the dispersed and specialised nature of this population, a non-probability, purposive (judgemental) sampling technique was used to select participants based on experience, knowledge, and relevance to the phenomenon under investigation, ensuring the inclusion of information-rich cases [36, 39]. A total of 12 participants were selected, representing SAPS members, ISS, and StatsSA. The determination of this study's sample size was informed by seminal scholarship, which suggests that qualitative inquiries targeting participants with substantial experience and deep knowledge of a specific phenomenon can achieve data saturation with as few as eight to twelve individuals [40, 41]. This approach ensures that the richness and depth of insights are captured while maintaining methodological rigor.

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to articulate their experiences while enabling the researcher to probe for deeper insights [37]. Data were analysed through thematic content analysis, facilitating the identification of recurring patterns, themes, and categories related to crime statistics management [42]. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, achieved by member checking, detailed documentation of procedures, and triangulation with secondary sources such as SAPS reports, CAS/ICDMS data, and StatsSA publications [43]. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study, including obtaining ethical clearance from the REC of the University of Technology, as well as a gatekeeper's letter from SAPS and ISS.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Theme 1: Unreported Crimes

The researcher asked the participants that, do all crimes not reported to the police remain unknown and do not form part of true reflection of the crime? The participants' replies shed light on their general perceptions of reported and unreported crimes in relation to their operational environment and experiences.

The participants' responses revealed a predominant view that crimes not reported to the police often remain unknown and therefore do not form part of a true reflection of crime. Participant 1 stated, *"Yes, simply because there are crimes that are not reported to the police depending on the seriousness of the crime…the majority of people do not report crime because they lost trust in the police."* Participant 2 added, *"[Y]es, I agree with the statement because if the crime is not reported to the police, it will always remain unknown to them, and all crimes not reported to the police will remain unknown and not form part of the true reflection of the crime."* Participant 5 said, *"Yes, crimes not reported to the police remain unknown…there is a problem with the police chasing people away and prevent them from reporting crimes."* Participant 7 noted, *"Yes, that is true, although with the help of Stats South Africa, we can get a more accurate picture…on the operational level, the police can only work with what was reported."* The other participant explained that.

> *"[Yes], since the police rely on reported crimes and that not all crimes are reported to them, they do not accurately reflect all crimes because not all crimes are reported to them. All crimes not reported to the police will remain unknown and not form part of the true reflection of the crime"* (Participant 8).

Participant 11 added, "Yes, *that is the case because if the crime has been committed and not reported it will remain unknown,"* while Participant 12 simply stated, *"Yes, because they are not broad into the attention of the authorities or the police."*

Other participants argued that while unreported crimes may not be captured by the police, alternative sources and indicators ensure that they are not entirely unknown. The other Participant elaborated:

> *"No, it is not unknown to the victims, but it is unknown to the police. It means that the police do not know about the crime, and that they are not going to know because they do not know about it. They might not think that they need to do anything about it, and they do not allocate resources, and they do not plan for those crimes. That is why the public's trust in the police is critically important for accurate crime statistics"* (Participant 3).

Similarly, the other Participant highlighted the importance of other data sources such as hospitals and mortuaries, and mentioned that;

> *"[N]o, I do not necessarily believe that, so I think there are other indicators and other sources of data that are important for the understanding of a crime that has been committed. It is because some people do not want to go to the police and instead, they would go to the hospital, depending on the type of crime, for if they are stabbed, but if they would start by reporting to the police, they can save their lives. Therefore, crimes that are not reported to the police will not always remain unknown since there are other sources of violent crime, such as hospitals and mortuaries. Hospitals and mortuaries provide an important indicator and source of data around violent crime"* (Participant 4).

A few participants provided data-informed perspectives, suggesting that although unreported crime is a challenge, partial visibility exists through surveys or community engagement. Participant 6 stated, *"Yes, that is a problem, but not all remain unknown. According to the Victims of Crime Survey by StatsSA, about 50% to 60% could be unknown depending on the type of crime."* Participant 10 highlighted community involvement, saying, "*Yes, they remain unknown but some we know them because of the community patrol. We get the information from the CPF, that is why we sent the police and CPF."*

4.2. Theme 2: Challenges Related to Crime Statistics as a Tool to Monitor and Evaluate Crime

The participants were asked by the researcher to express their thoughts and ideas on the challenges related to crime statistics as a tool to monitor and evaluate crime and challenges faced by the SAPS in compiling crime statistics. The answers from sub-categories were the same since the outcomes or questions were intertwined with one another.

The participants highlighted several challenges related to crime statistics as a tool to monitor and evaluate crime, with a common theme being public trust and perceptions of police performance. Participants emphasised that using crime statistics as a measure of police performance is problematic. It has been noted that

> *"[T]here will always be perceptions, and whether the people trust the police. One of the challenges is that the communities always want to use crime statistics as a measure of police performance. Crime statistics should never be used or measured as a police performance because if that were the case, the police may downplay some of the crimes and attempted murders that were recorded as normal assaults and other crimes merely to get the performance they need. The issue of using crime statistics as a measure of police performance is a big challenge because people do not report crime, and the police's crime statistics rely on reported crime"* (Participant 1).

Similarly, another participant stated that,

> *"Perceptions and public faith in the police will always exist. The communities' constant need to use crime figures as a gauge of police effectiveness is one of the difficulties. Crime statistics should never be utilized or evaluated as a gauge of police performance since, in order to obtain the necessary performance, the police might minimize certain crimes and attempted murders that were documented as routine assaults and other offenses. Because police crime statistics are based on reported crimes, and because many do not report crimes, using crime numbers as a gauge of police performance is fraught with difficulties"* (Participant 5).

Additionally, one participant reinforced this view, stating,

> *"[C]rime statistics should never be utilised or evaluated as an indicator of police performance since, to obtain the necessary performance, the police might minimise certain crimes and attempted murders that were documented as routine assaults and other offenses. Because police crime statistics are based on reported crimes, and because many do not report crimes, using crime numbers as a measure of police performance is fraught with difficulties"* (Participant 12).

Operational and logistical challenges were also highlighted. Participant 2 discussed infrastructure issues, stating,

> *"A challenge in our country is an issue of load shedding, since load shedding occurs in our country, when it does, some specific stations don't have a backup generator therefore they are forced to go back to registering or recording everything on paper for the possibility that when the system comes back on, they will then be able to retrieve everything and start capturing them on their computer systems"* (Participant 2).

Participants 3 and 7 focused on public access and police culture, with one participant noting:

> *"[P]eople don't trust the police, and some they cannot report the crime because the police stations are too far away. People don't report crimes because they don't trust the police, or the crime might be being committed by a family member or friend they know in the neighbourhood. In most cases, police stations are far away from rural areas so the CPFs should be the first to know of any crimes that take place in the neighbourhood before the police. The other challenge is that there is no culture in the South African police service of using information and data to drive innovation and plans. Therefore, although they do use the data, it is mainly only in the crime intelligence environment that they are working with the information and trying to figure it out, and it is not clear. It is clear that not all operations, certainly at the local level, is looking at the daily, weekly, and monthly crime threat analysis that is being undertaken at the station"* (Participant 3).

Others also stated,

> *"The police are not trusted by the public, and some people find it impossible to report crimes because police stations are too far away. Because they don't trust the authorities or because they think a family member or acquaintance they know in the neighborhood is doing the crime, many don't report crimes. CPFs should be the first to know about any crimes that take place in the neighborhood before the police. Police stations are typically located far away from rural areas. The other issue is that the South African police force does not have a culture that values using data and information to inform planning and innovation"* (Participant 7).

Other participants added and highlighted data recording and classification challenges. Where it has been explained that;

> *"[O]ne of the biggest challenges is that not all types of crime are recorded, also not all types of incidents observed by SAPS are recorded. SAPS may observe something in the community and do not want to deal with the paperwork and administration of recording the crime. Another issue is that people do not report crime to SAPS. Also, the location and time data is a very problematic thing to record as hospitals and SAPS don't really record accurately, as they are in terms of GPS coordinates, as hospitals and police stations are hotspot areas" (Participant 4).*

Participant 6 added, *"[T]he first challenge would be the under-reporting, probably the biggest problem. The second one is that the classification of some crimes is problematic because they are not necessarily all classified the same across stations, because they are put into huge categories, which makes it impossible to really analyse, and they lag behind the period, so you do not necessarily have an accurate real-time picture."*

One participant highlighted the low reporting of sensitive crimes, stating,

> *"One of the biggest challenges is the under report. There are low reporting rates for serious crimes like children abuse, home invasions, crimes against minors, and crimes against women like rape and assault. Reasons for such is that children don't know how to call the police, women are terrified of losing their partners in an assault, and*

> *women also feel ashamed after being raped, which causes the underreporting of crimes. The issue of underreporting of some crimes, such as sexual offences, assault, and harassment, is very low in terms of reporting rate. In 2013, the victim of crime survey indicated that the sexual offence and assault reporting rate is very low"* (Participant 8).

Furthermore, another participant noted,

> *"The fact that not all crimes or situations that the SAPS witnesses are documented is one of the main obstacles. SAPS may notice anything going on in the neighborhood, but they may not want to handle the paperwork and administrative load of filing a report for a crime. The fact that many fail to report crimes to SAPS is another problem"* (Participant 9).

Participant 10 emphasised, *"The biggest challenge regarding crime statistics as a tool to monitor and evaluate crime in South Africa is that not all types of crimes are reported, and also not all types of incidents that are observed by SAPS are recorded. For example, SAPS may observe something in the community and not want to deal with the paperwork or recording, so instead they might try to ignore it."*

Finally, one also highlighted classification issues,

> *"A challenge is that every crime might be accompanied by other crimes, making it difficult for the police to notice these other crimes while concentrating on the primary crime. It is actually quite a science to understand how to classify and how to interpret crimes to become a crime statistic. Some of the figures are made wrongly because people might classify it as a trespassing, in the meantime, it might have been a robbery, or it becomes a theft instead of a robbery because there was maybe not a weapon present, so you expect constables on the ground to almost be lawyers to understand these things"* (Participant 11).

4.3. Theme 3: Methodological or System to Measure, Monitor and Evaluate Crime

The participants highlighted a range of systems and methods used to measure, monitor, and evaluate crime, with a common emphasis on the South African Crime Administrative System (CAS). Participant 1 noted, *"I only know about the Crime Administrative System (CAS) system that has been currently used to monitor and report crime in South Africa. It is the system that collapses all the types of crime from the station level to the national level."* Similarly, numerous participants emphasised CAS as a central system for consolidating crime data. Participant 7 stated, *"Crime Administrative System (CAS) is the mother system because that is where all the information is. Another method is also Geographic Information System (GIS), which is used from the station level to the national level, and BI (Business Intelligence) is also used."* Participant 8 added, *"Countries have different methods to measure, monitor, and evaluate crime. In South Africa, the Crime Administrative System (CAS) is one of the methods or systems where all information is captured."* The participants argued that in order to prevent data manipulation, every capturing activity is synchronized on the CAS system. They continued by explaining that, in addition to CAS, there is a method called Geographic Information System (GIS) that can be used to draw crime patterns at the national level. Participant 8 further states, "*For instance, the crime patterns of Soshanguve, Centurion, Pretoria, or Thembisa can be drawn using GIS at the national level. Participants suggest that they could also rely on the Crime Threat Analysis (CTA) and Crime Pattern Analysis (CPA) to identify crime hotspots. It was argued that locating crime hotspots using CTA and CPA methodologies would help decision-makers choose how to allocate resources and the type and scope of actions needed to deal with the problems."* Participant 10 emphasised the same, *"In South Africa, we use GIS and CAS to make sure that the crimes are well registered and for the evaluation,"* while Participant 11 noted, *"SAPS uses drones to monitor crime. We have a national system, which is the CAS system, to monitor and evaluate crime. For instance, if a crime is committed in Mpumalanga Province, the system will display that particular crime in the CAS system."* Participant 12 concluded, *"SAPS rely on people who report crime. They use the CAS system and GIS system to measure, monitor, and evaluate crime."*

Some participants highlighted other complementary data sources used alongside CAS. Participant 3 noted, *"I can say administrative data that comes from the police, the community's best surveys, which might be done by research institutions, and telephonic surveys, or all different ways people collect data in order to understand crime."* Participant 4 stated, *"I do not know, but I think all sources of data are important to be taken into consideration, for example, Crime Threat Analysis (CTA) and Crime Pattern Analysis (CPA) can be used to identify crime hotspots."* Participant 5 added, *"Police data and court data are methods that tell us what happens to reported crimes. There are various surveys, such as administrative data from the courts. There are also research institutes interviewing people about their satisfaction."* Other participant provided an international perspective,

> *"If we compare our data sources with other countries' methods or systems to measure, monitor and evaluate crime they are all the same because there are forums that we sit on that is international where we discuss tools that will be used to collect or measure crime so they also rely on surveys, administrative data, police data and court data, tracking companies, department of health and department of justice"* (Participants 9).

Two participants offered insights into international practices and comparative methods. Participant 2 described, *"When we go to the international level, there are three points we can use to measure crime. Each country has its own methods of measuring crime statistics. Three points are used to measure crime statistics internationally*. The participant discussed the points below:

- *Input level: The first point is called the input level, which is used by South Africa. At the input level is when a person goes to the police station and report a particular crime, regardless of the nature of the reported crime, the police would record and register that particular crime. That is called input statistics that is used by South Africa.*

- *Intermediate level: The second point is called intermediate level which is used by other countries. The intermediate level is when a person goes to the police station and reports a crime, regardless of the type of crime that has been reported. The police then record that specific crime and go to investigate it. After they have determined that it is true, they then register that particular crime. That is called intermediate statistics that is used by other countries.*
- *Courts statistics and crime statistics: The last point is that other countries that use their courts statistics and crime statistics. At this point, is when a person goes to the police station and reports a crime, regardless of the type of crime that has been reported. The police then investigate it, and after they have determined that it is true, they register that particular crime. The courts would then examine and decide what kind of crime to prosecute someone with once they had looked into and registered that specific crime."*

While the other participant provided a detailed comparative perspective,

> *"It gets very complicated because in America, there are almost thousands of different police forces and they all have their own system. The most famous one is CompStat in New York. A lot has been written about how data is interpreted, but the Home Office in the UK does a lot of interpretation of crime statistics. In many of the so-called First World countries, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, America, as well as the UK, Netherlands, and Germany, they actually do release to people, academics and policyholders the point data. Point data provides insights into crime patterns, times of day, and that type of thing. In South Africa, the police have their own analysts at stations who do some analysis or should be doing analysis. They have very good systems through the Investigation Case Docket Management System (ICDMS) to capture, classify, and use crime data. However, it does not reach its full potential yet, academics are trying to contribute through interpreting crime statistics for different areas and cities to try and monitor what is going up and down and why they are going up and down, but obviously the more accurate the stats, the more accurate the analysis case"* (Participant 6).

When participants were asked to share their views on the methods or systems to measure, monitor and evaluate crime internationally, they highlighted that countries have different methods to measure, monitor and evaluate crime. Since countries vary, different countries have different reporting rate and crimes in a country might not be a crime in another country. For instance, Hart and Rennison (2012:57) assert that the UCR programme collects official data on crime in the USA, published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The UCR programme distributes crime statistics in the USA, which provides an annual summation of the incidence and rate of reported crimes throughout the USA. Participant 6 stated that:

> *"In South Africa, the police have their own analysts at stations that do some analysis or should be doing analysis. They have very good systems through the Investigation Case Docket Management System (ICDMS) to capture, classify, and use crime data"* (Participant 6).

Strom and Smith [20] support the above statement that the (CAS) or Investigation Case Docket Management System (ICDMS) in South Africa is the key source of data, a live system; therefore, information is updated regularly. South Africa provides quarterly and annual crime statistics. In addition, Strom and Smith [20] mention that other sub-systems remove information from CAS/ICDMS. The removed information is efficiently converted into a more presentable and accessible format, for example, using the Geographical Information System (GIS), Management Information System (MIS), and others. The Technology Management Services (TMS) division provides this information to the Crime Registrar on a monthly basis.

There are industrialised and developing countries in the world, and some employ more sophisticated techniques than others to track, monitor, and assess crime. For example, Skogan [6] states that the UCR programme has made resources available to help agencies address the cost of transitioning, as well as the potential insight that an agency has higher crime levels when a NIBRS actually establishes a new baseline that more accurately captures reported crime in a community

It was argued that all countries use the same methods because they all use surveys, police data, administrative data, and court data. Participant 9 highlighted that:

> "*There are forums that they sit on that are international where they discuss tools that will be used to collect or measure crime, so they also rely on surveys, police data, administrative data, and court data*" (Participant 9).

5. Discussions

The findings of this study illuminate the persistent and complex challenge of underreported crime in South Africa and its implications for the reliability of police crime statistics. The participants largely concurred that crimes not reported to the police remain unknown and, therefore, fail to provide a true reflection of the nation's crime burden. This perception is in harmony with existing scholarship highlighting the "dark figure of crime," where unreported offences constitute a significant portion of total criminal activity [1, 6, 12]. Consistent with international evidence, participants noted that victim fear, lack of trust in law enforcement, and the perceived inefficacy of reporting mechanisms contribute to underreporting, particularly in sensitive crimes such as sexual offences, domestic violence, and crimes against minors [14, 15]. These findings underscore the persistent gap between the occurrence of crime and its official recording, reflecting the systemic invisibility of unreported incidents that has been identified in previous studies both globally and within the South African context [10, 16].

However, the findings also revealed that unreported crimes are not entirely invisible. The findings indicated that alternative sources, including hospitals, mortuaries, community patrols, and victimisation surveys, provide partial visibility of criminal activity, suggesting that the police are not the sole arbiters of crime data. This perspective is in conjunction with studies advocating for triangulation of multiple data sources to improve the accuracy and contextual understanding of crime statistics [1, 7, 8]. While traditional literature often emphasises the limitations of quantitative police data alone, the

participants' experiences reveal that qualitative and community-informed insights can partially mitigate the "dark figure," highlighting a nuanced understanding that is somewhat inconsistent with the prevailing narrative of absolute invisibility of unreported crimes.

Moreover, the finding that using crime statistics as a measure of police performance may incentivize misreporting or downgrading of offences is consistent with the observations of Skogan [6] who note that performance pressures can distort the recording of crime. Furthermore, the participants' insights regarding logistical issues, such as load shedding, limited access to police stations, and infrastructure constraints, are in harmony with the literature pointing to administrative and resource-based barriers that hinder accurate data collection [32]. These operational challenges exacerbate the underreporting problem, reinforcing the notion from Social Disorganization Theory that community-level structural deficiencies, weak institutions, and low trust in law enforcement reduce the likelihood of accurate crime reporting [24, 26].

The findings also reflect on methods and systems to measure, monitor, and evaluate crime, providing insights into both strengths and gaps in current practice. The prominence of the CAS, complemented by GIS, CTA, CPA, and ICDMS, illustrates the South African police's efforts to consolidate, visualise, and analyse crime data. These findings are in conjunction with the literature advocating for multi-source, technology-driven approaches to enhance crime measurement [4]. The findings also highlighted international comparisons, noting that countries like the USA, UK, Australia, and Canada employ multi-level approaches, integrating police, court, and survey data to generate more comprehensive insights. This observation resonates with theoretical recommendations from Maguire and McVie [2] that crime statistics should reflect both the operational reality and the societal context, rather than merely institutional reporting practices.

The findings are further explained through the lens of Routine Activity Theory [21] and Social Disorganization Theory [24]. At the micro-level, the participants' accounts indicate that the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians, manifested as limited police presence, fear of retaliation, and inadequate reporting mechanisms, contributes to crimes remaining unreported. At the macro-level, systemic and community factors, including administrative inefficiencies, weak institutional oversight, and low public trust, create an environment in which crime statistics fail to capture the full reality. These findings are consistent with the Integrated Crime Reporting and Statistics Model (ICRSM) conceptualised in this study, which illustrates how unreported crime perpetuates incomplete datasets, misclassification, and delayed reporting, thereby undermining the reliability of SAPS statistics.

Importantly, the findings reveal both convergence and divergence with the literature. In harmony with prior studies, participants acknowledged that underreporting is pervasive and structurally entrenched, impacting the credibility of official crime statistics [2, 15]. At the same time, participants emphasised partial visibility through alternative data sources and community engagement, highlighting a degree of resilience and adaptive data capture that is less emphasised in existing literature. This nuance provides a practical contribution to the scholarly community and other stakeholders, demonstrating that improving public trust, integrating multi-source data, and leveraging community structures can enhance the accuracy of crime reporting while encouraging victims to engage with law enforcement rather than remain silent.

Collectively, these findings reinforce the urgent need for methodological reforms in South African policing, particularly through the integration of qualitative insights from individuals working daily with crime statistics. By bridging the gap between recorded crime and lived reality, this study contributes to understanding both the ethical and operational dimensions of underreporting, offering actionable recommendations for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and civil society actors. Enhancing the reliability of crime statistics not only supports evidence-based resource allocation but also strengthens public confidence in policing institutions, encouraging victims to report crimes and thereby reducing the "statistical silence" that continues to obscure the true extent of crime in South Africa.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study reveals that underreporting of crime remains a significant challenge in South Africa, limiting the accuracy and reliability of official crime statistics. While unreported crimes largely remain invisible to the police, alternative sources such as hospitals, community patrols, and victim surveys provide partial visibility, highlighting the complexity of capturing the true extent of crime. Operational inefficiencies, public distrust, logistical constraints, and inconsistencies in classification further undermine the utility of crime statistics as a tool for monitoring and evaluating crime. The study underscores that while systems such as the CAS, GIS, CTA, and CPA provide valuable mechanisms for crime monitoring, their effectiveness is contingent upon accurate reporting, proper data management, and community engagement. Overall, the findings illustrate that improving crime measurement in South Africa requires addressing both systemic and community-level barriers to reporting and enhancing the integration of multi-source data.

However, the researchers recommend that the SAPS and other relevant stakeholders implement measures to improve public trust and engagement, as this is fundamental to increasing crime reporting rates. Specifically, community outreach programs, regular engagement with Community Policing Forums (CPFs), and educational campaigns on the importance of reporting all crimes should be prioritised. This approach will empower citizens to actively participate in crime prevention while fostering a culture of transparency and accountability in policing.

The researchers further recommend enhancing crime data management and reporting systems. This includes optimising the use of the CAS, GIS, and Crime Threat and Pattern Analysis methodologies to ensure accurate, real-time data capture. Regular training for police officers and data capturers on standardised recording practices is essential to reduce inconsistencies. Moreover, the establishment of an independent crime data verification unit, in partnership with Statistics South Africa or academic institutions, is advised to audit and validate crime data. This ensures that reported statistics reflect reality and provide reliable intelligence for resource allocation, policy formulation, and evidence-based interventions.

Further, the researchers recommend embedding these measures within a national policy framework. Integration into the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) or Police Safety and Security Strategy would provide sustainability and accountability. Additionally, further qualitative research should be conducted to explore the lived experiences of officers working with crime statistics daily, providing deeper insight into operational challenges, improving reporting culture, and ensuring the integrity and reliability of South Africa's crime data.

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