

POPCRU



JUSTICE FOR ALL

POPCRU Presentation in ICPRA : Violence against police officers in South Africa

1. Back ground

Policing appears to be one of the hazardous professions in the world and the danger proportions varies subsistently from country to country. South Africa is one of the countries with high rate of violence against police. The Country has suffered an increase in police killing for the past few years. The integration of police into communities is still taking a stall hence police continue to be targeted even off duty. During 2003, the national summit on police killings was held and the culmination of a series of provincial meetings on the same topic took place without impacting the statistics on the matter. Although the objectives were not met, the collaborative drafting of a national action plan produced a number of excellent recommendations that deserve to be taken seriously.

2. Statistics

The South African situation is somewhat direr. In 1994, 265 police members were murdered. That is about 223 murders per 100,000 sworn police, but this number includes deaths both on and off duty. The body count stayed above 200 until recently. It dropped to 176 in the 2000/1 financial year, and then to 136 in 2001/2. Thus, the most recent total is about half what it was at the end of apartheid. The halving of police murders over seven years would appear to be a remarkable achievement in improving member safety.

According to the South African police records, 109 police officers were killed in the course of duty between April 2008 and April 2009. It is a general consensus that police work is a high risk career. This is particularly so in South Africa, considering the levels of crime prevailing in the country. Police officers are at the forefront of the on-going war against crime and therefore most at risk of violent attacks and even murder.

3. Reasons behind Police violence

With a murder rate of 48 per 100 000 in 2001/2, the average South African citizen is more likely to be killed than the average American police member. Comparing the police on-duty murder rate to the murder rate in the general population for both South Africa and America shows that the relative increase in risk incurred by enlisting is less in this country than in the US. But the ratio of field-deployed cops to the total police service is probably smaller in South Africa than in the US, because the SAPS have a higher share of command staff. To do a fair comparison, the risks of field-deployed staff would need to be compared, and there are no comparable figures for this.

Dealing with the crime encountered on South Africa's streets is clearly a risky business, and thus it is remarkable that the average South African Police Service member is more likely to be killed while off duty than on duty. Again, comparative data is lacking, but the 2002 figures released at the national summit suggest that 65% of police murder victims are killed while off duty. It has been argued that 60% of off-duty casualties were members who "put themselves on duty" by responding to crimes in progress. This been the case, the value of the interventions made by off-duty police needs to be weighed against the staggering costs.

3.1. Robbery

Are the police targeted for their guns? It is argues convincingly that since only 20-25% of the victims had their guns taken, this cannot be the primary reason people are attacking police members. Earlier SAPS research also suggested a 26% figure for robbery-related motives. But in interviews with 478 police members who survived attacks, 58% said they thought the motive for the attack was robbery, and 46% said the object of this robbery was their firearm. Even if the commissioner is right, the fact that a fifth to a quarter of all police murders are attempted robberies is alarming. In other countries the police would be considered a rather hard target to attack for the purpose of firearms acquisition, and the risks of such an attack would more than outweigh the benefits of acquiring a weapon that most likely is worth less than a good car stereo.

4. Training on use of force

The use of force standard as defined in the 1998 amendment to Section 49 of the Criminal Procedure Act could not be simpler. Unlike the past standard, where the police had to think about the charge to be brought before shooting at a suspect, the new principle is crystal clear : where a suspect poses a serious risk to the lives of the member or anyone else, the officer may shoot.

4.2. Training on tactics

Aside from use of force, the basics of police deportment need to be taught and drilled. Members who do not know how to search or handcuff a suspect safely are a hazard to themselves and everyone else. Since these principles are taught at the training academy, field members obviously need continual refreshers. Rather than carting members off to the academy each year, it would make more sense to train a crew of roaming trainers, who travel the country providing in-service training. The ideal time and place for such training is the parade at the start of the shift. These parades should be a time for information exchange, a briefing of the oncoming staff by those finishing their shift. Hot lists of vehicles and persons should be circulated, the day's work discussed, weapons and uniforms inspected, and some form of training given.

Field observation indicates that this potential is under-realised. In some stations, parades are little more than chaotic exchanges of vehicle keys and operational lists. Structure and discipline must be re-established, and in-service training is a good place to start.

In addition, members must also be required to re-qualify to use a firearm on at least a semi-annual basis, as is the case in most other armed departments around the world. Presently it would appear that some members have been carrying firearms that they last fired in the academy. The SAPS must issue ammunition for target practice and encourage members to improve their gun skills.

4.3. Non-lethal options

Members must have a force option between those situations they can handle with their bare hands, and those that require wielding deadly force. Internationally, police carry batons of some sort as well as at least one other non-lethal option, usually pepper spray. If members have no intermediate weapons, they may feel compelled to disproportionately escalate the level of violence – albeit unwittingly. Some stations have some of these tools, but they are not issued because of lack of training. Again, roving, in-service trainers can drill troops in the use of tonfa-style nightsticks and other intermediate force options.

4.4. Vests

Many of the vests issued to SAPS members are out of date. Those with the AK-47 shell-stopping ceramic plates had their place during the years of guerrilla war, but today these weapons are rarely used by criminals, besides in cash-in-transit robberies. The weight and bulkiness of the old vests are disincentives to use. The use of these heavy vests needs to be reviewed. While they may have some application in specialised units, every effort should be made to make the standard issue vests attractive to members. Once this has been done, the vest should become part of the uniform required for duty.

4.5. Shorten shifts

Many uniformed members work 12-hour shifts, four days a week. This allows for four-day weekends, popular with members who have to travel long distances to see their families. But 12-hour shifts are absurd from a member safety perspective. Police work on the street requires the maintenance of a heightened state of awareness. This state is essential for safety, and is impossible for most people to maintain for 12 hours. Field observation suggests that many members adapt by working only eight or fewer hours out of the 12. This may as well be made official.

Shortening shifts will not address the transport issue, however. Members who live far from their work sites will legitimately feel aggrieved at such a change. The solution is to allow members, whenever possible, to work in the station area where they live, an idea that has some resonance with the thinking behind the drive for sector policing. In addition, the use of public transport exposes members to a kind of vulnerability that many station commanders have tried to avoid by providing an informal taxi service using official vehicles at the change of shift. Once again, this might as well become official practice.

4.6. Off duty

Many of the suggestions above apply primarily to conduct while on duty, but the majority of police murders occur when the member is off duty. Providing protection to staff out of uniform is difficult, but is perhaps best achieved by a code of conduct that reminds them that a police career is a 24-hour vocation. This code should dictate when and how it is appropriate to intervene in a criminal situation without the protection of a uniform and back-up. It should prohibit the carrying of a firearm in a liquor establishment. It should specify the acceptable ways of carrying a gun off-duty. And it should contain sanctions for those who violate these rules.

5. No single remedy

Police violence results not on one cause, but evidence indicates that all causes are responsible for the high number of police member killed in the country. Addressing the problem will mean taking action on a range of issues, and continuous monitoring to ensure that new trends are quickly detected and addressed. Most important is that the issue is taken seriously

6. Precautions by South African Police Services

The precautions taken by the SAPS and by members to ensure their safety can never be divorced from the vital role all communities play in this regard. By working with the police, mobilizing support, forming a united front against the senseless killing of and attacks on police members, reporting on planned attacks and exposing police killers and criminal elements, communities together with the SAPS are bound to turn the tide against crime and build on a safe and more secure environment for all people in South Africa.

“Violence against police is devastating and should be fought against by all.”