



# POLICY BRIEF

## Murder trends in South Africa's deadliest provinces

David Bruce

The South African per-capita murder rate has steadily escalated since 2011/12, when it was at its lowest since 1994. The 2022/23 rate of 45 per 100 000 is the highest in 20 years. But focusing on national murder trends is misleading as trends vary greatly across the nine provinces. The current high per-capita murder rate is driven by high rates in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape and Gauteng.

## Key findings

- ▶ South African murder trends vary considerably across provinces.
- ▶ The Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape and Gauteng have the highest per-capita murder rates.
- ▶ In 2022/23, the Eastern Cape had the highest murder rate (71 per 100 000), followed by KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape, both with annual murder rates of 56.
- ▶ The four provinces with the most murders have also recorded the highest per-capita murder rate increases in the last 10 years.
- ▶ Since 2011/12, rates have increased most dramatically in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. The increase has been greatest from 2017/18 to 2022/23.
- ▶ The per-capita murder rate in the Western Cape decreased over the last five years.
- ▶ KwaZulu-Natal and, to a lesser degree, Gauteng experienced major surges in murder in 2021/22, with increases continuing in 2022/23. These have taken them well above their rates in the year before the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown.
- ▶ Deaths during the July 2021 unrest were not a major contributor to the increases in murder in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng in 2021/22.
- ▶ Many experts believe that the entrenchment and growth of organised crime has played a major role in the increasing number of murders.
- ▶ More in-depth provincially focused research and analysis is required to better understand the factors and circumstances driving murder trends.

## Recommendations

- ▶ The government and society must prioritise reducing murder rates, which are high and increasing.
- ▶ The collection of data about murder, and the analysis thereof, must be improved.
- ▶ ‘One-size-fits-all’ approaches to addressing murder are unlikely to be effective. Responses should be adapted to respond to the drivers of murder focusing on high-murder localities.
- ▶ Priority should be given to understanding and addressing murder in the four provinces with the highest per-capita murder rates.
- ▶ Lessons about good practice in understanding and addressing murder in different localities should be recorded and disseminated.
- ▶ The government should establish partnerships with academic and civil society organisations to assess available data. In addition, data should be better analysed to develop context-specific murder reduction strategies and interventions for different provinces and high murder policing precincts, cities and provinces.

## Introduction

Among the many distressing problems facing South Africa at the moment is the high level of violent crime. Murder – the deliberate and unlawful taking of another person's life – is a serious manifestation of this scourge. For some years, both the number of murders and the murder rates (the number per 100 000 of the population) have escalated steadily. This takes a heavy toll on society in lives lost and the impact on families, friends and communities. It also has a wide range of other serious social and economic costs.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this South Africa does not have a clear plan to reduce the number of murders. To date, what has been done is at best piecemeal and at worst ineffectual. However, the skills and resources exist to tackle the issue. Leadership and a clear, evidence-based strategy can make South Africa a safer place.

For the first 17 years of democracy, rates of murder dropped substantially. Between the financial years<sup>2</sup> 1994/95 and 2011/12, the murder rate fell by more than half (57%), from 69 to 29.5. Since then the rate has increased every year – except the lockdown year 2020/21.

## The risk of being murdered depends on who you are, your lifestyle, where you live and other factors

While there were 15 554 murders in 2011/12, by 2022/23 the figure had increased to 27 494. This equates to 77% more murders in 2022/23 than in 2011/12. The per-capita murder rate increased to 45 per 100 000, 52.5% higher than at the lowest point in South Africa's democracy.

It is high time that the country takes a new approach. Along with serious commitment, it is necessary to better understand the trends, patterns and factors driving murder in South Africa. It is only with improved information and analysis that we can develop appropriate and effective murder reduction strategies.

This policy brief responds to this. It must be noted, however, that provincial murder rates and trends do not reflect the risk of murder to all people living in those provinces. In each province, the risk of being murdered

is also linked to other factors such as your lifestyle and where you live.

## National versus provincial trends

Discussions of murder and other crimes in South Africa often focus on the national situation or the local picture, such as on police precincts with the most murders. Although they are presented in South African Police Service (SAPS) reports on crime statistics, provincial crime differences need to be more fully analysed and understood.

This policy brief focuses on provincial murder trends as an important dimension to understanding the national trend. Information on differences in provincial murder rates highlights the need for different strategies and approaches in addressing the issue. This is consistent with sections 206(1) and (2) of the Constitution, which highlight the need for policing to be responsive to the needs and priorities of different provinces.

## Methodology

This policy brief uses SAPS murder statistics, focusing on differences in provincial per-capita rates. SAPS murder statistics are seen to be the most accurate and reliable crime data released by the police.<sup>3</sup> The data used are provincial murder figures from 2011/2012 to 2022/23 (12 years). As highlighted above, in 2011/12, after 17 years during which murder had decreased steadily, rates were at their lowest since 1994. Since that year, numbers and rates have increased every year except 2020/21.

Note that:

- Population numbers typically vary between one area and another. They also tend to change over time in any country or region. The per-capita rate of murder is useful for comparing figures for murder between and within different areas for different periods. Per-capita rates are calculated per 100 000 of the population.
- To calculate annual per-capita rates, provincial population figures from the Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) mid-year population estimates are used for 2011/12 and 2017/18. For example, for the 2011/12 year, Stats SA estimates for July 2011 are used.



**Chart 1: Per-capita murder rates per province for 2022/23**

	Murders 2022/23	Stats SA census population estimate June 2022	Per-capita annual rate
Eastern Cape	5 150	7 230 204	71
Free State	979	2 964 412	33
Gauteng	6 411	15 098 907	42
KwaZulu-Natal	6 947	12 423 907	56
Limpopo	1 013	6 572 666	15
Mpumalanga	1 344	5 143 040	26
North West	1 108	3 804 779	29
Northern Cape	392	1 355 945	29
Western Cape	4 150	7 433 020	56
<b>South Africa</b>	<b>27 494</b>	<b>62 026 880</b>	<b>45</b>

Source: Analysis by author based on SAPS crime statistics

- For 2022/23, figures from the national census are used. The figures were published by Stats SA in October 2023, but reflect the estimated population at midnight of 22 – 23 June 2022.<sup>4</sup>

### The ‘big four’

Four provinces (Eastern Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape) share three features. They have:

- The largest populations – together they accounted for 68% of the national population in 2022 (in 2022, 42 million of the 62 million people in South Africa, lived in these four provinces).
- More murders than any other provinces – they accounted for 83% of murders in South Africa in 2022/23.
- The highest per-capita murder rates of all provinces.<sup>5</sup>

Chart 1 shows the provincial per-capita murder rates for 2022/23. Note that:

- The Eastern Cape and the Western Cape had the highest murder rates, at 59.5 and 58 respectively in 2019/20.<sup>6</sup> In 2020/21, the lockdown year, both had murder rates of 55.<sup>7</sup> Although there were factors that may have increased the risk of violence, the lockdown contributed to a limited decrease in levels of violence and murder.<sup>8</sup>

- The Eastern Cape rate has increased substantially since then, rising to 66 in 2021/22 and to 71 in 2022/23.
- In 2022/23, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape jointly had the second-highest annual rate of 56 per 100 000. This represents a major increase in the KwaZulu-Natal rate, but a decline compared to the 2019/20 Western Cape rate. The KwaZulu-Natal rate was 43 per 100 000 in 2019/20.
- Gauteng has the fourth highest per-capita rate (35 in 2021/22 and 42 in 2022/23). This is much lower than that of the other three provinces. However, similar to the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, the Gauteng rate has also increased substantially – by 40% from 2019/20 when it was 30.
- Compared to the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, the Western Cape (56 in 2022/23) therefore stands out. Whereas murder rates in the other three provinces have increased substantially since 2019/20, the Western Cape rate has dropped slightly.

### Provinces and populations

In 2022/23, all provinces had more murders than in 2011/12. However, per-capita rates of murder are also dependent on population changes. All provinces

**Chart 2: Changes in per-capita murder rates per province from 2011/12 to 2022/23**

	Per-capita murder rate 2011/12	Per-capita murder rate 2022/23	Change in per-capita murder rate (2011/12 to 2022/23)
Eastern Cape	48	71	23
Free State	35	33	-2
Gauteng	26	42	16
KwaZulu-Natal	32	56	24
Limpopo	13	15	2
Mpumalanga	20	26	6
North West	25	29	5 <sup>9</sup>
Northern Cape	33	29	-4
Western Cape	43	56	12 <sup>10</sup>
<b>South Africa</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>15<sup>11</sup></b>

Source: Analysis by author based on SAPS crime statistics

experienced increases in population during this period. Mpumalanga (41%), the Western Cape (41%) and Gauteng (33%) had the highest population increases. KwaZulu-Natal (15%), the Free State (7%) and the Eastern Cape (6%) had the lowest.

The changes in murder rates in the provinces were varied. As can be seen in Chart 2, per-capita rates decreased in the Free State and the Northern Cape during the 11 years. The number of murders in the Northern Cape was 7% greater in 2022/23 than in 2011/12, but the population increased by 24%. Free State murder numbers increased by 3% (from 954 to 979), but the increase was lower than the population increase of 7%.

On the other hand, the four most populous provinces all experienced distinct increases in per-capita murder rate during this period. In KwaZulu-Natal, the figure rose by 24 per 100 000, in the Eastern Cape by 23, in Gauteng by 16 and in the Western Cape by 12.

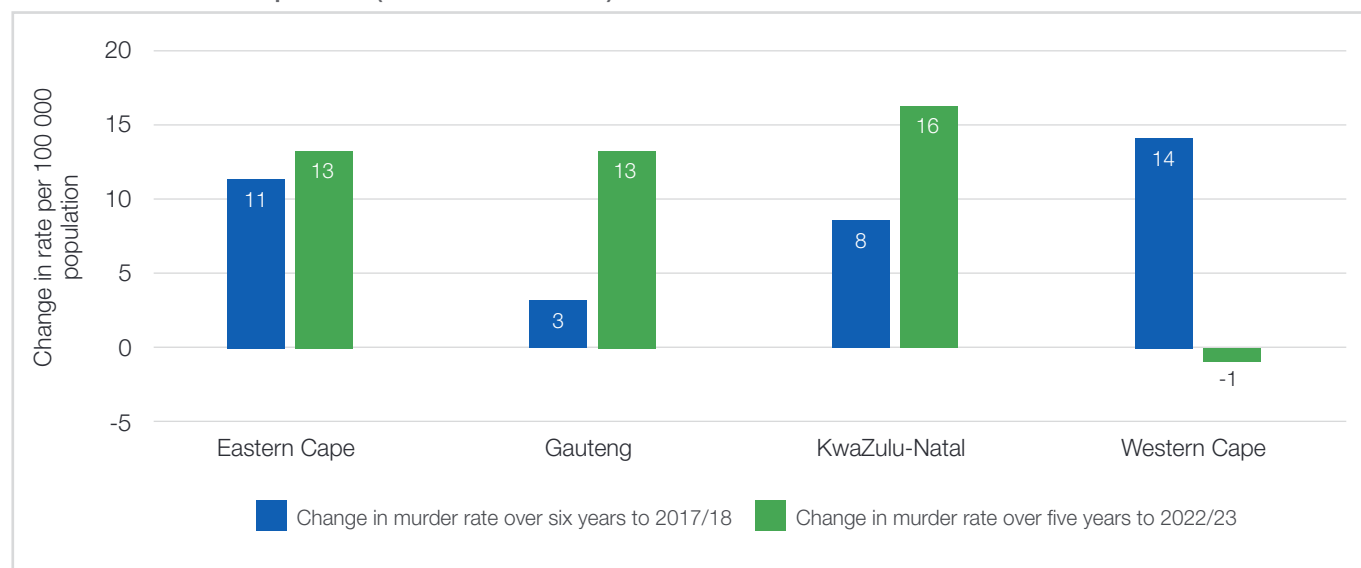
### Different patterns

Chart 2 shows that in 2011/12 the murder rates were 48 in the Eastern Cape, 43 in the Western Cape, 32 in KwaZulu-Natal and 26 in Gauteng. All these rates have increased since, but have followed different patterns (Chart 3).<sup>12</sup>

83%

OF SA'S MURDERS IN 2022/23  
OCCURRED IN THE  
EASTERN CAPE, GAUTENG,  
KWAZULU-NATAL AND  
WESTERN CAPE

**Chart 3: Change in the per-capita murder rate in the four provinces with the highest murder rates, over two consecutive periods (2011/12 – 2022/23)**



Source: Analysis by author based on SAPS crime statistics

### Eastern Cape

As previously indicated, the Eastern Cape had the highest per-capita murder rate in 2011/12 (48 per 100 000). It remains the province with the highest murder rate. As shown in Chart 3, from 2011/12 to 2017/18, the rate rose by 11 per 100 000. Since 2017/18 it has risen slightly more steeply, by 13 per 100 000.

### KwaZulu-Natal

In 2011/12 KwaZulu-Natal had a murder rate of 31.6 per 100 000. The surge in the rate in the last five years (2017/18 to 2022/23), by 16 per 100 000, is greater than that in both Gauteng (12.8) and the Eastern Cape (12.5).

Linked to both the high murder rate and the large population in the province, KwaZulu-Natal now has more murders than any other province (Chart 1). During the five years from 2017/18 to 2022/23 murders in the province increased by 59%, from 4 382 to 6 947.

In 2021/22, KZN recorded 1 670 more murders than in 2020/21 (Chart 4).

Was the dramatic increase of 1 670 in 2021/22 linked to the unrest in KwaZulu-Natal (and Gauteng) in July 2021? Upwards of 250 deaths were recorded in the province during that event.<sup>13</sup> Roughly 75% of these (about 180) were classified by SAPS as murders (the balance were referred to inquests as ‘non-natural deaths’).<sup>14</sup> This implies that not more than 12% of the additional 1 670 KwaZulu-Natal murders in 2021/22 are likely to have been unrest-linked. The 2021/22 trend also continued in 2022/23 with a further increase, to 6 947. Therefore, the major surge can be linked to factors other than the July unrest.

### Western Cape

As indicated, the Western Cape also has one of the highest per-capita murder rates and this has increased substantially since 2011/12. However, its increase was

**Chart 4: Number of murders in KwaZulu-Natal from 2019/20 to 2022/23**

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
<b>Murder in KwaZulu-Natal</b>	4 859	4 825	6 495	6 947
<b>Compared to previous year</b>		-34	1 670	452
<b>Net increase over two years</b>			1 636	2 122

Source: Based on data from SAPS crime reports, 2020–23

concentrated in the initial six years from 2011/12 to 2017/18. Although there have been fluctuations, overall it declined (by 1.4) from 2017/18 to 2022/23.

## Gauteng

Gauteng has the fourth highest per-capita murder rate (Chart 1). This has increased, at a lower rate than in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape but a higher rate than the Western Cape (Chart 2). Chart 3 shows that the increase in Gauteng was lower than that in the other three provinces from 2011/12 to 2017/18.

As with KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng experienced a substantial murder rise in 2021/22, which contributed markedly to the increase of 3 423 between 2012/13 (when murder numbers were lower than in 2011/12) and 2022/23. In 2021/22, Gauteng recorded 1 491 more murders than in the previous year.<sup>15</sup> Probably linked to the lockdown, the 2020/21 figure was 476 lower than the 4 555 of 2019/20 (Chart 5).

The net increase of 2 332 murders between 2020/21 and 2022/23 accounts for 68% of the overall increase of 3 423 murders between 2012/13 and 2022/23. Despite major increases in the provincial population, the per-capita increase in Gauteng is therefore similar to that in the Eastern Cape, from 2017/18 to 2021/22. As shown, Kwazulu-Natal recorded the biggest increase during this period.

## The other five provinces

The focus of the policy brief has been on the 'big four' most populous provinces. High increases in both the rate and number of murders in some of these provinces are the main driver of major increases in the South African murder rate.

Chart 6 shows that there is variation in patterns in the other five provinces:

- In the Northern Cape and the Free State the murder rates have dropped slightly since 2011/12 (Chart 2).
- Limpopo's rate increased slightly from 13 per 100 000 in 2011/12 to 15 in 2022/23. The increase took place in the first period, with a small decrease in the second.
- The number of murders in North West has fluctuated for many years. Similar to KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, they have increased more steeply over the last couple of years, reflected in an increase of 5 (4.5 per 100 000) between 2017/18 and 2022/23.
- The murder rate in Mpumalanga followed a similar pattern similar to North West. Rates increased by 0.9 per 100 000 in the first period. In the second, the increase was 5.4 per 100. Despite the overall increase of 6.3 per 100 000 since 2011/12, the 2022/23 murder rate in Mpumalanga (26 per 100 000) is still lower than that in all other provinces except for Limpopo (15).

Gauteng experienced a substantial murder rise in 2021/22, recording 1 491 more murders than in the previous year

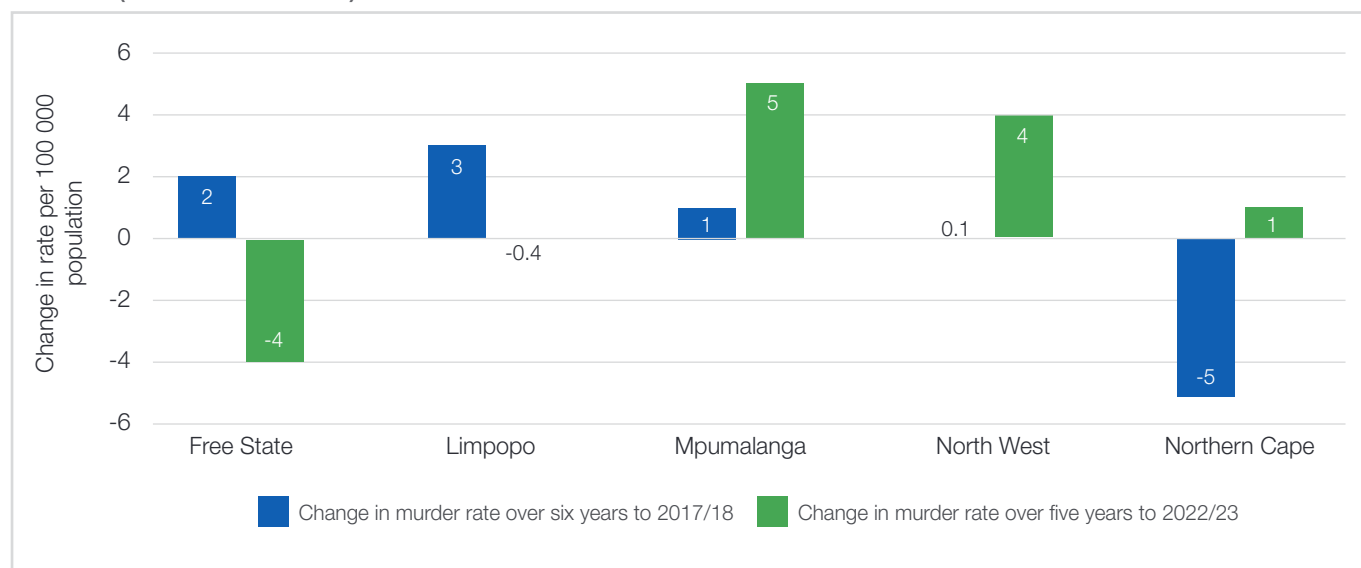
Chart 6 confirms the assertion that the South African murder rate increase since 2011/12 has been driven mainly by increases in KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape, and Gauteng. The Western Cape also made a substantial contribution to the increase, albeit smaller. Rates have decreased in the Free State and Northern Cape and increased modestly in Limpopo. Though murder rates in Mpumalanga and North West have increased, the increases in these provinces since 2011/12 have been much lower than the per-capita increase in any of the 'big four' provinces.

**Chart 5: Number of murders in Gauteng from 2019/20 to 2022/23**

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
<b>Murder in Gauteng</b>	4 555	4 079	5 570	6 411
<b>Compared to previous year</b>		-476	1 491	841
<b>Net increase over two years</b>			1 015	2 332

Source: Based on data from SAPS crime reports, 2020–23

**Chart 6: The other five provinces – changes in per-capita murder rate over two successive periods (2011/12 – 2022/23)**



Source: Analysis by author based on SAPS crime statistics

## Why these trends?

Why have murder rate increases been significantly higher in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal? What explains the differences in murder trends between the Western Cape and the three other provinces with the largest populations? And why, against this backdrop, are the Limpopo, Free State and Northern Cape rates remaining stable and even dropping (Chart 2)?

Many analysts believe the increase in murder is due to the expansion and entrenchment of organised crime

Questions about trends in murder and other crimes often do not have simple answers. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) cites structural drivers known to be strongly related to homicide rates. These include social conditions such as collective and individual poverty, inequality and the youthfulness of the population.<sup>16</sup> But these conditions don't necessarily explain why murder is escalating at a much greater rate in some provinces than others.

For example, according to the 2022/23 third-quarter Stats SA Labour Force Survey, the North West has the highest expanded unemployment rate – 53.3%

of its working-age population. On the other hand, the Western Cape has the lowest – 29.5%.<sup>17</sup> However, the North West has one of the lowest murder rates and the Western Cape one of the highest (Chart 1). Trends in murder, therefore, cannot be explained simply by 'structural factors'.

Another aspect that may be helpful is analysing the circumstances in which murder takes place. UNODC uses the following typology to differentiate murders:<sup>18</sup>

- Interpersonal homicides – these include those perpetrated 'by intimate partners or other family members' and by those 'outside the family or other intimate relationships'.
- Crime-related homicides – these include those related to 'organised criminal groups' and 'other criminal activities'.
- Sociopolitical homicides – this category includes the killing of journalists and human rights defenders, but is not a major contributor to overall homicides in many countries.<sup>19</sup>

These categories are all relevant to South Africa to a greater or lesser degree. However, applying the typology is not straightforward. Many analysts believe that a major factor behind increases in murder since 2011/12 has been the expansion and entrenchment of organised



**Chart 7: Summary of ‘causative factors/motives’ in SAPS reports for April to December 2022**

	Number	%
Arguments and disputes, including domestic violence	4 328	51.6
Conflict between (criminal) groups (taxi, gang and ‘illicit mining’ violence)	928	11.1
Related to robbery, rape or other crimes	1 513	18.0
Vigilantism	1 536	18.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>8 392</b>	<b>99.0</b>

Source: Analysis by author based on SAPS quarterly crime reports, 2022/23

crime. A 2022 report on organised crime in South Africa by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime argues that three major factors have contributed to an increase in murders linked to organised crime.

“First is the erosion of policing independence and skills, reflected in far fewer murder cases being solved. Second is the release of large numbers of state guns to the criminal underworld. Third is the enormous increase in the issuing of gun licences (including for semi-automatics) thanks partly to licensing system corruption. These factors have led to an increase in the number of organised-crime-related deaths in robberies, assassinations, gang violence and the like.”<sup>20</sup>

SAPS crime reports provide extensive statistical information. Currently however they do not clarify what share of murders might be linked to the growth of organised crime. This would include murders in the SAPS category ‘conflict between (criminal) groups’ and some related to robbery or other crimes. The data on causative factors is also not representative of murder nationally, nor accurately reflects provincial trends.<sup>21</sup> The SAPS data for the first three quarters of 2022/23 appear above.

Analysis of statistics on murder trends in the provinces, and better understanding of the factors driving murder in each province, can assist in enabling better responses to murder, and other violent crimes in South Africa. Detailed crime statistics are available. But there is a need for greater investment in the analysis of statistics and greater rigour with the collection and analysis of other data, such as that addressing ‘causative factors’. Identifying what is driving the increase in murders, particularly in the four most populous provinces, will better enable South Africa to respond to the dramatic increase in murder that has been recorded in recent years.



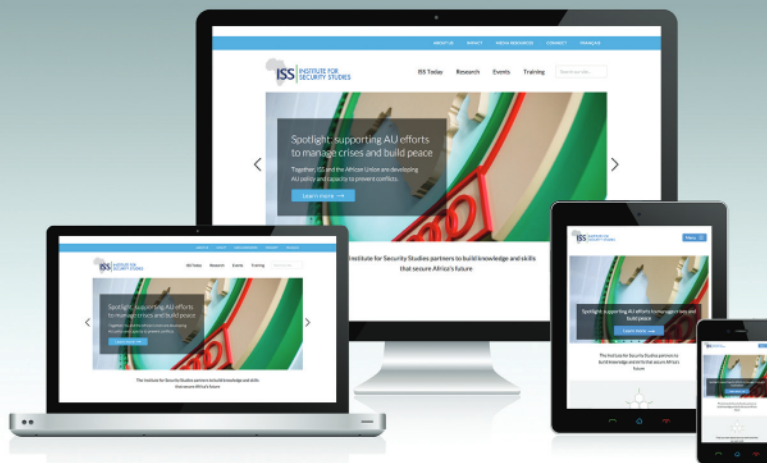
MURDER RATES HAVE  
INCREASED THE MOST  
IN EASTERN CAPE  
AND KWAZULU-NATAL

## Notes

- 1 UNODC, Global study on Homicide – Executive Summary, 2019, 8–10, [www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet1.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet1.pdf).
- 2 The South African Police Service (SAPS) releases annualised crime statistics for financial years starting on 1 April and ending on 31 March the following year.
- 3 A Kriegler and M Shaw, *A citizen's guide to crime trends in South Africa*, Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2016.
- 4 Stats SA, Post-enumeration Survey (PES) 2022, 10 October 2023, 1, <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P03015/P030152022.pdf>.
- 5 Note that in recent years, including 2015/16, 2016/17 and 2020/21, Free State recorded a higher per-capita murder rate than Gauteng (South African Police Service, Crime situation in South Africa: 1 April 2016 – 1 March 2017, 2017, 27 available at <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/factsheets/factsheet-south-africas-crime-statistics-201617>; D Bruce, South Africa needs less nationally-focused policing responses, Institute for Security Studies, 7 February 2022, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/south-africa-needs-less-nationally-focused-policing-responses>). The Northern Cape has also recorded higher murder rates than Gauteng in some years, including 2015/16 (South Africa Police Service, 2017, Ibid).
- 6 Africa Check, South Africa's crime statistics for 2019/20, 4 August 2020, <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/factsheets/factsheet-south-africas-crime-statistics-201920>
- 7 D Bruce, South Africa needs less nationally-focused policing responses, Institute for Security Studies, 7 February 2022, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/south-africa-needs-less-nationally-focused-policing-responses>.
- 8 A Kriegler, Crime statistics show South Africa's lockdown 'crime holiday' is over, *The Conversation*, 30 August 2021, <https://theconversation.com/crime-statistics-show-south-africas-lockdown-crime-holiday-is-over-166785>.
- 9 The increase is 4.6 before rounding.
- 10 The increase is 12.5 before rounding.
- 11 The increase is 14.6 before rounding.
- 12 The graphs are based on deducting the per-capita murder rate in each province at the beginning of the period from that at the end of the period. For instance, in 2011/12 the per-capita murder rate in Eastern Cape was 47.86 per 100 000. This increased to 58.7 in 2017/18, an increase of 10.84% (which is rounded up to 11 in the graph). From 58.7, it increased to 71.2 in 2022/23, an increase of 12.5 (rounded to 13 in Chart 3).
- 13 T Maeko, Death toll in riots rises by more than 100 to 337, *Business Live*, 22 July 2021, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2021-07-22-death-toll-in-riots-rises-by-more-than-100-to-337/>.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Similarly to KwaZulu-Natal, the bulk of this increase cannot be attributed to the July unrest. Fewer than 50 of the unrest-related deaths in the province were classified as murders by SAPS (T Maeko, Ibid).
- 16 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Global Study on Homicide: Understanding Homicide, 2019/20, [www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet\\_3.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet_3.pdf).
- 17 Stats SA, 2022/23 third-quarter Stats SA Labour Force Survey, 2023, 8, [www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/Presentation%20QLFS%20Q3%202022.pdf](http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/Presentation%20QLFS%20Q3%202022.pdf).
- 18 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Global Study on Homicide: Understanding Homicide, 2019/20, [www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet\\_3.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet_3.pdf).
- 19 Ibid, 69–70.
- 20 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, Strategic Organised Crime Risk Assessment: South Africa, 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/GI-TOC-Strategic-Organized-Crime-Risk-Assessment-South-Africa.pdf>.
- 21 Although the overall sample reflects 40% of murders (8 392 out of 20 983 cases recorded between April and December 2022), it is likely not to be representative. For instance, the sample used reflects a much higher proportion of murders in the Western Cape (64% of murders in the province) and Northern Cape (58%), but only 30% of murders in Gauteng and 27% of murders in the Eastern Cape. It is also not clear if the same standards are applied in selecting and classifying cases in the different provinces.

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## About the author

David Bruce is an independent researcher on policing and public security and an Institute for Security Studies consultant.

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