



Publication: Engineering News & Mining Weekly - Inside
Title: South Africa's crime epidemic
Publish date: 26 Jul 2024
Page: 41

Reach: 12703
AVE: R 25233.30
Author: Staff Reporter

AFRICA BEAT

South Africa's crime epidemic

In South Africa's cities, caution is the currency, and being labelled 'among the unsafest in the world' isn't just a statistic – it's a stark reality. This sentiment is underscored by Numbeo's Midyear 2024 Crime Index by City, which crowns Pietermaritzburg, in KwaZulu-Natal, as the world's reigning crime champion.

The index's top seven is dominated by South African cities, with Pretoria in second position, followed by Caracas in Venezuela, Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea, Johannesburg, Durban and Port Elizabeth. Among the 20 most dangerous cities, Cape Town ranks seventeenth.

The Numbeo index is compiled twice a year using data from surveys completed by visitors to the company's website. The survey results are presented on a scale of 0 to 100, with crime levels below 20 seen as 'very low', those between 20 and 40 as 'low', those between 40 and 60 as 'moderate', and those between 60 and 80 as 'high'. A score above 80 equates to 'very high' crime levels.

All the South African cities in the top 20 except for two – Port Elizabeth and Cape Town – were deemed by the survey respondents as having 'very high' crime levels. Pietermaritzburg's index-topping score was 82.5, and this was closely followed by Pretoria at 81.9, Johannesburg at 80.8 and Durban just a shade lower at 80.6. Port Elizabeth narrowly missed the Numbeo crime super league with a score of 77.7. Cape Town scored a relatively modest 73.8. Nevertheless, even at this level, law enforcement authorities in the Mother City clearly have their work cut out.

It's easy to dismiss the findings of the Numbeo survey as the exaggerated perceptions of visitors to the Numbeo website, possibly mostly foreigners. But hang on – just eight months ago, in October 2023, South African

Cities Network (SACN), an entity dedicated to promoting the exchange of information, experience and best practice on urban development and city management, published a report confirming that our cities are indeed major crime scenes.

To compile its report, SACN sifted through crime statistics reported by the South African Police Service (SAPS), which comprised city-level police precinct data from Johannesburg, Cape Town, eThekweni, Ekurhuleni, Tshwane, Nelson Mandela Bay, Mangaung, Buffalo City and Msunduzi, a municipality within which Pietermaritzburg falls. SAPS statistics do not show crime levels on a city level, which is why, strictly speaking, Pietermaritzburg was not included in the SACN analysis.

Something SACN was able to glean from the police stats was that the murder rate per 100 000 people is staggering: 3 165 in Cape Town, 2 815 in eThekweni, 2 121 in Johannesburg and 1 422 in my home city of Ekurhuleni.

These are chillingly high numbers and place South African cities almost in the same league as Port-au-Prince, in Haiti, where gangs run rampant, necessitating the deployment of a United Nations-backed mission led by Kenyan police. According to the Mexican Council for Public Security, Port-au-Prince has a murder rate of 3 502 per 100 000 people.

Kenyan President **William Ruto**, who has been in a tight spot of late, with protests by the country's Gen Z having compelled him to



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reverse austerity measures prescribed by the International Monetary Fund and to dismiss his entire Cabinet this month, at some point called in the army to bolster police efforts to quell the protests. These are the same police officers – who could not cope with unarmed, but angry, youngsters – that he is sending to Haiti, to face the Pacific nation's gangs, which reportedly control 80% of Port-au-Prince! The first contingent of 200 officers arrived early this month, with an equal number joining them on July 16.

But I digress. South Africa has a serious violent crime problem. I can attest to this personally, having been the victim of home robberies twice in the past 12 years. I am not alone in this unfortunate club. Many, many others can tell their own stories about just how dire the situation is. With **Senzo Mchunu** stepping in as the new Police Minister, he is going to need all the support he can get.

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