

Assault and sexual offences

Overview of the official statistics: 2014/15

This factsheet provides an overview of murder and robbery trends between 1 April 2014 and 31 March 2015 as recorded by the South African Police Service (SAPS).

A note about SA's crime statistics

On the day of their release, these statistics were already at least six months out of date. That means that the current crime situation, particularly at local level, could be very different to that described by these statistics. For a guide on how to interpret crime statistics see the [Africa Check Factsheet](#). For more factsheets, infographics, interactive maps, analysis and graphics on crime visit the [ISS Crime Hub](#).

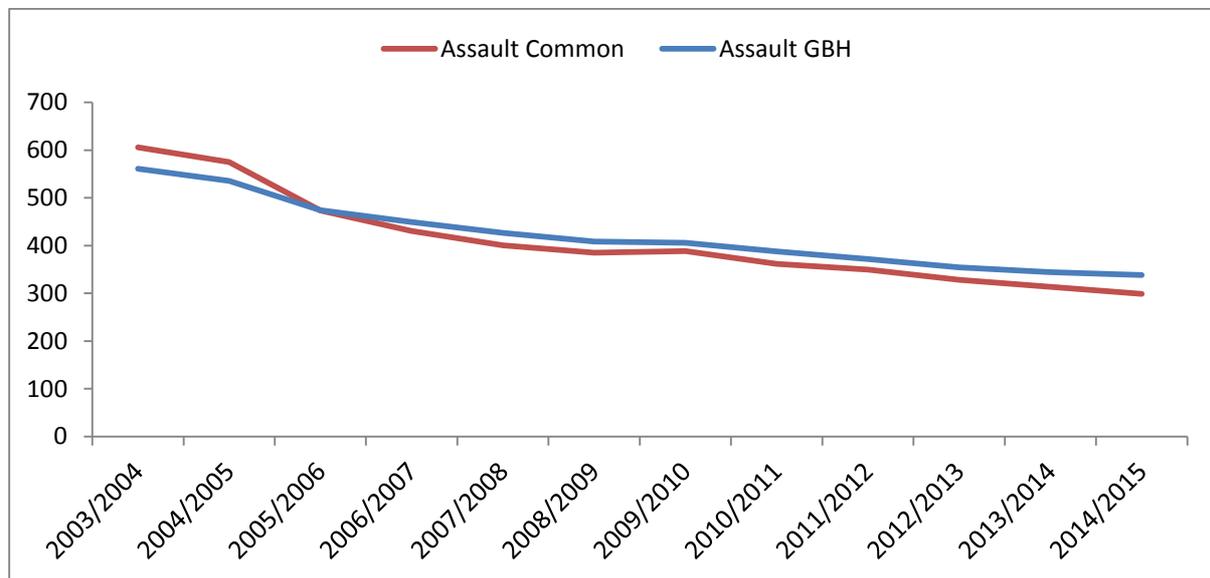
How 'real' are the decreases in assault?

- The number of cases of assault with the intention to inflict grievous bodily harm (GBH) recorded by the police increased by 0,1% between 2013/14 and 2014/15, from 182 333 to 182 556 recorded incidents.
- Cases of common assault recorded by the police decreased by 2,8% from 166 088 to 161 486 incidents.
- Figure 1 shows that the rate of common assault (per 100 000 population) recorded by the police almost halved in the past 12 years and assault GBH rates reduced by almost 40%.
- There is, however, reason to doubt that these figures reflect a real reduction in assault levels. Police statistics for assault are notoriously unreliable because most victims don't report these crimes to the police. Since the victim and perpetrator may be related (such as in a case of domestic violence) victims are often reluctant to disclose assault. The Statistics South Africa National Victims of Crime Survey (NVCS) found that most assault victims knew the perpetrators. The perpetrators were

either from the same community (34,2%), a spouse or lover (16,8%) or a relative (9,2%). Less than a quarter were described as unknown or categorised as ‘other’.

- Another reason to doubt the accuracy of official assault statistics is that the tendency among victims to report assault incidents to the police is declining. The NVCS shows a 7% reduction in the proportion of assault victims who reported the incident to the police, from 52,6% of victims in 2011 to 45,6% of victims in 2013. This may signal a loss of trust in the police or that the police are not recording as many in an attempt to show a decrease in violent crime so they can achieve the targets set for them. Similarly, an increase in reported cases of assault may indicate either an increase in public confidence in the police, or that the police are making it easier to report cases.

Figure 1: Common assault and assault GBH, 2003/04 – 2014/15



Domestic violence

Cases of domestic violence are likely to be recorded as cases of assault. Given the serious nature of domestic violence, it is important that assault victims are encouraged to report incidents to the police.

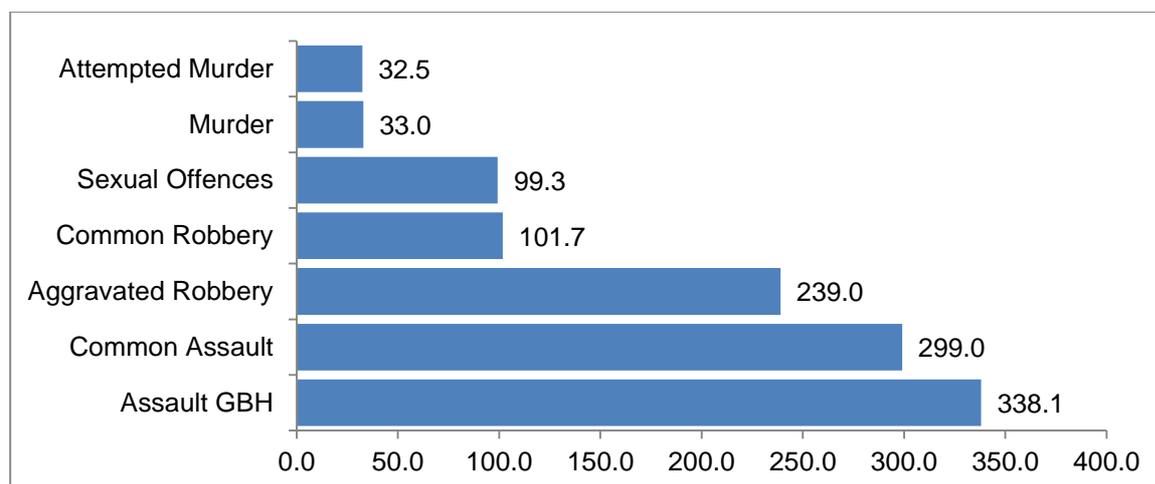
The police do not release the details about the number of assaults that involve intimate partners although they are required by law to record cases of domestic violence in a register at police stations and have victim friendly rooms available. Despite these requirements, regular compliance is very low:

- The [Civilian Secretariat for Police](#) found that between October 2013 and March 2014, only 1,4% of police stations inspected (two out of 145) were fully compliant with the Domestic Violence Act.
- 77% were partially compliant and 21% were rated as non-complaint.
- This means that the police are not adhering to their own policies in relation to recording domestic violence and therefore do not have an accurate picture of the extent of the problem facing the country.

Impact of assault trends on overall violent crime trends

- Violent crime includes various types of crime like common assault, assault GBH, sexual offences, robberies, murder and attempted murder.
- Figure 2 shows that common assault and assault GBH make up the vast majority of violent crimes reported to the police.
- Overall violent crime rates have decreased because of the declining number of assaults and sexual offences reported to police.
- Figure 2 shows that during 2014/15 the rate of assault GBH (338,1) and common assault (299,0) combined was 637,1. This means that for every 100 000 people in South Africa 637,1 were victims of assault. This is a substantial number considering that more than half of all assaults are never reported to the police.

Figure 2: Violent crime rates, 2014/15



Sexual offences

The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007 came into effect in December 2007 and created a number of ‘new’ sexual offences. It also expanded the definition of rape. This makes it difficult to compare the rape statistics before December 2007 with more recent figures.

Reported cases of rape continue to decrease. Between 2008/9 and 2014/15 recorded cases dropped by 7,4%, from 46 647 to 43 195 respectively.

‘Total sexual crimes’ as recorded by the police may include up to 59 separate crimes ranging from different forms of sex work to rape. Increases or decreases in such a broad category of crime tell us very little about the trends or extent of any of the specific offences contained therein. The category of sexual offences is therefore not useful and the police should publicly release statistics for each of the crimes that fall under the broad category of sexual offences.

Reporting rape

The rape statistics recorded by the police cannot be taken as an accurate measure of either the extent or trend of this crime. Various research studies have shown that depending on the locality, as few as one in thirteen rapes are reported to the police. The NVCS results show that the proportion of rape victims who report their victimisation to the police decreased by 21% between 2011 and 2014.

While the reporting of rape to the police must be encouraged, this alone is unlikely to improve reporting rates. Overall, reporting is likely to increase when there are substantial improvements in the service culture at police stations, and specifically, if those who want to report rape are assisted by specially trained police officers at each station.

In addition, there is an urgent need for reforms in how police performance is measured. According to performance targets, the police are expected to reduce violent crime by between 4% and 7% per year. This creates a profound disincentive for police to record all violent crimes reported to them. If victims are encouraged to report rape, and the police indeed record all these reports, the number of recorded rapes will increase. This should not impact negatively on assessments of police performance.

What does South Africa need to do?

Most assaults, murders and rapes occur between people who know each other. Research from the University of Cape Town suggests that violence begins in the home and is strongly linked to the absence of parents, poverty, levels of conflict in the home and community, exposure to poor role models, as well as alcohol and drug abuse. Violence against women is often compounded by gender inequality and their economic dependence on men.

Although the police can do very little to prevent this kind of violence, they have an important role to play in providing a quality service to those who report crimes of domestic violence and sexual offences. This includes not only getting the technical aspects of an investigation right, but also taking cognisance of the fact that victims have diverse needs and should be treated and catered for accordingly and with respect.

The most effective ways of preventing assault and sexual offences typically do not involve the police, but do require long-term investments related to social development. More must be done to reduce the risk factors for violence, by supporting parents, offering counselling to those affected by violence, and ensuring that basic services are delivered.

Women seek help from a range of different sources including the courts in the form of protection orders. Yet, information from the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development is not readily available to understand help-seeking behaviour in terms of protection orders. The Department of Health should also provide information about emergency health care to victims. This information would provide a more comprehensive

picture and allow for better planning and provision of services. Services are not adequately funded at present.

In relation to rape, child sexual abuse and other forms of child maltreatment, a far more comprehensive picture would emerge if statistics could be obtained from the Department of Social Development and the Department of Basic Education. The services they provide can help prevent and reduce longer-term psychological difficulties and other health problems.

The police do still play a crucial role – as the gateway to the criminal justice system – in accessing justice for the many victims of these crimes. The police need to be accountable for implementing the many national policy frameworks and guidelines that would ensure a better quality service to victims.

For more information on [domestic violence](#) and rape as well as [other types of sexual assault](#) in South Africa, visit the ISS Crime Hub at www.issafrica.org/crimehub.

This fact sheet was prepared in collaboration with the [Shukumisa campaign](#) by Lizette Lancaster, Chandre Gould, Lisa Vetten and Romi Sigsworth.

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