



POLICY BRIEF

Beyond boots on the ground Making police presence count

Anine Kriegler

South Africans say a visible police presence, followed by a faster response, would do most to increase their trust in the police. This policy brief argues that the South African Police Service (SAPS) should treat visible presence as a service in its own right, which is planned, delivered and reviewed alongside other duties. Better use of crime and deployment data can direct scarce capacity to where and when it is most needed. More presence everywhere is not the answer.

Key findings

- ▶ Public trust in the police is at a historic low. In 2024/25, only 22% of South Africans expressed trust in the police.
- ▶ Asked in the 2025 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) which police action would most increase their trust, 28.6% chose 'Be more visible and present in the area'; 21.7% chose faster response.
- ▶ Presence and faster response were the leading priorities across the sample, but their relative weight varied. Metro respondents emphasised presence, while elsewhere the two were more evenly balanced. Respondents without private home security were more likely to prioritise presence or response than those with it, though this may reflect other differences.
- ▶ Current South African Police Service (SAPS) performance measures capture visible policing activity, not actual police presence. Counts of roadblocks, searches, arrests and operations show what police did, not whether officers were in the right places at the right times.
- ▶ Visible presence should be neither spread evenly nor delivered uniformly. Crime, complaints and physical access vary across places and times, as do the forms of presence needed.
- ▶ The SAPS already has much of the information and planning structure needed to improve allocation. The main gaps lie in integrating these sources, analysing demand and deployment within precincts, and coordinating with other public safety providers.

Recommendations

SAPS leadership:

- ▶ Treat visible presence in precincts as a service in its own right, with procedures to assess need, plan and monitor deployment, measure impact and adjust accordingly.
- ▶ Strengthen crime location data and mapping in precincts, make vehicle tracking data more usable, and measure non-vehicle presence.
- ▶ Coordinate with municipal and other public safety partners, through information sharing and regular briefings, so their capacity complements SAPS deployment.
- ▶ Build analytical capacity alongside better technology.

Metropolitan and local government:

- ▶ Plan municipal visible policing around identified gaps in presence: metro police, law enforcement and traffic services can cover public spaces, transport nodes and recurring hotspots.

- ▶ Share information and coordinate with the SAPS to determine where presence is needed.
- ▶ Improve the physical conditions that enable police presence and emergency response, such as roads, lighting, pedestrian access, street names and house numbers.

Policy, oversight and funding bodies:

- ▶ Support the systems, analytical capacity and training needed for more deliberate deployment, including better crime location data, vehicle location reporting, measurement of non-vehicle presence, integrated operational systems, and links between crime analysis and operational management.
- ▶ Scrutinise where, when and why officers are deployed. Deployment should reflect crime, harm, complaints, access and capacity, not activity counts or uniform visibility targets.

Crisis of confidence

South African policing is going through a period of forced renewal. The immediate reasons are serious allegations of criminal infiltration, political interference and corruption at senior levels, which have prompted the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Criminality, Political Interference and Corruption in the Criminal Justice System (Madlanga Commission) and Parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee. There have been several changes in national and provincial leadership.¹

But the crisis of trust is much older. Over 27 years of national surveys, public confidence in the police has never exceeded half among South African adults.² Trust fell to 22% in 2022 and remained there in 2023 and 2024/25, the lowest level recorded since measurement began in 1998. By 2024/25, 62% of adults distrusted the police, while 16% were neutral or uncertain.³

Changes in leadership and action against compromised officials matter, but most people encounter policing at a much more ordinary level. They may not know the name of the National Commissioner or distinguish between the

South African Police Service (SAPS), metro police, traffic officers and other uniformed public safety services. What they do notice is whether officers are present, whether someone answers when they call, whether help arrives and how they are treated when it does.⁴

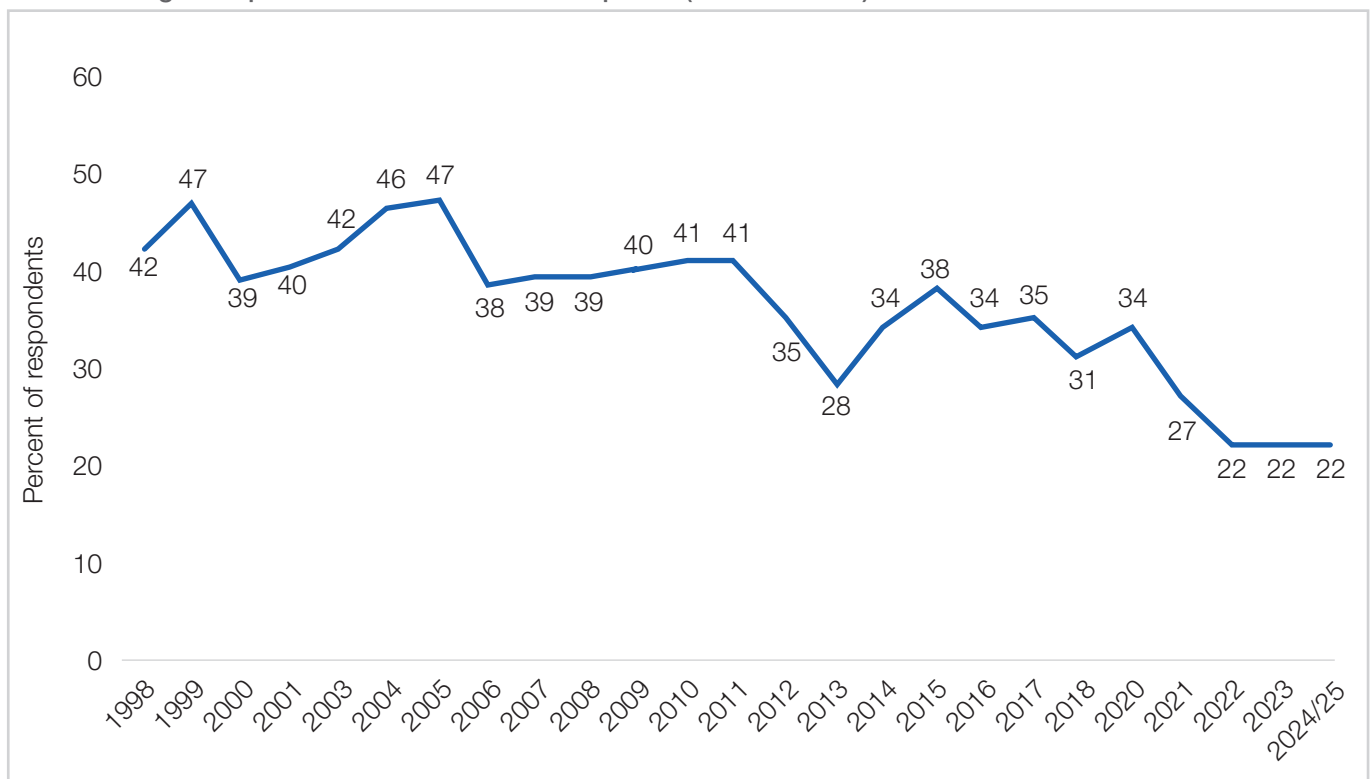
Rebuilding confidence depends on the everyday service people receive. Strengthening the SAPS requires better leadership and integrity, but also clearer operational priorities and better use of resources.⁵ The SAPS' 2025–2030 Strategic Plan recognises public confidence and trust as central to the relationship between police and communities.⁶

This brief focuses on one part of that challenge: how visible police presence can be managed more deliberately as an everyday service, using available capacity where and when it is most needed.

What the public says would increase trust

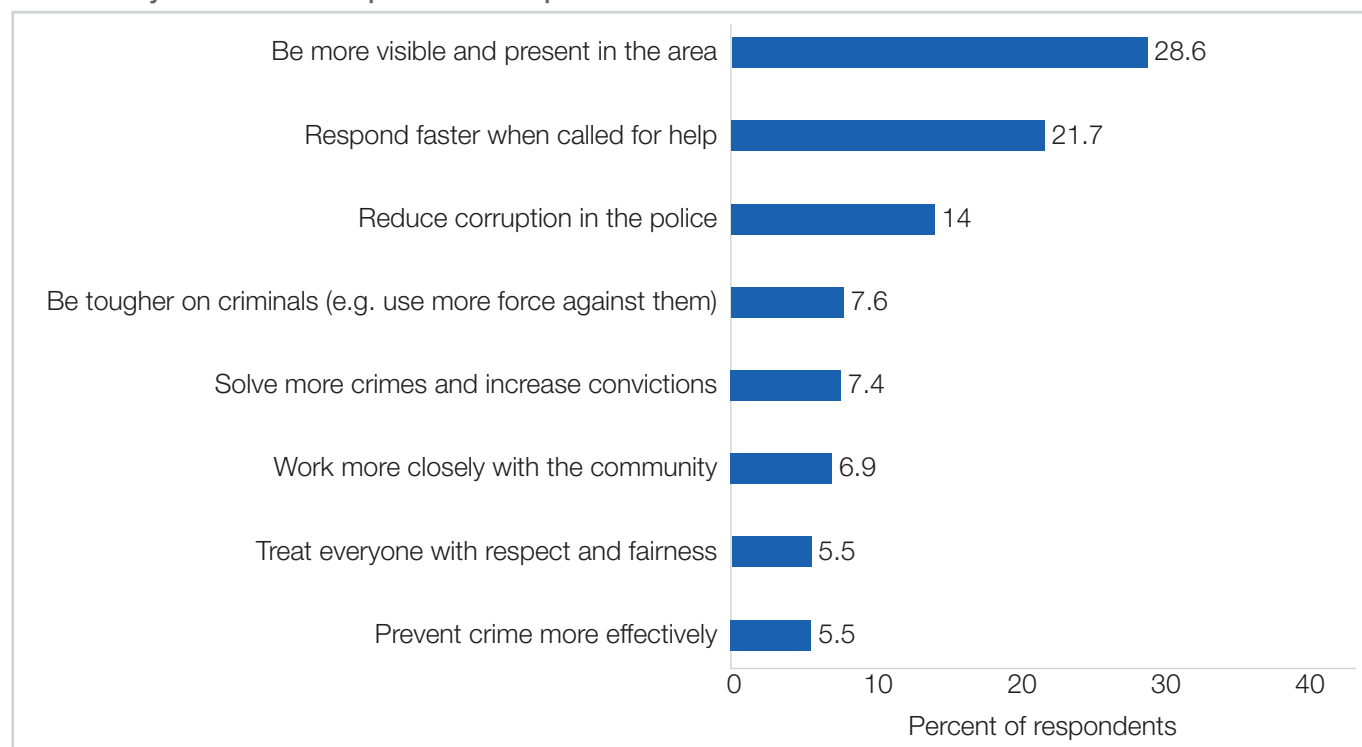
The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) commissioned a question in the 2025 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council. The nationally representative survey

Chart 1: Long-term public trust in South Africa's police (1998–2024/25)



Source: HSRC EPOP 1998–2001; HSRC SASAS 2003–2024/25. No survey was conducted in 2002 or 2019.

Chart 2: Key actions to build public trust in police



Source: HSRC SASAS 2025 (question commissioned by the ISS)

asked 3 279 respondents to choose the one thing police could do that would most increase their trust.

The largest group, 28.6%, chose 'Be more visible and present in the area' as the one action most likely to increase their trust. Another 21.7% chose 'Respond faster when called for help'. Reducing corruption came next, at 14%, while only 7.6% chose tougher treatment of criminals. This is not quite the same as the political language that has often surrounded policing, which has tended to favour tough rhetoric and visible displays of force.

This was a trust question, not a ranking of everything police should do, and respondents could choose only one option.

People may care deeply about investigations, fair treatment or community collaboration without selecting them here.⁷ The results nevertheless point to two very tangible aspects of everyday police service: whether police are visibly present in an area and whether they arrive when called. This brief focuses mainly on the first. The survey referred simply to 'the police' and did not ask respondents to distinguish between the SAPS and other public safety agencies.

Visible presence means officers being physically present and accessible in public spaces such as streets, transport areas and commercial centres. It is not the same as simply conducting more operations or putting more police everywhere. Where and when that presence is provided, what officers do while there and what other police functions must still be performed all matter.

The key questions are where and when visible policing will be useful and what form it should take

Visible presence matters to trust because it is one of the most direct ways people experience whether policing is available and responsive. This is especially relevant in a context where only 36% of South Africans feel safe walking alone in their neighbourhoods after dark.⁸ Investigations and detection are largely invisible to the public, while police presence in streets and other public spaces is something people can directly see and experience.

But the survey does not show that more visible policing will automatically increase trust. Presence alone is unlikely

to help if officers are ineffective, abusive or corrupt, and earlier ISS analysis has warned that general visibility can draw capacity away from more skilled and targeted police work.⁹

The question is therefore not simply how to provide more visible policing, but where and when presence will be most useful, what form it should take and what capacity must remain available for response and other duties. A more targeted approach may mean increasing presence in some places and times, while reducing or changing it elsewhere.

Allocation problem

The public demand for greater visibility sounds simple, but it is not. Police cannot be continuously present everywhere while also responding when called, investigating cases and carrying out the rest of their work.

In some stations, there may be little or no room for discretion around proactive deployment at all. Personnel shortages, vehicle constraints and high volumes of complaints (i.e. requests for police assistance or incidents requiring a response) can mean that most of a shift is already spoken for.¹⁰ This makes it even more important to understand where demands on police capacity are concentrated within the precinct, what capacity is actually available at different times and where additional resources are genuinely needed.

Better allocation of personnel and vehicles is not a substitute for adequate resources, nor is visible policing a solution to crime on its own

Where commanders do have some discretion over patrol time, better information can help them use it more deliberately. Automatic vehicle location (AVL) records the movements of equipped police vehicles. Experimental research has shown that giving commanders AVL information on where unallocated patrol time was being spent helped redirect presence to crime hotspots and was associated with lower crime there.¹¹ Routine management of visible presence should include analysis, deployment, monitoring and adjustment, rather than treating these as ad hoc tasks.

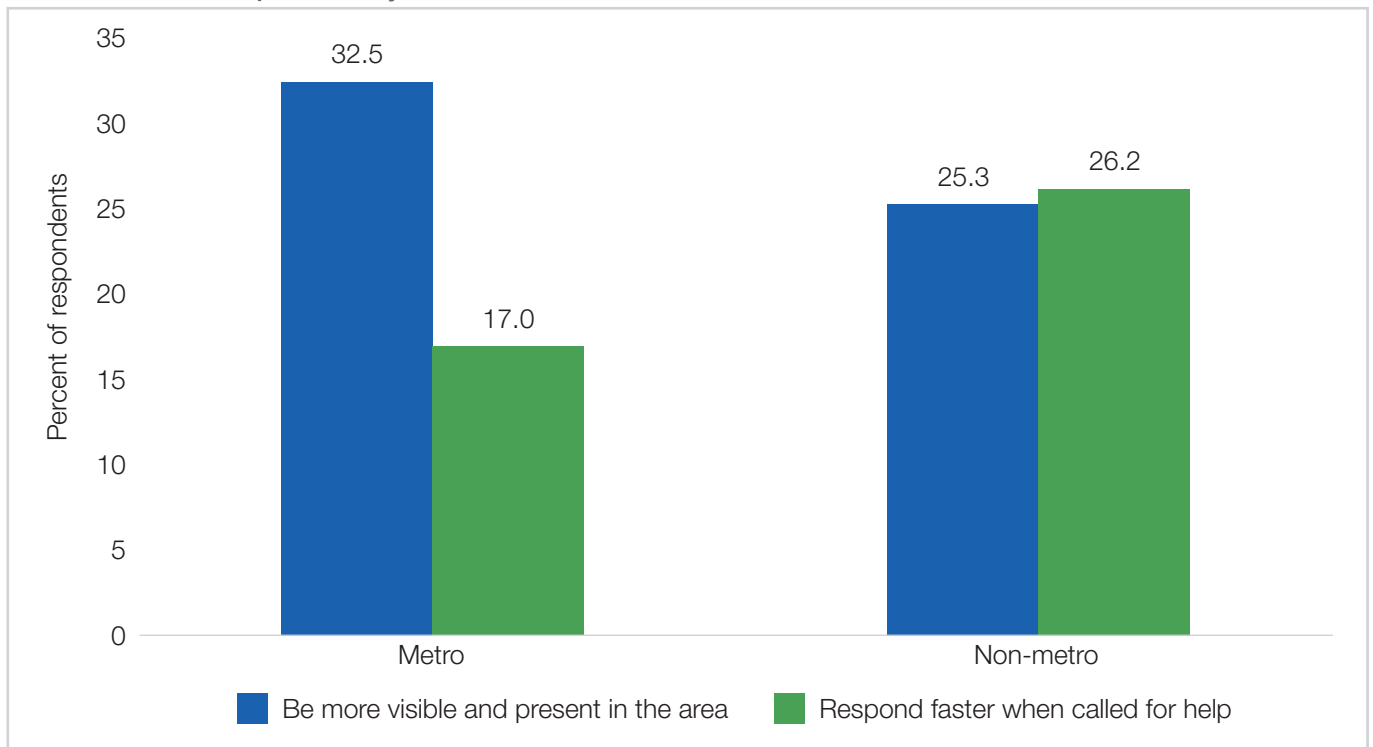
ISS work with SAPS and Western Cape safety partners has reinforced the importance of this management cycle. Instructions need to be specific enough to implement and measure, actual presence needs to be checked against what was planned and deployment should be adjusted as operational conditions and evidence change.

In some places, additional personnel, vehicles or operating budgets will be necessary. Better allocation is not a substitute for adequate resources, nor is visible policing a solution to crime on its own. But resources still have to be deployed: commanders must decide where officers should be, when they are most needed and what capacity must remain available for response.

10%

OF POLICE STATIONS
RECORD HALF OF ALL
MURDERS NATIONALLY

Chart 3: Public trust priorities by metro vs. non-metro location



Source: HSRC SASAS 2025 (question commissioned by the ISS)

The ISS' wider reform proposals have similarly argued for adequate resourcing alongside better use of existing capacity.¹²

Those decisions should not begin from the assumption that every area needs the same thing. Metro respondents were more likely to choose visible presence than faster response, at 32.5% compared to 17%. Outside metros, the two were almost evenly matched, at 25.3% and 26.2%. On farms, faster response was even more prominent, although the sample was small.

One possible explanation is practicality. In dense urban areas, people may place more value on police presence at particular streets, transport points or public spaces. In dispersed areas, the more pressing concern may be whether police can cover the distance when help is needed. The survey cannot test this explanation, but the difference reinforces the point that 'visibility' should not be treated as one standard service everywhere.

The same applies in cities. Serious violence in public spaces is not spread evenly, but clusters in particular places, often at fairly predictable times. In the first quarter of 2026, around 10% of police stations accounted for half of all murders recorded nationally,¹³ while analysis

within precincts has found even sharper concentrations around particular street segments and small areas.¹⁴

The SAPS already identifies priority stations for additional operational attention and resources. The same logic needs to extend further within precincts. A station identified as high priority still contains places and times of very different risk and demand.

Equal distribution of resources may look fair on paper while leaving the greatest need poorly served

Time matters as much as place. In one analysis of aggravated robbery in Nyanga, almost a third of incidents occurred in two one-hour periods, early in the morning and in the evening.¹⁵ A vehicle patrolling the right area at midday is not providing the same service as one available during the hours of greatest risk.

This does not mean that other areas can be ignored. Every precinct still needs response capacity and ordinary police service. It does mean that spreading visible patrols evenly is likely to waste a scarce resource.

Equal distribution may look fair on paper while leaving the greatest need poorly served.

Deployment decisions should instead take into account concentrations of the crimes that cause the most harm,¹⁶ where complaints originate, travel time and the capacity already available in each area. Commanders then need to decide what form of presence is useful and what capacity must remain available for response.

This logic is not new to the SAPS. Sector policing is already based on dividing precincts into smaller areas, understanding their particular crime and service problems and assigning responsibility for policing them. Better information on actual presence could strengthen this approach by helping commanders see whether planned sector coverage was delivered, where response and other duties are pulling capacity away and where deployment may need to be adjusted.

International evidence shows that hotspot policing can produce modest but consistent reductions in crime, with benefits often extending into surrounding areas

Hotspot policing applies the same place-based logic on a smaller scale, concentrating police presence at particular places and times where crime is most concentrated. International evidence shows that this can produce modest but consistent reductions in crime, with benefits often extending into surrounding areas.¹⁷ Hotspot policing can reduce crime, but the argument here is broader: if the SAPS is going to devote scarce capacity to visible presence, it should be clear where, when and why that presence is being used. Better information on where officers spend their time would strengthen hotspot policing as well as other existing approaches.

Managing police capacity in space and time

The SAPS is already taking steps to improve response times. Its 2026/27 Annual Performance Plan provides for a new incident management solution at 10111 centres to improve call handling, dispatch and response.¹⁸ This is important, although it covers calls routed through 10111 rather than all requests for assistance made directly to stations. It also addresses only one side of what survey respondents asked for.

Visible presence is measured less directly. The SAPS records roadblocks, searches, arrests and other operations associated with visible policing, while its Service Delivery Improvement Plan measures whether stations conduct weekly operations against identified crime generators.¹⁹ These remain important operational measures, but they show what police did rather than where officers were actually present, whether deployment matched need or how much capacity remained available for response.

Activity
≠
Presence

COUNTS OF ROADBLOCKS,
SEARCHES AND ARRESTS
SHOW WHAT POLICE DID, NOT
WHERE OFFICERS WERE

The SAPS already has planning and operational structures that could use better information on presence, including sector policing, crime analysis and the Operational Planning and Monitoring System. The missing piece is a clearer picture of how planned deployment translates into actual police presence across places and shifts. Measuring where and when officers were present would help commanders compare planned and delivered deployment, understand the trade-offs between proactive presence, response and other duties, and adjust accordingly.

Visible presence risks favouring the places easiest to reach by vehicle, not those where it is most needed

This should not become another uniform compliance target. Numerical targets can be useful for defined interventions, such as hotspot patrols, where a specified level of presence is part of the design. Applied broadly, however, they risk encouraging stations to maximise what is counted rather than make sensible operational trade-offs.

Better measurement of presence also does not imply that any police presence is beneficial or replace measures of enforcement activity, conduct or integrity. Abuse, intimidation and solicitation of bribes can themselves damage trust and must be addressed through their own accountability systems.

Where vehicle patrols cannot reach

Relying on vehicle patrols to provide visible presence has limits. Some high-demand places are difficult or impossible to patrol effectively by vehicle, including parts of informal settlements, transport interchanges, pedestrianised areas and dense central business district spaces.

In informal settlements, narrow footpaths, poor lighting, missing street names and limited road access can also slow response. The Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Police Inefficiency and a Breakdown in Relations between SAPS and the Community of Khayelitsha found that informal settlements were particularly difficult to police and that regular visible

patrols were often lacking, recommending specific guidance for policing these areas.²⁰

This is also a measurement problem. Vehicle tracking shows where a van went, but not whether officers continued on foot or reached areas beyond vehicle access. The SAPS therefore needs a simple way to record foot patrols and other deployments that AVL cannot capture.

The appropriate form of presence will vary by place. In some areas this may mean foot patrols, smaller vehicles, fixed contact points where the public can find or approach officers, or joint deployment with municipal services. Municipalities must also improve the physical conditions that make policing and emergency response possible, including roads, lighting, clear street names and house numbering, and pedestrian access.

Otherwise, efforts to improve visible presence risk favouring the places that are easiest to reach by vehicle rather than those where police presence is most needed.

Use the whole public safety system

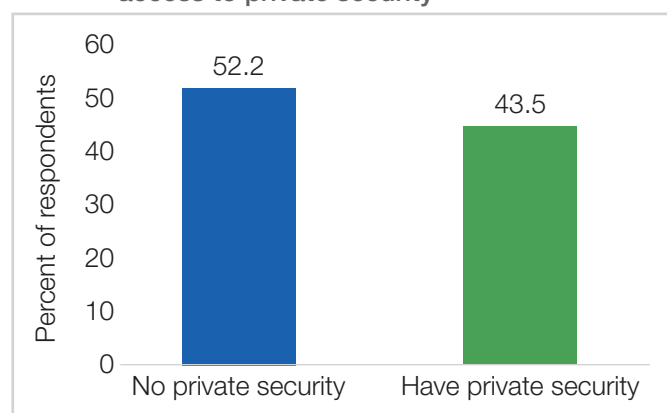
The SAPS is not the only provider of visible safety capacity in public spaces. Metro police, municipal law enforcement, traffic services, private security and community safety structures also put substantial capacity into these areas. The problem is that this capacity is distributed unevenly. Some areas have several overlapping layers of patrol and surveillance, while others depend much more heavily on public policing.

The survey provides some suggestive evidence of this difference. Visible presence or faster response were the priority for a majority (52.2%) of respondents without private home security, compared with 43.5% of those with private security.

Importantly, these were still the leading priorities among both groups. The difference should also be interpreted cautiously: access to private security is closely related to income, geography and other characteristics, and the survey cannot tell us whether private security itself explains the pattern. The result therefore does not justify shifting public policing away from areas with private security.

It does, however, point to a broader practical point: people with access to private patrol and response

Chart 4: Respondents who prioritised visible presence or faster response, by household access to private security



Source: HSRC SASAS 2025 (question commissioned by the ISS)

services have an additional source of safety capacity when public policing is stretched. Those without it depend more heavily on what the SAPS, municipalities and other public providers can deliver.

Local safety planning should therefore start with a clear picture of the total capacity already present within each precinct and its smaller operational areas: who patrols, when, with what powers and where additional presence is most needed. For this to work, information sharing needs to go both ways.

The SAPS should share sufficiently detailed, appropriately protected information on where crime and serious harm are concentrated, while municipalities and other authorised public safety providers should share information from their own systems so that deployment can be planned around a fuller picture of local risk, demand and existing capacity.

Whether people have private security should not determine their access to safety

The SAPS, metro police and municipal law enforcement have different mandates and capabilities, but all can contribute to visible presence in public spaces. Municipal safety services are particularly well placed to provide regular presence around transport routes, public spaces and recurring local problem areas, complementing SAPS deployment rather than simply duplicating it.

Private security can form part of this wider picture through better communication and coordination, but whether people have private security should not determine their access to safety. Police leaders and city governments need an intentional plan for which agency is best placed to provide additional visible presence where it is needed.

What new police leaders should build

The SAPS already has many of the basic ingredients for more deliberate allocation of visible presence: crime analysis, operational planning processes and vehicle tracking. The challenge is bringing them together in a way that gives commanders a clear picture of demand and deployment across a precinct. They should be able to see which sectors and geoblocks generate the most demand, when that demand occurs, what was planned, and what officers and vehicles were in fact deployed.

In practical terms, this could be as simple as comparing the patrol time planned for a defined hotspot during identified high-risk hours with the patrol time actually delivered there.

The problem is not a lack of systems. The SAPS already has several operational platforms, but the information they hold is difficult to use together. Crime, complaints, deployment and resource information should be easier to combine and interpret at the station level. The priority is not sophisticated modelling, but simple products that help commanders make routine deployment decisions quickly.

That should not be an excuse to ignore the larger problem of technology and analytical capacity. Better-integrated systems, more reliable location and deployment data and stronger capacity to bring together crime, demand and resource information across place and time will be needed over the longer term. The purpose is to turn better data into operational guidance that commanders can use. Useful improvements can still be made now while those more fundamental problems are addressed.

Better information will not create capacity where none exists. In many stations, shortages of personnel, vehicles and time are the binding constraint. Nor does putting information on a dashboard mean that it will be interpreted or acted on. Its value is in showing where

pressures are most acute and, where some discretion remains, helping commanders use available capacity more deliberately.

The aim should therefore be to strengthen existing decision making, not create another parallel planning or reporting system. Standardised analysis, planning and review products should be simple, quick to interpret and easy to use routinely, bringing together crime, complaints, available capacity and actual deployment. Commanders should use them to inform deployment, assess results and adjust where conditions change.

Crime location data remains a weak point. Earlier work in Cape Town found incidents plotted on artificial grids or attached to familiar landmarks rather than their actual locations, creating false hotspots and hiding real ones.²¹ Precincts are too large for many local deployment decisions. The SAPS already uses sectors and Crime Administration System geoblocks, but these need accurate digital boundaries linked to crime, complaints and deployment data.

AVL could be used more effectively, although the current system has real limitations. Device functionality, connectivity and signal coverage are uneven, and wider procurement and system issues will not be solved quickly.²²

Even within those constraints, existing AVL data can be turned into more useful management information, with simple visual reports showing where vehicles with functioning AVL equipment went, when they were there

and how long they stayed. Deployment should not default to what AVL records most easily. Foot patrol, smaller vehicles and fixed contact points may be more appropriate in some areas and should also be recognised in planning and review.

The SAPS does not need to wait for these larger system problems to be solved before making better use of the data it already has. At the same time, the technology, procurement and data-integration problems that constrain deployment information still need to be addressed.

The SAPS does not need to wait to make better use of the data it already has

The aim is not visibility for its own sake, another numerical target, or an additional reporting burden. Much of what is proposed here is about using existing police capacity more deliberately, rather than adding new capacity. Better deployment cannot, however, compensate for serious resource shortages or address the causes of crime on its own. What it can do is help ensure that available capacity is directed to the places and times where it is most needed.

Managed well, visible presence can therefore become both a more effective use of scarce police capacity and a more reliable everyday service to the public – one contribution to rebuilding trust.

Notes

- 1 The analysis in this policy brief draws on commissioned South African Social Attitudes Survey data, published research and the Institute for Security Studies' (ISS) ongoing work with South African Police Service (SAPS) and Western Cape safety partners on the design, implementation and monitoring of targeted police deployment. Operational observations about vehicle tracking, crime location data and deployment practice are informed partly by this work.
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