

## Crime and insecurity remain near the top of South Africans' agenda

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 154 | Anyway Chingwete**

### Summary

Though an economic magnet, South Africa is still grappling with serious problems of crime and violence. Both Statistics South Africa and the government's 20-year review (Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, 2015) reveal significant progress, but both also confirm continued disturbingly high levels of violence. The Victims of Crime Survey 2015/16 (Statistics South Africa, 2016) found that while the number of South African households that experienced housebreakings and home robberies declined between 2010 and 2016 (from 6.8% to 5.7%), more South Africans perceived crime to have increased (41.7% in 2015/2016 vs. 31.2% in 2010).

Moller (2005) notes that crime has long been a problem in South Africa and indeed increased steadily prior to the 1994 transition, at a time when the police force was focused on quelling political unrest and neglected criminal activity. Gould (2014), a senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies, argues that "it should come as no surprise that crime and violence remain disturbingly high in South Africa. What is surprising is that there isn't even more crime and violence, considering how we have dealt with our violent past, that we have increasing poverty and inequality, and have failed as a country to secure confidence in and respect for the rule of law." The post-1994- government took steps to address crime and violence, including the 1996 National Crime Prevention Strategy and the 1998 white paper on safety and security, and made crime reduction a strategic priority of its National Development Plan (South Africa National Planning Commission).

Despite these efforts, South Africa ranks among the world's most violent countries, according to the Global Peace Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2016): 126th out of 163 for overall peacefulness and 184th out of 193 based on homicide rates and perceptions of safe walking. The index report notes that "a weak and mistrusted security apparatus" may make it hard for the country to build on its progress going forward (p. 19). In addition to its devastating impact on individuals, crime and violence carry a high economic price for the country. The Institute for Economics and Peace estimates the economic impact of violence containment in South Africa at \$66.7 billion (R989 billion) for the past year and pegs the national cost of violence in South Africa at 19% of the gross domestic product (GDP) – the 16th-highest rate in the world (average 13% of GDP) (BusinessTech, 2016).

Findings of the 2015 national Afrobarometer survey confirm that ordinary South Africans are deeply concerned about their personal safety. As they have for the past decade, citizens continue to rank crime and insecurity as their nation's second-most-important problem, after unemployment. Levels of fear and experience of crime remain steady and high. Majorities – among the highest levels in Southern Africa – report feeling unsafe walking in their neighbourhoods and fearing crime in their homes. Poor and jobless South Africans are most likely to report having been victims of theft and physical attack. Non-black South Africans, especially Indian citizens, report an increase in physical attacks compared to 2011.

In line with Gould's (2014) argument that a failure to "secure confidence in and respect for the rule of law" contributes to the country's high crime rate, survey respondents are increasingly critical of unequal treatment under the law and express less trust in the police and the courts than in the past.

### **Afrobarometer survey**

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across Africa. Six rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2015. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 2,400 adult South Africans in August and September 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2011.

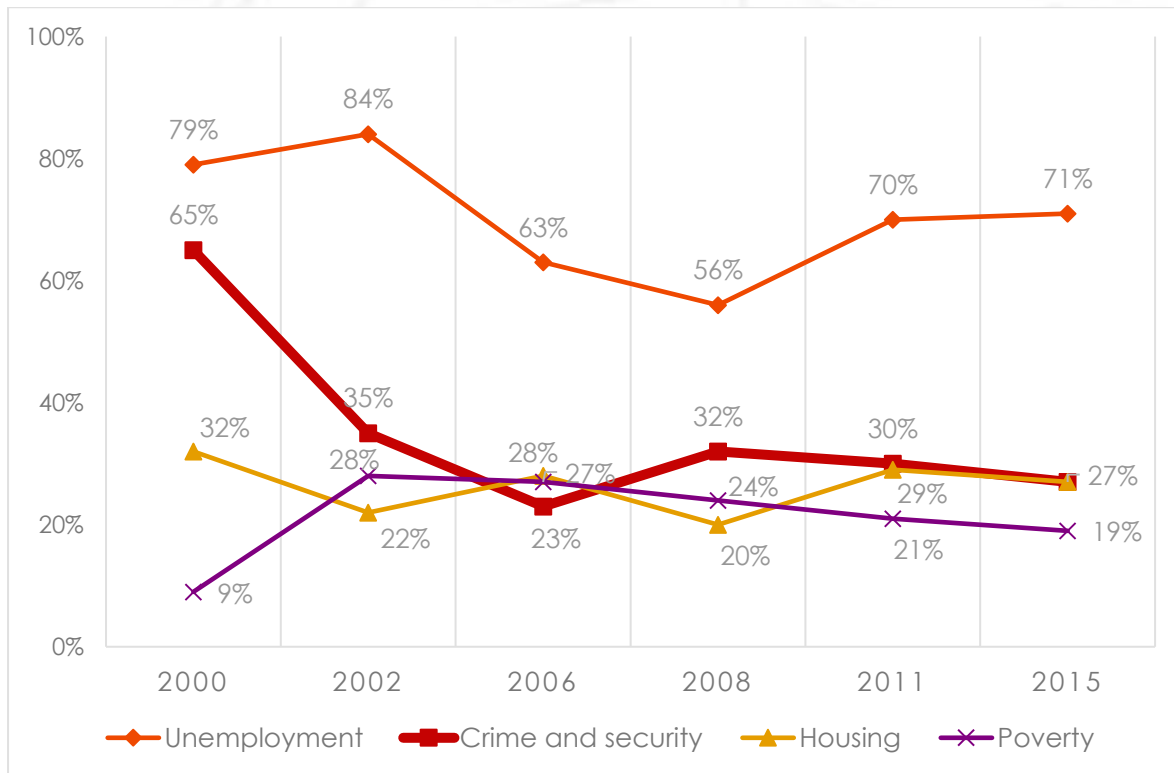
### **Key findings**

- Crime/insecurity continues to rank second among the most important problems that South Africans want their government to address.
- Majorities of South Africans say they felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood (60%) and feared crime in their homes (53%) at least once during the previous year. Across 11 countries surveyed in the Southern Africa region, South Africa ranks second after Madagascar in the proportion of citizens who report feeling unsafe and fearing crime.
- Substantial proportions of citizens report having experienced theft in their home (28%) and physical attacks (13%) during the preceding year. Experience of crime is more common amongst Indian South Africans than other racial groups and amongst poor citizens compared to their wealthier counterparts.
- A growing number of South Africans say that people are "often" or "always" treated unequally under the law (63%, up from 49% in 2011) and that officials who commit crimes "often" or "always" go unpunished (68%, up from 56%). Across 11 surveyed countries in Southern Africa, South Africans are the most likely to perceive unequal treatment under the law.
- Fewer than half (45%) of South Africans say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot" (down from 49% in 2011), and public trust in courts of law dropped by 10 percentage points, to 56%.

### **Crime and security a high priority for South Africans**

When South Africans are asked to identify the most serious problems facing their country, crime and security consistently rank high – generally in second place behind unemployment (Figure 1). The proportion of citizens citing crime and security among their top three concerns declined dramatically between 2000 (65%) and 2006 (23%), perhaps reflecting the government's stated commitment to reducing crime after the country's transition to democracy. Since then this proportion has hovered around three in 10, tying with housing in second place (27%) in 2015.

**Figure 1: Citizens' top-priority concerns | South Africa | 2000-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that the government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. Numbers shown are % of all respondents identifying each problem as one of their three most important problems. Since respondents could give more than one response, numbers total more than 100%.)

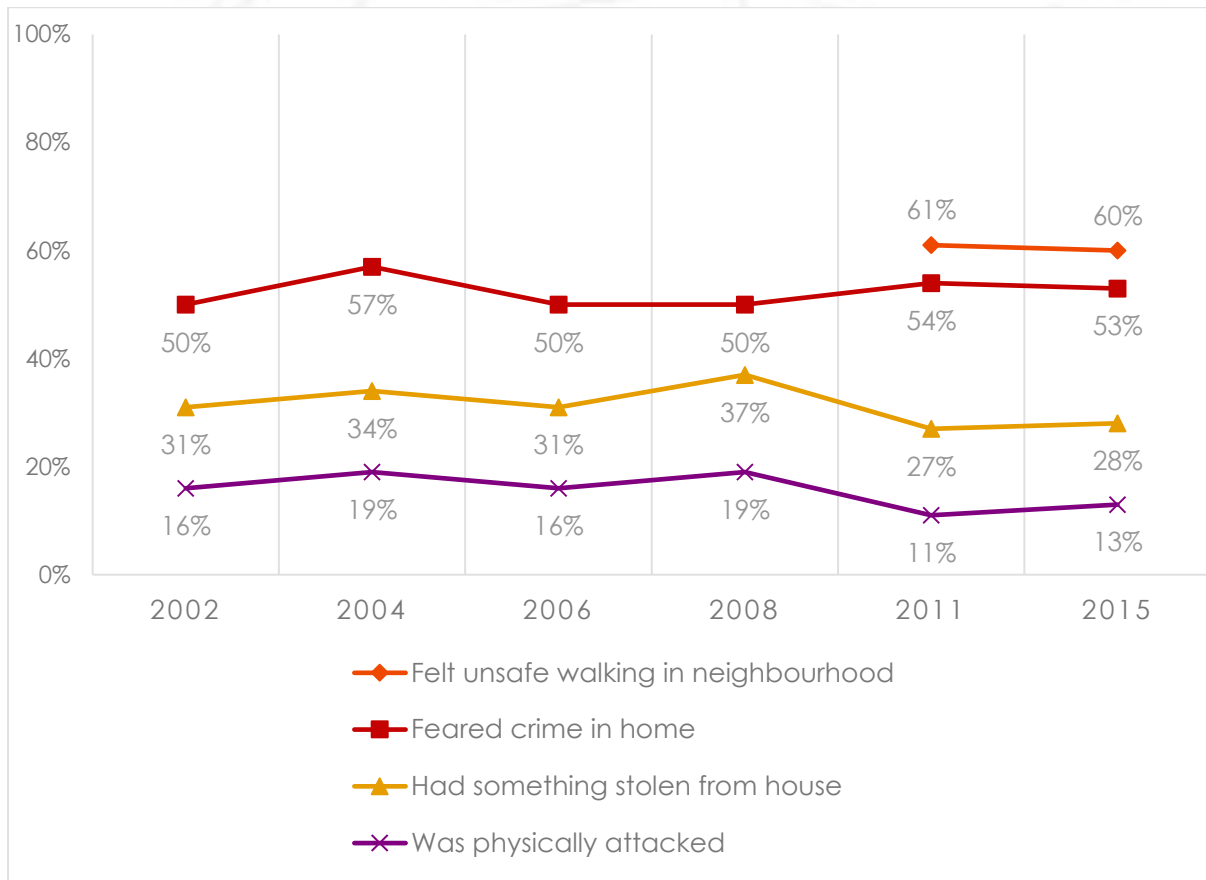
### Fear and experience of crime

Substantial numbers of South Africans report fearing and experiencing crime and violence. Six in 10 (60%) say they felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year, while a majority (53%) say they feared crime in their homes – both about the same proportions as in 2011 (Figure 2). About three in 10 (28%) say they experienced theft in their homes during the previous year, while about one in eight (13%) report being physically attacked – both levels unchanged since 2011 but lower than in 2008.

Amongst 11 surveyed countries in the Southern Africa region, South Africa ranks second after Madagascar in the proportion of citizens who report feeling unsafe walking in the neighbourhood and fearing crime in the home (Figure 3), at 17 and 13 percentage points, respectively, above the regional averages. In sharp contrast, Mauritius, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Swaziland fall below the regional averages in experience of fear of violence and crime.

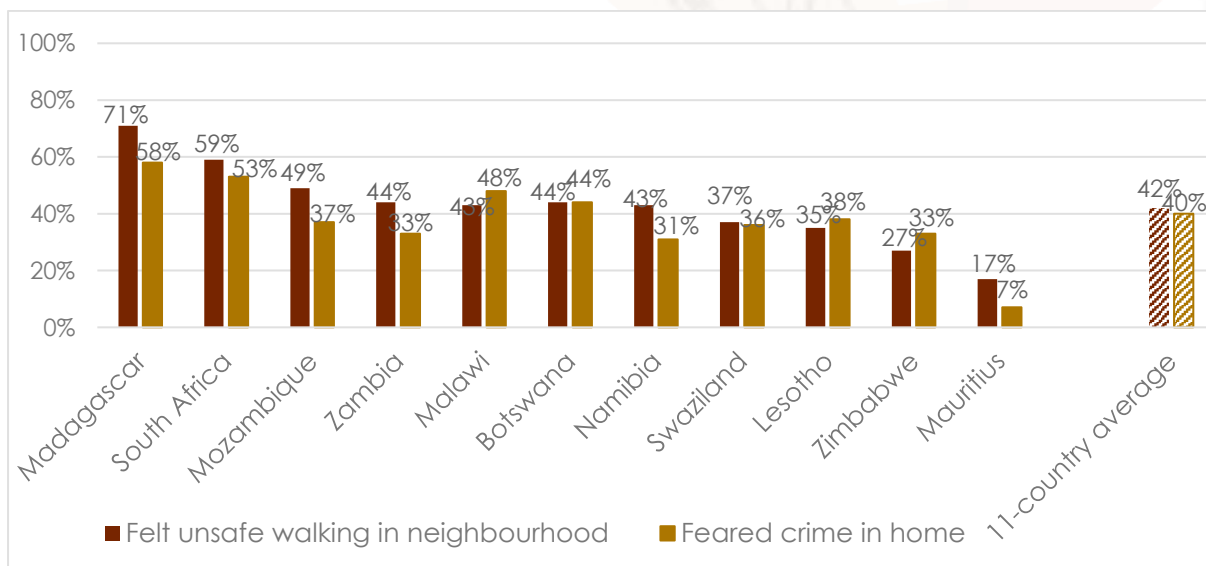
Analysis by race shows that Indian South Africans are most likely to experience physical attack (21%) and theft from the home (39%), followed by Coloured (15% and 32%, respectively) and black citizens (13% and 26%) (Figures 4a and 4b). Most racial groups witnessed increasing physical attacks between 2002 to 2008, which then dipped in 2011 before rising again.

**Figure 2: Fear and experience of crime | South Africa | 2015**



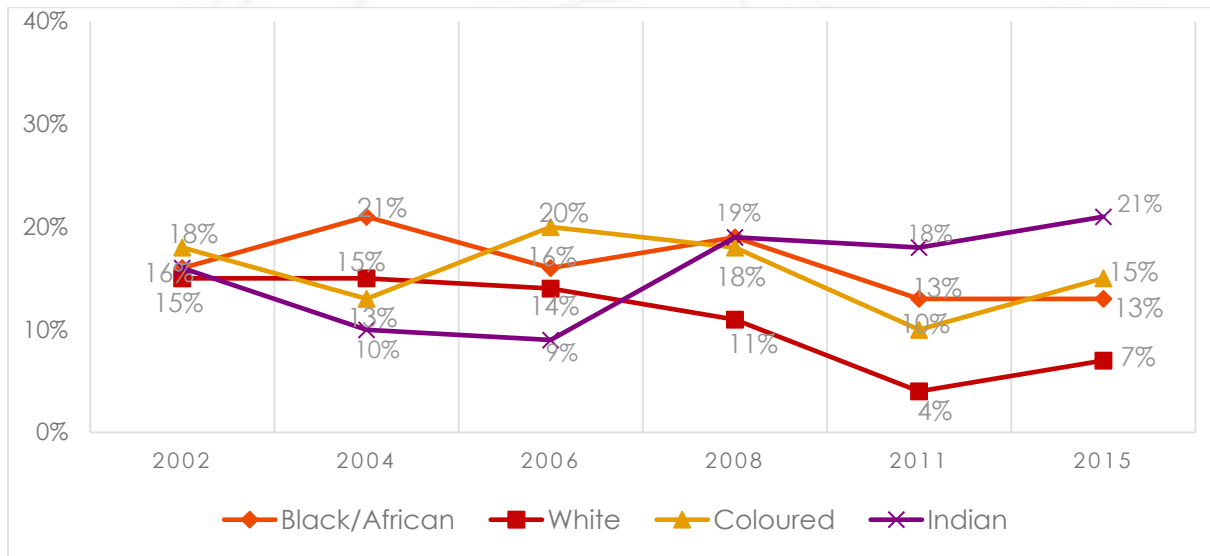
**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your home? Had something stolen in your home? Been physically attacked? (% who say “once,” “twice,” or “three or more times”)

**Figure 3: Fear of violence and crime | 11 countries in Southern Africa | 2014/2015**



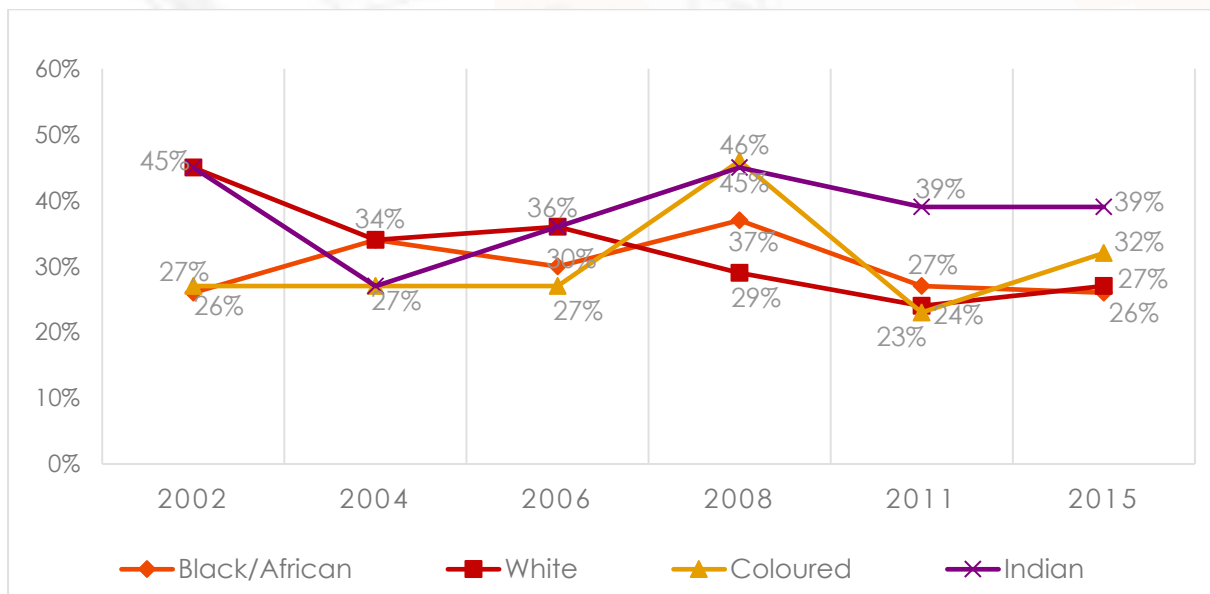
**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your home? (% who say “once,” “twice,” or “three or more times”)

**Figure 4a: Experience of physical attacks** | by racial group | South Africa | 2002-2015



**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family been physically attacked? (% who say "once," "twice," or "three or more times")

**Figure 4b: Experience of theft** | by racial group | South Africa | 2002-2015



**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family had something stolen from your house? (% who say "once," "twice," or "three or more times")

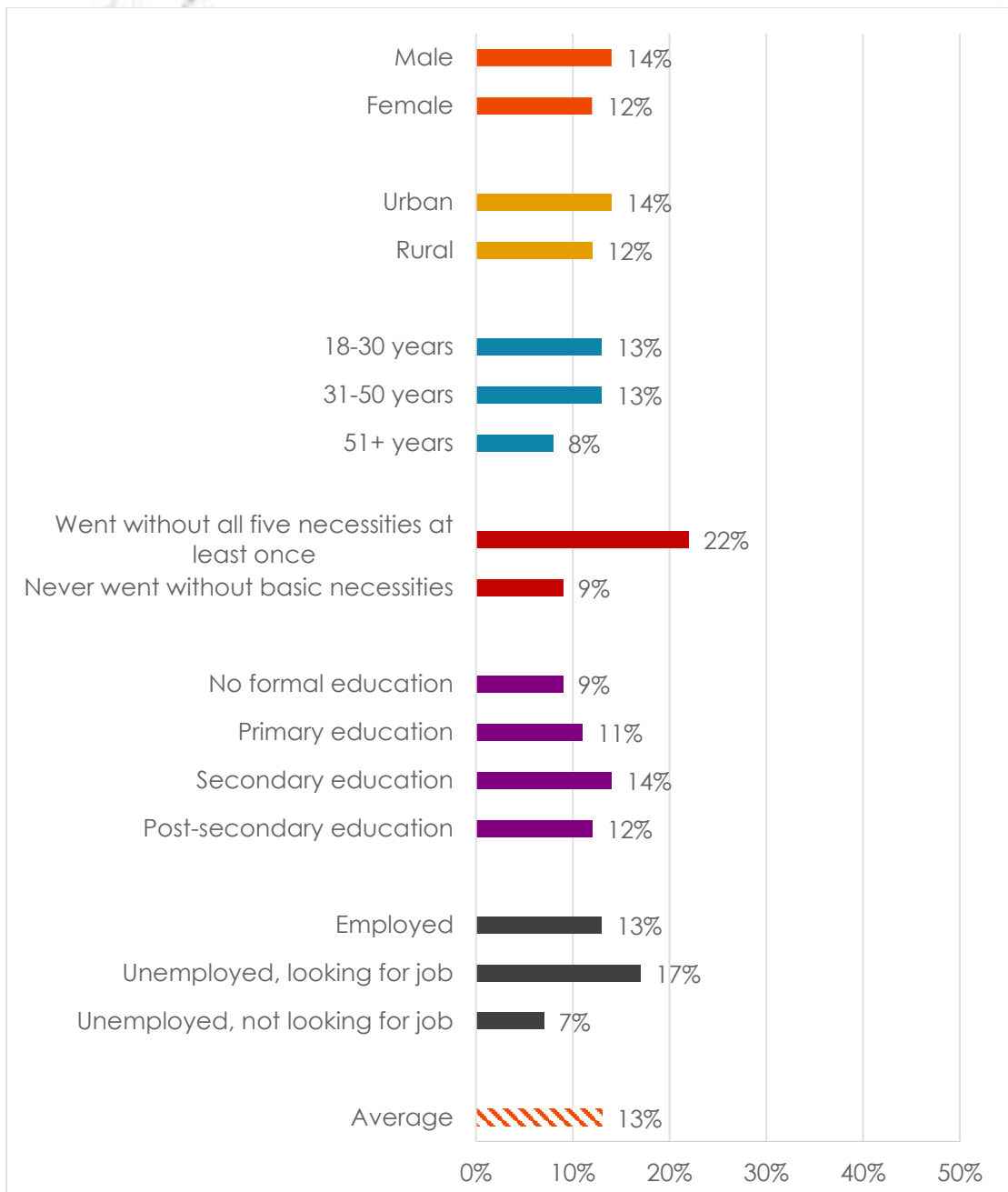
The likelihood of physical attack also varies somewhat by respondents' socio-economic status, age, education, and employment status (Figure 5). For example, citizens with high levels of lived poverty – i.e. who went without five basic necessities<sup>1</sup> at least once during the previous year – are more likely to experience physical attacks (22%) than wealthy

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer measures "lived poverty" by how often respondents or their families went without enough food, enough clean water, medicine or medical care, enough cooking fuel, and/or a cash income during the previous year.



respondents who never went without any of these five necessities (9%). While reports of physical attacks vary little by gender or urban/rural residence, older citizens (aged 51 and above) are least likely to say they were attacked (8%, compared to 13% of younger respondents). Citizens with at least a secondary education are slightly more likely to report attacks than their less-educated counterparts, and unemployed job-seekers report more attacks than those who are employed or those who are unemployed but not looking for a job.

**Figure 5: Experience of physical attack** | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2015



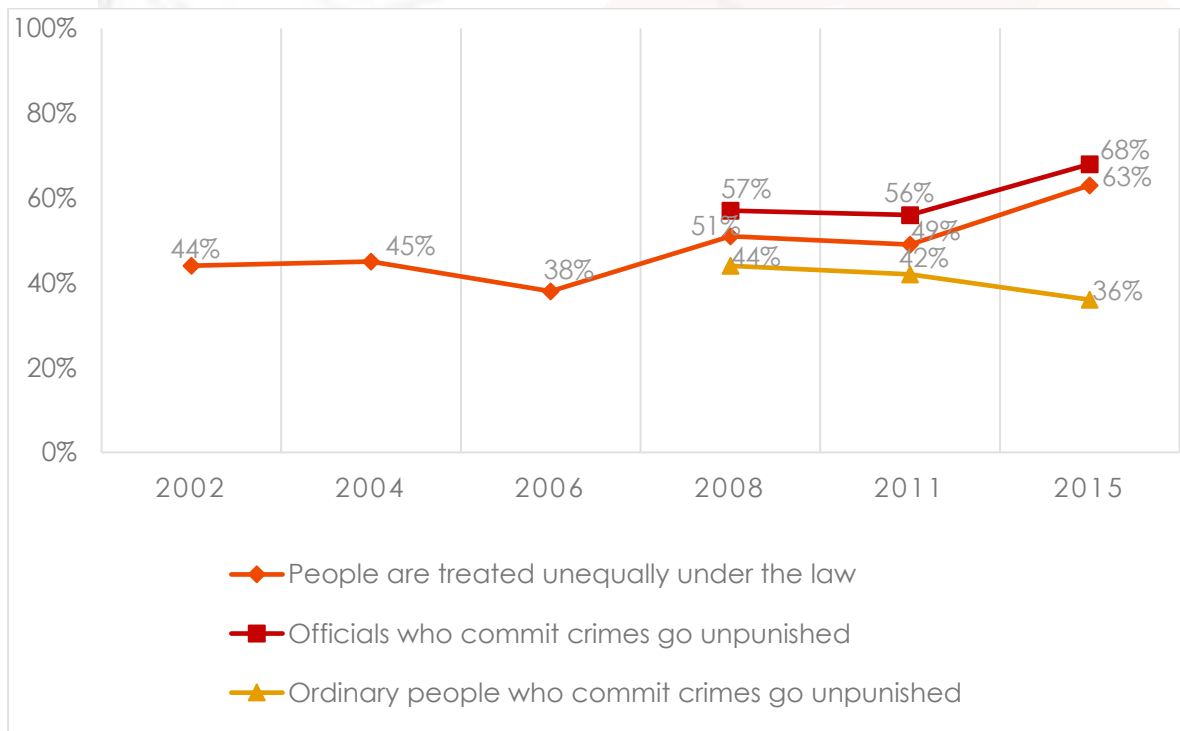
**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family been physically attacked? (% who say "once," "twice," or "three or more times")

## Perceptions of unequal treatment under the law

As Gould (2014) notes, an analysis of crime and violence in South Africa requires an understanding of the history of South Africans' attitudes toward their laws, policing, and the criminal justice system. Until the democratic transition of 1994, South Africans had little reason to respect the apartheid era's unjust and unfairly laws, and no reason to believe in the rule of law. Gould argues that even post-transition South Africa has failed to eradicate all vestiges of unequal treatment under the law.

Our data show that South Africans are increasingly critical of unequal application of laws (Figure 6). In 2015, almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents say people are "often" or "always" treated unequally under the law, up from 44% in 2002 and 49% in 2011. Similarly, more than two-thirds (68%) say that officials who commit crimes "often" or "always" go unpunished – a 12-percentage-point increase since 2011 (56%). Conversely, fewer South Africans believe that ordinary citizens who commit crimes escape the wrath of the law (36%, compared to 44% in 2008).

**Figure 6: Unequal treatment under the law | South Africa | 2002-2015**

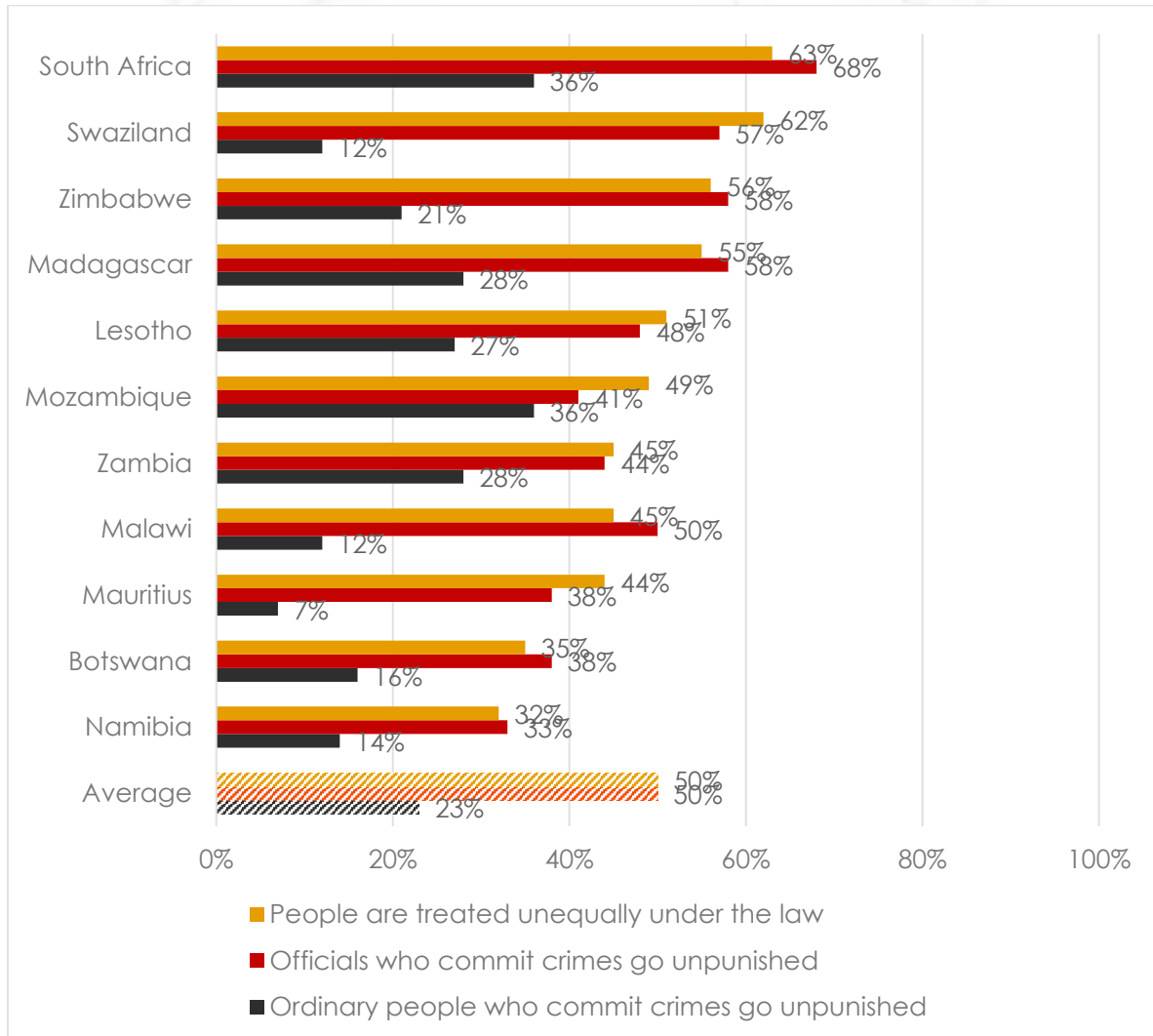


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often, in this country:

- Are people treated unequally under the law?
  - Do officials who commit crimes go unpunished?
  - Do ordinary people who break the laws go unpunished?
- (% who say "often" or "always")

Among 11 countries surveyed in Southern Africa, South Africans are the most likely to perceive unequal treatment under the law – 13 percentage points above the regional average (50%) and almost twice as likely as Namibians (32%) and Botswana (35%) (Figure 7). Majorities see such inequality in Swaziland (62%), Zimbabwe (56%), Madagascar (55%), and Lesotho (51%). Similarly, South Africa leads the field in perceptions that officials who break the law go unpunished.

**Figure 7: Unequal treatment under the law** | 11 countries in Southern Africa  
 | 2014/2015



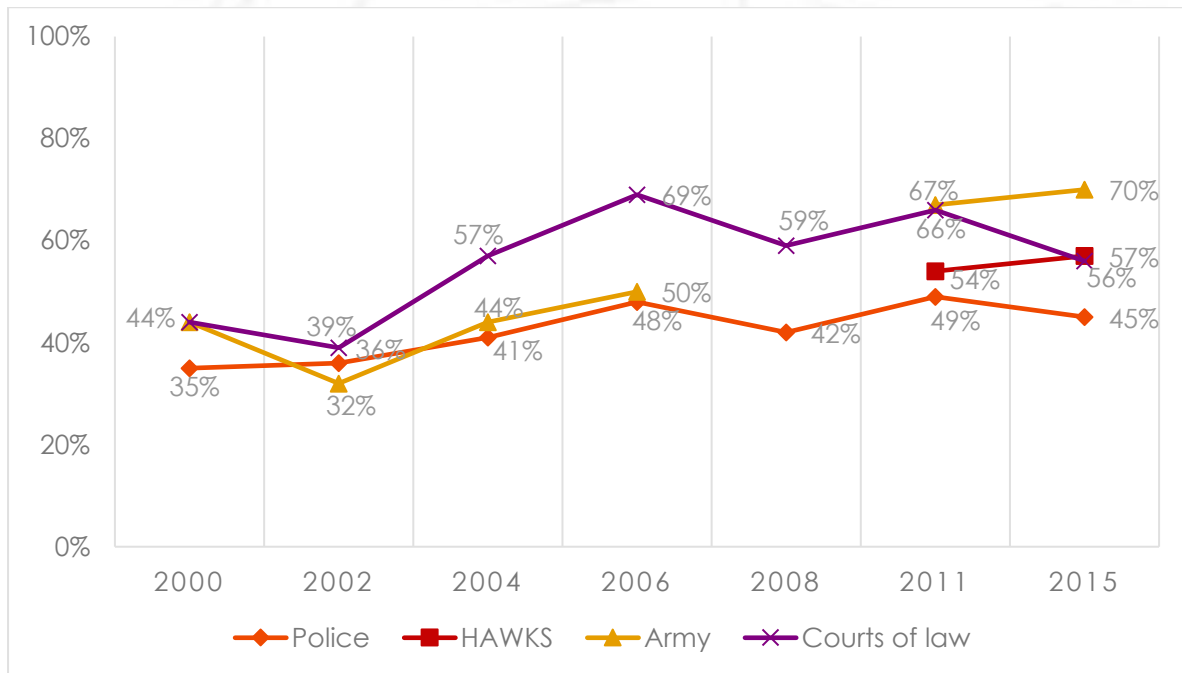
**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often, in this country:  
 a. Are people treated unequally under the law?  
 b. Do officials who commit crimes go unpunished?  
 c. Do ordinary people who break the law go unpunished?  
 (% who say "often" or "always")

**Trust in security institutions**

Perceptions of unequal treatment may undermine public trust in the security institutions charged with helping citizens who experience crime and violence. Public trust in the police has been consistently low in South Africa: On average since 2000, only 42% of respondents have said they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot" (45% in 2015, down from 49% in 2011) (Figure 8). Trust in the courts dropped by 10 percentage points between 2011 (66%) and 2015 (56%), to its lowest level since 2002. In contrast, popular trust in the army continued its upward climb to 70%, making it the most trusted security institution, well ahead of the Directorate of Priority Crime Investigations (HAWKS) (57%). (For more on public trust in South Africa's institutions, see Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 90, at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).)



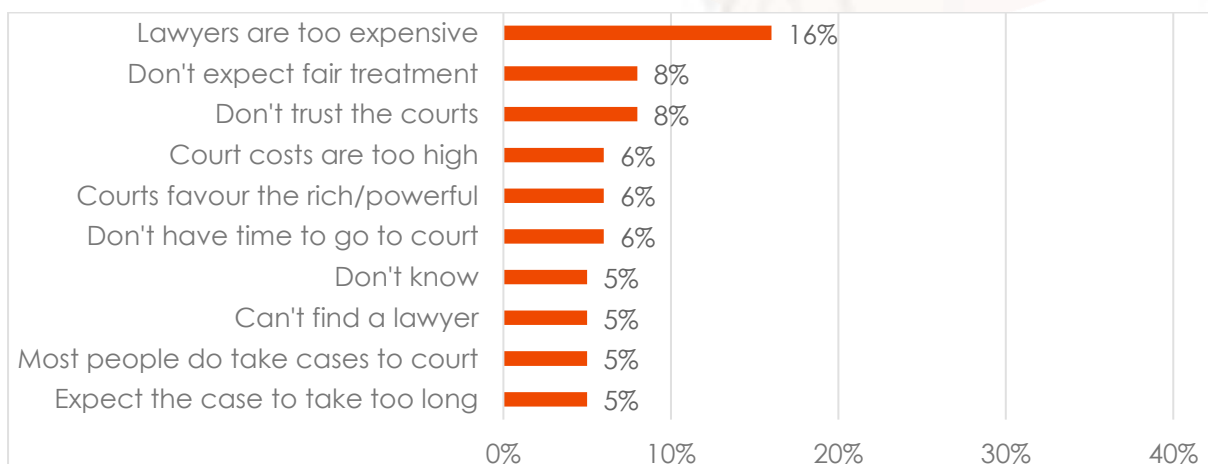
**Figure 8: Trust in security institutions | South Africa | 2000-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

A lack of faith in the legal system is also apparent when South Africans are asked why some citizens do not take their cases to the courts even if they think they have legitimate complaints and deserve justice. Among the most frequently cited reasons are that citizens do not expect fair treatment (cited as the most important reason by 8% of respondents), they don't trust the courts (8%), the courts favour the rich and powerful (6%), and they think that judges or court officials will demand money (4%) (Figure 9). (For more on perceptions of the courts and access to justice across 36 African countries, see Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 39, at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).)

**Figure 9: Reasons for not taking cases to court | South Africa | 2015**

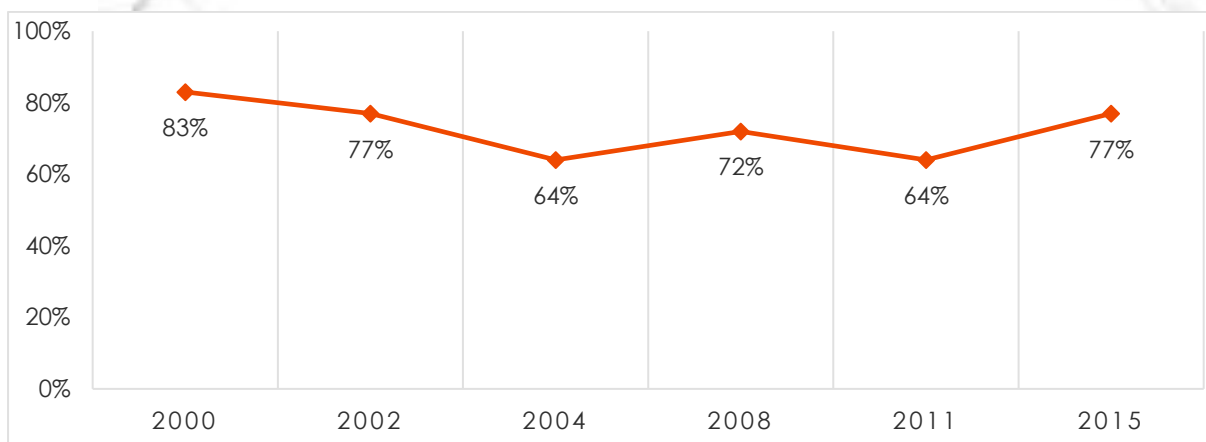


**Respondents were asked:** Sometimes people do not take a case to the government courts, even if they think they have a legitimate complaint and deserve justice. In your opinion, what would be the most important reason that people like yourself would not take a case to court? (Note: Respondents were allowed to give up to two responses; the figure above represents the first responses.)

### Government performance on fighting crime

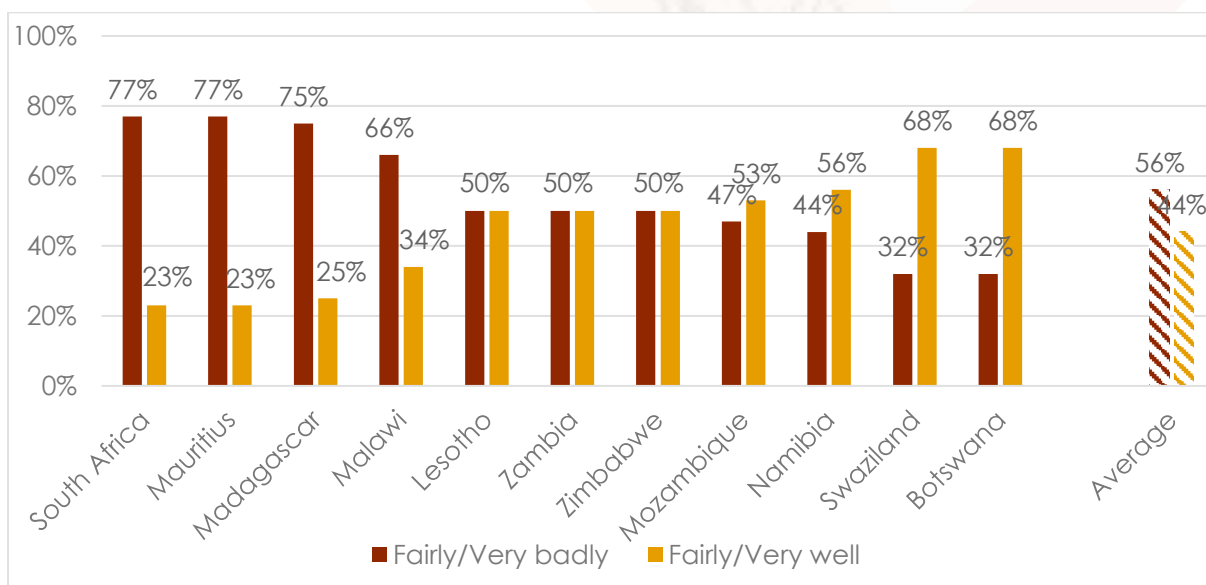
Whilst the government has vowed to fight crime as part of its National Development Plan commitment, three-fourths (77%) of South African say it is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” on reducing crime – an increase of 13 percentage points since 2011 (Figure 10). Crime reduction is one of four performance areas – along with the fight against corruption, management of the economy, and management of immigration – in which public disapproval of the government’s performance has been increasing (Chingwete, 2015). In the region, South Africa shares the lead with Mauritius in public disapproval of government efforts in fighting crime, more than twice the disapproval rate in Botswana and Swaziland (both 32%) and well above the regional average of 56% (Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Government handling crime reduction ‘badly’ | South Africa | 2000-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Reducing crime? (% who say “fairly badly” or “very badly”)

**Figure 11: Government performance on crime reduction | 11 countries in Southern Africa | 2014/2015**



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Reducing crime? (% who say “fairly badly” or “very badly”)

## Conclusion

Despite the government's efforts, South Africa has a long way to go to make its citizens feel safe. A holistic approach is required that takes account of the country's agonizing history, economic and social factors, and the response of the security apparatus. Building public trust in the police and courts, including faith in fair treatment, is essential to deter non-compliance and encourage cooperation. Clearly, crime and insecurity must continue to rank high among the government's priorities for action.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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