Crime in South Africa

Of the approximately 2.1 million cases of crime reported in South Africa between April 2007 and March 2008, "contact" crimes (murder, attempted murder, rape, assault with intent to inflict grievous bodily harm, common assault, indecent assault, aggravated robbery, and other robbery) accounted for 33% of all crimes. While the incidence of all contact crimes showed a decrease between 2007/8 as compared to 2006/7, the incidence of violent crime remains unacceptably high. For example, the murder rate per 100 000 for South Africa is 39 per 100 000, ranking 7th highest out of 117 countries for which data are currently available (Wikipedia, 2008).
Alcohol and the associated burden in South Africa

It has been estimated that the per capita consumption of alcohol in South Africa is between 10.3 and 12.4 litres, with the higher level reflecting the amount including homebrewed alcohol (Rehm et al., 2004). According to the World Health Organization (2002), 45% of men and 70% of women in Afro Region E (which includes countries like Ethiopia and South Africa) abstain from drinking alcohol. Therefore, while consumption per adult is only 7.1 litres of pure alcohol per year in this region, consumption per drinker is 16.7 litres per year (Rehm et al., 2003). It has been estimated that per capita consumption amongst drinkers in South Africa is likely to be even higher than the regional average (Parry, 2005). This gives South Africa one of the highest levels of alcohol consumption per drinker anywhere in the world, putting it at a similar level as countries such as the UK and the Ukraine (Rehm et al., 2004).

According to the World Health Organization (2002), in 2000 the global burden of alcohol in terms of death and disability was between 1.6% (for high-mortality developing countries) and 9.2% (for developed regions) of total disability adjusted life years lost (DALYs), accounting for 4.5 billion years lost. While South Africa is a high mortality developing country, it has recently been calculated that alcohol-related harm accounted for 7.1% of all deaths and 7.0% of DALYs in this country in 2000, resulting in 1.1 million life years lost in that year (Schneider, Norman, Parry, et al., 2007). Alcohol was the third largest contributor to death and disability after unsafe sex/sexually transmitted infections and interpersonal violence. The three largest contributors to the burden specifically related to alcohol included homicide and violence (40% of alcohol’s burden), alcohol use disorders (15%) and road traffic injuries (15%).

Alcohol’s role in violence and crime: International perspective

Various categories of criminal behaviour have been identified as having alcohol links such as drinking and driving, homicide, domestic violence, other assaults, sexual violence, and child abuse. A strong link between alcohol use, crime and violence has been established by meta-analysis, with between a quarter and half of homicide or purposeful injury having been shown to be attributed directly to alcohol use (English et al., 1995; Schultz & Rice, 1991; Single et al., 1998). McClelland & Teplin (2001) directly observed 2365 police-citizen encounters in the USA. Overall, 34% of these encounters were judged to be alcohol-involved, with the following percentages reported: violent crime and sexual assault (43%), spousal assault (43%), robbery (39%), public order/vandalism (46%), and other non-violent encounters (23%).

Alcohol is viewed as playing a role in violence and crime in a number of ways, and Graham et al. (1998) have specifically put forward various mechanisms for how this might occur: (i) societal and cultural attitudes, explanations and norms which influence how drinking, drunkenness and the effect of alcohol on behaviour are framed within different societies, (ii) “person factors”, for example, personalities predisposed to aggression may also be those who are inclined to drink heavily, (iii) the pharmacological effects of alcohol itself may include the suppression of various neurotransmitters that would normally inhibit aggression by causing anxiety or fear, (iv) specific drinking contexts which might inhibit or encourage the occurrence of a criminal act or injury, and (v) the interaction of these factors.
Data on the alcohol-crime/injury nexus in South Africa

Over the past decade or so there has been a wealth of research coming out of South Africa indicating a very strong association between alcohol, crime and injury:

• The link between alcohol and shebeens and violence (especially murder) was identified in a study undertaken by the South African Police Service in the Western Cape in 1996. Among other things, it was reported that in 64% of cases in which the motive was known, and in 24% of cases in which the circumstances surrounding the murder were known, the crime had been committed after an argument and/or during a fight in which alcohol was involved (South African Police Service, 1997).

• In 1997 the Institute for Security Studies reported on the results of research into alcohol and violence conducted in the Northern Cape showing that alcohol was linked with violence, particularly child abuse and rape, and the role of shebeens in the commission of violence was outlined in some detail (Shaw & Louw, 1997).

• A study on the relationship between alcohol use and specific crimes was carried out by the Medical Research Council and the Institute for Security Studies in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg in three phases between 1999 and 2000 (Parry et al., 2004). The main focus of the study was the link between drug use and crime, but arrestees in the three cities were also asked whether they were under the influence of alcohol at the time that the alleged crime took place. Overall, for 15% of the alleged crimes, arrestees indicated that they were under the influence of alcohol at the time the alleged offence took place. Regarding violent offences, arrestees indicated that they were under the influence of alcohol for 25% of weapons-related offences, 22% of rapes, 17% of murders, 14% of assault cases and 10% of robberies. Levels of alcohol-related crime were particularly high for family violence offences at 49%. Arrestees also indicated that they were often under the influence of alcohol in cases involving property offences, for example, 22% of cases involving housebreaking and 12% of cases involving the theft of a motor vehicle. When asked why they consumed alcohol or other drugs in relation to crimes, many arrestees indicated they consumed these substances in order to give them courage to commit the crimes (Parry et al., 2004).

• In a docket analysis finalized by the South African Police Service in 2001, it was noted that 9.1% (37/408) of child sexual offence cases in the Western Cape Province involved an offender under the influence of alcohol. This compared to 3.8% nationally (127/3326) (Crime Information Analysis Centre, personal communication).

• In 2001 39% of trauma patients in Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth had breath alcohol concentrations (BrACs) greater than or equal to 0.05g/100 ml (Plüddemann et al., 2004). Levels of alcohol positivity were particularly high for persons injured as a result of violence (73% for Port Elizabeth, 61% for Cape Town and 43% for Durban).

• Research has also been conducted by the Department of Transport into the issue of drinking and driving, and the national daily average of persons driving under the influence of alcohol was found to have increased from 1.8% in 2002 to 2.1% in 2003 (Arrive Alive, 2005). Drinking and
driving is an alcohol-defined offence and alcohol therefore has a direct role in the commission of this particular crime.

- In 2003 the Institute for Security Studies also undertook a national victim survey of persons who were victims of serious assault and reported even higher levels of alcohol intoxication. In 40% of cases victims believed that the assailant was under the influence of alcohol or other drugs at the time of the assault, and a third of victims conceded to having been under the influence themselves at the time of the assault (Omar, 2004).

- Data from the Non-Natural Mortality Surveillance System (NNMSS) in 2004 indicated that 50% of non-natural deaths in South Africa involved persons with positive blood alcohol concentrations (BACs) and the mean BAC overall was 0.17g/100ml (Matzopoulos, 2005). Levels of BAC positivity were high for both victims of homicides (54% positive, with a mean BAC of 0.17g/100ml) and suicides (37% positive, with a mean BAC of 0.15g/100ml). Over half of transport fatalities had positive BACs and the mean BAC for transport fatalities was 0.19 (almost four times the legal limit for driving).

- Research conducted to assess factors related to intimate partner violence found that men who reported problem alcohol use were twice as likely to have committed violent acts against their partners in the past 10 years (Abrahams et al., 2006). Research has also shown that women who drink are also more likely to be victims of violent acts. For example, Kalichman & Simbayi (2004) in a community study in a township outside Cape Town reported that women who had been sexually assaulted were twice as likely to have consumed alcohol. Alcohol therefore is linked directly to crime via perpetrators of crime who have drunk alcohol before the commission of the crime and less directly through victims who put themselves at risk of being a victim of crime through consuming alcohol.

References

17. Province of Western Cape. (14 March 2008). Western Cape Liquor Bill (Provincial Gazette Extraordinary No. 6509). Cape Tow: Author.1