

## State of media crime coverage in SA

Poverty, unemployment, HIV/Aids, homelessness, women and child abuse, moral depravation a corruption, among others, are just some of the critical issues facing post-apartheid South Africa. The media – as society’s watchdog – has, since the dawn of democracy, been equal to the task in reporting extensively on these issues to create social awareness and force the Government to review its strategies or implement workable policies, media analysts say.

 By [Issa Sikiti da Silva](#) 7 Mar 2007

But in the past five years or so, these issues seemed to have taken a backseat in newspapers, TV, radio and news websites, which have dedicated most of their space and critical analysis on rampant crime.

“There is no doubt that crime in SA is a critical issue that warrants extensive and prominent coverage in the country’s media, as it deals with fundamental rights of safety and security,” says the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) in its latest report titled ‘Media and Crime’.

### Failing in duty

However, the MMP deplors what it calls ‘dramatic coverage without context’, and is concerned that local media is failing in their duty to properly educate and inform their audiences on this burning issue.

The MMP said that recent patterns of coverage of crime in local media have only focused on basic levels of information without sufficient attention given to discussing and analysing the issues involved.

“Most of the crime stories reported in the media are very similar and too superficial,” William Bird, MMP executive director, told Bizcommunity.com.

“While all the background information is given in these stories, the media often fails to provide the explanation of the nature of the crime, its follow-up or do not even bother to conduct an objective and thorough investigation as to why that particular crime has been committed, or what should have been done to prevent it,” Bird added.

### Lack of focus

“Of particular concern,” the MMP report went on to say, “is a lack of focus in the coverage on the patterns of crime nationally, regionally and locally, the responsibility of the Government and the general public, and on issues in the justice system.”

“This is concerning because it is crucial for crime coverage to be undertaken within the broader social, political and legal context.

“In addition, the issue of crime in the country is multifaceted, requiring detailed discussion of the matter in its complexity. In particular, the high levels of inequality in the country.”

According to the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), SA currently spends 6.5% of its total budget on police and the country’s police per capita rate is fairly average by UN’s global standards.

The SAPS have made at least 2.5 million arrests in 2005/6, 40% more than in 2001/2. SA's prisons are overpopulated by 40%.

“Why does the country that as spends so much as SA does on criminal justice and that puts so many people in jail, that maintains adequate per capita policing levels, have such a big crime problem?” asks Dr Johan Burger, senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS).

## **Cheaply sensational**

It would seem that, objectively put, both politicians and media's approach on crime not only lacks context, but is inconsistent and 'cheaply sensational'. And while Dr Burger takes on politicians for their unrealistic crime strategies, the MMP lock horns with the media. Both the ISS and the MMP then suggest the use of proactive measures and integrated approaches.

Interestingly so, in its report the MMP uses David Rattray's murder to demonstrate the media's shortage of inspiration and 'political incorrectness'.

“Firstly it [the Rattray murder] failed to be framed by discussions surrounding crime and violence patterns in the northern Kwazulu-Natal where he lived and worked, and in South Africa more generally,” the report said

“Secondly, the Rattray incident illustrated the tendency of the media to focus on dramatic violent crime. This is opposed to the minimal coverage provided to other crimes such as gender-based violence and child abuse.

“Finally it was apparent that the key issues raised by many media outlets often overflowed into deliberate attempts to represent that crime was out of control. This was in order, it would appear, in an effort to increase Government action. Such a response would seem to be as the result of the perceived failure of the Government to tackle the crime issue.”

The MMP may be emailed at .

## **ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA**

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.  
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