



The effect of the South African police service on policing during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa

Mmakwena Modipa ¹  & Moses Motseki ¹ 

¹ Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

On 15 March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national disaster and implemented stringent measures under the Disaster Management Act (Act No. 57 of 2002) to curb its impact. Following this declaration, the mandate of the South African Police Service (SAPS) was extended to include enforcement of regulations outlined in the Disaster Management Act, 2000. This study explores the role of SAPS in police response during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study employed a systematic review as a non-empirical research design to analyse the relevant literature in detail. Key findings revealed that the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) played a crucial role in supporting the police, serving as a force multiplier with an increased authoritative presence in communities. However, while the initial deployment was well received, it soon became clear that they lacked the training and resources necessary to provide the expected level of assistance. Based on these findings, the study recommends that SAPS leverage the existing and proven structure of JOINTS rather than creating or activating additional structures. Furthermore, policy measures should be developed to promote collaboration among all stakeholders involved. Lastly, it is recommended that police officers receive comprehensive training on newly introduced legislation before deployment to ensure effective enforcement. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge in terms of combating crime, policy formulations, legislations and law enforcement.

Keywords: COVID-19, South African police services, Investigation, legislation, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 rapidly spread across the globe. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic, urging countries to implement urgent measures to contain its spread. In response, on 15 March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa declared the Covid-19 pandemic a national disaster and introduced strict control measures under the Disaster Management Act (Act No. 57 of 2002). Following this declaration, the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, gazetted regulations under the Disaster Management Act, which came into force on 18 March 2020. Consequently, the South African Police Service (SAPS) was assigned an expanded role, which included enforcing these regulations while continuing its primary mandate of maintaining law and order. This shift in responsibility necessitated an assessment of SAPS's capacity to

CORRESPONDENCE – Bernard Chingwanangwana Email: modipamv@tut.ac.za

PUBLICATION HISTORY - Received : 26th June, 2025 | Accepted: 8th December, 2025 | Published: 27th February, 2026.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE - Modipa, Mmakwena and Moses Motseki. "The effect of the South African police service on policing during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa." *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no.1 (2026): 291 - 297. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20267122>

COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING - © 2026 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Journals.

This is an open access article under the CCBY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

implement the Disaster Management Act regulations while upholding its core function of ensuring public safety and security.

According to Section 205(3) of the South African Constitution, the primary objectives of the police service are to prevent, combat, and investigate crime, maintain public order, protect citizens and their property, and enforce the law. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, this mandate was significantly expanded to include the enforcement of lockdown regulations. Police officers at the managerial and operational levels found themselves performing duties beyond their traditional scope, often in unfamiliar contexts. In addition to law enforcement, they played a crucial educational role in informing and protecting the public from a virus that many communities were sceptical of. The enforcement of lockdown regulations also posed unique challenges, particularly in informal settlements, where maintaining social distancing was difficult.

Despite these challenges, SAPS adapted by ensuring that all officers were designated as essential workers and adequately prepared for deployment. As part of its strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SAPS played a central role in efforts to curb the transmission of the virus. While SAPS's primary function remained frontline law enforcement, the organization had to adapt to an unfamiliar responsibility, enforcing regulations under the Disaster Management Act (DMA) while continuing its crime-fighting duties. Recognizing the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, SAPS swiftly devised strategies to manage police services in these extraordinary circumstances.¹

For years, SAPS has sought to professionalize its services and move away from aggressive policing methods; however, full transformation has not yet been achieved.² The expectation that police officers would adopt a more community-centered approach when enforcing lockdown regulations conflicted with their conventional methods of policing. Additionally, law enforcement officers encountered communities that harboured deep-seated distrust toward them, a sentiment rooted in both the legacy of heavy-handed policing during the Apartheid era and the present-day inability to control crime effectively. Consequently, SAPS officers were perceived as enforcers of regulations that evoked memories of past oppression.

A major challenge police officers faced was enforcing social distancing measures and movement restrictions in overcrowded informal settlements, where this compliance was often impractical or even hazardous. Furthermore, SAPS found itself in a complex position, caught between communities resisting enforcement and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), whose limited legal training made the appropriate use of force difficult to regulate. This placed SAPS in the difficult role of mediating tensions between the SANDF and the public, despite facing its own challenges in maintaining public trust.

Moreover, the Sunday Times reported a rise in criminal behaviour among otherwise law-abiding citizens.³ The prohibition of alcohol and cigarettes fuelled illicit trade, not only creating new black-market opportunities but also strengthening pre-existing criminal networks. Looting of businesses and delivery vehicles became more prevalent, often driven by the scarcity of food and liquor during the lockdown period. This article aimed to analyse the effect of SAPS on policing during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research approach to explore the impact of the SAPS on police services during the COVID-19 pandemic and to examine the challenges faced by law enforcement. Data collection and analysis were conducted contextually, relying exclusively on qualitative techniques without incorporating any quantitative methods. A comprehensive literature review was undertaken from March 2020 to September 2022, focusing on understanding the enforcement measures

¹ Malose Langa and Bandile Bertrand Leopeng, "COVID-19: Violent Policing of Black Men during Lockdown Regulations in South Africa," *African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention* 18, no. 2 (2020): 116–26.

² Mason Du Plessis, "Police and Power in a Pandemic: Reflections on the Rise of Police Brutality during Covid19 and Its Implications on Social Justice in South Africa," *The Pretoria Student Law Review* 15, no. 1 (November 8, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.29053/pslr.v15i1.3657>.

³ Sunday Times, "South Africa's COVID-19 Strategy Needs Updating: Here Is Why," 2020, <https://theconversation.com/south-africas-covid-19-strategy-needs-updating-heres-whyand-how-138368>.

implemented by SAPS during the pandemic and identifying the challenges that emerged in this period. Given the nature of the required data, this study predominantly used secondary data sources to gather relevant information. Various official documents, government gazettes, academic texts, journal articles, and other pertinent sources were examined to extract valuable insights. To ensure a rigorous analysis, the study used content and contextual analysis techniques. The data extracted were condensed, critically assessed, and interpreted to identify key themes and trends. Deductive synthesis was applied to organize and structure the findings, ensuring that the discussion aligned with the study's objectives. The results of this analysis are presented in different sections of this study, each corresponding to a specific research focus.

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

Enforcement Challenges

The SAPS encountered significant setbacks in enforcing the newly introduced COVID-19 regulations, particularly in communities where overcrowding made compliance nearly impossible. The SAPS adhered strictly to the provisions and amendments outlined in the Government Gazette to ensure that its enforcement actions remained constitutionally sound. However, despite the willingness and capacity of the officers to implement these regulations, some measures proved difficult to enforce due to their frequent and abrupt revisions. The rapid pace of regulatory amendments led to confusion, particularly when internal communication delays prevented frontline officers from receiving timely updates. Additionally, misinformation that circulated on social media, even when sourced from government entities, contributed to uncertainty about the accuracy of the available information.⁴

For many police officers, enforcing COVID-19 regulations was an additional responsibility that had to be carried out according to their Code of Conduct. Although the duty itself was not fundamentally different from the usual law enforcement role, the policing environment had changed drastically. The pandemic forced the government to implement extraordinary interventions, requiring law enforcement to not only combat crime but also impose an entirely new set of public health measures. South Africa's legislative approach to the pandemic was based on the classification of COVID-19 as a 'disaster' rather than a 'state of emergency.' Unlike a state of emergency where intervention is justified only to restore peace and order, the government deemed the disaster framework more appropriate, as the crisis did not meet the threshold for invoking emergency laws.⁵

One key factor to consider is that the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global event. No country could afford to assume that the virus was under control, nor could they become complacent in their response. Regulatory changes were, therefore, necessary and should be understood as adaptive measures intended to safeguard public health. However, the frequent amendments introduced by the National Command Council and various ministers created uncertainty for law enforcement officers. The lack of clear guidelines at times left frontline police unsure of how to implement certain measures, requiring further clarification from legal advisors in their respective provinces. While such concerns were valid, the sheer scale of the pandemic presented an overwhelming challenge that no government, regardless of its preparedness could fully anticipate or manage with complete effectiveness.⁶

This reality was not unique to South Africa; governments worldwide faced similar difficulties in navigating uncharted territory while striving to balance public health imperatives with the protection of civil liberties. Even well-established democracies struggled to craft a coherent response to the crisis, often adjusting their regulations in real-time. Despite the presence of pre-existing law enforcement structures, SAPS, like many international counterparts, was forced to adapt to a rapidly evolving landscape. The global nature of the crisis also underscored the absence of any legal precedent or international framework that could serve as a guide for pandemic management while ensuring minimal infringement on fundamental rights. Simply put, there was no universal blueprint to dictate the best course of action in responding to an emergency of this scale.

⁴ Institute for Security Studies (ISS), "Why Is South Africa Not Showing the Rise in Domestic Violence Cases Reported Elsewhere in the World?," 2020, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/gender-based-violence-during-lockdown-looking-for-answers>.

⁵ Brandon Dare, R Guadagno, and M A Nicole Muscanell, "Commitment: The Key to Women Staying in Abusive Relationships," *Journal of Interpersonal Relations, Intergroup Relations and Identity* 6 (2013): 58–64.

⁶ Langa and Leopeng, "COVID-19: Violent Policing of Black Men during Lockdown Regulations in South Africa."

Amendments to Regulations

During Alert Level 5, the Covid-19 regulations required that individuals remain confined to their residences unless they perform essential services, obtain essential goods, or attend to urgent matters such as medical treatments. All gatherings were strictly prohibited, with funerals limited to a maximum of 50 attendees. Those traveling for funerals, work, or interprovincial movement related to essential services were mandated to apply for permits. Public transport was largely restricted, with specific rules regulating the number of passengers allowed in the permitted vehicles. Additionally, all retail stores, except those selling essential goods, were ordered to close.

To ensure compliance, SAPS, Metropolitan Police, and the SANDF conducted extensive patrols across cities and townships. Law enforcement agencies also established roadblocks to enforce travel restrictions. The measures implemented by SAPS, SANDF, and Metro Police were outlined in the Code of Conduct for Enforcement Officers during the State of Disaster, jointly signed by the Minister of Police and the Minister of Defence and Military Veterans. This document served to provide clear enforcement guidelines for both police and military personnel.

At the end of April, while South Africa was still under Level 5 lockdown, law enforcement had recorded 107,000 cases, with 118,000 individuals charged for violating lockdown regulations. This number more than doubled in just over a month, reaching almost 230,000 cases, according to General Bheki Cele. The offences included: Liquor-related violations, Cigarette-related offences, Illegal gatherings (though reduced compared to Level 5), Failure to remain confined to residences (a persistent challenge), Cross-border and interprovincial movement violations, Business-related offences, Transport-related violations (decreased as taxi industry compliance improved) and Fraudulent or missing travel permits. These statistics highlight the challenges SAPS faced in enforcing ever-evolving lockdown measures, as well as the widespread non-compliance among certain sectors of society.

Legal and Theoretical Frameworks

The legal framework governing law enforcement during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa is rooted in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996). Section 7(1) of the Constitution establishes the Bill of Rights as the foundation of South African democracy, affirming the principles of human dignity, equality, and freedom. In terms of Section 7(2), the state has a constitutional obligation to respect, protect, promote, and fulfil these rights. However, Section 7(3) acknowledges that constitutional rights may be subject to limitations as outlined in Section 36, or as provided elsewhere in the Bill of Rights.

Freedom of Movement and Residence

One of the fundamental rights impacted by the Covid-19 lockdown regulations was freedom of movement, as outlined in Section 21 of the Constitution: (1) Every individual has the right to freedom of movement within the country. (2) Every individual has the right to leave South Africa freely. (3) Every citizen has the right to enter, remain, and reside anywhere in South Africa without restriction. (4) Every citizen has the right to a passport, ensuring their ability to travel internationally.

During COVID-19 period, the citizen was not allowed to leave their homes for 21 days only essential workers were allowed to go to work. No one was allowed to go to work or school, and citizens were only allowed to go out to get essential services. After the 21 days, citizens were allowed to move within their provinces but movement between provinces and travelling internationally was not allowed. The rights of the citizens were limited as per the section 36 of the Constitution.

Limitation of Rights

In terms of Section 36(1) of the Constitution of South Africa (1996), rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights may be limited under specific conditions. These limitations must be established by a law of general application and must be reasonable and justifiable in an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality, and freedom. For any limitation to be considered constitutionally valid, the following factors must be taken into account— (a) the nature of the right; (b) the importance of the purpose of the limitation; (c) the nature and extent of the limitation; (d) the relation between the limitation and its purpose; and (e) less restrictive means to achieve the purpose. Section 36 was used to

limit the rights of citizens during the pandemic. This section can only apply if it is justifiable and reasonable; it was reasonable and justifiable since the Disaster Management Act was implemented.

Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002

In response to the severity and scale of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was declared a global pandemic by the WHO and classified as a national disaster by the National Disaster Management Centre, the South African government implemented emergency measures. To strengthen and support the existing efforts of state institutions in managing the crisis, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, exercised her authority under Section 3 of the Disaster Management Act, 2002 (Act No. 57 of 2002).

Under Section 27(1) of the Act, a national state of disaster was officially declared, acknowledging that the unique and urgent circumstances necessitated such a designation. Additionally, Section 27(2) of the Act empowered the minister to formulate regulations, issue directives, or authorize the implementation of specific measures. These interventions were permitted only to the extent that they were deemed necessary to achieve the following objectives: (a) Ensuring public protection and assistance; (b) Providing relief and support to affected individuals; (c) Safeguarding property and critical infrastructure; (d) Preventing or mitigating disruptions caused by the pandemic; and (e) Managing the widespread consequences and destructive impact of the disaster.

The legal framework provided by the Disaster Management Act was essential in guiding the government's response to the pandemic. It allowed authorities to implement emergency measures while ensuring that the actions taken aligned with constitutional and legislative provisions aimed at protecting public health and maintaining social stability.

DISCUSSION

Challenges experienced by SAPS during COVID-19 pandemic

The South African Police Service (SAPS) encountered significant challenges in understanding and enforcing the frequently changing COVID-19 regulations. Amendments to these regulations were communicated through various channels, including emails, daily briefings, WhatsApp groups, printed documents in vehicles and police stations, and signed registers to ensure that the officers acknowledged the new guidelines. However, despite these efforts, the rapid pace at which the regulations were modified often made it difficult for law enforcement personnel to stay updated and effectively implement the changes. The urgency of enforcement left little to no time for proper preparation, adding additional strain on SAPS members.

In addition to regulatory challenges, law enforcement officers had to cope with the evolution of criminal activities during the pandemic. Criminals adapted their methods, leading to an increase in offenses such as the illegal trade of cigarettes. Furthermore, incidents of gender-based violence (GBV) increased, placing additional demands on an already stretched police force. Officers were also required to enforce pandemic-related laws in areas where maintaining social distancing was practically impossible, further complicating their duties. The combination of these factors created a high-pressure environment for SAPS members, requiring them to balance public safety, crime prevention, and compliance with new regulations, all under unprecedented conditions.

Expanded mandate

The mandate of the South African Police Service (SAPS) significantly expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic, introducing a major shift in policing responsibilities. While the core mandate of SAPS remained focused on crime detection, investigation, and prevention, the enforcement of COVID-19 regulations became an additional and urgent duty.

Inadequate capacity

Operational and administrative resources were insufficient even under normal circumstances. The initial capacity limitation resulted from internal measures aimed at flattening the curve. Capacity was further impacted when members tested positive, necessitating the evacuation of buildings. Even before COVID-19, the police faced ongoing challenges related to capacity and resources, particularly in terms of

vehicles and personnel. The expansion of their mandate further complicated the implementation of fundamental police duties.

Psychological impact

The risk of illness and death was compounded by the challenges of working under conditions of fear and uncertainty. Police personnel and the communities they served experienced confusion, shock, frustration, and anxiety. Despite implementing risk-mitigation measures, officers remained acutely aware of potential exposure when interacting with the public.

The emotional toll of loss and isolation was profound. Officers became apprehensive of one another due to fear of infection, which strained workplace relationships and diminished collegiality and cooperation. Many were hesitant to step outside their perceived zones of safety, leading to a noticeable divide among colleagues. The physical and psychological burden on officers was significant, contributing to emotional exhaustion. Additionally, some individuals were seen to exploit the situation by staying at home without justification, which led to resentment among colleagues. Despite widespread fatigue, officers had limited opportunities to leave, exacerbating the strain on their well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the SAPS' coordinating structures were generally effective, minimizing redundancy and confusion in future operations is essential. To achieve this, SAPS should adopt a straightforward approach by using established, proven structures. One key takeaway for police leadership at the station level was the effectiveness of teamwork, particularly within integrated teams that included members of various government departments and institutions. To sustain and improve this collaborative approach, it is recommended that policy frameworks be developed to support and encourage such practices. Additionally, before deployment, police officers should receive comprehensive training on newly introduced or unfamiliar legislation to ensure they are well-prepared for operational challenges. Multi agency approach to combating crime and violence should be integrated and sustained.

CONCLUSION

The study has analysed the effect of the South African Police Service during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The South African Police Service (SAPS) faced considerable difficulties in comprehending and upholding the constantly evolving COVID-19 laws. Changes to these regulations were shared through multiple avenues, such as emails, daily briefings, WhatsApp groups, printed materials in vehicles and police stations, and signed logs to confirm that officers recognized the updated guidelines. However, despite these attempts, the rapid rate at which the regulations were altered frequently hindered law enforcement officials from remaining informed and efficiently carrying out updates. Joint multi-agency approach was the best method to combat crime and violence during COVID-19 in South Africa, as the security cluster was integrated and working together to ensure a safe, secure environment. The collaborations established with different government departments and civil society to execute the disaster management regulations could easily be transitioned and modified to tackle the crime epidemic in the nation. In this context, the police could take on a primary role, but with a clear understanding that an integrated strategy is essential, incorporating other government and even non-government organizations. A crucial lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic is that we must not overlook the opportunities offered by valuable partnerships in policing during the pandemic, as they demonstrated to be achievable in combating crime and violence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.M. & M.M.; Methodology, M.M. & M.M.; Data Collection, M.M. & M.M.; Formal Analysis, M.M. & M.M.; Writing—Original Draft Preparation, M.M. & M.M.; Writing—Review and Editing, M.M. & M.M. Both authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical approval for this study was waived, as the research does not involve vulnerable populations or sensitive topics

Data Availability Statement: The data used in this study can be requested from the corresponding author. However, it is not publicly accessible due to privacy considerations.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Legislative and Constitutional Documents

Republic of South Africa (RSA). Constitution of South Africa, No. 108 of 1996. Pretoria: Government Printers, 1996.

Republic of South Africa (RSA). Disaster management act 57 of 2002. Pretoria: Government Printers, 2002.

Republic of South Africa (RSA). South African Police Service act 68 of 1995. Pretoria: Government Printers, 1995.

Republic of South Africa (RSA). Independent Police Investigative Directorate act 1 of 2011. Pretoria: Government Printers, 2011.

Other Published works

Dare, Brandon, R Guadagno, and M A Nicole Muscanell. "Commitment: The Key to Women Staying in Abusive Relationships." *Journal of Interpersonal Relations, Intergroup Relations and Identity* 6 (2013): 58–64.

Du Plessis, Mason. "Police and Power in a Pandemic: Reflections on the Rise of Police Brutality during Covid19 and Its Implications on Social Justice in South Africa." *The Pretoria Student Law Review* 15, no. 1 (November 8, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.29053/pslr.v15i1.3657>.

Institute for Security Studies (ISS). "Why Is South Africa Not Showing the Rise in Domestic Violence Cases Reported Elsewhere in the World?," 2020. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/gender-based-violence-during-lockdown-looking-for-answers>.

Langa, Malose, and Bandile Bertrand Leopeng. "COVID-19: Violent Policing of Black Men during Lockdown Regulations in South Africa." *African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention* 18, no. 2 (2020): 116–26.

Sunday Times. "South Africa's COVID-19 Strategy Needs Updating: Here Is Why," 2020. <https://theconversation.com/south-africas-Covid-19-strategy-needs-updating-heres-whyand-how-138368>.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Dr. Mmakwena Modipa is a researcher in the Department of Law, Safety and Security Management. The author worked hard to ensure the success of this paper. The author individually and critically worked on the paper and evaluated the quality of the manuscript. Formatting, proofreading, as well as the technical presentation of the manuscript in compliance with author guidelines was put right by the author, and in addition, editing and typesetting of the final draft was also done by the author. The author has read and agreed to this manuscript. This manuscript is dedicated to the late Professor Motseki Moses, the Co-Author of this manuscript.