

# Policing South Africa's Lockdown: Making sense of ambiguity amidst certainty?

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## Abstract

Despite the progressive vision of South Africa's policy elites after the end of Apartheid, the South African Police Service (SAPS) faces such severe challenges of efficiency, accountability, and legitimacy that the institution appears under chronic siege. We sought to document the view of insiders on the SAPS's preparedness and effectiveness at fulfilling its expanded mandate in response to COVID-19. As part of a larger research project, we conducted 27 interviews with police officers and representatives of other government departments across three provinces. These revealed two narratives. The first – and surprisingly dominant – is one of strong coordinating structures, capable leadership and effective command and control under exceptionally difficult circumstances. The second, however, is of an organisation stretched beyond breaking point and placing its members under impossible strains. We conclude that the two narratives are complementary and that their co-existence reflects the opposing pressures faced by the police in this period: the consolidating logic of state securitisation under conditions of crisis and the underlying fragmenting logic of dysfunctional, kleptocratic governance.

**Keywords:** policing; COVID-19 pandemic; South Africa

## Introduction

COVID-19 arrived in South Africa as a key institution in the fight against the pandemic, the police, was already in disarray. This stood in contrast to the vision of policy elites who, after 1994, embarked on the transformation of the state and its coercive apparatus. According to that vision, citizen security had to reverse Apartheid's emphasis on (white) state security. For the policy entrepreneurs at that time, the model of democratic policing served as a source of inspiration: the police institution had to be remodelled with efficiency, accountability, and legitimacy in mind.

Considerable thought and effort went into police restructuring. And for a short while, the South African Police Service (SAPS) enjoyed an enviable status in the region. In the late 1990s it was one of the largest, most modern, and best resourced police organisations on the continent of Africa. But neither the boldness of reform-talk nor the concerted effort of individuals, task teams, study groups, or advisory panels, offered respite against realpolitik. The latter would wreak revenge, with debilitating effect. As South African police studies is well developed, a sizeable scholarship speaks to the fault lines besetting the police organisation and the social and political influences at play. Given the focus of this paper, we turn to a brief overview of three key challenges: police efficiency, accountability, and legitimacy.

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With regards to efficiency, human resources in the SAPS have long been under strain. Decisions to rapidly boost police numbers in the early 2000s meant that the emphasis on quantity outstripped concerns with quality (Bruce, 2013). In addition, the organisation has become top heavy with a bulging and expensive cohort of office-bound generals. Staff turnover and high rates of absenteeism have long eaten into human resource capacity. Management expertise, it is widely acknowledged, is at an all-time low (Mlamla, 2021). Natural attrition, staff exodus, the too rapid pursuit of equity, as well as (more recently) nepotism in appointments have all contributed to the deficit in leadership. Such shortages have had deleterious effects on command and control in the operational field. A further systemic problem relates to the fact that the centralisation of decision-making stands in the way of initiatives to improve matters at sub-national levels. A range of fateful policy decisions that have led to the crippling of detective skills and other specialist policing capacities (for example, to engage organised crime and public disorder on the streets) have made the institutional dysfunctionality glaringly obvious (Burger, 2015).

On the accountability front, the architecture of oversight has been under attack. Internal systems of oversight remain weak. Very recently, the Commissioner of Police acknowledged before parliament that the internal disciplinary system requires drastic overhaul (Knoetze, 2021). Since their inception, external systems of oversight have struggled to make headway (Burger, 2008). More recently, the Independent Police Investigative Division<sup>2</sup> has been drawn into factional politics within the ruling party. This has meant that inquiries into wrongdoings have become selective. Police intelligence, like other intelligence arms of the state, has been 'captured' by political factions in cahoots with organised crime cartels. Corruption scandals involving several successive Commissioners of Police and other senior officers, exposed by investigative journalists, have rocked the organisation. An official inquiry (the Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, or Zondo Commission) has surfaced details about corruption and politicisation on a grand scale and the corrosion of mechanisms of democratic oversight. In the light of such evidence, SAPS's claim to robust ac-

countability – both horizontally and vertically – rings increasingly hollow. To add insult to injury, recent allegations regarding massive irregular spending on personal protective equipment such as cloth masks and hand sanitisers during the COVID lockdown have implicated the police in yet another round of shady deals (Thamm, 2021).

The growth in civil claims against the police serve as a partial indicator of ill-discipline on the streets (Dereymaeker, 2015). There is also organisational reluctance to act, either swiftly or decisively, against those in uniform with an appetite for abuse of power and the use of lethal force. A public inquiry into high-handed police action against striking workers at Lonmin mine in 2012 (that left 34 workers dead) found the police uncooperative. According to the Report of the Inquiry, police officials not only withheld evidence but in several instances police officials lied before the Commission (Marikana Commission of Inquiry, 2015). No police members have been prosecuted to date.

For some commentators, the proclivities associated with an increasingly unaccountable, centralised, and paramilitary police 'machine' are linked to the 'violent' nature of South Africa's democracy (Lamb, 2021). Yawning structural inequalities make for inequality of policing on the one hand and bestow on the police the responsibility for the policing of such inequality on the other. The police organisation (together with other components of the criminal justice system) appears under siege.

This brief sketch alludes to some of the key challenges the police organisation has been negotiating over the past decade and a half. It is at this delicate point in SAPS's trajectory that the COVID-19 pandemic entered South African soil. As elsewhere in the world, Pandemic Policing (as it is now referred to) has re-engaged the politics, logistics and ethics of policing (Sheptycki, 2020; Jones, 2020; Sheldon, 2021).

Globally, debates on the challenges of policing the pandemic have grown exponentially. On-line discussions organised by a range of constituencies compete for attention. Various scholarly journals have compiled special editions on the topic, debating diverse and fascinating themes. Under the broad rubric of internal organisational challenges, debates have focused on a range of factors (Laufs & Waseem, 2020; Maskály, Ivković & Neyroud, 2021), including the impact of COV-

<sup>2</sup> The Independent Police Investigative Division (formerly the Independent Complaints Directorate) was created in 1997 as part of post-apartheid police reform. IPID is responsible for investigating complaints against the SAPS including death in custody, crimes allegedly committed by police officers, violations of SAPS policy, and citizen dissatisfaction with police service.

ID on crime patterns (Mawby, 2020), the expansion of policing powers and surveillance, and the effects of the adoption of an ethos of accountability in policing (Gentithes & Krent, 2020). Others have considered the effects of the criminalisation of public health on the enforcement role of the police, arguing that differential enforcement of COVID regulations entrenches long standing societal inequalities. The open-ended question, asked at the start of COVID 19, as to whether pandemic policing will yield new opportunities for policing by consent or by force, has been debated in many jurisdictions (Grace, 2021). Across a variety of regions, protracted street battles between police and protesters seem poised to push the pendulum towards adversarial police-community interactions (Mead, 2021). Media coverage of strong-arm police tactics in Africa have tipped the scale more decisively in favour of a model of coercive policing, which may arrest even the modest gains in police legitimacy and accountability (Okech, Mwambari & Olonisakin, 2020).

### The Pandemic in South Africa

On Sunday 15 March 2020, a State of National Disaster was declared in South Africa in terms of the Disaster Management Act (DMA). This introduced an initial 21-day nationwide lockdown period that lasted from 21 March to 16 April, and mandated a shutdown of non-essential businesses, stay-at-home orders, a curfew, restriction on movement and the size of gatherings, compulsory mask wearing, and limits on room and vehicle occupancy. The sale of alcohol and tobacco products was temporarily banned, which resulted in 116 legal challenges incurring legal costs of at least R3.4 million (about 200,000 Euro), not including costs orders (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2020a). Still, the SAPS was mandated to enforce these highly controversial regulations.

The DMA regulations meant a dramatic expansion of police duties, surveillance, and visibility. The new responsibilities included vehicle check points to limit movement, issuing and checking permits for those authorised for essential travel, conducting high visibility patrols to enforce stay-at-home orders and curfew, enforcing the closure of public spaces including beaches and parks, monitoring the size of public gatherings, checking the occupancy of vehicles and businesses, policing the new black markets created by the alcohol and tobacco bans, and where necessary, imposing fines and arrests for contravention of the regulations. In the first month alone, 12,738 cases were registered

for breaching the lockdown regulations (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2020b). To date, over 400,000 people have been arrested for breaching the regulations, which have been amended numerous times since (BusinessTech, 2021).

From the start, there were widespread complaints about selective and heavy-handed enforcement by police and military personnel, particularly in informal urban settlements. By the end of April 2021, there had been 49 allegations of police brutality and at least six cases alleging deaths as a result of police action (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2021).

This article is drawn from findings from a national collaborative research project conducted by three academic research teams on behalf of SAPS, supported by the Government Technical Advisory Centre (GTAC) and the National Research Foundation (NRF). The project interviewed SAPS members and representatives of other government departments that collaborated with them before and during the first and second wave of infections. The project explored a number of themes,<sup>3</sup> but we focus here on the interviewees' perceptions and experiences about SAPS's preparedness and effectiveness in dealing with the unique challenges of policing the global pandemic.

Data collection took place between November 2020 and March 2021, and interviewees were selected and approached by the SAPS research division and passed on to the research team once they had agreed to participate, with the understanding that the researchers, although external to SAPS, were authorised to undertake the study. Participants were guaranteed that their responses would be aggregated and reported anonymously.

We present data from 27 interviews across three provinces: 11 interviews from the Western Cape, 7 from the Eastern Cape and 9 from the Northern Cape.<sup>4</sup> Three interviewees had responsibility at the Provincial Joint Command level, and one for human resources at their

3 Broadly, these themes included: measures implemented under police lockdown and citizen compliance; co-ordinating structures, inter-agency collaboration and intra-organisational strains; the crime reduction effects of lockdown and lessons for the future.

4 Interviewees hailed from the following districts and clusters: Amathole, Douglas, Francis Baard, George, Griekwastad, Harare, Joe Gqabi, Khayelitsha, Langa, Lwandle, Modder Rivier, Namakwa District Office, Nyanga, Pixley Ka Seme, Thembalethu and Worcester.

station. Interviewees who were external to SAPS came from the Departments of Education, Home Affairs, Social Development and Economic Development and Tourism. Four interviewees held the rank of Major General, seven of Brigadier, five of Colonel, three of Lieutenant Colonel, three of Captain, and one of Sergeant.

### Policing the pandemic in South Africa

Our data reveals two contrasting narratives about SAPS's preparedness and their overall performance. At first glance, the majority of respondents were impressed by the SAPS's flexibility and overall execution in what were, by all accounts, difficult circumstances. The extent of institutional approval and commendation expressed by the participants (both SAPS and external) was far greater than might be expected, given the long-standing and ongoing media coverage of disarray besetting the organisation, the dysfunctionality in SAPS leadership, the corrosive effects of corruption and media reports on the use of excessive force in the enforcement of lockdown regulations. However, lurking just below the glossy surface of strong coordinating structures, capable leadership and effective

command and control, respondents also described an institution barely able to fulfil its typical mandated functions and battling to perform its new role in the context of the pandemic.

To be fair to the evidence, the two narratives did not have equal standing. Views of SAPS as a well-oiled machine engaging the operational challenges of the pandemic were far more robust than views of SAPS as an embattled machine struggling to (externally) enforce a range of unprecedented restrictions while also mitigating the impact of COVID (internally).

We present the two competing narratives, making illustrative use of quotations to capture the respondents' views. How does this glossy narrative emerge at a time when the police organisation and the wider criminal justice system were fraught with such tensions and riddled with so many problems? In the concluding section, we offer some suggestions for how to make sense of the two narratives that emerged from this research against the contextual background of current strains confronting the South African police.

**Table 1:** Summary of Competing Narratives

<i>The well-oiled police machine</i>	<i>An embattled machine in a 'hot' climate</i>
<p><b>Clarity of purpose</b> COVID seen as just another set of regulations to enforce SAPS draw on long experience – for example, Soccer World Cup, routine protests</p>	<p><b>'Caught with our pants down'</b> No warning, no training – make it up they went along DMA Regulations keep changing creating a lack of clarity</p>
<p><b>Utilise hierarchy and command</b> Invoke mindsets of centralised paramilitary institution Able to activate organisational systems (Command Council; NATJoints) Invoke routine operational practices (visible policing; surveillance; intelligence)</p>	<p><b>Unclear regulations</b> Constantly changing regulations as lockdown levels shifted, often overnight. Confusion about (new) regulations within the organisation, implementing partners and in communities</p>
<p><b>Intra-organisational strengths</b> 'Capable' leadership SAPS as enjoying 'embedded' authority 'Hands on' oversight and active legal guidance in the field Ongoing briefings and proactive troubleshooting</p>	<p><b>Dealing with uncertainties &amp; challenges</b> Invisibility of SAPS as frontline workers Rhetorical question: Does 'the machine' care about street level enforcers? The expanded mandate crowds out normal policing duties as they deal with issuing and checking permits, fining and arresting people for non-compliance, doing high visibility patrols and enforcing curfew, closing beaches and parks etc.</p>
<p><b>Adaptability of SAPS</b> Manage their regular duties amidst a rapidly expanded mandate – they are fighting a war on two fronts: 'war on crime' and 'war on Covid' Able to 'make do' with available PPE Improvise as needed Tap into other available resources Rationalise resources – do more with less All hands on deck – cancel leave; office bound staff deployed; specialist capacity deployed Adapt shift systems and working from home</p>	<p><b>'Health' of SAPS</b> Fear of the virus, fear of one another COVID fatigue and burnout – some exasperation and resentment Supply chain management of PPE problematic Constrained capacity 50/50 rotation in office occupancy, isolation and decontamination after positive tests, infections and deaths Decline in service delivery – units out of action, stations closed, call response times increase</p>

*The well-oiled police machine*

**Let's Collaborate!**

Using a 'whole of society' approach  
 Ride on the wave of inter-sectoral collaboration  
 Everyone comes to the party – everyone fulfils their responsibilities  
 Involve community-based organisations, community policing structures and local leaders, traditional authorities and neighbourhood watches  
 Also included unusual 'partners' – taxi associations, churches, usually-reluctant community members, community radio

**Proactive communication up and down the chain**

Reports at Command Councils and Joint Command Councils  
 WhatsApp groups at local level create connection  
 Intelligence reports at strategic levels can be used  
 Information as part of enforcement becomes part of SAPS's active community engagement

*An embattled machine in a 'hot' climate*

**Ultimately responsible, risk without support**

Underneath surface are misalignments and tensions  
 Some departments 'missing in action'  
 Courts refused to process fines – police efforts sabotaged  
 Encountering resistance – (mis)trust of the politics of inequality  
 In townships compliance is 'fake' – once the police leave the scene, the masks come off – playing 'cat and mouse'  
 Urban/rural and over-time differences in how well stations are able to deal with the challenges of facing Covid.

**Systemic problem with communication systems**

Poor digital readiness  
 Lack of integrated data management system  
 Rural stations hard to reach with rapidly changing regulations  
 Newly-central information dissemination role

**Narrative 1: The well-oiled police machine**

Our interview data projected the image of a modern bureaucracy with competent civil administrators responding with an enviable degree of professionalism to the exceptional circumstances and challenges of the pandemic. Our interviewees felt that SAPS was organisationally well equipped to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic which was, in their view, a mere variation on a familiar theme:

*"As SAPS, we deal with disasters and contingencies all the time. So, we have plans in place for various [eventualities]. For example, a bomb blast, a flood, you know ... natural disasters. When something happens, we are able to, within a short space of time, mobilise our personnel. We have those contingency plans. So, when this came about, it wasn't something that caught us completely off guard, although we hadn't dealt with this kind of disaster, to this extent, prior to the virus. But the principle of the plans that follow our standard operating procedures are in place". (P16)*

South Africa remained in varying degrees of lockdown since March 2020, with periodic lessening, and occasional tightening of restrictions on movement, travel, work, tobacco and alcohol. As the lockdown levels shifted, so too did the DMA regulations -- sometimes overnight. This in turn required constant reorientation for both the police and citizens to what was (or was not) allowed. Despite such fluidity, the interviewees emphasised that the police organisation could rely on standard operating procedures and existing management structures in adjusting to regulatory changes. Immediately upon the release of each successive set of regulations, these were cascaded down the ordinary channels. SAPS's tight

chain of communication also facilitated communication from the executive epicentre down the bureaucracy:

*"An announcement is made by the President, and it is followed by a Government Gazette. We look at that Gazette... So immediately when it is distributed, it is distributed everywhere. You get it on the emails from head office, from departments, to provinces and to operatives and we operationalise all the regulations that were gazetted." (P04)*

Interpretation of the regulations required active involvement of the legal department of SAPS to guide operational divisions, and such advice was said to be readily forthcoming:

*"So, we took that as abnormal times. We know that in the enforcement of the regulations, there might also be trampling on the constitutional rights of individuals. And we tried to mitigate that by making sure that our legal service division is advising operatives in terms of each and every aspect of our regulation. The legality of any of the policy action is guided by the commanders on the ground and informed by our legal division." (P04)*

The implementation of the DMA required that SAPS link up with a range of other stakeholders, both inside and outside government. All interviewees emphasised the critical importance of long-established operational and intelligence structures as mechanisms for uniting government departments 'under one roof' and coordinating the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. An interviewee described: "Everyone is there, you know; for purposes of planning jointly" (P15).

The existing SAPS structures operate at national, provincial and district levels and have established administrative procedures to communicate decisions, coordinate responses and operationalise strategies. SAPS co-chaired the Provincial Joint Operational and Intelligence Structures, playing a leadership role and fulfilling a number of functions like “reporting, decision-making, monitoring, and troubleshooting” (P02). These structures, which had previously met monthly to coordinate security-related responses (especially around major events or protests), co-opted additional stakeholders and began to meet daily (and later, twice a week). The familiarity between the role-players meant that it was “not necessary to reinvent the wheel, because we are actually quite used to each other” (CC P09). Interviewees described that this system worked quite smoothly and with a high level of professionalism, which made it possible to utilise capacities and limited resources as efficiently as possible. Participants felt that SAPS’s leadership understood the leadership role and could operate effectively in that space. As a non-SAPS interviewee described, “I must say those generals... I was impressed by their lateral understanding of government operations” (P26).

Especially at the provincial level, participants gave the impression of an efficient machine that operated with a sense of purpose in fighting the pandemic, and which was useful “for unlocking or unblocking blockages that would hamper the efforts” (P26). At the more localised level, too, the Joint forum was described as “really very effective as we ended up sharing ideas also relevant for the future. Everything was running quite smoothly” (P12).

The chairs of these coordinating and planning structures (in most instances held by SAPS) enjoyed an ‘embedded authority’ that predated the pandemic response, and created a hierarchy that could be tasked with implementation:

*“I have been the chairperson of the Joints structure for some time. The authority that lies within the chair has never been questioned. And it’s not even being questioned now. So once the Joint structure takes a decision it becomes compelling... then the execution thereof is not debated. It’s got to be done” (P09).*

Many were impressed by the level of organisation and discipline they observed in the way that the police chaired these fora. A participant from outside SAPS

noted that there was “actually not much scope for negotiations... the Provincial Commissioner is not to be challenged” (P26). Another respondent marvelled at the speed at which decisions were made and the capacity that police leadership exhibited for follow up and follow through of such decisions:

*“Issues are escalated immediately. A phone is picked up and the report is needed within 24 hours. And then the next day a report is requested on what is the outcome of whatever happened the previous day” (P17).*

Participants noted that the COVID response fostered close working relationships between SAPS and other government departments such as Home Affairs, Public Works, Transport, Health, and Justice, as well as the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), other local law enforcement agencies and provincial liquor boards. SAPS officers described the level of intra-governmental cooperation and collegiality as very high. Although there had previously been ‘no proper teamwork amongst all the external role players,’ during COVID they were “forced to work together” (P25). These stronger professional networks could be leveraged as the need arose as role-players knew counterparts “in person, by name. It’s easy now to pick up a phone to say, I’m struggling with this and that. The responses are more positive than in the past” (P25). Interdepartmental cooperation and collaboration therefore created a degree of shared responsibility with the police, as one interviewee described:

*“Outside of COVID when it came to regulations and crime and lawlessness, you know, it was just the police. Now you find that institutions are all taking responsibility for what is happening because they all have a role to play, [and] they now understand their role” (P02).*

The close collaboration with other government stakeholders, gave these ‘outsiders’ an unusually close view of police operations, and SAPS’s capacity to gather intelligence around COVID related matters and to act strategically on such information. These participants felt that it was “intriguing to hear just what is going on in the police ... [SAPS was] briefing everybody, and there was intelligence reporting and reports from regions about what’s happening” (P14). Other interviewees also expressed a new appreciation for the structure that SAPS brought to the response:

*"Yes, I think I was quite impressed. And me and my colleague actually said to one another, you know what, we always thought a policeman is just a policeman [...] But they are very structured, and there is a clear rhythm in how they do things" (P26).*

There was also extensive collaboration with stakeholders in the community, including non-governmental organisations, community policing structures and neighbourhood watches, local political and traditional authorities, and religious and business leaders to increase their reach and improve the flow of information to communities about lockdown regulations and how to slow infections. Interviewees described that under conditions of COVID they operationalised a 'whole of society' approach – something that has featured prominently in policy but has, to date, been difficult to put into practice. Enlisting the support of community-based organisations in this way created new incentives for collaboration and yielded new dividends for police-community interaction. The spirit of horizontal cooperation also encouraged community members to assist SAPS in identifying transgressors:

*"I think COVID brought us together as different stakeholders [...] You see those people that were assisting us to distribute pamphlets, [now] just call me directly. When they see a church that is meeting against the lockdown regulations ... the taverns, the shebeens, the parties. I mean, you know, we Africans ... we always respect traditional events or ceremonies, but [the community] were reporting it. They were saying we don't want these things. So, the communication, and the fact that people started to talk to us, because they could see that [COVID] is becoming very dangerous" (P21).*

COVID required human resources to be maximised so as to do street level policing. All staff leave was cancelled, and, in many places, normally office-bound staff were deployed to assist with the enforcement of the new regulations. Many of the respondents commented on the support that police leaders provided in the actual field of policing. As one station commander observed: "I did not sit in an air-conditioned office. Instead, I went out on the streets myself to observe and participate" (P11). Another underlined the importance of his role in ensuring police accountability:

*"As commanding officer, I am accountable to the province. And the importance of accountable leadership is to ensure police in the streets follow the rules" (P11).*

All told, this narrative of policing the pandemic presented a picture of an adaptable institution that was about as well prepared as was possible under the extraordinary circumstances. The Provincial Joint structures – so key to Pandemic Policing – functioned like a security apparatus. The logic it adhered to was that of the 'war room'. Intelligence is tabled and carefully considered, operational strategies are crafted and responsibilities are apportioned. Decisions are made, instructions are given and reports received back. Decisions and strategies designed at the upper levels are cascaded down the chain all the way to the level of 'foot soldiers' on the street responsible for enforcing regulations. On the face of it, an impressive picture of the interlocking features of a 'well-oiled machine' working seamlessly in enforcing COVID regulations.

### Narrative 2: an embattled machine?

A second narrative that emerged from the interviews spoke to the novelty of responding to a public health crisis of unseen proportions, the unpreparedness of SAPS and the many strains and misalignments experienced along the way. In reality, the police were placed on the frontlines of the pandemic, responsible for enforcing regulations that encroached on lifestyles more generally and on the survival of poor communities particularly. In this narrative, the organisation scrambled to make things up as it went along and struggled to meet the range of new demands made on it. From these reflections emerged an organisation stretched beyond capacity. The pandemic added a host of new duties on top of SAPS's ordinary mandate of preventing and responding to crime. By most accounts, the expanded mandate of policing during this time was a major change as SAPS' core mandate remained intact (namely detecting, investigating and preventing crime) with the added responsibilities of policing COVID-19. For some participants, COVID was not simply an 'add-on', but displaced SAPS' core responsibilities (in part because crime itself declined under stringent curfews and lockdown). As one participant described:

*"You know, you could write a book about last year, because the experience changed from normal policing, and then we have to adapt swiftly to the situation that we're experiencing now in terms of the COVID virus [...] Our job is to do crime prevention and to do investigation. But now the mandate was extended .... we need*

*to enforce compliance in terms of the regulations”*  
(P19).

This dual set of responsibilities made for an exceptionally difficult balancing act. SAPS members had to ensure that people were confined to their houses, monitor the size of gatherings, act on intelligence to monitor indoor activities, monitor taxi occupancy, issue permits for travel, curb the sale of liquor and cigarettes, close the beaches and other public spaces, ensure that members and the public were kept as safe as possible from infection – all while still attending to the usual police work of taking statements and attending to calls for help and the crime-related needs of the community.

At the same time, the pandemic introduced numerous constraints on the organisation’s functioning. Stations were required to adopt a shift system to limit office occupancy to 50% of normal capacity. Those who could were encouraged to work from home. But incidences of suspected infection could place a vehicle, a building, or even an entire police station out of commission for days as there needed to be testing, precautionary isolation, and decontamination. This had a severe impact on service delivery.

A key challenge was finding the resources to manage the newly expanded duties. Government mandated that SAPS should oversee the issuing permits authorising movement or travel under lockdown which created major strain, as SAPS was “responsible for the crime as well now burdened by the issuing of permits now the whole day” (P24). There was also ‘the great operational change’ (P10) of needing to monitor the size of gatherings, enforce alcohol and cigarette regulations, staff vehicle check-points 24/7 – all while ensuring that staff were informed of, and abiding by, the constantly changing regulations. The expanded mandate of policing necessitated moving personnel accustomed to office work to outdoor operational duties, “so that they can assist in terms of enforcing the compliance on the disaster management regulation” (P19). This was a major adjustment. One participant had not worked operationally for 25 years, but suddenly had to adjust to working 12-hour night shifts.

SAPS members reported working in a climate of constant fear and uncertainty, concerned about the very real risks of illness and death as infection numbers climbed. Participants described confronting confusion,

shock, frustration, and fear among both members and the communities they serve. In dealing with the public, police members were now hyper-aware of risk. Interviewees described suddenly feeling afraid of things they had previously done without any thought, like sharing a pen that had been used by a member of the public. They described the discomfort and indignity of having to remove their uniforms at the end of a shift “in the yard or garage”, in the hope of protecting their families from infection (P02). This was all in addition to the usual strains of the job, as “on a constant basis, you had to face an unknown, an unseen enemy, then, through the pandemic, in addition to criminal activity” (P08).

Colleagues were now afraid of each other, as “you might have the Coronavirus, I might have the Coronavirus” (P19). There was a reduction in collegiality and co-operation, as people were reluctant to move from their areas of comfort and safety. Both physically and mentally, police felt that “now there is this thin layer in between us” (P19). Some members were perceived to be taking “advantage of COVID because now it was justifiable for everyone, for anyone to be at home without being questioned” (P21). Widespread physical and mental exhaustion was evident, as “SAPS members are human beings, we also suffer from mental fatigue” (P08) but there was no opportunity to take leave.

Maintaining performance and morale was a strain on senior members, who had to provide emotional support and motivate their members, to “stand there and pretend as if COVID will not kill you, because had I allowed it there would not have been a police station” (P21).

While the public and other government representatives had room to complain and resist unpopular regulations, the police had no choice but to follow orders and do what needed to be done to enforce the law. However, the regulations were in constant flux, sometimes changing overnight. Many of the prohibitions and rules were also unpopular and at times even SAPS members themselves balked at their enforcement. As one participant described:

*“You know, in the 38-and-a-half years that I’m in this organisation, this is the first time where I had to be on the beach ... where there is a little child with a spade and a bucket... [and] I must say to that child, you can’t [be on] the beach”* (P16).

The enforcement of the DMA regulations caused dissatisfaction among citizens who “have to be told like kids what to do and what not to do” (P19). This was especially true of the enforcement of alcohol and cigarette regulations, where “they looked at SAPS as if SAPS was responsible for their not drinking” (P22) and for spoiling the fun, but also around movement restrictions and public gatherings. The police found themselves at odds with traditional ways of marking important events such as funerals and weddings, which often involve large numbers of attendees and may require interprovincial travel. Although curbing these events was seen as unavoidable because “drastic measures had to be taken” to save lives (P15), this was a major new cause of conflict with the community.

According to this second narrative, inter-departmental cooperation was also far from seamless. SAPS members complained that all departmental representatives took their responsibilities seriously, describing that “there were challenges, because all the role players are not always there... if those other departments are not there, then things are hanging in the air” (P25).

Inter-departmental misalignment was also an issue. For example, a number of participants (especially in the Northern Cape) note that the courts were inconsistent in terms of fines they imposed for infractions. Many courts seemed uninterested in seeing through any prosecutions under the DMA. Interviewees described that courts were “sending back all our documentation, as in they weren’t going to clog the system... because people weren’t appearing” (P08). Because the “courts did not take the fines seriously”, and “said they were not interested” (P11), most of the cases were withdrawn by prosecutors.

Another debilitating factor was SAPS’s abysmally poor digital readiness, which meant that they were not able to use technology to support communication and operations in the way that many other large organisations were able to do. Because the role-players in the security structures were so accustomed to only meeting in-person, the absence of synchronised technology capacity within the Provincial Joints hampered their ability to connect with other government departments. An external participant explained:

*“I think it took awfully long for [SAPS] to move to Zoom or Teams. I found it weird and strange, because*

*whenever there were presentations [by other departments], we didn’t see it. You see the police are linked by their own sort of TV network. It was a technology thing, where it is proprietary. We don’t have working cameras and things. So finally, like literally last week, which was about nine months after we started, we got into Teams.” (P14)*

Interviewees also described how technology proved a challenge for “far flung, the deep rural police stations” that “most of the time, they will have challenges in terms of receiving communications that are sent through the emails... So, we had to try to minimise the gap” (P15). Given the rapidly changing regulations, the volatile policing environment and the interviewees’ emphasis on timeous, up-to-date communications as critical to the success of the policing project at the time, the urban/rural deficiencies in technology are one example of the cracks that lie just below the surface of SAPS’s own operational assessment.

The narrative of the SAPS as an embattled machine spoke explicitly to the challenges the SAPS, as front-line service responders, confronted in the context of the pandemic. Such conversations serve as an important reminder of the context-specific challenges COVID-19 brought into the policing field and how the police’s obligations had to be fulfilled despite the existing strains of an organisation riddled with tensions, and with compromised capacities to deliver services under even the best of ‘normal’ conditions.

## Conclusion

How best to make sense of the two narratives that emerged from the qualitative research against the contextual background of current strains confronting the South African police?

In the first instance, the dominance of the view of SAPS as an effective, accountable and legitimate actor responsible for the enforcement of lockdown regulations, must be understood as the outcome of two sets of influences. The first influence relates to the politics of a research project (conducted under the auspices of the South African government research and support agencies and executed by the research division of the South Africa Police Service) that invited senior police leaders to reflect on their own organisation’s capacity to undertake Pandemic Policing. Under these condi-

tions, police officials will understandably be inclined to emphasise their strategic, managerial, and operational capacities, and point out the available capacities have been harnessed through concerted effort to operationalise a martial-type plan of action. In the second instance, the narrative of a functioning machine doing 'battle' with the virus, can be linked to the cultural mindsets embedded in paramilitary police institutions like the SAPS. This mindset, we argue, is further enhanced by the wider processes of securitisation that typically accompanies the policing of emergencies. Making 'war' on the pandemic, much like making 'war' on crime and drugs, requires a plan of action, designed at the centre, transferred through provincial and district structures, to be enforced by street level bureaucrats under the watchful eye of vigilant commanders. It is this depiction that defined the dominant narrative.

The second narrative, exposing the wide range of difficulties that frontline responders faced, surfaces a picture that shows SAPS working with constrained capacity, exasperated and fearful of the virus, the communities they serve and one another. The narrative makes visible fissures within the organisation itself, silos between SAPS and other criminal justice system actors, and a deep mistrust by the people SAPS serves. This narrative surfaces many of the same critiques that have been levelled at SAPS pre-COVID: that it is a dysfunctional organisation that has little accountability, leadership or discipline, and that lacks authority or legitimacy

in the eyes of the country's citizens. The specifics of the COVID policing narratives are therefore but a variation on an all-too-familiar theme.

We propose that the narratives be viewed as complementary rather than contradictory. Certainty co-exists with ambiguity -- more so in moments of crises. Constructions of a lean and mean machine have a particular appeal in contexts of uncertainty, when institutions dithering on the edge of a cliff are called upon to contain a deadly virus.

Furthermore, the co-existence of these views is reflective of a wider existential dilemma confronting the South African state. The yawning disparity between the grand social contract as embodied in a transformative Constitution and the messy praxis of governance that have evolved since 1994 now confronts the seemingly insatiable, greedy impulses of a kleptocracy. Caught between centrifugal and splintering dynamics, those called upon to enforce lockdown regulations are given a truly daunting task. In the process of engaging that task they project a unitary sense of overall purpose and of functional capacity that smoothes over the crumbling interior. This projection of clarity, certainty and capacity as the uniformed guardians of social order under threat run parallel to another in which ambivalence, doubt and vulnerability dominate. Those two narratives, we conclude, are but two sides of the same coin.

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