

Protests and Police Statistics: Some Commentary

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23 March 2012

On 19 March the Minister of Police, Mr. Nathi Mthetwa, informed parliament about the number of 'crowd management incidents' that occurred during the three years from 1 April 2009.¹ Table 1, compares the new data with similar statistics for the preceding five years.

Table 1. Crowd management incidents²

	Peaceful	Unrest	Total
2004/05	7,382	622	8,004
2005/06	9,809	954	10,763
2006/07	8,703	743	9,446
2007/08	6,431	705	7,136
2008/09	6,125	718	6,843
2009/10	7,897	1,008	8,905
2010/11	11,681	973	12,654
2011/12 ³	9,942	1,091	11,033

In 2010/11 there was a record number of crowd management incidents (unrest and peaceful), and the final data for 2011/12 are likely to show an even higher figure.⁴ Already, the number of gatherings involving unrest was higher in 2011/12 than any previous year. During the last three years, 2009-12, there has been an average of 2.9 unrest incidents per day. This is an increase of 40 percent over the average of 2.1 unrest incidents per day recorded for 2004-09. ***The statistics show that what has been called the Rebellion of the Poor has intensified over the past three years.***

In 2010 the Minister of Police explained that: 'the Incident Regulation Information System (IRIS) classifies incidents either as crowd management (peaceful) where the incident is managed in co-operation with the convenor and the police only monitor the gathering, or as crowd management (unrest) where the police need to intervene to make arrests or need to use force when there is a risk to safety or possible damage to property'.⁵

¹ The minister was responding to a question raised by Mr M.H. Hoosen of the Independent Democrats. See National Assembly (2012), 36/1/4/1/201200049, Question No. 397, 19 March. I am grateful to Mr Hoosen for asking this question.

² Data supplied by ministers of police in response to parliamentary questions, with the exception of 2004/05, where the statistics come directly from the South African Police Service's IRIS. See Natasha Vally (2009), 'National trends around protest action: mapping protest action in South Africa' (Centre for Sociological Research and Development Studies Seminar, University of Johannesburg); Peter Alexander (2010), 'Rebellion of the poor: South Africa's service delivery protests – a preliminary analysis', *Review of African Political Economy* 37(123), pp. 26-27; National Assembly (2010), 36/1/4/1/201000030, Question No. 194, 19 April.

³ For 2011/12 the figures are for the period 1 April 2011 to 5 March 2012.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ National Assembly (2010).

‘Gatherings’ may be sporting activities, for example, but the majority are related to protests of some kind.⁶ During 2007/08 to 2009/10 ‘the most common reason for conducting crowd management (peaceful) gatherings was labour related demands for increases in salary/wages’. For the same period, the most common reason for ‘crowd management (unrest)’ was related to service delivery issues’.⁷ The Minister’s new statement does not include similar information for 2010/12.

According to the minister’s 2010 statement the average number of participants in gatherings defined as ‘crowd management (peaceful)’ was 500 (2007/08) and 4,000 (2008/09), and the average number in those defined as ‘crowd management (unrest)’ was 3,000 (2007/08) and 4,000 (2008/09). In the new statement, the minister declined to put a figure on numbers of participants.

For the first time, the minister was asked to state the number of arrests that had occurred with crowd management (unrest) gatherings. These were given as 4,883 (2009/10), 4,680 (2010/11), 2,967 (1 April 2011 to 5 March 2012). These figures give the average number of arrests per unrest gathering as, respectively, 4.8 (2009/10), 4.8 (2010/11), and 2.7 (2011/12).⁸

Table 2 is based on a breakdown of crowd management incidents in each province as provided in the 2010 and 2012 ministerial statements. As we have shown previously, these figures (and the data in general) do not necessarily give a precise indication of the number of incidents.⁹ There can be administrative weaknesses and human error. Nevertheless, they probably provide reasonably reliable approximations. Gauteng had the largest number of peaceful incidents and the largest number of unrest incidents, but it also has the greatest population, so this is not surprising.

Table 2. Total crowd management incidents, 2007/08 to 2011/12, by province and category, and propensity to participate in crowd management incidents.

	2011 population estimate ¹⁰	Peaceful incidents	Peaceful incidents per thousand	Unrest incidents	Unrest incidents per thousand
Gauteng	11,328,203	9209	0.81	1097	0.10
Limpopo	5,554,657	4066	0.73	222	0.04
North West	3,253,390	6980	2.15	695	0.21
Mpumalanga	3,657,181	1944	0.53	358	0.10
KwaZulu-Natal	10,819,130	8555	0.79	546	0.05
Eastern Cape	6,829,958	3578	0.52	322	0.05
Free State	2,759,644	2606	0.94	413	0.15
Western Cape	5,287,863	3148	0.60	599	0.11
Northern Cape	1,096,731	1990	1.81	243	0.22

Table 2 also compares numbers of incidents with size of population (as estimated by StatsSA for 2011). We need to add the rider that figures are for numbers of gatherings, and these can vary in size. However, when we take population into account North West and Northern Cape come out on top. Since it is likely that most of the peaceful incidents are related to labour protests and many are sporting events, the unrest incidents are probably more pertinent as a gauge of the scale of service delivery protests in particular and the rebellion of the poor in general. It is notable that the three poorer provinces (which are also the most rural) – i.e. Limpopo, Eastern Cape and KZN – have a

⁶ Vally (2009).

⁷ National Assembly (2010), National Assembly (2012).

⁸ National Assembly 2012.

⁹ Vally (2009), Alexander (2010).

¹⁰ Statistics South Africa, *Mid-year Population Estimates* (2011).

lower propensity towards unrest incidents than other provinces. The implication, reflected in other studies, is that the rebellion cannot be explained in terms of poverty as such. It is mainly a movement within urban areas, but within those areas most participants and leaders can be regarded as poor, with a high proportion coming from informal settlements, where services are especially weak.

The main conclusion we draw from the latest police statistics is that the number of service delivery protests continues unabated. Government attempts to improve service delivery have not been sufficient to assuage the frustration and anger of poor people in South Africa. From press reports and our own research it is clear that while service delivery demands provide the principal focus for unrest incidents, many other issues are being raised, notably lack of jobs. As many commentators and activists now accept, service delivery protests are part of a broader Rebellion of the Poor. This rebellion is massive. I have not yet found any other country where there is a similar level of ongoing urban unrest. ***South Africa can reasonably be described as the 'protest capital of the world'.*** It also has the highest levels of inequality and unemployment of any major country, and it is not unreasonable to assume that the rebellion is, to a large degree, a consequence of these phenomena. ***There is no basis for assuming that the rebellion will subside unless the government is far more effective in channelling resources towards the poor.***