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Rape stats reveal little and conceal the tr
COMMENT

LISAVETTEN

Women report the

crime to get justice,

not out of a

heartfelt desire to

help police reach

misguided targets

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TATISTICS never get caught in pub-
lic without their underwear. They
also do not snort coke on other
people's stomachs. This is probably
why most people, given the choice, would
rather know what their favourite celebrity/
model/actor is (not) wearing than flirt with
the arcane mysteries of odds ratios, confi-
dence intervals, ANOVAs or chi-square
tests.

Yet behind these sedate percentages
lurks as much potential for scandal as any
celebrity sex video on the internet. And
nowhere is this better illustrated than the
debate over the accuracy of police crime
figures, a controversy sparked by the dis-
covery that some stations in the Western
Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal may be
fiddling with their rape statistics (among
other crimes).

Now, it is most unlikely that national
SAPS management issued a memorandum
to all stations instructing them to stop reg-
istering rape complaints, destroy dockets
or chase victims from the community serv-
ice centre.

Rather, the origins of this perverse
incentive to juggle crime figures may be
traced back to the government's decision in

2004 to reduce rape and other serious and
violent crimes by 7 percent to 10 percent
annually. Individual station commission-
ers' performance and promotion prospects
were made dependent on reducing the num-
ber of crimes reported at their stations.
This target is inappropriate for at least two
reasons: the mistaken belief that the police
can prevent rape; and the extensive under-
reporting of rape.
In a paper summarising research
around men's perpetration of rape, the
World Health Organization (WHO) identi-
fied 22 factors contributing to sexual vio-
lence. On the basis of these findings, the
police, to prevent rape, would need to com-
pensate for miserable childhoods, disman-
tle patriarchy, promote loving and intimate
sexual relationships, create full employ-
ment, cure substance abuse problems, teach
anger management courses (along with
skills to curb impulsive thinking and behav-
iour, as well as build shaky egos) and pro-
vide schooling to those with incomplete
educations. None of these activities falls
within the police's job descriptions and
many are well beyond their control. With-
out the means to prevent rape, it is therefore
predictable that some stations will have

resorted to creative writing in the compila-
tion of their rape statistics.
This 7 percent target is also meaning-
less. As is the case across the world, rape is
extensively underreported in South Africa.
The national SA Demographic and Health
Survey undertaken by the Department of
Health in 1997 found that only one in nine
women who were raped reported it to the
police. So unless the police intend to rou-
tinely conduct large-scale surveys investi-
gating the extent of underreporting by
rape survivors, they have no way of know-
ing whether decreases are due to fewer rape
survivors reporting to the police (or fewer
police stations being willing to accept their
complaints), or the result of an actual drop
in the incidence of rape.

On all these grounds, it is essential that
the government revisit its target to reduce
rape by 7 percent annually.
In future, perhaps it would help if we
thought of police rape statistics as being
like swimwear, with what they reveal being
suggestive - but what they conceal vital (to
borrow Aaron Levenstein's metaphor).
On this approach, an obsession with fig-
ures showing a drop in reported rape con-
ceals underreporting. So, an increase in the

number of reported rapes is the better
measure, potentially indicating, on the part
of victims, growing confidence in the crim-
inal justice system's ability to do something
useful about the harm inflicted upon them.
The narrow focus on the number of
rapes reported conceals other vital truths:
the absence of figures quantifying the
police's ability to arrest suspects and to
investigate cases properly to ensure
that they are tried, and prosecutors' ability
to run successful trials that result in
convictions.

Ultimately, women's decisions to report
rape are not motivated by the burning and
heartfelt desire to contribute to police sta-
tistics. Rather, through reporting, women
seek justice, to feel safer knowing that the
perpetrator can no longer threaten them
and to prevent the same fate being inflicted
on others. Because statistics literally tell us
what counts, the routine absence of figures
for arrests, trials and convictions demon-
strates that the measure of women's claims
to justice count not at all.
• Lisa Vetten is a senior researcher and pol-
icy analyst with the Tshwaranang Legal
Advocacy Centre. She is also a contributing
editor to The Star.

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