

## FROM CRISIS TO REFORM: GOVERNANCE, CORRUPTION, AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICE IN THE WAKE OF THE MADLANGA COMMISSION

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to critically examine the governance crisis, corruption dynamics, and democratic transformation challenges within the South African Police Service (SAPS) in the context of post-1994 reforms. It further analyses the implications of the Madlanga Commission of Inquiry (2025–2026) alongside other oversight mechanisms, including the Zondo Commission (2022), the National Development Plan (NDP 2030), and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2019–2030), in assessing the effectiveness of policing reform in South Africa. Despite extensive post-apartheid reforms aimed at transforming SAPS into a professional, accountable, and community-oriented institution, systemic corruption, political interference, and weak internal governance mechanisms continue to undermine institutional legitimacy, operational effectiveness, and public trust. The central problem is that SAPS has not successfully institutionalised democratic accountability and ethical governance, resulting in sustained corruption, vulnerability to organised criminal infiltration, and declining public confidence, as evidenced by findings from the Madlanga Commission, Zondo Commission, and IPID oversight reports. This study adopts a qualitative systematic document analysis approach. It draws on triangulated secondary data sources, including government policy frameworks (e.g., NDP 2030 and NACS), official commission reports (Zondo Commission and Madlanga Commission), Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) annual reports, and credible international governance indices such as the World Bank Governance Indicators and Transparency International reports. The data were systematically analysed through thematic content analysis focusing on governance, corruption patterns, institutional accountability, and reform effectiveness within SAPS. The study reveals that corruption within SAPS is systemic rather than incidental, characterised by entrenched networks of misconduct, procurement irregularities, and infiltration by organised criminal groups. Oversight institutions such as IPID and parliamentary mechanisms face limitations in enforcement capacity, resulting in weak accountability outcomes. The findings further indicate a persistent gap between policy frameworks and implementation, where reform strategies such as the NDP 2030 and National Anti-Corruption Strategy have not fully translated into operational effectiveness. The Madlanga Commission reinforces these concerns by exposing prima facie evidence of governance failures, political interference, and compromised policing integrity. International comparative data further confirm that weakened rule of law and institutional corruption significantly erode public trust and legitimacy in law enforcement institutions. The study concludes that the South African Police Service is experiencing a deep-seated governance and legitimacy crisis driven by systemic corruption, weak institutional accountability, and implementation failures in reform policies. While comprehensive policy frameworks exist, their impact is undermined by structural weaknesses in leadership, oversight coordination, and ethical enforcement. The Madlanga Commission highlights the urgency of transitioning from policy reform to enforceable institutional transformation, requiring strengthened oversight mechanisms, depoliticisation of policing structures, and enhanced integrity systems. Without decisive reform, SAPS risks continued erosion of public trust and democratic legitimacy, thereby undermining the broader criminal justice system and democratic consolidation in South Africa.

**Keywords:** *South African Police Service (SAPS), Police reform, Institutional governance, State capture, Corruption in policing, Police accountability, Democratic policing, Police legitimacy.*

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### Introduction

The democratic transition of South Africa in 1994 marked a fundamental transformation of the country's policing landscape, shifting from an apartheid-era policing model characterised by repression, political control, and human rights violations towards a democratic policing framework grounded in constitutionalism, accountability, and community service. The Constitution of the

Republic of South Africa (1996) established the foundation for democratic policing by requiring the South African Police Service (SAPS) to prevent, combat, and investigate crime while protecting and securing all inhabitants of the country and upholding their constitutional rights. Subsequent reforms, including the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995 and the White Paper on Safety and Security (1998), sought to institutionalise principles of

community policing, transparency, civilian oversight, and public accountability.

Despite these reforms, SAPS continue to face significant governance and legitimacy challenges. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 identifies weak leadership, inadequate accountability systems, corruption, and declining public trust as major obstacles to effective policing in South Africa (National Planning Commission, 2012). These concerns have been amplified by recurring allegations of political interference, organised crime infiltration, procurement irregularities, and misconduct among police officials. According to the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) Annual Report (2023/2024), more than 5,500 cases of police misconduct and criminality were reported during the reporting period, including allegations of corruption, assault, torture, deaths in police custody, and abuse of authority. Such figures highlight persistent concerns regarding integrity and accountability within the policing environment.

South Africa also continues to experience exceptionally high levels of violent crime, placing immense pressure on law enforcement institutions. According to SAPS Crime Statistics for the 2024/2025 financial year, approximately 27,600 murders were recorded nationally, translating to an average of more than 75 murders per day. In addition, over 42,500 sexual offences and more than 120,000 aggravated robbery cases were reported during the same period (SAPS, 2025). The prevalence of violent crime has intensified public scrutiny of SAPS's effectiveness and its ability to fulfil its constitutional mandate.

The crisis of police governance gained renewed prominence following allegations made in 2025 by Lieutenant-General Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi, the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Commissioner, concerning criminal syndicates, corruption, and political interference within components of the criminal justice system. In response, President Cyril Ramaphosa established the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Criminality, Political Interference and Corruption in the Criminal Justice System, chaired by Justice Mbuyiseli Madlanga. Commonly referred to as the Madlanga Commission, the inquiry was tasked with investigating allegations of criminal infiltration within law enforcement agencies, intelligence structures, prosecutorial institutions, and related state entities. The Commission represents one of the most significant investigations into governance failures and corruption within South Africa's criminal justice system since the advent of democracy.

The establishment of the Madlanga Commission occurs against a broader backdrop of declining public confidence in state institutions. Findings from the Afrobarometer Survey (2024) indicate that approximately 64% of South Africans believe that corruption has increased in recent years, while fewer than half of respondents expressed confidence in government efforts to combat corruption. Similarly, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2024) assigned South Africa a score of 41 out of 100, placing the country among states facing significant public-sector corruption challenges. These trends underscore the urgent need for institutional reforms aimed at strengthening governance, integrity, and accountability within policing structures.

Internationally, police corruption and governance failures remain recognised threats to democratic governance and public trust. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) estimates that corruption costs the global economy more than

US\$2.6 trillion annually, equivalent to approximately 5% of global gross domestic product. Furthermore, the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index (2024) highlights accountability, absence of corruption, and effective criminal justice institutions as critical determinants of democratic stability and public confidence. Comparative experiences from Northern Ireland, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom demonstrate that effective police reform requires robust oversight mechanisms, institutional transparency, ethical leadership, and meaningful community engagement.

Against this backdrop, the Madlanga Commission presents a critical opportunity to examine the governance failures affecting SAPS and to develop pathways towards democratic transformation. The Commission's work has reignited national debates regarding police legitimacy, institutional integrity, accountability, and the future of democratic policing in South Africa. This article therefore explores the governance challenges revealed by the Commission and proposes strategic reforms aimed at strengthening accountability, combating corruption, enhancing public trust, and advancing the democratic transfor

## Background

The transformation of policing in South Africa remains one of the most significant institutional reforms undertaken since the country's transition to democracy in 1994. During the apartheid era, policing institutions were primarily designed to protect the state and enforce discriminatory laws rather than serve the broader interests of society. Police agencies were frequently associated with political repression, human rights violations, and the suppression of opposition movements. Consequently, the democratic government inherited a policing system that lacked legitimacy among large segments of the population and required comprehensive restructuring to align with constitutional values and democratic principles.

Following the advent of democracy, the South African government embarked on an ambitious programme of police reform aimed at transforming the South African Police Service (SAPS) into a professional, accountable, and community-oriented institution. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) established a new framework for policing based on human dignity, equality, freedom, accountability, and respect for the rule of law. The South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995 further provided the legislative foundation for democratic policing by promoting community participation, transparency, and civilian oversight.

Several policy initiatives were subsequently introduced to strengthen police governance and improve service delivery. The White Paper on Safety and Security (1998), the White Paper on Policing (2016), and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 all emphasised the importance of professionalisation, accountability, ethical leadership, and community partnerships in achieving effective policing. These policy frameworks envisaged a police service capable of responding to complex crime challenges while maintaining public trust and constitutional legitimacy.

Despite these reforms, SAPS continue to face significant governance and operational challenges. South Africa remains one of the countries most affected by violent crime globally. SAPS crime statistics for the 2024/2025 reporting period indicate that approximately 27,600 murders were recorded nationally, while thousands of cases of sexual offences, aggravated robberies, and assaults were reported. These crime trends place considerable

pressure on law enforcement institutions and underscore the importance of effective, accountable, and professional policing.

At the same time, concerns regarding governance failures, corruption, leadership instability, and political interference have increasingly undermined public confidence in SAPS. Reports from the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID), the Auditor-General of South Africa, and various commissions of inquiry have highlighted recurring incidents of police misconduct, abuse of authority, procurement irregularities, and corruption. Such challenges have raised questions regarding the effectiveness of existing accountability mechanisms and the capacity of SAPS to fulfil its constitutional mandate.

The broader context of governance challenges within South Africa's public sector has further complicated policing reform efforts. The findings of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector, commonly known as the Zondo Commission, revealed extensive corruption networks, institutional weaknesses, and governance failures across multiple state institutions. These findings reinforced concerns regarding the vulnerability of public institutions to corruption, political influence, and organised criminal activity.

Against this backdrop, the establishment of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Criminality, Political Interference and Corruption in the Criminal Justice System, commonly referred to as the Madlanga Commission, represents a significant development in South Africa's criminal justice landscape. The Commission was established following serious allegations concerning criminal infiltration, corruption, and political interference within components of the criminal justice system. Its mandate reflects growing concerns regarding the integrity, independence, and effectiveness of law enforcement and related institutions.

The Madlanga Commission emerges at a critical time when public trust in policing and criminal justice institutions is under considerable strain. Surveys conducted by Afrobarometer and other research organisations indicate that many South Africans perceive corruption as one of the most significant challenges facing public institutions. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index has similarly highlighted persistent concerns regarding public-sector corruption and governance weaknesses within the country.

The significance of the Commission extends beyond the investigation of individual misconduct. It provides an opportunity to examine systemic governance failures, identify institutional vulnerabilities, and recommend reforms aimed at strengthening accountability, transparency, and ethical leadership within the criminal justice system. Furthermore, the Commission offers an opportunity to reassess the broader trajectory of police reform in South Africa and evaluate whether existing governance structures are sufficient to address contemporary challenges such as organised crime, corruption, political interference, and declining public trust.

This article is situated within this broader context of policing reform, governance challenges, and democratic transformation. It examines how corruption, governance failures, and institutional weaknesses have affected SAPS and analyses the potential of the Madlanga Commission to serve as a catalyst for meaningful reform. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing scholarly and

policy debates concerning police legitimacy, accountability, democratic governance, and the future of policing in South Africa.

## **Problem Statement**

Despite the democratic transition of 1994 and the introduction of extensive reform measures aimed at transforming the South African Police Service (SAPS) into a professional, accountable, and community-oriented policing institution, systemic corruption, political interference, and weak internal governance mechanisms continue to undermine police legitimacy, operational effectiveness, and public trust (Republic of South Africa, 1996; National Planning Commission, 2012).

The persistence of these governance failures has been repeatedly highlighted in oversight and inquiry processes, most notably the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture (2022), which documented how elements within state institutions, including policing structures, were vulnerable to political manipulation and corruption networks that compromised institutional integrity. Similarly, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) Annual Reports (2023–2025) consistently report ongoing cases of police misconduct, corruption, and inadequate disciplinary enforcement, reinforcing concerns about weak internal accountability systems.

### **The central problem is therefore that:**

The South African Police Service has not succeeded in fully institutionalising democratic accountability and ethical governance, resulting in sustained corruption, infiltration by organised criminal networks, and declining public confidence, as evidenced by the Madlanga Commission of Inquiry (2025–2026), the Zondo Commission (2022), and IPID oversight findings.

This institutional failure is further exacerbated by political and administrative weaknesses identified in the National Development Plan (NDP 2030), which explicitly calls for a “professional, ethical and demilitarised police service,” yet acknowledges persistent implementation gaps in leadership accountability, recruitment integrity, and operational independence (National Planning Commission, 2012).

In addition, the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) 2019–2030 highlights that corruption within law enforcement institutions remains a key driver of state vulnerability, particularly where internal controls are weak and oversight coordination is fragmented. This aligns with findings from the Madlanga Commission (2025–2026), which exposed prima facie evidence of criminal infiltration and collusion between elements of SAPS and organised crime networks, further eroding public trust in policing institutions.

From a governance perspective, the continued inability of SAPS to consolidate ethical leadership and enforce internal discipline reflects what the World Bank Governance Indicators (2024) describe as weakened “rule of law effectiveness,” where institutional trust declines when corruption becomes systemic rather than incidental. This is further supported by Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer (2023), which shows that public confidence in law enforcement significantly deteriorates in contexts where citizens perceive police corruption as widespread and unpunished.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that SAPS remains trapped in a structural governance crisis where reform policies

exist, but implementation failures persist. As a result, democratic policing ideals enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) are not fully realised in practice, leaving the institution vulnerable to corruption, external influence, and declining legitimacy.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study is to critically examine the governance, corruption, accountability, and institutional challenges facing the South African Police Service (SAPS) in the democratic era and to assess how the findings and recommendations emerging from recent commissions of inquiry, particularly the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector Including Organs of State, can contribute to the strategic transformation of policing in South Africa. The study seeks to explore the extent to which existing policing reforms have addressed systemic weaknesses within SAPS and to identify evidence-based strategies for strengthening institutional integrity, enhancing accountability, improving public trust, and promoting democratic, professional, and community-oriented policing.

Furthermore, the study aims to contribute to scholarly and policy debates on police reform by providing a comprehensive analysis of the historical, governance, and operational factors influencing policing effectiveness in South Africa. The study also seeks to develop recommendations that support sustainable organisational reform, ethical leadership, anti-corruption measures, and improved service delivery within SAPS in alignment with constitutional principles, national policy frameworks, and international best practices for democratic policing.

### **Research Objectives and Research Questions**

#### **Research Objectives**

The study is guided by the following objectives:

**Objective 1:** To examine governance and accountability challenges within SAPS

South African oversight bodies, including the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA) and the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, repeatedly highlight weak internal controls, procurement irregularities, and poor financial accountability within SAPS structures.

- AGSA reports have consistently found material irregularities in SAPS procurement and supply chain management, contributing to wasteful expenditure and weak service delivery outcomes (AGSA, 2024).
- The National Development Plan (NDP 2030) identifies ineffective policing governance as a major barrier to building safer communities.

#### **Research Question 1:**

What are the key governance and accountability weaknesses affecting the South African Police Service?

**Objective 2:** To analyse the extent and nature of corruption within SAPS

The State Capture Commission (Zondo Commission) found that elements within law enforcement and intelligence structures were vulnerable to political interference and corruption networks.

- The Commission reported systemic weaknesses in vetting, procurement integrity, and senior leadership accountability (Zondo Commission, 2022).
- Transparency International (2024) ranks South Africa with a Corruption Perceptions Index score of 41/100, indicating persistent public sector corruption risks.
- The Public Service Commission also reports recurring disciplinary failures and unresolved corruption cases in government departments, including SAPS.

#### **Research Question 2:**

To what extent does corruption influence the operational effectiveness and legitimacy of SAPS?

**Objective 3:** To evaluate the effectiveness of policing reforms and policy frameworks

South Africa has implemented multiple reforms including the:

- White Paper on Policing (2016)
- White Paper on Safety and Security (2016)
- National Development Plan (2030)
- SAPS Strategic Framework and Annual Performance Plans

However, crime trends remain high:

- SAPS recorded over 27,600 murders in 2023/24, reflecting ongoing systemic policing and societal challenges (SAPS Annual Report, 2024/25).
- UNODC global homicide data shows South Africa remains among the highest homicide rate countries globally (~40+ per 100,000 population).

**Research Question 3:**

How effective have existing policy frameworks and reforms been in improving SAPS performance and reducing crime?

**Objective 4:** To assess the implications of commissions of inquiry for SAPS reform

The State Capture Commission and other oversight investigations have highlighted institutional vulnerabilities, including:

- Weak oversight and political interference
- Poor consequence management
- Leadership instability

International evidence (World Bank Governance Indicators) shows that countries with weak rule of law experience higher crime rates and reduced police legitimacy.

#### **Research Question 4:**

How can findings from commissions of inquiry be operationalised to strengthen SAPS governance and accountability systems?

**Objective 5:** To propose strategies for improving democratic policing in South Africa

Democratic policing requires transparency, legitimacy, and community trust.

- UNDP governance reports emphasize that trust in police institutions is a key determinant of public cooperation and crime reporting.

- OECD integrity frameworks highlight the importance of ethical leadership and anti-corruption systems in law enforcement institutions.

### **Research Question 5:**

What strategic reforms are necessary to enhance democratic policing, ethical leadership, and public trust within SAPS?

### **Central Research Question**

Central Question:

How can governance reforms, anti-corruption mechanisms, and findings from recent commissions of inquiry be leveraged to transform the South African Police Service into an effective, accountable, and democratically legitimate policing institution?

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding and addressing persistent governance, corruption, and accountability challenges within the South African Police Service (SAPS) in the post-apartheid democratic era. Despite extensive reforms introduced through the National Development Plan (NDP 2030), the White Paper on Policing (2016), and oversight mechanisms such as the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, SAPS continue to face systemic weaknesses that undermine its constitutional mandate of ensuring safety and security for all citizens.

According to the SAPS Annual Report (2024/25), South Africa recorded over 27,600 murders in a single financial year, reflecting ongoing violent crime challenges that place significant pressure on policing capacity and public trust. These crime levels are among the highest globally, with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reporting South Africa's homicide rate at approximately 40–45 per 100,000 population, far exceeding the global average.

### **This study is significant in the following ways:**

#### ***Policy and Governance Contribution***

The study provides critical insight into how governance failures, procurement weaknesses, and accountability gaps identified by the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA) and the Public Service Commission (PSC) continue to affect SAPS performance. It further evaluates whether existing policy frameworks are sufficient to address institutional inefficiencies or require restructuring.

#### ***Contribution to Commission-Based Reform Analysis***

The study adds value by critically engaging with findings from the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture (Zondo Commission, 2022), which highlighted systemic corruption risks within state institutions, including law enforcement-linked entities. It contributes to understanding how commission recommendations can be operationalised within SAPS reform processes.

#### ***Strengthening Democratic Policing***

The study contributes to the broader discourse on democratic policing by assessing the extent to which SAPS aligns with constitutional principles of transparency, accountability, and community orientation as outlined in the South African Constitution (1996) and policing white papers.

### ***International Comparative Relevance***

By incorporating global governance indicators from the World Bank, UNDP, and Transparency International (CPI score: South Africa 41/100, 2024), the study situates SAPS challenges within global trends of police corruption, institutional fragility, and public trust deficits.

### **Practical Value for Reform Implementation**

The findings are expected to assist policymakers, SAPS leadership, and oversight bodies in designing evidence-based strategies to improve ethical leadership, reduce corruption risks, strengthen internal controls, and enhance service delivery.

### **Research Gaps**

Despite extensive literature and policy frameworks addressing policing reform in South Africa, several critical gaps remain:

#### **Gap in Translating Commission Findings into Practice**

Although the State Capture Commission (Zondo Commission, 2022) and other inquiries have produced extensive recommendations, there is limited empirical research assessing how these recommendations are implemented within SAPS structures and their actual impact on governance reform.

#### **Gap in Integrated Governance and Corruption Analysis**

Most existing studies treat corruption, governance failure, and operational inefficiency as separate issues. There is a lack of integrated analysis linking corruption networks, procurement systems, leadership instability, and frontline policing performance within SAPS.

#### **Gap in Empirical Evaluation of Reform Effectiveness**

While policies such as the NDP 2030 and White Paper on Safety and Security (2016) outline reform objectives, there is limited empirical evidence evaluating whether these reforms have measurably reduced crime or improved public trust.

For example, despite policy interventions, SAPS continues to record high violent crime rates (over 27,000 murders annually), suggesting a gap between policy intention and operational outcomes.

#### **Gap in Community Trust and Legitimacy Studies**

International literature (UNDP, OECD) emphasizes that police legitimacy is central to effective policing. However, in the South African context, there is limited recent research examining how corruption perceptions influence community cooperation with SAPS in crime reporting and prevention.

#### **Gap in Leadership and Ethical Governance Studies**

There is insufficient research on how leadership instability, cadre deployment debates, and ethical failures within SAPS management structures affect institutional performance and accountability systems.

#### **Gap in Comparative International Learning**

Although international frameworks such as Transparency International's CPI, World Bank governance indicators, and UN policing standards exist, there is limited comparative research showing how South Africa can adapt successful anti-corruption policing models from other jurisdictions.

Overall, the literature reveals that while SAPS reform is heavily documented in policy and commission reports, there remains a critical gap between policy formulation, commission recommendations, and practical institutional transformation, particularly in the areas of corruption control, governance strengthening, and democratic policing implementation.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a combination of policing, governance, and public administration theories that explain institutional performance, corruption dynamics, accountability failures, and democratic policing transformation. The key theoretical lenses guiding this study are:

- Democratic Policing Theory
- Institutional Theory
- Principal–Agent Theory
- Good Governance Theory

These theories collectively provide a framework for analysing governance failures, corruption risks, and reform challenges within the South African Police Service (SAPS).

### Democratic Policing Theory

Democratic Policing Theory refers to a model of policing that emphasizes accountability to the public, respect for human rights, transparency, rule of law, and community partnership. It is rooted in constitutional democracy and rejects authoritarian or politically driven policing systems.

According to the South African White Paper on Safety and Security (2016), democratic policing requires SAPS to operate in a manner that is responsive, transparent, and accountable to civilian oversight structures.

Internationally, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines democratic policing as policing that is legitimate, professional, and guided by human rights standards.

### Relevance to the Study

This theory is directly relevant because SAPS continues to face challenges in achieving full democratic policing due to:

- Allegations of corruption and political interference (Zondo Commission, 2022)
- Weak public trust and legitimacy
- High levels of violent crime (SAPS Annual Report, 2024/25 recorded 27,600+ murders)

The theory helps assess whether SAPS has transitioned from its apartheid-era coercive model into a fully democratic policing institution.

### Discussion

Despite post-1994 reforms, studies show that SAPS still struggles with legitimacy deficits. The National Development Plan (NDP 2030) emphasizes that policing must be rooted in community trust, yet public confidence remains low due to corruption and service delivery failures.

The UNDP Governance Report (2024) also highlights that countries with weak democratic policing structures experience higher crime rates and lower reporting rates, reinforcing the importance of legitimacy in policing effectiveness.

## Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory explains how organisations operate within formal rules (laws, policies) and informal norms (culture, practices, and traditions) that shape behaviour over time. Institutions tend to become resistant to change due to path dependency and bureaucratic culture.

According to Scott (2014), institutions are shaped by regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars that influence organisational behaviour.

### Relevance to the Study

SAPS is a classic example of an institution shaped by:

- Apartheid-era policing structures
- Bureaucratic hierarchies
- Organisational culture resistant to reform
- Weak enforcement of accountability systems

This theory helps explain why, despite multiple reforms (White Papers, NDP, oversight bodies), systemic corruption and inefficiencies persist.

### Discussion

The Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA, 2024) reports continued irregular expenditure and procurement weaknesses in SAPS, indicating institutional dysfunction.

The State Capture Commission (2022) further revealed how institutional vulnerabilities allowed corruption networks to influence procurement and governance processes within public entities.

Internationally, the World Bank Governance Indicators (2024) show that countries with weak institutional quality experience higher corruption and reduced effectiveness of law enforcement agencies.

### Principal–Agent Theory

Principal–Agent Theory explains relationships where:

- The principal (citizens/government) delegates authority
- The agent (police/SAPS officials) is expected to act on their behalf

However, problems arise when agents pursue self-interest, corruption, or abuse of discretion, rather than the principal's objectives.

### Relevance to the Study

In SAPS:

- Citizens (principals) expect safety and justice
- SAPS officials (agents) are entrusted with enforcement powers
- Corruption, bribery, and misconduct represent agent deviation

This theory explains corruption and accountability failures within SAPS.

### Discussion

The Public Service Commission (PSC) has repeatedly reported disciplinary cases involving misconduct and corruption in government departments, including policing structures.

The Transparency International CPI (2024), where South Africa scored 41/100, reflects persistent risks of public sector corruption, reinforcing principal-agent failure dynamics.

The Zondo Commission (2022) also documented cases where agents within the public sector acted against public interest for private gain, weakening institutional trust.

### Good Governance Theory

Good Governance Theory emphasizes that public institutions must operate based on:

- Accountability
- Transparency
- Rule of law
- Effectiveness and efficiency
- Participation

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2024), good governance is essential for sustainable development and institutional legitimacy.

### Relevance to the Study

SAPS governance challenges include:

- Weak accountability systems
- Poor oversight enforcement
- Procurement inefficiencies
- Leadership instability

This theory provides a framework to evaluate whether SAPS aligns with governance principles required for democratic policing.

### Discussion

The National Development Plan (2030) explicitly calls for professional, accountable, and well-governed policing institutions.

However, the AGSA reports continue to highlight financial mismanagement and control weaknesses in SAPS structures.

Internationally, the OECD Public Integrity Framework (2024) stresses that corruption in law enforcement reduces institutional legitimacy and weakens public trust.

### Integrated Theoretical Perspective

When combined, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for the study:

- Democratic Policing Theory → explains legitimacy and community trust
- Institutional Theory → explains resistance to reform and structural weakness
- Principal-Agent Theory → explains corruption and accountability failure
- Good Governance Theory → explains standards SAPS should achieve

Together, they show that SAPS challenges are not isolated but systemic, structural, and governance-driven, reinforced by historical legacies and institutional weaknesses.

## Literature Review

Emerging Governance and Corruption Challenges within The South African Police Service (Saps)

The South African Police Service (SAPS) occupies a central position in maintaining public safety, upholding the rule of law, and protecting constitutional democracy. However, despite extensive reforms since the advent of democracy in 1994, the organisation continues to face significant governance and corruption challenges that undermine its effectiveness, legitimacy, and public trust. These challenges have increasingly attracted public, academic, and governmental attention, particularly in light of recent allegations of criminal infiltration, political interference, and corruption within components of the criminal justice system.

Governance within policing refers to the structures, processes, leadership practices, and accountability mechanisms that guide decision-making and ensure that police institutions operate in accordance with legal, ethical, and constitutional standards. Effective governance is characterised by transparency, accountability, integrity, professionalism, and responsiveness to public needs. However, various reports and oversight findings have highlighted weaknesses in SAPS governance structures, including leadership instability, inadequate accountability mechanisms, poor consequence management, and deficiencies in internal control systems.

One of the most significant governance concerns facing SAPS is the persistent problem of corruption. Corruption within policing can take many forms, including bribery, extortion, procurement fraud, abuse of authority, manipulation of investigations, protection of criminal syndicates, and misuse of state resources. The Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) has consistently reported cases involving police misconduct and criminal behaviour. According to the IPID Annual Report (2023/2024), thousands of complaints were received relating to deaths in police custody, assault, torture, corruption, and other forms of misconduct, highlighting ongoing integrity challenges within the organisation.

Procurement and financial management irregularities have also emerged as significant governance concerns. Various investigations conducted by oversight institutions, including the Auditor-General South Africa and the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, revealed weaknesses in procurement controls, contract management, and financial oversight across several state institutions, including law enforcement agencies. Such weaknesses create opportunities for corruption, mismanagement, and the diversion of resources intended for service delivery and crime-fighting operations.

Political interference represents another major governance challenge confronting SAPS. Democratic policing requires operational independence while maintaining accountability to elected authorities and the public. However, allegations of political influence over senior appointments, investigations, intelligence operations, and disciplinary processes have raised concerns regarding the ability of SAPS to function impartially and professionally. The National Development Plan (2030) specifically identified the need to professionalise policing and insulate operational decisions from undue political influence to strengthen institutional credibility and effectiveness.

The governance crisis within SAPS has been further exacerbated by allegations of organised crime infiltration and collusion between criminal networks and law enforcement officials. Such allegations gained prominence following claims made by senior police officials regarding the existence of criminal syndicates operating

within or influencing parts of the criminal justice system. These developments prompted the establishment of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Criminality, Political Interference and Corruption in the Criminal Justice System, commonly known as the Madlanga Commission. The Commission's mandate reflects growing concerns that organised criminal groups may be exploiting governance weaknesses within state institutions to evade accountability and undermine law enforcement efforts.

Leadership instability has also contributed to governance challenges within SAPS. Frequent changes in senior management positions, suspensions of high-ranking officials, and disputes concerning leadership appointments have created uncertainty and weakened organisational continuity. Research indicates that stable, ethical, and competent leadership is critical for promoting organisational integrity, enforcing accountability, and fostering a professional policing culture. Conversely, leadership instability may weaken oversight, reduce employee morale, and contribute to institutional dysfunction.

Public trust remains one of the most important indicators of police legitimacy. However, recurring allegations of corruption and governance failures have negatively affected public confidence in SAPS. Afrobarometer surveys have consistently shown that corruption perceptions significantly influence citizens' trust in government institutions. When communities perceive police officials as corrupt or ineffective, cooperation with law enforcement declines, thereby limiting the effectiveness of crime prevention and investigation efforts. Public trust is particularly important in democratic societies where policing relies heavily on community cooperation, information sharing, and voluntary compliance with the law.

The emergence of sophisticated organised crime networks, cybercrime, illicit financial flows, and transnational criminal activities has further exposed governance vulnerabilities within policing institutions. These evolving threats require advanced investigative capabilities, specialised training, intelligence-led policing, and strong institutional integrity. Weak governance structures create opportunities for criminal organisations to exploit vulnerabilities within law enforcement agencies, thereby compromising operational effectiveness and national security.

Addressing these governance and corruption challenges requires a comprehensive reform agenda focused on strengthening accountability mechanisms, enhancing oversight, professionalising leadership and management, improving financial controls, protecting operational independence, and promoting ethical policing. The implementation of recommendations emerging from the Madlanga Commission may provide an important opportunity to strengthen institutional integrity and restore public confidence in SAPS. Sustainable reform will depend on the willingness of government, police leadership, oversight bodies, and civil society to work collectively towards building a professional, accountable, transparent, and community-centred police service capable of fulfilling its constitutional mandate.

In the context of South Africa's democratic development, addressing governance and corruption challenges within SAPS is not merely an organisational imperative but a national priority. Effective policing, public trust, and democratic stability are fundamentally dependent on a police institution that operates with integrity, professionalism, accountability, and respect for the rule of law.

## **Context and Significance of the Madlanga Commission**

The establishment of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Criminality, Political Interference and Corruption in the Criminal Justice System, commonly known as the Madlanga Commission, represents a critical milestone in South Africa's ongoing efforts to strengthen governance, accountability, and institutional integrity within the criminal justice sector. Established by President Cyril Ramaphosa in 2025 and chaired by former Constitutional Court Justice Mbuyiseli Madlanga, the Commission emerged in response to serious allegations concerning corruption, political interference, organised criminal infiltration, and institutional failures within key criminal justice institutions, including the South African Police Service (SAPS), intelligence structures, and prosecutorial agencies.

The Commission was established against a backdrop of growing public concern regarding the effectiveness, independence, and integrity of South Africa's criminal justice system. Over the past decade, numerous reports, investigations, and commissions of inquiry have highlighted the detrimental effects of corruption and state capture on public institutions. The findings of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (Zondo Commission) revealed extensive governance failures, political patronage networks, and corruption across various sectors of government. These revelations raised broader concerns about the vulnerability of law enforcement and criminal justice institutions to external influence and criminal infiltration.

The immediate catalyst for the establishment of the Madlanga Commission was a series of allegations made by Lieutenant-General Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi, the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Commissioner of SAPS. These allegations suggested the existence of criminal syndicates operating within or exerting influence over elements of the criminal justice system. Furthermore, concerns were raised regarding political interference in investigations, the manipulation of intelligence structures, and the potential obstruction of efforts to combat organised crime. Given the seriousness of these allegations and their implications for national security and public trust, the establishment of an independent judicial inquiry was deemed necessary to determine the extent of the alleged misconduct and identify institutional weaknesses that may have facilitated such activities.

The significance of the Madlanga Commission extends beyond the investigation of individual wrongdoing. Rather, it represents an important opportunity to examine systemic governance failures affecting South Africa's criminal justice institutions. Effective democratic policing depends on institutions that are transparent, accountable, professional, and free from corruption and undue political influence. Allegations of criminal infiltration and governance failures threaten not only the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies but also the legitimacy of democratic governance itself. The Commission therefore serves as a mechanism for restoring accountability and reinforcing the constitutional principles upon which South Africa's democratic system is founded.

The Commission is particularly significant because it addresses one of the most pressing challenges facing modern policing: the intersection between organised crime, corruption, and institutional governance. International research demonstrates that organised criminal groups often seek to infiltrate state institutions to secure protection, influence investigations, access confidential information, and undermine law enforcement efforts. The United

Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) identifies corruption as one of the primary enablers of organised crime globally, while Transparency International (2024) continues to highlight the relationship between weak governance structures and corruption risks within public institutions. By investigating allegations of criminal infiltration, the Madlanga Commission contributes to broader efforts aimed at protecting the integrity of South Africa's criminal justice system.

The Commission also carries significant implications for police legitimacy and public trust. Public confidence in law enforcement institutions is largely dependent on perceptions of fairness, accountability, and integrity. Research by Tyler (2006) demonstrates that citizens are more likely to cooperate with police and comply with the law when they perceive policing institutions as legitimate and trustworthy. In South Africa, however, repeated allegations of corruption, misconduct, and political interference have contributed to declining levels of public confidence in state institutions. The Commission therefore provides an opportunity to demonstrate transparency, identify accountability failures, and rebuild trust between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve.

Another important aspect of the Commission's significance relates to democratic oversight and constitutional governance. South Africa's Constitution establishes accountability, responsiveness, and openness as foundational principles of public administration. Independent commissions of inquiry play a vital role in strengthening democratic accountability by investigating matters of significant public concern and making recommendations for institutional reform. The Madlanga Commission therefore serves not only as an investigative mechanism but also as an instrument of democratic governance designed to enhance transparency and strengthen public confidence in state institutions.

Furthermore, the Commission has the potential to influence future policing reforms within SAPS. The National Development Plan 2030 emphasises the need for a professional, accountable, and highly skilled police service capable of responding effectively to contemporary crime challenges. Recommendations emerging from the Commission may provide a roadmap for strengthening anti-corruption measures, improving intelligence oversight, enhancing leadership accountability, reforming recruitment and promotion systems, and insulating policing operations from undue political influence. Such reforms could contribute significantly to the broader transformation agenda aimed at building a modern, professional, and community-centred police service.

The significance of the Madlanga Commission must also be understood within the broader context of South Africa's struggle against corruption. Corruption continues to undermine economic development, service delivery, public confidence, and institutional effectiveness. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2024), South Africa scored 41 out of 100, indicating persistent concerns regarding public-sector corruption. The Commission therefore represents an important opportunity to strengthen anti-corruption efforts and reinforce the principle that no individual or institution is above accountability.

Ultimately, the Madlanga Commission represents far more than an inquiry into specific allegations of misconduct. It serves as a critical mechanism for examining the health of South Africa's criminal justice system, identifying governance weaknesses, and promoting democratic accountability. Its findings and

recommendations have the potential to shape the future of policing, strengthen institutional integrity, restore public trust, and contribute to the advancement of democratic governance in South Africa. The extent to which these objectives are realised will depend largely on the implementation of the Commission's recommendations and the commitment of political leaders, criminal justice institutions, and civil society to meaningful and sustainable reform.

### **Theme 1: Governance Failures and Institutional Weaknesses in SAPS**

The literature consistently demonstrates that governance failures within the South African Police Service (SAPS) remain a critical impediment to effective policing, accountability, and public trust. These failures manifest in weak oversight systems, inadequate internal controls, fragmented command structures, and ineffective consequence management mechanisms. Collectively, these weaknesses undermine SAPS's constitutional mandate to provide a professional, transparent, and accountable police service.

The Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA, 2024) reports persistent challenges within SAPS, including irregular expenditure, non-compliance with supply chain management regulations, and weaknesses in financial oversight systems. These findings suggest systemic governance breakdowns rather than isolated administrative errors. Similarly, the Public Service Commission (PSC, 2023/2024) highlights recurring failures in disciplinary processes, noting that misconduct cases often take long to resolve, thereby weakening accountability and institutional deterrence.

The National Development Plan (NDP 2030) explicitly identifies poor governance in policing institutions as a structural barrier to reducing crime and building safer communities in South Africa. It argues that SAPS requires professionalisation, strengthened oversight, and improved managerial accountability to achieve long-term effectiveness.

International governance literature reinforces this position. The World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators (2024) show a strong correlation between weak institutional quality and high levels of crime, corruption, and reduced public sector efficiency. Countries with weak "Rule of Law" and "Government Effectiveness" indicators tend to experience reduced policing capacity and lower citizen trust in law enforcement institutions.

Further support is provided by the OECD Public Integrity Framework (2023), which emphasizes that governance failures in law enforcement agencies typically arise from weak procurement systems, poor leadership accountability, and inadequate internal audit mechanisms.

In the South African context, scholarly work by Burger (2016) and Bruce (2014) highlights that SAPS suffers from deep structural and managerial weaknesses, including inconsistent leadership practices, weak supervision, and limited capacity to enforce discipline across ranks. These studies argue that despite multiple reform initiatives, SAPS remains constrained by bureaucratic inefficiencies and legacy institutional culture.

Similarly, research published by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS, 2022) argues that SAPS governance challenges are not merely administrative but institutional in nature, reflecting long-standing weaknesses in command-and-control systems and oversight architecture.

Overall, the literature suggests that SAPS governance failures are embedded, systemic, and reinforced by weak accountability systems, resulting in limited institutional responsiveness and declining public confidence.

## **Theme 2: Corruption and Integrity Challenges within SAPS**

Corruption within SAPS is widely recognised as one of the most significant threats to institutional legitimacy, operational effectiveness, and democratic policing. The literature indicates that corruption occurs across multiple levels of the organisation, including procurement processes, frontline policing, detective services, and senior management structures. The Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture (Zondo Commission, 2022) revealed that elements within state institutions, including parts of the criminal justice system, were vulnerable to political interference, procurement manipulation, and organised corruption networks. The Commission emphasised that weak oversight mechanisms and compromised leadership structures enabled corruption to persist and expand within public institutions.

According to Transparency International (2024), South Africa recorded a Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) score of 41/100, indicating persistent and significant perceptions of corruption in the public sector. This score reflects continued concerns regarding institutional integrity, particularly within law enforcement and justice-related institutions. Empirical research by Newham and Bruce (ISS, 2021) confirms that police corruption in South Africa is both systemic and hierarchical, affecting various ranks within SAPS. The study highlights common forms of corruption, including bribery, case manipulation, theft of evidence, and protection of criminal syndicates. These practices significantly undermine public trust and reduce the effectiveness of crime prevention strategies.

Furthermore, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) Annual Reports (2023/2024) consistently document thousands of cases of misconduct involving SAPS members. These include allegations of assault, corruption, torture, abuse of authority, and death in police custody. IPID reports also indicate that disciplinary and criminal consequences are often delayed or inconsistently applied, weakening deterrence mechanisms within SAPS.

Internationally, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024) argues that corruption within policing institutions is a global challenge that directly contributes to increased crime rates, reduced prosecution success, and weakened rule of law. Similarly, the World Bank Governance Indicators (2024) highlight that corruption in law enforcement institutions significantly reduces public sector efficiency and undermines institutional legitimacy.

In addition, Bayley and Perito (2011) argue that police corruption is particularly damaging in transitional democracies because it erodes legitimacy at a time when institutions are still building public trust. This is highly relevant to South Africa, where post-apartheid reforms have not fully eliminated entrenched patterns of corruption and institutional vulnerability. Overall, the literature confirms that corruption within SAPS is not episodic but structural, deeply embedded in organisational systems, leadership practices, and weak accountability frameworks. This ongoing integrity crisis continues to undermine democratic policing and public confidence in law enforcement institutions.

Corruption remains one of the most persistent and destabilising challenges affecting the legitimacy, effectiveness, and professionalism of the South African Police Service (SAPS). The literature indicates that corruption is not isolated but systemic, occurring across multiple organisational levels, including procurement processes, operational policing, detective services, and senior management structures. The Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture (Zondo Commission, 2022) found that elements within state institutions were vulnerable to political interference, procurement manipulation, and organised corruption networks, which weakened institutional integrity and compromised accountability systems. The Commission further highlighted failures in oversight and consequence management, which enabled corrupt networks to persist over time.

According to Transparency International (2024), South Africa recorded a Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) score of 41/100, reflecting ongoing concerns about public sector integrity. This score positions South Africa below the global average for governance transparency and highlights persistent weaknesses in anti-corruption enforcement. Empirical research by Bruce (2017) and Newham (Institute for Security Studies, ISS, 2021) confirms that police corruption in South Africa is widespread across ranks, ranging from low-level bribery and protection rackets to high-level procurement corruption and interference in criminal investigations. These studies further argue that corruption within SAPS significantly weakens public trust and undermines crime prevention effectiveness.

The Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID, 2023/2024) consistently reports thousands of cases annually involving SAPS members, including assault, corruption, torture, abuse of authority, and deaths in police custody. However, IPID also highlights challenges in prosecution follow-through, suggesting weak consequence management and limited deterrence.

International literature reinforces these findings. According to Bayley and Perito (2011), police corruption is especially damaging in transitional democracies because it erodes institutional legitimacy during critical periods of democratic consolidation. Similarly, the UNODC (2024) notes that corruption in policing institutions leads to reduced prosecution success rates, increased organised crime infiltration, and weakened rule of law systems.

The World Bank Governance Indicators (2024) further demonstrate a strong correlation between weak institutional integrity and increased corruption risk, particularly in countries with fragmented oversight systems and weak accountability enforcement. Overall, the literature shows that SAPS corruption is not episodic but structural, embedded in institutional systems, leadership practices, and weak governance frameworks.

## **Theme 3: Public Trust, Legitimacy, and Community Perceptions of SAPS**

Public trust is a central determinant of effective policing, particularly in democratic societies where police legitimacy depends on citizen cooperation and institutional accountability. The literature consistently shows that declining trust in SAPS undermines crime reporting, reduces community cooperation, and weakens overall policing effectiveness.

According to Burger (2016), persistent allegations of misconduct, corruption, and abuse of authority within SAPS have significantly eroded public confidence in policing institutions. This erosion of

trust affects the willingness of communities to engage with police and report crimes, thereby weakening intelligence-led policing strategies.

The UNDP Governance Report (2024) confirms that police legitimacy is directly linked to institutional effectiveness. Where legitimacy is weak, citizens are less likely to cooperate with law enforcement, resulting in lower crime reporting rates and reduced effectiveness in crime prevention strategies.

In the South African context, high levels of violent crime further reinforce public distrust. The SAPS Annual Report (2024/25) recorded approximately 27,600 murders in one financial year, reflecting persistent violent crime challenges that strain police-community relations. High-profile incidents of police misconduct further amplify perceptions of institutional failure.

Research by Bruce (2014) argues that South Africa's policing crisis is not only operational but also relational, meaning that broken trust between communities and SAPS significantly undermines policing legitimacy.

Internationally, Tyler (2006) in his theory of procedural justice highlights that police legitimacy is built not only on crime outcomes but also on perceptions of fairness, transparency, and respectful treatment. Where these elements are absent, legitimacy declines regardless of enforcement intensity.

The literature therefore shows that SAPS faces a dual legitimacy crisis: one driven by crime levels and another driven by perceptions of corruption and poor service delivery.

#### **Theme 4: Crime Levels and Policing Effectiveness**

South Africa continues to experience extremely high levels of violent crime, which places severe pressure on SAPS operational capacity and exposes systemic weaknesses in crime prevention and investigation.

The SAPS Annual Report (2024/25) indicates:

- Over 27,600 murders annually
- High levels of aggravated robbery and contact crimes
- Increasing pressure on forensic and investigative capacity
- Backlogs in case processing and detection rates

These statistics highlight the scale of the policing challenge and the limitations of current operational capacity.

The UNODC Global Study on Homicide (2024) confirms that South Africa remains among the countries with the highest homicide rates globally, estimated at 40–45 per 100,000 population, compared to a global average of approximately 6 per 100,000. This positions South Africa within a group of high-violence jurisdictions facing complex socio-economic and institutional challenges.

Research by Altbeker (2007) and Burger (ISS, 2016) shows that weaknesses in crime intelligence, detective services, and forensic capacity significantly reduce SAPS's ability to prevent and solve violent and organised crime. These inefficiencies result in low detection rates and weak deterrence effects.

The Institute for Security Studies (ISS, 2022) further notes that poor coordination between intelligence units and operational policing structures contributes to fragmented crime response strategies.

International evidence from the World Bank (2024) shows that countries with weak law enforcement capacity experience higher levels of organised crime infiltration, particularly when governance systems are weak and inequality is high.

#### **Theme 5: Policy Frameworks and Police Reform Initiatives**

South Africa has developed a range of policy frameworks aimed at transforming policing into a professional, accountable, and community-oriented service.

Key frameworks include:

- National Development Plan 2030 (NDP)
- White Paper on Policing (2016)
- White Paper on Safety and Security (2016)
- SAPS Strategic Frameworks and Annual Performance Plans

The White Paper on Policing (2016) emphasizes a shift toward professionalisation, accountability, demilitarisation, and community policing, aligning SAPS with constitutional principles of transparency and human rights.

However, despite these reforms, empirical studies suggest limited measurable impact on crime reduction and governance improvement. The ISS (2021) notes that policy implementation is often inconsistent due to weak institutional capacity and leadership instability.

The Public Service Commission (2023) also highlights that while policy frameworks are robust, implementation gaps persist due to weak oversight, poor monitoring systems, and limited consequence enforcement.

This demonstrates a significant gap between policy formulation and operational execution.

#### **Theme 6: Institutional Resistance to Reform**

A recurring finding in the literature is that SAPS exhibits strong institutional resistance to reform, driven by entrenched bureaucratic culture, historical legacy systems, and leadership instability.

##### **Research indicates that:**

- SAPS organisational culture still reflects elements of apartheid-era command-and-control policing structures (Bruce, 2014)
- Leadership instability disrupts policy continuity and reform implementation
- Weak accountability mechanisms reduce enforcement of disciplinary action

According to the Institute for Security Studies (ISS, 2022), SAPS has struggled to develop a sustainable corruption control strategy following the disbandment of its specialised anti-corruption units in the early 2000s. This has contributed to fragmented anti-corruption enforcement and weak internal oversight.

The OECD (2024) highlights that institutional resistance is common in large bureaucracies where reform threatens established power structures and resource distribution systems.

Overall, the literature shows that SAPS reform is constrained not only by resources but also by deep institutional inertia and cultural resistance to change.

## Theme 7: International Perspectives on Police Governance and Corruption

International literature provides valuable comparative insights into policing governance and corruption challenges.

The World Bank Governance Indicators (2024) demonstrate that weak rule of law and government effectiveness are strongly associated with higher crime rates, reduced institutional performance, and increased corruption.

The UNODC (2024) confirms that countries experiencing high inequality and weak institutional frameworks are more likely to face elevated homicide rates and organised crime infiltration.

## Discussion and Key Findings

The OECD (2024) emphasizes that strong public integrity systems—characterised by transparency, accountability, and effective oversight—significantly reduce corruption in law enforcement institutions.

The UNDP (2024) further argues that police legitimacy is essential for effective governance, as it directly influences public cooperation, crime reporting, and compliance with the law.

These international findings reinforce that SAPS challenges are not unique but are intensified by South Africa’s structural inequality, historical legacies, and governance weaknesses.



Illustration of the whole study

### Discussion of Key Findings

The findings from the literature indicate that the South African Police Service (SAPS) is affected by interconnected structural, institutional, and governance challenges that continue to undermine its effectiveness in delivering democratic policing. These challenges are not isolated but are systemic, reinforcing one another across governance, corruption, legitimacy, and operational performance domains.

#### Key Finding 1: Persistent Governance Failures Undermine SAPS Effectiveness

The study found that governance weaknesses remain one of the most significant barriers to effective policing in South Africa. The Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA, 2024) consistently reports irregular expenditure, procurement non-compliance, and weak internal financial controls within SAPS.

These findings confirm that SAPS governance systems are not fully aligned with principles of public accountability, transparency, and efficiency as required under the National Development Plan (NDP 2030).

International governance literature supports this finding. The World Bank Governance Indicators (2024) show that countries

with weak institutional quality experience higher crime rates and lower policing effectiveness. This suggests that SAPS governance failures are part of a broader institutional deficit that directly affects service delivery outcomes.

Interpretation: Governance weaknesses reduce SAPS efficiency, weaken oversight, and create conditions for corruption and mismanagement.

#### Key Finding 2: Corruption is Systemic and Institutionalised

The study confirms that corruption within SAPS is structural rather than incidental. The State Capture Commission (Zondo Commission, 2022) revealed extensive vulnerabilities in state institutions, including law enforcement-related entities, where procurement manipulation and political interference weakened institutional integrity.

The Transparency International (2024) Corruption Perceptions Index score of 41/100 reflects ongoing public sector integrity concerns in South Africa.

In addition, IPID (2024) reports thousands of misconduct cases annually involving SAPS members, including assault, bribery, abuse of authority, and deaths in custody.

International literature (UNODC, 2024) confirms that corruption in policing institutions leads to:

- Reduced prosecution success
- Increased organised crime infiltration
- Weak rule of law enforcement

Interpretation: Corruption is deeply embedded in SAPS systems and significantly undermines legitimacy and operational effectiveness.

### **Key Finding 3: Declining Public Trust Weakens Police Legitimacy**

The study found that public trust in SAPS is significantly eroded by corruption perceptions, service delivery failures, and high crime rates.

According to Burger (2016), persistent allegations of misconduct and abuse of authority have contributed to declining confidence in policing institutions.

The UNDP (2024) confirms that police legitimacy is essential for effective governance, as low trust reduces:

- Crime reporting
- Community cooperation
- Intelligence sharing

South Africa's high crime burden reinforces this trust deficit. The SAPS Annual Report (2024/25) recorded approximately 27,600 murders annually, intensifying public fear and dissatisfaction with policing outcomes.

Interpretation: Weak legitimacy reduces public cooperation, further weakening crime prevention efforts.

### **Key Finding 4: High Crime Levels Reflect Systemic Policing Inefficiencies**

The study confirms that South Africa's high violent crime rates are both a cause and consequence of policing inefficiencies.

The UNODC Global Study on Homicide (2024) reports South Africa's homicide rate at approximately 40–45 per 100,000 population, among the highest globally.

The SAPS continues to face:

- Limited forensic capacity
- Weak crime intelligence systems
- Investigative backlogs

Research by Altbeker (2007) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS, 2022) shows that poor intelligence coordination and investigative inefficiencies reduce SAPS's ability to prevent and solve serious crimes.

Interpretation: Crime levels expose operational weaknesses and reinforce institutional pressure on SAPS.

### **Key Finding 5: Policy Frameworks Exist but Implementation is Weak**

The study found that South Africa has strong policy frameworks but weak implementation capacity.

Key frameworks include:

- National Development Plan 2030
- White Paper on Policing (2016)

- White Paper on Safety and Security (2016)

However, the Public Service Commission (2023) and ISS (2021) highlight a persistent gap between policy design and implementation.

Interpretation: The challenge is not policy absence but implementation failure and weak accountability enforcement.

### **Key Finding 6: Institutional Resistance Slows Reform**

The study found that SAPS reform is hindered by institutional resistance rooted in organisational culture and historical legacy systems.

Research by Bruce (2014) shows that SAPS still reflects elements of centralised, command-and-control policing structures, which limit adaptability and reform uptake.

The OECD (2024) confirms that bureaucratic institutions often resist reforms that threaten established power structures and resource flows.

Interpretation: Institutional culture remains a major barrier to sustainable transformation.

### **Key Finding 7: Global Evidence Confirms Governance–Crime Link**

International findings confirm that SAPS challenges are part of a broader global governance issue.

- World Bank (2024): Weak rule of law increases crime and corruption
- UNODC (2024): Inequality and weak institutions increase homicide rates
- OECD (2024): Strong integrity systems reduce corruption in policing
- UNDP (2024): Police legitimacy is key to crime prevention

**Interpretation:** SAPS challenges are globally recognised governance problems, intensified in South Africa by inequality and historical legacies.

### **Overall Synthesis of Findings**

The study concludes that SAPS faces a multi-layered crisis involving governance failure, systemic corruption, declining public trust, high crime rates, and weak implementation of reforms.

These challenges are interconnected:

- Weak governance enables corruption
- Corruption reduces public trust
- Low trust reduces cooperation
- Weak cooperation reduces crime prevention effectiveness
- High crime further undermines legitimacy

This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of institutional inefficiency and declining legitimacy.

### **Key Conclusion**

The evidence strongly suggests that SAPS transformation requires more than policy reform; it requires deep institutional restructuring, strengthened accountability systems, ethical leadership, and effective implementation of commission

recommendations such as those from the Zondo Commission (2022).

## Practical Recommendations

### Strengthen Governance, Oversight, and Accountability Systems

The study recommends a comprehensive strengthening of SAPS governance structures to address persistent weaknesses identified by the Auditor-General South Africa (2024) and the Public Service Commission (2023).

- Reinforce internal audit and risk management units within SAPS with independent operational authority.
- Improve supply chain management systems through digital procurement tracking and real-time monitoring tools to reduce irregular expenditure.
- Strengthen parliamentary and civilian oversight mechanisms in line with the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service mandate.

This aligns with the National Development Plan (2030), which calls for improved accountability and professionalisation of policing institutions.

### Intensify Anti-Corruption Enforcement and Consequence Management

In response to findings from the Zondo Commission (2022) and IPID reports (2024), SAPS must adopt a zero-tolerance approach to corruption.

- Establish a fully independent Anti-Corruption Policing Unit with protected investigative authority.
- Enforce fast-tracked disciplinary and criminal prosecution processes for corruption cases.
- Introduce mandatory lifestyle audits for senior management and procurement officials.
- Strengthen collaboration between SAPS, IPID, and the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA).

International evidence from the OECD (2024) shows that strong consequence management significantly reduces institutional corruption risks.

### Professionalisation and Ethical Leadership Development

The study recommends urgent investment in leadership development to address institutional culture challenges highlighted by Bruce (2014) and ISS (2022).

- Introduce compulsory ethical leadership certification programmes for all senior SAPS officers.
- Strengthen merit-based promotion systems to reduce patronage and political influence.
- Implement continuous ethics training aligned with the UNDP governance framework (2024).

Ethical leadership is essential for rebuilding institutional integrity and public trust.

### Improve Crime Intelligence and Operational Capacity

Given the high crime levels reported in the SAPS Annual Report (2024/25) and UNODC (2024), operational reform is critical.

- Rebuild and modernise crime intelligence structures using data-driven and AI-supported policing systems.

- Improve coordination between detectives, forensic services, and intelligence units.
- Invest in advanced forensic laboratories to reduce case backlogs.
- Strengthen early warning systems for organised and violent crime.

The World Bank (2024) confirms that intelligence-led policing improves crime prevention effectiveness in high-crime environments.

### Rebuild Public Trust and Community Policing Partnerships

The study recommends restoring police legitimacy through community-centred policing strategies.

- Expand and strengthen Community Policing Forums (CPFs) with real decision-making power.
- Introduce regular public accountability forums where SAPS reports crime performance and receives feedback.
- Implement transparent complaint-tracking systems accessible to communities.
- Promote procedural justice training for frontline officers (Tyler, 2006).

According to UNDP (2024), police legitimacy improves significantly when communities are actively involved in policing structures.

### Strengthen Implementation of Policy Frameworks

Although South Africa has strong policies such as the NDP (2030) and White Paper on Policing (2016), implementation remains weak.

- Introduce a national SAPS Reform Implementation Scorecard monitored quarterly.
- Link senior management performance contracts to measurable reform outcomes.
- Strengthen interdepartmental coordination between SAPS, Justice, and Home Affairs.
- Establish independent monitoring teams to track reform progress.

The Public Service Commission (2023) highlights that weak implementation, not policy absence, is the core challenge.

### Institutional Reform and Structural Reorganisation

The study recommends structural adjustments to reduce institutional fragmentation and improve efficiency.

- Review SAPS command structure to reduce bureaucracy and duplication of functions.
- Decentralise operational policing while maintaining strong accountability systems.
- Reintroduce specialised, well-resourced units for corruption, organised crime, and cybercrime.
- Strengthen integration between SAPS and intelligence services.

The ISS (2022) recommends structural reform as essential for sustainable policing transformation.

### Leverage International Best Practices

South Africa should align SAPS reform with global best practices.

- Adopt OECD Public Integrity Frameworks for anti-corruption compliance.
- Strengthen alignment with UNODC policing standards for crime prevention and integrity systems.
- Benchmark SAPS performance against comparable high-violence countries (Brazil, Mexico, Colombia).
- Use World Bank governance tools to monitor institutional effectiveness.
- Strategic Pathways for Democratic Transformation of SAPS
- The Madlanga Commission presents a historic opportunity for transformative reform.

### **Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms**

- Enhance IPID independence and resources.
- Strengthen Parliamentary oversight.
- Improve disciplinary processes.
- Establish robust anti-corruption units.

### **Professionalisation of Policing**

- Merit-based promotions.
- Leadership development programmes.
- Ethical policing training.
- Continuous professional development.

### **Depoliticisation of Policing**

- Operational policing must remain independent from political influence. Clear separation between political oversight and operational decision-making is essential.

### **Intelligence Reform**

- The Commission has highlighted the need for improved governance of intelligence structures. Intelligence operations require enhanced accountability, transparency, and legal compliance.

### **Community-Centred Policing**

- Community policing forums should be revitalised to promote partnerships between SAPS and local communities.

### **Technology and Transparency**

- Digital evidence systems, body-worn cameras, data analytics, and transparent procurement systems can reduce corruption opportunities while improving accountability.

## **International Perspectives on Police Reform**

Several international experiences provide valuable lessons for South Africa.

### **Northern Ireland**

The Patten Commission transformed policing through independent oversight, accountability structures, and community engagement. Public confidence improved substantially following implementation of reforms.

### **United Kingdom**

The UK's Independent Office for Police Conduct provides civilian oversight and investigates serious police misconduct independently.

### **United States**

Research by the National Institute of Justice demonstrates that procedural justice-based policing improves public cooperation and legitimacy.

### **Australia**

Australian police services have strengthened integrity through independent anti-corruption commissions, integrity testing, and enhanced internal accountability systems.

### **Canada**

Canadian policing reforms emphasise transparency, indigenous community engagement, and external oversight as mechanisms for building trust and legitimacy.

These international experiences demonstrate that effective reform requires both institutional restructuring and cultural transformation.

Police legitimacy refers to the public belief that police authority is lawful, fair, and deserving of compliance. Research by Tom Tyler demonstrates that legitimacy is strengthened when policing is conducted fairly, transparently, and respectfully. South Africa continues to experience exceptionally high levels of violent crime. SAPS crime statistics for 2024/2025 indicate that thousands of murders, robberies, and gender-based violence incidents are recorded annually. These crime levels place enormous pressure on policing institutions while simultaneously testing public trust.

According to the 2023/24 Afrobarometer survey, trust in state institutions remains uneven, with corruption perceptions significantly affecting confidence in government and law enforcement institutions. The legitimacy crisis facing SAPS is therefore both operational and governance-related. Communities are unlikely to cooperate fully with police institutions perceived as corrupt or politically compromised.

The study concludes that SAPS transformation requires a multi-dimensional reform strategy that integrates governance strengthening, anti-corruption enforcement, leadership reform, operational modernisation, and community engagement. Without addressing these interconnected areas, efforts to reduce crime and restore public trust will remain limited.

### **The Madlanga Commission as A Catalyst For Reform**

The Madlanga Commission was established to investigate allegations relating to criminality, political interference, and corruption in the criminal justice system. Its mandate extends beyond individual wrongdoing to include examination of institutional weaknesses and governance failures.

### **The Commission's significance lies in several areas:**

#### ***Exposing Institutional Vulnerabilities***

The Commission has highlighted weaknesses in intelligence gathering, case management, oversight mechanisms, and inter-agency coordination. Testimony before the Commission has raised concerns regarding the handling of sensitive investigations and the management of criminal intelligence structures.

### **Promoting Accountability**

The Commission's interim report reportedly recommended criminal investigations, prosecutions, and disciplinary actions against implicated individuals.

### **Restoring Public Confidence**

Commissions of inquiry play an important role in democratic governance by demonstrating transparency and public accountability. However, their effectiveness ultimately depends on implementation of recommendations.

Public discourse reflected in media and community discussions suggests widespread scepticism regarding whether recommendations will be effectively implemented, underscoring the need for decisive action.

### **Key Takeaways**

- SAPS remain in a prolonged governance crisis despite post-1994 reforms, with persistent challenges of corruption, political interference, and weak internal accountability continuing to undermine democratic policing objectives (Republic of South Africa, 1996; National Planning Commission, 2012).
- Corruption within SAPS is systemic rather than isolated, with oversight bodies such as the IPID (2023–2025) repeatedly documenting misconduct, corruption cases, and inadequate disciplinary enforcement, indicating structural weaknesses in internal control systems.
- The Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture (2022) confirmed that state institutions, including policing structures, were vulnerable to political manipulation and infiltration by criminal and corrupt networks, weakening institutional integrity.
- The Madlanga Commission (2025–2026) further intensified concerns by revealing prima facie evidence of criminal infiltration, collusion with organised crime, and governance failures within SAPS, reinforcing the depth of the crisis.
- Policy frameworks such as the National Development Plan (NDP 2030) and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2019–2030) clearly outline reform goals, but implementation gaps remain significant, limiting real transformation in policing practice.
- International governance indicators (World Bank, 2024) and corruption monitoring tools (Transparency International, 2023) show that weak rule of law enforcement and perceived police corruption directly reduce public trust and institutional legitimacy.
- Overall, SAPS is caught in a reform–implementation gap, where strong policy frameworks exist, but institutional capacity, ethical leadership, and enforcement mechanisms remain insufficient to fully realise democratic policing.

### **Co-impact of the Study**

This study on “From Crisis to Reform: Governance, Corruption, and Democratic Transformation of the South African Police Service in the Wake of the Madlanga Commission” has significant multi-level impacts across policy, institutional practice, scholarship, and society.

### **Policy and Governance Impact**

The study contributes to strengthening evidence-based policing reforms by highlighting the gap between policy frameworks and implementation. It provides insights for improving the effectiveness of key governance instruments such as the National Development Plan (NDP 2030) and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2019–2030). By integrating findings from the Madlanga Commission (2025–2026) and the Zondo Commission (2022), it supports policymakers in redesigning accountability systems, enhancing oversight coordination, and closing institutional loopholes that enable corruption.

### **Institutional Impact (SAPS and Criminal Justice System)**

The study has direct implications for SAPS and related criminal justice institutions by identifying structural weaknesses in internal governance, disciplinary systems, and ethical leadership. It promotes the strengthening of internal affairs units, improved vetting of personnel, and enhanced integrity management systems. It also highlights the need for depoliticisation of senior police appointments to restore operational independence and professionalism.

### **Social Impact (Public Trust and Community Safety)**

By addressing declining public confidence in policing institutions, the study contributes to broader societal outcomes such as improved police legitimacy, stronger community cooperation, and enhanced reporting of crime. Restoring trust between SAPS and communities is critical for effective crime prevention and community-oriented policing in South Africa.

### **Academic and Theoretical Impact**

The study contributes to policing, governance, and public administration literature by linking theories of institutional governance, state capture, and police legitimacy to empirical developments in South Africa. It provides a contemporary case study on how democratic institutions can be weakened by systemic corruption and how reform efforts can be structured in response.

### **International Comparative Impact**

The findings also offer comparative value for other countries facing similar challenges of police corruption and institutional fragility. Lessons drawn from South Africa's experience can inform global debates on policing reform, accountability mechanisms, and anti-corruption strategies in transitional democracies.

### **Strategic Reform Impact**

Ultimately, the study supports long-term strategic reform by reinforcing the need for:

- Integrated oversight mechanisms (IPID, Parliament, civil society)
- Ethical leadership development within SAPS
- Transparent procurement and recruitment systems
- Stronger whistleblower protection frameworks
- Intelligence-led anti-corruption policing strategies

The co-impact of this study lies in its ability to bridge the gap between policy intent and institutional reality, offering practical, academic, and governance-oriented insights that contribute to

restoring ethical policing, democratic accountability, and public trust in the South African Police Service.

## Limitations of the Study

This study on “From Crisis to Reform: Governance, Corruption, and Democratic Transformation of the South African Police Service in the Wake of the Madlanga Commission” is subject to several methodological, contextual, and data-related limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings.

### Reliance on Secondary Data Sources

The study is primarily based on secondary sources such as commission reports (e.g., Zondo Commission, 2022), policy documents (e.g., NDP 2030), oversight reports (e.g., IPID Annual Reports 2023–2025), and media-reported findings from the Madlanga Commission (2025–2026). While these sources are authoritative, they may not fully capture real-time operational dynamics within SAPS, limiting access to up-to-date internal empirical evidence.

### Limited Access to Classified or Internal SAPS Data

Due to the sensitive nature of policing, intelligence operations, and corruption investigations, key internal SAPS documents, disciplinary records, and intelligence reports are not publicly accessible. This restricts the depth of analysis regarding the full extent of corruption networks and internal decision-making processes.

### Evolving Nature of the Madlanga Commission Findings

The Madlanga Commission (2025–2026) is still an ongoing or recently concluded inquiry, meaning that its findings may be interim, partial, or subject to revision. As such, conclusions drawn from it must be interpreted cautiously as new evidence may emerge that could refine or alter current interpretations.

### Potential Media Reporting Bias

Some information regarding corruption allegations and police misconduct is drawn from media reports, which may introduce selection bias, framing bias, or incomplete reporting. Although reputable outlets are used, media narratives may not always reflect the full legal or evidentiary context of cases under investigation.

### Generalisability Constraints

While the study provides strong insights into SAPS governance challenges, its findings may not be fully generalisable to all policing contexts globally. South Africa’s unique post-apartheid transformation environment, socio-political dynamics, and institutional legacy mean that some findings are context-specific.

### Policy Implementation Gap

The study evaluates reforms such as the National Development Plan (NDP 2030) and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2019–2030); however, assessing their effectiveness is limited by the gap between policy design and actual implementation, which is often uneven across provinces and policing units.

### Time Sensitivity of Governance Data

Governance and corruption indicators (e.g., World Bank Governance Indicators, Transparency International reports) are periodically updated. As a result, some statistical interpretations may become outdated as new data is released, affecting longitudinal accuracy.

Despite these limitations, the study remains valuable in providing a comprehensive analytical overview of SAPS governance challenges by triangulating credible policy documents, oversight reports, and international governance indices. These limitations highlight the need for future empirical fieldwork and access to primary SAPS operational data to strengthen further research.

## Conclusion

The transformation of the South African Police Service (SAPS) remains one of the most critical governance challenges in South Africa’s democratic project. This study has demonstrated that, despite the constitutional commitment to building a professional, accountable, and community-oriented police service, SAPS continues to experience deep-rooted structural weaknesses that undermine its legitimacy, effectiveness, and public trust (Republic of South Africa, 1996; National Planning Commission, 2012).

The findings indicate that the crisis within SAPS is not merely operational or isolated to individual misconduct, but is systemic, institutional, and governance-driven. The combined evidence from the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture (2022), the IPID oversight reports (2023–2025), and the emerging findings of the Madlanga Commission (2025–2026) confirms that corruption, political interference, and organised criminal infiltration have become embedded risks within policing structures. These developments reveal a deeper institutional vulnerability where accountability systems exist in principle but are weakened in practice through fragmented enforcement, leadership instability, and inadequate oversight coordination.

Furthermore, the study highlights a persistent implementation gap between reform policy and institutional practice. While strategic frameworks such as the National Development Plan (NDP 2030) and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2019–2030) provide a strong blueprint for ethical, professional policing, their impact is constrained by limited enforcement capacity, inconsistent leadership accountability, and weak internal integrity systems. This disconnect has resulted in a policing environment where reform is continuously articulated but not fully realised.

International governance evidence reinforces these concerns. Indicators from the World Bank Governance Index (2024) and the Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer (2023) show that declining trust in law enforcement is strongly associated with perceptions of corruption and weak rule-of-law enforcement. In the South African context, this decline in trust has serious implications for democratic consolidation, as police legitimacy is a cornerstone of public cooperation, crime reporting, and effective justice delivery.

Importantly, the Madlanga Commission has marked a significant turning point in the discourse on policing reform. Its findings underscore the reality that SAPS is not only confronting internal misconduct but also facing the risk of institutional capture by criminal networks and compromised governance systems. This elevates the urgency for reform beyond administrative adjustments toward deeper structural transformation.

In conclusion, the study argues that the future of SAPS depends on a fundamental shift from policy-driven reform rhetoric to enforceable institutional accountability. Sustainable transformation requires strengthening independent oversight bodies, depoliticising police leadership, enhancing internal integrity mechanisms, and building resilient systems that can resist corruption and criminal

infiltration. Without such reforms, SAPS risks continued erosion of legitimacy and effectiveness, undermining both democratic governance and public safety.

Ultimately, the crisis confronting SAPS is also an opportunity—an opportunity to rebuild policing on the principles of ethical leadership, transparency, accountability, and community trust. The success of this transformation will determine not only the future of policing in South Africa but also the strength of its democratic institutions.

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