

SOUTH AFRICA'S POLICING CRISIS OR LEADERSHIP CRISIS? A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF POLICE LEADERSHIP, ORGANISATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY, PROFESSIONALISATION AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICE

Dr. John Motsamai Modise*

Tshwane University of Technology

Received: 18/06/2026

Accepted: 21/07/2026

Published: 02/08/2026

Abstract: South Africa continues to experience persistently high levels of violent crime, organised criminal activity, gender-based violence, corruption, and public insecurity despite extensive policing reforms since the advent of democracy in 1994. Although the South African Police Service (SAPS) has implemented numerous crime prevention initiatives and institutional reforms, concerns regarding leadership instability, political interference, organisational accountability, declining public confidence, inadequate crime intelligence, shortages of experienced detectives, and limited professionalisation continue to undermine policing effectiveness. These challenges have generated increasing scholarly and public debate regarding whether South Africa is confronting primarily a policing crisis or a broader leadership and institutional governance crisis. Consequently, understanding the relationship between leadership, governance, accountability, professionalism, and policing effectiveness has become increasingly important for strengthening democratic policing and improving public safety. The purpose of this study was to systematically review and synthesise South African and international scholarly literature, government reports, policy documents, and empirical studies to critically examine the relationship between police leadership, organisational accountability, professionalisation, institutional reform, and policing effectiveness within the South African Police Service. The study further sought to identify the institutional factors influencing police performance and to develop evidence-based recommendations for strengthening democratic policing, organisational governance, and public trust. Despite substantial government investment in policing, South Africa continues to record among the highest levels of violent crime globally. Existing evidence suggests that persistent crime is not solely attributable to operational policing challenges but is also influenced by leadership instability, governance deficiencies, political interference, weak accountability mechanisms, declining organisational professionalism, limited crime intelligence capacity, and reduced public confidence in policing institutions. Although previous studies have examined crime trends, police legitimacy, corruption, and community policing, relatively few have comprehensively synthesised the interrelationship between leadership, organisational governance, accountability, professionalisation, and institutional reform within SAPS. This knowledge gap limits the development of integrated and evidence-based policing reforms capable of strengthening organisational effectiveness and improving public safety. This study adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. A comprehensive search of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, government reports, policy documents, official statistics, and publications from national and international organisations was undertaken. Electronic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, Sabinet, Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, and institutional repositories, were searched using predefined keywords related to police leadership, accountability, professionalisation, governance, institutional reform, and policing effectiveness. Literature published primarily between 2015 and 2025 was included, while seminal works relevant to policing theory were incorporated where appropriate. Following predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, eligible studies were critically appraised, coded, and analysed using thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns, conceptual relationships, and emerging themes relevant to policing reform in South Africa. The systematic review identified ten interrelated themes influencing policing effectiveness. The findings indicate that effective police leadership, ethical governance, organisational accountability, professionalisation, merit-based recruitment and promotion, crime intelligence, detective capacity, technological innovation, community partnerships, and institutional reform collectively influence policing performance. The review further demonstrates that South Africa's policing challenges cannot be explained solely by shortages of personnel or operational resources. Rather, they reflect deeper institutional weaknesses relating to leadership instability, governance failures, inconsistent accountability, political interference, declining organisational culture, and inadequate implementation of existing policing policies. The evidence also reveals that countries characterised by effective policing systems consistently invest in professional leadership development, intelligence-led policing, independent oversight, evidence-based policing, technological innovation, and continuous organisational learning. This study concludes that South Africa is experiencing both a policing crisis and a leadership crisis. While operational deficiencies remain important, sustainable improvements in policing require comprehensive institutional reform that strengthens ethical leadership, organisational governance, accountability, professionalisation, crime intelligence, and community-centred policing. The successful implementation of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995, the National Development Plan 2030, the White Paper on Policing (2016), and the White Paper on Safety and Security (2016) remains fundamental to achieving a modern, professional, accountable, and

intelligence-led police service. The study contributes to policing scholarship by providing an integrated evidence-based framework for police reform and offers practical recommendations that may assist policymakers, SAPS leadership, oversight institutions, and researchers in strengthening democratic policing, improving organisational performance, restoring public confidence, and advancing Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

Keywords: *South African Police Service; police leadership; policing effectiveness; organisational accountability; professionalisation; institutional reform; governance; crime intelligence; police legitimacy; systematic literature review; PRISMA; democratic policing.*

Cite this article: Modise, J. M. (2026). SOUTH AFRICA'S POLICING CRISIS OR LEADERSHIP CRISIS? A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF POLICE LEADERSHIP, ORGANISATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY, PROFESSIONALISATION AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICE. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 3(8),1-17.

Introduction

South Africa continues to experience one of the highest levels of violent crime globally, placing immense pressure on the criminal justice system and, particularly, the South African Police Service (SAPS). Despite constitutional guarantees that everyone has the right to freedom and security of the person, persistent levels of murder, rape, attempted murder, armed robbery, extortion, organised crime, illegal firearms, gang violence, corruption, and cybercrime continue to undermine public safety and socio-economic development (South African Police Service [SAPS], 2025; Statistics South Africa, 2024; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). South Africa's homicide rate remains among the highest in the world, significantly exceeding the global average, reflecting the complexity of violent crime confronting the country (UNODC, 2023). These challenges have intensified scholarly and public debate regarding whether South Africa is primarily facing a policing crisis characterised by operational deficiencies or, more fundamentally, a leadership crisis rooted in governance failures, political interference, weak accountability, institutional instability, and declining organisational professionalism (Burger, 2011; Burger, 2023; Newham, 2015; Institute for Security Studies [ISS], 2024).

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) mandates SAPS to prevent, combat and investigate crime, maintain public order, protect and secure the inhabitants of South Africa and their property, and uphold and enforce the law (Republic of South Africa, 1996). These constitutional obligations are reinforced through several legislative and policy frameworks, including the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995, the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, the White Paper on Policing (2016), the White Paper on Safety and Security (2016), and the National Policing Policy (2024). Collectively, these policy instruments advocate professional policing founded on constitutional values, ethical leadership, accountability, intelligence-led policing, evidence-based decision-making, community partnerships, and institutional professionalism as essential prerequisites for improving public safety and police legitimacy (Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, 2016a, 2016b; National Planning Commission, 2012; Republic of South Africa, 2024).

Although SAPS has implemented several crime-combating initiatives, including Operation Shanela, intelligence-led policing operations, integrated law enforcement strategies, and specialised interventions targeting organised crime, violent crime continues to pose a major national challenge (SAPS, 2025). According to the SAPS Annual Report (2024/2025) and the Quarterly Crime Statistics (2025), South Africa continues to record more than 26,000 murders annually, while serious crimes such as rape, attempted murder, aggravated robbery, kidnapping, extortion, and

illegal firearm offences remain widespread. Furthermore, organised criminal networks involved in illicit mining, drug trafficking, vehicle hijacking, stock theft, corruption, and transnational organised crime continue to threaten national security and economic stability (ISS, 2024; SAPS, 2025; UNODC, 2024). Consequently, the SAPS Strategic Plan (2025–2030) identifies strengthening crime intelligence, detective services, forensic science, professionalisation, digital policing, and public confidence as strategic priorities for improving policing effectiveness (SAPS, 2025).

The National Development Plan 2030 recognises that building safer communities depends not only on increasing police resources but also on developing a highly professional, accountable, ethical, and community-oriented police service (National Planning Commission, 2012). Likewise, the White Paper on Policing (2016) advocates a transition from reactive policing towards a professional policing model characterised by integrity, transparency, constitutional accountability, merit-based appointments, effective leadership, intelligence-led policing, and collaborative governance (Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, 2016a). These policy frameworks acknowledge that policing effectiveness depends as much on organisational leadership, institutional culture, governance systems, and professional competence as on operational capacity and resource availability.

South African scholars have consistently argued that policing effectiveness is fundamentally influenced by organisational leadership, governance, accountability, institutional professionalism, and police legitimacy. Burger (2011, 2023) argues that sustainable police reform requires ethical leadership, strategic stability, professional management, and institutional accountability rather than reactive crime-combating interventions. Similarly, Newham (2015) contends that leadership instability, political interference, and weak accountability mechanisms have negatively affected organisational effectiveness within SAPS. Faull (2019) further demonstrates that public trust in policing is primarily determined by procedural justice, fairness, ethical conduct, and professional service delivery rather than enforcement activities alone. These findings are consistent with international policing scholarship, which identifies organisational legitimacy, transformational leadership, accountability, and procedural justice as central determinants of police effectiveness (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Bayley, 2006; Tyler, 2006; Braga & Weisburd, 2022).

International evidence similarly demonstrates that countries characterised by effective policing systems invest in professional leadership development, transparent governance, independent oversight, evidence-based policing, continuous professional development, crime intelligence, technological innovation, and strong accountability mechanisms (OECD, 2023; UNODC, 2023;

World Bank, 2023). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023) emphasises that integrity, accountability, and institutional professionalism are essential components of effective public institutions, while the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) highlights intelligence-led policing, ethical governance, and institutional capacity as critical factors in reducing crime and strengthening democratic governance. Similarly, the World Bank (2023) argues that accountable and well-governed policing institutions contribute significantly to sustainable development, economic growth, and social stability.

Against this background, this systematic literature review examines whether South Africa's contemporary policing challenges should primarily be understood as an operational policing crisis or as a broader leadership and institutional governance crisis. Drawing upon South African and international scholarly literature, official government reports, policing policy documents, and empirical research, the study critically analyses the influence of leadership, organisational accountability, governance, professionalisation, and institutional reform on policing effectiveness and public trust. By synthesising multidisciplinary evidence, the study seeks to contribute to evidence-based policing reforms, strengthen institutional accountability, support the implementation of national policing policy, and advance the development of a professional, ethical, intelligence-led, and community-centred South African Police Service aligned with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) (United Nations, 2015).

Background to the Study

South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 fundamentally transformed the country's policing architecture by replacing the apartheid-era South African Police (SAP) with the South African Police Service (SAPS), established as a constitutional institution committed to democratic policing, accountability, human rights, and community service (Republic of South Africa, 1996; Republic of South Africa, 1995). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) mandates SAPS to prevent, combat and investigate crime, maintain public order, protect and secure all inhabitants and their property, and uphold the law. This constitutional mandate is reinforced through the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995, the White Paper on Policing (Civilian Secretariat for Police Service [CSPS], 2016a), the White Paper on Safety and Security (CSPS, 2016b), the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2012), and the National Policing Policy (Republic of South Africa, 2024), all of which advocate a professional, ethical, accountable, intelligence-led, and community-oriented police service.

Despite these legislative and institutional reforms, South Africa continues to experience one of the highest levels of violent crime globally. Official statistics indicate persistently high incidences of murder, rape, attempted murder, aggravated robbery, kidnapping, extortion, illegal mining, stock theft, cybercrime, organised crime, and gender-based violence, all of which undermine public safety, economic growth, investor confidence, and social cohesion (South African Police Service [SAPS], 2025; Statistics South Africa, 2024; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). According to the SAPS Annual Report (2024/2025), more than 26,000 murders were recorded nationally during the reporting period, while the Victims of Crime Survey indicates that fear of crime remains widespread and continues to influence citizens'

quality of life and trust in public institutions (Statistics South Africa, 2024). The UNODC Global Study on Homicide (2023) further reports that South Africa's homicide rate is approximately 45 murders per 100,000 population, substantially exceeding the global average of approximately 5.8 per 100,000, highlighting the country's exceptional violent crime burden.

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 identifies the creation of safer communities as a central developmental objective and argues that policing effectiveness depends not merely on increasing police personnel and operational resources but on strengthening ethical leadership, professional competence, organisational accountability, intelligence-led policing, and partnerships with communities (National Planning Commission, 2012). Similarly, the White Paper on Policing (CSPS, 2016a) promotes a professional policing model founded on constitutional values, integrity, transparency, evidence-based policing, continuous professional development, merit-based appointments, and effective civilian oversight. The White Paper on Safety and Security (CSPS, 2016b) further emphasises integrated crime prevention through collaboration among government institutions, communities, civil society, and the private sector, recognising that sustainable public safety requires coordinated governance rather than police action alone.

Notwithstanding these policy commitments, numerous institutional and operational challenges continue to undermine SAPS's effectiveness. The SAPS Strategic Plan (2025–2030) and Annual Report (2024/2025) acknowledge persistent shortcomings relating to crime intelligence, detective capacity, forensic science, digital policing capability, resource allocation, organisational professionalism, and public confidence. Furthermore, reports by the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service (2024), the Auditor-General South Africa (2024), and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS, 2024) identify governance deficiencies, leadership instability, allegations of corruption, inconsistent disciplinary processes, weak accountability systems, and financial management weaknesses as significant constraints to institutional performance. Transparency International (2024) similarly notes that corruption remains a major governance challenge affecting the credibility and effectiveness of public institutions, including criminal justice agencies.

South African policing scholars consistently argue that operational policing challenges cannot be separated from broader institutional leadership and governance concerns. Burger (2011, 2023) maintains that sustainable police reform requires professional leadership, organisational stability, ethical governance, and institutional accountability rather than reactive crime-fighting interventions. Newham (2015) similarly contends that political interference, leadership instability, and weak accountability mechanisms have undermined SAPS's organisational effectiveness and public legitimacy. Faull (2019) demonstrates that public confidence in policing is influenced more by procedural justice, fairness, ethical conduct, and respectful treatment than by enforcement activities alone, supporting Tyler's (2006) theory that police legitimacy is built through lawful, transparent, and procedurally just policing practices. Rauch (2021) further argues that democratic policing requires institutional independence, constitutional accountability, and sustained organisational reform to strengthen legitimacy and public trust.

Recent South African scholarship reinforces these concerns. Minnaar (2021) identifies leadership instability, resource limitations, organised crime, and evolving criminal threats as major

contemporary policing challenges, while Singh (2022) argues that corruption and governance failures continue to erode institutional integrity and operational effectiveness within SAPS. Masiloane and Kau (2023) emphasise that professionalisation, continuous skills development, competency-based recruitment, and ethical leadership are essential for improving police service delivery and organisational performance. Breetzke (2022) further highlights the importance of spatial crime analysis, intelligence-led policing, and geographic information systems (GIS) in supporting evidence-based policing strategies and improving resource deployment.

International policing literature similarly demonstrates that successful police organisations are characterised by ethical leadership, institutional accountability, professionalisation, evidence-based policing, intelligence-led operations, technological innovation, and collaborative partnerships with communities. Bayley (2006) argues that democratic policing depends upon accountable institutions, constitutional governance, and public legitimacy rather than coercive enforcement. Goldstein (1990) advocates problem-oriented policing as a proactive approach to addressing the underlying causes of crime, while Lum and Koper (2017) demonstrate that evidence-based policing improves operational decision-making through rigorous analysis of crime data and empirical research. Braga and Weisburd (2022) further show that police innovation and organisational learning enhance crime prevention and institutional effectiveness. These perspectives align with Moore's (1995) concept of public value, Scott's (2014) institutional theory, and the OECD's (2023) emphasis on governance, integrity, transparency, and accountability as prerequisites for effective public institutions.

International organisations likewise emphasise the importance of professional policing in promoting sustainable development and democratic governance. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023, 2024) identifies intelligence-led policing, institutional integrity, and effective criminal justice systems as essential components of crime reduction strategies. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) and the World Bank (2023) argue that accountable policing institutions strengthen social stability, economic development, and public confidence, while the World Justice Project (2024) identifies the rule of law, accountability, and effective law enforcement as critical indicators of democratic governance. These principles are further reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 16, which calls for peaceful societies, access to justice, accountable institutions, and effective governance (United Nations, 2015).

Against this background, increasing evidence suggests that South Africa's policing challenges extend beyond operational shortcomings to encompass deeper institutional problems involving leadership, governance, accountability, organisational culture, and professionalisation. Consequently, this study investigates the extent to which police leadership, organisational accountability, professionalisation, institutional reform, and governance influence policing effectiveness within the South African Police Service. Through a systematic review of South African and international literature, policy documents, official reports, and empirical research, the study seeks to provide an integrated evidence base capable of informing policing reforms, strengthening institutional accountability, enhancing police legitimacy, and contributing to the development of a professional, ethical, intelligence-led, and community-centred police service in South Africa.

Problem of the Statement

South Africa continues to experience persistently high levels of violent and organised crime despite substantial public investment in policing and numerous institutional reforms. Although SAPS remains constitutionally mandated to protect citizens, prevent crime, maintain public order, and uphold the rule of law, crime statistics continue to indicate serious challenges in policing effectiveness, investigative capacity, public confidence, and organisational performance (SAPS, 2025).

Numerous commissions of inquiry, government reports, parliamentary oversight processes, Auditor-General reports, and academic studies have identified recurring concerns regarding leadership instability, allegations of political interference, corruption, declining crime intelligence capability, inadequate accountability mechanisms, inconsistent disciplinary systems, and weaknesses in merit-based recruitment and promotion processes. These institutional challenges have raised questions about whether operational policing deficiencies are symptoms of broader leadership and governance failures rather than isolated resource constraints (Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, 2024; Auditor-General South Africa, 2024).

Although considerable research has examined crime trends and policing strategies in South Africa, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to systematically synthesising evidence on how leadership quality, institutional governance, organisational professionalism, accountability, and ethical leadership collectively influence policing outcomes. Consequently, there remains insufficient evidence-based guidance regarding the institutional reforms required to strengthen SAPS.

Central Research Problem

The central problem addressed by this study is: To what extent does South Africa's policing crisis reflect a broader leadership, governance, accountability, and institutional professionalisation crisis within the South African Police Service?

Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to systematically review and critically synthesise South African and international scholarly literature, government reports, official statistics, and policing policy documents to examine the relationship between police leadership, organisational accountability, professionalisation, institutional governance, and policing effectiveness within the South African Police Service (SAPS). Guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, the study seeks to evaluate how leadership practices, governance systems, accountability mechanisms, organisational culture, intelligence-led policing, and institutional reforms influence police performance, public trust, and democratic policing in South Africa (Page et al., 2021; Lum & Koper, 2017).

Furthermore, the study aims to identify gaps in the existing body of knowledge and assess the extent to which current legislative and policy frameworks including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995, the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, the White Paper on Policing (2016), the White Paper on Safety and Security (2016), and the National Policing Policy (2024) have contributed to strengthening police professionalism, ethical leadership, institutional accountability, crime intelligence, and public

confidence in SAPS (Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, 2016a, 2016b; National Planning Commission, 2012; Republic of South Africa, 1995, 1996, 2024).

In addition, the study seeks to compare South Africa's policing reforms with international best practices in democratic policing to identify evidence-based strategies for improving organisational effectiveness, police legitimacy, ethical governance, and service delivery. By integrating South African and international evidence, the study aims to develop practical and policy-oriented recommendations that support sustainable police reform, strengthen institutional resilience, promote constitutional policing, and advance Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) (Bayley, 2006; Braga & Weisburd, 2022; Burger, 2023; OECD, 2023; Tyler, 2006; United Nations, 2015; UNODC, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

Research Objectives

The study seeks to:

- Examine the current state of policing and leadership within SAPS.
- Analyse the influence of police leadership on organisational performance.
- Evaluate the impact of organisational accountability on policing effectiveness.
- Assess the role of professionalism in improving police legitimacy.
- Examine political and institutional influences on police governance.
- Investigate the effectiveness of crime intelligence and detective services.
- Evaluate the role of specialised policing units.
- Examine international policing reforms applicable to South Africa.
- Develop practical recommendations for institutional reform and police professionalisation.

Research Questions

- Does South Africa face primarily a policing crisis or a leadership crisis?
- How does leadership influence police effectiveness?
- What organisational factors undermine police performance?
- How does accountability affect police legitimacy?
- What role does professionalisation play in improving policing outcomes?
- Which international policing practices could strengthen SAPS?
- What institutional reforms are necessary to improve policing effectiveness?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to policing scholarship by integrating evidence on leadership, governance, accountability, and institutional reform within a single analytical framework. It

extends existing knowledge by examining how organisational leadership influences policing effectiveness beyond traditional crime control strategies.

The findings will assist SAPS senior management, the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, Parliament, the Ministry of Police, policymakers, academics, and community safety practitioners in developing evidence-based policing reforms. Furthermore, the study contributes to achieving the National Development Plan 2030, the White Paper on Policing (2016), Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), and the African Union Agenda 2063.

Research Gap

Existing South African policing research has predominantly focused on crime trends, community policing, procedural justice, corruption, police legitimacy, and operational policing strategies. However, relatively few systematic literature reviews have comprehensively examined the interrelationship between leadership quality, organisational governance, institutional accountability, professionalisation, crime intelligence, detective services, and police performance within SAPS.

Furthermore, limited research integrates South African policy frameworks with international evidence on police reform to develop a holistic institutional reform model. This study addresses this gap by synthesising multidisciplinary literature to provide an integrated evidence-based framework for strengthening police leadership, governance, accountability, and professionalism.

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

A theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation that guides the interpretation of research findings by explaining relationships between variables and situating a study within existing bodies of knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Saunders et al., 2023). Given the complexity of policing in democratic societies, no single theory adequately explains the interrelationship between leadership, organisational governance, accountability, professionalism, institutional reform, operational effectiveness, and public trust. Consequently, this study adopts a multi-theoretical framework comprising Transformational Leadership Theory, Institutional Theory, Procedural Justice Theory, Public Value Theory, and Systems Theory.

The integration of these theories reflects the multidimensional nature of policing and aligns with South Africa's constitutional and policy framework, which emphasises ethical leadership, accountable governance, professional policing, intelligence-led operations, and community-centred policing (Republic of South Africa, 1996; Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, 2016a; National Planning Commission, 2012; Republic of South Africa, 2024). Collectively, these theories provide complementary perspectives for understanding whether South Africa's policing challenges stem primarily from operational shortcomings or deeper institutional and leadership deficiencies.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Definition

Transformational Leadership Theory was originally developed by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass (1985) and Bass and Riggio (2006). The theory argues that effective leaders inspire

followers to transcend personal interests in pursuit of organisational goals by articulating a compelling vision, demonstrating ethical behaviour, encouraging innovation, and fostering continuous learning. Transformational leaders create organisational cultures characterised by trust, motivation, integrity, collaboration, and accountability rather than relying solely on positional authority or coercive control.

The theory identifies four key dimensions of transformational leadership:

- Idealised influence
- Inspirational motivation
- Intellectual stimulation
- Individualised consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Discussion

Transformational leadership has become one of the most influential theories in public sector governance because it recognises that organisational performance depends significantly on leadership quality rather than merely organisational structures or resources (Northouse, 2022). Within policing organisations, transformational leaders influence ethical decision-making, strengthen organisational culture, promote professional conduct, improve employee morale, and encourage innovation in responding to increasingly complex crime environments (Braga & Weisburd, 2022).

South African scholars similarly argue that many challenges confronting SAPS including declining public confidence, leadership instability, inconsistent strategic direction, weak accountability, and organisational dysfunction—reflect leadership deficiencies rather than merely operational shortcomings (Burger, 2011; Burger, 2023; Newham, 2015). The National Development Plan 2030 likewise identifies professional leadership and competent management as prerequisites for building a capable police service (National Planning Commission, 2012).

The White Paper on Policing (Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, 2016a) further advocates ethical leadership, integrity, continuous professional development, merit-based appointments, and organisational professionalism. Similarly, the SAPS Strategic Plan (2025–2030) identifies leadership development, professionalisation, organisational integrity, and performance improvement as strategic priorities.

International evidence also supports the importance of transformational leadership in policing. Bayley (2006) argues that democratic policing requires leaders capable of balancing operational effectiveness with constitutional accountability and respect for human rights. Braga and Weisburd (2022) further demonstrate that innovative police organisations are generally characterised by transformational leadership capable of promoting organisational learning, evidence-based policing, and adaptive responses to emerging criminal threats.

Relevance to the Study

Transformational Leadership Theory provides the primary lens for analysing whether deficiencies in ethical leadership, organisational vision, strategic management, and professional development contribute to policing challenges within SAPS. The theory assists in evaluating how leadership influences organisational culture, police legitimacy, employee commitment, accountability, service delivery, and institutional reform.

Institutional Theory

Definition

Institutional Theory explains how organisations are shaped by formal rules, legislation, governance structures, organisational norms, cultural expectations, and institutional pressures (Scott, 2014). Organisations achieve legitimacy when they comply with legal, political, and societal expectations while maintaining effective governance systems.

Scott (2014) identifies three institutional pillars:

- Regulatory institutions
- Normative institutions
- Cultural-cognitive institutions

Together these influence organisational behaviour and long-term institutional performance.

Discussion

Institutional Theory is particularly relevant to policing because police organisations operate within complex legal, political, and constitutional environments. In South Africa, SAPS functions within an extensive institutional framework comprising the Constitution (1996), SAPS Act 68 of 1995, White Paper on Policing, White Paper on Safety and Security, National Development Plan 2030, National Policing Policy (2024), and oversight institutions including Parliament, the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID), and the Auditor-General South Africa. Despite this comprehensive governance framework, several studies identify persistent institutional weaknesses relating to political interference, leadership instability, governance failures, corruption, inconsistent disciplinary processes, procurement irregularities, and organisational fragmentation (Newham, 2015; Auditor-General South Africa, 2024; ISS, 2024; Singh, 2022).

Burger (2023) argues that institutional reform should prioritise professionalisation, strategic leadership, organisational stability, merit-based appointments, and strengthened governance structures. Similarly, Rauch (2021) contends that democratic policing requires institutional independence, constitutional accountability, and effective civilian oversight to enhance public legitimacy.

Internationally, OECD (2023) emphasises that institutional integrity, transparency, accountability, and effective governance are fundamental characteristics of high-performing public institutions.

Relevance to the Study

Institutional Theory enables the study to examine how organisational rules, governance systems, institutional culture, political oversight, accountability mechanisms, and public sector reforms influence policing effectiveness and organisational legitimacy within SAPS.

Procedural Justice Theory

Definition

Procedural Justice Theory, developed by Tyler (2006), argues that public compliance with the law depends primarily upon perceptions of procedural fairness rather than fear of punishment. Citizens are more likely to cooperate with police when they perceive policing practices as impartial, respectful, transparent, consistent, and ethically conducted.

The theory identifies four principles:

- Fairness
- Voice
- Neutrality
- Respect

Discussion

Procedural Justice Theory has fundamentally reshaped contemporary policing by shifting attention from enforcement outcomes towards police legitimacy. Tyler (2006) argues that police legitimacy promotes voluntary public compliance, cooperation with investigations, crime reporting, and trust in criminal justice institutions.

South African evidence strongly supports this perspective. Faull (2019) found that citizens' confidence in SAPS depends more upon respectful treatment, fairness, transparency, and ethical conduct than arrest statistics alone. Similarly, Burger (2011) argues that rebuilding public confidence requires procedural fairness, organisational accountability, and professional policing.

The White Paper on Policing (2016) explicitly incorporates procedural justice principles by advocating constitutional policing, ethical behaviour, community engagement, and accountability. Likewise, the National Policing Policy (2024) identifies legitimacy, professionalism, public trust, and transparency as strategic priorities.

International organisations including the UNODC (2023) and World Justice Project (2024) likewise identify procedural justice as central to democratic policing and institutional legitimacy.

Relevance to the Study

Procedural Justice Theory explains how ethical policing, accountability, transparency, and respectful service delivery strengthen police legitimacy, improve community cooperation, and enhance policing effectiveness within SAPS.

Public Value Theory

Definition

Public Value Theory, developed by Moore (1995), proposes that public institutions exist to create value for society rather than merely deliver services efficiently. Public value is achieved when government institutions improve citizens' safety, trust, well-being, legitimacy, and confidence in democratic governance.

Discussion

Modern policing increasingly emphasises value creation beyond crime reduction alone. Police organisations are expected to enhance public safety, protect constitutional rights, improve citizen confidence, promote accountability, and contribute to social development.

The National Development Plan 2030 identifies public safety as essential for economic growth, poverty reduction, investment, and democratic development. Similarly, the White Paper on Safety and Security advocates collaborative governance and integrated crime prevention involving communities, local government, civil society, and the private sector.

Internationally, OECD (2023), the World Bank (2023), and the United Nations (2015) argue that accountable public institutions

create value through ethical governance, responsiveness, legitimacy, transparency, and effective service delivery.

Relevance to the Study

Public Value Theory enables this study to evaluate whether SAPS creates value through constitutional policing, crime prevention, ethical governance, professional service delivery, accountability, and strengthened community trust.

Systems Theory

Definition

Systems Theory, proposed by von Bertalanffy (1968), conceptualises organisations as interconnected systems whose effectiveness depends upon interactions among leadership, organisational structures, personnel, technology, resources, policies, and external stakeholders.

Discussion

Policing is an inherently complex system involving multiple interdependent actors and institutions. SAPS effectiveness depends not only on police officers but also on crime intelligence, detective services, forensic science, prosecution, courts, correctional services, municipalities, communities, oversight institutions, and political leadership.

The SAPS Strategic Plan (2025–2030) recognises this systems perspective by prioritising integrated policing, intelligence-led operations, digital transformation, forensic modernisation, partnerships, and organisational performance. Similarly, the White Paper on Safety and Security (2016) advocates a whole-of-government approach to crime prevention.

International research supports this integrated approach. Lum and Koper (2017) demonstrate that evidence-based policing depends upon coordinated information systems and organisational learning, while Braga and Weisburd (2022) emphasise innovation through collaboration across criminal justice institutions.

Relevance to the Study

Systems Theory enables a holistic examination of SAPS by recognising that policing effectiveness depends on the interaction between leadership, governance, accountability, intelligence capability, forensic services, organisational culture, technology, legislation, oversight institutions, and community partnerships rather than any single organisational factor.

Integration of the Five Theories

Although each theory offers a distinct perspective, they are mutually reinforcing. Transformational Leadership Theory explains how leadership shapes organisational culture and performance; Institutional Theory highlights the influence of governance structures and organisational legitimacy; Procedural Justice Theory demonstrates how fairness and ethical conduct build public trust; Public Value Theory focuses on the creation of societal value through effective policing; and Systems Theory recognises that policing outcomes emerge from the interaction of multiple organisational and external components.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the leadership, governance, accountability, professionalisation, and institutional reform challenges confronting the South African Police Service. Their integration aligns with South Africa's constitutional and policy

frameworks, including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the SAPS Act 68 of 1995, the National Development Plan 2030, the White Paper on Policing (2016), the White Paper on Safety and Security (2016), the National Policing Policy (2024), and the SAPS Strategic Plan (2025–2030), all of which advocate ethical leadership, accountable governance, professional policing, and community-centred service delivery as essential foundations for an effective and legitimate police service.

Literature Review

Introduction

Police leadership, organisational accountability, professionalism, and institutional reform have emerged as critical determinants of policing effectiveness globally. In South Africa, these issues have attracted increasing scholarly attention due to persistent violent crime, allegations of political interference, leadership instability, corruption, declining public confidence, and challenges within crime intelligence and detective services. Although considerable resources have been invested in strengthening the South African Police Service (SAPS), crime remains a significant national concern, raising questions regarding whether South Africa is experiencing a policing crisis or a broader leadership and governance crisis (Burger, 2011; Newham, 2015; Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, 2024).

The literature consistently demonstrates that successful policing extends beyond increasing police personnel and operational resources. Effective policing depends on ethical leadership, institutional accountability, professional competence, public legitimacy, intelligence-led policing, and collaborative governance (Tyler, 2006; Braga & Weisburd, 2022). This literature review critically examines South African and international scholarship relating to police leadership, organisational governance, accountability, institutional reform, and professionalisation.

Police Leadership and Organisational Performance

Leadership is widely regarded as one of the strongest determinants of organisational effectiveness. Transformational leaders establish strategic direction, promote ethical conduct, motivate employees, and improve organisational performance (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Within policing, leadership influences operational efficiency, organisational culture, employee morale, accountability, and public trust.

Burger (2011) argues that SAPS requires stable, competent, and ethical leadership to strengthen institutional legitimacy and improve policing outcomes. Similarly, Newham (2015) maintains that frequent leadership changes and political interference have weakened organisational effectiveness and long-term strategic planning.

Internationally, Bayley (2006) argues that democratic policing depends on professional leadership committed to accountability, transparency, and constitutional governance. Likewise, the OECD (2023) highlights leadership integrity as essential for effective public institutions.

Key finding

The literature indicates that leadership quality directly influences police professionalism, organisational performance, and public confidence.

Political Interference and Police Independence

Police organisations perform more effectively when operational decisions remain independent from political influence while maintaining democratic accountability. The South African Constitution (1996) establishes democratic oversight mechanisms while requiring SAPS to function impartially. However, various South African studies suggest that political appointments, leadership instability, and allegations of cadre deployment have affected organisational stability (ISS, 2024). The National Development Plan 2030 recommends professionalising police leadership through competency-based appointments rather than political considerations. International evidence from the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand similarly demonstrates that operational independence strengthens police legitimacy and public confidence (UNODC, 2023).

Key finding

Institutional independence supported by transparent oversight enhances policing effectiveness.

Accountability, Ethics and Good Governance

Accountability is fundamental to democratic policing. The White Paper on Policing (2016) identifies accountability, integrity, transparency, constitutional policing, and ethical leadership as pillars of professional policing. According to Tyler (2006), procedural justice increases public cooperation because citizens are more likely to obey the law when police are perceived as fair, respectful, and accountable. The Auditor-General South Africa (2024) continues to identify governance weaknesses, internal control deficiencies, and performance management challenges across public institutions, emphasising stronger accountability mechanisms. Transparency International (2024) similarly argues that corruption significantly undermines police legitimacy globally.

Key finding

Effective accountability systems improve organisational integrity, reduce corruption, and strengthen public trust.

Professionalisation of SAPS

Professionalisation refers to developing policing as a skilled, ethical, evidence-based profession supported by continuous education, specialised training, and competency development. The White Paper on Policing (2016) identifies professionalisation as central to policing reform. Research by Faull (2019) indicates that professionalism positively influences police legitimacy and public confidence. Internationally, the College of Policing (United Kingdom) advocates evidence-based policing, leadership development, continuous learning, and professional accreditation. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) similarly recommends professional education and specialised training as key policing reforms.

Key finding

Professionalisation strengthens organisational effectiveness, accountability, and service delivery.

Crime Intelligence and Detective Services

Crime intelligence remains central to proactive policing. The SAPS Strategic Plan (2025–2030) identifies intelligence-led policing as essential for combating organised crime, illegal firearms, extortion, gang violence, cybercrime, and corruption. Braga and Weisburd

(2022) argue that intelligence-led policing significantly improves crime prevention. Lum and Koper (2017) similarly demonstrate that evidence-based policing enables efficient resource allocation. South African scholars have noted that detective shortages, forensic delays, and intelligence challenges negatively influence conviction rates (Burger, 2011).

Key finding

Modern intelligence capability substantially improves policing effectiveness.

Forensic Science and Technology

Modern policing increasingly relies on forensic science, digital evidence, artificial intelligence, surveillance technologies, and integrated information systems. The SAPS Strategic Plan prioritises strengthening forensic laboratories and digital policing. The World Bank (2023) identifies technological innovation as a major contributor to policing effectiveness. UNODC (2023) similarly recommends investment in forensic science to improve criminal investigations.

Key finding

Technology improves investigative efficiency, conviction rates, and organisational performance.

Merit-Based Recruitment and Promotion

The White Paper on Policing advocates competency-based recruitment and promotion systems. The National Development Plan 2030 similarly recommends professional leadership appointments based on competence rather than political considerations. International evidence demonstrates that merit-based promotion improves organisational effectiveness, morale, and ethical leadership (OECD, 2023).

Key finding

Meritocracy enhances professionalism and institutional stability.

Public Trust and Police Legitimacy

Public trust determines policing success.

Procedural Justice Theory suggests citizens cooperate voluntarily when policing is fair and respectful (Tyler, 2006). Faull (2019) argues that procedural fairness significantly improves police legitimacy in South Africa. The Institute for Security Studies (2024) notes that restoring public confidence requires visible accountability, effective investigations, and ethical leadership.

Key finding

Police legitimacy depends on fairness, transparency, competence, and accountability rather than enforcement alone.

Community Policing and Collaborative Governance

Community policing remains a cornerstone of democratic policing.

The White Paper on Safety and Security (2016) emphasises partnerships among police, municipalities, civil society, and communities. Skogan (2006) concludes that collaborative policing reduces crime while improving legitimacy. The National Development Plan similarly promotes integrated community safety partnerships.

Key finding

Community participation strengthens crime prevention and trust.

Institutional Reform and Organisational Change

Institutional reform involves restructuring leadership systems, strengthening accountability, improving governance, enhancing professionalism, and modernising policing institutions.

The Civilian Secretariat for Police Service (2024) argues that sustainable policing requires institutional reform rather than isolated operational interventions.

International organisations including the OECD, UNDP, and World Bank similarly recommend comprehensive governance reforms.

Key finding

Sustainable policing depends on long-term institutional reform supported by accountable leadership and professional governance.

Synthesis of the Literature

The literature consistently demonstrates that policing effectiveness depends on multiple interconnected organisational factors rather than operational capacity alone. While additional police personnel, equipment, and funding remain important, sustainable improvements require competent leadership, ethical governance, professionalisation, effective crime intelligence, strong detective services, technological innovation, institutional accountability, and public legitimacy.

South African scholarship highlights recurring challenges including leadership instability, allegations of political interference, corruption, declining organisational morale, shortages of specialised investigative capacity, and inconsistent accountability mechanisms. International evidence similarly shows that countries with effective policing systems invest in professional leadership, transparent governance, evidence-based policing, merit-based appointments, independent oversight, and continuous professional development.

Consequently, the literature suggests that South Africa's policing challenges should be understood as both an operational policing challenge and a broader leadership and institutional governance challenge. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive organisational reform that strengthens leadership capacity, accountability, professionalism, and public trust while enhancing operational capability.

Major Themes Summary

Theme	Major Finding
Leadership and Organisational Performance	Ethical and competent leadership improves policing outcomes.
Political Interference	Operational independence enhances police legitimacy and effectiveness.
Accountability and Governance	Transparency and oversight reduce corruption and improve public confidence.
Professionalisation	Continuous education and competency-based development strengthen policing.
Crime Intelligence	Intelligence-led policing improves crime prevention and investigations.
Forensic Science and Technology	Modern technologies increase investigative efficiency and conviction rates.
Merit-Based Recruitment	Competency-based appointments improve institutional performance and morale.
Public Trust and Legitimacy	Procedural justice and fairness foster community cooperation.
Community Policing	Partnerships with communities improve crime prevention and trust.
Institutional Reform	Sustainable reform requires integrated leadership, governance, accountability, and professionalisation.

Discussion and Findings

Introduction

This systematic literature review synthesised evidence from South African and international scholarly literature, government reports, policy documents, and policing research to determine whether South Africa is experiencing primarily a policing crisis or a broader leadership and institutional governance crisis. The review examined five interrelated dimensions: police leadership, organisational accountability, professionalisation, institutional reform, and policing effectiveness. The findings indicate that while operational challenges such as resource shortages and increasing violent crime remain significant, these challenges are compounded by systemic weaknesses in leadership, governance, accountability, crime intelligence, and organisational culture.

The discussion is organised according to the major themes that emerged from the systematic review and is aligned with the study's theoretical framework, including Transformational Leadership Theory, Institutional Theory, Procedural Justice Theory, Public Value Theory, and Systems Theory.

Theme 1: Police Leadership as a Determinant of Organisational Performance

The review consistently found that leadership quality is one of the strongest predictors of policing effectiveness. South African scholars argue that effective police leadership extends beyond operational command to include strategic vision, ethical governance, organisational learning, and institutional accountability (Burger, 2011; Newham, 2015).

Transformational Leadership Theory suggests that leaders who inspire, motivate, and support professional development create organisational cultures characterised by integrity, innovation, and improved performance (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, the literature indicates that frequent leadership changes, instability in senior management, and inconsistent strategic direction have weakened institutional continuity within SAPS.

International policing systems, particularly those in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, demonstrate that professional leadership contributes significantly to organisational stability, public trust, and crime reduction (Bayley, 2006; OECD, 2023).

Finding 1

The evidence suggests that South Africa's policing challenges are closely linked to leadership quality. Stable, competent, and ethical leadership is essential for improving operational effectiveness and institutional performance.

Theme 2: Political Interference and Institutional Independence

Institutional Theory emphasises that organisations perform effectively when governance structures are transparent, predictable, and insulated from inappropriate external influence (Scott, 2014).

The literature reviewed indicates widespread concern regarding political influence over senior leadership appointments, strategic decision-making, and organisational priorities. Such interference may undermine operational independence, employee morale, and public confidence.

The National Development Plan 2030 recommends professionalising leadership appointments based on competence rather than political affiliation. International policing models similarly demonstrate that operational independence strengthens accountability while maintaining democratic oversight.

Finding 2

The review indicates that strengthening institutional independence while preserving democratic accountability would improve strategic leadership and organisational legitimacy.

Theme 3: Accountability, Ethical Governance and Police Legitimacy

Procedural Justice Theory argues that police legitimacy depends largely on fairness, transparency, impartiality, and respectful treatment of citizens (Tyler, 2006).

South African studies consistently show that allegations of corruption, misconduct, inconsistent disciplinary action, and governance failures negatively influence public trust in SAPS (Faull, 2019; ISS, 2024). The Auditor-General South Africa has also highlighted weaknesses in governance, performance monitoring, and internal controls across public institutions, reinforcing the need for stronger accountability mechanisms.

International evidence demonstrates that independent oversight bodies, transparent disciplinary systems, lifestyle audits, and

ethical leadership improve institutional integrity and public confidence (Transparency International, 2024; OECD, 2023).

Finding 3

Police accountability is fundamental to organisational legitimacy. Strengthening internal governance and independent oversight is likely to improve public confidence and operational performance.

Theme 4: Professionalisation and Human Capital Development

Professionalisation emerged as one of the most prominent themes throughout the literature. The White Paper on Policing (2016) advocates transforming SAPS into a professional policing institution characterised by competency-based recruitment, continuous education, ethical leadership, and evidence-based policing.

The literature indicates that professionalisation requires investment in leadership development, specialised training, research capacity, technological competence, and continuous professional development. Countries with professional police services generally demonstrate higher organisational effectiveness, stronger public legitimacy, and lower levels of corruption (UNODC, 2023).

Finding 4

Professionalisation should be regarded as a long-term institutional reform strategy rather than simply a training intervention.

Theme 5: Crime Intelligence, Detective Services and Operational Effectiveness

Crime intelligence emerged as a critical determinant of policing success.

The SAPS Strategic Plan (2025–2030) identifies intelligence-led policing as essential for addressing organised crime, extortion, gang violence, illegal firearms, cybercrime, and transnational criminal activities.

International evidence indicates that intelligence-led policing enables proactive crime prevention, strategic deployment of resources, and improved investigative outcomes (Braga & Weisburd, 2022).

South African literature identifies shortages of experienced detectives, delays in forensic investigations, and weaknesses in intelligence coordination as significant barriers to effective crime prevention.

Finding 5

Investment in crime intelligence, detective services, forensic science, and digital policing technologies would substantially improve investigative effectiveness.

Theme 6: Organisational Culture and Institutional Reform

Systems Theory suggests that organisational performance depends upon interactions between leadership, human resources, governance structures, organisational culture, technology, and external stakeholders.

The review indicates that sustainable policing reform requires comprehensive organisational transformation rather than isolated operational improvements. Institutional culture characterised by accountability, professionalism, innovation, ethical leadership, and continuous learning contributes significantly to organisational effectiveness.

The Civilian Secretariat for Police Service argues that institutional reform should focus on governance, leadership, human resource management, accountability, organisational learning, and public trust.

Finding 6

Long-term policing effectiveness depends on integrated institutional reform rather than operational interventions alone.

Theme 7: Public Trust, Community Partnerships and Police Legitimacy

Public trust remains central to democratic policing.

South African studies demonstrate that citizens are more willing to cooperate with police when policing is perceived as fair, professional, transparent, and accountable (Faull, 2019).

Community policing forums, local safety partnerships, and collaborative governance remain important mechanisms for improving crime prevention and strengthening police legitimacy.

International studies similarly demonstrate that community-oriented policing contributes to crime reduction and improved relationships between police and communities (Skogan, 2006).

Finding 7

Public confidence depends more on police legitimacy and ethical conduct than on enforcement alone.

Overall Discussion

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that South Africa's policing challenges cannot be explained solely by shortages of personnel, equipment, or operational resources. Rather, policing effectiveness is influenced by a complex interaction of leadership quality, organisational governance, accountability, institutional culture, professionalisation, crime intelligence, detective capability, technological innovation, and community trust.

Transformational Leadership Theory explains the importance of ethical leadership in motivating personnel and improving organisational performance. Institutional Theory highlights the influence of governance structures and organisational rules on institutional effectiveness. Procedural Justice Theory demonstrates how fairness, transparency, and accountability strengthen police legitimacy. Public Value Theory emphasises the creation of public trust through responsive and ethical service delivery, while Systems Theory illustrates the interdependence of leadership, organisational structures, technology, and stakeholder relationships.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives suggest that South Africa's policing challenges should be understood as a multidimensional governance and leadership challenge rather than merely an operational policing problem.

Summary of Key Findings

The systematic literature review identified the following principal findings:

- Leadership quality is a fundamental determinant of police effectiveness, organisational performance, and public confidence.
- Political interference undermines institutional stability, operational independence, and strategic decision-making.

- Professionalisation through merit-based recruitment, continuous education, leadership development, and competency-based promotion enhances policing performance.
- Accountability mechanisms, including transparent disciplinary systems and independent oversight, strengthen institutional integrity and public trust.
- Crime intelligence, detective services, forensic science, and digital policing technologies are critical for improving investigations and combating organised crime.
- Community policing and procedural justice strengthen police legitimacy, public cooperation, and crime prevention.
- Institutional reform, rather than isolated operational interventions, offers the most sustainable pathway towards improving policing effectiveness.
- South Africa's policing challenges represent both a policing crisis and a leadership and governance crisis, requiring integrated reforms that address operational capacity alongside ethical leadership, organisational accountability, and institutional professionalism.

Implications

These findings support the implementation of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995, the National Development Plan 2030, the White Paper on Policing (2016), and the White Paper on Safety and Security (2016). Collectively, these frameworks advocate a professional, accountable, intelligence-led, and community-centred police service grounded in constitutional values. The review further aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), underscoring that strengthening leadership, governance, and institutional professionalism within SAPS is essential to improving public safety, restoring public confidence, and enhancing the effectiveness of democratic policing in South Africa.

Practical Recommendations

The findings of this systematic literature review indicate that South Africa's policing challenges require comprehensive institutional reforms that extend beyond increasing police personnel and operational resources. Sustainable improvements in policing effectiveness depend on strengthening leadership, organisational governance, accountability, professionalisation, technological innovation, and community partnerships. The following practical recommendations are proposed.

Professionalise Police Leadership

SAPS should implement a competency-based leadership development framework that prioritises ethical leadership, strategic management, emotional intelligence, and evidence-based decision-making. Senior leadership appointments should be based on qualifications, policing experience, integrity, and demonstrated leadership competencies rather than political considerations. Leadership development programmes should be institutionalised through continuous executive education in partnership with universities and accredited training institutions.

Strengthen Merit-Based Recruitment and Promotion

The recruitment, promotion, and succession planning systems within SAPS should be reviewed to ensure transparency, fairness, and competency-based appointments. Clear performance indicators and independent assessment panels should be introduced to reduce perceptions of favouritism and political influence. Merit-based promotion will improve organisational morale, professionalism, and institutional credibility.

Enhance Accountability and Ethical Governance

SAPS should strengthen internal accountability mechanisms by introducing regular leadership performance evaluations, ethics audits, lifestyle audits for senior officers, and enhanced disciplinary procedures. Independent oversight institutions, including the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service (CSPS), the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID), Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Police, and the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA), should be adequately resourced to monitor organisational performance and governance.

Modernise Crime Intelligence and Detective Services

Government should prioritise investment in crime intelligence capabilities, digital policing technologies, forensic laboratories, cybercrime units, and detective services. Intelligence-led policing should guide operational planning, resource deployment, and crime prevention strategies. Additional specialised training should be provided to detectives, forensic investigators, and crime intelligence personnel to improve investigation quality and conviction rates.

Invest in Continuous Professional Development

Professionalisation should become a mandatory organisational philosophy rather than a once-off training initiative. Continuous professional development programmes should include leadership, ethics, forensic investigation, intelligence analysis, digital policing, community policing, human rights, conflict management, and evidence-based policing. Professional accreditation systems similar to those adopted internationally should be explored.

Strengthen Community Policing and Public Participation

Community Policing Forums (CPFs) should be revitalised through improved funding, training, and structured engagement with local communities. Partnerships between SAPS, municipalities, traditional leaders, civil society organisations, private security providers, and community-based organisations should be strengthened to improve collaborative crime prevention. Public participation in local safety planning should be institutionalised.

Improve Police Resource Allocation

Resource allocation should be informed by empirical evidence, crime trends, and geographic crime hotspots rather than administrative convenience. Additional personnel, specialised units, vehicles, forensic resources, and digital technologies should be deployed to high-crime areas to improve operational effectiveness and response times.

Expand Evidence-Based Policing

SAPS should institutionalise evidence-based policing by strengthening research partnerships with universities, research councils, and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS). Routine analysis of crime data, operational performance, and policing

innovations should inform policy development and operational decision-making. Performance management systems should focus on measurable outcomes rather than activity-based indicators.

Accelerate Institutional Reform

Government should fully implement the recommendations contained in the White Paper on Policing (2016), the White Paper on Safety and Security (2016), the National Development Plan 2030, and the National Policing Policy. Institutional reforms should prioritise leadership stability, organisational restructuring, accountability, digital transformation, ethical governance, and improved service delivery.

Promote Organisational Culture Change

SAPS should cultivate an organisational culture founded on professionalism, integrity, accountability, transparency, constitutional values, and service excellence. Employee wellness programmes, leadership mentoring, recognition of excellence, and organisational learning initiatives should be expanded to improve morale, reduce burnout, and strengthen institutional resilience.

Key Findings

The systematic literature review produced several important findings regarding policing effectiveness, organisational leadership, accountability, and institutional reform within the South African Police Service.

Finding 1: South Africa faces both a policing crisis and a leadership crisis

The review demonstrates that operational policing challenges cannot be separated from leadership and governance deficiencies. Increasing police personnel or budgets alone is unlikely to improve policing outcomes without addressing institutional leadership, accountability, and organisational culture.

Finding 2: Leadership quality is the strongest predictor of organisational performance

The evidence indicates that ethical, competent, and transformational leadership significantly influences police effectiveness, employee morale, organisational performance, and public confidence. Stable leadership promotes strategic continuity, accountability, and organisational learning.

Finding 3: Political interference weakens institutional effectiveness

The review found that political influence over leadership appointments and strategic decision-making undermines operational independence, organisational stability, and public trust. Merit-based appointments and transparent governance are essential for strengthening institutional legitimacy.

Finding 4: Professionalisation is fundamental to sustainable policing reform

Professional policing requires competency-based recruitment, continuous education, leadership development, specialised training, evidence-based practice, and ethical conduct. Professionalisation should be viewed as a long-term institutional transformation strategy rather than a short-term training intervention.

Finding 5: Accountability enhances public trust and organisational legitimacy

Transparent disciplinary systems, independent oversight, ethical leadership, and strong governance mechanisms improve institutional integrity and strengthen public confidence in SAPS.

Finding 6: Crime intelligence and detective capacity require significant strengthening

The review identified crime intelligence, detective services, forensic science, and digital policing technologies as critical components of effective crime prevention and criminal investigations. Strengthening these capabilities will improve operational efficiency and conviction rates.

Finding 7: Community-centred policing strengthens police legitimacy

Collaborative partnerships between SAPS, communities, municipalities, and other stakeholders enhance crime prevention, improve information sharing, and increase public confidence. Procedural justice and respectful engagement encourage greater community cooperation.

Finding 8: Institutional reform should be holistic

Effective policing depends on the interaction between leadership, governance, accountability, professionalisation, organisational culture, technology, and stakeholder collaboration. Sustainable reform requires integrated institutional change rather than isolated operational improvements.

Finding 9: South African policy frameworks provide a strong foundation for reform

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995, the National Development Plan 2030, the White Paper on Policing (2016), the White Paper on Safety and Security (2016), and the National Policing Policy collectively provide a comprehensive policy framework for transforming SAPS into a professional, accountable, and community-centred police service. However, the review highlights that implementation has been inconsistent, limiting the achievement of intended reform outcomes.

Finding 10: International best practices offer valuable lessons

International evidence demonstrates that police organisations achieve better outcomes when they invest in ethical leadership, independent oversight, intelligence-led policing, professional accreditation, evidence-based decision-making, advanced technology, and continuous organisational learning. Adapting these practices to the South African context could strengthen SAPS while remaining aligned with constitutional principles and local policing realities.

Summary

Overall, the review concludes that South Africa's policing challenges are multidimensional and cannot be addressed solely through increased resources or reactive crime-combating operations. Sustainable improvements require integrated reforms that strengthen leadership, governance, accountability, professionalisation, intelligence capability, technological innovation, and community partnerships. Implementing these recommendations would contribute to a more effective, legitimate, and resilient South African Police Service capable of responding to

contemporary crime challenges while upholding constitutional values and democratic policing principles.

Contribution and Impact (Academic, Practical and Policy Impact)

Academic Contribution

This systematic literature review contributes to the growing body of knowledge on policing by providing an integrated analysis of police leadership, organisational accountability, professionalisation, institutional reform, and policing effectiveness within the South African Police Service (SAPS). Unlike previous studies that have examined these variables in isolation, this review synthesises South African and international evidence to develop a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected factors influencing police performance.

The study also advances policing scholarship by integrating Transformational Leadership Theory, Institutional Theory, Procedural Justice Theory, Public Value Theory, and Systems Theory into a single analytical framework. This multidisciplinary approach provides a more comprehensive explanation of the institutional, organisational, and leadership dynamics shaping policing effectiveness in South Africa. Furthermore, the review identifies key research gaps and proposes an evidence-based framework that can guide future empirical studies on police governance, organisational leadership, and institutional reform.

Practical Contribution

The findings provide practical guidance for SAPS leadership, police managers, policymakers, and practitioners by identifying institutional reforms that can strengthen policing effectiveness. The recommendations on competency-based leadership, merit-based recruitment and promotion, ethical governance, intelligence-led policing, forensic modernisation, continuous professional development, and community-centred policing offer practical strategies for improving organisational performance and service delivery.

The study further highlights the importance of strengthening crime intelligence, detective services, digital policing technologies, and leadership development programmes. These recommendations can support SAPS in improving operational efficiency, enhancing public trust, increasing conviction rates, and responding more effectively to complex crime challenges such as organised crime, cybercrime, extortion, and gender-based violence.

Policy Contribution

The study contributes to public policy by evaluating the implementation of key South African policing policies and identifying areas requiring further institutional reform. The findings support the objectives of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995, the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, the White Paper on Policing (2016), the White Paper on Safety and Security (2016), and the National Policing Policy.

The evidence generated may assist the Ministry of Police, Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Police, the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID), National Treasury, and other oversight bodies in developing evidence-based policies aimed at strengthening

police professionalism, accountability, governance, and institutional effectiveness.

Overall Impact of the Study

The overall impact of this study lies in its potential to influence academic research, policing practice, and public policy simultaneously. By demonstrating that South Africa's policing challenges are not solely operational but also institutional and leadership-related, the study encourages a shift from reactive crime-fighting strategies towards sustainable organisational reform.

If the recommendations proposed in this review are implemented, SAPS may experience improvements in leadership effectiveness, organisational governance, accountability, employee morale, crime intelligence, investigative capacity, community partnerships, and public confidence. Ultimately, these improvements could contribute to reducing violent crime, strengthening democratic policing, promoting the rule of law, and advancing Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and the objectives of the National Development Plan 2030.

Limitations of the Study

Although this systematic literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge on police leadership, organisational accountability, professionalisation, and institutional reform, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government reports, policy documents, and publications from national and international organisations. Consequently, the findings are dependent on the quality, scope, and methodological rigor of the existing literature. No primary empirical data were collected from SAPS personnel, policymakers, or community members.

Second, the review adopts a systematic literature review methodology, which synthesises published evidence rather than testing causal relationships. While this approach provides a broad understanding of existing knowledge, it cannot establish direct cause-and-effect relationships between leadership practices and policing outcomes.

Third, policing is influenced by diverse contextual factors, including political dynamics, socio-economic inequalities, organisational culture, resource availability, technological capacity, and community characteristics. Although these factors are discussed, the study cannot fully capture the complexity and diversity of policing experiences across all provinces, municipalities, and police stations in South Africa.

Fourth, much of the available literature focuses on governance, corruption, police legitimacy, and violent crime, whereas comparatively fewer studies examine leadership development, organisational culture, succession planning, and institutional resilience within SAPS. This uneven distribution of evidence may influence the breadth of analysis across different thematic areas.

Fifth, official crime statistics and institutional performance reports may be affected by under-reporting, variations in recording practices, changes in crime classification, and reporting delays. While official sources such as SAPS, Statistics South Africa, the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, and the Institute for Security Studies were used to enhance reliability, these limitations should be considered when interpreting statistical trends.

Finally, although international literature provides valuable comparative insights, policing systems operate within different constitutional, political, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. Therefore, international best practices should be adapted carefully to the South African policing environment rather than adopted without contextual consideration.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a comprehensive, evidence-based synthesis of the literature and provides practical, policy-relevant recommendations for strengthening leadership, accountability, professionalisation, and institutional reform within the South African Police Service. It also establishes a strong foundation for future empirical research that can test and refine the conceptual relationships identified in this review.



Figure 1: illustrating the study

Conclusion

South Africa's persistent crime challenges have reignited national debate on whether the country is confronting merely a policing crisis or, more fundamentally, a leadership and institutional governance crisis within the South African Police Service (SAPS). This systematic literature review demonstrates that while increasing violent crime, organised criminality, and resource constraints continue to undermine public safety, these operational challenges are inseparable from broader institutional weaknesses relating to leadership, governance, accountability, professionalisation, organisational culture, and public trust. The evidence reviewed suggests that sustainable improvements in policing cannot be achieved solely through increasing police numbers, expanding budgets, or intensifying crime-combating operations. Rather, meaningful reform requires a comprehensive transformation of the institutional systems that shape leadership, decision-making, ethical conduct, and operational effectiveness.

The review found that leadership remains the cornerstone of effective policing. Competent, ethical, and visionary leadership influences organisational culture, employee morale, operational performance, accountability, innovation, and public confidence. Conversely, leadership instability, political interference, inconsistent governance, corruption, weak accountability mechanisms, and deficiencies in crime intelligence and detective services continue to impede SAPS's ability to fulfil its constitutional mandate. These findings reinforce the principles articulated in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995, the National Development Plan 2030, the White Paper on Policing (2016), and the White Paper on Safety and Security (2016), all of

which advocate a professional, accountable, community-centred, and intelligence-led police service.

The study further demonstrates that professionalisation should be regarded as a continuous institutional transformation process rather than a once-off training intervention. Competency-based recruitment and promotion, continuous professional development, ethical leadership, evidence-based policing, technological innovation, and effective civilian oversight emerged as fundamental requirements for strengthening organisational performance and restoring public confidence. International experiences from democratic policing systems further illustrate that sustainable policing is achieved through transparent governance, independent oversight, merit-based leadership, advanced crime intelligence, strong forensic capabilities, and collaborative partnerships between police and communities.

From a theoretical perspective, the integration of Transformational Leadership Theory, Institutional Theory, Procedural Justice Theory, Public Value Theory, and Systems Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interactions between leadership, governance, organisational culture, public legitimacy, and policing effectiveness. Collectively, these theories demonstrate that police performance is influenced not only by operational resources but also by the quality of leadership, institutional integrity, accountability systems, and public trust.

The findings of this review therefore support the conclusion that South Africa is experiencing both a policing crisis and a leadership crisis. The policing crisis is reflected in persistently high levels of violent crime, organised criminal activities, investigative challenges, and resource constraints. Simultaneously, the leadership crisis is characterised by governance failures,

organisational instability, inadequate accountability, inconsistent professionalisation, and declining institutional legitimacy. Addressing one dimension without simultaneously addressing the other is unlikely to produce sustainable improvements in public safety or police performance.

Accordingly, the future of policing in South Africa depends on bold, evidence-based, and systemic institutional reform. Government, SAPS leadership, Parliament, the Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate, and all criminal justice stakeholders must work collectively to strengthen ethical leadership, organisational accountability, professionalisation, crime intelligence, technological innovation, and community-centred policing. These reforms should be implemented within the framework of constitutional democracy, respect for human rights, and evidence-based public administration.

Ultimately, a safe and secure South Africa will not be achieved solely by deploying more police officers or introducing tougher enforcement measures. It will be realised through the creation of a professional, ethical, accountable, intelligence-driven, and community-oriented police service that enjoys the trust and confidence of the people it serves. Such a transformation is not merely an institutional necessity but a constitutional imperative for safeguarding democracy, promoting social justice, advancing sustainable development, and ensuring that every person in South Africa can live free from fear, violence, and insecurity. By embracing comprehensive institutional reform, South Africa has an opportunity to reposition SAPS as a modern, professional, and resilient policing institution capable of meeting the complex public safety challenges of the twenty-first century.

References

1. Auditor-General South Africa. (2024). *Consolidated general report on national and provincial audit outcomes 2023–2024*. Auditor-General South Africa.
2. Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. Free Press.
3. Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational leadership* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
4. Bayley, D. H. (2006). *Changing the guard: Developing democratic police abroad*. Oxford University Press.
5. Braga, A. A., & Weisburd, D. (2022). *Police innovation: Contrasting perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.
6. Braga, A. A., & Weisburd, D. (2022). Research on evidence-based policing.
7. Breetzke, G. D. (2022). Spatial analysis of crime in South Africa. *South African Journal of Criminal Justice*.
8. Burger, J. (2011). *To protect and serve: Restoring public confidence in the South African Police Service*. Institute for Security Studies.
9. Burger, J. (2023). Professionalising the South African Police Service: Leadership and institutional reform. *South African Crime Quarterly*, 75, 1–14.
10. Civilian Secretariat for Police Service. (2016b). *White Paper on Safety and Security*. Government Printer.
11. Civilian Secretariat for Police Service. (2024). *Annual report 2023/2024*. Government Printer.
12. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2024). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
13. Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation. (2020). *Medium-Term Strategic Framework 2019–2024*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
14. Faull, A. (2019). Police legitimacy in South Africa. *South African Crime Quarterly*, 68, 27–39.
15. Goldstein, H. (1990). *Problem-oriented policing*. McGraw-Hill.
16. Institute for Security Studies (ISS). (2024). Reports on policing, crime, and governance.
17. Institute for Security Studies. (2023). *South African Crime Review 2023*. Pretoria: ISS.
18. Institute for Security Studies. (2024). *Crime and Justice Hub reports*. Institute for Security Studies.
19. Lum, C., & Koper, C. S. (2017). *Evidence-based policing*. Springer.
20. Masiloane, D., & Kau, M. (2023). Police professionalism and service delivery. *Journal of Public Administration*.
21. Moore, M. H. (1995). *Creating public value: Strategic management in government*. Harvard University Press.
22. National Planning Commission. (2012). *National Development Plan 2030*.
23. National Planning Commission. (2012). *National Development Plan 2030: Our future – Make it work*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
24. Newham, G. (2015). Strengthening police accountability in South Africa. *Institute for Security Studies Policy Brief*, 72, 1–16.
25. Northouse, P. G. (2022). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (9th ed.). Sage.
26. OECD. (2023). Governance and public-sector integrity reports.
27. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023). *Government at a glance 2023*. OECD Publishing.
28. Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., et al. (2021). *The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews*. *BMJ*, 372, n71.
29. Rauch, J. (2021). Police reform and democratic governance in South Africa. *African Security Review*.
30. Republic of South Africa. (1995). *South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995*. Government Printer.
31. Republic of South Africa. (1996). *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*. Government Printer.
32. Republic of South Africa. (1998). *Prevention of Organised Crime Act 121 of 1998*. Government Printer.

33. Republic of South Africa. (2000). *Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
34. Republic of South Africa. (2024). *National Policing Policy*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
35. Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2023). *Research methods for business students* (9th ed.). Pearson.
36. Scott, W. R. (2014). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities* (4th ed.). Sage.
37. Singh, D. (2022). Police corruption and governance in South Africa. *Acta Criminologica*.
38. Skogan, W. G. (2006). *Police and community in Chicago*. Oxford University Press.
39. South African Police Service. (2024). *Annual Report 2023/2024*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
40. South African Police Service. (2025). *Annual report 2024/2025*. Government Printer.
41. South African Police Service. (2025). *Quarterly crime statistics 2024/2025*. Government Printer.
42. South African Police Service. (2025). *Strategic Plan 2025–2030 and recent Annual Reports*.
43. South African Police Service. (2025). *Strategic Plan 2025–2030*. Government Printer.
44. South African Police Service. (2025). *Strategic Plan 2025–2030*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
45. Statistics South Africa. (2022). *Governance, public safety and justice survey*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
46. Statistics South Africa. (2024). *Mid-year population estimates 2024*. Statistics South Africa.
47. Statistics South Africa. (2024). *Victims of Crime Survey 2023/2024*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
48. Transparency International. (2024). *Corruption Perceptions Index 2024*. Transparency International.
49. Tyler, T. R. (2006). *Why people obey the law* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press.
50. United Nations Development Programme. (2022). *Human Development Report 2021/2022*. United Nations Development Programme.
51. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2023). *Global study on homicide 2023*. United Nations.
52. United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. United Nations.
53. von Bertalanffy, L. (1968). *General system theory: Foundations, development, applications*. George Braziller.
54. World Bank. (2023). *Governance and institutional capacity publications*.
55. World Bank. (2023). *World Development Report 2023: Migrants, refugees, and societies*. World Bank.
56. World Justice Project. (2024). *Rule of Law Index 2024*. World Justice Project.