

An assessment of whether community police relations has improved public confidence in the police

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Abstract

This article revisits a 2016 mixed-methods assessment commissioned by the Directorate: Policy and Research in the Gauteng Department of Community Safety to determine whether Community Police Relations (CPR) initiatives improved public confidence in the police in Gauteng, South Africa. The original study examined Community Policing Forums (CPFs), the Community Patroller Programme and related community engagement interventions through a survey of 1,680 respondents across 42 areas, supplemented by qualitative interviews with station commanders, CPF chairpersons and other key stakeholders.

The findings show that awareness of CPFs and community patrollers was relatively moderate, but awareness alone did not translate into stronger confidence in the South African Police Service (SAPS) or Metropolitan Police Departments (MPDs). Rather, confidence was more closely associated with meaningful participation, positive direct contact, perceptions of procedural fairness and visible responsiveness. Although CPR initiatives contributed to community mobilisation and helped moderate declines in confidence among active participants, overall public confidence deteriorated over the five-year period examined by the 2016 study.

The article situates the 2016 findings within contemporary literature published between 2021 and 2026, including recent work on procedural justice, police legitimacy, CPF oversight, evidence-based policing and long-term trends in declining police trust in South Africa. The synthesis indicates that the core challenges identified in 2016—corruption, poor response times, weak feedback mechanisms, uneven service delivery and limited community participation remain central to current debates on police legitimacy. The article concludes that CPR interventions remain policy-relevant, but their contribution to public confidence depends on stronger accountability, clearer civilian oversight, sustained community participation and improved day-to-day police conduct.

Keywords: *community police relations, public confidence, police, SAPS, civilian oversight*

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I. Introduction and Background

Community policing has been central to South Africa's democratic policing framework since the establishment of the SAPS in the mid-1990s. In Gauteng, the Directorate: Community Police Relations (CPR) within the Gauteng Department of Community Safety has historically supported this mandate through initiatives aimed at deepening community participation, particularly through Community Policing Forums (CPFs), the Community Patroller Programme and related mobilisation activities against crime.

This article is based on a departmental assessment conducted in 2016 by the Directorate: Policy and Research. Its primary purpose was to assess whether CPR it is not about the unit but community police relations initiatives had contributed to improved public confidence in the police across Gauteng. Because the empirical study was conducted in 2016, the findings are interpreted here as a historically situated baseline rather than as a current measurement of public confidence. The article therefore combines the original evidence with literature and policy debates published between 2021 and 2026 to examine the continuing relevance of the study's conclusions.

1.1 Aim of the Assessment

"The aim of the article is to present the findings of the study to assess whether initiatives implemented by the Community Police Relations Programme have led to improved public confidence in the police across Gauteng province"(DCS, 2018:10).

1.2 Objectives of the Assessment

“The objectives of the study are to assess whether interventions by the CPR programme have:
Improved community awareness on the role of the CPFs and Community Patrollers in the fight against crime.
Improved active participation of communities in the social movement against crime.
Improved relations between the communities and the police.
Heightened activities on crime prevention.
Increased public confidence in the police”.(DCS, 2018:10).

1.3 Research Questions

“Based on the research objectives, the study sought to answer whether interventions to improve community police relations have:
Improved awareness of the role of the CPFs and Community Patrollers in the fight against crime?
Improved active participation of communities in the social movement against crime?
Heightened activities in crime prevention?
Improved relations between communities and the police?
Increased public confidence in the police?”

II. Literature Review

The literature distinguishes between confidence, trust, legitimacy and satisfaction in policing. Confidence refers to a generalised reservoir of support for the police as an institution, whereas trust often refers to expectations about whether police actors will behave competently, fairly and ethically in particular encounters (Cao, 2015). More recent South African literature reinforces this distinction by showing that public confidence is affected not only by crime levels, but also by police visibility, perceived fairness, accountability, responsiveness and the quality of police-community encounters.

2.1 Contact with Police

Confidence represents generalized support for the police as an institution, constituting a reservoir of goodwill normally directed towards the institution rather than individual incumbents (Cao, 2015; Garcia & Cao, 2005). Although it is largely a result of structural socialisation, personal experiences or contacts with officers play a pivotal role in shaping public sentiment(Cao, 2005).

Contacts are distinguished by quality and type (voluntary vs. involuntary) (Cao, 2015). Prior research concludes that the quality of contact heavily shapes attitudes(Cao, 2015).. Negative experiences have an intense adverse effect on overall institutional perception (Bridenball & Jesilow, 2008; Cao, 2011; Gau, 2009). Conversely, positive contact increases public confidence (Cao, 2011; Frank et al., 2005).

Voluntary Contact: Initiated by a citizen for service requests or reporting crime, which generally tends to increase institutional confidence (Ren et al., 2005).

Involuntary Contact: Police-initiated encounters, such as traffic citations or arrests (Bradford et al., 2009; Cao, 2011). Confidence can be severely swayed by involuntary contacts if officers fail to follow procedural due process (Bradford et al., 2009; Cao, 2011).

Contextual Note on Geography: The original research framework tests whether these dynamics hold true for residents in complex sub-national administrative divisions. While international frameworks reference "medium-sized cities", this study directly translates these parameters to the distinct urban, township, and rural terrains characterizing the Gauteng province.

2.2 Larger Institutional Confidence Complex

Public perceptions towards broader public organizations directly dictate confidence in law enforcement (Albrecht & Green, 1977; Boateng et al., 2016). Albrecht and Green (1977).labelled this the "larger attitudes complex," while Stack and Cao (1998) termed it the "larger institutional confidence complex". Similarly, government performance theory suggests that citizens who express high confidence in wider public entities (state, provincial, and local government offices) are statistically predisposed to maintain higher confidence in the police (Van Craen, 2013). This study hypothesises that a positive correlation exists between broader state institutional trust and police legitimacy within South African metropolitan contexts.

Recent South African scholarship published between 2021 and 2026 places particular emphasis on procedural justice and police legitimacy. The Institute for Security Studies research argues that trust can be improved when police treat residents with respect, listen to community concerns, explain decisions clearly and apply rules neutrally (van der Heyde, Faull & Sycholt, 2023). HSRC write in full as indicated previously analysis of long-term survey trends similarly shows that confidence in the police has remained persistently low, with the 2024/25 South African Social Attitudes Survey reporting historically low trust levels. Recent CPF

studies further show that community policing structures retain potential but are weakened when their oversight role becomes blurred, politicised or under-resourced (Burger, 2021; Dlamini, 2023; Dlamini, 2025).

III. Methodology

The 2016 assessment adopted a mixed-methods design to examine whether CPR interventions were associated with improved public confidence in the police. The design combined quantitative survey data with qualitative stakeholder interviews, enabling both measurement of public perceptions and contextual interpretation of the institutional and community dynamics shaping those perceptions.

3.1 Data Collection & Triangulation

Quantitative Data Collection: A paper-based survey was administered to 1,680 respondents across 42 selected areas in Gauteng. The instrument measured safety indicators, crime exposure, community-police relations, CPF and patroller awareness, and institutional confidence.

Qualitative Data Collection: Focus group interviews were systematically conducted with CPF executive members, station commanders, and local chairpersons to triangulate the survey findings.

Research Model: A theoretical path model was developed to isolate direct and indirect predictors of confidence, controlling for confounding variables such as baseline crime exposure, neighbourhood safety ratings, and perception of historical crime deterioration.

IV. Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented in relation to the study objectives and then interpreted against contemporary South African literature. This structure clarifies the relationship between the 2016 empirical baseline and recent evidence on police legitimacy, procedural justice, CPF effectiveness and public confidence in SAPS (DCS,2016).

4.1 Crime Exposure and Perceptions of Safety

The original study noted that one-third of Gauteng households experienced crime within the preceding years, with township areas bearing a disproportionate burden of house burglaries and robberies.

This pattern remains consistent with recent national evidence. Statistics South Africa's Governance, Public Safety and Justice Survey continues to identify household crime, especially housebreaking, as a prominent public safety concern, while recent SAPS crime statistics confirm the persistence of serious violent crime (DCS, 2016). Contemporary evidence therefore supports the 2016 study's conclusion that confidence in the police cannot be separated from residents lived exposure to crime, their sense of safety and their perception of whether police institutions respond effectively(DCS, 2016).

4.2 Awareness, Participation and Community Policing Forums

Recent literature reinforces this finding. Burger (2021) cautions that CPFs risk losing their impartial civilian oversight function when they become overly absorbed into operational policing. Dlamini's recent studies similarly argue that CPF legitimacy depends on transparency, accountability, community retrospectivity, adequate resources and credible oversight mechanisms. This suggests that CPR initiatives are most likely to improve confidence where participation is substantive, inclusive and linked to visible accountability, rather than limited to nominal awareness campaigns(Burger, 2021).

4.3 Community Patrollers and Direct Contact

The original assessment isolated a critical trend: only 14.8% of citizens had direct contact with patrollers, yet actual contact in vulnerable transport nodes (e.g., railway stations during peak hours) significantly checked the deterioration of public confidence in the police.

This is consistent with procedural justice literature, which emphasises that everyday encounters with policing actors shape institutional legitimacy(DCS,2016). Visible and respectful community-based patrols can strengthen perceptions of care, responsiveness and safety when they are properly supervised and integrated into local safety planning(DCS,2016). However, the positive value of patrollers depends on clear role definition, training, accountability and coordination with SAPS and MPDs (DCS,2016).

4.4 Confidence in SAPS, MPDs and Comparative Service Expectations

The study uncovered a sharp contrast in satisfaction between state organs and private security operators. Private security firms received high marks for customer service, rapid response, and accountability. SAPS and MPDs suffered from structural resource allocation problems, requiring them to serve the entire public under constrained budgets. In 2024/25 Human Sciences Research Council Institute for Security Studies(ISS) analyses show that this legitimacy challenge has deepened. The Human Sciences Research Council

(HSRC) trend data indicates that public confidence in the police has remained below majority levels for more than two decades and reached historically low levels in 2024/25 Human Sciences Research Council. (2025) ISS research links low trust to corruption, poor accountability, negative police encounters and perceptions that police do not respond fairly or effectively. These contemporary findings confirm the continuing relevance of the 2016 study's emphasis on corruption, slow response times, lack of feedback and poor communication as key drivers of declining confidence (Human Sciences Research Council, 2025).

V. Conclusion and Policy Implications

The 2016 Gauteng assessment provides an important empirical baseline for understanding the relationship between community police relations and public confidence in the police. Its central contribution is the finding that community policing initiatives are not automatically confidence-building. Awareness of CPFs or patrollers is insufficient on its own; confidence improves, or deteriorates less sharply, when residents participate actively, experience constructive contact and observe visible responsiveness from policing institutions.

5.1 Strengthen Procedural Justice and Police Conduct

Institutionalise Soft Skills Training: Reform basic police training curricula to prioritize procedural justice, victim-centered policing, and empathetic communication.

5.2 Empower Localized Governance: De-centralise policing mandates to allow metropolitan councils and local CPFs to set precinct-specific targets

5.3 Target Public Awareness Campaigns: Launch strategic educational campaigns detailing how citizens can participate in local CPFs and safely engage with Community Patroller networks.

5.4 Institutionalise Evidence-Based Monitoring

5.5 Execute Longitudinal Tracking Studies: Considering the 2024–2026 trust deficits, the Gauteng Department of Community Safety should commission a follow-up, multi-method tracking study. This research must map contemporary safety satisfaction data against updated national crime matrices to evaluate current intervention strategies.

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