

When 'criminals' are many, but not all are counted

Statistics can lie sometimes. Headline can do so too. This is possible when those who use them pick out what they want to paint a misleading picture.

The latest Uganda Police crime report states that "in 2025, a total of 196,405 cases were reported to the police compared to 218,715 in 2024, which represents a 10.2 percent reduction. Out of the reported cases, 115,301 were submitted to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, from which 79,291 were taken to court. A total of 24,899 cases secured convictions, with 31,732 persons convicted and sentenced."

The police attributes this success to improved intelligence-led policing with operations to identify and stop criminals before offences were committed. Then deployment to sub-counties, which takes services closer to the people. Use of technology, which includes CCTV cameras, forensics services, and canine units to decrease local crime opportunities. The increased community policing, which creates partnerships between the police and the community, and increased prosecution efficiency which acts as a deterrent.

There were drops in cases related to fraud, narcotics, domestic violence, and sexual offences. But there was an increase in land-related disputes and fatal road crashes despite the fact that traffic offences decreased.

Like most things in Uganda, the report split public opinion. Those who don't like or trust the government and things official, expressed scepticism. To them, it is obvious things don't add up because there is rampant crime all over the place. On the other side of the coin, there are glorious arguments like the Parish Development Model, money giving people what to do and deterring them from crime.

Going by the data collection method, the key-

words 'cases reported'. The police takes figures from its station diaries. So, the Uganda Police is correct when they argue that the crime rate has gone down, even if the public witnesses and experiences criminal activity like phone theft, assault with pavers by gangs, etc., on a daily basis. The self-praising arguments for the 'improvement' are matters for another debate.

In other words, if a crime is committed and it is not reported, it does not appear in the statistics. Or if it is reported and the desk officer refuses or fails to record it because the person being reported is a big shot or is 'dangerous,' and may, with the weight of impunity, cause the officer trouble. That makes the overall report look rosy.

The question to address is, why don't citizens report crime to the police, or why don't crimes end up in the station diary?

Trust issues are paramount. It is not news as was shown in the 1999/2000 Justice Julia Sebutinde Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Corruption in the Police report. At times, some police officers may team up with suspects to the detriment of a complainant, especially if the latter has pockets deep enough to compromise them.

There is a history of the underfunded police not following up on investigative matters to their logical conclusion, which is successful prosecution. The complainant is left at the risk of reprisal by the suspect. This discourages people from reporting. The case backlog in the courts makes it very tedious and expensive to follow up on reported cases. It put a burden on the complainant and their witnesses. They stop reporting and instead resort to mob 'justice', witchcraft, or suffering fools gladly.

Secondly, there are several constraints that hinder the police's capacity to investigate. From lack of logistics like vehicles, fuel to airtime, etc. Even

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Nicholas Sengoba
Plainly speaking



the advancement in technology say in matters like tracking stolen phones leaves the police helpless. People then learn to simply look for money to replace the stolen item instead of wasting time reporting to the police.

In other places, the police view crime as an opportunity for their survival. These mainly include traffic offences or embarrassing crimes like procuring prostitutes. Some of the underpaid, under-motivated, poorly housed, and facilitated officers blackmail the suspect who provides a bribe to disappear the crime instead of losing their dignity.

The other issue is the number and spread of the police in Uganda. As of 2026, there are approximately 38,000 police officers for the 45 million people of Uganda, giving a ratio of 1 to over 1,200 people per officer. The problem is compounded by the fact that there are some people in the higher echelons of power who have up to 10 police guards and two police escort vehicles at their disposal. It puts police officers on the beat at risk in case of patrolling to apprehend criminals or mov-

ing to scenes of crime. Sometimes they are outnumbered, and mobs usually turn on them.

In many places, especially upcountry, the police is excluded. Elders and the rich sort out matters for the community, including the administration of corporal punishment or paying animals as fines for offences like defilement. Sometimes, poor families are dissuaded with money and petty inducements not to report crime. In fact, they view crime against them as an investment from which to milk money. This is possible in a country where approximately 7.3 million Ugandans (about 16.1 percent of the population) live in absolute poverty, surviving on less than \$1 (about Shs3,663) per person per day (Uganda National Household Survey 2023/24).

We also have cultural and social issues. A man will not report to the police if his wife or child beats or robs him for fear of being laughed at. A wife may not report that her husband or male relative defiles their own child or the househelp. A 'sensible' person will not report that they were conned after greedily and naively falling into a Ponzi scheme.

Then there are the crimes that are committed by the police or other security agents against citizens, like the violence during elections. The same applies to abduction, disappearance, and incarceration of citizens in ungazetted places. These crimes occur in broad daylight, but we rarely see them prosecuted, highlighted, and documented as serious crimes. In fact, perpetrators walk scot-free even when recorded evidence is plenty in the public domain. This self-preservation and collegial shielding is one of the main reasons why citizens keep away from the police. The case of PC No 55915 Charles Bahati, who shot Julius Ssekamwa in broad daylight and fled from his colleagues in December 2024, is a case in point.

X: @nsengoba