

South Africa's Cops Are Really, Really, Unbelievably Corrupt. Wow, They're Corrupt



On Friday, Magistrate Desmond Nair [approved bail](#) for Oscar Pistorius, the South African track star and double amputee accused of killing his girlfriend, model Reeva Steenkamp, last Thursday. Though some protesters were aggrieved by this decision, they should've seen it coming. Maybe I'm being naïve, but I can't think of anyone *less* likely to successfully skip bail than an instantly recognizable, trial-of-the-century-causing international track star. I'm sure it's possible for someone like that to slip away unnoticed, but doing so would probably require stealth aircraft, or theatrical makeup, or the world's dumbest border guard.

Of course, it didn't help that the prosecution was hindered by the abysmal courtroom performance of lead detective Hilton Botha—"the worst Botha since [PW](#)," as one wag [put it on Twitter](#), referring to the former South African prime minister and apartheid apologist. Botha's testimony was inconsistent and occasionally favored the defense; his credibility was damaged when the media learned that he himself is [facing attempted murder charges](#). Once again, South Africans found themselves embarrassed by their nation's breathtakingly corrupt police force. So what else is new?

"Ever since it was founded in 1995, the South African Police Service (SAPS) has struggled to foster an image as a professional police agency," wrote Andrew Faull in [his 2011 paper](#) "Corruption in the South African Police Service." In a 2007 survey, the Human Science Research Council found that over 60 percent of South African citizens didn't trust the police.

Can you blame them? South African police officers [killed 566 people](#) from 2009-2010. The police have been accused of using inner-city crime districts as their personal ATMs, routinely extorting drug dealers, prostitutes,

and others. ("My cousin had a cider and she was standing at the gate, not outside the yard and when the police came to her they said, 'We are arresting you or you give us a bribe,' " one Johannesburg resident told Faull.) Sexual harassment runs rampant. "I cannot trust a policeman whom, when I go to report that I was abused by my boyfriend, he sees that as an opportunity to ask me out and he starts touching you," [reported](#) one Durban resident.

All this malfeasance leaves the police with little time to actually prevent crimes: "South Africa has one of the highest murder rates in the world and the highest number of reported rapes per capita of any Interpol member country," [reported David Dolan](#) of Reuters. "The police commissioner is investigating claims by a police union that parts of a 464 million-rand (\$53 million) DNA database machine were sold for scrap while about 500 million rand's worth of evidence has been stolen from narcotics labs in the province home to Johannesburg and Pretoria."

Perhaps the most embarrassing recent incident was the 2010 conviction on corruption charges of police commissioner [Jackie Selebi](#). (Before he was convicted, Selebi tried to scuttle the case by having prosecutor Gerrie Nel—the same man who's handling the Pistorius case—arrested and charged with corruption. The charges against Nel were dropped a few days later.) Gareth Newham and Andrew Faull summarized the Selebi case in their paper "[Protector or predator? Tackling police corruption in South Africa](#)," noting that the independent governmental unit that led the Selebi investigation was later disbanded, and that today "there is no independent structure that has the capacity to undertake a criminal investigation into the SAPS National Commissioner." Though Selebi received a 15-year sentence, he was paroled for medical reasons in 2012.

So, yeah, South Africa's police force is pretty bad, though not necessarily more corrupt than the police in other African nations. In 2010, Human Rights Watch [declared](#) that "widespread corruption in the Nigeria Police Force is fueling abuses against ordinary citizens and severely undermining the rule of law in Nigeria." Last November, the *New York Times*'s Jeffrey Gettleman [wrote about](#) Kenya's "spectacularly dysfunctional national police force;" the article began with an anecdote about two officers walking into a pool hall and shooting a teenager in the head. Zimbabwe's traffic cops, who are apparently quite brazen about demanding bribes from motorists, [have been called](#) "the most corrupt department in southern Africa." The *Lesotho Times*—a news source for Lesotho, the tiny, land-locked country located entirely within South Africa—[recently published an editorial](#) asking whether "our police are the most corrupt in southern Africa."

Police corruption isn't just endemic to South Africa; it's endemic to all poor, undereducated countries with histories of political instability. South Africa [ranks 107th](#) in the world in GDP per capita; it's not surprising that people in power might choose to exploit that power in order to supplement their incomes. Soliciting bribes is certainly easier than, say, getting a second job; according to the *CIA World Factbook*, South Africa has the world's third-highest [rate of unemployment](#) among youth in the 15-24 age group.

“The SAPS stands out as one of the few options for formal employment for South Africa’s unemployed matric [high school] graduates,” [write Gareth Newham and Andrew Paul](#). “As a result, many people apply to become police officials if they meet the minimum requirements, primarily because they view policing as a job rather than a vocation, and many are thus not particularly well suited to the work. The greater the number of such individuals in a police organisation, the more likely it is that it will have problems with corrupt officials.

Oscar Pistorius will stand trial in June. If this week’s bail hearing is any indication, his lawyers will spend a lot of time disparaging the credibility of the officers who investigated the crime scene. And if Hilton Botha is any indication, Pistorius's lawyers will have a lot of material to work with.