Lessons from research with South African Police Services (SAPS): The third national femicide study during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Abstract

Collecting South African Police Service's (SAPS) data is critical for femicide research in South Africa. This paper outlines lessons learnt from interviews with SAPS officials during the COVID-19 pandemic to collect data for the third national femicide study. This paper is based on the shared experiences of the research team, particularly the fieldworkers, and provides insight into undertaking research with the SAPS. It guides researchers, especially those planning to conduct researcher-administered questionnaires with SAPS officials. This paper also provides insight into the complexities and sheds light on the intricacies behind the hierarchical structure of the SAPS. It further suggests ways to improve both face-to-face and telephonic data collection and strategies to reduce missing data. The paper also highlights the need to be flexible and creative in devising strategies to overcome challenges. Finally, the paper addresses the various methods used to resolve challenges and enable the project to collect the best quality data with the least disruption to the services provided by SAPS officials.

Background to the femicide studies

The murder of women and girls is one of the most extreme consequences of gender-based violence (GBV). The overall 2017 femicide rate (for women 14 years and older) declined to 11.2 per 100 000 population. This is less than half the rate for 1999, which was estimated to be 24.7 per 100 000. Despite the decline, approximately 2,407 women were murdered in South Africa in 2017, equating to roughly seven women per day. Further, among these, we estimate that 1,029 were murdered by an intimate partner, indicating that South Africa continues to have an enormous problem with intimate partner femicide.[2]

South Africa does not have a reliable and efficient administrative system to collate data on the murder of women and to identify the perpetrators and their relationship with the victims. Recognising this gap, the Gender and Health Research Unit (GHRU) of the South African Medical Research Council has conducted dedicated femicide research in South Africa for nearly two decades. Research has also been recognised as a critical pillar in the South African National Strategic Plan (NSP) on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF).[3] Specifically, the outcome for Pillar 6 of the NSP, entitled 'Research and Information Systems', calls for national research to shape and strengthen the response to GBVF. The national femicide studies respond to this outcome: study 1 was completed in 1999, and study 2 in 2009. In this paper, we present our experiences of collecting data with SAPS for the 2017 study (study 3).

Femicide study methodology

Data collection for the third femicide study started in January 2020 and ended 19 months later in September 2021. This period coincided with the COVID-19 lockdown levels presented in Table 1. The 2017 femicide study formed part of a broader study that also collected data on adult male murders and child murders. The focus of this manuscript is on our experiences of data collection on femicide cases, as the victim-perpetrator relationship was critical in identifying intimate partner femicides. The study followed a two-phased approach: phase one entailed data collection in mortuaries, and phase two involved interviews with SAPS officials. The first phase entailed collecting data at the 81 sampled mortuaries (out of 149 operating mortuaries) on all murdered females from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2017. The randomly selected sample of mortuaries was drawn from a sampling frame that included all the operational mortuaries in South Africa in 2017. We used an external contractor to collect this data under direct oversight by the study team. Phase one data collection ended in July 2020. We used the phase one data to plan the second phase. This entailed following up on all the identified cases through researcher-administered interviews with SAPS members. The collected data was captured on the Research Electronic

Data Capture (REDCap) system, a secure web application for building and managing online surveys and databases.[4] We were able to start police data collection in the Western Cape as early as March 2020, as the phase one data was provided electronically by the province. Phase two is especially critical as police data provides us with a more detailed account of the murders, specifically to verify if the manner of death was a murder. If the case was confirmed to be a murder, we proceeded to collect information on what was known or suspected about the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator (in other words, whether it was an intimate partner or not). Phase two data collection was particularly challenging, and it extended over a longer period than anticipated and only concluded at the end of September 2021. This coincided with the end of COVID lockdown level 2.

Phase two is the focus of this paper, which is outlined below. For a detailed description of the methods used in phase one, please refer to the Injury Mortality Survey study report.[5]

TABLE 1: SOUTH AFRICA'S FIVE-LEVEL COVID-19 ALERT SYSTEM[6]
Lockdown from midnight 26 March to 30 April 2020. (Alert level 5)
Alert level 4 from 1 to 31 May 2020.
Alert level 3 from 1 June to 17 August 2020.
Alert level 2 from 00h01 on 18 August 2020.
Alert level 1 from 21 September to 28 December 2020.
Adjusted alert level 3 from 29 December 2020 to 28 February 2021.
Adjusted alert level 1 from 1 March to 30 May 2021.
Adjusted alert level 2 from 31 May to 15 June 2021.
Adjusted alert level 4 from 16 June 2021.
Adjusted alert level 3 from 16 June to 27 June 2021.
Adjusted alert level 4 from 28 June to 25 July 2021.
Adjusted alert level 3 from 26 July to 12 September 2021.
Adjusted alert level 2 from 13 September 2021.
Adjusted alert level 1 is in place from 1 October 2021.
The National State of Disaster lifted as of 5 April 2022.

Obtaining approvals

One important first step was obtaining national and provincial approvals from the SAPS Research Division. Once national approval was granted for the study, the Head of SAPS Research sent written communication

via email to all provincial contact persons. Once provincial contacts received this information, we commenced communicating with them. In seven provinces, the relevant Provincial Officers briefed the identified SAPS police stations directly by emailing the applicable Station Commanders. In the two remaining provinces, the Provincial Officers briefed the District Commanders only (see Table 2). Therefore, we had to follow up with the District or Cluster Commanders' Office and request that the information be communicated to the relevant police stations that were part of each District or Cluster. The districts then emailed the head of each station, the Station Commander, who would then communicate with their Detective Commanders.

After Detective Commanders received the communication from their Station Commander, the next point of contact was to identify the Investigating Officers (IOs) who were linked to each case. However, it is important to note that the process was not always linear, especially within larger police stations, as they tended to have a different management hierarchy. In these larger stations, the Station Commanders would communicate with the Branch Commander, who would then communicate with the various Detective Commanders. Detective Commanders would only then provide us with the relevant IO's contact details. In some police stations, Station Commanders directed us to the police stations' communication office, who would verify our study documents and communicate with the Detective or Branch Commanders before the interviews proceeded.

Our first delay was related to a 2018 date which was recorded on the national approval letter for the study. Our study started in 2020, and the letter with the earlier date was unacceptable to many provincial staff and police stations. We were requested to obtain a new approval letter with a more recent date. The difference in dates between the approval letter and the start of data collection results from approval letters being issued in advance as they are required as part of the institutional research ethics approval process.

TABLE 2: DEFINITION OF TERMS	
Station Commanders	Head of the station
Detective Commanders	Head of the detectives
Investigating Officers	These are the officers who led the investigations and who we interviewed to collect data.
District Commanders	Head of a district, responsible for all police stations falling within a particular district.
District Offices	The offices of the District Commanders

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Gaining access and establishing contact with police stations

The national approval letter was, however, not always adequate, and we received requests for additional ratification from the provincial office, which further delayed the start of data collection. This was also not always a straightforward process. For example, a few Detective Commanders refused to engage with us despite the approval letters. We learnt that SAPS officials operate within a hierarchal system and will frequently only proceed after receiving direct verbal or written communication from line managers, despite approval letters from Head Office. Thus, we often needed to go back to the line manager and ask them to communicate directly with the Detective Commanders. This entailed repeated communication of the same documents to various officials until it landed with the correct person or someone who was prepared to attend to the research request and assist us.

We were also often referred to District and Provincial Offices to obtain additional approvals. Again, this meant resending the full set of research approval documents via email and following up on multiple occasions until approval was received. This extra layer of approval was a learning curve and often a frustrating process. We found that these requests were inconsistent and depended on the size of the police station and who we spoke to. We learnt that we had to identify the correct chain of command as this was critical to managing the access approval processes. We also learnt that larger police stations had different access processes, often a result of more senior staff being present at the larger stations. The diversity across the management structures of police stations continued to amaze us during the fieldwork. We often thought we understood the process but then encountered new ways of engagement with the police.

Another challenge we encountered was finding the correct contact details of the police stations identified in phase one. In our fieldwork preparations, we started by searching for the contact details of each identified police station. We learnt that, although all the police station's contact details are listed online, only a few of the numbers are in operation or functional. Similarly, most SAPS email addresses listed online were no longer in use and, therefore, stations would not receive our emails. In other instances, we received a 'mailbox full bounce' to our emails. Given the difficulty of contacting some of the police, we had to be creative and think of alternative channels. As a result, WhatsApp was used. In many cases, we asked our contacts within the stations where we had already completed interviews for the contact details of the nearby and relevant stations. Initially, we used WhatsApp to establish contact, and later, we used it to schedule interviews and even exchange emails. WhatsApp became an effective communication tool especially because the police are rarely in the office.

In addition, despite the study being approved and supposedly communicated to all relevant parties, it was not uncommon for officials to fail to recall such communication. This was due to several understandable factors, including, but not limited to, challenges with accessing emails, competing demands, urgent tasks taking priority, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was challenging to access police officials as the research took place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In South Africa, police members were redeployed to patrol the streets to enforce COVID-19 lockdown measures. Police members were also frequently in quarantine, and if one staff member tested positive for COVID-19, the entire police station was closed for a period of decontamination. Therefore, members were very often unavailable. Additionally, IOs were prohibited from taking their annual leave during South Africa's hard lockdown Levels 4 and 5 (Table 1) because of additional COVID-19 duties. As a result, once the country moved into eased lockdown levels, such as level 3, many IOs went on extended annual leave to avoid forfeiting their leave.

In addition, several Station Commanders and Detective Commanders left the service, mainly due to retirement, which meant reintroducing the study to new staff. Sometimes, we were lucky, and the staff had been transferred from stations that were also part of the study sample. Thus, they knew about our study already, which made the process easier.

Scheduling interviews

Once all approvals were obtained and access was granted to the relevant police stations, we could begin scheduling interviews.

In line with the fragmented approach to granting access described above, we also discovered that there was no 'one size fits all' approach for scheduling interviews. Consequently, we had to be flexible, adaptable, and especially creative to devise strategies that best suited specific stations. For example, with a handful of police stations, the process of setting up interviews was seamless because the Station Commanders had received the notification informing them of our research from the provincial office and had, therefore, emailed us a schedule with interview dates and times in advance.

For most police stations in the different provinces, we had to forward the original provincial email as evidence to the Station Commander before scheduling an interview because of the prior stated access issues we described previously. The Station Commander would then undertake a verification process of engaging with the email, reviewing the documents, and in some instances making calls to the Provincial Office to verify the study.

In some provinces, interviews were planned and conducted at the District or Cluster Offices. In these instances, we had to contact the Cluster or District Commanders and send an interview schedule with dates, times, and police station names. This approach allowed for a group of police station data collection to be conducted on the same day, minimising the time spent.

One key factor contributing to the delay in data collection was the challenges related to scheduling interviews. For some police stations, this process took two to three weeks, while for other police stations, it took two months or more before appointments could be scheduled. Through this experience, we learnt the importance of allowing ample time for the scheduling of interviews.

Telephonic interviews

As mentioned earlier, the research methodology was conceptualised before the COVID-19 pandemic, and we, therefore, envisaged physically going to police stations to conduct face-to-face interviews. However, this had to be adjusted when the country suddenly went under lockdown due to the pandemic. For example, due to the lockdown measures imposed by the South African government, such as stay-at-home orders and restricted travel movement, we could not physically travel to police stations. Therefore, during the hard lockdown phase, we had to adapt the data collection process and move from face-to-face interviews to conducting telephonic interviews. Once some restrictions were lifted, we could move to a blend of both face-to-face and telephonic interviews (outlined in the next section). In the end, most interviews (70%) were conducted via telephone. The remaining 30% were conducted face-to-face.

In line with adapting our research methods, we altered the nature of consent-taking for telephonic interviews. Before the pandemic, IOs provided written consent as part of data collection in the face-to-face interviews in the Western Cape province. However, during the hard lockdown, we had to adjust the consent procedure for the telephonic interviews. Initially, we emailed the information sheet and consent form to officers before the interview date, with the aim that they would sign and scan the consent form back to us. However, this method had a low response rate. Consequently, we used a blended approach, using both WhatsApp and REDCap. We sent the consent form via WhatsApp or a REDCap link, which the IOs could access using their phone and sign digitally.

Although REDCap was a powerful data collection tool, it required Wi-Fi to send completed questionnaires to the SAMRC server. However, during the hard lockdown, we had to adjust to working from home and ensure all team members had adequate data and Wi-Fi at home. Another challenge with REDCap was that when we connected using data and not Wi-Fi, we often experienced connection issues, and, as a result, we noticed that we were receiving duplicate cases. This happened because when the

internet bandwidth was not strong enough, REDCap would return a message informing us that the case was not successfully sent to the server, and thus, a duplicate case was uploaded.

Nevertheless, telephonic interviews presented many unforeseen opportunities. For example, they allowed for flexibility in terms of interview times. Most IOs preferred very early mornings for interviews, as they usually went to court or visited mortuaries during the day. The telephonic interviews enabled us to conduct interviews as early as 6:30 a.m.

Another advantage of telephonic interviews was that these interviews were usually shorter compared to face-to-face interviews. This happened for two reasons. Firstly, conference calls were often organised with teams of police sitting together in a meeting room. The advantage of this was that we could explain the study in detail once and did not have to repeat the process for each IO. Secondly, IOs would not deviate as much from the questionnaire to engage in side conversations. However, it is worth noting that side conversations tended to be informative as we developed a great understanding of the intricate processes involved in investigating cases and the role of multiple stakeholders in the country's criminal justice system. Such detailed qualitative accounts have enhanced the understanding of the complexity of how cases are handled by the criminal justice system.

With all the advantages and convenience of telephonic interviews, there were also several disadvantages. For instance, police members conduct their daily work face-to-face and in person, so naturally, they preferred being interviewed in person. When we introduced telephonic interviews, we found that some IOs were hesitant to divulge information over the telephone because of uncertainty related to our identity as the research team, the fact that they had not met us before in person, and the sensitive nature of the data we were collecting. This meant that for some police stations, we had to obtain additional approval from the Provincial Office that stated that the IOs were authorised to telephonically relay the information we needed to complete our data collection questionnaire.

Furthermore, some police stations had poor telecommunications infrastructure, which affected the interview process as the IOs could not be easily reached on the phone. In addition, some of the police stations had electricity problems, which not only affected the telephone lines but also meant that the IOs struggled to locate the dockets as they could not access the Crime Administration System (CAS)—the internal electronic platform that the SAPS uses for information management.

It is worth noting that we dealt with a lot of fluidity, and there was no guarantee that appointments for the day would materialise due to the unpredictability of police tasks. This applied to both telephonic and face-to-face interviews. The nature of SAPS work is that IOs are expected to respond to crime scenes as they occur, which ultimately means they work with unpredictable schedules. Therefore, we often had

interviews cancelled at the last minute, and we always had to be prepared to conduct an interview at short notice.

Face-to-face interviews

As mentioned, once some lockdown restrictions were lifted, we re-introduced collecting data face-to-face. At that point, South Africa was operating under lockdown level 2, and the COVID-19 vaccine was not yet available. Therefore, we were anxious returning to the field, after being confined to our homes for an extended period of time. Despite COVID-19 precautions being in place and the team having adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), the risk of contracting COVID remained, given that police stations are busy public spaces and maintaining social distancing was only sometimes possible. Many police stations have small offices with limited ventilation. Fortunately, we did not contract COVID-19 from visiting stations.

Although face-to-face interviews were more time-consuming because of the travel time involved and, in some instances, the amount of time spent in police stations, they did, however, provide an opportunity to build rapport and maintain relationships with the police, which seemed to happen more naturally when interviews were conducted face-to-face.

We also found that IOs tended to be more prepared and organised when it came to face-to-face interviews. Face-to-face meetings also provided us with a chance to complete partially completed interviews, as the IO was able to review information on the CAS to fill in the gaps from incomplete cases.

Although face-to-face encounters had more benefits, there were also some impediments. It was often physically challenging to get to a police station. For example, the road infrastructure hampered the accessibility of some of the stations, especially those located in rural areas. In addition, load shedding created additional challenges, with CAS being offline and IOs not able to access information.

Dealing with missing or incorrect CAS numbers

Several identified cases at the mortuaries did not have a CAS number allocated or the CAS number recorded from the mortuary did not match the CAS number at the police station. The mismatch of CAS numbers meant we could not identify a criminal case at the police station. When we finalised data collection, we had 220 cases (i.e., 9.1%) of such cases that could not be located at police stations. For example, we would locate the CAS number we found at the mortuary, but this case number matched a case of abandoned stock at a police station. We also learnt that CAS numbers change each time a case is transferred to another station and that it is common for cases to be transferred between stations, especially when a death occurred in one police station's area or jurisdiction, but the injury had happened in a different location.

Thus, the challenge of incorrect and missing CAS numbers was related to a systemic administrative problem in how police and mortuaries record CAS numbers. To resolve the CAS number mismatch, we returned to the mortuaries to validate and check the CAS numbers. However, this strategy did not always resolve the CAS number mismatch problems.

We, therefore, developed multiple strategies to identify a case at the police station. One of the strategies entailed assigning a team member to collect more detailed information on the case from the mortuary files to assist with its identification with the IO. Part of this entailed obtaining identification (ID) numbers and the names of the deceased. However, we could only do this after we submitted an ethics amendment application and received approval to collect ID numbers and victim names. A second strategy involved requesting that stations assist in identifying the correct CAS numbers using the online CAS. The IO and the admin staff used the CAS number, the name and ID number of the deceased, as well as the date of the incident, to identify correct CAS numbers, where possible. However, we had to declare some cases as 'dead end' cases despite our efforts and were, therefore, unable to conduct interviews for such cases. Overall, we were able to resolve most problematic cases, but there was a percentage (15.7%) that contributed to the missing cases that were identified during analysis.

Monitoring and reporting

Since the research team was spread across the country, it was important to share challenges and lessons learned, and good, daily communication was important. Meeting weekly to discuss challenges was critical to troubleshoot together and share strategies for resolving difficulties. During these meetings, cases were escalated to seniors within the team if a team member experienced low levels of cooperation from the police. Lastly, before these meetings, the study coordinator would merge each individual report into a consolidated team report, which was presented and discussed. This tool enabled us to track progress and identify problematic cases for follow-up.

Vicarious trauma

We recognised the potential for vicarious trauma, and therefore, monthly debriefing sessions with a psychologist were organised. This was crucial and beneficial as we often struggled with the nature of the topic and the difficulty of collecting data during the pandemic.

Conclusion

This paper is based on the shared experiences of the research team, particularly the fieldworkers, and provides insight into undertaking research with the SAPS. It provides a guide for researchers, especially those planning to conduct researcher-administered questionnaires with SAPS officials. This paper also provides insight into the complexities and sheds light on the intricacies behind the hierarchical structure of the SAPS. It further mentions ways to improve both face-to-face and telephonic data collection, as well as strategies to reduce missing data. The paper also highlights the need to be flexible and creative in devising strategies to overcome challenges.

Key lessons for researchers:

- Permission letters are a requirement for HREC boards and should be renewed after ethics approval is received to avoid a lengthy lapse between issuing the first permission letter and initiating the research process.
- Sufficient time should be allocated to gaining access. Despite approval letters from Head Office, SAPS officials often also require direct verbal or written communication from line managers.

Recommendations for SAPS officials:

- Remedy the lack of communication between police and mortuary systems so that deaths/bodies can be consistently found across systems.
- Resolve the challenge of incorrect and missing CAS numbers to decrease the number of challenges associated with linking the correct CAS numbers to cases at the mortuaries.
- Consistently update online contact details for police stations.

NOTES:

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