

## Failure to tap the service potential of South African police reservists

Claudia Forster-Towne

Reservists have worked in the South African Police Service (SAPS) for over fifty years, yet little is known about them, and no research has been conducted into how they can be utilised to help in the fight against not only South Africa's high levels of crime but also the prevalence of fear in the country. This policy brief provides seven workable recommendations as to how the services of reservists could be better utilised.

### Introduction

South Africa has long been characterised the world over by its high levels of crime. Unfortunately the recent national crime statistics further reinforce this narrative. Although the overall crime numbers have decreased, it appears that some of the country's most violent crimes are on the rise, including sexual abuse, murder and business robberies.<sup>1</sup>

One concern, as far as analysis of this year's crime statistics is concerned, is that most people (the media and academics alike) seem to have overlooked the possibility that the increase in these numbers could also be attributed to higher levels of reporting such crime. Nonetheless, whether the increase is real or perceived, the perception of such increases feelings of uneasiness and fear among South African residents.

Police performance is thought to have a direct correlation with crime; police are given statistics which they have to reach, and very little attention is actually given to soothing the

fears of communities. In fact, very little attention is given to perceptions in general; these are seen as matters of hearsay. However, people's perspectives and feelings often guide their actions and should be given more weight in policy debates and discussions. One resource which I believe could be used to help soothe the fears of communities is police reservists, who come from within those communities themselves. However, reservists appear to be regarded as an appendage to policing, an add-on, as opposed to a resource that is actively used and engaged with. This is problematic; I believe a real opportunity to curtail fear and increase community confidence is being overlooked.

### Reservists

The exact beginnings of the South African police reserve are unclear, but they appear to have been around since the early 1960s (more specifically and probably 1962). The start of a policing reserve

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**Some of the country's most violent crimes are on the rise**

at this time is not surprising, as South Africa was in a state of emergency and policing resources were primarily being directed toward containing riots and conducting arrests of dissidents. The early 1960s were marked by high-profile arrests (such as that of Nelson Mandela), the banning of both the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) and the death of 69 people in the Sharpeville massacre. As such, police were in need of help to manage the 'normal' crimes and disturbances of communities, and reservists appeared to be the solution.

A reservist, as defined by the South African Police Service (SAPS), is 'a member of the community who performs policing duties or activities for the SAPS on a voluntary basis without being paid for those services'.<sup>2</sup> There are four categories of reservists, the most common being Category A, who wear the same uniform as police officers, are allowed to carry a firearm and who must undergo functional policing training.<sup>3</sup>

In order to be a reservist one must be in possession of a matriculation certificate (grade 12), have employment, be willing to work a minimum of 16 hours per month, be able to converse in English, and be physically fit and able. Reservists work at stations within (or adjacent to) the communities in which they live or work, and do so without remuneration. When on duty, reservists carry out visible policing duties like permanent police officers, which means they go out on patrol and are given the authority to carry out arrests. Alternatively, reservists work within the Community Service Centre (CSC) and deal directly with community complaints.<sup>6</sup> The reasons for reservists' volunteering are complex,<sup>7</sup> but the lack of information on them, their work, and their potential is both an academic and policy oversight.

Owing to the absence of information it is difficult to ascertain what role they play in the SAPS today. The reasons for this are twofold – firstly, no research (qualitative or quantitative) has been done into understanding reservists and the work they do, and secondly, reservists are frequently absorbed into general policing rhetoric, so it is not easy to identify how their role might differ from that of regular police officers. Considering the poor image of the SAPS at present and the increasing calls (both locally and internationally) for more community-orientated policing, it is surprising that more has not been done to understand reservists and their potential in policing. Furthermore, any conversations relating to reservists and their functionality have happened internally in the police and have failed to incorporate communities and their thoughts.<sup>8</sup>

It is unclear how many reservists currently work in South Africa, but it is safe to assume that the number is probably lower than it could be. This is mainly due to the implementation of a moratorium imposed since April 2009,<sup>9</sup> meaning that no new reservists have been recruited since then. Furthermore, existing reservists have not been allowed to move up the ranks and are currently in a state of limbo, feeling uncertain about their positions within the organisation and particularly vulnerable to the idea that the next National Instruction<sup>10</sup> will result in changes to the uniform which will make them distinguishable from permanent members.<sup>11</sup> That said, there are no publicly available national figures on how many reservists South Africa does have, but in Gauteng they make up over 16 per cent of the SAPS.<sup>12</sup> This is a sizeable temporary workforce – one which has not been adequately researched and whose potential, this brief argues, remains untapped.

**Table 1: Types of reservists<sup>4</sup>**

Type of reservist	Function and allowances
A	Carry out the same operational duties as regular members, May wear a uniform, Undergo training about functional policing.
B	Carry out support duties, May not do functional duties, May not wear a uniform, May undergo legal training that pertains to their tasks.
C	Have specific skills or expertise than can be utilised by the SAPS (such as divers, doctors, or pilots), May wear a uniform if their commander permits it.
D <sup>5</sup>	May carry out operational duties in specific sectors, May wear a uniform depending on duties, Trained in aspects of sector or functional policing.

As such, this brief seeks to provide recommendations which will help policy makers and policing practitioners to better utilise the potential of reservists. Reservists could be used not only as additional ‘manpower’<sup>13</sup> but also as a community liaison group (much like Community Policing Forums or CPFs), able to serve as a legitimate link and information carrier between communities and police.

## Background to this policy brief

The research<sup>14</sup> on which these assertions are based was conducted in March/April 2013, at which time I interviewed 23 reservists working in suburban Johannesburg. The interviewees were found using a snowball method and each semi-structured interview ranged from two to four hours in length. I was also given formal approval by the SAPS to conduct ad-hoc observations in two stations (in order to better orientate myself) and to discuss (also informally but with permission) with permanent members their views on reservists.

The sample of interviewees was over-represented by white men, but their feelings were also shared by the other groups interviewed (though more research is needed here). The research focused on issues of difference (such as gender, race, and class) and tried to understand how difference informs who does the work and why. However, beyond the findings which related to issues of identity (which are encompassed in historical and organisational practices which tend to maintain and sustain differential treatment and perspectives), the interviewees also noted that reservists are being sidelined, and that their utilisation as a resource at any given station is largely dependent on the relevant station commander – not on a centralised mandate which hopes to better community relations.

This brief, as such, will not be focusing on the sociological and theoretical dimensions of the research but rather on practical recommendations which provide workable steps toward recognising the potential of reservists in policing, which could in turn help to curtail the prevalence of fear in our society.

## Recommendations

These seven recommendations do not exist in isolation from each other and all require further examination and elaboration. Nonetheless, they provide a starting point from which to discuss

the future of reservists and a better utilisation of their labour.

### *Recommendation 1: Home in on station commanders who value reservists*

A prevalent view expressed by reservists was that they felt undervalued by the SAPS as an organisation and by the permanent members they worked with. This was reiterated time and time again. However, a key player in the happiness of reservists was the station commander. It appeared that reservists who worked for a station commander whom they perceived to be ‘for’ them were generally happier. They tended to feel that they were included in policing operations and not forgotten when their station made orders for provisions (such as clothing).

Good working relations between the head reservists and the station commanders are probably the most important factor when it comes to harnessing the potential of reservist services. Station commanders who are active in communicating with reservists and are clear as to what they expect of them tend to have a pool of reservists who are loyal to the station and willing to do any work that is asked of them. However, reservists who were at stations where they felt that the leadership was indifferent about them, felt unclear what was expected of them and, more importantly, felt undervalued, that their work went unnoticed and that they were sometimes being discouraged from actively participating. This feeling of victimisation also stemmed from being forgotten when provisions were ordered, or not being recognised when work was done well.

### *Recommendation 2: Reward reservists’ behaviour*

As such, the second recommendation concerns rewarding reservists for good work. Merits should not happen in isolation from the rest of the station but should be integrated into the overall image of the station. Care should be taken, however, not to induce competition between reservists and permanent members, as this could create animosity between groups whose relationships are generally already fragile.

Reservists carry out their functions on a voluntary basis, which means they are not remunerated for their services. There have been issues in the past with reservists asking for access to more provisions and payments

**A reservist is ‘a member of the community who performs policing duties on a voluntary basis’**

**Existing reservists have not been allowed to move up the ranks and are currently in a state of limbo**

**A prevalent view expressed by reservists was that they felt undervalued by the SAPS**

and this has caused some internal tensions.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, there are other ways of rewarding good service, the most obvious being rank.

Reservists showed some distress (although nowhere near the same amount that they did about possible changes to the uniform) regarding the fact that they are no longer able to move up SAPS ranks, and will probably remain unable to do so once the next National Instruction is implemented. This is unfortunate, as the possibility of promotion not only helps reservists to operationally organise themselves and understand their position within the organisation, but is also a crucial tool which could be effectively used by the SAPS to promote behaviour it desires from people who want to be there.

Other incentives for reservists could include allowing them some autonomy over provisions they are able to secure from communities (such as sponsored vehicles), but this could also create pressures within stations and would need to be handled in a sensitive and transparent fashion.

Reservists feel that when they perform poorly they are singled out as being reservists, but when they perform well they are regarded as being police. Reservists identify themselves as being police officers (not reservists), but I find the absorption of reservists into general policing rhetoric problematic, as this not only makes their labour invisible but it also makes it difficult to measure the success of any given reserve. Differentiating between reservists and police officers, at least in terms of rhetoric, might make it easier to reward them, but this might further complicate relations between reservists and permanent members.

***Recommendation 3:  
Do more to foster good working relations between permanent members and reservists***

At some stations both reservists and permanent members described the working relationship as good, but the in-depth interviews tended to reveal situations in which relationships were fraught with complications. Some of these tensions stem from ambiguous wording in policies which call for permanent members and reservists to work together. This has been interpreted by some as meaning that every reservist must work in a vehicle with a permanent member, whereas others interpret it as loosely meaning that reservists must report their functioning to a permanent member. The first, making reservists and permanent members work together in the same vehicle, has both practical and social challenges.

Practically, reservists stated that because of their other working commitments they were often not available for entire shifts, which might leave the permanent member without a partner and not on the road for a portion of the shift. Socially, others stated that they had little in common with permanent members and that part of the reason they had chosen to volunteer as reservists was for enjoyment. This complaint is informed by racial, cultural, and class differences, but one should not underestimate perspectives and how they can affect the work environment.

More needs to be done to foster working relationships between permanent members and reservists, but this should not be something that is forced, as this could create uneasiness on both sides. One avenue is to possibly carry out awareness campaigns, both for reservists and permanent members, regarding what training the other group undergoes (or even to create integrated training programmes). One of their biggest concerns about working with each other was that each party did not entirely trust the training of the other and felt that they were putting themselves in danger. This type of anxiety and lack of trust is clearly tied to lack of communication between the two, which is not conducive to helping to create a united service.

***Recommendation 4:  
Do more to understand reservists' anxieties and needs before making policy changes***

Speaking of anxiety, more needs to be done to understand reservists and their fears before the next National Instruction is implemented. Many reservists feel that they have been excluded from the process of drawing up the next National Instruction and also feel that when consulted their concerns have not been given due consideration.

One of the biggest anxieties reservists have is over the possibility of changes to their uniform. At present reservists are identical to regular police officers, but fear that if their uniform is distinguishable they will no longer be able to carry out their duties, as they will be undermined by communities at large. However, what is alarming here is how little the communities actually know about reservists. The call for changes to the uniforms is not necessarily unfounded, but the reasons behind the changes need to be elaborated further and the implications of such changes also need to be understood.

**Station commanders who are active in communicating with reservists tend to have a pool of reservists who are loyal to the station**

Many reservists bluntly stated that if their uniforms were changed they would leave the reserve, despite enjoying the work. This is due to the complexity of emotion and identity that is bound up with the uniform; before a blanket, nationwide policy makes such changes I would suggest a pilot project within a community to first try to gauge what the possible repercussions and outcomes would be.

**Recommendation 5:**  
*Use reservists more to communicate with and foster communities*

As mentioned above, more effort is needed to raise awareness among communities about what a reservist is, and also to find out how reservists may be used to create better relationships between the state and communities. This is possibly the avenue in which reservists hold the most potential. They know the areas they work in intimately and are passionate about the work they do; however, they perform duties identical to those of police officers. This blurring of roles has been flagged by the SAPS and it is hoped that it will be made clearer in the next National Instruction.<sup>16</sup>

While there is nothing inherently wrong with reservists doing the same duties as permanent members, which they enjoy, more could be done to find novel avenues through which they could forge better relationships with community members. Community members have been excluded from conversations about changes to policy regarding reservists, despite communities being seen as the greatest beneficiaries of the reserve. This is an oversight which should be addressed as soon as possible.

**Recommendation 6:**  
*Conduct further research*

That said, reservists' motivations for doing the work are not entirely altruistic. While many, if not most, reservists will state that they are doing the work to protect and help their communities, many others will cite motivations such as fun, opportunities and camaraderie as being their primary reasons for not only joining the reserve but for staying on. More needs to be done to understand not only who joins the reserve, why, and how to retain them, but also how these are informed by broader societal processes and practices.

Despite having been around since the early 1960s, there is no academic material available on South African police reservists. Nevertheless, there are other countries in which auxiliary

policing is used, and carried out with varying degrees of success. While South Africa should be cautious of adopting any blueprint policies or actions, it could be valuable to commission research into other countries or sectors (such as the army) that make use of reserve workers and to document challenges and successes they experience. Most importantly, I would urge policy makers to focus on how the potential labour is tapped into and encouraged. South African police reservists, despite feeling that their positions in the organisation are fragile, continue to do the work because, as many of them stated, they are passionate about it. They have also found a place where they belong and which makes them feel important. The needs and wants of reservists should not be trivialised in this pursuit of trying to understand best practice, but one must also be sensitive to how these have been created through histories of difference.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, the additional research should also consider how the extra skills reservists bring to the police could be harnessed. Many reservists I interviewed had tertiary education and are employed full time, which has equipped them with a range of skills. However, to my surprise (with the exception of C-reservists), little is done to create a space from which permanent members and reservists can learn from each other. The disregard of reservists' additional skills stems largely from poor communication channels.

**Recommendation 7:**  
*Create better communication channels*

Inasmuch as more research needs to be done on who reservists are and why they do their work, practical measures also need to be taken to retain the reservists who currently operate within the SAPS. Reservists' sense of insecurity stems largely from the multiple 'hoops' they believe they are being made to jump through. One of the biggest failings of higher tiers of the SAPS appears to be their inability to effectively communicate with reservists. The moratorium and the anticipation of the new National Instruction provide prime examples of this.

While the moratorium has been in place since April 2009, few reservists are certain as to why it was initiated in the first place. Several theorise that it is due to poor performance by D-reservists, because reservists marched on the Union Buildings asking for better provision, but there are no concrete answers as to why the moratorium was instituted and even less

**More needs to be done to foster working relationships between permanent members and reservists**

**Community members have been excluded from conversations about changes to policy regarding reservists**

**Reservists provide a partial solution to helping to curtail the high levels of fear in the country**

idea of when, or if, reservists can expect it to end. Similarly, reservists appear to be unclear as to when the new National Instruction will be implemented. From what I was told, conversations regarding the document have been going on for some time, but no one was able to provide me with actual time frames and dates when it would be started. There is a definite air of anticipation and when I interviewed reservists in April of 2013 they seemed to be of the opinion that its launch was imminent – yet six months later it remains in the wings and the reasons for the delay were unclear.

### Concluding remarks

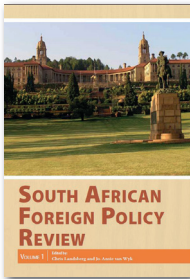
This research aimed to provide a starting point for a discussion about reservists and their place in the policing landscape of South Africa. As they have been around since the 1960s, this conversation is long overdue and is in need of further attention. Reservists are not only a substantial temporary work force but one that is also enthusiastic about policing.

The seven recommendations above, although not detailed, should contribute further to the body of work currently being created about policing in South Africa. I strongly recommend that the potential of reservists not be sidelined, and that more be done to identify how they can be effectively used to contribute to South Africa's strained criminal-justice network in a way that is germane to learning and development. All the time, both researchers and policy makers need to remain sensitive to the unequal and multifaceted landscape these individuals find themselves in, and to be aware that their relationships with others in the SAPS and their reasons for doing the work are likely to be just as complex.

Reservists, I believe, provide a partial solution to helping to curtail the high levels of fear (not necessarily crime) in the country, as they are people who come directly from the communities they are trying to protect and who have a passion for the work. However, the long mismanagement of reservists and the under-utilisation of their skills are troublesome. Even more worrying is the absence of community voices in this discussion – if reservists are to truly ever to help residents, who they are and how they are used need to be given further consideration.

### Notes and references

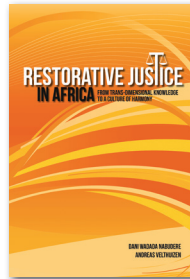
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- 4 Ibid.
- 5 This category of reservist came about prior to the 2010 Soccer World Cup as a means of bolstering policing presence. Many have since converted to A reservists.
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- 8 Forster-Towne, C., 2013. *The uniform fetish: South African police reservists and the possibility of changes to the uniform* (Currently under review).
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- 10 The current National Instruction is National Instruction 1/2002: *The South African Reserve Police Service*. Available at: [http://www.saps.gov.za/comm\\_pol/reservists/downloads/forms/ni1\\_2002ee.pdf](http://www.saps.gov.za/comm_pol/reservists/downloads/forms/ni1_2002ee.pdf) [Accessed 15 January 2013].
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- 12 Forster-Towne, C., 2013. *Informed in and through difference*, op. cit., Appendix 3 (sourced from email correspondence).
- 13 I have used this word knowingly – One of the key findings of my research was the normalisation of male labour in the world of policing.
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- 16 Ibid.
- 17 This has been done to some extent in the Civilian Secretariat for Police, *South African Reserve Police*, op. cit., which outlined experiences from nine other countries and discussed what lessons they hold for South Africa – but more in-depth analysis is needed.



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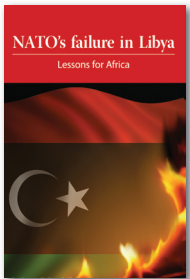
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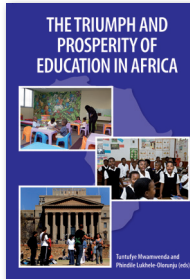
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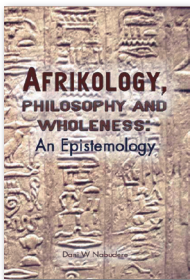
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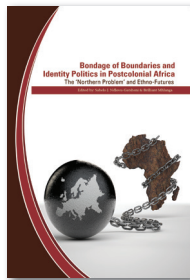
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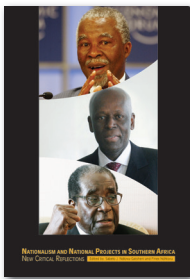
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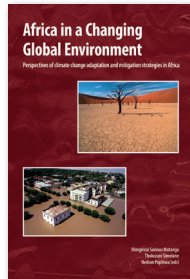
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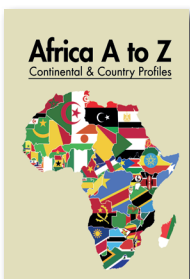
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