



CRIME INTELLIGENCE

in modern policing

As organised crime becomes more complex and deeply rooted, effective crime intelligence has become essential for modern policing. In South Africa, where criminal networks increasingly outsmart traditional law enforcement methods, the need for a professional, politically independent intelligence capability within the SAPS has never been more urgent. Globally, police agencies rely on timely, accurate intelligence to keep communities safe, reduce criminal activity and uphold the rule of law - South Africa should be no different.

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Crime intelligence plays a critical role in South Africa's efforts to combat criminal activity, providing law enforcement has the insight needed to address threats and vulnerabilities effectively. According to the National Strategic Intelligence Act 39 of 1994, crime intelligence is defined as "intelligence used in the prevention of crime or to conduct criminal investigations and to prepare evidence for the purpose of law enforcement and the prosecution of offenders". The Act mandates that the SAPS Intelligence Unit gathers, analyses and coordinates such intelligence in line with the objectives of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.



The SAPS depends on specialised expertise, deep knowledge and strong intelligence-gathering capabilities to tackle criminal threats effectively. Its Crime Intelligence Division operates as a nationwide agency that monitors criminal activity, and the continual flow of accurate and relevant intelligence is crucial to fulfilling the SAPS's constitutional responsibilities. By strategically applying intelligence and investigative resources, police can significantly curb crimes linked to organised syndicates. **Intelligence only exists when information is analysed and transformed into actionable insights. It is the product of a formal analytical process, where raw data is converted into meaningful information that drives investigations and planning**, while non-analysed data should never be mistaken for intelligence (Jacobs, 2022). This view is reinforced by Ratcliffe (2016) who notes that crime intelligence emerges as the final product of

a cycle of collection, analysis and evaluation aimed at preventing crime. In short, crime-related data becomes true intelligence only after undergoing structured analytical methods.

Types of crime intelligence

Crime intelligence cannot be neatly divided into fixed categories, even as police agencies continue to rely on such classifications to guide investigations. However, people continue to identify specific types of crime intelligence, namely, tactical, strategic, operational and evidential intelligence.

Tactical intelligence is widely described as the frontline tool for investigators dealing with immediate crime problems. This intelligence is gathered in a narrow timeframe to address specific threats. Because of its direct relevance to day-to-day police work, law enforcement officials tend to be most comfortable with this form of intelligence. Tactical intelligence is invaluable to investigators because it is rapidly processed and highly actionable. It provides answers to the "who" and "how" of crime, giving information about individuals, groups, associates, contact points and communication methods (Pickett, nd). This type of intelligence can reveal the modus operandi of perpetrators, enabling early countermeasures. Tactical intelligence may be proactive, seeking to prevent crime before it occurs, or reactive, responding to crimes already committed. Ultimately, tactical intelligence is case-specific and short-term, designed to move an investigation quickly towards prosecution. It produces concrete details such as names, addresses and associates that investigators can use immediately (Jacobs, 2022).

Faced with increasing evidence of organised crime, police must rely on increasingly advanced methods to fight crime, but criminals adapt too and sophisticated groups intentionally act to prevent investigators from penetrating their operations. Because many crimes occur in secrecy, investigators must employ special methods, such as undercover work, financial inquiries, interviews and other covert techniques (see more below). Most of these techniques are invasive, but they often uncover information that would otherwise remain hidden. All these techniques must be legal, as unlawfully obtained intelligence is inadmissible in court (Jacobs, 2022).

Strategic intelligence extends beyond addressing immediate threats, supporting long-term planning and informing the assessment of crime trends, patterns and criminal organisations. Its primary aim is to develop a comprehensive, long-range understanding of crime problems. By analysing past and present criminal activity, strategic intelligence helps predict future risks, provide early warnings and guide policy decisions, with particular focus on organised crime and emerging threats. Researchers note that, due to its forward-looking nature, strategic intelligence is mainly used at the management level to shape policies, allocate resources and prevent corruption proactively (Jacobs, 2022). INTERPOL emphasises that strategic intelligence analysis offers a broad evaluation of specific crime threats, trends or criminal behaviour within particular environments, examining the various factors influencing different types of crime to anticipate how they may evolve in the near to mid-term future (INTERPOL, nd).

Evidential intelligence involves gathering information from known evidence to uncover new evidence. It is better understood as an information source rather than a standalone intelligence category (Jacobs, 2022).

Operational intelligence focusses on large-scale criminal activity over extended periods, providing deeper insights into criminal behaviour and supporting the development of cases for arrest or charges (Jacobs, 2022).

Unlike tactical intelligence, which targets individual cases, operational intelligence is proactive and strategic, identifying trends, series and patterns to generate investigative leads and inform broader crime reduction strategies. It guides decision-makers in allocating staff and resources effectively, making it a critical tool for law enforcement agencies (INTERPOL, nd). According to INTERPOL (nd), operational intelligence analysis specifically seeks to achieve outcomes such as arrests, seizures, asset forfeitures or the disruption of criminal enterprises, while identifying links between suspects, clarifying the roles of persons of interest, generating investigative leads and highlighting information gaps.

Covert intelligence gathering

When the public imagines crime intelligence, images often emerge of mysterious operatives and high-tech interception devices. Signal interception, trawling through e-mails or cellphone records to place people at a specific time and location, undercover agents, whistleblowers, media leaks and the forensic mining of financial statements or use of social media software tools, tend to dominate the imagination regarding intelligence (Jacobs, 2022). But covert information collection is far broader, involving investigations conducted entirely "behind the scenes", with secrecy as the primary objective (Tier, 2017). Covert collection focusses on planned criminal acts that have not yet happened, for which investigators must prepare. Four key techniques are identified: physical surveillance, electronic surveillance, informants and undercover officials. Financial information also forms part of this largely hidden world (Bila, 2015).

Physical surveillance remains a cornerstone of fighting crime. It is the covert observation of people to gather critical intelligence as well as the collection and analysis of personal information to regulate or control criminal behaviour. Surveillance is powerful, but clearly defined objectives, proper briefing of team members and an organised mechanism for capturing information are indispensable. Surveillance can also be slow, labour-intensive and expensive. Physical surveillance includes:

- **Static surveillance** from fixed positions, where investigators usually work in pairs or teams. The term "stakeout" typically comes to mind. This type of surveillance is sometimes aimed at catching suspects in the act. Reasons for such operations include identifying associates, confirming information from informants, tracing suspects and protecting undercover operatives (Jacobs, 2022).
- **Mobile surveillance** is far more fluid and far riskier as career criminals are quick to spot when they are followed (Dutelle and Becker, 2019). A team-based approach is recommended with solid communication and coordination.

When it comes to physical surveillance, a former police investigator told **Servamus** a couple of years ago that it is crucial to blend in with the surroundings when conducting such observations. "Both the vehicle and the personnel must integrate seamlessly into the environment without attracting attention," he explained. To achieve this, law enforcement should consider using vehicles that are not immediately recognisable as police cars, such as plain white sedans but consider using vehicles that would blend more in with the neighbourhood. Physical surveillance is an effective tool for investigating criminal activity and gathering evidence, and it remains one of the most commonly employed techniques for securing arrests and convictions (Geldenhuys, 2021).

Electronic surveillance is widely regarded as a crucial investigative tool, often essential for uncovering deeply hidden corrupt networks (Jacobs, 2022). In South Africa, the Regulation of Interception of Communications and

Provision of Communication-related Information Act 70 of 2002 (RICA), which came into effect on 30 September 2005, governs the legal interception of communications during investigations into serious crimes. When an investigation is conducted under RICA with a judge-approved interception direction, the information is admissible in court, provided strict compliance with procedural requirements and section 14 of the Constitution, which safeguards the right to privacy. Once authorised, telecommunications service providers transmit intercepted data to law enforcement interception centres, where it is transcribed and analysed for intelligence, evidence or prosecution purposes (Chetty, 2019). Transcriptions in languages other than English must be carried out by certified transcription companies, not police officials (Geldenhuys, 2021). Complementing RICA, the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPI) regulates the collection, processing and storage of personal data, including CCTV recordings, by both public and private institutions. Section 33 of POPI permits the police and metropolitan police departments to process personal information for public law duties, such as crime prevention and investigation, while emphasising that surveillance must be proportionate, necessary and limited to areas relevant to their responsibilities (Jacobsberg, Schepers and Novazi, 2020).

Some types of electronic surveillance include:

- **Wiretapping**, despite being well-known to criminals, is effective as cautious suspects do not necessarily render it useless. Wiretapping relates to the interception of communication contents. In South Africa, law enforcement or intelligence agencies must obtain a court order, called an "interception direction," from a specially designated judge under the Regulation of Interception of Communications and Provision of Communication-Related Information Act (RICA) before they can legally intercept communications (wiretap) (Vermeulen, 2021).
- **Pen registers and trap-and-trace devices** offer a less intrusive alternative. These tools track incoming and outgoing numbers but not message content. Frequent calls between individuals implicated in corruption or other crime types can help investigators map relationships (Jacobs, 2022).
- **CCTV** systems, widely deployed these days, offer yet another layer. Although there are privacy concerns, raw footage, once correlated with other reports, becomes actionable intelligence. Still, investigators must act quickly as most systems overwrite old footage (Jacobs, 2022).
- **Bugging** refers to the practice of placing a small electronic device on a person or in a strategic location to enable eavesdropping on their conversations and to record or copy them in real-time (Chetty, 2019).

Infiltration of criminal networks is sometimes the only way to gather inside information. Joubert (2018) explains that infiltrating a criminal enterprise without detection can be essential. Building trust or "roping" is central to gaining access to information. Jacobs (2022) mentions two infiltration techniques that dominate:

■ **Informants** have long played a crucial role in policing, offering vital intelligence, assisting with the information required to apply for search warrants and to support telephonic intercept applications (Fitzgerald, 2015). They are particularly valuable for identifying criminals (Joubert, 2018) and providing information to the SAPS about illegal activities in exchange for remuneration. A key aspect of their usefulness is their anonymity, which is rigorously protected to shield them from potential retribution. However, informants should not be confused with undercover agents, whose roles and responsibilities differ significantly (Dintwe and Zinn, 2015).

■ **Undercover operations** allow investigators to penetrate criminal networks more deeply than any other method, but they carry significant risks and costs. According to AmaShabalala (2025), budgets for such operations cover expenditures including safe houses, training and travel for undercover agents, remuneration of human sources and resources necessary for agents' day-to-day operations, such as vehicles and communication devices. Typically, undercover agents are police officials who assume false identities to infiltrate crime syndicates and gather intelligence. These operations are tightly regulated under section 252A of the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 (Zinn and Dintwe, 2015). During the 2023/2024 financial year, the SAPS Crime Intelligence Division (SAPS-CI) registered 82 undercover operations aimed at combating organised crime carried out by syndicates and criminal groups (AmaShabalala, 2025).

Financial intelligence can uncover details that conversations often cannot, but access is tightly controlled and typically requires a court order. Banks release such information only upon the issuance of a subpoena in terms of section 205 of the Criminal Procedure Act (CPA) 51 of 1977. Beyond the banking sector, the Financial Intelligence Centre (FIC), established under the Financial Intelligence Centre Act (FICA) 38 of 2001, plays a key role in tracing illicit proceeds. At the Transnational Organised Crime Conference hosted by Pinpoint Stewards in November 2025, it was clear that the FIC's capacity to compile financial profiles of potential criminal actors remains underutilised.

With **overt techniques**, collecting intelligence happens in plain sight, including interviews with witnesses, victims and suspects (Bila, 2018). But interviews require planning and must be conducted professionally. This technique is valuable in revealing details of crimes, timelines and roles. Investigators must also observe constitutional protections, including the right to silence and legal representation (Jacobs, 2022).



Intelligence professionals must follow a clear principle: start with the least intrusive methods and escalate only when necessary. These methods include interviews, document analysis, psychological profiling and social media checks. If these fail to address investigative hypotheses, more intrusive options such as interrogation, signal interception, e-mail monitoring, full surveillance and/or infiltration may be authorised by a court (Jacobs, 2022).

Intelligence collecting platforms

Jacobs (2022) recognises the following information collection platforms:

■ **Human intelligence** continues to be regarded as the most valuable asset in the intelligence community, often referred to as its "crown jewels". As the oldest and frequently most effective method of gathering information, it depends on direct interpersonal interactions. These can involve professional spies, couriers, access agents and case officials who recruit and manage informants. Depending on operational requirements,

data may be collected overtly, such as through interviews with witnesses or suspects, or covertly (Fitzgerald, 2015). By offering critical insights into the behaviour and operations of criminal networks, human intelligence enables law enforcement to intervene before crimes are committed (Iglesias, 2025).

- **Signals intelligence** is another critical component of modern intelligence work, involving the interception of communications, whether between people or transmitted electronically (Jacobs, 2022). According to Iglesias (2025), this includes the monitoring and analysis of phone calls, e-mails and social media messages. Law enforcement agencies employ sophisticated technologies to track and decode these communications, helping to uncover potential criminal activities and plans.
- **Imagery intelligence** has evolved dramatically and includes the study of satellite photographs, videos and other visual material (Fitzgerald, 2015). Law enforcement agencies increasingly deploy drones, helicopters and other aircraft equipped with advanced imaging systems (Jacobs, 2022).
- **Geospatial intelligence** uses geographic information - such as surveillance footage, GPS tracking and crime mapping - to pinpoint areas of concern. This approach enables law enforcement to predict potential crime hotspots and allocate resources more effectively (Iglesias, 2025).
- **Measurement and signatures intelligence** is an emerging and increasingly sophisticated field. This involves analysing unique signatures, such as emissions from motors, generators or radar systems, to supplement imagery intelligence data (Jacobs, 2022).
- **Open-source intelligence** provides distinctive advantages, mainly in terms of its ability to be collected without geographic or temporal limits. Drawn from publicly available sources, including news media, the Internet, industry and technical documents, and organisational publications, it can be gathered at any time without the need for legal warrants or covert operations. Investigators, however, need to be cautious about its reliability (Jacobs, 2022). Iglesias (2025) agrees that publicly accessible data, such as social media posts, news reports and online platforms, can offer valuable insights enabling law enforcement to monitor criminal activity in real time and anticipate emerging threats.

Using intelligence

Growing pressure on law enforcement agencies to stop crime before it happens is reshaping how intelligence is used in modern policing. These days, police are expected to prevent criminal activity and, when prevention fails, to quickly track down offenders and hold them accountable (Jacobs, 2022).

Against this backdrop, intelligence-led policing has emerged as a central strategy for effective law enforcement. **Unlike traditional reactive policing, which responds after crimes occur, intelligence-led policing is a proactive approach that gathers and analyses information about criminal activities, patterns and suspects.** By leveraging intelligence, police can target criminal networks, anticipate emerging crime trends and deploy resources more efficiently (Iglesias, 2025). **Intelligence-led policing relies on real-time intelligence to guide operations, making it a dynamic tool for both tactical responses on the ground and broader strategic decision-making.** Jacobs (2022) describes it as an "information-organising process" that helps agencies better understand crime problems and make informed decisions about how to address them.

Data analysis is at the heart of intelligence-led policing. Analysts examine patterns and trends in the information collected to uncover links between crimes, suspects and locations. As an example, analysing reported burglaries might reveal a specific time of day, neighbourhood or method favoured by

offenders. This intelligence allows officials to focus patrols and surveillance in high-risk areas and anticipate future criminal activity, enabling more effective crime prevention and resource allocation (Iglesias, 2025). As criminal threats evolve, intelligence-led policing is increasingly seen as a crucial tool for law enforcement agencies striving to stay one step ahead (Jacobs, 2022). An example that comes to mind happened towards the end of 2025, following an increase in the theft of gate motors in some neighbourhoods in the east of Pretoria. The information about this crime trend was brought to the attention of the community through news reports and community message groups, including the typical time when these thefts happened and how homeowners could mitigate the risk of falling victim to this crime type (Mokoena, 2025).

Political interference in crime intelligence

The SAPS's ability to tackle organised crime hinges on effective crime intelligence, but unfortunately, several challenges hamper proper crime intelligence. This includes the fact that, for years, political interference has repeatedly undermined operations. A high-profile example involved the former Divisional Commissioner of Crime Intelligence, Lt-Gen Richard Mdluli, who faces criminal charges including murder and corruption. Mdluli was irregularly appointed to the position two months after Jacob Zuma became the President of South Africa, amid allegations that he provided Zuma's legal team with the controversial "spy tapes". These tapes were subsequently used by then-acting National Director of Public Prosecutions Adv Mokotedi Mpshe to withdraw 783 charges of corruption, fraud, money laundering and racketeering against Zuma, clearing the way for his presidency. Despite being suspended on full pay for many years since 2012, disciplinary processes failed to have Mdluli removed, reportedly due to interference from the late former Minister of Police, Mr Nathi Mthethwa, who allegedly instructed the then acting National Commissioner, Lt-Gen Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi to halt investigations and disciplinary action. Mdluli's suspension was only enforced following a court order (Newham, 2016).

Concerns over this Division resurfaced at a Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Police hearing on 5 March 2025, convened to address persistent instability, corruption and operational shortcomings within SAPS Crime Intelligence. The meeting was attended by the (now suspended) Minister of Police, Mr Senzo Mchunu; the National Commissioner of the SAPS, Gen Fannie Masemola and senior SAPS officials. During the hearing, lawmakers raised the alarm over internal leaks, leadership turmoil and mismanagement of resources that have long plagued the division. While SAPS officials sought to assure the Committee that intelligence operations remained functional, members highlighted repeated leadership changes, politically motivated misuse of intelligence and failures to prevent violent crime and unrest.

The Committee stressed that stable leadership and strategic oversight are essential to ensure intelligence services are proactive rather than reactive. Officials referenced past State Capture investigations and the July 2021 riots, which exposed

severe intelligence lapses. Reports concluded that Crime Intelligence had been unable to anticipate, prevent or disrupt the deadly unrest, revealing gaps in the country's security framework. Although Gen Masemola downplayed concerns, insisting the Division has contributed to recent successful operations, lawmakers highlighted that frequent reshuffling of top officials and slow reforms continue to undermine long-term stability. The Committee also examined allegations of corruption and politicisation within Crime Intelligence, including repeated accusations of the misuse of State resources for political purposes and internal factionalism compromising operations. A key concern was the mismanagement of secret funds, which the State Capture Commission previously found had been misappropriated for personal gain. Committee members questioned whether sufficient safeguards have been implemented, noting that stronger controls were only recently introduced (Teixeira, 2025).

Collaboration between agencies

Despite numerous challenges, the SAPS cannot operate in isolation. Effective crime-fighting often relies on coordinated efforts, with intelligence-sharing between local, provincial and national agencies, units and departments providing a more comprehensive understanding of criminal activity. Information gathered by one agency can inform the strategies of others, helping to map broader criminal networks. This cooperative approach extends internationally, with agencies such as INTERPOL playing a key role in addressing transnational crimes such as human trafficking, terrorism and drug smuggling through cross-border intelligence-sharing (Iglesias, 2025).

The success stories

Despite ongoing efforts, the SAPS has faced challenges in dismantling organised criminal syndicates, raising concerns over whether intelligence operations are effectively targeting high-level criminals. Critics argue that delays in providing actionable intelligence and responding to emerging threats have eroded the credibility of the SAPS's Crime Intelligence Division. **Lawmakers warn that without a strong, independent and well-resourced Crime Intelligence Division, South Africa remains vulnerable to criminal networks, political violence and civil unrest** (Teixeira, 2025).

However, recent operations indicate that SAPS's Crime Intelligence Division is achieving some tangible successes, particularly in disrupting drug trafficking syndicates. One such example happened in June 2025 at OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg. With intensified intelligence-led interventions to combat international drug smuggling, in one week alone, the SAPS managed to make three high-profile arrests involving international couriers carrying large quantities of drugs. On 5 June 2025, a 42-year-old Nigerian national travelling from São Paulo, Brazil, was apprehended after a medical X-ray revealed he had ingested more than 70 pellets of suspected cocaine. Five days later, a 30-year-old Brazilian

woman, also arriving from São Paulo, was intercepted after swallowing more than 100 cocaine capsules. Later that day, a 57-year-old Ethiopian man was arrested with more than 90 kg of khat in his luggage. "These arrests are not isolated incidents but part of a broader intelligence-driven strategy prioritising medical screening, surveillance profiling and operational sweeps at key transit points," the SAPS stated. Between January and June 2025, at least 23 drug traffickers were arrested at OR Tambo International Airport, reflecting a strategic focus on disrupting international cartels exploiting South Africa as both a transit and consumer market (Chimoio, 2025).

In Gauteng, the SAPS Anti-kidnapping Task Team struck a significant blow against an illegal firearms syndicate on 28 July 2025, during a coordinated intelligence-led operation in Meyersdal, Johannesburg. The involvement of the SAPS Crime Intelligence, the Gauteng Provincial Investigating Unit, Johannesburg K9 Unit, Johannesburg Metro Police Department and private security companies led to the arrest of two suspects. They were found with 30 unlicensed 9 mm firearms, destined for the Western Cape. Investigations linked the pair to multiple criminal cases across Gauteng and the Western Cape - they now face charges relating to the illegal possession and trafficking of firearms (SA News, 2025).

Similarly, intelligence-led operations in the Eastern Cape led to arrests focussing on financial crimes and immigration violations. On 30 July 2025, the SAPS executed a search warrant at a residence following intelligence about suspected criminal activity by foreign nationals. A male suspect was arrested for contravening the Immigration Act after a large sum of cash, suspected to be the proceeds of crime, was discovered. Authorities are investigating potential violations of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act 21 of 1998 related to money laundering (SAPS, 2025a).

SAPS operations continue to target organised crime across the country. On 8 December 2025, a crime intelligence operation in Gauteng's West Rand prevented a CIT armed robbery, arresting six suspects and seizing firearms and vehicles. On the same day, a drug laboratory in Tembisa, Makapanstad, resulted in the discovery of drugs and equipment valued at more than R100 million. This clandestine laboratory was shut down because of another intelligence-driven raid and six suspects were arrested (SAPS, 2025b).

These coordinated operations demonstrate that while the SAPS's Crime Intelligence Division has faced many challenges and often justified criticism, targeted, intelligence-driven strategies are producing measurable results in combating the trafficking of drugs and illegal firearms and other organised criminal activities. More must be done, but these are steps in the right direction.



Intelligence is the frontline weapon in the battle against organised crime. Despite political interference and resource challenges, the SAPS's Crime Intelligence has shown it can strike hard and smart, from catching drug traffickers at OR Tambo to dismantling illegal firearms syndicates in Gauteng - when they focus on the work they are mandated to carry out. The message is clear: stable leadership, political independence and effective intelligence are not optional; they are essential. When intelligence is used appropriately, crime can be prevented and South Africa can be safer, one operation at a time.

Editor's note

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