

COVID-19 AND DEFENCE FORCE ATTITUDES

Two-fifths (40%) of the surveying was done prior to the national COVID-19 lockdown introduced on 27 March 2020, with the balance completed between November 2020 and February 2021. This allows for testing whether attitudes to the SANDF differed before and after the lockdown. The results show that the public became more critical on most of the survey indicators examined, including awareness, pride, trust, performance evaluations, and transformation attitudes. The largest impacts were on SANDF performance ratings (professionalism, discipline, effectiveness, fairness and overall performance).

CONCLUSION

The 2020/21 survey of public attitudes towards the Defence Force has provided a sense of sustained public confidence vested in the institution, despite moderate signs of decline since 2017. Results show support for expanded defence roles in line with the 2015 Defence Review, and public recognition that the progressive transformation agenda has been successful.

The analysis suggests that the observed downward trend in pride, trust and performance ratings relative to previous surveys is partly attributable to changing public perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. This may reflect views on the deployment of the SANDF to assist the police in enforcing lockdown regulations, and contact with the SANDF during 2020. This points to sensitivities about SANDF involvement in civic affairs.

Knowledge of, and exposure to, the SANDF emerge as factors associated with positive overall evaluations. Yet, knowledge of, and direct exposure to, the Defence Force are circumscribed. There remains scope for improvement in civic engagement and outreach to address this.

It remains important to regularly monitor public perceptions of the SANDF to discern ongoing patterns of change in defence-related attitudes, behaviour and preferences.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

In 2020/21, the Department of Defence (DOD) commissioned a survey, with the main aim of profiling general attitudes towards the SANDF. More specifically, it focused on assessing public awareness of the SANDF, probing the expected roles of the SANDF, evaluating performance, examining perceptions of transformation, and establishing overall levels confidence, trust and pride in the SANDF. This was the third survey in the series, with previous rounds being undertaken in 2014 and 2017.

These surveys are nationally representative, cross-sectional samples of the South African adult public. They were conducted as a partnership between the Department of Defence (DOD) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), using the HSRC's South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) research infrastructure.

The survey involved face-to-face interviewing with individuals aged 16 and older living in households that were geographically spread across the country. The data are weighted and benchmarked to the latest available mid-year population estimates published by Stats SA to ensure that the results are representative of the adult public.

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ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL DEFENCE FORCE (SANDF)

2014 - 2020



defence

Department:
Defence
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

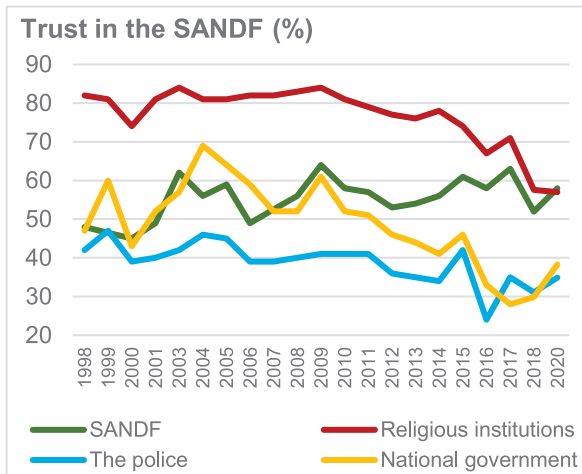
KEY FINDINGS

Awareness of the SANDF

In 2020/21, 53% of South Africans said they were 'very' or 'somewhat' knowledgeable about the SANDF. By contrast, 25% reported being 'not very knowledgeable' and 19% 'not knowledgeable at all' about the SANDF. Slightly less than a third (30%) could correctly identify all branches of the SANDF. This is similar to 2017 (28%) but higher than in 2014 (21%). The SANDF invests significantly in public outreach, and levels of awareness appear to be improving over time. There is however scope for further efforts in promoting public knowledge of the SANDF.

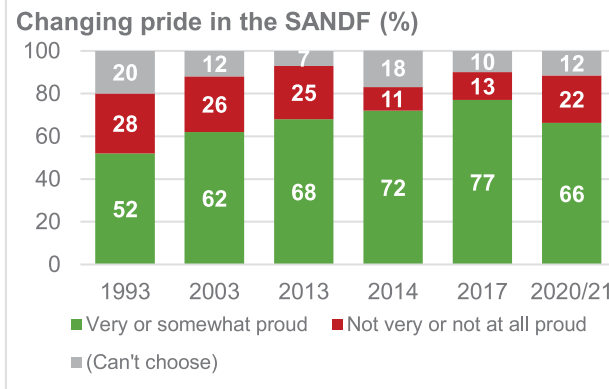
Overall confidence and pride in the Defence Force

While trust in the SANDF has fluctuated since the late 1990s, it has displayed a gradually improving trend over time. By 2017, almost two thirds (63%) of South Africans trusted the SANDF. This dipped to 52% in 2018 but rose again to 58% by 2020/2.



Compared to trust in other political and social institutions, the SANDF fares well. While trust in political institutions such as national government and Parliament declined dramatically during the 2010s, trust in the SANDF increased. The SANDF is also rated more favourably than the police. It remains one of the top-rated institutions alongside religious institutions and the national broadcaster (SABC).

Pride in the SANDF has also risen steadily since the transition to democracy. The share of the public reporting that they were 'very' or 'somewhat' proud rose from 52% in 1993 to a high of 77% in 2017. In 2020/21, the share decreased to 66%. This decline occurred mostly after the hard lockdown in March 2020.



Perceived roles of the SANDF in a democratic society

In line with the 2015 Defence Review, the survey included questions on the roles that the public regarded as most important for the SANDF to perform. The results show that South Africans generally prioritise conventional Defence Force roles, as well as domestic rather than international interests. In 2014 and 2017, the roles deemed most important by the public were 'defending and protecting South Africa', 'safeguarding and patrolling the country's borders' and 'helping other government departments in times of disaster or emergency'. Approximately two-thirds considered these roles 'very important'. Lower levels of importance were attached to certain expanded roles, such as developmental tasks, but there was support for these playing a key secondary role.

In 2020/21, 'assisting the police uphold law and order in the country' was top ranked, followed by 'helping other government departments in times of disaster or emergency' and 'safeguarding and patrolling the country's borders'. The increased priority on maintaining law and order and assisting with disaster management is likely a reflection of shifting priorities due to the COVID-19 emergency response.

Perceived performance

As for performance, 57% of the public believed the SANDF were doing a good job relative to their expected

roles. Only 10% felt the SANDF was performing badly, while 25% were neutral and 9% uncertain. This represents a decline of 15 percentage points in 'good job' evaluations compared with 2017 (74%), due to an increase in neutral and negative responses. Majority shares regarded the SANDF as professional (56%), disciplined (52%), effective (52%) and procedurally fair (44%). While these assessments are consistently positive, each fell by at least 10 percentage points since 2017.

Transformation and diversity

The White Paper on Defence (1996) guides the transformation of the SANDF and promises to foster a non-racial, non-sexist and non-discriminatory institutional culture. It is therefore encouraging that, in 2020/21, a sizeable majority (63%) agreed that the SANDF is representative of all South Africans, while 75% believed that transformation is progressing well.

Perceptions about women in the SANDF have become progressively more positive over time. In 1995, only 36% agreed that women should do combat duty, while 38% favoured special attempts to recruit more women into the military. By 2020/21, the equivalent figures had risen to 47% and 58% respectively. The share agreeing that women can perform as well as men in all areas of the military stood at 58% in 2020/21. Gender differences are presented in the chart below.

