

POLICY BRIEF

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AUGUST 2025



The 'silent witness': understanding the reluctance to report corruption in South Africa

Executive summary

Several reports from anti-corruption organisations, widespread media coverage on the struggles faced by whistleblowers and evidence from the Zondo Commission suggest that there is broad reluctance among South African citizens to report corruption. This phenomenon of the 'silent witness' is examined in relation to the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) 2020–2030, which aims to foster transparency and public accountability in the country. A strategic objective of the NACS is to "cultivate and foster a culture of reporting in which citizens understand the negative impact of corruption and where individuals are empowered to report any devious or corrupt activities they become aware of."¹ Data from the 2023 round of the Human Sciences Research Council's (HSRC) South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) was used to analyse public willingness to report corruption. It shows that only about half the adult population expressed an intention to alert authorities if they encountered corrupt practices. What accounts for this reluctance? The aim of this policy brief is to examine the barriers to corruption reporting, and to provide actionable suggestions that can help encourage people to report corruption.

Context and background

The development of the NACS began in 2015 and consisted of a multi-stakeholder process that included representatives from government, civil society and the private sector.

Through a series of deliberations, stakeholders recognised that citizen participation is essential to uncovering corruption in the private and public sectors. In their view, a justice system that is committed to integrity and clean governance is a system that encourages and responds to citizen reports of corruption.² With more people actively reporting corruption, a culture of integrity and accountability becomes the societal standard. As a result of the multi-stakeholder process, the NACS adopted empowering citizens to report corruption as one of its core strategic goals.

To empower citizens to report corruption to the authorities, the South African government has implemented various reporting mechanisms (e.g., hotlines and online platforms). Reports are conveyed to law enforcement agencies (including dedicated anti-corruption institutions such as the Special Investigating Unit, the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation and the Public Protector) which then use that information to investigate and, where appropriate, prosecute corruption cases. The questions are, how do we create an enabling system? How best can we encourage people to utilise these and other reporting structures to fight corruption? Answering these questions is difficult. Not much is known about why people do not report corruption in South Africa. Most of the current discourse on this issue is dominated by unscientific speculation, anecdotal accounts and informed guesswork. The present study is intended to help cut through this conjecture and provide a clear description and analysis of the problem that can help identify opportunities to bolster an enabling system.

Methodology and approach

By its design, the SASAS is a nationally representative, and annually repeated cross-sectional survey. The sample is restricted to adults aged 16 and above residing in private households. The sample size in 2023 was 3,112 with interviews conducted between mid-October and mid-December in 2023. SASAS is specifically designed to support policymakers by offering a unique and detailed perspective on the nature of prevailing attitudes and behavioural norms in contemporary South Africa. This unique survey allows for an in-depth examination of trends driving public willingness to report that they have witnessed corruption. The survey is a central component of a multi-year study being undertaken by the HSRC in partnership with GIZ entitled '[Tracking Anti-Corruption Social Norms and Behaviour Change in South Africa](#)'.

Results and conclusions

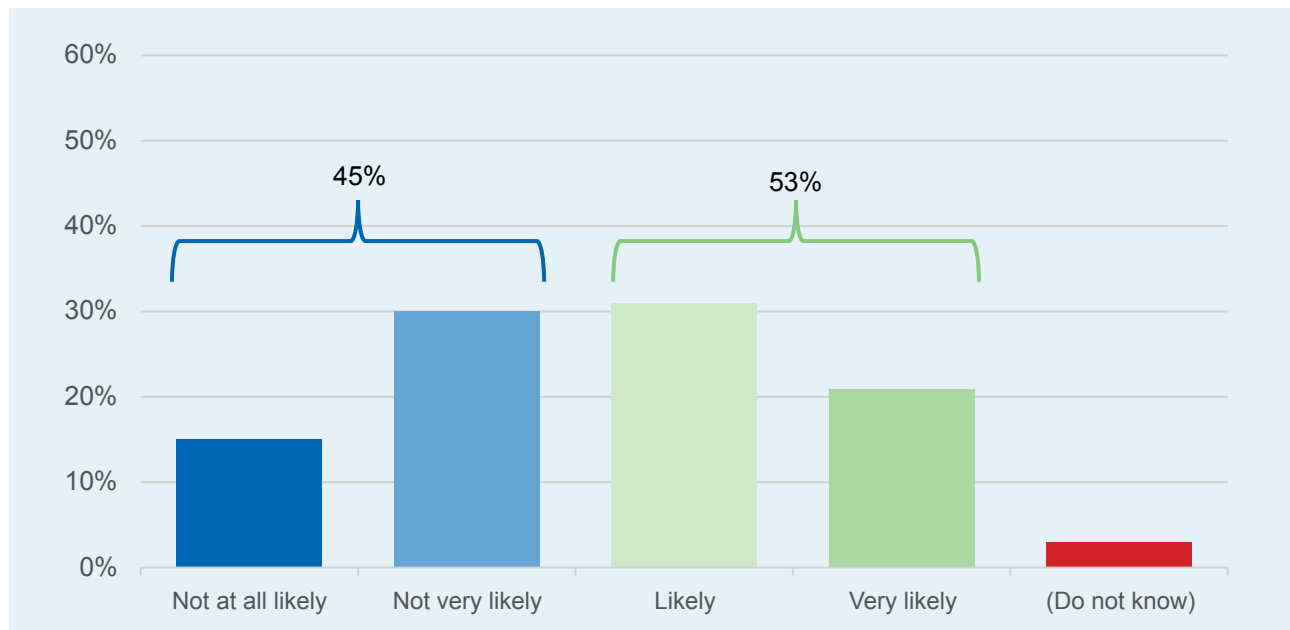
Reluctance to report corrupt practices

Survey participants were requested to indicate whether, if they experienced or witnessed corrupt behaviour, they would report it. There was significant polarisation in how the general public answered this question (Figure 1). About half said that they would not report, with 30% stating that it was not likely and 15% that it was not at all likely. A similar proportion told fieldworkers that they would report corruption if they experienced or witnessed it. More than a fifth (21%) said that it was very likely that they would report, while 31% stated that it was just likely. The remainder (3%) were uncertain and did not answer the question (Figure 1).

We examined how the reporting intention question was answered by a diverse set of geographic and socio-economic groups. Rural dwellers showed a lower willingness to report than their urban

peers. We also found that the propensity to report corruption differed considerably by province of residence. When compared to other provinces, residents of Mpumalanga and Limpopo had the lowest propensity to report. There was also a dissimilarity in how different labour market groups answered the report intention question. The self-employed demonstrate a lower willingness to report than waged employees or non-workers. Supplementary data analysis revealed that reporting intention differed substantially by economic stratum. The economically advantaged were more likely than their less affluent peers to state that they would report corruption if they witnessed or experienced it.

Figure 1: Public responses to the question: “If you experienced or witnessed corrupt behaviour, how likely is it that you would report it?”



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2023

Table 1: Main lay beliefs on why many people do not report corruption in South Africa (multiple response), 2023

		%		95% Conf. Interval	
Psychological Factors	Corruption is normalised	27	(1,376)	25	30
	People don't know where to report it	23	(1,251)	21	26
	No one wants to betray anyone	21	(1,296)	19	24
Environmental Factors	Those responsible will not be punished	51	(1,584)	48	54
	There is no protection for those who report corruption	49	(1,578)	46	52
	The officials they would report to are also corrupt	30	(1,438)	27	33
	It is not worth the effort of reporting it	28	(1,415)	25	30
Other Responses	Other reason	2	(0,476)	1	3
	Refused	3	(0,586)	2	4

Note: Linearised standard errors in parenthesis.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2023 Lay beliefs about the reluctance to report

Lay beliefs about the reluctance to report

We asked members of the public why there is so much reluctance to report witnessed corruption in South Africa. The opinions of ordinary ('lay') people can be an important source of information here. Unpacking non-expert attitudes towards this problem can shed light on the complex interplay of societal, institutional, and psychological barriers that surround it (Hewstone, 1989). By uncovering these lay beliefs, we can start to develop a better appreciation of the root drivers (i.e., social norms) of the problem (also see Sahar, 2014). To capture non-expert views on this issue, SASAS participants were requested to provide a rationale for why many people in South Africa do not report corruption.³ A wide variety of different options were read out to respondents and multiple options could be selected. Public responses to this question are provided in **Table 1**.

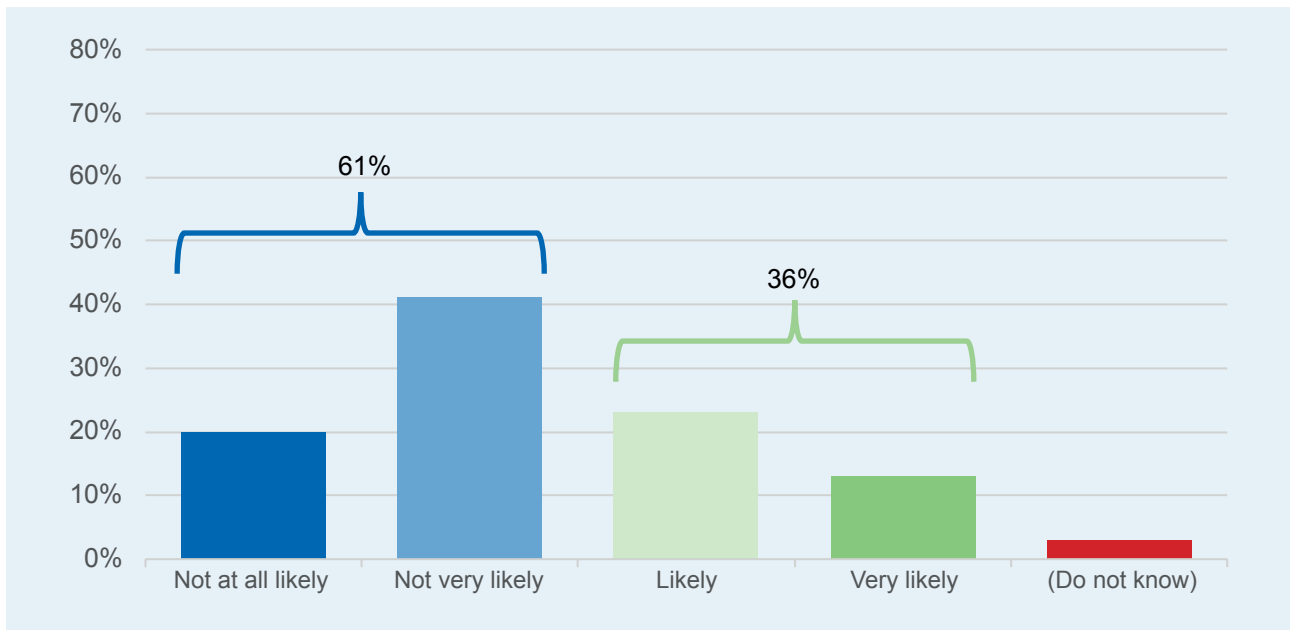
Reviewing all the responses provided in **Table 1**, the most common involved environmental (i.e., external) factors. Nearly nine-tenths (86%; SE=0.010) of the general public identified factors related to the law enforcement system. Of the four different external factors listed, lack of punishment (i.e., accountability) for the guilty was the most common (51%; SE=1.584), and this was followed closely by a lack of protection for those reporting corruption (49%; SE=1.578). In addition, we found that 30% (SE=1.415) of the public stated that the reporting structures themselves were corrupt. Slightly more than half (55%) of the population listed psychological (i.e., internal) factors as drivers of non-reporting. The most common internal factor selected was the normalisation of corruption, with 27% (SE=1.376) stating that no one reports because corruption is believed to be normal and everyone does it.

Barriers to reporting corruption?

Building on the data analysis provided above, we now look at the following pivotal question: What are the key determinants influencing the inclination to report witnessed corruption? To provide a satisfactory answer to this question, we used advanced statistical algorithms to identify major drivers of reporting intention. This required us to look at related attitudes to accountability and retaliation. Major drivers of reporting intention are discussed below.

Perceived ineffectiveness of reporting structures. SASAS participants were asked: "How likely is it that action would be taken if you went to a government office or the police to report corrupt behaviour?" Answers to this question show that a significant proportion of the general public do not think that these anti-corruption reporting structures in South Africa are responsive to their needs (Figure 2). We tested the thesis that the perceived effectiveness of reporting structures was a significant determinant of intention to report corruption. We found that attitudes towards reporting structures had a large and positive effect on reporting intention. In other words, when people think that reporting mechanisms are responsive to their needs, they are more likely to adopt a moral obligation to report. Notably, of all the determinants examined in our analysis, attitudes to reporting structures had the most powerful influence on reporting intention.

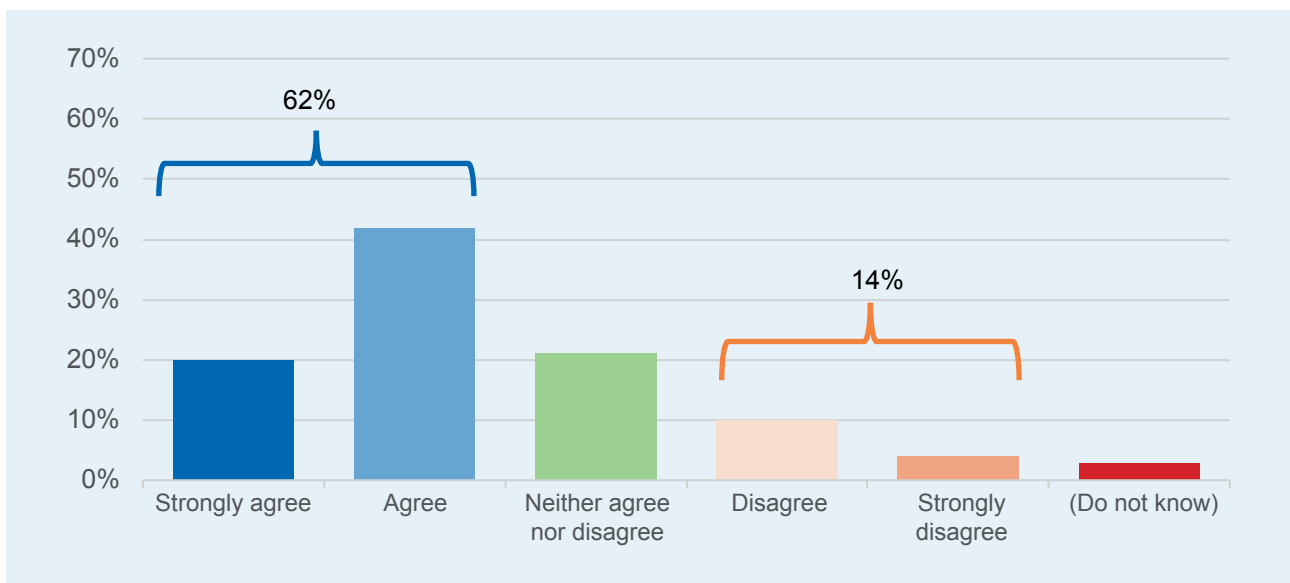
Figure 2: Public responses to the question: “How likely is it that action would be taken if you went to a government office or the police to report corrupt behaviour?”



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2023

Fear of retaliation. A significant quotient of SASAS participants identified fear of retaliation as one of the reasons that people do not report corruption to the authorities. To better understand attitudes to this issue, survey respondents were requested to indicate if they agreed with the statement: “In this community, people risk revenge if they speak out against corruption”. Roughly three-fifths (62%) of the adult population alleged that those who reported corruption in their community risked retaliation (Figure 3). In view of widespread concerns about revenge, we tested the hypothesis that fear of retaliation affected intention to report. We were able to validate this hypothesis, finding that the greater the fear, the more unwilling an individual would be to report corruption if they had witnessed it. This finding speaks to ongoing work by Wiener (2023) who argued that reprisals against whistleblowers act as a barrier to creating a zero-tolerance environment for corruption in South Africa.

Figure 3: Public agreement and disagreement with statement: “In this community, people risk revenge if they speak out against corruption.”

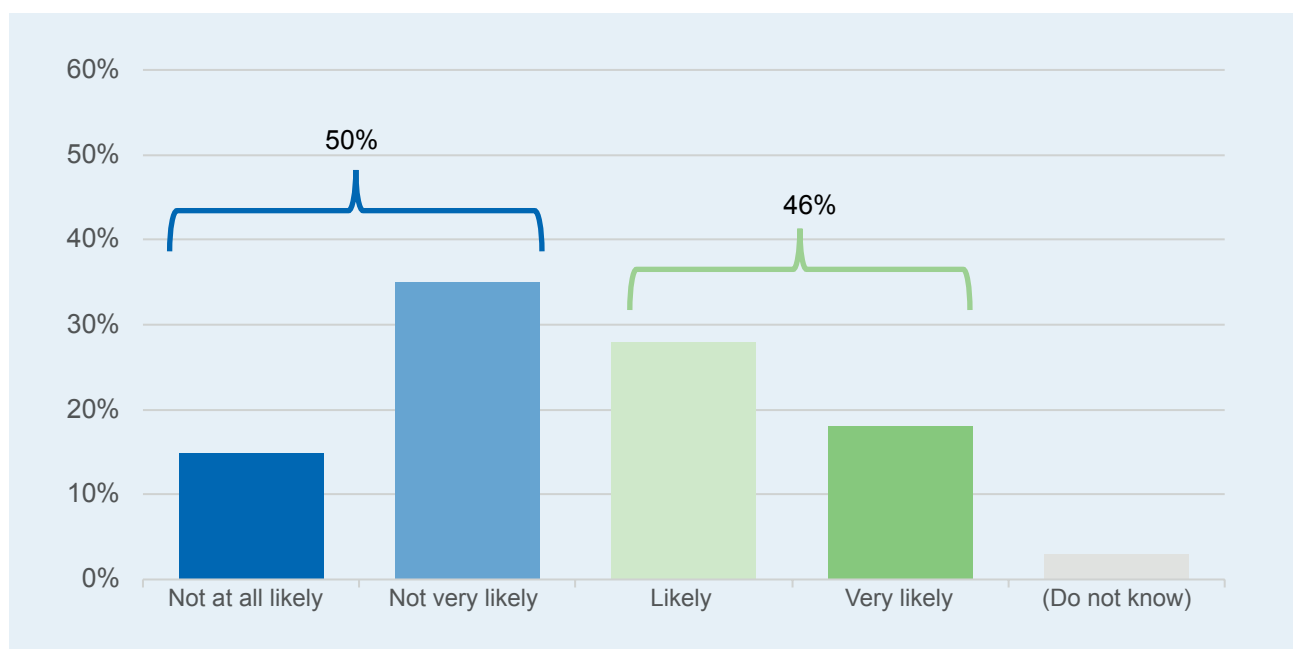


Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2023

Experiences of petty corruption. It could be argued that frequent exposure to public sector corruption undermines the expected social norm of alerting the authorities to wrongdoing. If a person witnesses public officials behaving in a corrupt manner and soliciting bribes, this could undermine their willingness to comply with the law. It could damage their respect for the authorities, eroding their trust in the system. In view of this argument, we hypothesised that repeated experience of public sector corruption will reduce willingness to report. Analytical tests did indeed find that frequent experience of public sector corruption had a negative effect on intention to report. This finding validates our hypothesis and shows that exposure to petty corruption undermines a person's willingness to participate in anti-corruption behaviour.

Accountability for non-elites. A significant proportion of the general public identified weak law enforcement as a major determinant for why people do not report witnessed corruption. Does the populace believe that the justice system holds people to account? When asked if the system holds offenders accountable for corruption, we found that the populace was quite sceptical (Figure 4). Half of the adult population thought that the system would not punish ordinary people if they engaged in corrupt practices.⁴ We examined whether there was a link between confidence in the justice system and willingness to report corruption, and found that if a person viewed the legal system as willing to hold ordinary people accountable, then they were more likely to report corruption. This finding is consistent with the procedural justice model which suggests that popular trust in the justice system improves public compliance with the law (Tyler, 2006).

Figure 4: Public responses to the question: "How likely is it that an ordinary person in South Africa will be punished by the authorities for giving or receiving a bribe, gift or favour in return for a public service?"



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2023

Accountability for elites. We saw above that perceived accountability for ordinary people influenced a person's intention to report corruption. But what about perceived accountability for elites (i.e., the rich and powerful)? It could be argued that if individuals see powerful figures repeatedly escape consequences for corrupt behaviour, then they may lose faith in the legal system's ability to address corruption impartially. One might anticipate that this loss of faith would decrease people's willingness to report to the authorities corruption that they witness or experience. Our data analysis validated this thesis and showed that the perceived ability of the system to hold elites accountable influenced public intention to report corruption. In other words, if you believe that there is a culture of impunity for elites in South Africa, then you are unlikely to show a willingness to report wrongdoing. This finding suggests that the perceived fairness of the justice system is important when trying to strengthen the social norm of reporting corruption.

Policy implications and recommendations

The NACS seeks to empower citizens to actively participate in fostering a culture of accountability against corruption in South Africa. In addition to building public trust in effective institutions, encouraging people to report corruption also requires developing and implementing effective strategies to change public attitudes. Unfortunately, policymakers have often failed to adequately recognise this necessity, and adequate resources have not been allocated to initiatives aimed at changing public attitudes to reporting corruption. Without thoughtfully designed and adequately funded efforts, the citizen empowerment envisioned by the NACS will not be realised.

The present study has examined why people in South Africa are reluctant to report corruption to the authorities. The results of this research offer useful lessons for policymakers who may want to design interventions aimed at encouraging citizens to work with government in the fight against corruption. Some of the most important of these lessons are provided below:

- Strengthen the credibility of reporting structures. Improving the credibility of anti-corruption reporting structures is essential. People need to be able to trust that these structures are effective and free from corruption themselves. The public need to know that it is safe to report corruption without fear of retaliation. Campaigns to promote anti-corruption reporting structures should start with ensuring their ability to uphold anonymity and personal security. People need to be able to trust that these structures are secure and confidential. Enhance and enforce strong whistleblower protection laws, making examples of those who would harm or victimise whistleblowers.
- Publicise success stories. The public need to be aware of corruption cases in which citizens' reports have led to successful investigations or prosecutions. This should include not only high-profile cases but also cases where ordinary offenders are held to account. These stories should be made visible through media campaigns and community outreach.
- Reduce petty corruption amongst public officials. Citizens' exposure to petty corruption in the public sector helps normalise corrupt behaviour and weaken societal norms supportive of the values of fairness and justice. Citizens are more likely to be directly exposed to petty corruption than to grand corruption. They will feel those experiences more intensely, although they may recognise the negative impacts of grand corruption. Law enforcement needs to target petty corruption amongst public officials and codes of ethical conduct for officials need to be strictly enforced. This should be followed by media campaigns to highlight effective accountability, including internal disciplinary action and prosecutions where necessary.

- Build partnerships with civil society organisations. Partnerships with trusted civil society organisations and community leaders should be strengthened to support potential and actual whistleblowers, for example, by providing access to informed guidance,⁵ legal advice and representation, psycho-social support, etc.

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