

Waging a war on a virus: The SAPS' policing of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications for crime control in South Africa



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Dr Guy Lamb is the BA International Studies Programme Leader within the Political Science Department at Stellenbosch University of (South Africa). He also serves as a commissioner with the National Planning Commission where he chairs the Commission's Justice, Crime Prevention and Security Task Team. Between 2012 and 2020 he was the Director of the Safety and Violence Initiative at the University of Cape Town. Prior to this he was a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Security Studies (2006-2012). He is a National Research Foundation rated researcher and has undertaken research and published on crime and violence reduction, urban safety, policing and peace-building issues in Africa for more than 25 years.

During the hard COVID-19 lockdown period in 2020 the South African Police Service (SAPS) were mandated to implement various controls relating to space and population movement throughout South Africa. The South African government's response to the spread of COVID-19 was framed by senior officials as 'fighting a war' in which the use of force, and the threat thereof, was envisaged to be central mechanism through which the COVID-19 regulations would be enforced. For example, within the first 24 hours of lockdown measure being implemented, the Minister of Police, Bheki Cele, who referred to the police as "ground forces", warned in a press briefing: "[W]hat is happening here is not the war against any citizen...It's a war against this enemy called Coronavirus. But whoever is breaking the law, whoever is not working with South Africa...is joining the enemy against the people of South Africa...If you don't walk with us then we will pull you to walk with us". This seminar will explore why such a warlike framing was adopted by government and the implications that such an approach has had for crime control and police legitimacy in South Africa.

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Location: CSSR Seminar Room, Robert Leslie Social Sciences Building, UCT