

Harnessing the Power of Social Media Communities to **FIGHT CRIME**

Inexpensive social media platforms used as a crime fighting and prevention tool

Crime is a reality that affects everyone, especially in South Africa which has one of the world's highest crime rates. In response, communities are increasingly using social media platforms to prevent and fight crime. Researchers from the University of Pretoria investigated the extent to which crime fighting communities are represented on Facebook in South Africa and the link between the existence of the communities in relation to crime rates at the provincial level.

Using the socio-technical approach to study the symbiotic relationship between communities, use of Facebook and current Government structures, a **review** of Facebook communities between 22 March and 30 May 2016 revealed that:

- In total more than 1.1 million people belonged to crime fighting communities.
- There were 297 dedicated crime fighting Facebook communities throughout South Africa. Gauteng had

the greatest number of communities (114), followed by the Western Cape (71) and Kwa-Zulu Natal (29). The only exception was Northern Cape, where no Facebook crime fighting communities existed.

- In comparing the number of communities to the crime rates in the country, the Limpopo province, which had six crime fighting communities, reported the lowest levels of crime events. The researchers suggested that this could be attributable to the province having low internet access levels.
- On the contrary, Gauteng had the most crime fighting communities on Facebook, reported the second highest crime level, as well as the largest

internet access level. This shows the link between the crime levels, the number of social media crime fighting communities and to, a lesser extent, the availability of Internet access in the province.

According to the researchers, the organisation of crime fighting communities show a strong and functional

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subsystem. This is because the use of Facebook has enabled members to contribute to a greater common cause despite geographically dispersed challenges. In addition, many of the communities work together with the police departments and security companies in the fight against crime.

Despite the positive collaboration, there is a sentiment that this initiative is driven from the citizens' side. The study recommends that Government and police departments should formally recognise the potential of social media crime reports as a

crime fighting tool and commit resources to assist communities in monitoring social media crime reports, as well as availing the necessary people to act on these reports.

In addition, the government needs to develop a formal strategy, incorporating all relevant departments, to enable citizens through the provision of affordable data and infrastructure to participate in the fight against crime. If these challenges are addressed, this can contribute to a stronger and much more effective socio-technical system which will benefit communities. **SA**

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