# Former IPS chief reveals secrets behind South Africa’s perfect serial killer conviction record



Gérard Labuschagne, a former head of South Africa's Investigative Psychology Section (IPS), has shared insights into the country's forensic profiling success, particularly in tracking down serial killers. Labuschagne led the IPS—a unit akin to the FBI's behavioural analysis team—for 14 years before resigning in 2016. Throughout his tenure, the section maintained a 100% conviction rate in serial crime cases.

Labuschagne speaks candidly about the challenges and misconceptions faced by forensic profilers. He describes the field as one often misunderstood, plagued by Hollywood portrayals that differ dramatically from the reality of painstaking police work. "When I was in the police service, I would just say I’m a policeman and people would just stop talking to me," he told the Mail & Guardian during an interview.

South Africa's IPS team, composed of both psychologists and detectives, utilises behavioural analysis to profile offenders, allowing police to anticipate and intercept future crimes. This method has proven effective in cases like that of Moses Sithole, a serial killer responsible for at least 38 murders and 40 rapes, whose profile predicted he would contact the media. Sithole later did so, confirming the classification.

The IPS formed in the mid-1990s under forensic psychologist Micki Pistorius, who trained over 100 detectives during her six years leading the unit. The section has contributed significantly to South Africa’s crime-solving capabilities but has also faced obstacles such as underfunding, heavy caseloads, and skilled personnel shortages, which has affected staff retention.

South Africa is recognised as having one of the highest numbers of serial killers worldwide, after the United States and Russia, according to serial killer databases and reports such as those cited by the Sunday Times. Labuschagne said he personally worked on 110 serial murder cases, more than many counterparts internationally, including that of notorious serial killer Richard Nyauza, convicted in 2006 for multiple murders.

Labuschagne credits South Africa's extensive DNA database and rigorous investigative processes as key to the ability to accurately identify and link serial murders. "No one has ever walked out of a court and was found not guilty," he asserts, pointing to the efficacy of the profiling and investigative work.

The IPS offers specialised training for detectives, focusing on psychologically motivated crimes such as serial murder, rape, paedophilia, and intimate partner violence. The South African Police Service remains unique globally in its regular provision of intensive courses in this area.

Despite its successes, Labuschagne notes the profound personal cost borne by those working in forensic profiling, including high stress levels and exposure to disturbing crime scenes. Following his departure from the police, he described experiencing symptoms akin to post-traumatic stress, underscoring the pressures inherent in this line of work.

Collaborations with international institutions like the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York have furthered research into South Africa's serial murder patterns. A major 2014 study analysed 302 offences committed between 1953 and 2007, contributing to a broader understanding of serial homicide within the country.

Labuschagne emphasises that forensic profiling requires specialised cognitive skills and psychological resilience, making recruitment and retention challenging. Many in the field come from detective backgrounds rather than purely academic psychology training, which aids practical understanding of crime scenes and legal proceedings.

The discipline of criminal profiling, emerging formally in the 1970s with the FBI’s Behavioural Science Unit, intersects psychology and law enforcement. It is employed not just for serial murders but also in cases of arson, terrorism, child abduction, and cybercrime, all characterised by psychological motivation.

The FBI, along with international experts including those from South Africa, defined ‘serial murder’ in 2015 as "the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s) in separate events." Despite this, variations in definitions and limitations in data accuracy make definitive rankings of countries by serial crime rates difficult.

The Mail & Guardian reports that South Africa’s forensic profilers hold a respected global position due to their thorough investigative techniques and a robust court record, despite the challenges faced by their unit. Their work continues to play a critical role in addressing some of the most serious crimes in the country.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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