Missing in action: Perspectives on employee absenteeism in the South African Police Service

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Abstract: This article explores the pervasiveness of employee absenteeism in the South African Police Service (SAPS) at the station level and the factors that contribute to it. Employee absenteeism is a critical problem for most organisations and the SAPS is no exception. While measures have been put in place to curb this problem in the SAPS by the police authorities, employee absenteeism has persisted and remains a significant problem for the SAPS in contemporary South Africa. A recent qualitative study, using a convenient sampling technique, found that absenteeism is not only prevalent, but has become entrenched within the SAPS, and that several institutional policies and privileges, such as sick, normal, and incapacity leave, are often abused for personal benefit. Absenteeism was found to be affected by ineffective communication between station commanders and employees. The implications of the findings for effective police efficiency in the country are discussed.

Subjects: Sociology & Social Policy; Criminal Justice; Police

Keywords: absenteeism; morale; motivation; South African Police Service; South Africa

1. Introduction

Employee absenteeism is a major problem for many organisations across the globe (Kumar et al., 2014), and police institutions are no exception. Although employee absenteeism is generally
prevalent in the South African public sector, there are concerns about its pervasiveness in the country's principal law enforcement institution, namely the South African Police Service (SAPS) (see Cornelius, 2016). Notably, the provision of quality service delivery forms a critical component of the goals of the SAPS that are specified in the institution's strategic plans. However, there are doubts about actual institutional commitment, and capacity to achieve this goal in the face of the increasing level of employee absenteeism that is affecting the institution in recent times. In addition to its cost implications, incessant employee absenteeism from duty may have a grave impact on the actualisation of the constitutional mandate of the police, which is to meet public safety and security demands (see Moreli, 2012). Police authorities implemented notable measures in the distant past to address the problem of absenteeism. These include, but are not limited to, refusing permission for members to leave their residence when on sick leave, forcing employees to provide evidence of illness in the form of a medical report or certificate for the period of absence from duty, and checking up on sick members at their residence to confirm the genuineness of their illness (see Cornelius, 2016).

These measures have been found ineffective, to the extent of worsening a nearly hopeless situation (Cornelius, 2016). The SAPS Code of Conduct was introduced in 1997 to curb absenteeism, among other challenges, facing the SAPS. The principle of “Batho Pele” (which means “people first”) was also endorsed in the SAPS to promote commitment to service and to discourage official absenteeism. However, these measures have failed to limit the spate of employee absenteeism in the SAPS. Petersen (2019, p. 3) indicates that “at least 70% of the police officers failed to report for work at various police stations” in the country. Despite the efforts made by the police authorities to address this phenomenon, employee absenteeism has continued to flourish in many police stations across South Africa (see Petersen, 2019; Pietersen, 2014; South Africa, 1997).

Although a significant number of studies have been conducted on the factors that contribute to employee absenteeism in the SAPS, they have mostly considered the subject from the broader framework of the SAPS institution (i.e., from the general point of view). The findings of such research may have significant specific and contextual limitations. Arguably, the fact that the outcomes of such studies could provide empirical propositions for curbing employee absenteeism in the broader police institution does not portend that they will be sustainable. There could be variations in the applicability of such findings to all SAPS components, and specifically to station levels and units. To this end, there may be a need to consider specific contextual factors that promote absenteeism at the police station level. This study intends to fill the void in police practice research by exploring the factors that contribute to employee absenteeism in the SAPS at the station level.

It is noteworthy to state that an exploratory study of this nature has professional and practical benefits. Professionally, information on specific contextual factors that promote employee absenteeism in the police at the station level could help to examine the scope of generalising the applicability of some relevant employee absenteeism propositions to diverse policing contexts. Practically, knowledge of the contributing factors to police employee absenteeism at the station level could provide neoteric direction to police authorities and policymakers on pragmatic approaches to address the problem in contemporary South Africa. The aim of this study was to explore the factors contributing to employee absenteeism in the SAPS at Akasia Police Station.

Employee absenteeism means many things to many people. Raja and Gupta (2019) for instance, are of the view that absenteeism refers to the keeping away from place of work without prior notice. Saxena and Sharma (2013) indicate that absenteeism is an unauthorised absence of a worker from his job. It can also be defined as the failure of an employee to report for duty when they are scheduled to work (see Saxena & Sharma, 2013). Forte (2017) also defines employee absenteeism as absence from work when there is an official obligation to report for work. According to Tomar (2014), absenteeism is determined by a number of factors, which include personality, attitude, and sometimes gender. It is a diverse and complex phenomenon that reflects an individual’s decision to be absent from work. For the purpose of this study, employee
absenteeism refers to employees' habitual and intentional absence from work. The implication of such “missing in action” for the SAPS is that it will have significant negative effect on the extent and quality of service delivery South African communities expect from the police. There is therefore an urgent need to minimise this menace in the SAPS. Absenteeism has been found to have grave impacts on the morale of diligent members and, in turn, creates innumerable challenges for managers (see Grace-Izaks, 2018).

1.1. Etiological factors that promote employee absenteeism

Although incidences of police absenteeism are rarely topical in criminological research, there is overwhelming evidence that points to the prevalence of the phenomenon in transitional African societies, including South Africa (Petersen, 2019). Regardless of the size and component of any organisation, employee absenteeism is caused by a variety of factors that are operational within the milieu in which organisations operate. It is shaped or triggered by factors such as lack of commitment, low morale, job dissatisfaction, and poor incentives, among others (see Cornelius, 2016; Petersen, 2019). To Gangai (2014), a high rate of absenteeism often occurs owing to a lack of commitment to work. Bolstering this argument, Tomar (2014) indicates that when employees feel they are not valued in an organisation, they become discouraged, which usually results in frequent absenteeism from work. Employees may also assume that sick leave is beneficial to them, just as annual leave is; hence they may see nothing wrong with being absent from work, regardless of their health status (Swarnalatha & Sureshkrishna, 2013). Such a scenario often plays out in the police institution, where police officials sometimes feel that they are entitled to leave from work, especially after a daunting operation. This may explain why there is shortage of personnel during police operations, such as patrolling, and during other crime prevention initiatives.

The environment of an organisation plays a significant role in promoting employee absenteeism. An environment where employees can build relationships with colleagues and share their ideas, challenges, private or privileged information and perspectives regarding work will limit absenteeism (see Deery et al., 2014; Diestel et al., 2014). But when employees do not have trust in their employers, they will find it difficult to confide in them, and that can be a major factor for the habitual act of missing in action. Poor communication and relationships between supervisors and subordinates were also found to promote employee absenteeism (see Zin et al., 2017).

Organisational environment also can negatively impact on service delivery. Leblebici (2012) argues that work environmental factors are the root causes of employees engaging and disengaging in the workplace. For instance, a hazardous work environment could have serious health implications, which might engender employee absenteeism (Tomar, 2014). Gethsi and Venkatrama (2014) state that employees are often absent from work for reasons such as sickness, lethargic attitude, family emergencies, excessive workload, stress, monotonous work, and general job dissatisfaction. Such absenteeism may be unplanned. Unplanned absenteeism can also be caused by personal illness and domestic issues (Kocakulah et al., 2009). Moletsane (2018) indicates that absenteeism has a direct and indirect negative effect on organisational capacity to function optimally. Low performance, working under inconvenient conditions, and occupational health diseases have a significant effect on the causes of high levels of absenteeism and organisational turnover (Leblebici, 2012). Other factors that are linked to absenteeism are past absence history, education, personality, and the abuse of alcohol (Gangai, 2014).

Employee absenteeism may also be caused by individual lifestyle characteristics, domestic responsibilities, low morale, boredom on the job, poor supervision, work overload, and poor health conditions (see Gangai, 2014; Kocakulah et al., 2009). Other factors include stress, favouritism, low wages, workplace bullying, organisational injustice, leadership style, burnout, and lack of employee performance appraisal (Aziri, 2011; Letooane, 2013; Motlou et al., 2016; Yusoff et al., 2013).

It is reported that employees experience job satisfaction when their expectations and values are met in their job (Yusoff et al., 2013). Motlou et al. (2016) indicate that employees who are more
satisfied with their jobs are less likely to be absent from work or contemplate leaving, compared to those who are less satisfied. To Letsoane (2013), job satisfaction refers to the feelings and attitudes of how people perceive their work psychologically, and it is a known fact that job satisfaction results in qualitative and quantitative improvement in performance. When the satisfaction level of employees increases, the likelihood exists that there will be more returns to the organisation (Javed et al., 2014). Regardless of the actual circumstances and situation, job satisfaction is an emotional response that cannot be seen, but merely inferred (Badubi, 2017a).

In contrast to the numerous benefits of job satisfaction to employees, employee dissatisfaction has been reported to have adverse effects on the efficiency and effectiveness of an organisation (Javed et al., 2014). According to Kian et al. (2014), job satisfaction will increase only when job tasks are delegated to the right individual, and where the true nature of the tasks complements the individual's value, which will in turn gratify positive feelings towards the task. To Kuranchie-Mensah and Amponsah-Tawiah (2016), job satisfaction simply refers to how people feel about their jobs and its various aspects. Job satisfaction is influenced by factors such as the nature of the work, salary, advancement opportunities, management, work groups, and work conditions (Aziri, 2011). It represents a combination of positive or negative feelings that workers have towards their work (Aziri, 2011). While it is appropriate to understand the factors that promote or cause absenteeism before any response can be effective, there may be a need to consider those that are specific to each individual organisation.

1.2. The South African Police Service (SAPS)

The first formal police institution in South Africa—the South African Police (SAP)—was established on 1 April 1913 (see Watson, 1999). It was formed during the apartheid era, principally to enforce the repressive and racial policies of the apartheid government at that time (Van der Spuy, 2005). The SAP has a history of human rights violations through the use of force, violence, and brutality (see Foster & Luyt, 1986). However, South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 revolutionised different spheres of the country, including the merger of 11 homelands police agencies formed during the apartheid regime into a single national police institution (see Burger, 2015). The institution's name was also changed to the South African Police Service (see Olutola & Bello, 2016). All these changes resulted in legislation being established in order to increase democratic policing (Pruitt, 2010).

The SAPS was established in terms of the Interim Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (South Africa, 1993), which came into effect on 27 April 1994 (South Africa, 1993). In terms of section 205 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996), the functions of the SAPS include preventing, combating, and investigating crime; maintaining public order; protecting and securing the inhabitants of South Africa and their property; and upholding and enforcing the law (South Africa, 1996). The functions of the different police divisions are as follows:

- Visible Policing Division: The purpose of this division is crime prevention, such as patrols, roadblocks, etc. It provides direction to the effective combating of crime through the provision of visible policing services.
- Community Relations Division: To foster community-police relations between the police and the community in order to develop trust between the police and the community.
- Crime Intelligence Division: To assist the SAPS with the generation of reactive intelligence reports, profile and intelligence analysis on crime, and stability issues in the SAPS.
- Crime Combating and Investigation Division: The focus of this division is to conduct investigation and crime analysis and to gather crime intelligence. It ensures effective and efficient investigation of crime as set out in the SAPS Act (South Africa, 1995b).
- Human Resources Management Division: This division focuses on the allocation of resources to the operational functions. It manages human resource performance, labour relations and compensation, human resource planning, and career planning.
• Assets and Legal Management Division: This division renders legal advisory services to the SAPS and the National Commissioner in particular.
• Management Interventions: This division’s focus is to ensure professional knowledge-based management of policing towards achieving the outcomes and impact of the SAPS’s constitutional objectives (South Africa, 1996).

It is important to note that these divisions are interlinked; they support one another in the maintenance of law and order and in ensuring that the objectives of the SAPS are achieved and sustained. However, the objectives of the organisation may be impeded by incessant employee absenteeism. It is therefore important for the SAPS to develop effective measures to curb employee absenteeism.

1.3. Managing employee absenteeism
Notable measures found in the literature that can be adopted to reduce employee absenteeism in organisations. They include, but are not limited to, employee motivation, employee morale boosting, creating organisational culture, developing an employee health and wellness (EHW) programme, and developing organisational culture.

1.4. Employee motivation
To reduce or eliminate employee absenteeism from work, there is a need for employers to develop a robust means of motivating their employees. Kaur (2013) indicates that motivational factors play an important role in increasing employee satisfaction. Authors have argued that such an approach has the capacity to promote high job satisfaction among organisational staff (Nguyen-Cong & Dung-Nguyen, 2013). To Singh et al. (2016), motivation is a vital component of employee behaviour and performance, which has a direct effect on whether an organisation will succeed or not. Motivation explains the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of goal-directed behaviour (Mohajane, 2017). It is an internalised, introspective process that energises, directs, and supports positive behaviour (Beiu & Davidescu, 2018). Where there is no motivation, employee morale will likely be low and absenteeism may thrive (Shaban et al., 2017).

1.5. Employee morale
Morale in the context of this study is defined as the depiction of emotions, satisfaction, and overall attitude towards a workplace (Tiwari, 2014). Kanimozi and Vinothkumar (2018) argue that morale is a composite of feelings, attitudes, and sentiments that contribute to general tendencies of satisfaction at the workplace. They are of the view that increased morale could stimulate employees’ positive feelings towards their jobs. Mohajane (2017) highlights that morale is related to job satisfaction in that employee whose morale is high tend to be more satisfied with their duties, and are more productive than those with low morale. Employee motivation goes hand in hand with employee morale because a motivated employee engenders higher morale. In this context, a high level of morale promotes motivation and reduces absenteeism. The SAPS authorities should therefore develop vibrant measures to ensure that the employees are well motivated for optimal performance. It is believed that such an approach will reduce employee absenteeism (Mohajane, 2017). Kanimozi and Vinothkumar (2018) emphasise that morale has a direct effect on productivity; that is, when morale is high, productivity will likely be high, and when it is low, productivity will likely be low. Moreover, the SAPS junior officers’ lack of access to their immediate commanders to discuss work related activities especially resources could affect morale. This can lower morale and limit performance, thereby resulting in low productivity, and increased absenteeism (see Edwards, 2014). These will undoubtedly have negative impacts on SAPS service delivery.

Shaban et al. (2017) indicate that high motivation and high morale lead to greater productivity. Similarly, Tiwari (2014) indicates that high morale contributes to high levels of productivity and high returns to stakeholders and promotes employee loyalty. High morale is usually characterised by discipline, confidence, and willingness to perform; whereas low morale can be attributed to
many factors, such as job insecurity, lack of fair compensation, uncertain business conditions, and excessive outsourcing practices (Shaban et al., 2017). Morale is the most important psychological state of mind of a person, which is expressed as self-confidence, loyalty towards the organisation, and enthusiasm (Kandhakumar & Balasingh, 2016). It reflects the satisfaction and sense of achievement that employees gain from being part of an organisation (Kandhakumar & Balasingh, 2016).

1.6. Creation of organisational culture
It is believed that there is a direct relationship between organisational culture and absenteeism in the sense that people who share a similar culture have the same pattern of behaviour (Richardson, 2014). When organisational culture is positive, there is a likelihood that absenteeism will diminish (Kocakulah et al., 2009). To Randhawa (2017), a good organisational culture is one with a well-developed and open communication culture at all levels of the organisation. Poor organisational culture contributes to employee absenteeism. According to Cucchiella et al. (2014), organisational culture plays a fundamental role in the propensity towards absenteeism in terms of sense of responsibility, motivation, and many other aspects relating to the culture that contribute to keeping an employee from being absent from work.

1.7. Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)
An EAP plays a fundamental role in reducing absenteeism (Dipela, 2016). Kenny (2014) avers that many organisations introduce an EAP for specific reasons suitable to them, especially in response to a high rate of sick leave and absenteeism, and to promote a sense of social responsibility. An EAP helps to reduce absenteeism, creates a peaceful workplace, and enhances employee skills in meeting the challenges they face both in their personal and professional lives (Dipela, 2016). It also helps to nurture positive behavioural change and attitudes towards an organisation; that is, it establishes how employees feel about their work environment, which contributes to how they perform their duties (Richardson, 2014). To Kenny (2014), an EAP is cost effective for employers to use. For example, rehabilitating a chemically dependent employee costs less than training a new employee. Kenny (2014) also indicates that an EAP plays a key role in enhancing employee productivity, boosting organisational image, and improving retention, productivity, and wellbeing.

An EAP may help an organisation to address more pressing personal problems that may be affecting its employees (Kenny, 2014). Kocakulah et al. (2009) argue that an EAP should be implemented in order to assist workers to deal with issues outside of their work that they bring to the workplace. Some employers provide their employees with EAP contact details to cater for issues that affect them outside the workplace. Grobler and Joubert (2012) indicate that management has a responsibility to provide for both the internal and external wellbeing of its employees in order to enhance their health and wellness. One way of ensuring the improvement of health and wellness in an organisation is to put an EAP in place in the organisation. Such initiatives have been found to help organisations reduce employee absenteeism (see Dipela, 2016).

1.8. Absence of policy
The establishment of an absenteeism policy in an organisation can assist to curb absenteeism. Such a policy should state clearly what constitutes authorised absenteeism, and supervisors must also adhere to the policy when granting an employee leave (Badubi, 2017a). It should clearly set forth which absences are allowed, and what behaviour could subject the employee to disciplinary action (Shenbaham & Hemalatha, 2016). Badubi (2017a) notes that planned absence from work allows managers to make contingency arrangements and implement them in advance. However, it should be taken into account that people need control over their work life and family responsibilities and commitments, such as preparing their children for school in the morning and taking care of them when they are ill, which may keep employees away from work (Badubi, 2017a, 2017b).
1.9. Employee incentive programmes
Kocakulah et al. (2009) indicate that employee incentive programmes can help to reduce absenteeism. The best way to introduce this programme is to pay employees for every sick and personal day that they do not take, whereby employees receive money for their unused days at the end of each year (Kocakulah et al., 2009). Such an initiative or programme is also likely to help promote productivity in an organisation by fostering a sense of belonging, promoting organisational culture, and boosting morale and job satisfaction.

1.10. Job satisfaction
Qureshi and Ab Hamid (2017) contend that job satisfaction is the attitude that individuals have towards their work. Furthermore, Kian et al. (2014) over that job satisfaction is an individual's subjective judgment and feelings towards the level of satisfaction regarding job-related factors. To Mohajane (2017), job satisfaction comprises the feelings or constellation of attitudes that employees have about their overall jobs or aspects of their jobs. Magee et al. (2016) maintain that job satisfaction is the main motivational factor underlying behaviour. To Grace-Izaks (2018), job satisfaction is determined by individual values and expectations in the work environment. In order to prevent employee dissatisfaction due to unmet expectations, managers should carefully match employees' values and job characteristics during recruitment in order to enhance job satisfaction (Singh et al., 2016).

Job satisfaction is an important component for employee motivation and encouragement towards improving performance (Razig & Maulabakhsh, 2015). It is also considered as one of the most important variables in the work life of an employee in any organisation. If there is a high level of satisfaction in an organisation, the likelihood exists that there will be a reduction in the rate of absenteeism (Siukola, 2013). Job satisfaction has to do with an individual's perception and evaluation of his or her job, and this perception is influenced by the person's unique circumstances such as needs, values, and expectations (Ashitri, 2013). According to Javed et al. (2014), employee satisfaction is the measure of an employee's general emotion about his or her workplace and job, capturing his or her approach towards the job, and the extent to which the job satisfies the employee's needs.

Employees will gain job satisfaction when their expectations and values are met in their job (Yusoff et al., 2013). Motaou et al. (2016) indicate that employees who are more satisfied with their jobs are less likely to contemplate leaving than those who are less satisfied. Leotoone (2013) explains that job satisfaction refers to the feelings and attitudes of how people perceive their work psychologically; where it is a known fact that job satisfaction results in qualitative and quantitative improvement in performance. When the satisfaction level of employees increases, it will result in more returns to organisations (Javed et al., 2014). Regardless of the actual circumstances and situation, job satisfaction is an emotional response that cannot be seen, but merely inferred (Badubi, 2017b).

Employee dissatisfaction has adverse effects on the efficiency and effectiveness of organisations (Javed et al., 2014). According to Kian et al. (2014), job satisfaction will increase only if job tasks are delegated to the right individual, where the true nature of the tasks complements the individual's value, which in turn will generate positive feelings towards the delegated tasks. To Sahito and Vaisanen (2017), job satisfaction and motivation are two success factors of an organisation because organisational success depends on employees and their attitudes, behaviour, and outcomes. The role of management is to assist employees to adjust and feel comfortable in the work environment to ensure that employees’ motivation is consistent with organisational objectives (Sahito & Vaisanen, 2017).

2. Method
An exploratory research design was adopted for this study. The goal was to gain insight into specific issues and factors that cause and promote employee absenteeism in the SAPS at the station level. A qualitative research approach was utilised. This study used a purposive non-probability sampling technique to select the study participants. According to Palinkas et al.
(2015), non-probability sampling is not randomly made, but people are selected individually to participate in a research, because each person has certain unique characteristics that need to be researched. This type of sampling is often applied to small sample size. The choice of this technique was based on the belief that it is the most appropriate for obtaining valuable information from the study participants on the subject matter. Moreover, it affords participants the opportunity to narrate their experiences on the issue under investigation. This approach also enables researchers to access the thoughts and feelings of participants in order to understand how they describe their experiences.

From the population of SAPS employee at Akasia Police Station, Gauteng Province, a sample of 30 participants were drawn for the study. From that sample, the views of only 15 participants, consisting of seven female and eight male employees of the SAPS, were considered in this article. The sample size was limited to 15 participants owing to data saturation (see Hennink et al., 2019). To Hennink et al. (2019), saturation cannot be permanently fixed. It may be attained during research interviews when successive participants begin to replicate similar or analogous responses as those previously interviewed. Hennink et al. (2019) further stipulate that attainment of saturation could vary depending on the study and the information obtained from interviews. For one study, saturation could be reached at 17 interviews and in another, it might be achieved at 14 interviews. Additionally, Boddy (2016) argues that in a qualitative study with a relatively homogenous population, a sample as small as 12 could be appropriate for data saturation. Notably, the participants of this study were from a homogenous population (the SAPS).

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used to obtain valuable information from the study participants. Interviews were held between June and December, 2019. All were conducted by the first author following a semi-structured interview schedule. Prior to the interview, participants have been notified about the study through the police institution. Although the study participants comprised employees from junior, middle, and senior management levels, the researchers focused on those with a minimum of five years’ experience in the service. Each interview was documented and, in some instances, audio recorded after securing the consent and permission of the participants to do so. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Some of the semi-structured interview questions included the following:

- Why has absenteeism persisted in the SAPS (and indeed your station) despite various measures adopted to curb it?
- In your own opinion, does employee absenteeism have any impact on the daily operational requirements of the institution?
- In your opinion, what are the resonating factors that contribute to employee absenteeism in the SAPS (using your station as a case study)?

The overall research question that guided this study was: what are the factors contributing to employee absenteeism in the SAPS at Akasia Police Station?

3. Data analysis
Data obtained from the interviews were analysed using thematic coding. Themes were generated after an initial review of the data and coding was completed. A thorough analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted in order to collect relevant data based on the identified themes. A credibility check was done to ensure the validity of the data, and to ensure that the findings adequately captured the views of the participants (see Rajakaruna et al., 2017). Measures were also adopted to ensure the validity of the data, including participants’ voluntary participation, and assurance that the study was for academic purposes and thus required their sincere input. The researchers also indicated that other ethical issues would be strictly adhered to, including that of participants’ anonymity and confidentiality of information provided during the interviews. All these ethical considerations were adhered to in line
with the stipulated guidelines in the ethics protocol of the Tshwane University of Technology’s Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (reference: FCRE/SSM/STD/2019/08).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Prevalence of employee absenteeism

It emerged from the participants’ responses that absenteeism was prevalent and has been an issue of concern for the SAPS for some time. The prevalence of absenteeism is said to be a direct consequence of abuse of sick leave by SAPS employees. Most participants indicated that employee absenteeism was the result of excessive sick leave taken by employees of the SAPS Akasia Police Station. Such sick leaves are common at month-end, and are a serious concern for the station management. Some of the participants stated:

“Some members in the station have a tendency of abusing the sick leave” (Participant 1, 5 August 2019).

“They think that they can take sick leave even when they are not sick” (Participant 3, 5 August 2019).

“Sick leave is used for personal issues, maybe he or she has got a matter to attend to, will just say ‘I am sick’” (Participant 7, 7 August 2019).

“The manner in which they are taking sick leave becomes intolerable” (Participant 12, 12 August 2019).

“Most members do not come to work, especially at month-end” (Participant 2, 5 August 2019).

“Absenteism is very high at month-end at this station” (Participant 3, 5 August 2019).

“When members do not come to work month-end, it creates a serious problem” (Participant 6, 6 August 2019).

Some participants stated that employee absenteeism was associated with domestic matters and excessive use of alcohol. According to the participants, domestic matters impact negatively on members’ absenteeism, along with excessive consumption of alcohol. The responses painted a bleak picture, as the participants indicated that members abused sick leave. Some of the participants stated:

“The reason why some members do not report for duty month-end is because they are involved in domestic-related issues that they cannot handle” (Participant 15, 13 August 2019).

“Month-end comes with so many challenges for members; some are maintaining more children outside their wedlock and end not having money to survive for the whole month” (Participant 5, 6 August 2019).

“Employees sometimes consume excessive alcohol at month-end after receiving their salaries. Such [a] habit sometimes keeps them away from work” (Participant 3, 5 August 2019).

4.2. Low morale, job dissatisfaction, and poor communication

The participants indicated that some members came to work but did nothing. The participants highlighted that job dissatisfaction was a cause of employee absenteeism. It was stated that some employees who reported for duty were unproductive owing to low morale and the monotonousness of the job. Such dissatisfaction is due to a communication gap within the organisation, and boredom arising from firearm incompetency. It is evident from the participants’ views that lack of
firearm competency results in boredom among the members, as they end up working where they do not want to. Selected views of some participants are as follows:

“Coming to work without a corresponding performance is a serious concern” (Participant 9, 7 August 2019).

“Some members are not happy in the Akasia station; that is why they come to work and [are] unproductive” (Participant 1, 5 August 2019).

“Communication between commander and employees is a serious problem” (Participant 6, 6 August 2019).

“Low morale of the members is caused by lack of information” (Participant 4, 6 August 2019).

“Some of the members that do not have firearm competency get frustrated when they are posted outside, they can’t perform their duty properly” (Participant 8, 7 August 2019).

4.3. Low usage of social services by employees
When asked what factors contributed to employee absenteeism in the SAPS, the participants concurred that a number of factors contributed to employee absenteeism. The participants raised issues such as the inability to balance work life and personal life, lack of willingness to engage with social services such as an EHW programme, and lack of communication between employee and supervisor, which all result in members continuing to be absent from work. Some of the participants said:

“The problem is that balancing two lives, at home and at work, is not possible for any member” (Participant 2, 5 August 2019).

“Some members are absent because they end up caught with personal life at the time when they have to engage on work life” (Participant 1, 5 August 2019).

“Absence due to personal problems, [and] lack of using [the] wellness programme, is destroying lot of members and thus affects the service” (Participant 5, 6 August 2019).

“Members who refuse to use [the] wellness programme become depressed and then rely on alcohol” (Participant 10, 12 August 2019).

“It is not good to deny the service that helps you; you end up being depressed and the next thing you are alcoholic while we have the necessary services internally” (Participant 8).

“It is clear that members become depressed and when you ask them to go for counselling, they refuse and then become depressed and use more alcohol” (Participant 11, 12 August 2019).

It is clear from the above responses that these factors exist in the SAPS more generally, and at Akasia Police Station in particular. Members who are not willing to utilise available services such as the EHW programme continue to be absent, become depressed, and become dependent on alcohol.

4.4. Curbing employee absenteeism in the SAPS
When the participants were asked how employee absenteeism could be addressed, they expressed different views. They stated that there was a need for effective communication, that management needed to be transparent when disseminating information to members, and that there should be regular workshops with members. Introducing an awards point system would improve job satisfaction, morale, and employee performance, and would also contribute to addressing employee absenteeism. Some of the participants indicated:
“What we need is a good communication between the supervisors and employees” (Participant 12, 12 August 2019).

“Effective communication in terms of information on what needs to be done and how, the changes and other information” (Participant 9, 7 August 2019).

“Members need to attend workshops; it assists them with knowledge of how things are done” (Participant 9, 7 August 2019).

“All members that love [their job] and extremely dedicate their time to do their work properly must be awarded points to be paid money for not being absent for a specific period of time” (Participant 1, 5 August 2019).

“Awards raise their morale and improve performance in coming on time [and] not taking unnecessary sick leave” (Participant 6, 6 August 2019).

“When an employee is satisfied, [he/she] will have a positive morale and [it] will also increase performance” (Participant 4, 6 August 2019).

“I am telling you, if we have workshops maybe once per quarter, I think it will be better” (Participant 10, 12 August 2019).

According to the participants, if the station introduced a system where employees are given awards, it would discourage absenteeism. The participants also indicated that the SAPS needed to implement a vibrant EHW programme dedicated to assisting members who experience personal problems. The programme could provide counselling to members of the SAPS. The participants further stated the importance of having station orders, enforcing the Labour Relations Act (LRA), and requesting sick notes when sick for two or more days in order to reduce employee absenteeism. They also suggested that prior arrangement of leave should first be made with the brigadier of the station. The following are the verbatim statements from some of the participants:

“There is EHW to assist employees who have challenges” (Participant 12, 12 August 2019).

“The use of [the] health and wellness programme is there for any member who is in need of assistance” (Participant 8, 7 August 2019).

“There is a need to enforce the Labour Relations Act because you cannot just punish an employee who is absent from work; you have to follow the law” (Participant 11, 12 August 2019).

“The Labour Relations Act is the law that the station is enforcing; they are not using their own discretion but follow the prescript” (Participant 5, 6 August 2019).

“In terms of the LRA, the failure to provide a sick note constitutes a disciplinary action” (Participant 13, 13 August 2019).

5. Discussion
This article explored the factors that contribute to employee absenteeism in the SAPS at Akasia Police Station. It is worth stating that SAPS employees at this station are distressed about the increasing incidence of absenteeism from duty by their colleagues. The police authorities therefore need to take cognisance of this problem and develop effective ways to address it. This research contributes to existing literature on employee absenteeism by exploring specific factors that trigger absenteeism among SAPS employees at the station level. Although there are notable academic articles that have considered this subject matter, focusing on the problem as it concerns the entire police institution shows that there is more to learn, particularly as it applies to the specific station-level context.
Moreover, the qualitative nature of this study allowed for a more contextual explication of the resonating factors that promote employee absenteeism in the SAPS at the station level.

This study found that employee absenteeism is rampant in the SAPS at the station level, and that it takes place the most at month-end, under the pretext of sick leave, which often provides a leeway for truancy. Although there is a dearth of literature on month-end absenteeism, its correlates, such as abuse of sick leave, alcohol abuse, and feelings of discouragement, are under-reported. Although literature is silent on employee absenteeism at month end, but from our findings, we contend that such trend may be connected with feelings of discouragement. This is consistent with the findings of Tomar (2014). For instance, Tomar (2014) found that feelings of discouragement often breed loss of commitment, which usually results in frequent absenteeism from work. Employees may also feel that they are entitled to sick leave, just like they are to annual leave. Such notions of entitlement cause them to be absent from work, regardless of their health status (Swarnalatha & Sureshkrisna, 2013).

Employee absenteeism was also found to be motivated by low morale, job dissatisfaction, and poor communication. These factors were found to also breed feelings of being undervalued and underappreciated, which sometimes engender absenteeism. This finding is consistent with the work of Netshidzati (2012). It is argued that organisations with satisfied employees often experience low absenteeism rates, and vice versa (Netshidzati, 2012). If employees are highly motivated, they are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, and to deliver higher-quality services, which may lead to lower rates of absenteeism. Mohajane (2017) established that morale is related to job satisfaction, where employees whose morale is high tend to be more satisfied with their duties than those whose morale is low. Employee job dissatisfaction has adverse effects for the efficiency and effectiveness of organisations (see Javed et al., 2014) and can encourage absenteeism from work. Shift or station commanders must therefore strive to promote an organisational culture that drives job satisfaction among the workforce. Consistent with Cohen and Golan (2007), job dissatisfaction was found to increase the rate of absenteeism, which may impact on the ability to perform and successfully meet the institution’s goals. Low morale and low productivity were also found to emanate from increased pressure, increased workload, and frustration due to a shortage of staff. Goldberg and Waldman (2000), however, found no correlation between job satisfaction and absenteeism.

Furthermore, our findings indicate that ineffective communication was found to be a major contributory factor to employee absenteeism in the police at Akasia Police Station. Good communication will possibly help to eliminate relationship gap between supervisors and subordinates in the institution (see Zin et al., 2017). Ineffective communication between employees and their supervisors promotes absenteeism and has a significant effect on job satisfaction and performance. Randhawa (2017) found that a good organisational culture is one with a well-developed and open communication culture within the organisation, at all levels. In this context, an organisation such as the SAPS should establish a vibrant culture of communication in terms of organisational hierarchy. Poor organisational culture often contributes to employee absenteeism. Additionally, Kocakulah et al. (2009) state that a positive culture will help to promote job satisfaction. According to these authors, communication plays an important role in the prevention of employee absenteeism. They note that communication must be integrated into the organisational culture. Lending credence to this, Kocakulah et al. (2018) advise that communication ought to be established by holding regular staff meetings, emphasising positives and downplaying negatives, recognising and acknowledging employees’ work, and clarifying expectations and job requirements.

Unwillingness to embrace the EAP was also found to promote employee absenteeism at the Akasia Police Station. From a study conducted by Dlamini (2015) on employee absenteeism, it was discovered that most employees are uncomfortable with the EHW initiative that was implemented to promote the wellbeing of workers. Lack of confidence in the scheme and dissatisfaction with the
services offered by the officials of the scheme sometimes prompt employees to seek medical assistance and services outside the organisation, which sometimes results in increased absenteeism. According to Maletzky (2017), the demands and expectations of the workplace and the personal lives of employees can greatly affect their health. This is because employee wellness can influence the wellness of the organisation, and vice versa (Sieberhagen et al., 2011, p. 4). Although issues of health and safety aspects are covered by occupational health and safety legislation, legislation regarding employee wellness remains undetermined (Sieberhagen et al., 2009). Andrews et al. (2019) note that healthy employees experience more job satisfaction and greater productivity. Poor management of employee wellbeing erodes the quality of work performed by employees (Badul, 2018).

6. Recommendations

The findings of this study, underscore the need to address the issue of employee absenteeism in the SAPS, especially at the station level. It is believed that when the factors that promote employee absenteeism are considered and addressed, it will have a corresponding effect in limiting the spate of absenteeism currently affecting the institution. It will also help to promote healthy relationships and a good organisational culture, which are necessary requirements for organisational effectiveness and efficiency. Reducing employee absenteeism will undoubtedly have a positive impact in increasing the level of employee morale, employee satisfaction, and employee performance, as well as improving service delivery.

Although the findings of this study have significant implications for policing in South Africa, it is not without its limitations. Considering the cross-sectional nature of the study and the sample size, it will be difficult to make causal conclusions. Therefore, for more accurate inferences, it is recommended that a longitudinal study that will cut across all police stations in the Gauteng Province and other provinces of South Africa be conducted. However, this does not detract from the significance of the findings of this study.

In addition, it is will be appropriate for the State to review, and ensure existing laws and procedures governing the SAPS, particularly in relation to absenteeism, are vibrant and effective. Remuneration, and equitable training system should also be put in place to boost employee morale, satisfaction and performance. These factors are likely to help limit absenteeism in the organisation (see Simushi, 2020). For instance, Simushi (2020) recommends, amongst others, for an equitable employee training and management development system as well as the application of modern management techniques, and a periodic review of the remuneration system so that remuneration reflects the prevailing market trends.

In order to address the problem of inadequate communication in the workplace, the SAPS commanders as well as human resource officials, need to understand, identify and address its root causes. Providing employees with effective communication solutions, such as a collaboration platform for texting and speaking can boost performance and help the organisation operate efficiently. It is also constructive for the SAPS authority to practice active listening, emotional management skills and team communication with employees. Celebrating the accomplishments and progress of employees is another way to create an engaging company culture.

The implementation of the findings of this study will benefit various stakeholders, including academics, the SAPS, and South African society at large. The SAPS authorities will be provided with tools to address employee absenteeism in the organisation. The application of the findings of this study will also equip police officials with appropriate strategies that can help to improve service delivery to the communities they serve. The implementation of the findings will also enable South African communities enjoy the dividends of improved police services, which will to help eliminate the burden of frequent visitation to police stations for any service.
7. Conclusion
This study began with an exploration of factors that contribute to employee absenteeism in the SAPS’s Akasia Police Station. It also described the nature and extent of employee absenteeism in the SAPS, including its impact on daily operational requirements. While the findings of this study have significant implication for effective policing in South Africa, especially at the station level, it is important to note that the study is not immune from limitations. As earlier emphasised, the cross-sectional nature of the study makes it challenging to make causal conclusions. Moreover, considering the study sample size, it will be impractical to generalise the findings to all police stations across in South Africa, hence, our findings should be treated with caution. However, these limitations do not detract the findings from its contribution to the body of knowledge.

Fundamentally, the study highlights a lack of adequate communication between the commanders and the employees. The employees are confronted with the same challenge, as they were not free to communicate some of the sensitive or privileged information to their respective commanders as their reasons for missing in action. Employees often desire a conducive work environment where they can network, build relationships, share ideas and support one another with the ultimate goal of achieving organisational goals. Effective communication between station officers and their supervisors is therefore an important factor for reducing employee absenteeism in the SAPS.

Moreover, the study underscores the need to address the issue of employee absenteeism in the SAPS, especially at the station level. It is believed that when the factors that promote employee absenteeism are considered and addressed, it will have a corresponding effect on limiting absenteeism in the institution, and will also help to promote healthy relationships and a good organisational culture, which are necessary requirements for the organisation’s effectiveness and efficiency. Reducing employee absenteeism will undoubtedly have a positive impact on increasing the level of employee morale, employee satisfaction, and employee performance, as well as improving service delivery.

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