

Chapter 8 The Wierdabrug area – Gauteng

The Wierdabrug police district

The Wierdabrug police district, south-west of Pretoria, covers a surface area of 467 square kilometres. The police district comprises a highly urbanised and middle class component, a number of squatter and informal settlements, low cost housing areas, a large area of smallholdings of various sizes, and a few farms.

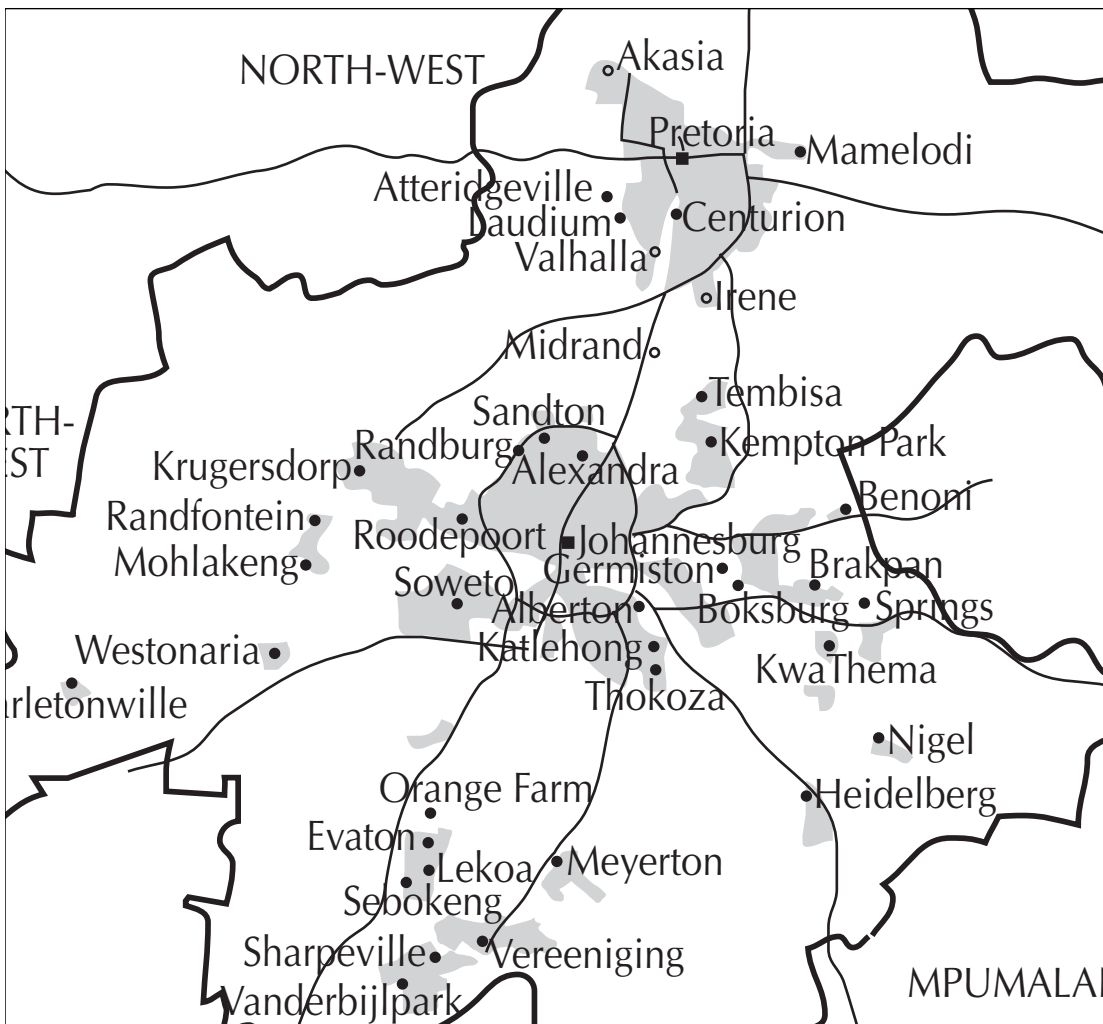
Many, if not most, of the smallholdings in the Wierdabrug area are not used for commercial purposes. They are, in essence, large residential properties occupied by people who want to live close to the city, but not in a normal high density residential neighbourhood. Moreover, most of the smallholdings in the area are lumped together in clusters. As a result, the majority of smallholdings are not isolated and far removed from their neighbours (as would be the case with farms in rural areas). Generally, the house on a smallholding is not more than 75 to 100 metres away from the house of its nearest neighbour.

At the end of 1999, the number of inhabitants in the Wierdabrug police district was upward of 168 000 people. This figure is growing rapidly as young people move into the squatter and informal settlements from outlying areas to be closer to the Pretoria-Midrand-Johannesburg industrial-commercial complex in search of work. It is estimated that some 55 000 people are living in the squatter and informal settlements. The number of inhabitants in the Wierdabrug area grew rapidly after 1994 as part of a larger trend of young rural and poor people moving closer to the cities with the hope of finding employment.

Smallholding attacks in the Wierdabrug area

If the period January to June 1998 is compared with the same period in 1999, it is apparent that the number of attacks on farms and smallholdings in Gauteng increased substantially: from 80 to 124 attacks (an increase of 55%). Over the same period, the

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number of attacks in the Pretoria police area increased by 181%, and in the Wierdabrug police district, the number of attacks increased by a massive 475% (from 4 to 23).

Virtually all the smallholding attacks which occurred in the Wierdabrug area in 1999 were directed against the property of the smallholders. (Of the 23 smallholding attacks between January and June 1999, 21 were armed robberies, and two attempted murders in connection with armed robberies.) That is, it appeared that the culprits were motivated primarily by greed. Not surprisingly, most crimes registered under 'smallholding attacks' were those of robbery, and housebreaking with the intent to rob. In two instances, smallholders were seriously injured in the attacks and attempted murder dockets were opened. It would appear, however, that the violence used by the culprits was aimed at achieving their primary objective to rob the smallholder of his or her possessions. The violence involved in these attacks did not seem to be gratuitous.

While most of the smallholding attacks in the Wierdabrug area do not involve a high degree of violence, this does not mean that smallholders' quality of life is not affected by crime in their areas. All the smallholders interviewed were adamant that crime in their area had increased substantially over the last few years. Smallholders blamed the increase in crime primarily on an ineffective criminal justice system which fails to apprehend most criminals, and which does not punish convicted criminals severely enough. Smallholders' way of life had also changed considerably because of a fear of crime. Most smallholders interviewed said that they no longer left their property after sunset (many do not even dare to venture outside of their houses at night), and many had spent considerable amounts of money on security structures and systems.

No real pattern could be established in respect of where the attacks took place in the Wierdabrug police area, or the days of the week on which they were most likely to occur. Most of the attacks seemed to be randomly situated, and culprits did not select only those smallholdings which had weak or no security measures in place. A number of observations can be made from the smallholding attacks studied in the Wierdabrug area.

Pattern of escalating victimisation

In many of the instances of smallholding attacks that were analysed, the smallholder (or his or her family) had been victimised by criminals in the weeks and months leading up to the eventual serious 'smallholding attack'.

There was often a pattern of escalating victimisation. That is, some weeks or months before the eventual 'attack', the smallholding concerned experienced some

relatively minor crime. This typically involved the theft of some washing from an outside washing line, the tampering with a motor vehicle which had been parked outside, or the theft of garden implements or furniture left outside. This then typically escalated a few weeks later to more serious crimes such as theft out of a motor vehicle, or housebreaking (while the inhabitants were out). Finally, the inhabitants of the smallholding would come into direct contact with their attackers whereupon the crime would be one of robbery. At times, smallholders were hurt or injured in such robberies.

In-house co-operation

Many of the smallholding attacks analysed seemed to involve some kind of collusion or co-operation between the culprits and domestic workers living on the smallholding, or with workers who worked on the smallholding during the day, or people who had worked for the smallholder in the past.

In a high proportion of the attacks investigated, there was strong circumstantial evidence that the culprits were familiar with the terrain of the smallholding, the inside of the dwellings on the smallholdings, and that they knew where valuables and safes were hidden.

Motive for attacks

In all the attacks investigated, the primary motive for the attack was one of greed. The theft of valuables, especially money, vehicles and electronic appliances seemed to be high on the culprits' agenda. No evidence was found that the majority of attacks were motivated by a desire to obtain firearms.

The research team asked everyone they came across in their investigation (victims, members of the security forces, workers on the smallholdings and non-victims) whether they thought that the smallholding attacks in the Wierdabrug area could have been motivated by anything other than greed and common criminality. Specifically, the research team sought to ascertain whether any of the attacks could have had an underlying political or ideological motive. None of the people interviewed thought that the attacks in the Wierdabrug area had been motivated by anything else but the desire to rob and steal.

Type of culprits

In cases where the culprits were identified by their victims, they tended to be young black males operating in groups of three or four. According to some members of the security forces, the culprits were generally well prepared and methodical in their 'attack' on the smallholding. Often, one of the culprits would not be physically involved in the actual attack on the smallholding, but would remain away from the

crime scene to act as a lookout to warn his accomplices about the arrival of the smallholder or the security forces. It also appeared that some attackers made use of a 'sweeper' who followed his accomplices and made sure that no incriminating evidence (such as fingerprints and cartridge shells) were left behind.

Smallholders' level of security

Of the smallholdings inspected, the research team's investigations revealed that there was no direct relationship between smallholders' security measures and the likelihood that they would be attacked. There was a considerable disparity in the levels of security employed by the inspected smallholdings which had been attacked. Some had comprehensive security measures (such as alarms, high walls with electric fencing, dogs, and the dwellings on the smallholding were clearly visible from the road), while others had no security measures in place (such as a fence or outside lights).

Cognisance must be taken, however, of the fact that the research team only inspected about a dozen smallholdings which had been attacked over a one-year period. The sample is consequently a small one and does not provide conclusive proof that there is no relationship between a smallholding's level of security and the likelihood that it will be attacked. The conclusion, however, can be drawn that even the best security measures are no guarantee against smallholding attacks.

Areas of attacks

Overall – looking at the whole Wierdabrug police area – there are no geographic patterns to the smallholding attacks. However, a high proportion of the attacks investigated occurred in the vicinity of shebeens (illegal taverns) and bars, and squatter and informal settlements.

The smallholding and rural areas within the Wierdabrug police district contain some 27 registered liquor licences. There are, moreover, a number of shebeens and taverns in the area which are not licenced. According to the police, shebeens and taverns are general crime hot-spots in the area. Criminals prey on intoxicated people to assault, rob and even rape them on their way home from shebeens and taverns. Criminals exploit the fact that their victims – who are on foot – are intoxicated, and that it is usually late at night or early in the morning when revellers go home. These kinds of attacks peak towards the end of the week or month when victims have been paid and carry relatively large amounts of cash.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that criminals from outside of the district frequent shebeens in the Wierdabrug area to gather information on the locality they want to victimise. Such criminals would befriend a local person. With the inebriating effect

of alcohol, a local labourer might reveal information on his employer – and his or her habits, security structures and possessions – vital to the criminal who is selecting his next target. As it is likely that local labourers would frequent a shebeen within walking distance of where they work, it would be logical (if shebeens are information gathering centres for criminals) that many of the smallholding attacks would occur within the vicinity of a local shebeen. Moreover, it is possible that outside criminals use the shebeens to recruit local people to assist them in their attacks on smallholdings.

Case studies

Attempted murder and armed robbery

In October 1998, Mr and Mrs A – a middle-aged couple – were returning home from church on a Sunday evening.¹ It was raining and Mrs A rushed from the car, in which she and her husband had travelled, to her house's front door to unlock it and switch off the house alarm. As Mr A got out of the car, he was accosted by three or four youths. They pushed him into the house. Mr A also saw a further three culprits remaining outside of the house. As he was being pushed into his house, Mr A struggled with his assailants. Two shots were fired by the assailant holding Mr A. Mr A was seriously injured in his arm and back. Mrs A then set off the alarm and the attackers fled.

Mrs A immediately phoned for an ambulance which arrived within minutes. She also phoned a police reservist in their area who also arrived at the crime scene within minutes. The police reservist then called the police who responded rapidly. Mr and Mrs A were also hooked up to a private armed response security company. They never responded to the activated alarm.

While the police's initial response was good, the follow-up by the detective service was poor. Mrs A claimed she had a clear view of one of the assailants, but the police never sought to develop an identikit of the identifiable culprit. Mr A's statement was only taken at the end of January 1999 – some three months after the attack. Moreover, one of the bullets fired by the assailants passed through Mr A's body and lodged itself into the lounge wall of his house. This discharged bullet was never taken by the police for the purposes of a ballistic test to see if the same firearm was used in the commission of any other crime(s). The second bullet fired that night was never found.

On the night of the attack, the A's house had an alarm system connected to a private armed rapid response security company. The windows of the house were covered with burglar guards. The property was surrounded by a fence of approximately 1.8

metres in height. The house was clearly visible from the road (it is approximately 30 to 40 metres from the road), and the house was lit up by two large spotlights on the roof, and five smaller outside lights attached to the house and along the driveway leading up to the house.

The A's property was not large, and the houses of their two neighbours were not more than 50 metres away. However, even though two shots were fired, the alarm was activated and Mrs A claimed that she screamed for help, neither of her neighbours came to her assistance or tried to ascertain what had happened.

Mr and Mrs A thought that the motive for the attack was theft as their assailants started looking around as soon as they had entered the house. At the time of the attack, two people who worked for Mr and Mrs A lived on the property: a woman who worked as a domestic servant inside the house, and her common law husband who worked as a gardener on the property. Both had worked for Mr and Mrs A for six years. The domestic servant initially claimed that she knew who the attackers were, but later denied it. She was an alcoholic and it appeared that the police did not take her utterances all too seriously. She disappeared shortly after the attack, and the police do not know her whereabouts.

Prior to the attack on Mr and Mrs A in October 1998, a number of other criminal incidents occurred on their smallholding. About six weeks prior to the attack, unknown persons broke through Mr and Mrs A's back kitchen door. The culprits entered the house, but it seemed that they were surprised and fled, as very little was taken. In response, Mr and Mrs A installed an iron gate on their back door, installed an alarm in their house and subscribed to a private armed response security firm.

About five weeks prior to the attack, the tyres were stolen off Mr and Mrs A's car which they had parked outside their garage. A week later, their car was stolen. The thieves could not open the electric gate, so they cut a large hole in the fence and pushed the stolen car through the hole.

Theft of motor vehicles

Mr B lives on a large smallholding with his wife and children, and his brother and his family. Also on the smallholding is a vehicle repair workshop where Mr B works with his brother and approximately 30 workers.

At the end of 1998, Mr B built a two metre high wall around his entire smallholding. Electrified wires run along the top of the wall. If the wires touch or are cut an alarm is activated. The wall is three kilometres long and cost half a million rand to build.

In October 1999, thieves carefully broke a large hole in the wall without disturbing the electrified wires on the top. The hole was broken into the wall at a point furthest from Mr B's house. The thieves then broke into the premises of the vehicle workshop, retrieved the keys for two bakkies and drove the bakkies out of the property of the smallholding though the hole in the wall – again without disturbing the electrified wires on top of the wall.

By virtue of the fact that the thieves knew where the keys for the bakkies were, and where a hidden immobiliser switch was inside the bakkies, it is likely that the thieves were employees, or former employees of Mr B, or had been briefed by one of his employees.

On discovering the theft the next morning, Mr B called the Wierdabrug police station which responded rapidly. Mr B, however, was disappointed with the follow-up by the police's detective service. While the police were first notified at 7h00 in the morning, the detectives only arrived at 15h30 to lift fingerprints.

Other security measures on the smallholding include two powerful floodlights which cover the whole workshop area where the vehicles were stolen. Mr B and his brother also had a number of dogs. Because the houses are far from the workshop, it is likely that the dogs did not hear anything.

Previous to the vehicle theft incident, Mr B experienced a number of minor incidents of theft in his workshop. About a year prior to the incident, someone had short-circuited the electrified wires on top of the wall surrounding the smallholding. This was done in such a way that the person doing this would have known how the alarm system connected to the fence worked. In other words, the probability was high that this was done by someone who had some inside knowledge of Mr B's security set-up.

Armed robbery

Ms C is a domestic worker who lived on a smallholding in a room attached to her employer's house. In April 1999, she, her child and two of her friends were sleeping when three youths (whom Ms C claimed came from a nearby squatter camp) broke into her room, threatened them with a gun and a knife and tied them up. The robbers then broke into the main house whereupon the alarm went off. The robbers took a video machine and some other household items and ran away.

Ms C managed to untie herself and phone the police, who took 30 minutes to arrive. The personnel of the private security company working for Ms C's employer arrived first at the scene of the crime. At the time of the incident, the smallholding was not

properly fenced. There were no dogs on the smallholding. The smallholding was well lit at night, however, with a number of lights around the perimeter of the house.

The smallholding had a history of escalating criminal victimisation. Two months prior to the incident, clothes were stolen from the washing line at night and a garden shed was broken into and some minor items stolen. The owner of the smallholding did not report this incident to the police. A month later, someone tampered with Ms C's employer's motor vehicle while it was parked on the smallholding during the night. This time, the matter was reported to the police who took a written statement from the vehicle's owner. To Ms C's recollection, no attempt was made by the police to lift any fingerprints from the tampered vehicle.

The rural protection plan in the Wierdabrug area

The structure

Structurally, the rural protection plan is working well in the Wierdabrug area. A captain of the Wierdabrug police is the chairman of the local Ground Level Operational Co-ordinating Committee (GOCOC). Members of the Pretoria East Commando and the SANDF's Army Group 15 are also represented on the GOCOC, as is the local agricultural union, and a representative of the Centurion city council which partly funds a non-profit section 21 security company which frequently assists the Wierdabrug police in their operations by providing vehicles and personnel.

Pretoria East Commando

The Wierdabrug area falls under the jurisdiction of the Pretoria East Commando. The commando is responsible for a large area stretching from Garsfontein in the east to Erasmia in the west, and Pretoria central in the north to Midrand in the south. The Pretoria East Commando has some 900 members of which 15% to 30% are active at any one time. There are about 150 commando members in the Wierdabrug area, of which 30 are fully trained area-bound reaction force members. Most of the remainder are home and hearth protection reaction force commando members.

The relationship between the Pretoria East Commando and the Wierdabrug police is good. There have been numerous joint patrols involving both organisations. Some commando members are also SAPS reservists, and vice versa.

Weaknesses in the commando's operational effectiveness:

- The Pretoria East Commando has limited resources and a lack of properly functioning non-armoured vehicles and radios. Unless the commando receives new vehicles, it is likely that the few remaining non-armoured vehicles at its disposal will cease functioning because of old age. This would severely affect the

commando's operational capacity. The commando is also suffering from a shortage of modern handheld radios. For example, it has no radios which can tune into the SAPS's radio frequency. As a result, during joint commando-SAPS operations, the communication between the two forces is severely limited. Pretoria East Commando can obtain SANDF Kenwood radios (with access to the SAPS's radio frequency) from Group 15 headquarters. However, this is a lengthy and bureaucratic process and takes too long in an emergency such as a smallholding attack. Cellular phones and the fact that some commando members are also SAPS reservists (by virtue of which they have access to SAPS radios) alleviate this problem somewhat. The situation is far from ideal, however. (The ostensibly trivial case of the radios is a good example of where a relatively small investment in a few radios could make a substantial and positive impact on the commando's ability to engage in joint operations with the SAPS after a smallholding attack.)

- The commando has a limited reach into the black community and consequently little advance intelligence from the black community in the Wierdabrug area. This is being addressed, and the commando has begun to train black volunteers from Laudium. This is a slow process, however, and there seems to be a degree of apprehension from some of the ordinary white commando members at the process of racially integrating the commando. This could delay the integration process within the commando. Moreover there are very few black commando members who live on the smallholdings or in the squatter and informal settlements in the Wierdabrug area. This is clearly a weakness in the rural protection plan, and is recognised as such by the commando's leadership. This weakness is being addressed, but it will take some time before the rural protection plan can benefit from the new integrative approach.
- A concern raised by the commando is that the area bound reaction force members are slow to mobilise. This is especially so during daytime hours on weekdays when most of these members are at work. By the time the commando's reaction force is mobilised, smallholding attackers have disappeared out of the area because of the high number of escape routes criss-crossing the district.

SAPS Wierdabrug

At the time of the research project (October 1999), the Wierdabrug police station had a total staff complement of 111, of whom 22 were administrative staff. Of the remaining 89 members, 11 were working on crime prevention duties. A further 23 members were detectives. The station had 25 vehicles, of which four were for crime prevention functions, and six for detective duties. According to the police, the Wierdabrug police station was understaffed by 47%. There is approximately one SAPS employee in the Wierdabrug police district for every 1 500 inhabitants in the

area. This is low by national standards, with about one SAPS employee for every 315 people living in South Africa.

The Wierdabrug police have adopted a sector policing approach. Two crime prevention members are devoted exclusively to the policing of smallholding areas in the police district. The station had approximately 30 trained police reservists, of whom six lived in the smallholding areas. Two of the six reservists who live in the smallholding area were also commando members.

The sector policing approach is beneficial to all concerned. Large parts of the smallholding areas in the Wierdabrug police district have badly marked roads and smallholdings. There are also many private and informal roads in the area which are not marked on any map. Such an area can be policed effectively only by police officers who know the geographical layout of the area intimately and are familiar with its terrain. Moreover, the sector policing approach allows the two police inspectors who are responsible for the smallholding areas to acquaint themselves with a relatively large number of its residents.

A further strength of the Wierdabrug police is the willingness of its leadership to cooperate with neighbouring police districts, especially the adjacent Erasmia police district which also includes a large number of smallholdings. This process of cooperation is facilitated by regular GOCOC meetings where SAPS members, who deal with crime on smallholdings, from Wierdabrug and Erasmia police are represented.

Members of the security forces felt that some of the smallholding attacks were related and involved the same people. Criminals would attack a smallholding in one police district and then attack another smallholding a few days or weeks later in another police district, and so forth. The culprits' strategy is to shift from one police district to the next with the hope that the police does not make the connection between these seemingly separate attacks. The good lines of communication which exist between the Wierdabrug and Erasmia police enable them (at least in these two areas) to develop a better understanding of the smallholding attacks which are occurring in their areas and identify any trends which might assist them to apprehend the culprits involved.

Weaknesses in the operational effectiveness of the SAPS

- *Resources:* The Wierdabrug police's operational capacity suffers from a lack of resources, primarily in terms of personnel and functioning vehicles. As has been mentioned, the station is 47% understaffed. Crucially, the Wierdabrug police can only devote two full-time police inspectors for crime prevention duties in its

smallholding areas. As these two police officers work in a pair and generally work eight hour shifts, it means that the smallholding areas are not policed (for crime prevention purposes) for some 16 hours out of very 24 hours.

- *Public apathy*: There is a high degree of apathy on the side of smallholders to get involved in security structures such as the police's reservists or the commando. Most of the victimised smallholders even expressed little interest in participating in the available security structures.

The reasons for this lack of participation were varied. Most smallholders argued that they did not have the time to get involved. Many were also under the misconception that becoming a police reservist or commando member would entail long periods away from home to man roadblocks and do crime prevention duties in areas away from their neighbourhood. None of the smallholders interviewed had heard of the rural protection plan, and virtually none of them had heard of the commando's home and hearth protection force membership option, whereby participants do not have to do commando duties away from their homes.

- *Geography*: The Wierdabrug police area is easily accessible from a number of major roads which criss-cross the area. For example, the N1 national highway, the Krugersdorp highway, and the old Johannesburg road all pass through, or are immediately adjacent to the police area. This allows criminals to make a quick escape from the area after they have committed a crime. According to the police, it is possible to get onto a major arterial road or highway from anywhere in the Wierdabrug police area within five minutes in a fast car, and out of the police area in less than ten minutes. It is consequently almost impossible to implement any kind of contingency plan where the security forces can cordon off the area after a smallholding attack with the aim of trapping the suspects in the area and finding them through the use of dogs and trackers.

The Wierdabrug police area is not particularly mountainous and has few major natural obstacles such as rivers. As a result, numerous informal roads and paths have developed throughout the area. These are also used by criminals to escape quickly from the area.

The Wierdabrug police district contains numerous squatter and informal settlements. These settlements have a highly transient population as people are continuously moving out to get closer to Johannesburg and Pretoria, and new people are moving in from outlying areas to look for work. It is consequently relatively easy for persons who have participated in a smallholding attack (and

who cannot flee from the area because they do not have access to a vehicle) to 'disappear' in one of the many squatter and informal settlements. After waiting for a few hours after the smallholding attack (and for the security force activity to wane), such persons can then board a taxi and be driven out of the area. Because of the high volume of traffic, the numerous roads and the anonymity provided by a densely populated area, the security forces are virtually unable to apprehend smallholding attackers once they have disappeared from the scene of the crime.

The Wierdabrug police station is situated in the northern-most corner of the district. Because the police district is large, it takes a police vehicle up to 20 minutes to drive from the police station to the other side of the district.

The Wierdabrug police district covers a number of magisterial districts and six municipal areas (Pretoria, Centurion, Krugersdorp, Midrand, and small sections of Randburg and Sandton). Crimes which, for example, occur in Midrand (but within the Wierdabrug police district) are often reported to the Midrand police as the public are unaware of the exact police district boundaries. It often takes one to two weeks for the docket, which has been opened in Midrand, to reach the Wierdabrug police. In the interim, no investigation takes place of the reported crime. By the time Wierdabrug detectives arrive at the scene of the crime, some two weeks later, the crime scene is ruined and of little use for the collection of forensic evidence.

- *Detective support:* If the security forces are unable to make an arrest immediately after a smallholding attack, their only hope is to solve the case through good detective work. However, the detective work in respect of smallholding attacks is often less than adequate (see 'case studies' above).

Part of the problem is simply a shortage of experienced personnel. Because the Wierdabrug police are also responsible for a highly populated urban area, they have to deal with numerous cases of housebreaking and theft out of motor vehicles, especially over weekends. As a result, the limited detective capacity of the Wierdabrug police is torn between the district's urban and smallholding areas. With more serious crimes, the Wierdabrug police rely on specialist detective support from Pretoria (eg, ballistic tests, taking of blood samples at a crime scene, and the taking of photographs). Because such specialist detectives are responsible for a number of policing districts, there is frequently a lengthy delay between the time of a smallholding attack, and the time the first detective arrives on the crime scene.

Note

- 1 Real names have been omitted to protect the confidentiality of those involved.