

CHAPTER 10

EXPERIENCES OF VEHICULAR CRIMES

Like murders, vehicular crimes are also represented by a rather small number of cases, due in part to the fact that only 28% of the households in inner Johannesburg own a motor vehicle. Working with a small number of cases limits the usefulness of the data, but some general statements can be made.

Car theft

Forty-eight people reported having a vehicle stolen in the last year, out of the 309 households reporting having a vehicle. This means 15% of those owning vehicles in our sample had their car stolen in last year.

Just under half of these thefts occurred near the home, with another 42% elsewhere in inner Johannesburg. While details were not taken on the make and model of the vehicle, it is likely, given the poverty of the area, that many of these cars were older vehicles. Over a third of these vehicles had no security features, but 30% had an alarm and 19% had a gear lock.

The vast majority of victims (85%) reported the theft to the police (41 cases), despite the fact that two thirds of the vehicles were not insured. The police clearly understand the importance of giving case numbers in cases of vehicular theft, because all 41 who reported the crime said they had received a case number. Thus, two thirds of the victims did not need a case number for insurance purposes, but all of them recall receiving one nonetheless.

This supports the argument that, for other crime types, those who say they did not receive a case number indeed did not receive one. Whether the number was issued and not delivered remains unclear, but it is possible that reported cases are not always being recorded. The fact that many people say they did not receive a case number cannot be simply ascribed to faulty memory.

One reason for victims without insurance reporting the crime is the high level of police performance with regard to vehicle theft. Overall, 61% of those who

reported the theft said they had been contacted by a detective. The vehicle was recovered in 14 cases, or about 30% of the time. In half of these cases, the vehicle was found elsewhere in Johannesburg, and half outside the area. This indicates that a large portion of vehicles stolen in the area are moved elsewhere for sale.

Despite the fact that 14 vehicles out of 42 stolen were recovered, an arrest was made in only three cases, according to the respondents. This makes one wonder how the other 11 cars were recovered. It is possible that these vehicles were found in raids on large chop shops, or recovered from drivers who bought them from the thief, and no charges were brought on the individual theft our respondents suffered.

Although the number is small, it is alarming that, of the three cases in which an arrest was made and the victim called to court, two of the respondents said that they had been induced to change their testimony through bribes or threats. This suggests an organised activity in which witness intimidation or influencing is part of doing business.

Hijacking

Thirty people (3%) reported having been the victim of a hijacking, and two people reported attempts, in inner Johannesburg in the previous year. This is an individual crime, rather than a household crime, because respondents could be hijacked while driving another person's vehicle.

Most of the hijackings occurred near home (41%) or elsewhere in inner Johannesburg (59%). Most (58%) reported that both threats and violence were used during the crime. With 97% of these cases involving a gun, it seems nearly impossible to commit this crime without one.

Hijacking is a particularly brutal form of robbery. Injuries were sustained in a surprising 34% of the cases, compared to 22% for other forms of robbery. Since nearly all of these crimes were committed with a firearm, it is not surprising that 91% of the injuries required medical attention. One death was reported, though clearly not that of the reporting victim. While the small number of cases makes it impossible to generalise, it seems your chances of being shot or otherwise seriously injured during an inner Johannesburg hijacking could be as great as one in three.

Hijacking seems to be a group activity. Most of these cases involve more than one assailant, with 31% involving two and 66% involving three or more. In contrast to the car theft cases, hijack victims always saw their perpetrators, and report a variety of ethnic types being involved. Eighty-eight percent of these hijackings were reported, despite the fact that only 38% of these vehicles were insured.

Once again, one reason for reporting was probably stellar police performance. All but one of the victims received a case number. Detectives followed up in just over half of the cases, but three arrests (10%) were made. Oddly, none of these victims were required to attend court, and so none were subject to the bribes or threats found in vehicular theft cases. The vehicle was recovered in a surprisingly high one third of the cases.

Implications

While the numbers of cases are very small, possible implications of this data include:

- Recovery rates of about one in three vehicles stolen suggest good police performance in the way that matters most to the victims.
- Victims recall being given case numbers in the vast majority of cases, even when not insured, which suggests that, for other crime types, the suggestion that a case number was not given should be taken seriously.
- It appears that very few hijackings occur without the use of firearms, so gun control could have direct impacts on this crime type.
- More research is needed on the possibility that vehicle theft syndicates are involved in witness tampering.