

## CHAPTER 7

# EXPERIENCES OF ROBBERY

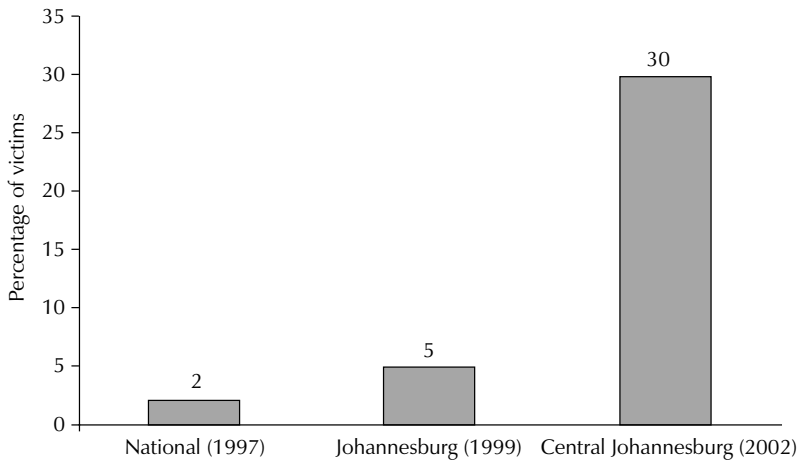
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The most commonly reported crime experienced was robbery, which was defined for the respondents as “the taking of property by force or threat of force.” A remarkable 30% of those polled in the initial survey (325 cases) had personally been robbed in the last year in inner Johannesburg. This level of robbery is unparalleled anywhere else in the world, and past surveys of Johannesburg in general have failed to detect such high levels (Figure 7.1). If the Census population figures are correct, this means that 33,600 robberies took place in the 23.5 square kilometres that make up the two station areas over the course of a year. It suggests that those who live in inner Johannesburg for three years are virtually assured of being violently relieved of their property at some point.

These figures almost defy belief until the police figures and the rate of under-reporting are taken into consideration. Based on the number of robberies reported in the past, the two stations could be projected to record nearly 10,000 robberies during the period covered by the survey. If, as the survey indicates, only 36% of these robberies are reported to the police, the survey estimates gel with the police statistics, although problems with the Census figures and non-resident reporting complicate this analysis.

### **Nature of the offence**

Also remarkable was the high level of violence associated with these crimes. Guns were used in over half (56%) of the cases reported, with knives featuring in another 26%. These are not simple purse snatchings, but robberies that would be classed as ‘aggravated’ had charges been filed. Over a fifth (22%) of the cases resulted in injury, and 60% of these injuries required medical attention. This means that in a shocking 13% of the cases, these robberies were accompanied by assault serious enough to result in substantial injury. In three cases, the victims reported that someone died. Either robberies in inner Johannesburg are uncommonly violent, or only the most serious offences were reported to the fieldworkers.

**Figure 7.1: Comparative robbery victimisation rates, one year period**

Sources: Stats SA, UNCRI

This suggests that getting the property was not all that the offenders were after, and that these crimes were somewhat 'expressive' in their nature. Robbery becomes the preferred method of acquiring stolen property (over simple theft or burglary) when there is a need for immediate cash (as with drug addicts) or where the violent confrontation is, to some extent, an end in itself, a means of expressing anger and frustration. Alternatively, given the rough qualities of the neighbourhood, it is possible that successful robbery in inner Johannesburg requires active violence to assure compliance.

Also frightening was the public nature of these offences, which indicates the brazenness with which they were committed. Nearly 80% of these incidents took place in some public place, including half that occurred on the street in a residential area. In 63% of the cases, the victim was alone, and over 90% of the robbers were in groups of two or more. In fact, in over 60% of the cases, the robbers numbered three or more. It is highly unlikely the victims attempted to resist under these circumstances, which makes the violence seem all the more gratuitous.

Because robbery is a crime in which the victim generally confronts the perpetrator face to face, it was possible to ask the victims about the identity of their

assailants. Just under a third felt that the perpetrators were locally based, although they did not know them. In 14% of the cases, the robbers were known to the victim. In two cases, the robbers were identified as police officials.

The people of inner Johannesburg live in a multi-national community, and this exposure made them confident enough to even identify the robbers by their national origin. If these identifications were accurate, Zimbabweans were over-represented among the robbers, with 38 cases against them, accounting for 12% of all robberies reported. Zimbabweans make up just 6% of the survey population. Mozambicans were held responsible for 4% of the crimes, South African coloureds for 4%, and South African blacks for 56%.

Of course, it is impossible to say whether these perceptions were substantiated or merely the result of popular prejudice. In 1999, the SAPS Brixton Murder and Robbery Squad publicly blamed 60% of all bank and serious house robberies in Johannesburg on Zimbabweans<sup>20</sup>, and this image may have endured in the public imagination.

During the ISS time use study, the local police indicated that a good deal of the street robberies are tied to people getting intoxicated after getting their monthly paycheque, and then being relieved of their funds when they are too inebriated to resist. It has also been postulated that the need for drugs may be a major factor driving robbery, particularly in Hillbrow.<sup>21</sup> The reports of the victims back up these contentions to a small degree. The victim reported believing that the criminal was under the influence of drugs or alcohol in 15% of the cases. Victims admitted to being under the influence of alcohol or drugs in 6% of the cases, but in another 3%, they weren't sure if they were intoxicated at the time or not.

Cash was taken in half of the robberies, followed in popularity by electronic equipment (48%), and jewellery (27%) (multiple items were often taken). According to assessments of the police gathered during the ISS time use study, most of the 'electronic equipment' was probably cell-phones, although this distinction was not made in the survey. Surprisingly, only one case of robbery of a firearm was reported by the respondents. Most of the property was uninsured (87%) and was recovered by the police in only 2% of the cases. This leaves most of the victims with little incentive to go to the police with the matter.

In seven of the eight cases in which property was recovered, it was recovered in inner Johannesburg. This suggests that property stolen in the area remains in the area, but caution is required in making this assumption. Recovery of

property is most likely if the offender is apprehended very close to the time of the offence. In these cases, there is simply not time for the booty to be relocated to another destination.

## Reporting

It is therefore not surprising that only 36% of these robberies were reported to the police. This figure is low in comparison to other surveys in South Africa, where the percentage reporting ranges between 40% and 50%, and low in comparison to the other two major crimes surveyed, burglary (66%) and assault (47%) (Figure 4.3).

Many of those who did not report said it was not important enough or necessary (46%), a common reason for not reporting, often reflected in international surveys. But over a quarter of the respondents said they did not report because they did not trust the police. This 25% is cause for concern.

Failure to report may also be tied to unpleasant experiences in the past. Only 42% of those who did report said they were happy with the initial police response, which was low in comparison to burglary (50%) and assault (55%). If past experiences were as bad as the present one, many could be expected not to report again.

Even those who did report the crime may not have had the incident recorded in the official police figures. As discussed in Chapter 4, a case number is given when a docket is opened for a complaint. Failure to open a docket means that the case will not be investigated further and will not be recorded in the official statistics. Having a case number is vital for the victim as well, because without it, it will be very difficult to track the progress of the case. Only 84% of victims of robbery polled reported receiving a case number, when, in theory, all of them should have. It is possible that they did receive the number but simply did not realise its significance, but this too could be considered a failing on the part of the police.

## Follow-up

Since the survey asked about crimes that occurred in the last year, it is possible that the police had not yet had the time to follow up on all of the cases reported by the respondents at the time of the poll. This applies to robbery as

well as the other crime types. In addition, the number of cases in which follow-up was reported was so small for most crime types that it becomes impossible to generalise. Nonetheless, the figures do have some value, as long as their importance is not overstated.

It may be that detectives had not yet had a chance to contact the victim, but unless there was a crime wave immediately before the survey, it does appear that reporting a crime does not guarantee that an investigation will follow. The respondents said detectives made contact with them in only 33% of the cases where the crime was reported. Of course, not all cases merit further investigation. In cases where victims report at the outset that they would not be able to identify the robbers, where there are no additional witnesses, and where the property taken is not unique (such as cash), there is very limited scope for follow-up. If victims have this explained to them by the police at the outset, it is possible satisfaction levels might be higher.

Only 11 of the 325 victims knew of an arrest being made. This represents an arrest rate of 3%, considerably lower than the 15% 'detection rate' (including all cases referred to court, declared unfounded, and withdrawn) claimed by the police for aggravated robbery based on recorded crimes.<sup>22</sup> It is possible that arrests were made and plea bargains entered without requiring notification of the victim, but failing to report this success to those who value it most represents a failure to truly complete the case.

Six of these 11 who knew of an arrest were required to attend court and four of these six were required to attend four times. This finding was not surprising – it was in keeping with what was discovered in the ISS survey for the National Prosecuting Authority in 2002.<sup>23</sup> But this represents a substantial incursion into the victim's time, whose input in most robbery cases is fairly straightforward.

Only half, three people, had testified at trial at the time of the survey, and there had been two convictions, both resulting in jail sentences. While more arrests may still be forthcoming, this represents a conviction rate of six out of every 1,000 robberies. However, three victims reported that the case was still pending, and if all three cases are won, it is possible that that this rate could be pumped up to 1.5%.

At the end of all of this, only 22% of those who reported the crime said they were happy with the way the authorities handled the case, with equal numbers blaming the uniformed police and the detectives. However, half of those

contacted by detectives were satisfied, which suggests that more follow-up would go a long way in improving client satisfaction. Of those contacted by a detective who were not satisfied, 60% blamed the detectives.

## Implications

The results provide some basic suggestions for policing robberies in inner Johannesburg:

- Half of these robberies are conducted on residential streets, most by groups of three or more, about half with at least one firearm. This would suggest that large and well-armed anti-robbery patrols, targeting and searching groups of local young men, would be an effective strategy.
- The public should be educated on how to respond to a robbery situation, so as to avoid unnecessary violence.
- All victims reporting should be given a case number, and the significance of this number should be impressed on the victim.
- When reporting, victims should be informed as to whether or not to expect detective follow-up, and detectives should follow up, at least by telephone, in as many cases as possible.
- An ongoing campaign to win public confidence should be conducted in order to win over the 25% of victims who do not report robberies because they “do not trust the police”.