

## CHAPTER 5

# PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ABOUT CRIME

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Public perceptions of crime are important since they shape how people think about, and respond to, crime. Perceptions about crime are influenced by many factors such as actual experiences, media reports, and recent events that may be discussed among family and friends a particular community. Fear of crime and negative public opinion of the police and justice system can lead to problems like vigilantism, under-reporting of crime and unwillingness to co-operate with the police as witness or informants.<sup>37</sup> Crime reduction strategies should include projects to reduce fear of crime and improve perceptions of the criminal justice system. Concerns about crime can, however, also have positive consequences, such as encouraging people to take more personal precautions, or changing their behaviour to avoid victimisation. Strategies can reinforce such behaviour, and at the very least, encourage it where it is absent.

### Fear of crime

The victim survey data showed that over half (55%) of the people surveyed in the metro believed that crime has been increasing since 2000. About 30% said it had stayed the same and only 15% thought it was decreasing. There were no significant variations based on race, gender or area type.

Concerns about crime were not random or generalised: nearly half (44%) of those surveyed said there was a specific area that they were afraid of in their neighbourhood. When grouped into general categories, these areas were:

- streets (34%);
- open fields or parks (23%);
- areas near shops (17%); and
- shebeens (14%).

Despite these concerns, less than one third (32%) of survey respondents said they changed their behaviour because crime. More whites (41%) and Indians (35%) than blacks (30%) and coloureds (22%) indicated that this was the case. The most common types of behaviour change were:

- coming home early and staying indoors (69%);
- being more aware of their surroundings (31%);
- installing an armed response or home alarm (2%).

#### Implications for strategy development

Many of the places that people are most afraid of are used for shopping and commuting, and as such will be difficult to avoid. The specific sites that are of most concern to the public should be identified and interventions developed that help people to feel safer, even if actual crime levels are not high in these areas.

It is disturbing that a majority of people simply stay indoors for fear of criminal victimisation. A strategy should aim to empower the public to get involved in crime prevention activities, which will build confidence that crime can be beaten, and at the same time reduce fear of crime. People should be encouraged to pass on information about crime in their neighbourhoods to the police. For their part, the authorities should respond to such public efforts, and should distribute information about specific crime hot-spot areas, how to avoid victimisation, how to respond if it does happen, and what to expect from service providers such as the police and courts.

### Youth perceptions about crime

During the course of interviews and discussions with various stakeholders in the NMMM, the role of the youth in crime was repeatedly mentioned. Young people were identified as being vulnerable to both victimisation and offending. As a result, focus groups were conducted, and the views of young people explored about who commits crime and why they become involved in criminality.

Over half of the participants said they knew someone who is involved in crime - most were referring to friends and relatives, and some to local groups or gangs. When asked about offenders in general, young people were of the opinion that groups of between two to six people committed crime. Males of between 18 and 30 years were largely identified as the culprits, although criminal careers were believed to start when boys were as young as 14 or 15. Typically, they would commit petty crimes at first, working with older and more experienced criminals. Thirteen male participants indicated that they had committed crime in the past - mostly robbery, followed by theft and drug use.

The youth also spoke about problems relating to drugs. Young people between 14 and 18 years were believed to be involved in drug abuse and related

crimes, whereas older youths were perceived to be into drug dealing. In some instances older criminals use children to sell drugs and commit other crimes such as burglary. Some boys and girls worked together to sell drugs at schools. Female perpetrators were predominantly believed to be involved in shoplifting and drug abuse (mainly smoking dagga).

The reasons commonly given by participants for why youths commit crime were related to poverty and unemployment. They also mentioned peer pressure, lack of parental and family guidance, lack of education, the need for recognition and respect, and drug use.

#### **Implications for strategy development**

- The youth seem informed about certain crimes, such as robbery and drug related offences, and could provide a valuable source of information about the nature of these crimes, as well as their reduction.
- Criminal careers seem to start at a young age and involve petty crimes. Children are also said to be involved in drug related crimes, some of which take place at school. Many of the reasons that young people get involved in crime relate to parenting, socialisation, and schooling. These factors all point to the role that schools, parents and the Department of Education should play in strategies aimed at reducing the chances that young people will turn to crime.