

CHAPTER 6

PUBLIC RESPONSE TO CRIME

Knowledge about how members of the public respond to crime, and to their perceptions about crime, is important for strategy development. It indicates whether there is a willingness to become involved in crime prevention activities, and the extent to which people take personal responsibility for their own safety and that of their households. The victim survey included questions about what people do to protect themselves and their homes from crime, as well as their level of knowledge of, and participation in, community police forums. The views of young people about crime prevention measures were also explored in the focus groups.

Measures taken as protection against crime

When the survey respondents were asked about how they protect their families and homes against crime and violence, the following results were obtained:

- most responses (58%) related to some sort of target hardening (e.g. fences, walls, burglar proofing);
- over a third (35%) said they do nothing to protect themselves;
- 27% mentioned having dogs;
- 7% said they carry a weapon for protection; and
- only 4% mentioned private security.

White (73%) and Indian (69%) respondents were much more likely to have adopted target hardening measures than coloureds (40%) and blacks (17%). The latter groups were most likely to say they do nothing to protect themselves from crime. This trend no doubt relates to wealth disparities between the race groups that affect people's ability to pay for target hardening measures. Nevertheless, the results are worrying considering the prevalence of burglary in the NMMM, and the likelihood that even basic target hardening can reduce the occurrence of this crime.

Implications for strategy development

The results suggest a sense of helplessness among black and coloured residents of the NMMM, who seem to be investing much less than other race groups in their personal safety and the protection of their homes. Awareness campaigns highlighting how crime can be prevented should focus on these groups, and encourage an investment in target hardening where possible. Other options could include providing a basic subsidy for target hardening equipment such as fencing and burglar proofing, or lobbying the Department of Housing for the inclusion of such measures in the contracts of low-cost housing suppliers.

Community anti-crime initiatives

Protection measures need not be limited to what money can buy, however. Community initiatives against crime such as neighbourhood watch schemes, community patrols, and community police forums can also help to secure an area from certain types of offences. However, these initiatives were just as rare in the NMMM as the physical protection measures covered above. The following results illustrate this:

- Only 15% of survey respondents knew of any anti-crime initiative operating in their area.
- Public awareness and knowledge of community policing forums was also low. Only 34% of respondents knew what a CPF is. Of these, only 26% said a CPF existed in their area. More blacks (38%) and coloureds (31%) said there was a CPF in their area than Indians (22%) and whites (17%).
- The means of communicating about CPFs is very informal: most (64%) of those who knew about a CPF in their area, acquired this knowledge through word of mouth. Only 12% heard about the CPF from the police.
- Of the few respondents who said a CPF existed in their area, only 9% said they participated in its activities regularly, while 28% participated occasionally.

Implications for strategy development

Public knowledge of, and participation in, community policing forums or other community anti-crime initiatives is low. The NMMM could assist with efforts to improve and formalise the system of communicating about such projects. Local councillors could play an active role in crime prevention projects in their wards. The challenge is to provide information about how, specifically, people can help rather than expecting participation in broad, undefined crime related activities.

Youth views on crime prevention

Focus group participants were asked to comment on community anti-crime structures in their areas, how schools and teachers were dealing with crime, and the role of families and parents.

Community anti-crime initiatives

Most participants from KwaZakhele/New Brighton, KwaNobuhle, and to a certain extent Motherwell, said the most active community structure dealing with crime in their area was a community crime watch named Amadlozi. The municipal Community Based Volunteers, anti-crime units and patrols by community policing forums and concerned community members, were also mentioned.

The participants thought the anti-crime units and community patrols were random, less effective, unsustainable and sometimes abused their power. There were mixed responses about the role of Amadlozi. A few participants said that Amadlozi was more effective than the police in dealing with crime because after an intervention by Amadlozi, "criminals do not go free". This suggests vigilante activity, and indeed many participants viewed Amadlozi as a vigilante group that ends up committing crime under the pretext of fighting it. Comments in this regard included: "Amadlozi tortures suspects for information before they are taken to the police", and "often the Amadlozi beat up the wrong people because they do not investigate the cases properly".

Measures taken by schools

Youth perceptions on how teachers respond to crime, were mixed. Many participants were sympathetic to teachers, saying they try their best but are not coping well. They felt that crime problems are enormous and teachers' powers and scope to respond are limited. Some also said that teachers fear to intervene as they could be victimised by gangs or learners that they discipline.

On a more positive note, several youths said that some teachers work with pupils' families and the police to sort out crimes committed by youngsters. Some noted that the suspension and expulsion of students was not helpful because it pushed them further towards criminal careers. For example, some stated that, "expelled youth move freely in the community and commit crime".

A few participants said teachers and schools are not doing anything about crime. This was evident in statements such as, "teachers do not usually do

anything because they feel that they are...not parents", and "schools are not doing anything - educators drink in shebeens with scholars and this leads to the disintegration of respect".

The role of parents

Youth perceptions about parental roles and parenting in general were negative. Most felt that parents were directly or indirectly supporting crime by being either over-protective or too permissive. Some noted that parents had given up on their parental responsibilities. It was, however, also acknowledged that some parents struggle to supervise their children because of work pressure. Participants noted that some parents do try to intervene in their children's life by providing the necessary guidance, while others go to the extent of taking their children to the police if they have committed a crime.

Implications for strategy development

- The results suggest that youth are somewhat alienated from the institutions responsible for their development and socialisation, such as parents/the family, and schools. Given that young people are especially likely to be victims and offenders, crime prevention strategies should aim to include youth wherever possible, but particularly with regard to schools-related projects. In this regard, it is essential that parents also participate.
- The focus group study highlights the importance of inter-departmental co-ordination. The metro will need to engage the Departments of Social Development and Education to assess the problems experienced by children and families, and to develop interventions that prevent some youth drifting into a life of crime.
- Trust in institutions of authority could also be built by involving youth in activities of the municipality. For example, 'youth councillors' could be selected to represent their schools or organised community groups. The youth councillors could be invited to attend council meetings as observers. They could also participate in forums where they could interact with councillors and municipal officials.
- The role of the Amadlozi should be investigated to establish the extent to which the organisation contributes to crime (as a vigilante group), or could assist crime prevention practitioners as a community based anti-crime initiative.