

CHAPTER 4

RANDFONTEIN (TOEKOMSRUS)

Randfontein is an old mining town about 40km west of central Johannesburg. It is situated on the periphery of the West Rand policing area, with Krugersdorp to its north, Roodepoort to its northeast, and Soweto to its east. A district of farms and smallholdings lies to its west. It has an estimated population of 130,000. Like many Gauteng and Free State mining towns, the industry it serves is shrinking, and unemployment levels appear to have been rising steadily over the last two decades.

The station jurisdiction has been divided into seven sectors. The first comprises Randfontein's African township, Mohlakeng, which is home to about 50% of Randfontein's population. At the time of my visit, the station was in the process of dividing Mohlakeng into two sectors, each with its own sector manager and dedicated sector patrol van. Sector 2 is responsible for policing Randfontein's coloured township, Toekomsrus, as well as an adjacent informal settlement and a small residential section of the central town. The third sector covers Randfontein's Central Business District. Sectors 4 and 5 are middle class, largely white, suburban areas. The sixth sector is a smallholding district and the seventh a large farming district which extends westwards from the outskirts of Randfontein.

Toekomsrus

Randfontein's Sector 2 was chosen for this study. The bulk of the sector's jurisdiction consists of Toekomsrus, Randfontein's coloured township. Toekomsrus is composed largely of modest, freestanding formal houses. Its layout is typical of 1970s apartheid township-planning: concentric layers of crescent-shaped streets, the outermost layer, Diamant Street, forming a closed circle around the periphery of the township. There are four schools, a post office, a sports ground and a cemetery. It is a low-income, working class community with a high unemployment rate. Aside from Toekomsrus, the northeastern corner of the Sector 2 is home to an informal settlement known as the Dumping Ground. The settlement is quite literally built on a rubbish dump. Many of its 500 or so residents eke out a living sifting through the rubbish for edible food, building materials, and merchandise to sell. Station

management estimates that Sector 2 is home to about 30,000 people. The sector is policed by a fulltime sector manager, one 24-hour sector patrol van and seven sector-dedicated detectives.

The crime profile of Toekomsrus is typical of a small, low-income Gauteng community. With the exception of residential burglary and theft, the sector's priority crimes are all contact crimes and cluster around weekend evenings. In August 2004, for instance, the last month for which stats were available at the time of writing, Toekomsrus reported 19 cases of robbery and armed robbery, 16 of assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm (assault GBH), 14 of assault, 22 of residential burglary, six theft out of a motor vehicle, 15 of other theft, and 14 of malicious damage to property. There was one murder and three attempted murders. Most (88%) of reported crimes occurred on weekend evenings. The majority of assault and malicious damage to property arose out of domestic violence complaints. Almost all contact crimes, whether committed in private homes or in public places, involved men under the influence of alcohol. The sector's crime patterns are discussed in more detail below under the section headings 'Identifying patterns and preventing crimes' and 'Saturday night patrol'.

The sector manager

Sector 2's manager has the dream profile of a grassroots community policing leader. He has lived in Toekomsrus since childhood and is a figure of some standing in his community. He recently served for eight years as chairman of the governing body at one of Toekomsrus's schools, is a leading figure in his church, and runs weekly Sunday school classes. From victim support groups, to religious bodies, to neighbourhood watches, there isn't a single organ of civil society in Toekomsrus with which he is not intimately familiar. The combination of his informal civic authority and the authority conferred on him by his uniform is quite extraordinary to witness. Walking down any Toekomsrus street with the sector manager is to observe the work of a man who is, *de facto*, part social worker, part counsellor, part policeman, part community elder. Problems – any and all problems imaginable – follow him like pins to a magnet. A few examples give a sense of the texture of his working life:

- On a routine visit to a primary school, a woman spots the sector manager in the parking lot, drags her ten-year-old son by the scruff of the neck to him, and explains that her son disappears every afternoon and comes home after nine 'o clock at night. The sector manager assumes his diffuse role of policeman/lay counsellor/community elder and quizzes the boy on

what he does in the evenings, where he goes, and why he does not communicate with his mother. He tells the boy that if he or his sector patrol finds him on the street after dusk they will pick him up and put him in the back of their van. "You see," the mother says to her son. "What you are doing is so serious the police are involved now!"

- A few seconds after leaving the school grounds, a woman on the pavement hails the sector manager's van and tells him she is having trouble with her husband. He makes an appointment to visit her that evening. Presumably he will be mediating a family conflict.
- His next stop is the Dumping Ground. As soon as he gets out of his van, about half a dozen residents of the informal settlement, all of whom know him by name, surround him and tell him that members of the street committee have established a kangaroo court and punish people by not allowing them to go to work for a week at a time. They also complain that the street committee is demanding R20 from residents in return for ANC and NNP membership cards. He arranges to hold a community meeting the following day.

Sector managing in this style means that the bulk of his work consists of micro-level problem-solving. Much of his role extends well beyond policing functions and substitutes for the work of other agencies. In the Dumping Ground, for instance, he has called in the Department of Social Development to do a census of children in the informal settlement to identify which kids are not going to school. He has attended a series of meetings with the local Council to negotiate a mutually acceptable relocation site. (The Council wanted to move the Dumping Ground community to an informal settlement in Mohlakeng, but residents refused. An alternative site has to be found.)

Spending time with the Toekomsrus sector manager during the daylight hours deceives you into believing that policing in Toekomsrus has returned to that nostalgic, idealised philosophy of the police officer said to have been practiced in nineteenth century Britain: his job was not to enforce the law as such but to ensure that "the individuals of the state, like members of a well-governed family, are bound to conform their general behaviour to the rules of propriety, good neighbourhood and good manners, and to be decent, industrious and effective in their respective stations."³⁵

The Sector Crime Forum

There is a world of difference, however, between a community that leans on its local police to solve *ad hoc* problems and a community that is prepared to

be mobilised as a partner in preventing crime. Nowhere is this disjuncture as visible as in the problems experienced in constituting a functional and productive Sector Crime Forum (SCF). The first forum, established in early 2004, collapsed in August of that year after the majority of its members stopped attending meetings. The sector manager hastily convened a second forum, consisting largely of a small batch of new people, which began its work in September, a month before the time of writing this monograph.

While the sector manager desperately wants the SCF to be mobilised into crime prevention projects, SCF members themselves appear to understand the forum largely as an opportunity to express dissatisfaction with the manner in which they are policed. For instance, when this research was being conducted in Toekomsrus, the SCF was in the process of organising a march in protest against poor policing. The SCF was not entirely sure what, in particular, they were marching against. Each SCF member the researcher interviewed had his or her own personal reason, ranging from distress caused by a murder, to the presence of drug dealers at a school, to a spate of street robberies. At the SCF at which the proposed march was discussed, a ward councillor suggested that the march be convened, not against the police, but against crime. "Do you have a crime prevention plan?" the councillor asked. "What, precisely, are you mobilising the community to do? What exactly do you want from the police?" She was met with blank stares.

The irony is stark. The sector manager's primary resource is a single patrol van; he desperately needs civilians to play a subsidiary role in policing. Yet the civilians he meets regard themselves as victims of under-resourced policing; their most voluble and energetic campaign is the persistent demand for an extra patrol van!

It appears, from my brief experience, that citizen passivity in Toekomsrus is, in part, symptomatic of the community's political identity. They are a minority coloured community in a predominantly African and white province. Rightly or wrongly, many regard themselves as victims of discrimination. Many residents I met spoke bitterly of the RDP housing and community centre construction projects in progress in the African township of Mohlakeng across the road. Residents' relation to the police is symptomatic of the alienation they feel towards state agencies in general.

What is crucial to point out here is that the sector manager's status as a respected community member does not appear to ameliorate this alienation.

The following comments, made by SCF members, are emblematic. "We trust the sector manager, but we do not trust his superiors." Or: "The sector manager is doing his best but his white boss won't give him the resources to do his job." Or: "The sector manager understands our problems, but his organisation does not." In other words, community policing in Toekomsrus does not appear to have bridged the divide between residents and the policing bureaucracy. Instead, residents have dragged the sector manager to their side of the bridge! "The sector manager is one of us, not one of them". He is a respected community member before he is a policeman. Residents simply co-opt their sector manager as a fellow victim. The divide between the community and the police remains, and the task of mobilising residents as crime prevention partners remains inadequate.

Given his status in the area, the current sector manager is better qualified to perform the tasks of community mobilisation than anyone. The problem, in other words, is structural rather than a failure of local leadership. It is buried deep in the political and cultural fabric of the community. Were an outsider, or indeed a less respected community member, appointed as sector manager, he or she would probably have been shunned by residents.

Having said that, there are several solvable problems that fuel residents' sense of frustration. The sector manager has an office at the satellite station, but it has no furniture, so he is based in town. He does not have his own vehicle, and is often stranded in town for days on end. For residents, the fact that the SAPS cannot make provision for the sector manager to do his work is symptomatic of bureaucratic indifference to their plight.

Second, the SCF believes, rightly or wrongly, that the detective branch fails to inform complainants about their cases and that it treats witnesses indifferently. They believe that laying a criminal charge is thus a painful and alienating experience. This perception could be wrong, but is not helped by the fact that Toekomsrus detectives are based in town several kilometres away, and are thus largely inaccessible. Moving them into the sector they police, so that their offices are accessible to complainants and witnesses, might go a long way.

Identifying crime patterns and preventing crimes

If one of the rationales of sector policing is to have a police force with intimate knowledge of crime patterns, repeat offenders, repeat victims, and

the situational causes of specific crimes, it is undoubtedly working. Every police officer who works in the sector, from the manager, to the sector patrol officers, to detectives, has a rich, nuanced knowledge of the sector's flashpoints, perpetrators and victims. The issue, of course, is translating this knowledge into problem-solving. In some cases, problem-solving is creative and successful. Sometimes it is stymied by limited resources. In other cases, solutions are both very difficult and, arguably, beyond police capacity.

Street lighting and vacant fields

The sector was very quick to determine that street robberies and residential burglaries are clustered around unlit areas of the township. They also found a concentration of robberies on vacant pieces of land which residents use as a shortcut to town. In regard to the first problem, the sector manager is in more or less permanent negotiations with the infrastructure department of the local Council for more street lighting. Dark areas are slowly being lit and the manager is gratified to note that street robberies have retreated into the remaining spaces of the township that remain unlit.

In regard to vacant pieces of land, there is little the police can do with one patrol vehicle and in the absence of efficient community mobilisation. The manager identifies flashpoints and ensures that residents who use the areas in question are alerted. But what he would really like is to constitute sub-sector forums across Toekomsrus and use its members as security guards between 4pm and 7pm at flashpoints. The SCF seems a long way from being able to mobilise a capacity of this nature.

Illegal shebeens

Street robberies, as well as assault and assault GBH cases committed in public places are concentrated around weekend nights and in the vicinity of shebeens. The sector manager keeps a comprehensive list of Toekomsrus's illegal shebeens and compiles a weekly crime profile of each establishment and the areas surrounding it. At least twice a month, high-crime shebeens are raided, their stock of liquor confiscated, their customers searched for illegal firearms, and drunk patrons arrested.

The policing of shebeens is notoriously difficult. Some of its problems are intractable. The following comments are in no sense intended as a criticism of the manner in which Toekomsrus shebeens are policed; rather, they should be viewed as discussion on inherent difficulties and hard choices.

When asked whether they hold formal or informal discussions with illegal shebeen owners, Toekomsrus police officers said: "We do not negotiate with the owners of illegal businesses." Yet this is not strictly speaking true, for the very activity of periodic raids on high-crime shebeens is a form of tacit negotiation. The unspoken trade-off is this: 'We will leave your shebeen alone as long as it does not generate crime. As soon as crime levels around your shebeen rise, we will raid.' When this tacit negotiation works, illegal taverners begin to police their own environments; they deny admission to known offenders, phone the police when they are aware of the presence of weapons on their premises, refuse to serve excessively drunk patrons, and so forth. In Toekomsrus, this process of tacit negotiation does not appear to be particularly effective. The same shebeens crop up on the high-crime list month after month. Shebeens closed down on a Friday night resume normal business the following Friday night. Shebeeners seem to factor the occasional raid into their routine business costs. Raids, in other words, do not appear to constitute a lasting deterrent. The best that can be said is that they reduce crime levels in a particular place on the night they are conducted.

This is not in itself a bad thing, but the current strategy does come at a price. Successful shebeen owners are entrepreneurs in poor communities, wealthy in comparison to their neighbours, and thus community leaders of a sort. Targeting businesses which many community members consider not merely legitimate but respectable, damages community-police relations, tarnishes the reputation of the police, and can even serve as a stimulus to law-breaking. This does not mean that the SAPS should wash its hands of shebeens and refuse to police them. Rather it suggests that there are trade-offs, and that it is often difficult to ascertain whether the crimes prevented by shebeen raids are worth the damage they cause. There are no easy alternatives. Formal negotiations with illegal shebeen owners – over closing time, control of alcohol consumption, crime-monitoring, and so forth – bring a host of problems of their own.

There are no easy solutions, but there is a need for further research. The policing of shebeens is a country-wide problem, shared by stations in all nine provinces. A national research project which distils best and worst practice from across the country would be extremely fruitful.

Saturday night patrol

I joined a Toekomsrus sector patrol shift on a Saturday night, the township's peak crime time. During the course of the shift, the patrol responded to 11

complaints within the sector (as well as four outside the sector): five domestic violence, two residential burglary, two assault GBH, one disturbance of the peace, and one use of a vehicle without the owner's permission. In each and every case, the patrol officers not only knew each complainant and each suspect by name and face, but also his/her family background, criminal profile and personal biography. In two cases, the suspect was no longer at the scene of the complaint; in both cases, the patrol officers found the suspect within the hour. It is difficult to stress how remarkable this is. In my previous experience of shift work before the implementation of sector policing, it was unusual to find a patrol officer who knew any of his complainants. This intimate familiarity with perpetrators and victims has both costs and benefits, as illustrated below.

Hotspots – the “Cold War” syndrome

For the first few hours of the shift, I was puzzled that the patrol officers appeared to be avoiding the two Toekomsrus shebeens with the highest crime profiles. I discovered why when the patrol was dispatched to attend to a complaint at one of them; the mere presence of the van there was a provocation, and triggered the commission of a crime. The complainant was a father whose son had driven his bakkie to the shebeen without his permission. The patrol officers drove to the shebeen, identified the bakkie and its driver, and informed him that they would be escorting him to his father's house. Six young men jumped onto the back of the bakkie, and it drove down the street, the patrol vehicle following close behind.

A few hundred metres from the shebeen, the bakkie turned into a vacant field and came to a halt. The six men jumped off the back, and stood leaning against the bakkie, waiting for the two patrol officers to get out of their vehicle. The moment they did so, the six men formed a circle around them and closed in on the officers menacingly. One of the six men – call him Jakes – had been arrested by one of the officers at the scene – call him John – on a charge of residential burglary the previous year. As the six men closed in on the officers, Jakes began to shout at John. “John,” he said, “it's revenge time. I know where you live. I'm going to kill you. I know where your son goes to school. I'm going to kill him.”

The two officers drew their guns and cautiously made their way back to the vehicle. They called for backup. The six men surrounded the vehicle. Jakes put his head through the window and volleyed another death threat at John.

Within three minutes, two patrol vehicles were approaching the scene at high speed. At the sound of the sirens, the six men dispersed. There were now six police officers at the scene. They spent the next 30 minutes looking for Jakes but couldn't find him.

This story is emblematic of an unintended consequence of sector policing. Repeat offenders get to know sector patrol officers well – too well, it seems. Generalised hostility between offenders and the police is quickly personalised. And as the relationship between offenders and police gets more personal, it escalates. An individual patrol officer is targeted for victimisation; he needs to fight back and assert his authority to defend his personal integrity and his professional space; the perpetrator ups the ante, and so on. It is the classic ‘Cold War’ scenario of mutual escalation. A personal war of attrition between offenders and police cannot be good for policing; it generates, rather than prevents, crime.

Both the patrol officers on the Saturday night shift informed me that they do not frequent public places in Toekomsrus when off duty. They are quickly identified and threatened.

Domestic violence

In all five domestic violence complaints to which they responded, the patrol officers on the Saturday night shift adopted the same procedure. They briefly asked the complainant whether she wanted to lay charges or seek a protection order, and she refused. They then used the discretion available to them under the Domestic Violence Act to take the suspect in for ‘questioning’. Taking him in for ‘questioning’ was really just a means of getting him out the house for a few hours, in the hope that by the time he returned he would be calm and sober. The patrol officers were essentially covering their own backs; if they had left the suspect in the house, and he had committed a crime later in the evening, they would have been blamed for leaving the complainant exposed to danger. Their horizons were very narrow indeed. Their chief concern was to prevent the commission of a crime on their shift.

A harsh judgment of their actions would insist that this is a mechanical and blunt use of domestic violence legislation. A more realistic evaluation would point out that a single sector vehicle policing an area in which domestic violence complaints are laid in rapid succession throughout the night is overburdened.

Informal community 'delict'

The two cases of assault GBH to which the Saturday night patrol responded tell an interesting story. In both cases, although the suspect had left the scene of the complaint by the time the police arrived, the patrol officers not only found him within the hour, but knew enough about his criminal profile to urge the complainants, in the strongest terms, to lay charges. In both cases, the complainants refused to do so. The patrol officers were left feeling immensely frustrated. Since the advent of sector policing, they felt, they have come to know Toekomsrus well enough to have identified a handful of repeat offenders, people they know they should be getting off the streets and locking in jail. Yet they are prevented from doing so because complainants seldom lay charges. Instead, the patrol officers testify, complainants shun the formal justice process and replace it with what is perhaps best termed a system of informal 'delict'. The complainant's family informally 'sues' the perpetrator's family for damages. The range of crimes to which this system applies is inexhaustible. According to patrol officers, such cases range from assault, to rape, to house robbery, to car-jacking.

In this context, sector policing in Toekomsrus may well be playing an intriguing, unexpected, and, by police officers' lights, unacceptable function. Victims of crime are quick to call the police because they know that, since the advent of sector policing, the officers called to the scene are likely to find the suspect. And, should a case be opened, sector detectives are likely to conduct an adequate investigation. Police work thus stands in as a kind of surety, an underwriting of the private and informal justice process. The victim's family will 'sue' the offender's family in the knowledge that, should the offender's family fail to pay up, charges can be laid with every chance of a conviction. The formal justice process thus stands in the wings, ready to be instituted if a party reneges in the informal 'delict' system.

One possible consequence of sector policing, then, is that it will begin to strengthen pre-existing cultures of informal delict. For police officers, the irony is a bitter one. They feel they that their work is belittled and abused, that they are roped into strengthening a culture of informal justice of which they do not approve. At times, they feel they are used as little more than debt collectors. At others, they suspect they are manipulated into attending to an ostensible crime when they are in fact being drawn into a personal dispute, the terms of which are murky. And yet, while police officers' frustration is understandable, it is an open question whether their perspective is wholly correct. If sector policing is strengthening an informal system of dispute

resolution, it is possible that it is assisting that system in playing a deterrence function and in underwriting the non-violent resolution of conflicts.

Crime statistics

Since the advent of sector policing in Toekomsrus, the rate of recorded crime has been decreasing substantially. For instance, in August 2004 the sector's A category crimes were down 13% compared to the same month of the previous year. Yet whether these statistics reflect a decrease in actual crime is open to debate. It is just as likely that the decrease represents a change in recording practices.

A perusal of the stats illustrates that the decreases are accounted for by just two crimes – common assault (which decreased by 50% year-on-year) and assault GBH (which decreased 24% year-on-year). Beginning in mid-2004, the sector began to change its recording practices in regard to these crimes. Instead of recording a crime at the scene of the complaint, officers began to advise the complainant to see a doctor, to get the doctor to fill in a J88 form recording injuries sustained, and then to decide whether to lay a charge. Note that the motive in introducing this practice was not to bring the recorded crime rate down. It was a response to the repeated frustration of opening criminal cases only to see charges dropped 48 hours later. The rationale is that if a complainant still wishes to lay charges the morning after, there is a greater chance that he or she will be prepared to see the criminal justice process through to its completion. The decrease in recorded crime, in other words, may well be more a reflection of sector officers getting to know and anticipate the responses of complainants, than of a drop in crime.