

CHAPTER 5

ROODEPOORT (SECTOR 6 – CBD)

The social profile of the Roodepoort policing precinct is a classic exemplar of Johannesburg's urban sprawl. Situated more than 25km from central Johannesburg, it is really something of a mini-city. About 64km in size and home to more than 300,000 people, it consists of 32 residential suburbs, seven informal settlements and low cost housing projects, a central business district, a small manufacturing district and a strip of shopping malls along Ontdekkers Road. It contains, in others words, a cross-section of the social profile of Gauteng. Its single police station is thus responsible for managing the full gamut of the province's crime problems, ranging from the under-regulated character of economic life in informal settlements, to the street robberies and car thefts of the CBD, to the high volumes of residential burglaries in the suburbs.

Two years ago, the station was staffed by about 180 police personnel. On a typical day, two patrol vehicles and one response vehicle were responsible for visible policing in the entire precinct. Complainants in the precinct's informal settlements would often have to wait three or four hours for a police response. Vast zones of Roodepoort were policed only in name. The result is that the precinct has historically placed great reliance on blunt, paramilitary policing, drawing on police numbers from outside to perform back-to-back special operations, casting a net over large chunks of the precinct, conducting door-to-door searches, shebeen raids, and stopping and searching pedestrians.

Today, the Roodepoort precinct is staffed by about 340 personnel. It has divided its jurisdiction into nine sectors, each patrolled by a dedicated, 24-hour vehicle. In talking about the introduction of sector policing one is, before anything else, talking about the injection of sufficient resources to make ordinary policing possible at all.

Roodepoort Sector 6 – three sectors in one

Nonetheless, given Roodepoort's extraordinarily diverse social geography, it is arguable that the precinct remains underpoliced. Despite the fact that it has divided its jurisdiction into nine sectors – more than any of the other West

Rand police stations visited – some of the sectors are palpably far too diverse to operate as effective units of community policing.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Sector 6, the sector covered in this study. While formally dubbed the 'CBD sector' its members are in reality responsible for policing three discreet communities. The first is the CBD itself, which consists of a dense strip of retail, office and light manufacturing space, a taxi rank and a train station, ringed by a cluster of residential streets. To the east of the CBD lie the formerly white residential suburbs of Creswell Park and Georgia, and to the west, the miniscule coloured township of Davidsonville. Much of the social diversity of Roodepoort, then, is condensed into the 3km² of Sector 6.

To expect the residents of a poverty-stricken township – whose chief concerns are contact crimes committed on the streets and in their homes – to form a single SCF with suburban residents who are concerned mainly with house breaking and vehicle theft, is to stretch the idea of community policing beyond its limits. The result is that something has to give. In Sector 6, it is Davidsonville, which is represented in the SCF by a single pastor. Indeed, the SCF consists largely of businesspeople from the CBD and white, primarily middle-aged and elderly residents of Creswell Park. The issues that animate the SCF thus reflect its partial and limited composition: long grass in parkland areas, neglected gardening and landscaping on street islands, suspicious vehicles driving through the suburbs, a neighbourhood bar that generates too much late-night noise.

Given resource limitations, subdividing Sector 6 into smaller sectors may not be feasible. But there is nothing to prevent the sector from convening a second SCF, dedicated exclusively to the residents and the concerns of Davidsonville. In the absence of this, the danger is that Davidsonville will become the dark zone on the sector's map, an area the police occasionally patrol, but enter largely to respond to complaints, to raid its single illegal shebeen, and to police street gambling.

Policing Sector 6

Despite its diversity of people and geography, and the problems experienced in constituting a representative SCF, the sector's bewildering array of crime patterns are policed with extraordinary competence. Indeed, the policing of the sector is a signal lesson in the way rudimentary problem-analysis and problem-solving can fast become integrated into the routine activities of daily policing.

The CBD

In the CBD itself, one of the central crime problems is the theft of vehicles off the main streets. The sector's primary strategy in this regard has been the establishment of a network of car guards, recruited from the ranks of the unemployed. A bank has sponsored luminous bibs making registered guards highly visible. The sector manager interviews and screens new recruits, checks their fingerprints on a morpho-touch machine to ensure that they have no criminal record, and re-deploys them every week in line with the previous week's vehicle theft patterns. While their security guard function is important, their primary value is as a source of information. They are on the streets at least eight hours a day and are told to spend their time watching and listening. If they do their jobs well, it is unlikely that vehicle thieves scouting the area will go unnoticed. They are instructed to call the police on Sector 6's dedicated cell phone the moment a piece of information, or a suspicion, passes their way. The manager immediately dispatches a patrol car to the area to interview the guard. Visible policing thus becomes less random and is trained on the specific block, street corner and time where a crime is likely to be committed. A guard who allows more than a couple of vehicle thefts to happen on his watch is assumed to be shirking responsibility and risks losing his bib, and thus his income.

The CBD information network extends well beyond registered car guards. The security details at supermarkets, bank guards, indeed, anybody whose job it is to spend the bulk of his or her time watching and listening on the streets, is enlisted into providing information. It is a simple substitute to and guide for visible policing in a large sector with only one vehicle. And it works. In the first three-month period after the launch of the sector, reported vehicle theft decreased by 10%, and reported theft out of motor vehicles by 52%. By the end of the second three-month period after the launch of the sector, vehicle theft appeared to be down almost 50%.

A second crime common in the CBD is street robbery. The sector has both a taxi rank and a train station. The bulk of street robberies occur on the pedestrian routes taxi and train commuters use to and from the rank and the station. In regard to the policing of this crime, the sector is somewhat hamstrung by the nature and the limits of the resources at its disposal. Vehicle patrols neither prevent street robberies nor apprehend street robbers. A police vehicle can be seen from a mile off, and a street robber can be sure that it will be gone ten minutes later. Foot, bicycle and plain-clothes patrols are the only effective form of policing street robberies. The sector does not have the

resources to conduct these on a regular basis. Police officers from across the precinct are encouraged to work overtime and are occasionally enlisted into CBD foot patrols and stop-and-search operations. But this is a limited and sporadic capacity. In an attempt to overcome this resource limitation, the sector manager enlisted a CBD businessman to sponsor the purchase of two bicycles and a bicycle rack, which will be attached to the back of Sector 6's patrol car. For a couple of hours a day, Sector 6's patrol officers will leave their car and conduct bicycle patrols in the CBD. In the meantime, the lack of adequate resources shows: in the first three-month period after the launch of the sector, the rate of common robbery and robbery with aggravating circumstances remained almost unchanged.

Robberies committed with a firearm trigger a more meticulous response from the sector manager. In each case, the *modus operandi* is carefully recorded, witnesses are interviewed to provide profiles, people on the streets are quizzed about what they have seen and heard. Once the sector manager has profiled a determinate group of repeat offenders, their descriptions are relayed to appropriate civilians. For instance, the sector has a close relationship with the chairman of the local taxi association. In one instance in mid-2004, a group that had robbed several cell phone shops over a three-week period was identified as having hijacked a taxi. Their profiles were given to the local taxi association chairman, and the association itself identified the suspect within a matter of days.

The sector is also meticulous in monitoring crime-inducing places and people, and in enlisting social agencies and by-law enforcers in tackling potential problems. For instance, a large office block in the centre of the CBD, which had stood empty for several years, was occupied early in 2004 by a large group of homeless people. The health inspector was called in, the illegal residents moved to a shelter, and the building boarded. In 2003, the welfare department was called to deal with a group of children who lived on the streets of the CBD. Some of the children's parents were traced, and they were taken home. Others were moved to places of shelter.

Housebreaking in the suburbs

In the ring of residential streets around the CBD and in the suburban areas to the east, the biggest crime problem is residential burglary, committed primarily on weekday mornings. Here, one of the sector's primary strategies is simply to make itself as widely known and as visible as possible among residents, with the aim of enlisting resident support in the identification of

suspicious vehicles and people. The sector makes as much mileage as possible out of its efficient service. Response time to complaints is seldom longer than five minutes, usually closer to three. Crimes scenes are dealt with meticulously and complainants carefully interviewed. Each complainant is given a bright sticker or leaflet with the sector's dedicated 24-hour cell phone number on it, and urged not to hesitate to use it, whether for a complaint, a query, or to give information. The complainant is assured that if he or she uses the cell number, rather than dialling 10111, a five-minute response time is guaranteed. The stickers and pamphlets are produced en masse and distributed to every house in the suburbs. A questionnaire on sector policing is currently being prepared, which will also be distributed throughout the suburbs via the SCF. The idea is not simply to find ideas to improve sector policing, but to ensure that every resident knows the sector cell phone number, what it's for, and uses it.

In a sense, the sector is simply trading on the novelty of quality service. Eighteen months ago, it was not unusual for one response vehicle to cover the whole of Roodepoort, and a complainant from a suburb like Creswell Park would be lucky to get a police response to her complaint within half an hour. The experience of having a dedicated sector patrol which shows that it is serious about following up on the information it receives, and demonstrates the will to do what it can to prevent burglary, is a novelty the sector stretches to its limits to win goodwill among residents.

The sector also ensures that its patrol is as visible and as intrusive as possible to potential housebreakers. The suburbs are patrolled aggressively. Cars loaded with goods on the backseat are routinely stopped and searched, the occupants fingerprinted. Patrol officers do immediate licence checks on cars parked on the side of the road. The net is spread wide, but the idea is that potential housebreakers should know that if they enter the area, they stand a good chance of finding themselves in a face-to-face encounter with the patrol.

By-law and trade law enforcement

In contrast to the other two West Rand sectors studied, much of Roodepoort's Sector 6 is a formally white area. Its commercial and trade activity is thus located in the formal economy and is regulated by by-laws and trade law. The sector is vigilant in using these laws to monitor and restrict the criminal market place.

Four hotels and six legal taverns are located in the sector. Each is carefully monitored for the patterns of crime associated with it – street robberies,

fighting, disturbance of the peace, and so forth. The owners and clients of problem taverns and hotels are badgered. Closing times are rigorously enforced. Taverns are raided, inebriated patrons arrested for drunkenness and owners arrested for allowing their patrons to inebriate themselves. Stop-and-search operations are conducted outside tavern premises, and the traffic department is called in to do breathalyser tests on car drivers leaving taverns. Problem taverns, in other words, are neither pleasant to own nor to patronise. In one case, a persistently problematic tavern was closed down and after the sector police discovered that the tavern manager had not paid his rent for several months, and put pressure on his landlord to force payment.

Each hotel in the sector is also subject to sporadic cordon-and-search operations, in which the entire hotel premises, including every guestroom, is searched. These searches occasionally net people wanted on criminal charges and very occasionally an illegal firearm. Their value, though, is measured more in their deterrent effect than in the people and goods they net. The idea is to shine a light in every possible dark space in the sector which can be used as infrastructure for criminal activity.

Finally, all second hand traders in the area – pawn shops, second-hand car dealers, and so forth – are registered, and trade law is strictly enforced. Pawn dealers, for instance, are required to keep of a photocopied record of the I.D. book of every seller and the name and address of every buyer. Their records and registers are checked every month. Of course, most of the household goods, cell phones and cars stolen in Sector 6 are sold elsewhere, but enforcing trade law at least restricts the potential for the establishment of stolen goods markets in the sector itself.

Paramilitary and community policing juxtaposed

In the middle of the Roodepoort study, the officers patrolling Sector 6 were pulled out of their sector for several hours on a Saturday afternoon to help co-ordinate a massive cordon-and-search operation. The operation involved the search of each shack and a great number of residents at a large informal settlement in the suburb of Princess situated in Roodepoort's Sector 4. The operation mobilised air support, a mounted patrol, a fleet of armoured vehicles and several dozen police officers fitted with defensive armour and armed with shotguns and short-range weapons. To all intents and purposes, it was a large scale paramilitary operation. Events in the months leading up to the operation explain its rationale and are worth recording here.

During the first half of 2004, attempts were made by the Roodepoort police to establish a SCF in Princess. A group of residents that had historically controlled the informal settlement by force – demanding protection money from shebeens, and claiming to be the settlement's political leadership – insinuated itself into the emerging SCF and attempted to take it over. Some time in July, a sector patrol vehicle entered the settlement in response to a complaint at a shebeen controlled by the settlement's local mafia. When the responding officer attempted to make an arrest, he was attacked and injured. The following week, the shebeen in question was raided. The police conducting the raid had their vehicles pelted with stones and had to retreat from the settlement. This cycle continued in the weeks that followed. Police officers who entered the settlement were routinely attacked and were forced to withdraw.

This sequence of events suggests that there was a deliberate attempt to make the area unpoliceable. And it has worked. In August, the Roodepoort precinct took a decision not to respond to complaints in Princess. Complainants were instructed to meet police officers at designated points outside the perimeter of the settlement. Nor is it a coincidence that the attempt to render policing impossible was made directly after efforts to introduce sector policing in the informal settlement. The SAPS has been reduced to policing the area with the only means left to it. Month after month, a large quasi-military contingent invades the area and casts a giant fishing net over it, hoping to find guns, stolen goods and people with outstanding warrants against them. Every shack is searched. Scores of residents are subjected to electronic fingerprint tests. Shebeens are raided, their owners arrested and their stock destroyed. Both sides regroup in preparation for the next confrontation.

The SAPS has in essence resigned itself to the fact that normal policing will not be possible in Princess for the foreseeable future. It cannot leave the area entirely unpoliced, as it is a haven for people who commit crimes in the Roodepoort area. It must enter the settlement in force to look for guns and stolen goods. Yet the SAPS is also aware that wave after wave of paramilitary operations will neither drive the criminal formations that control the area out nor pave the way for sector policing. It is not so much an endgame as a stalemate, one for which there is little prospect of resolution. All in all, the story is one of a successful sabotage campaign against the introduction of sector policing.