A WORLD OF CRIME

Youth views on crime in the Nelson Mandela Metro

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Although South Africa's youth are implicated in many incidents of crime, little is known about their experiences and perceptions of the problem. A focus group study in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality in the Eastern Cape reveals the extent to which crime features in the lives of young people. Many were victims of violent crimes like robbery, and over half knew people involved in crime – mostly family and friends. Drug related offences also featured prominently. Few of the youths had confidence in families and schools as the institutions responsible for their development and socialisation.

Internationally, a large proportion of crime, and particularly violent crime, is committed by young people. At the same time, the youth also make up a substantial chunk of the victims. In South Africa the trends are similar, and there is growing concern about how young some offenders are, and the seriousness of their offences. Both juvenile offenders and victims are becoming younger, and increasing numbers of children are being arrested for serious crimes including housebreaking, robbery, rape and assault.[2]

Prison statistics are one indication of the extent of the problem. At the end of October 1998 there were 1,440 children awaiting trial in prisons across the country, and 1,222 children serving a prison term.[3] By December 2003 the number awaiting trial had increased by 53% to 2,197. The number of children who had been sentenced and were in prison had risen by 42% to 1,734.[4] The figures are worse for older youths: in January 2004 there were 24,966 young people between the ages of 18 and 21 years in South African prisons.[5]

Although the youth are central to understanding crime, both as victims and perpetrators, research on their experiences and views on how to prevent crime is limited. Our lack of understanding about how young people get involved in criminal activities and the extent of their vulnerability to victimisation, limits our ability to plan appropriate strategies.

The challenge for government is to ensure that children have the best start in life with opportunities to develop and achieve their full potential. Achieving this will require identifying risk factors associated with poverty, family conflict, poor educational opportunities and poor service delivery. Once these factors have been properly understood, appropriate youth crime prevention programmes can be designed and implemented.[6]

This article hopes to contribute to this effort by presenting an overview of youth experiences and perceptions of crime in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality (NMMM) in the Eastern Cape. The research was conducted by the Institute for Security Studies as part of a broader project to develop a crime prevention strategy for the NMMM. (For other research results from this project see the article by Valerie Møller in this issue, and *SA Crime Quarterly* No 5, Sept 2003).

What factors make youth likely to offend?

Research has found that youth behavioural problems can be prevented if the risk factors that lead young people to become offenders are accurately identified. Internationally, the most common risk factors are found in a youth's family life, school experience, and community and peer relationships.[7] These are illustrated in the text box below.

Risk factors for youth offending
Family
Poor parental supervision and discipline
Family conflict and violence
Poor early childhood care
Low income and poor housing
Schooling
School disorganisation
Low quality of teaching and learning
Lack of commitment, such as truancy
Disruptive behaviour such as bullying, aggressive and hyperactive
Low school achievement
Individual/peer
Early involvement in problem behaviour
Peer involvement in problem behaviour
High proportion of unsupervised time spent with peers
Alienation and lack of social commitment
Community
Community disorganisation
Poor neighbourhood
Availability of drugs
Prevalence of gangs
Opportunity for crime
High percentage of children in the community
Early adulthood
Lack of skills or qualifications
Unemployment or low income
Shortage of housing

The experience of one or more of these risk factors does not automatically lead to behavioural problems or criminality. However, the more risk factors that are present in a young person's environment, the greater the chances are that he or she will experience problems. Programmes aimed at reducing youth crime should focus on eliminating risk factors and building 'protective' factors. The latter are broadly viewed as the opposites of risk factors.

Youth perceptions of crime in NMMM

In the course of conducting research to inform a crime reduction strategy for the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality (NMMM), it became apparent that the youth were widely believed to be responsible for most crime in the area. As a result, focus groups were conducted to explore young people's perceptions about crime.

Focus groups were conducted with youth from the following police station areas: Port Elizabeth central, New Brighton, KwaZakhele, Bethelsdorp (northern end areas), Motherwell and KwaNobuhle. These areas were selected because of their high crime levels, as recorded by the police and the ISS victimisation survey.[8] In total 16 focus groups were conducted and 116 youths between the ages of 14 and 25 participated.

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of crime. Their views were also sought on who perpetrates crime, as well as the role of parents, schools and community organisations in deal with criminality.

Youth as victims of crime

Although the sample of focus group participants is not representative of youth in NMMM, the victimisation rate was high, and the experiences of crime largely involved violence. More than a quarter (28%) of the participants said they had been a victim of crime in the past year (July 2002-July 2003). The most common crime experienced by the youth was robbery: 20 of the 33 participants who were victimised said they had robbed. In most cases, either a knife or a firearm was used to commit the robbery.

Most of the robbery victims were males between the ages of 19 and 25, and nearly all said the crime occurred when they were on their way home from taverns or shebeens. Other crimes experienced by the participants included assault and theft of personal property.

Views on crime trends

Unsurprisingly, given that the public generally think crime is increasing, a majority of the youths believed that crime in their area was rising. Of more interest

were their views on which crimes are most common. Participants thought that robbery, burglary, theft, drug dealing and drug abuse were the most prevalent crimes in their area, with robbery believed to be the crime most likely to affect the youth. Drug dealing and drug abuse were also regarded as problems experienced by young people. These views differ from those recorded in surveys of the general public (over the age of 18), in which burglary is typically believed to be most prevalent, and drug related crimes are seldom mentioned.[9]

Opinions about the perpetrators
The above results indicate that the youth participating in focus groups experienced a substantial amount of violent crime first hand, as victims of robbery. The pervasiveness of crime in their lives was further illustrated by the fact that over half of the participants said they know someone who is involved in crime. Most were referring to friends and relatives, and some to local groups or gangs. Thirteen of the 48 male participants admitted to having perpetrated a crime – mostly robbery, followed by theft and drug use. (This figure is probably an undercount considering that young people will rarely confess to such wrongdoing in front of their peers.)

When asked about offenders in general, young people were of the opinion that street robberies were mostly committed by groups of male youths between 18 and 23 years. More serious robberies like hijackings and bank robberies were attributed to older males of between 27 and 30 years. Although robberies were blamed on older boys and men, participants said criminal careers started when boys were as young as 14 or 15. Typically, they would commit petty crimes at first, working with older and more experienced criminals.

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 the drug dealers. 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, a need for recognition and respect, and drug use. When referring to other people they knew to be involved in crime, participants said their involvement was an individual choice, although a few also cited peer pressure. Some mentioned negative community attitudes that tolerate crime, as well as poor living conditions and family violence as contributory factors.

The results suggest that young people are well informed about crime and its causes. As such, they are a valuable source of information about the problem, and could make a significant contribution to local crime reduction activities, instead of just being blamed for criminality.

Youth views on crime prevention
Focus group participants were asked what community structures in their areas were doing to manage the problem of crime. They were also asked about how schools and teachers were dealing with the problem, and what families and parents were doing. The results suggest that the youth are quite alienated from the institutions responsible for their development and socialisation, namely the family (parents), and schools.

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, not particularly 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 the former, "criminals do not go free". This suggests vigilante activity, and indeed many participants viewed

Amadlozi as a vigilante group that commits crime under the pretext of fighting it. Youths commented that: "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".

Generally, perceptions about the police were not much better. Young people viewed the police as corrupt, ineffective and as drunkards. Their statements included:

> police misconduct and corruption inspires a lack of community confidence…some police members are often seen drinking in shebeens and they beat up people in the street while drunk…police are ineffective because they do not have adequate resources to deal with crime.

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. Crime problems were perceived to be enormous and teachers' powers and scope to respond, limited. Some also said that teachers are afraid 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.

Conclusion

Criminal and behavioural problems are fairly easy to detect. But developing and implementing programmes aimed at reducing these problems is a major challenge. Young people in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality highlighted most of the risk factors for youth criminality and behavioural problems. This high level of knowledge about the issues improves the chances of securing their participation in corrective interventions. What remains is for government to engage relevant civil society stakeholders, assess the extent of the problem, and initiate appropriate programmes. Given that the youth are both victims and perpetrators of crime, and have many insights into the dynamics of the problem, their participation in prevention programmes is essential.

Endnotes

1 At the time of writing, Sibusiso was a senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies.
2 J Mayer and B Frean, Young violent criminals shock SA courts, *Independent on Saturday*, 17 January 2003.
3 J Sloth-Nielsen and L Muntingh, Juvenile justice review 1998, *South African Journal of Criminal Justice*, 12(1), 1999.
4 Civil Society Prison Reform Initiative (CSPRI), Newsletter, Issue No 3.
5 H Hosken, Violent crimes by young on the rise, *Pretoria News*, 4 May 2004.
6 Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General, <www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence/chapter4/sec1.html>
7 Centre for Research on Youth at Risk, <www.stthomasu.ca/research/youth/risk.htm>
8 S Masuku, Local solutions for local problems, *SA Crime Quarterly* No 5, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, September 2003.
9 See for example P Burton, A du Plessis, T Leggett, A Louw, D Mistry and H van Vuuren, *National Victims of Crime Survey: South Africa 2003*, ISS Monograph No 101, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, July 2004, p 46.