

APARTHEID NOSTALGIA

Personal security concerns in South African townships

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Iconic images, such as the photograph of Hector Petersen, the thirteen year old boy shot by police in 1976 at the onset of the Soweto uprising, serve as powerful reminders of the brutality of apartheid. The National Party regime marked a time of great suffering for black South Africans. Televised images of white police beating and shooting black protestors exposed the racist violence of apartheid to the world. Steve Biko's murder in police custody, popularised in the west by the movie *Cry Freedom*, was further emblematic of the apartheid regime. As a student in Canada at the time, the writer of this article was greatly influenced by these events and images, and subsequently spent several years in South Africa conducting research on crime, social conflict and policing. This article concentrates on the relationship between personal security and the concept of 'apartheid nostalgia', not among white diehards, but among residents of Soweto.

Approximately 80 interviews conducted over the past two years as part of an ongoing research project, depict the townships of the apartheid era as much safer than they are today. Men and women are equally represented and respondents from several different Soweto neighbourhoods – including Orlando, Pimville, Meadowlands and Naledi – range in age from 30 to 82. Respondents were contacted primarily through door to door canvassing and the only selection criteria were that the interviewee be over thirty years of age and had lived in Soweto for several years during the apartheid period. A large majority of respondents report that violent crime was relatively rare prior to the 1990s and that the police were more successful in controlling crime. Older residents regard the 1950s and 1960s as particularly safe, but also describe the 1970s to the mid-1990s as less dangerous than the post-apartheid period. Available statistics, while by no means infallible, confirm that there was an increase in violent crime in many areas throughout the 1990s.

However, the representation of the apartheid past as a virtually crime free period flies in the face of other evidence. Newspapers, academic analyses, government reports and biographies all indicate that Rand townships were plagued by violent crime from the 1940s, if not earlier. For example, newspapers intended for African readers such as the *Bantu World* and *Golden City Post*, as well as some of the mainstream English papers, reported extensively on the crime problem in the townships.

Every evening township people scuttle – like frightened cockroaches – out of packed trains and buses at various stations into the streets on their way home from work. Nobody among them knows for sure whether he will reach his destination safely. The homeward bound crowds know that anything can happen for the incidence of crime has almost become a way of life.
African reporter, *Johannesburg Star*, 1966

Residents complained that the South African Police (SAP) and local municipal police prosecuted pass and liquor offenders and ignored serious crime. In the absence of adequate civil policing many communities formed groups to patrol the streets and punish suspected offenders. All such organisations utilised violence, and as some defensive associations grew more powerful, they engaged in predatory behaviour that rendered them indistinguishable from the criminals they originally mobilised against.

During the unrest of the 1980s and 1990s police were condemned for suppressing political dissent, hunting down activists and sponsoring violence, rather than protecting residents from criminals. Township violence intensified during this period as localised struggles frequently acquired a political veneer. The state, the Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress all made use of criminals and vigilantes to consolidate their power bases and undermine political opponents. Gangs and strongmen eagerly accepted the patronage of organisations that supplied weapons, reinforcements and, in some cases, a measure of popular legitimacy. As a result, many townships turned into battlegrounds and tens of thousands of people were killed.

How, then, is it possible for so many of the aforementioned respondents to characterise apartheid as harrowing, but more predictable and less dangerous, than life in present day South Africa? This said, the minority of respondents who were actively engaged in the liberation struggle do not remember the apartheid period as a time of relative security, nor do they regard the apartheid police as effective crime fighters. One former ANC activist labelled the SAP as “killing machines... The police did not protect black people against any crime. They were only concerned with so-called political crime... they were our natural enemies.” (The research team has yet to interview Inkatha Freedom Party militants or other non-ANC combatants.)

Deconstructing memory

The above question poses great difficulty because of the nature of memory. How does one deal with the

widespread tendency to idealise the past, especially for those suffering hardship in the present? Additionally, many of the elderly people interviewed feel more at risk than they did when they were younger. One theory is that this heightened sense of vulnerability may lead some to magnify the current danger, and erase, or at least diminish, past difficulties.

It is impossible to definitively identify selective memories, or to determine how and why stories may become distorted. The transition from an authoritarian, repressive regime to a more open, democratic society has been confusing and chaotic for many respondents whose expectations of a new South Africa have not been met. (South Africans are not alone in this respect. Some disillusioned Russians, for example, reminisce wistfully about the order of Soviet rule.)

However, these anxieties, no matter how influential, do not invalidate their perceptions of the past. In fact, their stories might point the way to a more balanced perspective of how township residents experienced apartheid, serving as a useful reminder that most black urbanites were preoccupied with more prosaic concerns than the struggle for liberation.

The majority of respondents, while profoundly bitter about the restrictions, humiliations and abuses imposed upon them by the white-ruled state, regarded outright opposition as futile and did not directly participate in protests and fighting. Most noted that political violence was predominantly an affair for the youth, although older residents were occasionally caught in indiscriminate attacks and persecuted as suspected informers. Several nostalgic notions express our respondents' dissatisfaction with the present but also challenge the idea of an apartheid past in which urban black South Africans were terrorised at every turn – initially by criminal gangs and a brutal police force, and later by the maelstrom of politicised violence. Their testimony describes a different reality:

Criminal activity was not a real problem in the townships. It was not a big problem at all. People were free to walk where they

wanted... Blacks were not scared of other people, they were only worried about being arrested by the police if they were out late in the wrong area. They were not scared of meeting other black people. People felt very safe in those days.

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Crime was not a problem during apartheid. Criminals were criminals just because they wanted to be criminals. It was not too bad then. Most people had jobs...Criminals were a bit considerate during the apartheid years. For instance, when they robbed people, they left them money for transport unlike current criminals who do not leave you a single cent. They take everything that you have and then they kill you.

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When the apartheid period ended, things changed. The crime rate increased. We don't know exactly why this happened because we were under the impression that the end of apartheid implied freedom and peace. It doesn't look like we got it right.

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What I can say is that Mandela took over as president in 1994 and then crime started to be a problem. Before 1994 during the Boers' time, there were jobs. People were afraid to get arrested and there were lots of jobs.

Policing then and now

Along with higher rates of employment, respondents consistently attribute the lower incidence of crime during apartheid to more effective policing. Although some of our respondents were victimised by the SAP and many spoke of its oppressive role in the townships, the former force is remembered as capable and motivated, especially when compared to the post-apartheid South African Police Service (SAPS):

The police tortured people badly. Boers hated black people. They oppressed them...The apartheid police were bad but there was order and the law was obeyed. The SAP ensured that people were protected.

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The SAP did not play games. They were very strict. They arrested people and it was well known that should they arrest you, you would definitely learn to behave yourself and stop bothering the community.

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The police were effective in fighting crime. Our lives were better at that time than now... I sometimes miss the apartheid period because we were safe at that time and when you had left your possessions they would still be there when you came back, but today, forget it.

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If you reported a case they would follow it until the criminal was found. There were no stories of missing docket. They made sure that the criminals paid for their crimes by locking them in jail and beating them.

The SAPS, in contrast, is castigated as shamelessly corrupt. To be fair, a number of respondents noted that the SAPS is more approachable than its openly racist predecessor: "Today I can go to any police station and speak to any police officer without fear. The current police treat us with respect unlike the apartheid police. I always wondered what they were told about black people during their training."

Part of the disillusionment with the SAPS almost certainly stems from higher expectations. Township residents are acutely aware that the SAP's primary task was to preserve white interests, while the SAPS is supposed to protect and serve all South Africans:

They are criminals. They rob people, demand bribes, it's always there... Whenever you see a roadblock, especially in Soweto, you know that there is money involved. They only do roadblocks when they are hungry and need money to buy liquor or something like chicken.

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There is a huge difference between the democratic police and the apartheid police. The democratic police respect people and they know the rights that people have, unlike the apartheid police. However, today corruption is rife in the police force. You

can hardly open a newspaper without reading about police taking bribes from criminals... Corrupt police complain about earning a meagre salary so they take bribes. They fail to combat crime in the townships and also in the city. Corrupt police prey on criminals and illegal immigrants. Nigerian criminals complain that they have become ATMs for the corrupt policemen.

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The current police are lazy, they take bribery... People don't respect them. It was much better during the apartheid period. The apartheid police made mistakes but did their work very well. They were competent and very committed unlike the current police... The only thing they know how to do is to sit under trees and drink. They don't care about the safety of the community.

Lawlessness and disorder

The government's stance on human rights is widely criticised. The abolition of the death penalty, the ease with which suspects seem to be granted bail, and a perceived government crackdown on independent community policing initiatives and spontaneous vigilantism, all contribute to the conviction that criminals in the new South Africa have little to fear:

In the past a person who stole a radio would be caught and beaten by people and it would end there. That person would not do it again. I don't understand the present law that states that even criminals have rights. Another thing is that it is said that it is nice in jail. They eat delicious food you see. You think a criminal is caught whereas he is actually going to have a good time and be safe... It must be clear that a person is in jail.

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Crime is worse because people have rights now – even criminals have rights. In fact they have more rights than the citizens who behave themselves in the community. It is so sad. You can't tell people anything now because they will tell you about their rights.

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Under the Boers people behaved... Our government made a mistake by banning the death penalty.

The influx of foreigners and the proliferation of firearms in post-apartheid South Africa are also seen as important factors in the differential rates of violent crime. One woman commented, "Carrying passes helped to control people. That was a good control measure. You see today everyone is flocking to South Africa... foreigners do not know what they are putting us through. They cause a lot of crime." Numerous respondents stated that prior to the 1990s most criminals only carried knives, whereas nowadays the townships are awash with firearms and shootings are a daily occurrence.

Time to reflect

This report, based on an ongoing research project limited to Soweto, makes no claim to being representative, but instead brings to light some preliminary impressions and perceptions relating to issues of personal security. The poor reputation of the SAPS in the townships indicates a need for both a visible crackdown on corruption, and a more effective public relations campaign to convince residents that the current force is dedicated to improving the quality of policing in township communities. As it stands, our respondents have little understanding of, or patience with, human rights legislation that they view as protection for criminals. In order for people to support such initiatives, the government needs to educate the public as to how such legislation safeguards the rights of law-abiding citizens.

Finally, state repression, violent crime and conflict have a long history in the townships, but a precarious present leads the majority of people interviewed to portray the past as a time of relative order and security. For those who attained a degree of residential stability and avoided nationalist politics, this may well be the case. Much more research is needed to better understand the day-to-day realities of the urban black experience under apartheid. For now, however, we should not dismiss the possibility that, for some, life in apartheid era townships was less fraught with peril than their current existence.

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