

Cops and robbers: a new approach

The Gauteng Aggravated Robbery Strategy

GARETH NEWHAM

Gauteng Department of Community Safety
Gareth.Newham@gauteng.gov.za

During 2006, substantial increases were recorded in residential and business robberies in Gauteng. Along with hijackings, these three subcategories of aggravated robbery were collectively referred to as the 'Trio Crimes'. After various policing operations failed to adequately reduce the Trio Crimes in Gauteng, the Gauteng Department of Community Safety undertook research into international best practice for combating residential and business robberies. The findings of this research formed the basis for the Gauteng Aggravated Robbery Strategy, which was subsequently developed and implemented in partnership with the Gauteng South African Police Service (SAPS). This initiative provides a case study of the role that provincial governments could play in supporting the police to reduce crime in South Africa.

The Constitution states that Provincial Executives are entitled to 'determine provincial policing needs and priorities' and to essentially monitor police performance.¹ The Gauteng Provincial Government has taken this mandate seriously and spells out its approach to achieving this objective in the Gauteng Safety Strategy 2006-2014. During 2007, the Gauteng Department of Community Safety developed and implemented the Gauteng Information on Police Performance System (GIPPS).² This system enabled the department to regularly monitor SAPS information on crime and policing across the 134 police stations in the province. As a result the department was quickly able to identify the substantial increases in the Trio Crimes during the first half of 2006 and carefully evaluate the impact of the police's response to these crimes. Subsequently, the department could play a proactive role in working with the police to tackle aggravated robberies

through the development of the Gauteng Aggravated Robbery Strategy.

INITIAL INTERVENTIONS TO TACKLE ROBBERY

Although police statistics show an overall decrease in Gauteng crime levels since the 2003/2004 financial year, specific types of aggravated robbery have unfortunately followed the opposite trend.³ Between 2005/06 and 2006/07, residential robbery increased by 25 per cent and business robbery increased by 43 per cent. Hijacking, which had decreased by 27 per cent during the previous three years, started to record an increase. Collectively termed the Trio Crimes, these three categories of robbery were given priority status by the government because of the extent to which they contribute to public fear and anxiety about crime.

Indeed, the 2007 National Victims of Crime Survey found that more people had become victims of robbery than ever before. Moreover, people who indicated that they were most fearful of being robbed or having someone break into their homes outnumbered those who stated that they feared other crimes, including murder and sexual assault.⁴

The nature of the Trio Crimes are of particular concern to people, as they occur in places where one would expect to feel the safest, such as at home, at work, or while travelling in a motor vehicle. These crimes can happen to anyone and are highly traumatic to victims, as they are too often accompanied by murder, rape and serious assault, or the threat of these crimes. Although they occur throughout South Africa, they are of a particular concern in Gauteng, where 51 per cent of the country's total number of residential robberies, 52 per cent of its business robberies and 53 per cent of its hijackings occur.

During the first half of 2006 the Gauteng MEC for Community Safety noted the substantial increases in these robbery categories and requested that the provincial SAPS develop a strategy to stabilise the situation within six months. Consequently, the Gauteng SAPS devised and implemented

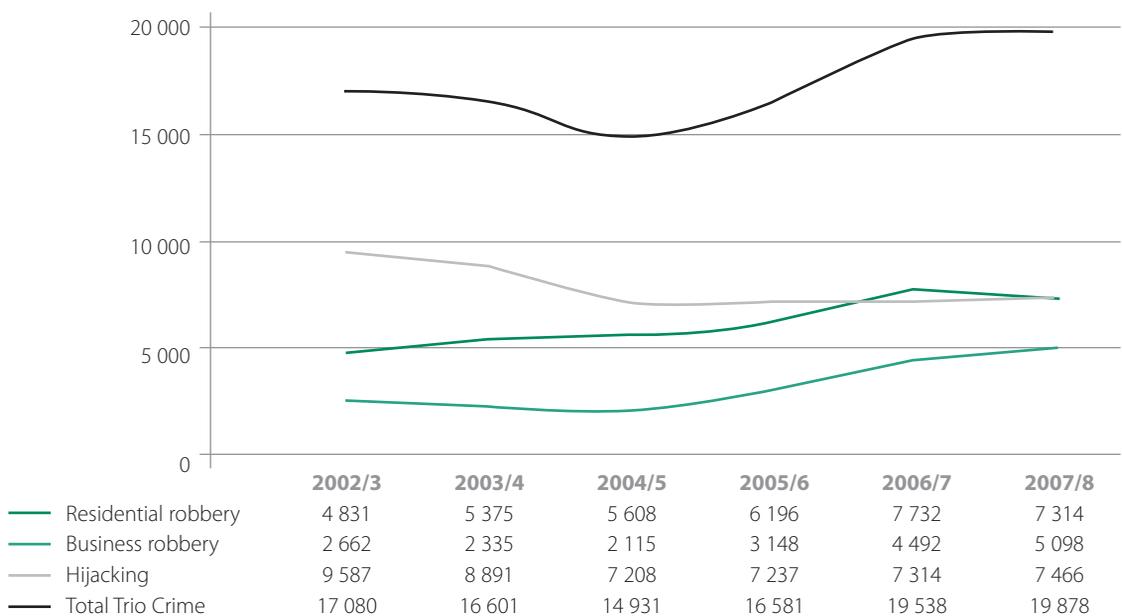
Operation Iron Fist between July and December 2006. The impact of this operation was carefully evaluated by the Department of Community Safety, and the findings publicly presented by the MEC.⁵ Although Operation Iron Fist yielded a number of positive results, it failed to stabilise or reduce the Trio Crimes.

Early in the following year, the SAPS at national level launched 'Operation Trio' in an effort to reduce these specific crimes, as they had started to increase across the country and not only in Gauteng. However, by 2008 the SAPS conceded that these crimes remained a significant challenge, 'despite various focused initiatives to counter them in 2006 and 2007.'⁶ During the 2007/2008 financial year, Gauteng was recording an average of 21 hijackings, 20 residential robberies and 14 business robberies every single day.

DEVELOPING A NEW APPROACH

The policing operations to tackle Trio robberies in 2006 and 2007 relied heavily on deploying additional personnel into identified Trio crime 'hot-spots' to engage in high visibility activities such as road-blocks, stop and searches and increased patrols. While these tactics could reduce Trio crimes in specific locations for a limited time,

Figure 1: Gauteng Trio Crime Trends between 2002/03 and 2007/08



it was clear that they were not leading to sustainable reductions. Consequently, the Gauteng Department of Community Safety undertook a project to better understand the nature of the Trio robberies and to identify other policing methods that would have a better effect.

After engaging with police officials and researchers with knowledge of the Trio robberies, it was found that the perpetrators were relatively organised and planned their attacks well. They were used to committing crime and had typically graduated to committing residential and business robberies after having spent some time committing petty crime. The main purpose behind targeting residences, businesses and vehicles was that a single attack would generally yield higher value in stolen goods and cash. When a perpetrator attacks a person walking in the street, he may only manage to steal a small amount of cash, jewellery and a single cell phone. However, if a perpetrator gets together with two or three others and they attack people while they are at home or at their business premises, they can substantially increase the amount and value of stolen goods. Through the use or threat of torture they can identify hiding places or combinations of safes where items of considerable value are kept.

In addition to the economic incentive to commit these types of robberies, it was found that there was very little disincentive, as few perpetrators were being arrested and successfully prosecuted.⁷ This was attributed to the time spent planning their attack so that they would be able to surprise and overpower their victims, and avoid police operations in order to make a successful escape. As these perpetrators operate across police precinct boundaries and because they are strangers to their victims, investigating officers who are precinct bound will struggle to identify them without additional assistance. But even when perpetrators were arrested, a substantial proportion of the cases were withdrawn in court due to a lack of evidence resulting from inadequate crime scene management and investigation. The combination of these factors meant that criminally orientated individuals and groups were increasingly recognising that robbery was a low risk and high yield enterprise.

The department's research included exploring international examples where robbery had been effectively reduced, to establish to what extent policing could have an impact on these crime types. A number of examples were found of different contexts in which robbery had been reduced by the police. The two examples that are briefly presented below demonstrate that even in different circumstances, and where the police have vastly different resource levels, there are common tactics that will be successful in reducing robbery.

A good example of robbery reduction within a developing country with fewer resources than South Africa was that of the city of Bogota in Colombia, South America. While this city is better known internationally for substantially reducing its murder rate through a combination of law enforcement and social crime prevention initiatives, Bogota's robbery rate also decreased by 75 per cent between 1996 and 2001.⁸ Interestingly enough, this was achieved without increasing the number of police officials, and during a period when unemployment was on the rise. Through focused investments and improvements in police training, crime intelligence and investigation, the Bogota police were able to increase their arrest and detention rates of wanted suspects by over 500 per cent.⁹ While a range of other interventions were conducted in Bogota over this period, a detailed evaluation of what primarily caused the reduction in violent crime found that '...the stick measures explain this reduction in greater proportion...'. This supported the use of proper policing methods as an effective means of reducing violent crime.¹⁰

Another well-known example is that of New York City between 1990 and 1999, where various violent crimes decreased substantially, including robbery, which decreased by 67 per cent. While many theories have been forwarded to explain the decrease in New York's crime rate, there is emerging consensus that an improvement in policing was one of the key factors behind the decline. Earlier analysis found that during this period, '[w]hen the arrest rate of robbers rose 10 percent, the number of robberies fell 5.7 to 5.9%.¹¹ A later and more thorough analysis of all the

factors at play at the time of the crime reduction found that a key factor that contributed to New York experiencing a far greater and sustainable reduction in overall violent crime levels when compared to other American cities was '...both the quantity of police in the city and the way police were deployed, evaluated and managed.'¹² Key to the success of the NYPD in reducing robberies specifically was the improved coordination of intelligence and criminal investigations by specialised detective units tasked with identifying and arresting the perpetrators.¹³

In addition to the above two examples, a number of other robbery reduction strategies were examined. It became clear that wherever successful examples of robbery reduction were found, similar policing approaches were adopted. Typically, police managers were subjected to substantially higher levels of accountability for identifying and arresting the actual perpetrators of crime, and ensuring that incontrovertible evidence is presented before a court of law so that appropriate prison sentences are handed down. This serves to reduce the number of people who commit robberies, while increasing the risk and thereby the disincentives to other criminally inclined individuals from becoming involved in this type of crime. As violent crime decreases, communities feel less afraid, increase their trust in the police, and are better able to control petty crimes such as theft and drug dealing in their neighbourhoods.

THE GAUTENG AGGRAVATED ROBBERY STRATEGY

The Gauteng Department of Community Safety was very aware that policing strategies that work in other countries might not always be effective in South Africa. For this reason the strategy was developed in close consultation with experienced SAPS police officials working in different components of the organisation. This ensured that the SAPS in the province could implement the final strategy. It was determined that the SAPS had already successfully employed similar tactics in Johannesburg to substantially reduce hijackings in the early years of this decade. However, the capacity that was in place at that time had been

focused on specific locations and had subsequently been disbanded and redeployed once hijackings had decreased.

Given the scale of the challenge in Gauteng, it was clear that the biggest challenge facing the police was the strengthening and coordination of intelligence and investigations across the province. In addition, attention would have to be given to improving cooperation with other important role players such as the National Prosecuting Authority and other law enforcement agencies. It was not enough to simply identify and arrest the perpetrators; they had to be removed from society through incarceration if robbery were to decrease.

A summary of the key elements and the implementation of the strategy to date are as follows:

Strengthening crime intelligence and analysis of Trio Crimes

The Crime Intelligence component has started to give greater attention to identifying and locating perpetrators of Trio crimes and the networks involved in supporting them. This is partly achieved through the interrogation of arrested suspects by crime intelligence agents.

The establishment of 22 specialised Trio Crime investigating units

All of the 134 police stations in the province have been grouped together into 22 clusters, each with a cluster commander. Each of these clusters has a dedicated unit consisting of skilled and experienced detectives. This has allowed detectives to pool their resources, work across police precinct boundaries, and focus their energies on Trio cases. Each Trio task team is also responsible for tracing and arresting identified wanted suspects who live in their areas.

Enhancing forensic support to Trio Crime investigators

Some form of forensic evidence is left by perpetrators at each crime scene, be it fingerprints, shoe prints or DNA. This type of evidence is the most effective way to link a perpetrator to a crime scene in a court of law for the purposes of securing a conviction. Following the adoption of the

strategy the Local Criminal Record Centre (LCRC) forensic investigators have prioritised attending every Trio crime scene to gather possible forensic evidence.¹⁴

Improve response times to 10111 emergency calls

The quicker the police are able to respond to calls for assistance when robberies are reported, the more likely they are to arrest perpetrators. During 2008 the 10111 Centre launched 'Project Reaction Time', which improved the Gauteng SAPS monthly average response time for serious crimes by 48 per cent between May 2008 and May 2009.

Disrupt perpetrators through intelligence-led roadblocks and saturated policing

Using an analysis of crime patterns and trends, visible policing components can increase the chance of apprehending perpetrators through roadblocks and 'search and seizure' operations targeted at specific localities at particular times. A special roadblock task team has been established at each of the 22 clusters across Gauteng for this purpose.

The establishment of the Gauteng Crime Management Centre (CMC)

This is a new structure specifically established to provide coordination amongst all the above functions. It is staffed with officers from crime intelligence, detectives, LCRC and visible policing, with the aim of coordinating the strategy against Trio crimes across the province. Each Trio robbery reported anywhere in the province is also expected to be reported to the CMC within 30 minutes. In addition, any arrests, profiles of suspects, or evidence collected need to be reported to the structure. By obtaining and analysing data across the province, the CMC is improving the capacity of the SAPS to identify and profile groups of perpetrators and support networks, and link them to specific crime scenes. In addition, where necessary, specialised operational and technical investigative support is provided at various crime scenes when required.

Improving Trio case management through the criminal justice system

The strategy called for dedicated prosecutors to work with the Trio task teams to ensure that bail

could be successfully opposed and that, in order to minimise postponements, cases were trial ready before being placed on the court roll. During 2008 the Deputy Minister of Justice adopted the strategy as a pilot project for the Criminal Justice Review process so as to identify ways in which case flows could be improved. To date, specific experienced prosecutors have been identified to work closely with each of the Trio task teams.

In addition to the above components of the strategy, the Gauteng Department of Community Safety has provided support in the following ways:

- Buying and allocating 42 high-speed vehicles to the SAPS Provincial Rapid Response Unit, which is tasked with responding to robbery incidents
- Establishing a specialised Anti-Truck Hijacking unit within the Traffic Law Enforcement component to respond to hijackings on provincial roads
- Coordinating joint roadblocks between the SAPS and the Gauteng Traffic Law Enforcement Agency
- Providing counselling and support to victims of Trio crimes through the Ikhaya Lethemba Victim Empowerment Centre and police station-based victim empowerment centres
- Building a community patroller programme that has resulted in over 8 000 carefully screened, trained and equipped community volunteers partaking in police deployed patrol groups in 71 policing precincts

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the strategy is tracked through a monthly Joint Steering Committee meeting; co-chaired by the SAPS Provincial Commissioner, Perumal Naidoo, and the Head of the Department of Community Safety, Margaret-Ann Diedricks. At this meeting the various police commanders and departmental managers responsible for implementing various components of the strategy report on what has been achieved in the previous month.

Departmental officials also attend each one of the 22 monthly cluster meetings held by the SAPS Cluster Commanders to monitor the implementation of the strategy throughout the province. Furthermore, each month a detailed evaluation of five high-crime police stations is undertaken to establish how they are performing against priority violent crimes, including murder, rape and aggravated robbery.

There was no illusion that it would take some time to fully implement the strategy, given that at the time when it was formally adopted in June 2008, none of the required structures such as the CMC, the Trio Task Teams and the Rapid Response Units were in place. It has only been since February 2009 that most of the structures have been up and running, and it is therefore too early to evaluate the impact of the strategy on Trio crimes at a provincial level.

Nevertheless, where the core elements of the strategy have been implemented, there have been some signs of improvement. For example, in one of the policing precincts that has consistently recorded amongst the highest levels and increases in Trio crime and was one of the first to implement some of the core elements of the strategy (e.g. establishing a specialised detective unit), recorded double digit decreases in residential robbery and hijacking during the 2008/2009 financial year. In addition, business robberies started to decrease in that precinct during the last quarter of the current financial year (January to March 2009).

In Gauteng as a whole there were early signs that the strategy could be starting to bear fruit, with residential robberies and hijacking showing decreases during April and May 2009 (the latest figures available at the time of writing). While insufficient time has passed to evaluate the strategy, it will continue to be monitored and, where necessary, adjustments made, until the scourge of aggravated robberies cease to be a major threat to the people of Gauteng.



To comment on this article visit
<http://www.issafrica.org/sacq.php>

NOTES

- 1 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (No. 108 of 1996), Section 206.
- 2 The contribution of GIPPS to the Gauteng Provincial Government's objectives in relation to crime was recognised when it won an award at the 2008 Premier's Service Excellence Awards.
- 3 By definition, a robbery requires the direct threat of violence against a victim to steal valuables. This differentiates robberies from burglaries or theft, where a victim is not present when valuables are stolen. Aggravated robbery typically refers to robberies where a weapon such as a firearm or knife was involved. The SAPS further differentiates the broad category of aggravated robbery into the following seven sub-categories: street robbery, residential robbery, business robbery, vehicle hijacking, truck hijacking, bank robbery and Cash-in Transit Heists (CITs). Typically, over two thirds of the total numbers of aggravated robberies recorded are street robberies.
- 4 These findings were presented at a seminar, 'Results of the 2007 National Victims Survey', held at the Institute for Security Studies on 8 May 2009.
- 5 The results of the evaluation of this operation were broadcast live by Radio 702 on 2 February 2009 and also published: Operation Iron Fist after six months. Provincial Police Strategy under review, *SA Crime Quarterly* 19 (2007).
- 6 See page 14 of the SAPS summary of crime during the 2007/ 2008 financial year in South Africa available at: www.saps.gov.za/statistics/reports/crimestats/2008/docs/introduction2008.pdf
- 7 During 2006, an average of 1 533 Trio cases were reported each month and although the Gauteng SAPS arrested a monthly average of 159 suspects for these crimes, a majority of Trio cases were withdrawn before or in court. As a result, on average only 32 Trio cases ended in a conviction each month. Per crime this worked out to be a monthly average of 13 convictions for residential robbery, 12 for hijacking and seven for business robbery for the whole Gauteng province.
- 8 M V Llorente and A Rivas, *Case Study: Reduction of Crime in Bogota. A Decade of Citizens' Security Policies*. Washington DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank (2005).
- 9 Ibid, 5.
- 10 Ibid, 23.
- 11 H Corman and N Mocan, Carrots, Sticks, and Broken Windows, *Journal of Law and Economics* 48 (1 April 2005), 235-266.
- 12 F E Zimring, *The Great American Crime Decline*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 149.
- 13 Further details of the NYPD approach to reducing robberies was gained during interviews with the Chief of the NYPD, Raymond W. Kelly, and a number of his senior officers during an official study trip to New York from 17 to 25 April 2007.
- 14 For example, as of December 2008, the SAPS had fingerprints linking identified suspects to 1 381 cases of residential robbery, 1 192 cases of hijacking and 772 cases of business robbery.