

NO ONE TO TRUST

Preliminary results from a Manenberg crime survey

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A survey of crime in Manenberg reveals the hold that gangs still have on the community. Many believe the police take protection money from gangsters, and most doubt the police's ability to protect witnesses in a murder trial. Public knowledge about drugs is high, especially among the youth, which suggests open drug markets that can only exist when enforcement is lax. It is not surprising then that local public opinion of the police is much more negative than that recorded in a recent national victim survey.

In the article 'Still Marginal: Crime in the coloured community' (*SA Crime Quarterly* No 8, 2004), I suggested that crime may be disproportionately impacting the coloured community, especially in the Western Cape and Northern Cape, for a variety of reasons. The need for further research was identified, and this article is a first attempt at filling this gap.

In August 1993, the ISS undertook a 1,100 household victim survey in Manenberg police station area in the Cape Flats, an area that was 89% coloured at the time of the 1996 Census. Manenberg has long been synonymous with gangsterism in the public mind. Home of the notorious Staggie twins, this small township across the tracks from Gugulethu has acquired international notoriety for all the wrong reasons. The police station area that bears its name is also responsible for several other townships, including most of Heideveld, an area with a growing reputation of its own.

The sample of 1,100 is quite large in an area with perhaps 80,000 residents in less than 20,000 households. In addition to the standard victim

survey questions, specific questions were asked about gangs, drugs, and involvement in the prison system. The survey was followed by focus groups, gang interviews, and a school survey, none of which are detailed here. This article simply outlines some of the survey findings, based on unweighted data.

Demographics

Manenberg defies much of the traditional reasoning about high crime areas. Unlike inner city areas, for example, most people own their homes, and the population is both stable and fairly elderly.

Of those polled, 62% said they owned their home, and 27% had a long term lease. It is not surprising then that 88% of the respondents reported having lived in the area for more than five years. Survey fieldworkers indicated that many of those they interviewed reported having lived in the area for 20 years or more.

In addition, 73% of the respondents said they were 35 years old or older. Keeping in mind that the cut-off age to be interviewed in this survey was 18, contrast this to 1996 Census population profile for

the area, in which 54% of the adult population were found to be 35 and over. This is quite a bit older than the national average.

The survey was conducted during the day, and whoever answered the door was interviewed, if they consented. High unemployment and an older population meant that 44% of those interviewed identified themselves as the head of the household, 30% were the spouse of the head, and 22% the child of the head. Almost 60% of the respondents were female, but only 28% said they were 'housewives'. Over a fifth said they were unemployed, seeking work, but 13% were retired, 15% were full time formal employees, and 8% were part time formal employees.

Virtually all of the respondents identified themselves as either Christian (62%) or Muslim (38%), with most attending either a church (53%) or mosque (30%) on a weekly basis.

Thus, the survey results indicate a stable, older, and religious population, which is not what one would expect in an area known for gangs and drugs. However, as was suggested in 'Still Marginal', there are other factors at work here.

A pivotal issue is overcrowding. The average household size in the Manenberg victim survey sample was six, mostly housed in either two (45%) or three (40%) bedrooms. But 29% had seven or more members, and one respondent claimed 17 members in his household!

This overcrowding is largely due to the fact that high rentals in Cape Town make it impossible for adult children to leave the family home. About 20% of the respondents were living in flats, and the other forms of housing in the area also leave little room for expansion. Many people erect 'Wendy houses' in their backyards to accommodate new members, but the situation has become untenable in many instances.

Internationally, overcrowding is associated with crime, and as was suggested in 'Still Marginal', overcrowding combined with population stability may be fuelling gangsterism. An aggravating factor

is the lack of mobility. Manenberg is situated quite a distance from the city centre and from potential work sites, which would suggest some form of transport would be a necessity. Unfortunately, only a minority (39%) of households owned any form of vehicle.

Pushed outdoors by overcrowding, unsupervised youth clustering on street corners is seen by many as the start of gangsterism. Despite this, 68% of those polled said they thought children should be allowed to play unsupervised on the street at the age of 12 or less, perhaps because there are no alternatives.

Perceptions of safety and policing

Despite the hype about Manenberg, most people (54%) said they felt either very or fairly safe walking alone in their area during the day. At night, the situation reverses, however, with 78% feeling "a bit" or very unsafe. The respondents were divided on crime trends, with 44% feeling it had increased a little or a lot, and 43% believing it had decreased a little or a lot. Females (34%) were far more likely than males (19%) to say crime had increased a lot.

Burglary (29%), robbery (27%) and gang-related crimes (19%) were believed to be the most common crimes in the area. Most people (87%) said there were parts of Manenberg they would never go, listing a wide range of specific locations.

Fear of crime has made the public quite vindictive, and nearly everyone (87%) was in favour of the death penalty for murderers. Furthermore, nearly half (48%) favoured the death penalty for drug dealers.

To measure to what extent members of the public were willing to give up privacy interests in order to promote safety, the respondents were asked, "would you be willing to have your home searched by police once a month if it would reduce crime in your area?" As was the case when this question was asked in a similar central Johannesburg survey, most (81%) answered "yes, definitely" or "yes, maybe".¹ Accordingly, of the 34% who said there had been a SAPS search and seizure 'Crackdown operation' in their area, 83% felt it had been effective in

reducing crime. But more people were in the “maybe” category (22%) than in the Johannesburg poll, probably reflecting a greater local scepticism of the police, as will be discussed below.

As a result of these concerns, over a third (36%) said there was an agency, other than the police, who provided security to their area, and most (91%) described this agency as a “neighbourhood watch”. A substantial share (43%) said they actually paid money to this organisation.

But the group they were describing was no ordinary group of concerned citizens sporting reflective bibs and flashlights. A quarter (25%) of those polled said they had seen this group actually mete out punishment to suspected offenders. Most (52%) said they felt this group was more effective than the police, with 27% describing them as “about the same” and 7% complaining that neither worked.

These “watches” hark back to an internationally recognised tradition of vigilantism in the area, best known for the organisation called People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad). Exactly 81% of those polled said they had been living in Manenberg when Pagad was an issue, and 34% admitted to supporting Pagad at the time, including 44% of those aged 35-49. A quarter (25%) said they changed their mind about Pagad at some point, with 69% mentioning violence against innocent members of the public, and 26% mentioning violence against gangsters, as the factor that shifted their opinion.

Despite this, most (58%) felt Pagad did deter gangsters, and 29% said they would support a new movement that drove gangsters from the area by violent means. This reflects a general lack of confidence in the police to sort out local crime problems: 63% felt the police were doing a poor job. This is much higher than the national equivalent of 45%, as recorded in a recent nationwide victim survey.²

In explaining this, people in Manenberg mentioned lack of resources (48%), corruption (42%), a failure to come into the area (24%), and laziness (20%).

Only 15% of victim survey respondents said they saw a police member in uniform in their area at least once a day, which is also much less than the 29% who so answered nationally in the ISS’ 2003 National Victims of Crime survey. Fifteen percent in Manenberg said they “never” saw the police in their area. As many as 41% of victim survey respondents was willing to say that the police took protection money from gangsters. Of equal concern was the fact that 82% said the police would not be able to protect them if they wanted to be a witness in a murder trial.

Dissatisfaction with the police is symptomatic of a larger sense of social exclusion in the community. An alarming 53% of respondents felt the apartheid government ran the country better than the present one, while only a third thought the democratic government was performing better. In addition, 71% felt that affirmative action was being applied improperly, to the detriment of the coloured community. When asked if the government would be better run by a religious body, 13% said yes.

The prevalence of gang activity

While it is difficult to get reliable information on gang membership in a door-to-door survey, some conclusions can be drawn from the data.

Respondents were asked if a gang controlled their area and, if so, which gang or gangs. Perhaps partly due to the fact that the survey area (the police station area) was not restricted to Manenberg proper and included a number of more affluent areas, only 60% of the respondents said they felt a gang controlled their area. Of those, the following gangs were mentioned:

- Americans (57% of mentions);
- Hard Livings Kids (29%);
- Junky Funky Kids (22%);
- Dixie Boys (17%);
- Clever Kids (12%);
- Cat Pounds (10%);
- Jesters (8%).

According to the police, the “Cat Pounds” are an upstart school gang, and are comprised mainly of school-age members, especially prevalent in Heideveld. These school gangs are the primary

feeder for street gangs, either graduating classes into established gangs or staking a claim of their own.

While the number of mentions could have been affected by sampling, these figures would appear to represent a decline in the fortunes of the Hard Livings, who formerly dominated the area, in favour of the Americans. But most of these gang territories seem to be well established, since 75% of those polled said the gang had been in their area for more than three years. While territories may be small, membership is believed to be high: 53% said the gang that controlled their area had more than 50 members; 16% said it had more than 100. In addition, 72% said the size of gangs had increased in the last five years.

This would suggest a substantial share of the young male population is involved in gangs, but estimating the total number of gang members, or gang member prevalence, is difficult. Nearly a quarter (22%) of respondents were willing to admit they had friends or family members who were gang members, and 7% said a gang member resided in their household. But 7% also refused to say whether gang members resided in their homes, so the number may be higher still. Fieldworkers reported that respondents bearing clear gang tattoos would deny that gang members resided in the household when asked during the survey.

Given that 40% of the households said no gang controlled their area, this would suggest that there are neighbourhoods where as many as one household in eight or nine could house a gang member. Using only the share of households willing to admit harbouring a gang member, this suggests at the very least 1,400 gang households in a community of about 80,000, and it is possible (if not likely) that multiple members could reside in a single household. An estimate of over 5,000 members, which was given by a local community worker, could be in the right ballpark. This would account for about 30% of the males in the area between the ages of 10 and 30.

According to the victim survey, the intake for formal gang membership is believed to be around the onset of adolescence. While 28% said the youngest

gang member they knew was under 12 years, the majority (87%) said the youngest was under 14. This was supported by additional qualitative research in the area, which found that young people were armed and began fighting immediately on joining.

With such a high level of gang involvement, and the low age of entry into gangs, it is not surprising that 38% of those polled knew someone who had been to prison or reform school, and 30% knew someone who was presently inside. A remarkable 7% admitted that a member of their household had been incarcerated in the past, and 4% said a member was presently incarcerated. These figures are roughly the same as those willing to admit gang membership, and suggests a high level of general exposure to the correctional system.

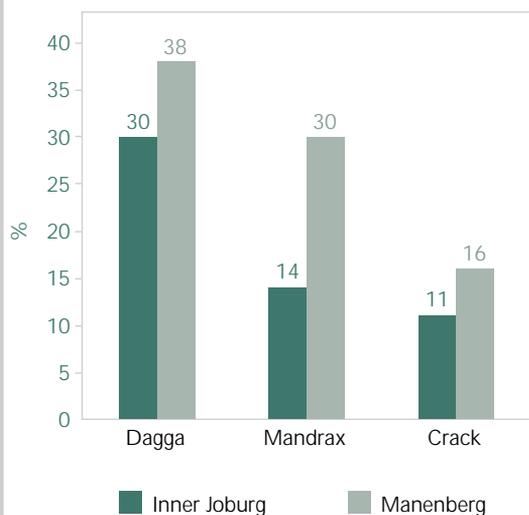
Despite this high uptake, only 14% felt that gang members were respected by the community. The majority (52%) thought gangs preyed primarily on community members, rather than outsiders (12%) or both community members and outsiders (32%). Only 31% said the gangs helped community members with money, and only 4% felt that gang members protected non-gang members. As a result, only 8% said community members could approach gangs with a problem, and 59% felt that most of the crime in their area was gang related.

Open drug markets

In contrast to the views on gangs, 69% of those polled thought most of the crime in their area was drug related, and 78% felt drug use had increased in the last five years. Nearly three quarters (72%) had seen dagga smoked in their area, half (50%) had seen Mandrax smoked, a quarter (25%) had seen crack smoked, and 11% had seen ecstasy used. Among respondents under 24 years, 87% had seen dagga, two thirds (66%) had seen Mandrax, 35% had seen crack, and 26% had seen ecstasy used.

A remarkable 38% of respondents of all ages knew where to buy cannabis, 30% knew where to buy Mandrax, 16% knew where to buy crack, and 7% knew where to buy ecstasy. Younger respondents were more likely than the general sample to know where to buy drugs: among those under 24 years of

Figure 1: Respondents who said they know where to buy drugs in their community



Source: ISS victim surveys in inner Johannesburg, 2002 and Manenberg, 2003

age, 57% knew where to buy cannabis, 46% knew where to buy Mandrax, 24% knew where to buy crack, and 16% knew where to buy ecstasy. A remarkable 35% of respondents could name a drug addict in their community.

All of these figures are higher than comparable statistics in central Johannesburg and Hillbrow, which is recognised as being one of South Africa's main drug markets (Figure 1).³ This high level of public knowledge about drugs is indicative of open drug markets, which can only exist in a context of lax enforcement.

Tackling the pillars of crime

The survey results confirm the existence of several factors that may contribute to high rates of criminal victimisation:

- residential overcrowding, with an average of six individuals in a two or three bedroom flat;
- lack of mobility, with only 39% of households owning a vehicle;
- unsupervised youth on the streets, with 68% of respondents saying children 12 years and under should be allowed to play unsupervised on the streets;

- high levels of gang membership, with perhaps 30% of young men joining;
- entry into gangs at a young age, with children being armed about the time of the onset of adolescence;
- loss of confidence in the police, and consequent support for violent solutions to crime problems, including open vigilantism;
- a high sense of social exclusion, with over half of respondents saying the apartheid regime ran the country better than the present government;
- high levels of exposure to the corrections system, with 7% of households admitting that a present member had served time;
- open drug markets, with most people under 24 years knowing where to buy drugs.

These facts paint a bleak picture, but they also show where crime prevention interventions might be applied. Simply because the residents of Manenberg live in formal housing does not mean that their housing needs have been adequately addressed. There is also a need for both public transport and organised community activities for young people.

The gang issue needs to be tackled, and child gang membership in particular. But gangsterism may be symptomatic of other issues, and the problem might therefore be best addressed indirectly by other measures. Simply jailing gang members seems to have little effect, other than to increase the levels of community exposure to a possibly counterproductive corrections process, and increasing the perceived normality of having household members in jail.

One clear area for enforcement is the sale of illegal drugs, which is being done openly enough for all to see that the law can be disregarded with impunity. Aside from the social consequences of the drugs themselves, this fuels the public belief that the police are either incompetent or corrupt. As a result, the public are deterred from cooperating with law enforcement, despite the fact that they clearly possess high levels of knowledge about criminal activity.

Vigilante activity cannot be tolerated, and it is essential that the police regain public confidence in

their willingness to combat crime. The public appears willing to assist and is likely to tolerate inconvenience and invasions of privacy, so long as the police concerned can be trusted. The state in general needs to regain the trust of the coloured community in places like Manenberg – a community so alienated that the majority feel the country was run better under apartheid.

Endnotes

- 1 T Leggett, *Rainbow Tenement: Crime and policing in inner Johannesburg*, ISS Monograph No 78, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, April 2003.
- 2 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.
- 3 T Leggett, op cit.