

# A DEN OF INIQUITY?

## Inside Hillbrow's residential hotels

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Hillbrow's sleazy hotels are notorious crime hotspots. After a general victim survey of the Hillbrow police station area conducted by the ISS, a special follow-up was conducted in these hotels. This survey uncovered startling frankness about the prevalence of drugs, commercial sex work, and corruption in Johannesburg's inner city.

**A**s part of a much larger victim survey of the Johannesburg Central and Hillbrow policing areas, a focused (n = 200) household survey was conducted exclusively in the residential hotels. While this might sound like a tiny sample, there are a limited number of residential hotels in Hillbrow, an area with an official population estimate of just over 80,000. Respondents were polled at 10 sites.

### Crime hot spots

These hotels are well known as centres for criminal activity, in particular the drug trade and prostitution, and contribute disproportionately to the total narcotics arrests in the country. According to the police, in one randomly selected five-month period in 2000, Hillbrow was responsible of over a quarter of all non-cannabis drug arrests in the Johannesburg policing area, an area with a population of nearly one million. Most of these arrests took place in one of a handful of residential hotels, several of which were included in this survey.

The state has taken action against several of these locations. The Mimosa International on Clarendon Street, allegedly a virtual drive-in drug market, has been seized under the assets forfeiture provisions of the 1996 Prevention of Organised Crime Act. The Sands Hotel, on O'Reilly Street, has been shut down by court order, as the hotel is in default to the city

for payment of services and is in violation of building codes. The Sands, and other nearby hotels, have been the sites of countless drug arrests.

Many new migrants to central Johannesburg (including students at the nearby educational institutions) find their first accommodation in Hillbrow's residential hotels, where medium-term rates can be negotiated without long-term commitments. For this reason, the hotels give special insight into the crime problems of areas of rapid residential turnover.

Because the residential hotels contain a large proportion of foreign migrants (36% of respondents were foreign), interview schedules were devised for them and an extra set of questions was generated for Nigerian nationals in particular (22% of respondents). These special questionnaires were based on qualitative research into the issues of particular concern to these groups, and are discussed below.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, because many of the residential hotels are well known for prostitution, particular questions were asked of all female residents (35% of respondents, 27% of whom admitted engaging in prostitution). These are also discussed below.<sup>2</sup>

### Snapshot of residential hotel life

When asked why they chose to reside in a residential hotel, most residents mentioned factors related to

Hillbrow as a neighbourhood, with 20% saying 'location' was the deciding factor, 21% citing their social connections to the hotel, and 8% reporting opportunities for prostitution as their main motivation. A large chunk complained of nowhere else to go (17%), but few cited price as a deciding factor.

Despite the option of paying daily, most residents reported paying for their accommodation by the month, with 57% saying the monthly rental was less than R1,000, and 17% between R1,000 and R2,000. None of the respondents mentioned prices of over R2,000 a month. Less than a third were compelled to pay the full amount, with 55% paying between 10% and 50%. Just over a quarter of hotel residents lacked cooking facilities in their rooms, although nearly all had their own bathrooms.

A quarter of all residents polled claimed that drugs were sold in their building, and every hotel in which surveys were done contained some respondents who said they were available. Of these 50 people:

- 12 respondents claimed any drug could be bought in their building;
- 28 specified that dagga was available;
- 30 specified Mandrax;
- 27 specified crack cocaine; and
- one specified ecstasy.

Ninety-one percent of the respondents said they thought that the legalisation of drugs would not improve the situation in Hillbrow.

With regard to prostitution, 75% said that women sold sex in their building. As was revealed in later questions, few of these women were responsible for small children. Less than a fifth of respondents (17%) said that children under 12 years old were left unsupervised in the hotel.

### **Views on policing**

The majority of people in every building had been present during at least one police raid. A third of these people felt the raid had achieved its objectives, but 15% said it had limited success, citing various forms of corruption as a reason. Eighty percent said there had been a 'Crackdown'

operation (the informal name for the high density search and seizure operations carried out by the South African Police Service in recent years) in their area, and 36% felt this had been successful.

Sixteen percent of respondents admitted to having being arrested at some point, and 21% claimed that the police had in the past asked them for money.

It appears that most residents feel that police efforts to reduce criminal activity have had limited success, and a number have had direct experience of the corruption some blame for this failure.

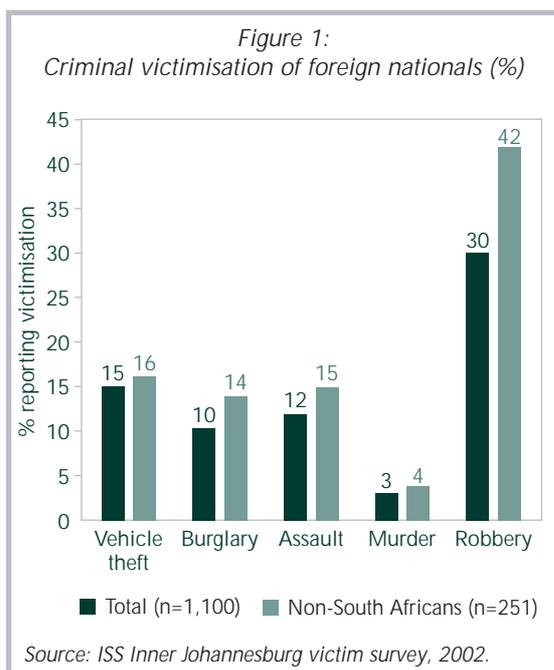
### **Foreign hotel dwellers**

A wide range of foreigners were found in the hotels, although young Nigerian men made up by far the single largest grouping (62%), and 92% of these Nigerians described themselves as belonging to the Ibo ethnic group, a group that past qualitative research has identified as being involved in a range of grey and black market activities.<sup>3</sup> Ninety percent of all foreign nationals were male, including all of the Nigerians.

Two thirds of the foreign nationals polled arrived in this country some time within the last two years, with over a third having been here less than a year. This illustrates why official population estimates for the area are unlikely to be accurate. Only 10% had been to South Africa prior to moving to Hillbrow, but 70% knew someone who was residing here at the time.

The foreign residents interviewed were drawn to South Africa by a variety of factors, but most were related to business or job opportunities. While 14 of the 72 foreign residential hotel residents polled said they would be arrested or killed if they returned to their country of origin, this response may have been motivated by a desire to remain consistent with claims to political asylum. Ten of 45 Nigerians, two of four DRC nationals, and one of two Sierra Leone expatriates made this claim.

Life in Hillbrow is not easy for new immigrants. A remarkable 62% said that they had been assaulted by local residents merely for being foreign. As was revealed in the representative, general victim survey

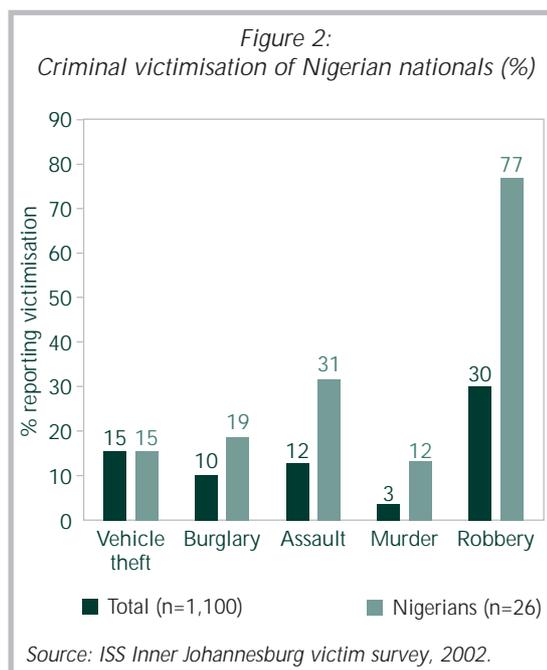


of Hillbrow and the Johannesburg central area, foreign nationals were more likely to have been victims of crime than were locals in every category polled (Figure 1). For Nigerian nationals, the situation was even more extreme, with more than three-quarters reporting having been robbed in central Johannesburg in the past year (Figure 2).

Despite these problems, most of these foreigners were quite happy with what they had found in South Africa. In fact, 43% said their opinion of their prospects here had improved since they had arrived, compared to 33% who said it had stayed the same and only 22% who said it had got worse. A surprising 73% said they would recommend South Africa to their countrymen as a good place to stay, and a quarter said they intend bringing members of their family over.

While 11% wanted to leave the country as soon as possible, the majority (58%) wanted to stay in South Africa for as long as they could, but were not sure how they would achieve this goal. Only 5% said they had the intention of applying for citizenship or permanent residency, but 75% said they were, or intended to become, married to a South African.

But remaining in South Africa has its costs. In addition to the police bribes paid by hotel residents



generally, a remarkable 43% of the foreign nationals said they had been asked for bribes by South African authorities. Only two people admitted to having been deported in the past.

Few foreign nationals felt they were operating at their full potential in this country. Two thirds claimed they possessed a tertiary qualification, and nearly three-quarters felt they had job skills that were not being utilised in South Africa.

This picture of foreign migrants supports previous research findings in many ways, while challenging them in others. The group is indeed largely young and male, motivated primarily by an interest in economic gain. But, contrary to past surveys that suggested most immigrants are here for short-term income generation, most of the Hillbrow respondents wanted to forge long-term ties with South Africa. And while they are subject to a wide range of abuses, the bulk of the immigrants were positive about their experience in this country.

#### **Women in the residential hotels**

Hillbrow is a dangerous place, and, given that most people are recent arrivals to the area, it seems strange that women in particular would choose to migrate here. Twenty percent of the female hotel residents polled cited business or job opportunities

as their reason for being in Hillbrow, but another 27% candidly admitted to engaging in prostitution.

These sex workers appear to have been motivated primarily by prospects for economic gain, as 47% said being unemployed and staying at home prompted them to take up streetwalking. An additional 21% said they had been abandoned by a man and left with small children. None said they had been addicted to drugs prior to starting. Despite this element of choice, 79% said they would give up sex work if offered a job in a fast food restaurant.

A surprising 87% of the female hotel residents said they had a home elsewhere that they could return to at will. Twenty-one women said they kept their children in a household they maintained outside Hillbrow, while only four said they kept their children with them in the hotel. The majority of the women (61%) had someone else pay their rent, with nine women citing a Nigerian as their keeper. Past qualitative work has revealed that this is a common method of linking prostitution and drug markets.<sup>4</sup>

The vast majority (86%) said they had boyfriends or husbands, of whom about a quarter were foreign nationals. Nearly all claimed to love this person, although over a third admitted at least occasional beatings, and nearly a fifth claimed that this abuse was regular.

Thirty percent said they would return home if their present building were to be shut down, with just under 25% saying they would seek another form of accommodation in Hillbrow, and 14% saying they would simply go to another residential hotel nearby.

While the sample size is small, the trends are striking. In contrast to its reputation for turning runaways into sex slaves, this survey suggests that many of the women living in Hillbrow are, in fact, here by choice. They have homes and families to return to, but have chosen to brave the dangers of inner Johannesburg as an alternative to idle unemployment.

### **Implications for policy**

This survey suggests several points of relevance for law enforcement and social crime prevention. Drug

sales and prostitution are widely acknowledged by the residents, so identifying the names and locations of dealers in this area should be easy if the police command any public confidence at all. Corruption, especially with regard to foreign nationals, is clearly a major impediment to enforcement in this area.

Among foreigners, Ibo Nigerians make up the single largest group, and efforts to work with this community to solve the local crime problem should be advanced. This is in the best interest of the local immigrant community, as they are disproportionately the victims of crime.

Despite harassment and xenophobic attacks, these foreign nationals still view Hillbrow as an attractive alternative to their home countries, and most are interested in forging long-term ties here. Since immigration control measures have plainly failed, and criminalising these foreigners seems to result in still more criminal activity, some sort of official recognition of their status should be considered.

The sex workers polled were not the desperate runaways many may have expected. They are women with homes elsewhere, migrant labourers involved in sex work as the only form of employment available. This suggests that the provision of targeted alternative employment opportunities would decimate the local sex work market, and reduce the general air of lawlessness that hangs over this troubled area.

### **Endnotes**

- 3 See T Leggett, *Rainbow Vice: the drugs and sex industries in the new South Africa*, David Philip, Cape Town, 2001.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.