

Sourcing crime intelligence from incarcerated house robbers

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'House robbery' is the term formulated by the South African Police Service (SAPS) to describe a robbery where the perpetrators overpower, detain and rob the residents (occupants) of a residential premise inside their residence.¹ There is evidence that the police have not been successful in preventing or investigating this kind of crime. Part of the problem appears to be that the police do not have sufficient crime intelligence about house robbers. This article focuses on the value of incarcerated offenders of house robberies as an additional source of crime intelligence to the police on the basis of research conducted by the author in Gauteng in 2007.²

It is evident that the SAPS experiences difficulties in combating house robberies and other violent crimes in South Africa. This contention is supported by the police's annual report on crime released in 2009:

The trio crimes (house robbery, carjacking, business robbery), increased by 22,6% in 2008/2009, despite the special emphasis on these crimes and various efforts to contain the latter.³

The SAPS's inability to effectively combat house robberies in South Africa appears to be linked to the police's largely reactive style of policing and the fact that they do not make use of crime intelligence to inform a defined and effective intelligence-led policing approach.⁴

THE ORIGINS OF INTELLIGENCE-LED POLICING

According to Ratcliffe,⁵ intelligence-led policing was originally articulated as a law enforcement operational strategy that sought to reduce crime through the combined use of crime analysis and

criminal intelligence. This strategy was implemented to determine crime reduction tactics that concentrate on the prevention of criminal offender activity and law enforcement in cases where offenders did offend, with a focus on active and recidivist offenders. This approach emphasises information gathering through the extensive use of confidential informants, offender interviews and the analysis of recorded crime, and calls for service delivery, surveillance of suspects, and community sources of information.

All of the crime information, as well as the sources from which the information was derived, are analysed so that law enforcement managers can determine objective policing tactics (for example through crime intelligence initiatives). While retaining the central notion that police should avoid getting bogged down in reactive, individual case investigations; intelligence-led policing is evolving into a management philosophy that places greater emphasis on information sharing and collaborative, strategic solutions to crime problems at local and regional levels.⁶

Initially most police forces in the UK and other countries in Europe where intelligence-led policing became known as an alternative policing

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model, were too focused on investigating crime that had already been committed to devote significant resources to the development of intelligence systems, even where they accepted the possibility that the predictive ability of good intelligence systems might eventually help to reduce crime levels.⁷ A further reason for the lack of emphasis on the development of intelligence systems was that police forces were reluctant to take a leap of faith in engaging in the new concepts of intelligence gathering, intelligence exploitation and intelligence-led policing in a formal sense.⁸

Despite its slow start, intelligence-led policing has gradually established itself as the modern approach to crime combating or crime management. Flood is of the opinion that there are essentially four things that can be done to manage criminal activity through intelligence-led policing:⁹

- the targeting of individual criminals or criminal groups and networks (instead of trying to police the entire community)
- the identification and management of crime and disorder 'hot spots'
- the identification and investigation of 'crime series'; and
- the application of a range of preventative measures, which may include requirements for legislative and policy changes, neighbourhood watch schemes, Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) systems and directed patrols, and innovations such as restorative justice programmes

The use of intelligence-led policing has been extended to many countries, including Australia, New Zealand and continental Europe, and, since 11 September 2001, it has become increasingly common in the USA.¹⁰ This use of intelligence-led policing does not come without its own risks. The police should not, for example, become overly reliant on intelligence being available, and be unable to perform their duties in the absence thereof. Furthermore, agencies that collect crime information should not collect information in such a way that it will be in contravention of

human rights principles or the law, or disregard good police-community relationships.

THE BENEFIT OF USING COMPREHENSIVE CRIME INTELLIGENCE

Crime intelligence, according to Brown, can be divided into two categories:¹¹ 'tactical intelligence', which is information that directly supports a specific policing objective, for example when and where a house robbery will take place; and 'strategic intelligence', which is related to wider incidences, for example the increase of motor vehicle hijackings near taxi ranks. Both can be used by decision-makers to do projections of future policing needs. However, according to Higgins,¹² some of the literature refers to strategic intelligence as if it had a separate data set to that of tactical intelligence. The distinction between the strategic and tactical levels of intelligence applies only to the use that is made of intelligence in strategic or tactical assessment. Any given item of intelligence may have tactical, strategic, or dual relevance.

The basis of the success of intelligence-led policing is that the police, through comprehensive crime intelligence, get a better understanding of who and what are driving specific crimes, as well as where, when and why these crimes are taking place. It also *inter alia* provides insight into markets for stolen goods, and why specific areas and persons are selected as targets by criminals. The police can then focus their policing initiatives on those motives, perpetrators, places, times and reasons with regard to the specific crimes.

Obtaining comprehensive crime intelligence can also identify further areas that need to be investigated, or the need for more intelligence to address a specific policing concern. This might be the case when, through crime intelligence, it is discovered that local crime is driven by organised groups. This realisation will then require more intelligence to be collected on the organised nature of local crime, as well as the syndicates involved in these crimes, before these crimes and criminals can be policed more effectively.

There are various international examples where the use of comprehensive crime intelligence has resulted in more successful policing and a subsequent reduction in crime volumes. Some of these examples will be briefly discussed to illustrate the point. A number of further examples are available in the original studies on motor vehicle hijackings¹³ and house robberies.¹⁴

Operation Hawk is an example of an intelligence-led campaign. An operation of the Greater Manchester Police, the campaign played a major role in tackling robberies within local communities. The campaign aimed to reduce robberies, educate residents and visitors on how to avoid becoming victims of street crime, and discredit offenders to break the cycle of re-offending. Over a period of 12 months (2005/06), the Greater Manchester Police brought 6 720 more robbery offences to justice than it had in the previous year. This success was achieved through high profile, intelligence-led policing and the targeting of persistent offenders.¹⁵

In the past the SAPS launched a number of campaigns based on crime intelligence in order to deal with high levels of crime. These campaigns included the searching of entire neighbourhoods, such as Hillbrow, and the formation of various task teams to deal with specific crimes and to carry out intelligence-led police interventions. These crime intelligence-based initiatives achieved various levels of success. Examples include a decrease in truck hijacking during 2004/05 to its lowest level since it peaked in 1998/99 (an 85% reduction),¹⁶ and bringing motor vehicle hijacking to 22% lower than when it peaked in 2001/02.¹⁷

However, in general the management style, approach to crime combating, and investigation of crime within the SAPS means that the organisation does not utilise the sources of crime information and crime intelligence to their full potential. The police, for example, still do not interview sentenced and incarcerated offenders as a matter of course in order to obtain detailed crime intelligence on the profile, motives, and all facets of the *modus operandi* of perpetrators.

SOURCES OF CRIME INFORMATION TO INFORM CRIME INTELLIGENCE

According to Higgins, one of the first things that needs to be done when following a crime intelligence approach is to identify relevant operational sources that can fill the gaps in police knowledge.¹⁸ This article draws on a research project conducted in Gauteng with the aim of evaluating the value of crime information obtained from prison inmates incarcerated for house robbery. House robbery is one of the crimes in South Africa about which, from a crime intelligence point of view, very little information is available. Higgins supports the idea of exploring new sources, stating that the assimilation of intelligence needs to extend beyond the data immediately accessible to the analyst, so that the end product reflects a collective understanding of the threat.¹⁹ The inmates thus become a relevant additional operational source that can contribute to filling the gaps in police knowledge about house robberies.²⁰

In a previous study on motor vehicle hijackers, the researcher established that incarcerated hijackers are a valuable source of crime intelligence.²¹ The approach of interviewing perpetrators of a crime is supported by Ronczkowski, who believes that analysts and investigators must keep open minds when transforming information into intelligence and should not discount learning from 'the enemy'.²²

Valuable information with regard to crime, including *modus operandi*, trends, syndicate formation, etc. as well as the profile of a criminal can be obtained by studying the profiles of relevant inmates and the crime information that they are prepared to furnish. The crime intelligence that can be processed from this information can contribute to decreasing the crime that occurs inside and outside of correctional centres by means of intelligence-driven policing.

A further benefit of crime intelligence is that the motives of offenders can be identified, and a

crime combating strategy formulated to deal with these specific problems.

For instance, satisfying financial needs may be the most general motive for burglaries in South Africa.²³ This type of information about the motive of the offender is important to assist in the formulation of rehabilitation programmes in correctional centres, and community crime prevention programmes that deal with the reasons, including the motives, for committing crime. However, all techniques used to obtain crime information must be in accordance with the law.

Gay, Beall and Bowers;²⁴ Rheinier, Greenless, Gibbens and Marshall;²⁵ Hough;²⁷ Ronczkowski²⁸ and Higgens²⁸ have all shown that the police are generally reluctant to use new technological aids and techniques. They ascribe this, *inter alia*, to a closed police culture, an unwillingness to experiment, fixed ideas, short-term financial planning, and in some cases a lack of vision and insight into the advantages associated with new technology or techniques.

The police can gather useful crime information on all crimes and criminals from inmates who are serving their sentences, as is done in the UK. This is because concrete information can be gathered about a criminal and his/her *modus operandi* after the criminal has been arrested. This information can be verified by the investigation conducted at the crime scene as well as by following up on the offender's history.

In several countries all available sources are used to obtain crime information on a specific crime in order to formulate crime intelligence that is as accurate and reliable as possible. These sources also include the offender of the crime that is being researched. Sentenced offenders are considered a valuable source of crime information, since they tend to be more willing to provide information after they have been arrested and sentenced than before they are prosecuted. Convicted and incarcerated offenders are debriefed as a matter of course by for example, the New York Police Department (NYPD),³⁰

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI),³¹ and the Metropolitan Police Service, London (New Scotland Yard).³²

Robbers are part of the crime 'underworld' and are therefore very knowledgeable about a wide range of crime issues. In South Africa, however, this wealth of crime information is not being fully utilised since no formal (let alone integrated, co-operative inter-agency) programme or process exists to obtain, collect, collate and analyse crime information from inmates, as is carried out in the NYPD-developed Compstat system.³²

The relatively new concept of debriefing inmates after their sentencing in order to obtain crime information, means that existing definitions and procedures with regard to crime information will have to be re-examined in order to determine whether definitions and procedures need to be updated to incorporate this new concept. This will include analysing the concepts and sources of crime information, profiling an inmate after s/he is sentenced, examining the procedures used to collect crime information from inmates, verifying such crime information, and collating and analysing the crime information, including the use of international intelligence databases.

OBTAINING INFORMATION FROM THE OFFENDER

Internationally, crime information is obtained by the police through interrogation, questionnaires, and/or interviews with sentenced and incarcerated inmates.

Crime information from inmates can enhance the information-gathering techniques and methods used by the police and correctional services authorities, and provide information about the profile of the inmate, including

- *modus operandi* information
- motives of the offender
- the type of crime, geographic details, choice of target, victim details, disposal of evidence and stolen goods, who committed which type of crime and why, when, and where, syndicate activities, etc.

It can also provide data with which to populate crime databases and inform policing initiatives.³³

Much of this information can be acquired through a profile analysis of the sentenced criminals and/or from information that is gathered directly from them during interviews.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The author conducted thirty detailed interviews with sentenced and incarcerated house robbers in the six largest correctional centres³⁴ in Gauteng. The decision to interview respondents in these correctional centres was based on the fact that the majority of house robberies occur in Gauteng and thus it was assumed that that the largest proportion of this type of offender would be incarcerated in this province.³⁵

WILLINGNESS OF INCARCERATED HOUSE ROBBERS TO PROVIDE CRIME INFORMATION

These data are in fact extremely important since this research project deals with, among other things, how the police internationally debrief sentenced and incarcerated offenders in order to collect crime information. For this to happen, sentenced and incarcerated offenders must be willing to cooperate with the very same police service that arrested them.

The study found that the majority of the inmates interviewed were willing to share information about themselves and their crimes after being incarcerated. And, subject to certain conditions mainly pertaining to their safety and privileges, they were also willing to provide the SAPS with information on the particular house robbery that they were incarcerated for, as well as other crimes in general. They explained that their willingness was due to the fact that they had been sentenced and incarcerated for the house robbery and could not suffer further legal consequences for it.

After being sentenced and incarcerated none of these respondents had been approached by the SAPS or officials from the Department of

Correctional Services (DCS) with the aim of obtaining crime information from them. The request by the researcher for an interview was the first such request received by the convicted house robbers. Moreover, this researcher could find no formal instructions or procedures compelling SAPS or DCS officials to debrief inmates after their conviction and incarceration. The only formal occasions (prior to the interviews conducted by the researcher) on which some of the incarcerated inmates who took part in this study had discussed aspects of their crimes had been when they went for counselling by a social worker or psychologist employed by the DCS. And the purpose of these discussions was solely to assist the inmates to deal with personal problems and not to obtain crime information from them for official records.

During their investigation and trial only just over a third of the respondents to this study provided the SAPS or the court with information about the crimes they had committed. This is mainly because they did not want to provide any information that could be used against them to secure a conviction. However, after sentencing and incarceration, a large majority of the respondents were willing to provide information about their crimes.

On the basis of this study it can be concluded that house robbers who have been incarcerated for between six and 24 months after being sentenced by a court would most likely be willing to cooperate with the SAPS in providing crime information. However, there is still a possibility that the SAPS might obtain crime information from those house robbers who have served between 24 months and six years of their sentence. These two groups combined (i.e. those who have been incarcerated for between six months and six years) constituted just under two thirds of the respondents who voluntarily took part in this research.

The above findings (on how long after sentencing incarcerated house robbers are willing to be interviewed) are interesting when compared to the findings of a similar study conducted previously by the author on incarcerated motor vehicle

hijackers.³⁶ In the study on motor vehicle hijackers, the researcher found that the group of respondents who had already served between six and 18 months of their sentences was most likely to be willing to be interviewed. The reasons for the differences between these two groups (hijackers and house robbers) need to be further researched.

What is most important, however, is that a large number of sentenced and incarcerated perpetrators of house robberies and motor vehicle hijackings declared themselves, under certain conditions, and subject to a set time of incarceration, willing to provide crime information to the SAPS.

VALUE OF THE CRIME INFORMATION OBTAINED FROM INCARCERATED HOUSE ROBBERS

The value of the crime information obtained from incarcerated house robbers for formulating crime intelligence has been clearly demonstrated from the crime information obtained from the respondents in this study.

The information the respondents were willing to share can be summarised under the following themes:

- personal information, enabling the drafting of a profile for incarcerated house robbers
- information about the most appropriate places and people, where and from whom the investigator can obtain information about a suspected house robber
- respondents' opinions on the relative effectiveness of security devices/electronic systems, including alarm systems, as a deterrent against house robberies
- respondents' opinions on what measures residents should take, or lifestyle habits they should adopt, to prevent them becoming easy targets for house robbers
- respondents' opinions about successful crime investigation methods for apprehending house robbers and for tracing stolen goods and/or stolen vehicles

- respondents' opinions about effective crime prevention strategies/methods which the SAPS could implement to prevent house robberies
- the disposal of stolen goods, including stolen motor vehicles
- the selection of target houses and victims
- actions that could lessen the risk of injury or death of victims
- the role of informers in providing inside information to house robbers; and
- detailed information on the *modus operandi* (in addition to what has already been listed) of house robbers during the planning and commissioning phases of the crime and after leaving the crime scene

Over and above the information about crime that can be obtained from a profile analysis of sentenced prisoners and their *modus operandi*, valuable information can also be obtained from inmates about house robbers who are still actively committing house robberies outside of correctional centres, as well as about other criminals who continue to commit crimes outside of correctional centres.

The crime information obtained from incarcerated offenders can also be used to confirm or disprove public and media speculation about how certain crimes are executed. For example, this study found that only a small number of house robbers were aware of methods or techniques used to mark (identify) the target house before a robbery. The respondents who marked a house or farm only used marking techniques in order to be able to find the target house when returning to the area after keeping it under surveillance for a period of time. This is contrary to the myth that unknown people (not the house robbers themselves) mark certain houses (e.g. by placing an empty coke tin on the verge outside a house) for house robbers to later identify as a target for a robbery.

The information that can be offered by incarcerated offenders is unique and cannot be obtained from any other source. This includes, for example, information about their personal motives, how they plan their crimes, their crime

associates, *modus operandi* before and after committing the crime, their crime preferences, other crimes they have committed but have not been linked to by the police, advice on how the public should go about more effectively preventing themselves from becoming victims of house robberies, and the actions victims can take during a house robbery to minimise the chances of being injured or killed.

VALUE OF HOUSE ROBBERS AS AN ADDITIONAL SOURCE OF CRIME INFORMATION

The fact that respondents shared remarkably similar information suggests that the information they provided in this study is accurate. This includes information that enabled the compilation of a profile of house robbers; established what *modus operandi* was displayed by the respondents; provided knowledge of which crime prevention measures serve as a deterrent and which do not; and confirmed the deterrent value of anti-house robbery security equipment. On the basis of the validity of this type of information the SAPS would not only be able to develop and obtain an overview of the criminal and his/her *modus operandi* but also be able to anticipate how the house robber is likely to think and act in certain situations, and to be able to predict when and where future house robberies are most likely to take place.

The ability of the respondents to provide a large and detailed volume of information is a further indication that the information is most probably reliable. This is based on the assumption that if the respondents were deceitful in answering the questions, they would not have described in such detail their involvement in house robberies, and provided such a volume of information on the topic. Moreover, the respondents would not have concurred to such an extent on the details of the crime information they provided.

The information provided by the respondents also correlates with the relevant information on the conduct of robbers that the respondents in the study on motor vehicle hijacking (robbery)

provided.³⁷ The information on how a victim should react during a house robbery to minimise the risk of injury or death; the firearms robbers prefer; how and where they obtain the firearms they use for committing crime; the willingness of incarcerated house robbers and motor vehicle hijackers to provide crime information to the SAPS; and the disposal of exhibits after the crime are all demonstrable examples of the correlation of the information provided by the two studies. The information provided by the respondents also correlates with the information reported via media news reports by victims of house robberies on what transpired during the robbery in which they were the victims.

After the study the crime intelligence division of the SAPS independently conducted an analysis of a thousand house robbery cases that were reported to the SAPS. They did this to determine whether the information from a docket analysis concurred with the information obtained through this study. They reported that there was a high correlation between the findings of this report and the case docket analysis. This serves to further confirm the accuracy and validity of the information provided by the respondents during the interviews.

The fact that the convicted house robbers interviewed are willing to provide accurate, reliable and unique information will enable the police to compile comprehensive crime intelligence on house robberies.

Because these house robbers are incarcerated they are protected from active criminals about whom they might have incriminating information. This would otherwise be a restrictive factor for people who wish to provide information to the police. The safety of the inmate who informs, especially on specific individuals, will, however, still have to be guaranteed by the police in a practical and sustainable way, since it is known that criminals on the outside have contacts inside prisons who may retaliate against the informing inmate. There is also the possibility that those criminals might retaliate against the prisoner's family. The police will have to take all of these factors into

consideration when negotiating with a prisoners to provide information on specific individuals.

In order to obtain information about the crimes for which prisoners were convicted, as well as more general crime information, it may be necessary for the police to offer some form of benefit to the offender; for example, by offering the offender privileges while still incarcerated. These privileges could include some sort of payment; being moved to a section in the prison where more visits are allowed; or for his/her co-operation with the authorities to be taken into account when early parole is considered. These privileges are discussed in detail in the study on motor vehicle hijackers.³⁸ However, for undetected or unconvicted crimes the respondents have committed it may be necessary to consider a plea bargain in order to persuade them to reveal information about their accomplices and crime associates who are still at large.

CONCLUSION

The value of crime information obtained from convicted offenders can only be maximised if it is analysed, processed and used in conjunction with other crime information and crime intelligence. Analysing and processing crime information in this way will enable the SAPS to utilise and move to an intelligence-driven style of policing – a style that has proven to be very successful internationally. But this is an ideal that can only be achieved if sufficient information from a variety of sources is obtained, collected, and analysed, and if comprehensive and reliable crime intelligence is derived from this. Crime information collected from prisoners can make a valuable contribution to the process of developing reliable crime intelligence from a variety of crime information sources.

The adoption of a fully comprehensive, intelligence-led policing style, inclusive of crime intelligence based on integrated databases, will require law enforcement agencies to take a leap of faith in engaging with the new concepts of intelligence gathering, intelligence exploitation and intelligence-led policing.³⁹



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NOTES

- 1 The term is now 'officially' used by SAPS in its official crime statistics to describe a specific type of robbery, namely: house robbery, as a sub-category of robbery with aggravating circumstances. The term 'house robbery' is, however, not defined in South African legislation as a separate type of crime.
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- 34 Baviaanspoort [Pretoria North], Johannesburg, Leeuwkop [Kyalami], Modderbee [Brakpan], Pretoria [Central], and Zonderwater [Cullinan].
- 35 A further factor in the decision to interview only respondents who were incarcerated in the six largest correctional facilities in Gauteng was that the larger correctional facilities are the only facilities in Gauteng that have high and maximum security detention sections. House robbers are more likely to be incarcerated in a higher concentration in these facilities than in lower security sections, owing to the violence used by the respondents that forms an integral part of the particular crime. See Zinn, *Sentenced Motor Vehicle* 39-41.
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