

EASY PREY

Results of the national youth victimisation study

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Recent media reports have highlighted incidents of violence and crimes against children and young people in South Africa. Yet, up till now, there has been little exploration of the extent and nature of criminal victimisation against youth. The recent National Youth Victimisation Study reveals that young people are almost twice as likely to be victimised as adults, and that young people are surrounded by violence and crime in all the spheres they occupy: the home, the school and the community.

According to recent press reports, in the period between 2004 and 2005, 85,808 crimes were committed against children, of which over 27,000 were sexual offences, and over 1,000 were murders.¹ Internationally, victim surveys have shown that children and young people are victimised at a significantly higher rate than adults.² Yet, other than the occasional sensationalised report in the media on child rapes and murders or attacks in schools, there is a dearth of accurate data on crimes against children and young people in South Africa.

This is an important gap in the literature, as the victimisation of young people can have a tremendous impact on their ability to relate to others and form healthy relationships, their performance at school, as well as their vulnerability to later victimisation as adults.³ Victimisation at an early age has also been identified as one of the many risk factors associated with later anti-social or delinquent behaviour.⁴ In a country where crime is widely perceived as endemic, the lack of focus on children and youth as victims of crime is highly problematic. This gap has been filled in part by the recent National Youth Victimisation Study, conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.⁵

The international experience

The United States of America and Britain have only in the past five years begun to focus on the disproportionate victimisation of youth. In the United States, data from the National Victimisation Survey, the National Youth Victimisation Survey, and the Uniform Crime Reports reveal some startling figures:

- Youth between the ages of 12 and 19 years are twice to three times more likely to be victims of assault, rape and robbery than older age groups.
- Homicide rates are highest for youths of 17 to 19 years of age, then decline through the higher ages.⁶

More recent reports argue that 22% of all violent crimes in the United States are committed against juveniles.⁷ These crimes may be committed by strangers or by individuals known to the youth or child. In fact, with the exception of robbery, the majority of cases across most crimes tend to be committed by someone known to the victim.

In the United Kingdom, the British Crime Survey, together with a National Youth Survey, showed that:

- 35% of youngsters had been physically attacked at school, and 39% in their area of residence.
- 45% had been threatened at school, and 38% where they lived.
- 22% had had their mobile phone stolen at school, and 25% had their phone stolen in their area of residence.
- 24% had something else stolen at school, while 7% had something else stolen from them in the area where they lived.⁸

These findings provide some indication of what might be expected in a youth victimisation survey in South Africa, where crime rates are significantly higher than in the US or the UK.

Collecting data on crime

Data on the rates of crime are generally collected from two sources: police statistics, which are dependent on the reporting of crimes to the police, and victim surveys. The proclivity to report crime to the police may depend on the nature of the crime, whether insurance is to be claimed, the levels of trust that the victims have in the police, or their belief that there is some use in reporting to the police, as well as the accessibility of the police.

Victim surveys are best seen as complementing the data available from the police, as they are based on a self-report system, when there is usually no motive to either over-report or under-report incidents. Victim surveys are usually conducted at a household level, with respondents interviewed within the home environment, and asked a series of specific questions regarding perceptions of crime, their feelings of safety, and importantly, their experience of a range of crimes over a pre-defined period (usually the preceding 12 months). By asking people about individual crimes, and locating them within a predefined period that is not too far in the past, it becomes possible to collect accurate information on the extent and the nature of crimes experienced.

Research methodology

The National Youth Victimisation Study followed the standardised research approach for youth victimisation surveys. The sample was drawn using

a stratified probability proportionate to size methodology, from a sampling frame based on the Statistics South Africa census data of young people between 12 and 22 years of age. The sample was stratified by province and race.

A total sample of 4,409 respondents was interviewed. Following data capture and validation in SPSS, the data were benchmarked and weighted by province, race and gender. This approach allows for the accurate extrapolation of the sample to young people aged between 12 and 22 throughout South Africa.

Extent of crime against young people

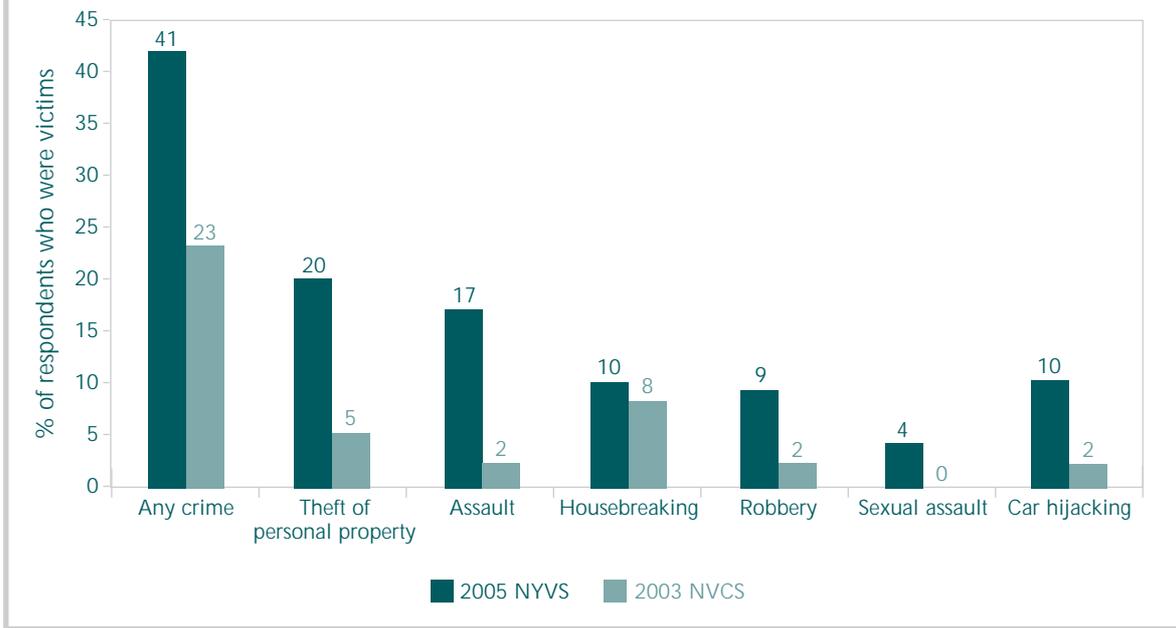
In the period between September 2004 and September 2005, 42% of South African children and youth between the ages of 12 and 22 years were victims of crime or violence. This translates to roughly 4.3 million young people. These crimes include assault, sexual assault/rape, theft, robbery, housebreaking and car hijacking.

The crimes of assault, sexual assault/rape, theft and robbery are all crimes committed against the individual. While not crimes experienced directly against a child or youth, crimes such as housebreaking and car hijacking are important in assessing the levels of crime that young people are directly exposed to, and which are likely to impact on their development, socialisation, and experience and perceptions of life.

It might be argued that property crimes such as theft, or housebreaking have less of an impact on young people than the violent personal crimes of robbery, sexual assault or rape, and assault. Even if this is true, this offers little reassurance in the South African case, where slightly more respondents actually fall prey to violent crime (27%), than to property crime (26%).

The youth victimisation data is directly comparable to the 2003 National Victims of Crime survey conducted by the Institute for Security Studies.⁹ A comparison between the victimisation rates shows that young people are twice as likely to be victims of at least one crime than adults (Figure 1). One in ten young people had

Figure 1: Youth and adult victims of crime in South Africa 2005 and 2003



experienced more than one crime over a 12 month period between September 2004 and September 2005.

Boys are more at risk of becoming victims of crime and violence than girls, with almost one out of two (46%) males reporting victimisation as compared to 37% of young females. This trend holds for all crimes except sexual assault and rape. This fits the international trend that places young men at greater risk of victimisation than young women.

Table 1: Youth victimisation by area type

	Area classification			
	Metro	Urban	Rural	Total
Any crime	44.6	42.0	40.5	41.5
Property crime	26.8	25.1	25.7	25.6
Violent crime	30.8	26.9	25.5	26.6

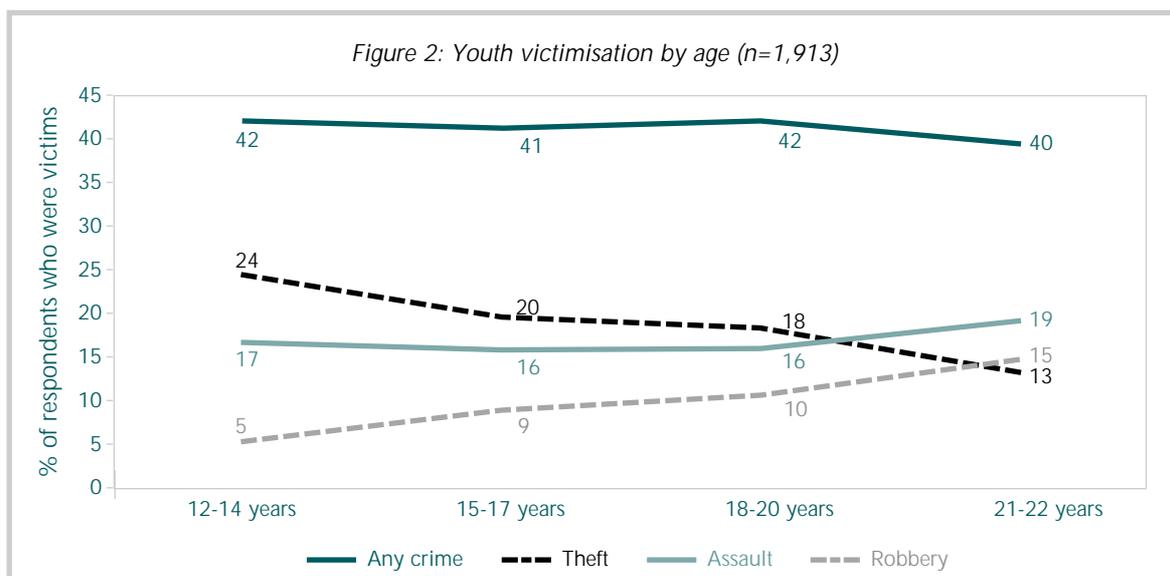
Youth living in metropolitan areas of eThekweni, Nelson Mandela, Tshwane, Johannesburg, and City of Cape Town are most likely to be victims of crime, while those in rural areas are the least likely.

Repeat victimisation is common: more than one tenth (14%) of all those interviewed had been victimised on more than one occasion during the 12 month period.

An analysis of victimisation by age provides some interesting observations. Children between 12 and 14 years, and youth between 18 and 20 years of age, are most likely to be victims of crime. As shown in Figure 2, the violent crimes of robbery and assault are more common among the older age groups of 18 to 20 and 21 to 22 years of age, while the property crime of theft is most common among the younger children. This may in part be explained by the lifestyle of older youths, who are more likely to spend time socialising, out of their 'safe' environments, and in areas that would put them more at risk of violent crimes.

Nature of crime against young people

A total of one in five (20%) young people were victims of theft of personal property in the 12-month period. As the most common crime, theft of personal property could include the theft of items such as money, wallets or purses, schoolbags, books, music equipment or any other personal belongings. In a country where almost one out of



two (49%) inhabitants fall under the poverty line,¹⁰ and 27% of the population is unemployed,¹¹ theft of any goods can be a significant trauma and have a range of negative consequences for the victims.

Roughly one in six (17%) young people were assaulted in 2005. These assaults were most likely to occur at school (26%), in the street near shops (21%), or at home (20%). Nine out of ten of the young people who were assaulted knew their attacker, most often from school or elsewhere in their community. This is in accordance with trends identified in the international literature that suggest in the majority of both assault and robbery cases against young people, the perpetrator is known to, and often a peer of, the young victim.¹²

In total, one in ten (10%) young people were robbed in the 12 month period. This translates to roughly 973,000 young South Africans between 12 and 22 years old. One in three robbery victims knew who had robbed them. Perpetrator(s) tended to be

Assaults recorded in the survey include incidents of bullying that occurs at school. The frequency of violent experiences at schools contributes to the levels of fear that many children expressed of their school environment. One in ten youngsters (10%) attending school reported that they were scared at school.

someone from the young person's community (38%), or a schoolmate (21%).

A point must be made about the cases of sexual assault or rape reported in this study. In total, 4.5% of youngsters reported experiences of sexual assault or rape over the preceding 12 months. Victim surveys are notoriously weak instruments for measuring incidents such as these, as they entail supplying very personal information to a complete stranger knocking on one's door. They do not offer any of the supportive environmental factors that might normally be required in exploring the extent or nature of sexual crimes.

The rate of report here is thus indicative rather than an exact representation. As Figure 1 shows, the rate is significantly higher than that revealed in the 2003 National Victims of Crime survey. The fact that the figure is as high as it is here is perhaps an indication of the extent of this crime within this age group, and the real figure is perhaps three or four times what is shown here.

Reporting of crime and violence

As previously mentioned, official police statistics are dependent on the reporting of crimes to the police. Yet in many instances crimes remain unreported due to feelings of mistrust, a lack of confidence in the police, lack of access to a police station, fear of retribution, or simply because the crime is not perceived as serious enough to report. However,

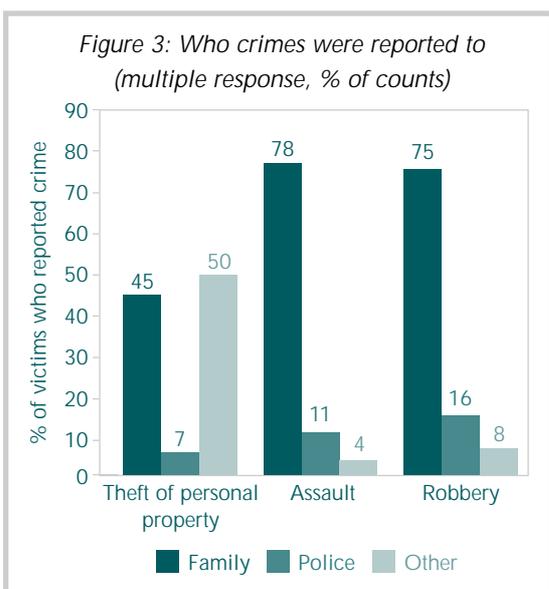
reporting often gives victims access to essential services that serve to ease the psychological trauma, and in many instances, treat the physical injuries, that result from victimisation.

It might be expected that young people are more likely than adults to tell others about crimes against them. Children will not easily hide injuries from their parents, and if they lose clothes, books, or other items, it is almost inevitable that an adult, either parent or teacher, will find out. Thefts of items such as money or cell phones are equally likely to be discovered.

As Figure 3 illustrates, in the majority of instances someone in the family was told about the crime. Most commonly this person was one of the child's parents or caregivers. In only a few cases were the police told about the incident, with reports ranging from 7% in the case of thefts, to 16% in the case of assaults.

Exposure to violence

The prevalence of violence such as assault and robbery against South African youth is further exacerbated by the exposure, other than personal victimisation, to violence within their home, school and community environments. Extensive international research has shown that exposure to violence and crime at a young age, including acts of personal victimisation, will increase significantly the



likelihood of engaging in anti-social or criminal behaviour at a later stage in life.¹³ Those who are exposed to such incidents within their communities and homes are also at greater risk of victimisation themselves.

The survey revealed just how common exposure to violence is for South African children and youth. Three out of five young people have witnessed incidents of intentional violence within their home community, and one out of five children or youths have been witness to incidents of domestic violence within their own home.

One in two children or youth below the age of 22 years knows someone in their community who commits crime; while one in four knows someone who actually makes their living from criminal activity. One in ten young people have at least one family member who had engaged in activities that could get them into trouble with the law over the period September 2004 to September 2005.

These experiences clearly impact on the overall quality of life of South African youth and children. Approximately 28% of young people, just under three million people, cite murder as the one thing that they are most scared of, while over one fifth (21%) cite rape or sexual assault. These fears mirror those of the adult population of South Africa, with the 2003 National Victims of Crime Survey revealing that murder, housebreaking and sexual assault or rape were what most South Africans were afraid of.

These rates of crime against young people have profound implications. Fear of crime permeates every aspect of young South Africans' lives. One in five do not feel safe in the community in which they live, and just under one in ten feels scared of criminals when they are at home. This, together with those who feel scared at school, reflects the general conditions of fear that many young people in the country live under.

The normalisation of crime

These fears feed into what can be called the normalisation of crime for young South Africans. Not only have almost one in two been victims of crime or violence, but they are exposed to it on a range of

levels in their home, school and social lives. Crime is something that surrounds almost all young people in South Africa in some form or another.

In addition to the exposure and victimisation discussed above, almost one in five children or youth had considered engaging in acts that constitute a crime. One half of these, just under one million youngsters, had committed criminal acts. Personal knowledge of people who do engage in crime is also common. Almost one in every two young persons personally knows someone who is currently, or who has been, in jail for criminal activities.

Violence and crime have become something not unusual, or deviant, but commonplace. Despite the extent of victimisation, the levels of repeat victimisation and the acts of violence that surround these young people, levels of fear remain surprisingly low. Fewer than one tenth (9%) of young people report feeling scared at home, while only a little over one in ten (12%) report feeling scared at school, or for those that work, in their workplace.

Breaking the cycle

Being beaten up, having belongings stolen, or watching one parent beat the other, has become a way of life for the majority of young South Africans. Perpetrators all too often are other children and young people, the same age or slightly older than the victims, people who themselves are surrounded by violence on all levels, and for whom such acts have become an acceptable way of obtaining something desired, or of resolving a dispute or conflict.

Unless steps are taken to provide a range of more efficient social services and support for children and youth, and as more and more young people fall victim to these crimes, criminal acts will simply become the preferred way for many to achieve their goals. Coherent strategies offering alternatives to violence as a form of conflict resolution, and encouraging the reporting of crimes and violence to the authorities, need to be combined with broader policies designed to make schools and the home in particular, safer for young people.

Parents, caregivers and educators need to be made aware of the cycles of violence in which young people find themselves, and trained to facilitate ways of breaking these cycles. Effective and accessible support measures for young people who have been victimised need to be developed within all the realms that children occupy, but most importantly the school and home, bearing in mind that in some instances educators and caregivers might be complicit in the crime. Most importantly, adequate resources need to be allocated to these strategies.

Endnotes

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