Urban Crime and Violence in South Africa

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Introduction

Three fundamental facts underpin this analysis of crime in South Africa:

- There are many different kinds of crime, requiring many different types of intervention.
- There is no single cause of crime, so it is necessary to understand the linked social, economic, political and psychological causes in order to prevent it.
- Crime statistics are notoriously unreliable, so simple statistical analysis may hide as much as it reveals. To develop effective solutions, crime and its causes must be disaggregrated.

The Scale of the Problem

Every day in South Africa over 1 900 serious crimes are reported. On average, these include:

50 murders

88 rapes

150 cases of fraud

187 aggravated robberies

216 burglaries of businesses

260 car thefts

431 aggravated assaults

544 burglaries of houses

Estimates suggest that between 1990 and 1994 the overall crime rate rose by more than 18 per cent, and the rate of violent crime by 35 per cent. Most reported crime is in the cities, and judging from conviction rates (26 per cent of all convictions are of juveniles), much is committed by young people.

The Background

Before independence, and despite the government's apartheid policy, rural poverty generated massive migration to urban centres. Since this migration was contrary to official policy, housing, infrastructure and services were not provided to black South Africans living in urban townships. Pockets of white-owned wealth amidst grinding poverty, massive unemployment and scarcity of even basic resources – which led to intense internecine conflict – contributed to a situation in which criminal activity was generally seen as legitimate and socially acceptable.

Urbanisation under apartheid placed enormous pressure on family structures and destroyed the support structures of the extended family. Traditional and customary legal structures were manipulated for the purpose of social control. Schools, which also operated as mechanisms of control, lost their potential as places of social cohesion and identity for young people, and became sites of political struggle. Young black people were educationally, economically, politically and emotionally disempowered.

But young South Africans proved very resilient in the face of such marginalisation. They forged new sub-cultures within political organisations, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. As the shock troops of liberation, young township-based children were placed centre-stage rather than on the margins of society. Ironically, in the process of transition young people were again marginalised. The struggle moved from the streets to the negotiating table, and from the hands of youth to an older generation.

After Apartheid

The new democratic government inherited many state institutions and personnel and with them, due to their functions under apartheid, the popular legacy of mistrust. The most widely distrusted institutions during apartheid were the police, the justice system and correctional services. The criminal justice system has not yet produced new, legitimate and respected sources of social authority, with the result that there is a culture of impunity. This enables criminals to operate freely and it also socially sanctions private 'justice', with the dangers of cycles of revenge that accompany it.

Unrealistic expectations that better living conditions would be delivered immediately were destined to be frustrated. Although the political backlash that some commentators feared has not occurred, the rising crime rate indicates growing disaffection, especially among the young.

It is easy to understand the appeal of the criminal youth gang as an alternative provider of social cohesion in the absence of the school, the family, the workplace or the political organisation. Criminal gangs offer a complete sub-culture with their own uniforms, language and alternative forms of wealth creation through crime. Criminal activities are not only acquisitive – robbery, arms-trading, assassination, protection – but include gang rape, domestic violence and child abuse.

Although the direct correlation between levels of violence and reluctance by the business community to invest has still to be established, the general costs of violence and crime impair the state's capacity to deal with the root causes of the problem.

Crime further contributes to economic impoverishment – which is one of its root causes.

The social and psychological insecurity generated both by real levels of crime and by public hysteria associated with media presentations of it contribute to feelings of fear and helplessness. This in turn encourages a resort to armed 'self-defence', resulting in spiralling violence.

Popular Approaches to Crime Prevention

The growing crime rate has become a key political issue, but many politicians talk about crime in simplistic and misleading ways. They tend to see crime as having a single, overriding cause and therefore a single solution.

Giving simple labels to the complex causes of crime can also be dangerous. For example, where violent conflict has been described as 'ethnic', there have often been underlying conflicts over material resources or political allegiance. Political parties that mobilise support in ethnic terms feed off volatile interest groups which are difficult to control or demobilise. In the same way, conflicts over material resources may be labelled 'party political', resulting in an attempt to search for solutions through party-based dialogue, when the problems actually originate elsewhere.

In poor communities, violent political conflict quickly generates its own criminal sub-economy, with objectives such as trade in arms, protection or assassination. Any approach to tackling such violence would have to distinguish between politically motivated destabilisation and vested criminal interests in a war-based sub-economy. Just as social conflict can translate into politics, so may political conflict translate into acquisitive crime.

The debate about crime in South Africa is broadly divided between the 'criminal justice' and 'developmental' schools.

The Criminal Justice School

This school of thought believes that solutions to crime can be found by reforming or transforming the criminal justice system in one of the following ways:

Bring back the rope: Punishments should be tougher sentences, they should be mandatory and longer bail should be refused; the death should be reintroduced, and so on.

Quite apart from the danger that South Africa may retreat from its new culture of enshrined human rights, one practical difficulty with this principle is that harsh sentencing is not a disincentive for certain types of crime, such as crimes of passion or economic necessity. More importantly, for this to be an effective deterrent, criminals must first be caught and convicted, so this new approach is dependent on effective policing and prosecution and leaves no room for the principle of diversion.

More police: More police will ultimately solve the crime problem by means of 'saturation'.

While that might provide solutions for some types of crime, it would not deal with crimes which happen within the private sphere – rape, domestic violence and child abuse. Nor would visible policing prevent the growing problem of 'white collar' crime – fraud and embezzlement, which require specialist intelligence and expertise. Also, campaigns to 'clean up the streets' may push street children into the arms of crime syndicates.

Quality, not quantity, in policing: Effective deployment of resources within the policing system, especially the development of sophisticated technology, will solve the crime problem. The gathering and analysis of intelligence need to be enhanced in order to track criminal action effectively.

The problem with this is that technological innovation often gives rise to new forms of crime – for example, if hi-tech surveillance and security techniques make car theft very difficult, car hijacking with violence may take its place. This leads to new and more serious problems of technological and resource allocation.

Effective rehabilitation: Effective rehabilitation of criminals will solve the crime problem by eliminating recidivism. The correctional services are the key to dealing with problems of criminal behaviour.

This approach fails to disaggregate criminal behaviour and therefore to recognise that rehabilitation is only appropriate to the psychological make-up of certain types of criminal. This principle, too, depends on effective detection and prosecution.

Improved co-ordination: The answer lies in a co-ordinated approach across the criminal justice system. Blockages and leakages need to be addressed in each part of the system – for example, effective correctional services depend on effective prosecution, which depends on effective police intelligence and investigation. All of these are dependent on transformation of the responsible state institutions and building up public confidence in them.

While this approach is more comprehensive, it needs further analysis. Problem areas within the system vary according to different types of crime. For some (e.g. rape) the problem may be under-reporting; for others (e.g. economic crimes) it may be lack of investigation; and for others prosecution, sentencing or rehabilitation may be flawed. Improved co-ordination demands considerably more targeted data-gathering and

analysis, and requires systematic policy formation across the criminal justice system for each type of crime.

There is clearly some value in each of the positions outlined above, but none has much value in isolation. Perhaps the most important flaw in the 'criminal justice school' is its limited vision: that the problems of crime can be resolved within the criminal justice system alone. It ignores the extent to which the historical, social, political and value systems that underpin crime must be addressed if crime is to be prevented.

The Developmental School

This school of thought takes account of the historical inequities and the socio-economic issues that underpin crime and violence in transitional South Africa. Its approach to dealing with crime is through development and empowerment, in one of the following ways:

Economic development: Poverty and unemployment are the root causes of crime. Without necessarily assuming a simple correlation between poverty and crime, the solution is investment, economic growth and job creation.

This approach fails on its own because it takes no account of the economic crimes committed by the affluent and the employed. It also fails to account for the extent to which criminal activity is serviced by an extremely affluent illegal/informal sector. In particular, the growing problem of syndicated crime, which is capturing a significant portion of the country's economic wealth, will not be solved by job creation and economic development. Development might be against the vested interests of those in the criminal economy, who could be expected to resist.

Also, economic development generates new forms of criminal behaviour such as corruption, competition, theft and political conflict. The injection of new resources into communities previously divided by competition for scarce resources potentially escalates social conflict and crime.

Human development: To undermine the conditions that lead to crime, target communities must be comprehensively educated and empowered. This should happen alongside the creation of economic opportunities.

Here, the implicit assumption is that crime control is achievable only in the long term, because culture and value changes within a dehumanised society can take place only gradually. Although the human development model is an important realistic addition to the others, the need to seek interim short-term solutions to crime cannot be ignored.

Strategic Objectives for Reducing Crime

None of the above approaches for dealing with crime is entirely incorrect. The problem of crime demands an integrated approach that tackles both the criminal justice system and economic and human development simultaneously, with the following strategic objectives:

- Recognition that crime prevention must be based on data collection and disaggregation of different types of crime
- Awareness, based on data analysis, of the regional differences in both magnitude and types of crime
- Transformation of the criminal justice system as a whole, on the basis of disaggregration of crime into different categories. This demands unified, crime-specific policy formation and action
- Prioritisation of the most socially costly forms of crime. While all crime damages the national psyche and the building of reconciliation, the social and economic costs of violent crime are the greatest
- A specific focus on crime in the spheres of development, education and social welfare
- Formulation of plans for short-, medium- and long-term solutions
- Integration and co-ordination of the activities of all the various departments – criminal justice, education, health and social welfare, home affairs and the police.

South Africa has a National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) with ten priority areas for crime prevention. The NCPS puts victims rather than criminals at the heart of crime prevention; victim empowerment is seen as a critical intervention to break the cycle of crime and violence. Young people are the key target group in the fight against crime, because they are the primary victims and perpetrators of crime in South Africa, and because they represent the country's future.