

WHO IS TO BLAME?

Crime in Meadowlands, Soweto

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Meadowlands is one of the only suburbs in Soweto that does not include any informal or squatter areas in its boundaries, and in terms of length of tenure, has a relatively stable population. Yet crime in the area is on the increase, and rates of burglary, robbery and assault are high. Contrary to popular perception, crime here is not committed by foreigners or by people from other parts of Soweto or Johannesburg. Rather, victims and non-victims alike believe that crimes are committed by people living in Meadowlands – largely young people and the unemployed.

Meadowlands is one of Soweto's oldest suburbs. Created in 1958 as a direct result of the forced removal policy of the apartheid state, Meadowlands has witnessed a legacy of political turbulence unique to the township areas of South Africa. It now, however, bears evidence to a different type of violence; violence played out in the form of criminal activity to which the inhabitants of the area still fall victim.

In 2002 a crime and victim survey was conducted by the ISS in Meadowlands. This followed a similar survey earlier in 2002 in inner Johannesburg (which included the police station areas of Hillbrow and Johannesburg Central – see Ted Leggett, *SA Crime Quarterly no. 2*, 2002). In many ways these two survey localities could not be more polarised: Meadowlands is home to a predominantly stable population in terms of tenure, and comprises a variety of predominantly South African cultures. Meadowlands is also unusual in terms of Soweto suburbs, in that no informal settlements exist in its boundaries.¹

Inner Johannesburg, by contrast, is home to a largely immigrant population, a transient stop for people in search of better lives and employment in the 'land of opportunity'. An analysis of crime

trends in Meadowlands allows for a startling comparison between these two dichotomous societies, and questions some of the commonly held assumptions of the public and, at times, the authorities, regarding crime in South Africa.

The extent of crime in Meadowlands

Crime levels in Meadowlands were measured using two approaches. The first simply looked at the perceptions of the community regarding the levels of crime in the area, whilst the second calculated the actual incidence of crime. Using a similar approach to that adopted by international victim studies,² 1,400 household respondents were asked whether they had been victims of crime over a longer period of time, in this case since 1994, and if so, whether this incident (or incidents) had occurred in the past twelve months.

Those who had been victims of crime in the preceding twelve months were then asked a series of detailed questions about their experience. For methodological purposes, a differentiation was made between crimes against individuals, and crimes against the household. Respondents were asked only to report crimes against their property or household, or crimes against them personally, rather than against other people residing in the household.

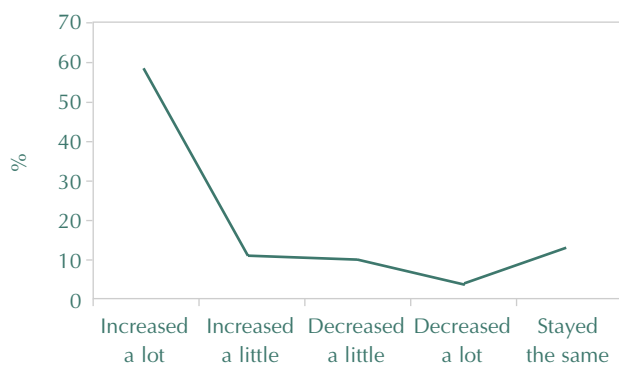
This ensured that all information was reported as accurately as possible. Rather than asking detailed questions about all possible crimes, the study focused on the more serious crimes, namely:

- Household crimes
 - Theft of car
 - Burglary
- Crimes against the individual³
 - Robbery
 - Hijacking
 - Assault
 - Murder

Reflecting often-documented public sentiment on crime in South Africa, the vast majority of residents of Meadowlands felt that crime had increased significantly since 1994. There was little difference between the numbers of people who thought it had decreased or increased a little, or stayed the same, while only a fraction thought crime had actually decreased a lot (Figure 1). However, such questions reveal only perceptions, that may be based as much on media broadcasts, exaggerated word of mouth accounts, and general feelings of fear and pessimism, as on the actual status quo. The media throughout South Africa tend to reinforce negative perceptions of crime levels; these in turn contribute towards individuals' perceptions of the situation nationally and are translated into the areas where they live and work.

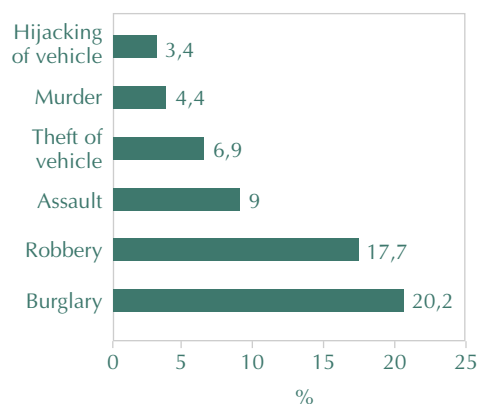
When it comes to actual crime levels, the majority (64%) of respondents in Meadowlands had

Figure 1: Perceptions of levels of crime since 1994 (n=1,400)



Source: ISS Meadowlands Victim Survey, 2002

Figure 2: Victimization levels in Meadowlands in the previous 12 months (n=1,400)



Source: ISS Meadowlands Victim Survey, 2002

experienced some form of crime, either personally or against their household, since 1994. This is not in itself surprising, given the relatively high levels of victimisation that exist throughout South Africa. Of more concern, however, is the fact that almost half (47%) of all those interviewed had been victims of crime in the twelve months preceding the interview.

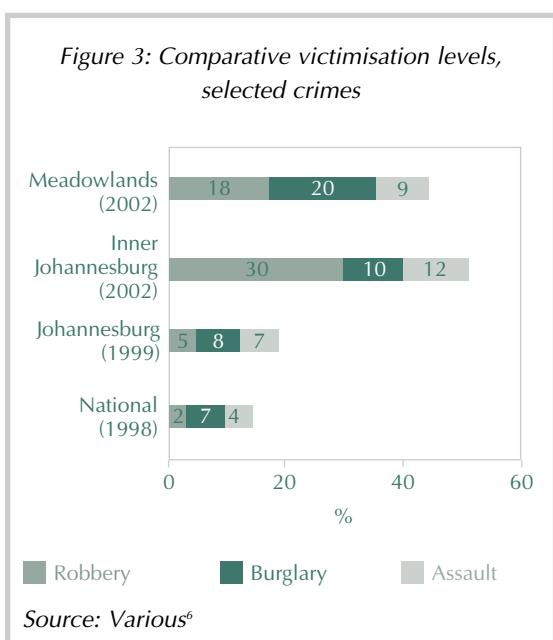
These crimes had by and large occurred in Meadowlands, with only 4% of victims saying the crimes against them happened outside the area. This already starts to paint a clear picture of victimisation levels in the area, and suggests a significant increase in crime within the area over the preceding twelve months.

The trends regarding the most prevalent crimes to a large extent match findings in other studies. Burglary was the most commonly committed crime in Meadowlands, experienced by a fifth (20%) of the respondents over the preceding year, followed by robbery (18%) and assault (9%) (Figure 2). Crimes such as vehicle hijackings, despite being prioritised by the Meadowlands police, occurred relatively infrequently. One reason for low incidence may be the low levels of private vehicle ownership within Meadowlands. The study did not accurately record details of the hijackings of commercial vehicles owned by companies or businesses.

Contextualising the crime rate

A number of victim surveys have been conducted in South Africa and South African cities over the past five years, allowing for some comparisons of crime levels.⁴ While these studies have not necessarily utilised identical methodologies, they allow for a rough comparison, rather than a benchmarking, of victimisation. As figure 3 shows, certain crime levels in Meadowlands are significantly higher than those recorded in previous household surveys conducted nationally and in Johannesburg in 1998 and 1999, and are only marginally lower than in inner Johannesburg. Also of note is that while robbery and assault are lower in Meadowlands than in inner Johannesburg, the rate of home burglary is double that recorded in inner Johannesburg.

Also of concern, given the violent reputation of Hillbrow in inner Johannesburg, is the marginally higher number of murders that occurred in Meadowlands, compared to inner Johannesburg. While more respondents had been victims of car theft or hijacking in Meadowlands than in inner Johannesburg, this is almost certainly explained by the higher ownership of vehicles that might be assumed in a more stable population such as Meadowlands, rather than in a transient, largely immigrant population as found in inner Johannesburg.⁵



Nature of crime in Meadowlands

The frequency of burglaries experienced in Meadowlands may in part be related to the stability of the population, and thus the greater likelihood of accumulated wealth and possessions, compared to more transient populations. This is however unlikely to be the sole explanation, but is one possible factor in accounting for this trend. Another reason for higher rates of burglary in Meadowlands than in inner Johannesburg, for example, may be the comparative ease of targeting houses for burglaries, as opposed to the flats and high-rise buildings that characterise inner Johannesburg.

The burglaries in Meadowlands tended to take place after dark, thus providing the offenders with some measure of protection from being seen. This is in direct contrast to the pattern identified in inner Johannesburg, where the majority of burglaries occurred during daylight.⁷ While the cover of darkness often works in the offenders' favour, it may be outweighed by the fact that there is also a greater likelihood of someone being at home at the time of the offence, thus increasing the chance of discovery. Despite this, in less than half (44%) of the burglaries someone was at home, suggesting that the offenders had possibly taken care to assess this fact prior to committing the offence.

Burglaries are often conducted without the threat or use of violence or force, and are thus not commonly regarded as violent crimes. However, in Meadowlands almost one quarter (23%) of the burglaries committed in the previous year entailed the threat of violence, which effectively marks these as violent rather than property crimes.

Both robbery and assault are categorised as violent crimes, and generally entail the use of violence or the threat thereof. These crimes differ from burglary in that they are crimes committed against individuals rather than households. As such, a variety of risk factors may be considered in relation to these crimes. Masuku highlights a variety of characteristics that may be considered risk factors in violent interpersonal crimes, including, *inter alia*, age, gender, race and environment (SA Crime Quarterly no. 2, 2002).

Further, according to Louw and Shaw, a strong correlation exists between social deprivation, and likelihood of victimisation.⁸ One indicator of such deprivation and poverty could include employment or vocational status. In Meadowlands, the unemployed constituted 30% of those who had been victims during the preceding year, the highest category of respondents and ahead of both those who were employed in the formal sector, and those employed in the informal sector or self-employed. The impact of crime is also greater for the unemployed, given the relative difficulties they face when trying to recover from criminal acts. Generally they are unable to afford replacements of stolen goods, are uninsured, and cannot afford medical care in the case of injury.

Age and gender are both additional factors that may be considered significant in developing a victim profile in Meadowlands. An analysis of the age of victims of assault and robbery over the previous twelve months reveals that, while the sample was comprised of a higher percentage of respondents between the ages of 21 to 30 years, and 31 to 40 years, a significantly high percentage of those in these age groups had been victims of these two crimes (Figure 4). This reflects the findings in other studies that reveal that the likelihood of violent crime increases from the age of 15 to the mid-thirties.⁹

While gender was not a statistically significant factor in any of the crimes recorded in Meadowlands, a

greater percentage of women were victims of assault than men. Generally, men between the ages of 15 and 25 years are more at risk of falling victim to violent crime than are women. The predominance of women as assault victims in Meadowlands may in large part be due to the nature of the assault that occurred.

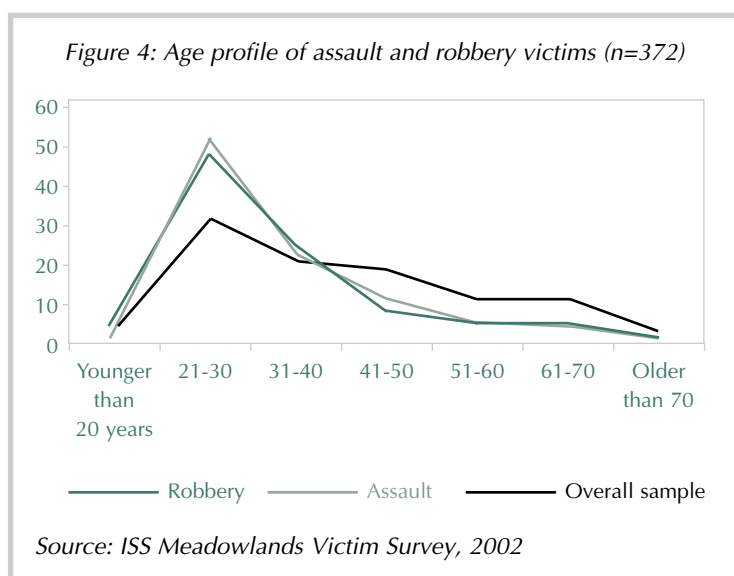
Assaults in Meadowlands tend to fall predominantly into two categories: those committed in the home by assailants known to the victim, and those committed in places of entertainment. Both types commonly reflect abuse of alcohol as one factor in the crime.

In Meadowlands, a large percentage of those assaults recorded by the study could be categorised as domestic violence. The assaults are distinctive in a number of ways: some form of relationship between the victim and the assailant was evident in the majority of the cases reported in the study; in over one third of the cases, the assailant was a lover or spouse; in one quarter of the assaults the motivation was thought to be jealousy; and in almost half (44%) of the assaults the assailant had attacked the victim on at least one previous occasion.

These are all factors that point to some form of domestic violence. Assault was also the one crime recorded in the study in which alcohol or drugs played a significant part. Almost two thirds (63%) of the assailants were reported to be under the influence of one of these substance types, while less than one third (31%) of the victims were themselves under the influence of either drugs or alcohol at the time of the attack.

The offenders, and sentiment towards them

The brief analysis of the assault cases in Meadowlands has already touched on the identity of the assailants in these instances. A common concern of the police throughout Johannesburg,



and indeed throughout South Africa, is the extent of crime committed by foreigners, that is, non-South African nationals. This is a result largely of the massive influx of people in search of employment opportunities, and people seeking various forms of asylum and refuge from neighbouring Southern African states and from countries further north on the continent.

While areas such as Hillbrow in inner Johannesburg have provided a melting pot of accommodation for people of all nationalities, the concern about such people turning to crime is not limited to that area. The Meadowlands police have joined many others in expressing their concern at the levels of crime committed by foreigners within their policing boundaries. Such sentiments and concerns are not, however, the domain solely of the police; public sentiment often expresses the same concern, and much of the crime throughout South Africa is blamed on foreigners.

However, the perceptions of those living in Meadowlands provide a marked departure from such sentiment. Less than one tenth (8%) of all those interviewed in Meadowlands felt that the crimes committed in the area were committed by foreigners. The vast majority of those interviewed felt that local South Africans were responsible for the high levels of crime that characterised their places of residence.

In particular, the unemployed and the youth in the area were seen as being the culprits. Interestingly, those who were themselves unemployed, or young, did not significantly differ in their opinions. One fifth of those under 20 years of age themselves thought that the youth were responsible for the crime in the area, and a significant percentage of those who were themselves unemployed blamed people in similar circumstance for the crime. This creates an interesting profile, given that people characterised by these identifiers are themselves amongst the most commonly victimised.

The residents of Meadowlands go one step beyond merely feeling that South Africans are responsible for the crime in their area. Rather, there was a

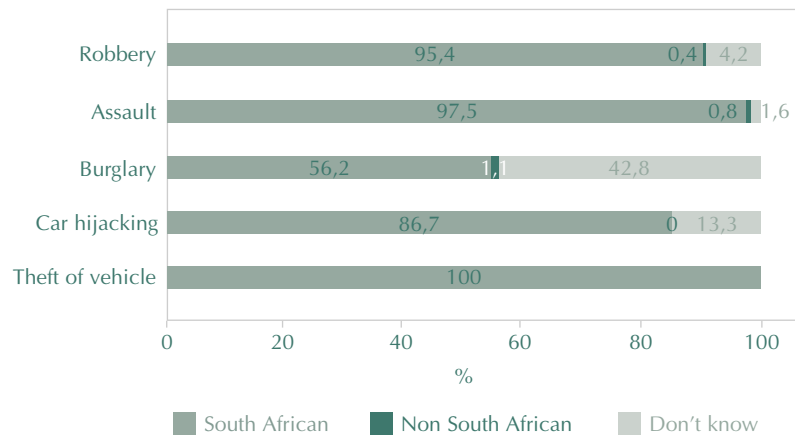
perception among almost all those interviewed that the crime in the area was committed by people living within Meadowlands itself, and only 15% of the sample felt that people resident elsewhere were responsible.

It certainly is interesting that in an area such as Meadowlands, comprised almost solely of South Africans, albeit of a variety of cultures, local nationals are perceived as being responsible for most of the crime. In inner Johannesburg, on the other hand, an area comprising a variety of nationalities from all over the continent, foreigners are seen as being responsible for most of the crime. One might expect, given the levels of xenophobia that are often evident in this country, that in an area predominantly South African people would feel more strongly that immigrants are responsible, while foreign communities in South Africa might be inclined to deny such claims. Meadowlands and Hillbrow present just the opposite: a South African community reports that South Africans are responsible, while the predominantly immigrant community of inner Johannesburg feels strongly that foreigners are responsible for crime.¹⁰

While these findings are premised on perception data among the general population, those who had actually been victims of crime are in many instances able to provide more factual information on the criminal offenders active in Meadowlands. Those who had been victims of any crime (with the exception of a household murder) in the last twelve months were asked if they knew who the offenders were, and the race and nationality of the offenders.

For every crime type, respondents believed that South Africans constituted the vast majority of offenders, while only burglary victims said they were uncertain, probably due to the fact that in many of the instances the victims were not present at the time of the crime (figure 5). While it is not clear how certain those victims who had their cars stolen were that they knew the perpetrators, anecdotal evidence indicates that the perpetrators of certain crimes are commonly known in the townships. It is also not unusual to see the stolen car in the area or in neighbouring areas at a later stage.

Figure 5: Perceptions of nationality of offenders for selected crimes



Source: ISS Meadowlands Victim Survey, 2002

Despite the fact that there are no hostels within the municipal boundaries of Meadowlands, a number of hostels, including the notorious Dube hostel, fall within the jurisdiction of the Meadowlands police station. Dube hostel, like many others, is surrounded by long grass, has no lighting in the area, and is located in a generally unkempt environment. It is not a safe place for the people of Meadowlands to walk. Even the police fear for their lives when attending to crimes, or patrolling in the area. What is more, the police themselves have little access to equipment that might ensure their own safety – even flashlights are few and far between. Several victims reported incidents of assault and robbery in the area. Environmental design is clearly one significant factor in these crimes, and suggests the need for a concerted effort by local authorities and landowners to provide an environment that is more conducive to safer living.

A punishment to fit the crime

Residents tended to want harsh sentences for offenders, undoubtedly a result of the high levels of violent crime in the area. In particular, respondents felt that the death penalty was warranted for

murderers, car hijackers, and even drug dealers. While the first two are not unexpected, given the naturally violent nature of the crimes, the third is somewhat more surprising; however, in the mind of the community there tends to be a clear correlation between drugs and crime. While the smoking of dagga is often seen in the area, drugs such as mandrax and cocaine are much more rare.

This despite, almost one third of the sample reported that they knew someone in their area who needed drugs at least once a day. While there was little evidence to suggest that a significant number of crimes were committed while under the influence of drugs, the harsh stance taken by the residents would indicate that drugs are perceived as a problem in Meadowlands. They are seen as a strong causal factor when crime is committed.

Implications of these findings

These findings present a number of implications for both policymakers and police. Firstly, on a macro level, much of the focus has fallen on foreigners as perpetrators of crime, and many have blamed the increase in crime levels on the massive influx of immigrants from across the borders since 1994. These findings, however, present an alternative picture; one in which South Africans are perceived as being responsible for increasing crime levels, if not nationally, then within a specific locality. This

does not imply that it is an either/or scenario. Rather, a more comprehensive exploration into perpetrators of crime is required. If any effective attempts are to be made to counter much of the xenophobia that is so common, the picture of immigrants as criminals and South Africans as victims needs to be addressed.¹¹

Secondly, and related to this, the perception that exists in Meadowlands that the unemployed, and youth, are responsible for the bulk of the crime highlights the importance of effective integrated job creation, welfare and policing initiatives in preventing crime.

Thirdly, these findings pose some interesting questions for the Meadowlands police. In-depth interviews and a time use study conducted by the ISS among police in the area highlighted the perception among police that foreigners are indeed to blame for much of the crime within the area. Furthermore, the police priority crimes do not always match the findings of the study in terms of the most prevalent crimes. This may be due to the fact that crime levels recorded by the police (which are used to determine police priorities) do not reflect the actual crime levels in an area, simply because people do not always report incidents to the authorities. Victim surveys present a much more accurate picture of the actual crime levels in an area, because they reflect the number of people who have actually experienced crime, rather than those who choose to report it to the police. For example, in Meadowlands the police prioritised car hijacking, although the survey shows this to be a comparatively negligible crime problem. The findings of studies such as these can therefore enhance the information available to the police, thus facilitating a more effective policing strategy for the area.

The prevalence of violent crimes such as assault and robbery, particularly in public places, suggests that some measures need to be devised to make these areas within Meadowlands safer. One means of addressing this is to look at the environmental design issues of particular 'hotspots', such as those surrounding the hostels and other open spaces identified by respondents, both victims and non-victims, as areas that are unsafe.

Endnotes

- 1 While having no informal settlements, the area falling under the jurisdiction of Meadowlands does include several hostels which, while clearly very different from informal areas, often present their own hodgepodge of criminal activity.
- 2 U. Zvekic, Criminal Victimization in Countries in Transition, *UNICRI Publication 47*: Rome, 1998; also Van Kesteren, J., P. Mayhew and P. Nieuwbeerta (February 2001) *Criminal Victimization in Seventeen Industrialised Countries: Key findings from the 2000 International Crime Victims Survey*. The Hague: Research and Documentation Centre (WODC), Netherland Ministry of Justice Series: Onderzoek en Beleid, No. 187
- 3 Given the low number of reports in previous victim surveys, as well as issues around sensitivity, sexual crimes were deliberately excluded from this survey.
- 4 See Leggett (2003) *Rainbow Tenement: Crime and Policing in Inner Johannesburg, ISS Monograph* (forthcoming), Louw et al (1997) *Crime in Johannesburg: Results of a City Victim Survey, ISS Monograph No 18*, February 1998; Van Kesteren, J., P. Mayhew and P. Nieuwbeerta op cit.
- 5 Leggett op cit.
- 6 Van Kesteren, Mayhew and Nieuwbeerta, op cit., Leggett op cit., Louw (1997) op cit., Statistics South Africa (1998); *Victims of Crime Survey*, Pretoria: Statistics South Africa
- 7 Leggett op cit.
- 8 Louw A and Shaw A (1997), *Stolen opportunities: the impact of crime on South Africa's poor, ISS Monograph No 14*, 1997
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Leggett op cit. In the Hillbrow and Inner Johannesburg survey, 39% of foreigners in these areas reported that foreigners were responsible for most of the crime.
- 11 Such an argument is touched on in Leggett (2002), *Inside Hillbrow's residential hotels, SA Crime Quarterly, No. 2*, November 2002, where crimes against foreign national residents (especially Nigerians) of Hillbrow is explored.