# LIVING WITH CRIME

## Does crime affect victims' perceived quality of life?

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Crime is thought to be a major concern that shapes the everyday lives of South Africans. But what impact does living with high levels of crime have on the mindset of ordinary citizens? A recent household crime victimisation study conducted in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality provides tentative answers to this question.

A total of 3,300 householders participated in a sample survey conducted by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in October and November 2002 as part of a project to assist the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality with the development of a crime prevention strategy for the area.[1] The survey covered experience of crime, general perceptions of crime, personal and household protection, policing, local government and service delivery, and quality-of-life issues.

The sample included people from all walks of life. A quarter of householders were under 35 years and over a third were 50 years or older. Average household incomes varied considerably and a third of households received social assistance, in most cases an old-age pension. Some 42% of householders were black, 35% white, 23% coloured, and 1% Indian. White householders were overrepresented in the sample owing to a sample design that was stratified according to police station areas rather than geographical areas.

Social integration is known to protect neighbourhoods from crime. The majority of households in the survey were well established in their neighbourhood and knew and trusted their neighbours. Over one in seven belonged to a local organisation; faith-based memberships being the most popular. However, less than one in ten householders belonged to a residents' association and even fewer to a neighbourhood watch.

### Incidence of criminal victimisation

The survey collected information on criminal victimisation[2] supplied by the householder for the five-year period from 1998 to 2002. In line with common practice, the survey distinguished between crimes against the household and crimes against the individual. Information was collected for a total of 2,014 cases of criminal victimisation. Some 30% of householders reported experience of a household crime, and some 10% reported experience of an individual crime against the person. Burglary was the most common crime (Table 1).

### Quality of life issues[3]

Householders who had experienced a crime were expected to register greater dissatisfaction with their lives than others. The negative impact was thought to vary according to how recently the crime had been experienced, the trauma of the incident – it was assumed that crimes against the person would be more traumatising than household crimes – and the lack of victim support and coping skills.

Quality of life studies have perfected instruments that measure personal wellbeing. The standard probe asks respondents to state their satisfaction

| Table 1: Percentage of respondents who said they were victims of crime | |
|---|---|
| | **% victimised in 2002** |
| *Household crimes* | |
| Home burglary | 10.1 |
| Theft out of vehicle | 4.2 |
| Stock theft | 2.1 |
| Theft of vehicle | 1.5 |
| Murder | 0.5 |
| *Individual crimes* | |
| Robbery | 4.4 |
| Assault | 1.8 |
| Sexual assault (rape) | 0.2 |
| Hijacked in vehicle | 0.2 |

*Source: ISS NMMM victim survey, 2002*



*Figure 1: Perceived quality of life, percentages 'very satisfied' and 'satisfied' (n = 3,300)*
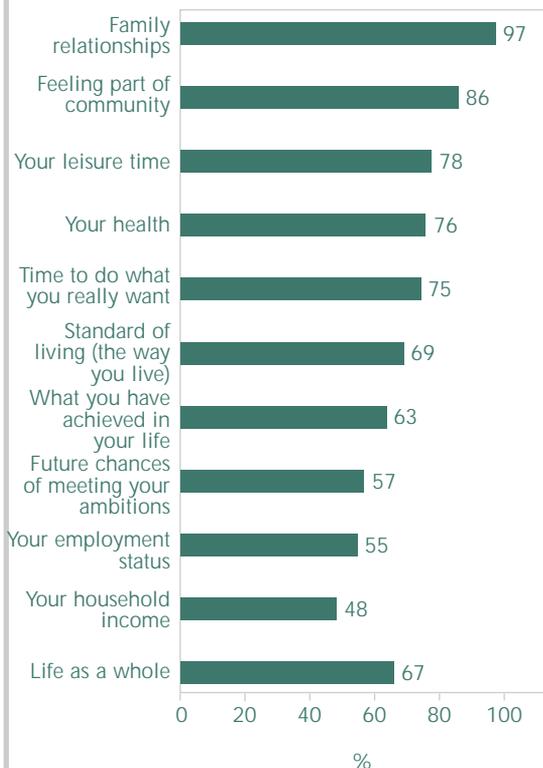
*Source: ISS NMMM victim survey, 2002*
*(Percentages based on 5-point satisfaction scale)*

with life or various aspects of life 'these days' on a scale from 'very satisfied' to 'very dissatisfied'. Respondents were asked to rate their quality of life in terms of overall life satisfaction, as well as ten spheres of satisfaction (Figure 1).

The majority of the householders (67%) reported life satisfaction. This rate is higher than that observed in national surveys, possibly due to the over-representation of white respondents in the study. South African satisfaction scores tend to mirror socio-economic status. Thus, given our history, whites consistently score higher than others on both living standards and subjective wellbeing.[4] As is the case generally, spheres of life closer to the self, such as family relationships and health, produced greater satisfaction than income and employment.

**Personal safety and neighbourhood quality of life**
Another set of items addressed community quality of life. Respondents were asked to rate 15 characteristics of their neighbourhoods (Figure 2). Satisfaction with basic services was highest while satisfaction with job opportunities was lowest. Satisfaction with personal safety ranked at the bottom of list, only ahead of recreational facilities and job opportunities.

Results from the Nelson Mandela Metropole study on neighbourhood quality of life are consistent with other findings that South Africans are generally least satisfied with their earnings, job opportunities, and safety from crime.[5]

**Views on risk of victimisation and misfortune**
Towards the end of the interview, respondents were asked to assess their risk of becoming victims of select crimes, accidents and negative turns in their lives. They were asked about the likelihood that such negative life events might 'happen to you in the next year'. Four of the risks referred to becoming a victim of crime.

Fear of crime featured high on the list of risks perceived by householders – on par with a serious illness and a serious road accident (Table 2). Respondents were least likely to consider being accused of criminal activities themselves. It is noteworthy that although over 11% of South Africans are estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS, respondents in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality considered contracting the disease one of their lowest risks, akin to the risk of being branded an offender.

## Coping strategies

Lastly, how do residents cope with their fear of crime and risks in life? Two survey items addressed coping strategies. The first asked respondents how they protected themselves from misfortune (Table 3). The overwhelming majority of respondents stated that they seek protection from misfortune by trusting in a supreme being, a response consistent with the fact that many householders are members of a church or religious organisation. Minorities stated that they try not to worry or else take initiatives to prevent things from going wrong in their lives.

Women, older, and coloured respondents were more likely than others to be reassured by their faith. Taking 'personal responsibility' and 'getting on with life' appears to be mainly the prerogative of the young and the employed, and decreases systematically with age.

The second item asked respondents to take their pick of three types of social assistance (Table 4). One option was compensation for criminal victimisation. The other two options, an income grant to provide social protection for the economically active without jobs, and antiretroviral treatment for persons living with HIV/AIDS, were not available at the time of the survey but were hotly debated issues.

All three options of social assistance were popular, but among different constituencies. Preference for *compensation for victimisation* increased

*Figure 2: Neighbourhood quality of life – personal safety compared with other issues (n = 3,300)*

| Issue | % satisfied |
|---|---|
| Access to convenience shops | 81 |
| Domestic electricity supply | 79 |
| Water supply | 75 |
| Sanitation | 75 |
| Street lighting | 73 |
| Refuse removal | 71 |
| Public transport | 68 |
| Housing | 65 |
| Educational opportunities | 65 |
| Roads | 61 |
| Health care | 61 |
| Cleanliness and maintenance of area | 59 |
| Personal safety | 48 |
| Recreational opportunities | 46 |
| Employment opportunities | 23 |
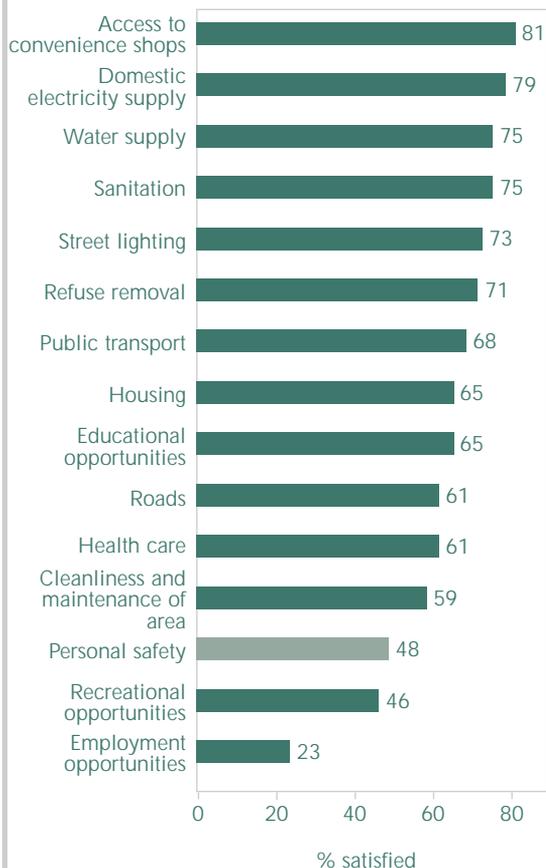
*Source: ISS NMMM victim survey, 2002*
*(Percentages based on 3-point satisfaction scale)*

### Table 2: Fear of crime and misfortune – risk assessments

| "Do you think that the following are likely to happen to you in the next year?" | Very likely % | Maybe % | Unlikely % | Perceived risk index | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Robbed | 41 | 52 | 7 | 1.67 | Highest risk |
| Serious illness | 33 | 58 | 9 | 1.76 | |
| House broken into | 38 | 47 | 15 | 1.77 | |
| Serious car accident | 29 | 62 | 10 | 1.81 | |
| Household car stolen | 26 | 56 | 18 | 1.92 | |
| Sexual assault, rape | 27 | 53 | 20 | 1.93 | |
| Breadwinner loses job | 24 | 51 | 25 | 2.02 | |
| House burns down | 22 | 48 | 30 | 2.08 | |
| Infected with HIV/AIDS | 20 | 45 | 35 | .15 | |
| Respondent accused of involvement in crime | 16 | 27 | 57 | 2.41 | Lowest risk |

*Source: ISS NMMM victim survey, 2002*

| Table 3: Coping with crime and misfortune – personal strategies | |
| --- | --- |
| **Personal strategies: how respondents cope** | |
| **"People try to protect themselves from things that can go wrong in various ways… which is your approach?"** | **%** |
| Put faith in God | 65 |
| Take personal responsibility | 16 |
| Don't worry, get on with life | 9 |
| Rely on friends and people I trust | 6 |
| Rely on good luck | 3 |
| Protect myself with *muti*, traditional medicine | 1 |
| Total | 100 |
| *Source: ISS NMMM victim survey, 2002* | |

| Table 4: Coping with crime and misfortune – preferred support | |
| --- | --- |
| **Preferred support in case of crime or misfortune** | |
| **"There has been a lot of talk of ways to help households to cope…what would help you most: compensation for being a victim of crime, access to free treatment in case of contracting HIV/AIDS, a monthly social grant of R100 in case of loss or lack of income?"** | **%** |
| Income grant | 36 |
| Free treatment for HIV/AIDS | 35 |
| Crime victim compensation | 29 |
| Total | 100 |
| *Source: ISS NMMM victim survey, 2002* | |

systematically from only 14% of black householders in favour, to 27% of coloured and 48% of white householders. The compensation option was popular mainly among higher income earners and the employed. The higher income groups in the study are more likely to be insured and to attract property crimes. The literature states that the need for victim compensation is most beneficial for victims of property crimes who suffer financial damage. Compensation for victims of crimes against the person (mostly violent crimes) tends to be much lower than for victims of property crimes.[6]

The *income grant* was a favourite among a third of householders mainly in the lower-income bracket. Access to *free antiretroviral treatment* was voted for by all survey categories but was most popular among blacks and young householders under 35 years.

**The impact of crime victimisation on perceived quality of life**

In order to gain a better understanding of the impact of criminal victimisation on quality of life, some 11 different combinations of victimisation were explored in relation to perceptions of life satisfaction and personal safety. The distinction between earlier and more recent victimisation was taken into account, as was that between crime against the household or the individual person. Analyses were conducted separately for black, coloured and white householders and for the total sample.

Contrary to expectations, no significant differences in life satisfaction were observed between victims and non-victims. There were few differences in levels of wellbeing among residents who had been victimised in the past year or in an earlier period. Equally surprising, there were few differences between victims and non-victims' levels of satisfaction on domain and neighbourhood quality-of-life items. In some instances, higher proportions of victims than non-victims were satisfied with life or with particular aspects of life.

It was only in the largest subsample of blacks, that individual victimisation came closest to having a very significant negative influence on life satisfaction. Although household crimes appeared to have no impact on life satisfaction, it is noteworthy that all but one of the 17 black householders who had experienced a murder in their households were dissatisfied with life.

One plausible interpretation is that the negative impact of the one-off crime experience on perceived quality of life tends to be overshadowed by the longer term positive effects of a higher standard of living. This explains why many results produced by the first round of analysis were counter-intuitive. Consider that the bulk of crime experienced by South Africans is property crime. The main targets are higher-income householders who enjoy a better standard of living and report higher levels of life satisfaction in spite of victimisation.[7]

Of importance for providing assistance to victims, the study found that crime victims were more dissatisfied with their personal safety than non-victims. Satisfaction with safety was significantly positively associated with all measures of quality of life used in the study and negatively associated with fear of crime and misfortune. Among blacks, individual victimisation had the most noticeable negative impact on feelings of personal safety. Among whites, household as well as individual crimes seemed to impact negatively on feelings of safety. For example, white victims tended to be significantly less satisfied with personal safety in the case of a home burglary experience. These findings point to the importance of the personal safety factor as a mediator of life satisfaction in the case of victimisation.

**Profiles of victims and non-victims**
Victim profiles are a useful tool for crime prevention strategies and victim support. Profiles were drawn up for the total sample as well as for householders living in black, coloured and white neighbourhoods. To ensure sufficient numbers, victims were defined as householders who had experienced any of the nine household and individual crimes covered in the survey in the five-year period from 1998-2002. The profiles are based on some 43 indicators and indices covering socio-demographics, social integration, perceptions of neighbourhood safety and policing, assistance with coping, fear of crime and misfortune, and personal and neighbourhood quality of life.

• *Victims* tend generally to be socio-economically advantaged, well established and socially integrated in their residential neighbourhoods. Victims are likely to have taken precautions to protect their homes, possibly as a result of an earlier property crime experience. It is perhaps telling that victims are more inclined to report actively taking personal responsibility to avoid misfortune than simply to place their trust in God. Although higher proportions of victims have taken precautions to protect themselves from crime, they do not appear to feel much safer than non-victims. Victims tend not to report less personal wellbeing and less satisfaction with various domains of life. Victims and non-victims achieve

similar scores on the neighbourhood quality of life. Although victims do not fear crime more than non-victims, they are significantly less satisfied with their personal safety.

• *Non-victims* are characterised mainly by lower socio-economic status and fewer possessions, such as a vehicle or a cell phone, which would make them targets of crime. Higher proportions of non-victims than victims are shack dwellers, newcomers, and persons who appeared to be less well integrated in their neighbourhoods. Non-victims appear to be significantly more confident of their immunity from crime than victims. They are less likely to take any precautions to protect their home and have more positive perceptions of safety in the neighbourhood and policing. Non-victims tend to believe crime in their areas has decreased in the past three years and they express confidence in the police. Non-victims are less likely than victims to identify an unsafe place in their neighbourhood and have not considered it necessary to change their behaviour to protect themselves from crime. Importantly, non-victims are more satisfied than victims with their personal safety.

The same method was used to draw up a profile of residents who feel safe from crime based on their assessment of 'satisfaction with personal safety' in the neighbourhood.

• *Residents who feel safe*: Householders who are satisfied with personal safety are more likely to be men and socio-economically better off as indicated by the survey categories of higher household income, formal employment, detached housing rather than shack accommodation, telephone or cellular phone and vehicle ownership. Satisfaction with safety increases with age. Social integration appears to be particularly important for feelings of safety in coloured neighbourhoods. Coloured householders who are satisfied with their safety know their neighbours' names and would trust them to look after their children. Persons who feel safe hold positive views of their neighbourhood and policing in their neighbourhood. They are less likely than others to identify unsafe places in the neighbourhood, or to

have found it necessary to change their behaviour to protect themselves from crime. They are however inclined to take responsibility for protection, and have installed target-hardening measures such as alarm systems. They generally feel safer with these protective measures in place. Regarding policing matters, householders who feel safe are likely to believe the police and municipality are now doing a better job; they express confidence in the police and volunteer to report neighbourhood crimes. They would nevertheless welcome more visible policing. Satisfied householders are also more likely than others to prefer assistance in the form of victim compensation if they were to become a victim of crime in future.

Particularly important for this study is that householders who are satisfied with their personal safety report enhanced wellbeing on all quality-of-life measures used in the survey: overall life satisfaction, satisfaction with domains of life, satisfaction with the neighbourhood, and a Personal Wellbeing Index. All these indicators use similar scales. Therefore it is noteworthy that satisfaction with safety also goes hand in hand with lower fear of crime and misfortune, items that are measured differently.

- *Residents who feel unsafe:* Householders who felt more vulnerable than others include shack dwellers and people who are not socially integrated, that is, do not know their neighbours' name or would not trust them to look after their children. Householders who are dissatisfied with their personal safety are very likely to have no home protection or else have resorted to keeping a weapon. Interestingly, people who keep a weapon as protection tend to be less, not more, satisfied with personal safety than others.

## Conclusion

International studies have commented on the hardiness of most victims.[8] Results of the NMMM study suggest that most South Africans living with crime appear to be resilient. They do not let the crime experience depress their life quality. However, many pay a high price in terms of restrictions on lifestyle and fear for their personal safety. In order to enhance the wellbeing of residents, particularly those living in poorer neighbourhoods,[9] more needs to be done to boost perceptions of personal safety and freedom from fear of crime.

### Endnotes
1  See an earlier report on the study by S Masuku, Finding Local Solutions: Crime prevention in the Nelson Mandela Metro, *SA Crime Quarterly*, No 2, 2002, p 5-12.
2  Since 1994, attention has shifted from victims to the perpetrators whose human rights have been violated in the past. Victim studies help to restore balance. In this connection, see L Camerer, What about the Victims?, *Nedcor ISS Crime Index*, No 2, 1999, p 14-15.
3  For a fuller account of results, see V Møller, Resilient or Resigned? Criminal victimisation and quality of life in South Africa, *Social Indicators Research*, 2004 (in press).
4  See V Møller, Democracy and Happiness: Quality of life trends, *Indicator South Africa*, Vol 17, 2000, No 3, p 22-32 and V Møller, Happiness Trends under Democracy: Where will the new South African Set-level come to rest?, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, Vol 2, 2001, p 33-53.
5  See V Møller, Quality of life in South Africa: Post-apartheid trends, *Social Indicators Research*, Vol 43, 1998, p 27-68.
6  See J Wemmers, Restorative Justice for Victims of Crime: A victim-oriented approach to restorative justice, *International Review of Victimology*, Vol 9, 2002, p 43-59.
7  This study seeks to unravel interaction effects of income and feelings on personal safety observed in earlier ones such as reported by M Schönteich, Sleeping Soundly, Feelings of Safety: Based on perceptions or reality? *NedBank ISS Crime Index*, No 2, 2001, p 1-6.
8  See A J M Denkers and F W Winkel, Crime Victims' Well-being and Fear in a Prospective and Longitudinal Study, *International Review of Victimology*, Vol 5, 1998, p 141-162.
9  On the particular vulnerability of shack dwellers, see T Leggett, Safe Shack Living: Criminal vulnerability in shacks and government housing. *NedBank ISS Crime Index*, No 5, 2001, p 8-12.