

RECLAIMING OUR HOMES?

Tackling residential robbery in Gauteng

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During 2006, residential robbery in Gauteng started to increase at a substantial rate – well above the average annual six per cent increase that had previously been taking place. This galvanised action from the provincial government, the South African Police Service and other key roleplayers in the province. The initiatives that were introduced have started to bear fruit as, for the first time in half a decade, a decrease in residential robberies started being recorded from April 2007. This article considers the extent and nature of residential robbery in Gauteng and what is being done to tackle the problem.

A person's home is usually considered a sanctuary, a safe haven from the rest of the world. To suddenly be confronted at home by armed and hostile strangers whose intention is to threaten violence and steal valuables and property, is an experience that leaves most people deeply traumatised. The police record this type of crime as residential robbery. Residential robberies share several common characteristics: the victims will always be at home and they will experience a direct threat, or the attackers will use violence to ensure compliance with their demands.¹

Until relatively recently, all reported cases where a direct threat or use of violence occurred as a means to illegally acquire cash or goods were recorded by the South African Police Service (SAPS) under the broad category 'robbery aggravating'. It was only in 2002 that residential robbery and business robbery were added as separate subcategories of 'robbery aggravating', joining the four other subcategories namely vehicle hijacking, truck hijacking, bank robberies and cash-in-transit heists (CITs).

Very little research has been undertaken on the subject of residential robberies in South Africa. Most

of what is known resides with police investigators and is usually geographically specific to the areas in which the investigator works. Nevertheless, the available data and information are growing and have started to provide insights into the extent and nature of this crime.

Home robbery trends in SA

It must be recognised that South Africa is not alone in experiencing this type of crime. Typically referred to as 'home invasions' in the international literature, such crimes are also a challenge in other countries. In the USA, for example, there are approximately 1,4 million home invasions each year, and these increased by 18 per cent between 1999 and 2003, compared to an increase of only one per cent in the total number of all other types of armed robberies (Adame 2005).

In South Africa a total of 126 558 aggravated robberies (of all subcategories) was recorded by the SAPS during the 2006/07 financial year.² Of this number, 12 761 or ten per cent were recorded as residential robberies. Although official statistics only reveal part of the picture, a 2003 national victimisation survey found that 72 per

cent of victims of residential robberies reported the crime to the police (Burton et al 2003:135). This is substantially more than the 12 per cent of street robbery victims who report the incident to the police.

Of all the country's provinces, Gauteng records the lion's share of home robberies: 58,5 per cent of the national total recorded in the 2006/07 financial year. At an average of 20 cases per day, Gauteng has almost three times the number of residential robberies as KwaZulu-Natal, the province that records the second highest number (Table 1).

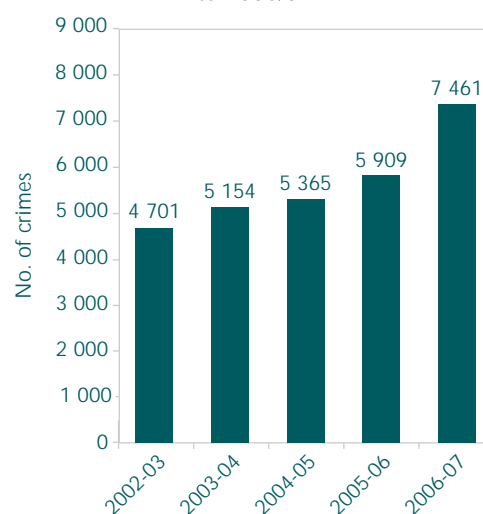
Table 1: Residential robbery in SA by province, April 2006 – March 2007

Province	Cases recorded	% of national figure	Ratio per 100 000 of the population
Gauteng	7 461	58,5%	81,0
KwaZulu-Natal	2 655	20,8%	27,3
North West	853	6,7%	22,0
Mpumalanga	505	3,9%	15,5
Western Cape	658	5,1%	13,9
Eastern Cape	356	2,8%	5,0
Limpopo	199	1,6%	3,5
Free State	64	0,5%	2,2
Northern Cape	10	0,1%	1,1
RSA Total	12 761	100%	26,9

Source: SAPS

The average annual increase between the 2002/03 and the 2005/06 financial years was three per cent nationally and six per cent in Gauteng (Figure 1). However, during the 2006/07 period, residential robbery increased by 25 per cent nationally and by 26 per cent in Gauteng.

Figure 1: Home robberies in Gauteng, 2002/03 to 2006/07



Source: SAPS

Furthermore, residential robbery as a proportion of all recorded aggravated robberies in Gauteng had also been increasing from eight per cent in 2002/03 to 14 per cent in 2006/07 (Table 2).

A vast majority – 63 per cent or 33 410 – of the total 52 924 cases of aggravated robbery that took place in Gauteng in 2006/07 occurred in public

Table 2: Residential robbery as a proportion of total aggravated robbery in Gauteng per financial year, 2002/03 to 2006/07

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
No. of aggravated robberies	58 167	60 998	55 139	48 784	52 924
No. of residential robberies	4 701	5 154	5 365	5 909	7 461
% of residential robberies	8,1%	8,5%	9,7%	12,1%	14,1%

Source: SAPS

spaces such as streets, parks, and walkways. Although it is clear that there are increasing numbers of perpetrators targeting residences for the purposes of robbery, the reason for such a substantial increase in 2006 is not known.

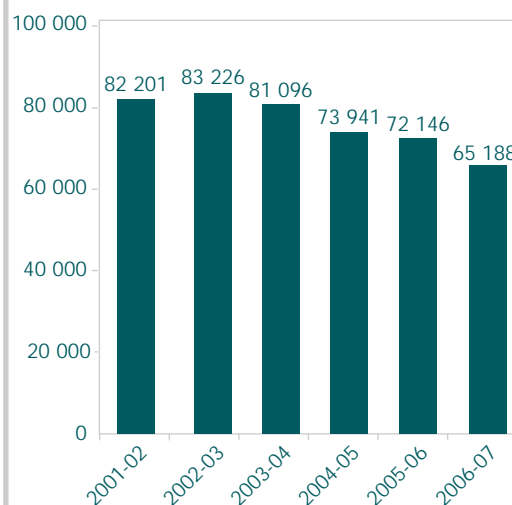
Initially, the prolonged and bitter strike by private security guards that took place in May 2006 was blamed for the increase. However, the vast majority of Gauteng residences were not protected by those guards who went on strike, and even after the strike ended, the rate of increase in such robberies did not abate.

There is ample evidence that, when the incentives for and risks of committing particular crimes change, criminals will respond by shifting their focus. A convincing argument has been made that improvements in tackling vehicle hijacking contributed to the increase in other forms of aggravated robbery in South Africa (Altbeker 2006). At least one study found evidence that perpetrators of armed robbery had initially been involved in committing other types of crime before moving towards aggravated robbery (Zinn 2002).³

As noted above, a vast majority of the total cases of aggravated robbery that took place in Gauteng in 2006/07 occurred in public spaces. However, street robberies have decreased by 22 per cent since 2002/03, which raises the question: are many street robbers turning their attention to households? Typically, street robbers prey on individuals and get a relatively small amount of cash, cell phones and some jewellery during each incident. However, when targeting the occupants of a household, robbers can steal many more items of higher value, including electronic goods such as laptops, i-pods, DVD players, and digital cameras.

Given that the number of residential burglaries in Gauteng has decreased by 22 per cent between 2002/03 and 2006/07 (Figure 2), it is possible that some burglars are also turning to robbery. This may have arisen due to the likelihood that many people have improved their home security in response to the general increase in crime since the mid-1990s. This target hardening approach would make it more difficult for burglars to gain access to homes. It is

Figure 2: Gauteng burglaries at residential premises, 2002/03 to 2006/07



Source: SAPS

possible that some of these criminals may have switched to robbery as a means of accessing the valuables kept at residences. However, the extent to which this contributed to the increase in residential robbery requires further research and analysis.

It is also possible that some of the increase in residential robbery can be attributed to changes in the way the crime is recorded. The 2003 National Victims of Crime Survey found that although approximately 90 000 incidents of residential robbery occurred nationwide, only 9 000 incidents were recorded under the category of residential robbery by the police. As this subcategory of robbery had only been introduced by the SAPS the year before, it is likely that it would have taken time for all police members to get used to the new category and that '... these crimes were probably captured under the heading of general robbery' (Burton et al 2003). In every subsequent year a greater number of residential robberies would have been accurately recorded.

Nevertheless, the scale and consistency of the increase indicates that there are far too many people willing to take on the risks associated with committing residential robbery. Until quite recently, most of the risks to the perpetrator were posed by

the victims and not by the criminal justice system, as too few perpetrators were being arrested and effectively prosecuted. As has been coherently argued, robbery is a difficult crime to police anywhere in the world because 'the number of targets out there and the adaptability of criminals makes the prevention of robbery almost impossible, while the difficulties associated with making a case means that conviction rates are low' (Altbeker 2007:82).

As individuals and gangs of robbers successfully avoid the criminal justice system, more and more people of criminal bent are encouraged to engage in this type of crime. South Africa's huge wealth gap and endemic inequality mean that there will always be a market for cheap household items which would otherwise be well beyond the reach of many millions of people.

However, none of these explanations adequately explain the scale of the increase recorded during 2006 and focused research on this issue is required.

The nature of residential robbery

Typically, a crime is recorded as a residential robbery when two or more armed individuals enter a private residence by force while the people who live or work there are present. The primary motivation for the crime is robbery, with perpetrators usually targeting money, electronic goods (such as laptops, DVD players, etc.), jewellery and firearms.

Profiles of perpetrators seem to suggest that a substantial number are experienced career criminals who commit a large number of other criminal acts before they are caught. Furthermore, these criminals have typically progressed to home robbery from other forms of petty crime and street robberies. Over time they become experienced in using violence to steal from people. Robbers target residences as these yield higher rewards than street robberies in which the takings are relatively small.

It would appear that the perpetrators of most residential robberies target certain areas more than others. This is because they are familiar with the exit and entrance routes of those areas and are reasonably close to where the stolen goods will be

dropped off for cash. According to the latest SAPS Annual Report for 2006/07, a small proportion (three per cent), or 32 police precincts in South Africa account for 40 per cent of all residential robberies (SAPS 2007:233). Among these stations, 47 per cent were classified as serving primarily suburban communities, 38 per cent township communities and 15 per cent CBDs (central business districts).

An unpublished analysis of a sample of residential robbery dockets at five police stations that record among the highest numbers of residential robberies in the country, found the following:⁴

- 75 per cent of incidents are carried out by groups of two or three perpetrators (with the size of the group sometimes consisting of up to six people)
- Most of the perpetrators are males between the ages of 17 and 29
- 92 per cent of the incidents involved firearms
- 50 per cent took place between 21h00 and 04h00, but this differs according to area
- 60 per cent of incidents occur following a 'forced entry' while people are in their homes
- 12 per cent of incidents occur as a result of 'easy access', as residents have not locked doors or windows, or left gates open or unlocked
- Three per cent of incidents occur when perpetrators wait for the victims to get home before forcing them inside
- Three per cent of incidents occur with the perpetrators following victims home from other locations (e.g. shopping malls)
- 13 per cent of the incidents were committed against 'shack dwellers'

Different groups have different ways of accessing the residences that they target. The most common *modus operandi* is to break into homes while the residents are at home. This is because people have turned off their alarm systems, are relaxed, have opened doors and windows and usually have televisions or radios on and are not always aware of people intruding until it is too late to call for assistance.

Typically, perpetrators target residences about which they have some information. Sometimes this

information is gathered through observing the residence or through forging links with people who work at or have worked at the residence. Sometimes would-be robbers gain access for reconnaissance purposes by pretending to be officials of some kind (e.g. water meter readers). It is interesting to note that 30 per cent of victims appeared to 'know the perpetrator' (Burton et al 2003:136).

The primary intention of the perpetrators is to steal and leave the premises as soon as possible. Although the fear experienced by victims who are subject to direct violence is very real, the reality is that in a vast majority of residential robberies, victims are left mostly unharmed. While cases of horrific violence such as rape, torture and murder do occur, serious violence associated with home robberies is relatively rare. The abovementioned docket analysis found the following:

- Murder occurred in two per cent of incidents
- Attempted murder occurred in nine per cent of incidents
- Rape occurred in four per cent of incidents
- Some form of injury occurred in 13 per cent of incidents

It is also becoming apparent that a significant proportion of residential robberies are the work of criminal syndicates. Often the perpetrators will immediately transport the stolen property to a 'receiver' who will exchange the goods for cash. A network of people belonging to the syndicate will then be responsible for storing, repackaging, transporting and reselling the stolen property as new or 'second hand' goods and laundering the money that is made. A proportion of the stolen property is transported to other provinces or across the national border.

Turning the tide

In July 2006 the Gauteng MEC for Community Safety, Firoz Cachalia, publicly announced that there was an increase in certain crime categories, including residential robbery, in the province. The intention was to begin the process of mobilising the police and the public to take action against crime. As part of this announcement he launched a six-month high intensity police operation called 'Operation Iron Fist'.

Early in 2007 the MEC reported on an evaluation of the operation. It was found that, while the police had successfully stepped up their activities and that certain crimes had stabilised or decreased, the tactics used did not have the desired impact on residential robbery in particular (Cachalia 2007a).

The lack of success in dealing with residential robberies during the last six months of 2006 led to a number of new initiatives launched in early 2007. In February 2007 the SAPS launched 'Operation Trio', which saw the police more carefully targeting the perpetrators of residential robberies, business robberies and vehicle hijackings. Police stations recording the highest numbers of these particular crimes were clustered together to coordinate operations and investigations and further resources were deployed at these stations. More attention was given to developing intelligence about perpetrators and syndicates behind these crimes.

By July 2007 it was evident that the police initiatives had started to have an impact. Arrests for residential robbery had increased by 44 per cent, arrests for vehicle hijacking had increased by 98 per cent and arrests for business robberies had increased by 243 per cent (Cachalia 2007b).

In addition to the shifts in policing strategy and tactics, a range of other initiatives spearheaded by other agencies and sectors were also underway. In March 2007 the Gauteng Department of Community Safety launched the 'Take Charge against Crime' campaign. Attended by over 11 000 people from across the province, the launch marked the start of a programme to mobilise various communities to play a greater role in tackling crime.

In the run-up to the launch, consultations were held with over 300 organisations representing or working in 11 different sectors (e.g. youth, gender and faith based organisations, labour, hostel Indunas, etc.). Community volunteer patroller programmes were launched, a number of community policing forums (CPFs) were revived and communities were encouraged to participate in safety initiatives, to report crime and not to purchase stolen goods.

The business sector was also starting to make headway on a number of projects initiated by the Big Business Working Group initiative that had been endorsed by the President and Cabinet towards the end of 2006. In addition the media started to play a more active role in supporting the movement against crime with notable examples being Primedia's launch of 'Crime Line', an anonymous sms crime reporting number, and the *Star* newspaper initiative to increase the profile of and support for community policing forums.

From April 2007 it was clear that the improvement in targeted policing, along with the other initiatives, were starting to show results. For the first time in half a decade the number of residential robberies recorded started to decline. At the time of writing the latest official crime statistics released by the national Minister of Safety and Security revealed that between April and September 2007 residential robberies in Gauteng had decreased by eight per cent or 297 cases when compared to the same period in the previous year. Furthermore, residential robberies in Gauteng as a proportion of the national figure had also decreased from 59 per cent to 53 per cent.

While the results achieved during 2007 are to be welcomed, the battle against residential robbery in Gauteng and the rest of the country is far from over. Even with the recent decreases, the number of residential robberies in Gauteng is still far too high. Nevertheless, a good start has been made and it has been demonstrated that targeted policing supported by initiatives in communities, civil society and business, can make a difference.

As the SAPS continues to strengthen its capacity and ability to target the perpetrators of residential and other forms of aggravated robbery, and other initiatives are launched or expanded during 2008, we will hopefully start to see further progress, not only in Gauteng, but throughout the country.

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Endnotes

- 1 Residential robbery is often confused with residential burglary. The key difference is that during a burglary the victims will not be home and will not have direct contact with the perpetrator. A robbery by its very definition requires the direct threat or use of violence by a perpetrator against a victim. Sometimes a burglary turns into a robbery, for example if the victims return home while a burglary is in progress and are then threatened by perpetrator/s.
- 2 All South African crime statistics presented in this article are officially released by the South African Police Service and are available from www.saps.gov.za.
- 3 Zinn's work is very useful for obtaining a better understanding of the profile of a perpetrator who engages in violent robberies generally.
- 4 Although these findings cannot be generalised beyond the specific stations involved in the study, the results provide some insight into the nature of the crime.