

Consequences of citizens' non-reporting of crime to the Police: A survey of Mthatha Policing Precinct, South Africa

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Abstract

Whilst citizens are at liberty to decide whether or not to report a crime to the police, non-reporting of crime to the police may come with a heavy price. This study evaluates the consequences of non-reporting of crime to the police in South Africa's Mthatha policing area. It comes against a backdrop of a rise in criminal activities in South Africa. A survey was conducted among households in selected residential areas of Mthatha, from where 120 respondents were selected through stratified random sampling technique. Data analysis was done using SPSS to reveal both descriptive and inferential statistics. From the analysis, continued engagement in criminal activities by perpetrators, resulting in absence of investigations was found to be the major impact of non-reporting of crime to the police. Findings also revealed that the victims bear the most implications of non-reporting of crime. Inability to identify crime hot spots, misallocation of policing resources and inability to determine crime trends and tendencies were also viewed as significant impacts of non-reporting of crime to the police. A factor analysis revealed officials' inability to determine trends and tendencies that could inform policing strategies as the most significant component.

Keywords: Crime reporting, crime control, non-reporting, victimisation.

Introduction

Crime problem is one of the major challenges that affect socio-economic wellbeing of nations. Thus, governments, through law enforcement organisations, have a duty to ensure that criminal activities are kept at barest minimum levels. This is achieved by crafting sound crime fighting strategies and policies. Importantly, for any crime strategies and policies to be successful, they should be underpinned by accurate crime statistics. For this to occur, crime needs to come to the attention of the criminal justice system, especially the police who are the gateway into the criminal justice chain. Unless the police were witnesses to a crime, a crime incident has to be reported to the police for them to be aware of it. Moreover, criminologists have considered crime reporting as a crucial aspect in the criminal justice process (Gottfredson & Hindelang, 1979; Black, 1970). Sadly though, many crimes that are committed do not make it to the police, which distorts the true picture of crime within

communities. Longstanding research has confirmed that a large proportion of crime remains unreported (Kaukinen, 2002; Bowles et al., 2009; Harrendorf, Heiskanen & Malby, 2010; Lancaster, 2013). For example, a study on unreported victimisations not reported to the police in the United States during the period 2006 to 2010 showed that the highest percentages of unreported crime were among household theft (67%), followed by rape and sexual assault at (65%) (Langton et al, 2012). In South Africa, previous researchers have also raised concern over non-reporting of crime to the police (Lancaster, 2013; National Home Security Month (NHSM), 2016). When crimes are not brought to the police's attention, victims may not be able to obtain necessary services to cope with victimisation, offenders may go unpunished, and there will be misallocation of community resources due to inaccurate crime information (Langton et al, 2012).

There are several reasons why victims decide not to report crime to the police. Some victims blame themselves for the crime incident by suggesting that they should not have been walking out late at night), whilst others fear reprisal from the perpetrator who may live near the victim (Lancaster, 2013; Ranapurwala, Berg & Casteel, 2016). Victims may also not report crime when they consider the crime as trivial, and when they are dissatisfied with the police service during their encounters with the police (Dai & Jiang, 2016; Koster et al, 2020; Merenda et al, 2020). Notwithstanding the availability of a plethora of reasons for non-reporting of crimes to the police, non-reporting of crimes has serious implications on the community's safety levels and social wellbeing. It is against this background that this study explores the implications of non-reporting of crimes to the police. The study was conducted in Mthatha Policing precinct in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa, which comes against a rise in criminal activities in South Africa. For example, the 2019/2020 statistics show a rise in crimes against persons (0.7%), sexual offences (1.7%), and aggravated robbery (1.7%) (Stats SA, 2020). Given the importance of accurate crime statistics on crime control policies and strategies, this study sheds light on the implications of non-reporting of crime to the police. This will help citizens to self-introspect on crime reporting issues and will spur them to report crimes to the police. The study also adds to the growing body of literature on non-crime reporting and its implications on community safety.

Theoretical framework: The rational choice perspective to crime reporting

General crime reporting disposition lies with the assumption derived from the rational choice theory which states that people are 'rational' in character and they calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do (Scott, 2000). In the context of crime reporting, the decision to report criminal incidents is a complex process involving a consideration of both costs and benefits (Kaukinen, 2002; Bowles et al., 2009; Boateng, 2016). According to Kaukinen (2002), crime victims decide to contact the police based on their rational assessment of the event. Thus, victims and witnesses who find the benefit of reporting to be greater than the associated cost will be willing to call the police (Bowles et al., 2009). There are several benefits victims may enjoy from reporting a crime to the police. According to victimology experts, the benefits may include receiving protection from authorities, receiving treatment

from appropriate agencies and departments, and preventing future victimisation by helping to get the offender arrested and punished (Boateng, 2015; Bowles et al., 2009). Conversely, victims who consider reporting crime to be costlier than beneficial will be discouraged from making the event known to the police (Kaukinen, 2002). For instance, victims who believe that the incident was minor will never call the police. The costs associated with reporting crime to the police can be enormous and may include the possibility of retaliation from the offender, especially when the incident involves domestic violence, shame and embarrassment, stigmatisation of the victim and a challenging trial process (Boateng, 2016; Lancaster, 2013; Papp et al, 2019). In addition to the costs associated with crime reporting, victims also need to be confident that the information that they give to the police will be treated with the highest degree of secrecy, as well as the assurance that the police will treat their cases with fairness and efficiency (Boateng, 2016). Thus, the level of citizens' satisfaction with the police service is also crucial on the citizens' decision on whether to report a crime incident or not.

In this study, we look at the rational choice perspective in the context of the consequences of non-reporting of crime to the police. These consequences should be factored in by the citizens in their decision on crime reporting, as the consequences also pose as costs of non-reporting of crime to the police. Thus, by exploring the consequences of non-reporting of criminal activities to the police, this study adds a crucial aspect which should be considered by citizens before they decide not to report victimisations to the police.

Brief literature on consequences of non-reporting of crimes

The decision not to report crime to the police can have profound implications for crime victims and the criminal justice system. Crime reporting is a key determinant in shaping the statistics recorded by the police and also in providing a broader understanding of how crime impacts on citizens and their communities (Tarling & Morris, 2010). First and foremost, police heavily rely on citizens' reports for them to take action (Yoon, 2015) and without citizens' notification, few crimes would come to the attention of the police. Hindelang and Gottfredson (1976) regard the victim as "the gatekeeper of the criminal justice system" for if they do not report, the deterrent capability of the criminal justice system is severely limited, as certain classes of perpetrators are safeguarded from official view (Fohring, 2014). If the police are not aware of the crime, they will not be able to step in to investigate the alleged criminal activities, and they will not be able to pass on the investigative process to the next step in the criminal justice process (Yoon, 2015). Thus, unreported crime will not be investigated, meaning that the perpetrator will continue to engage in criminal activities (Fohring, 2014; NHSM, 2016). On the other hand, reporting crime allows the police to search for and arrest criminals, preventing them from continuing with their criminal activity, thus protecting others from a similar fate (Lancaster, 2013). The impacts of continued engagement in criminal activities is felt more when offenders live in the same communities with the victims (Skogan, 1984; Boateng, 2016) and in cases involving abuse by relatives and family members (Fohring, 2014). Part of the

reporting process also entails sharing relevant information about the circumstances of the crime and possibly the offender (Koster et al, 2020). This kind of information may help the police to solve the crime, in particular and to preserve law and order, in general (Koster et al, 2020).

Research has also shown that victims of crime pay the ultimate price for non-reporting of crime to the police. This is especially true given that a crime incident has direct impacts on the victims, and according to Shapland and Hall (2007), these direct impacts include: physical injuries, shock and lack of trust in the society, guilt of having become a victim, financial loss, and psychological effects, among other effects. Thus, crime reporting will offer a sense of protection to the victims by allowing the criminal justice process to take its course (Koster et al, 2020). It also needs to be borne in mind that the effects of crime are not only felt by individual victims, but also by their families, friends and colleagues (Shapland & Hall, 2007) - a phenomenon which is known as the ripple effect. A study by Ranapurwala et al (2016) established that reporting victimisation to the police is associated with less future victimisation, underscoring the importance of crime reporting on personal security and crime prevention. Victims who refuse to notify the police about their victimisation deny themselves the benefits of receiving psychological and medical treatment which are necessary in coping and managing trauma (Boateng, 2016). Moreover, they will be cut off from financial compensation (Fohring, 2014), as compensation to victims of crime and insurance payment are dependent on reporting the crime incidents to the police (Carcach, 1997).

In addition, the official level of crime influences the distribution of criminal justice resources (Skogan, 1976; Yoon, 2015), especially given that police tasks are defined by accurate knowledge of crimes prevailing in a community (Carcach, 1997). To this end, strategic planning, operational planning, budgeting and proper allocation of policing resources are dependent upon accurate crime statistics. Without accurate crime statistics, the police will not be able to determine "hotspot" areas where they can implement preventive and focused policing (Carcach, 1997; NHSM, 2016). Thus, if a community has high crime rates but low victim reporting rates, there may be a smaller police force than is realistically required (Yoon, 2015). In such a scenario, there will be fewer police officers to deal with the real crime volume, rendering the police less effective. Lancaster (2013) also notes that underreporting crime distorts the real picture of crime and undermines the accuracy of information used by police to plan crime combating and prevention operations.

Methodology

Population sample and sampling techniques

The data for this study were collected from a sample of 120 respondents who voluntarily participated in the study. This set of respondents, from age 18, and including all races was selected from a large population of Mthatha policing area. The object of selecting such a population size was to decrease the extent of the sampling error. Nevertheless, a tolerable sample size for Mthatha population would be 377

respondents using Raoself for a total population 210 783, with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. A large sample usually increases the chances that the sample will have similar characteristics as those of the population from which it is drawn, but the researchers chose to reduce the sample size to 120 respondents because of manageability and affordability in terms of costs. Additionally, it is the fact that not all sections of Mthatha were targeted.

The researchers employed stratified random sampling, where Mthatha was stratified into six areas that comprised of 3 (middle class) suburbs and 3 (lower middle class) townships. The researchers then randomly selected a sample of 20 respondents (from households) in each stratum by identifying 4 streets in each stratum, then randomly selecting 5 respondents from 5 households in each street to make a total of 20 respondents in each of the strata. This process can be further explained by illustrating the steps:

1. Selecting an area – Suburb: Southridge Park, Sdwadwa View, & Southernwood; and Township: New Payne, Old Payne, & Nthlekiseni Location.
2. Selecting streets (4 streets from each of the above 6 areas)
3. Selecting households (120 households- 5 households per street and 20 households from each area)
4. Selecting a household head or any adult that could respond to the research questions or selecting adults randomly from different streets. Random selection of adults from different streets (without actually invading households) was employed due to the anticipated absence of potential respondents from the household because of work related issues or temporary relocations.

All ethical protocols were observed, given that the researchers have to secure permission from respondents who responded to the survey before they participated. The research was also granted ethical clearance (Certificate No: REC/05a/2019) by the Walter Sisulu University Senate through the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law Research and Higher Degrees Committee.

Instruments and data analysis

This study made use of a survey. A closed-ended questionnaire which was divided into sections that included consequences of not reporting crime to the police was utilised. Respondents were asked to indicate their responses on a 4 point Likert Scale. By the use of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), a reliability test carried out on the seven items on perceived consequences of not reporting crime to the police confirmed that all items were individually and collectively satisfactory. The test in Table 1 shows an overall Cronbach Alpha of 0.768 and all items were found reliable at a range above the acceptable 0.5 threshold. Output from data analysis are presented in tables to reveal descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. In addition to the descriptive statistics on the findings, the researchers also performed factor analysis and regression analysis on the relationship between the demographic variables and crime reporting disposition.

Table 1: Reliability test on perceived consequences of not reporting crime to the police

	Cronbach's Alpha
Under-reporting of crime has an extremely negative impact on the victim	.761
Unreported crime(s) lead to no investigation.	.735
Perpetrators keep on committing crime(s).	.766
Unreported crimes prevent the police from identifying hotspot areas	.707
Officials are unable to determine trends and tendencies that could inform policing strategies	.685
Under-reporting crimes could seriously impact on the type and amount of resources allocated to alleviate crime	.705
Failing to report for another person could lead to civil liability	.801

Findings

Perceived consequences of not reporting crime to the police

Table 2 shows the respondents' views on the consequences of non-reporting of crime to the police. The assertion that "Perpetrators keep on committing crime(s)" topped the list among the consequences of non-reporting of crimes to the police, with 88.3% strongly agreeing and the remaining 11.7% agreeing to the assertion. Therefore, we can conclude that all respondents believed that perpetrators will keep on committing crime if crime is not reported. This was followed by the assertion that "under-reporting crime has an extremely negative impact on the victim" where an overwhelming majority of the respondents (70%) strongly agreed to the assertion, whilst 29.2% agreed. There is no doubt therefore that not reporting crime has negative implications on the victim. On the third place was the assertion that "Unreported crime(s) lead to no investigation", with two thirds of respondents strongly agreeing and 30.8% agreeing to the assertion. In relation to the assertion that "Unreported crimes prevent the police from identifying hotspot areas", majority of respondents at 55.8% strongly agreed, while 38.3% of respondents agreed that hotspots will be hardly identified if crimes are not reported.

Table 2: Perceived consequences of not reporting crime to the Police.

	SD	D	A	SA	Total	Mean	SD	V	C h i - Square	Sig
Under-reporting of crime has an extremely negative impact on the victim	1 (0.8)	-	35 (29.2)	84 (70.0)	120 (100)	3.68	.518	0.269	87.050 ^a	0.000

Unreported crime(s) lead to no investigation.	–	3 (2.5)	37 (30.8)	80 (66.7)	120 (100)	3.64	.532	0.531	74.450 ^a	0.000
Perpetrators keep on committing crime(s).	–	–	14 (11.7)	106 (88.3)	120 (100)	3.88	.322	0.104	70.533 ^b	0.000
Unreported crimes prevent the police from identifying hotspot areas.	1 (0.8)	6 (5.0)	46 (38.3)	67 (55.8)	120 (100)	3.49	.635	0.403	101.400 ^c	0.000
Officials are unable to determine trends and tendencies that could inform policing strategies.	1 (0.8)	10 (8.3)	58 (48.3)	51 (42.5)	120 (100)	3.33	.663	0.440	82.200 ^c	0.000
Under-reporting crime could seriously impact on the type and amount of resources allocated to alleviate crime.	–	10 (8.3)	59 (49.2)	51 (42.5)	120 (100)	3.34	.628	0.395	34.550 ^a	0.000
Failing to report for another person could lead to civil liability.	6 (5.0)	37 (30.8)	34 (28.3)	43 (35.8)	120 (100)	2.95	.934	0.871	27.000 ^c	0.000

The statement “Under-reporting crime could seriously impact on the type and amount of resources allocated to alleviate crime” is believed to be an important consequence of not reporting crime to the police, with almost half of the respondents (49.2%) agreeing with the assertion, whilst 42.5% strongly agreed. The second to least popular assertion is that “Officials are unable to determine trends and tendencies that could inform policing strategies” where 48.3% of the respondents agreed and 42.5% strongly agreed. The least popular among the assertions was the opinion that “Failing to report on behalf of another person could lead to civil liability.”

Overall, the test for perceived consequences of not reporting crime to the police showed that all the variables were significant. This means that the respondents differ in all the variables, with overwhelming majority of citizens incline towards agreeing and strongly agreeing in all cases. Based on the Mean output (Figure 1), the item with the highest mean was that perpetrators keep on committing crimes and the item with the least mean on the perceived consequences of not reporting crimes was that failing to report for another person could lead to civil liability.



Figure 1: Summary of mean scores on perceived consequences of not reporting crime to the police.

Factor analysis on perceived consequences of not reporting crime to the police

Furthermore, factor analysis was performed to establish the relative importance of each factor. The results present the value of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sample Adequacy (KMO) which amounts to 0.799, exceeding the recommended value of 0.5. This is a satisfactory factor analysis; the test results were (chi-square =257.204, df=21 and the significance value of Bartlett’s test of Sphericity is (sig=0.000), which means that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix.

Table 3 shows that the inability of Officials to determine trends and tendencies that could inform policing strategies best represents and explained the citizen’s most perceived consequence of not reporting crime to the police. This is followed by the reality that unreported crimes prevent the police to identify hotspot areas and the fact that under-reporting crimes could seriously impact on the type and amount of resources allocated to alleviate crime.

Table 3: Variance Explained and Factor loading on Perceived consequences of not reporting crime to the Police

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Factor Loading
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Component Matrix
Officials are unable to determine trends and tendencies that could inform policing strategies.	3.194	45.626	45.626	.857
Unreported crimes prevent the police from identifying hotspot areas.	1.041	14.865	60.491	.797
Under-reporting crimes could seriously impact on the type and amount of resources.	.818	11.685	72.176	.780
Unreported crime(s) lead to no investigation.	.707	10.104	82.280	.689
Under-reporting of crime has an extremely negative impact on the victim	.588	8.400	90.679	.516
Perpetrators keep on committing crime(s).	.428	6.116	96.795	.511
Failing to report for another person could lead to civil liability.	.224	3.205	100.000	.463

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

While all other variables are important in explaining consequence of not reporting crime, the possibility of civil liability arising as a result of failing to report for another person was found to be the least consequence. This revelation indeed somewhat accounts for why a lot of victims suffer abuse in the hands of perpetrators, while neighbours and family members watch without the duty of care of reporting such abuse to the police.

Discussion

Results of the analysis reveal that continued commission of crimes by perpetrators

is the major consequence of non-reporting of crime to the police. Thus, when crime victims or witnesses do not notify the police when crime occurs, the police will not take action and perpetrators will be free to continue engaging in criminal activities. This finding resonates with Skogan (1984), Lancaster (2013), and Boateng (2016)'s finding that continued engagement in criminal activities is a major impact of non-reporting of crime to the police. As previously noted by Fohring (2014), the challenge of continued commission of crime is more pronounced when the perpetrators either live in the same communities with the victims or are victims' relatives. It follows that when victims fail to report crime to the police, the police will not take the necessary action such as arrests, searches and investigations and possible sanction, as also confirmed in Fohring (2014) and NHSM (2016)'s studies. Several indirect impacts will also flow from non-investigation of criminal activities. For example, the perpetrator will not have his or her day in court to face justice. Moreover, and as noted in the previous studies by Boateng (2015) and Bowles et al (2009), victims will not be able to obtain assistance in the form of police protection and claims from insurance companies. In the end, absence of investigations and continued presence of criminal elements within the communities will negatively impact the overall community safety and security. Recent occurrences in South Africa resonate with the findings of this study where many women have been killed by their intimate partners who continue to perpetrate femicide and gender based violence without facing the wrath of the law. Most of these women lose their lives on daily basis due to either police negligence when prior complaints are made by victims or the victims were hesitant to report the abuse to the police.

Findings also reveal that majority of the respondents believe that non-reporting of crime has major implications on the victims of crime. This confirms findings from previous studies (e.g. Sharpland & Hall, 2007; Korster et al, 2020) that the victims pay the ultimate price for non-reporting of crime to the police. It goes without argument that victims bear the direct impacts of crime through injuries, loss of money and loss of property. Moreover, as noted by Sharpland and Hall (2007), there could be indirect victimisation impacts upon the victims' immediate family members, friends, employees and customers. As argued by the rational choice theory, these are the costs that the victim should take into consideration before deciding against reporting crime to the police. Also, as observed in the previous studies, non-reporting of crime increases the chances of future victimisations (see Ranapurwala et al, 2016), and prevents the victims from obtaining help in the form of counselling and compensation (see Carcach, 1997; Fohring, 2014; Boateng, 2016). Overall, and in resonance with the rational choice perspective, non-reporting of crime has serious direct and indirect cost implications, which the victim should take into account before making a decision not to report crime to the police.

Results also show that respondents believe that unreported crime will prevent the police from identifying crime hot spot areas where they can implement preventive and focused policing, echoing previous findings by Carcach (1997), Langton et al (2012), and NHSM (2016). This is especially true given the fact that proper and accurate deployment of police manpower and resources are dependent on accurate crime statistics. It also follows that non-reporting of crime will seriously impact the

type and amount of resources that are available for dealing with crime- an opinion that was also noted by majority of the respondents. More previously observed by Yoon (2015), if a community has high crime rates than the officially reported crime, there would be fewer police officers and resources than is realistically required. In the end, if the crime statistics are obscured, all the crime prevention efforts by the police will be in vain, as proper crime control strategies should be underpinned by accurate crime statistics. Closely related to poor identification of crime hot spot areas and misallocation of policing resources is the view officials are unable to determine trends and tendencies that could inform policing strategies. Importantly, factor analysis also revealed inability to determine trends and tendencies that could inform policing strategies as the most significant consequence of non-reporting of crime to the police. This finding resonates with Lancaster (2013)'s view that underreporting crime distorts the real picture of crime and undermines the accuracy of information used by police to plan crime combating and prevention operations.

Conclusion

Whilst citizens are at liberty to decide whether or not to report crime to the police, the results of this study reveal that there are huge costs to pay for non-reporting of crimes to the police. Chief among the consequences of non-reporting of crime to the police is the fact that perpetrators continue to engage in criminal activities. Given that police action is mainly spurred by reported crime, non-reporting will mean that no investigations will be conducted and criminals will not face justice. Findings also reveal that the victim suffers most due to non-reporting of crime to the police. As a result of unreported crime, the police will not be able to identify crime hot spots and there will be misallocation of policing resources. Moreover, the police will not be able to determine trends and tendencies that could inform policing strategies. Given the huge impacts of non-reporting of crime as revealed in this study, measures should be taken by the government in general and police departments, in particular, to encourage citizens to report crime to the police.

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