

Exploring the challenges that the South African police services encounter when responding to Residential burglary

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Abstract

Burglary at residential premises is a global and growing problem. Thus, the Newlands East Policing Precinct of Durban, is no exception to this problem. This study aimed at exploring the challenges that the South African Police Services (SAPS) in the Newlands East Policing Precinct experience in responding to burglaries at residential premises. The motivation behind this study was based on safety within the selected community, mainly focusing on burglary at residential premises because this crime has been the highest reported property-related crime in the area for the past five years (2015-2019). It was also underpinned by the National Developmental Plan (NDP) of attempting to build safer communities by 2030. In ensuring that the aim of this paper was achieved, a qualitative research approach was used, which enabled the researchers to explore the attitudes, opinions, perceptions and views of the selected SAPS officials on the challenges that they experience in responding to residential burglary. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from ten (10) participants who were purposively selected. The challenges that the participants perceived included lack of community participation, resources, trust and community tolerance to crime as hindrances to responding to residential burglary. Collectively, these findings suggest that more effort is needed from the government, police, and community members to fight this crime.

Keywords: housebreaking/burglary at residential premises, South African Police Services.

1. Introduction

Burglary at residential premises/housebreaking is a serious problem in South Africa (SA) and would most likely remain a problem so long as a large number of its people are facing unemployment, poverty as well as relative deprivation (Van Zyl, Wilson, Pretorius, 2003; Motseki, 2016). Van Zyl (2002) states that burglary at residential premises is a property related crime that occurs the most out of all the crimes in South Africa. This is evident from the latest crime statistics released by Statistics South Africa (2020), which revealed that the number of households that experienced this crime in the last five years has increased from 2, 1 million in 2015/16 to 2, 3 million in 2019/20. With an estimated 1, 2 million incidences of housebreaking in 2019/20, and affecting 891 000 households in South Africa, this represented 5, 3% of all households in the country (Stats SA, 2020). Furthermore, over fifty (50) per cent of all crimes experi-

enced by households in South Africa in the last five years was burglary at residential premises (Africa Check, 2019).

The many residential burglaries in South Africa, is a cause for concern, moreover as few residential burglaries are resolved mainly through primary investigations. According to the South African Crime Statistics, just one out of every five reported incidences of residential burglary an arrest is made as well as just one in five individuals of residential burglary are convicted (Crime Statistics South Africa, 2017). These findings are in harmony with earlier research conducted by Oppler (1998:18), which revealed that property-related crimes in South Africa, excluding shoplifting, are hard to resolve, with about 80 and 90 percent of housebreaks going undetected, “of the cases that do eventually reach court, a large proportion is withdrawn during proceedings as a result of insufficient evidence”. Furthermore, similar outcomes were discovered in a study conducted by Coupe and Griffiths (1995) in the United Kingdom (UK) that few residential burglary cases were solved by primary investigations, and little of the stolen property was recovered. They found that in more than 66 percent of the incidents, there was not enough evidence available to justify an investigation.

Based on the above information, it is clear that the South African Polices Services experiences challenges when responding to residential burglaries. A study conducted by Motseki (2016) in Vanderbijlpark, Gauteng Province found that one of the challenges experienced in the Vanderbijlpark area is the lack of cooperation between the SAPS and the communities. The author mentioned that there are Community Police Forums (CPF's) that are established in the community, however they are not effective. Furthermore, the author also indicated the lack of trust, relationship and partnership between the SAPS and the community as challenges in responding to residential burglaries (Motseki, 2016). Moreover, in a study conducted by Van Zyl et.al. (2003) the authors indicated that the SAPS find it difficult to satisfy the needs and expectations of communities to be protected against burglars and armed robbers since the SAPS have limited personnel and resources to their disposal to successfully and effectively respond to burglary at residential premises.

The present study

This paper explores the challenges experienced by the SAPS in responding to burglary at residential premises in the Newlands East Policing Precinct, Durban. The motivation behind the demarcated crime was safety within the selected community, given that every individual wants to feel safe in their homes. However, this is not the case in Newlands East Policing Precinct because burglary at residential premises has consistently been one of the highest reported property-related crimes in the area according to the SAPS crime statistics since 2015 (refer to table 1).

Table 1.1: Comparison of burglary at residential premises with other property-related crimes in the Newland East Policing Precinct of Durban over a five-year period

Nature of Property related Crime	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019

Burglary at Residential premises	380	310	407	325	394
Burglary at Non-residential premises	38	48	42	37	52
Theft of motor vehicle and motorcycle	112	107	99	101	142
Theft out of or from motor vehicle	103	151	171	168	136

Source: Crime Statistics South Africa (2019)

The table above shows the statistics of property- related crimes in Newlands and it shows that for the past five years burglary at residential premises has remained relatively high. In connection to the provided five years projection of SAPS statistics; the objective of this study was to explore the SAPS challenges in responding to burglary at residential premises in their policing area. The study aimed to develop best practices to be employed by the local SAPS in reducing the level of victimisations.

II. Methodology

To fully understand the challenges the SAPS officials experience in responding effectively to residential burglary in their policing area, the researcher adopted a qualitative research design. Qualitative research involves “an in-depth investigation of knowledge” (Crix, 2004:119). The qualitative research design was suitable for this study because it made possible the elicitation of different perceptions of the SAPS officials regarding their challenges in responding to the crime of burglary as it facilitated a setting in which they could explain and describe their feelings and experiences. Accordingly, possible recommendations based on the insight which was gathered is provided by this study.

Study population

Qualitative research data collection methods are time-consuming and expensive. Therefore, data is usually collected from a smaller sample than would be the case in quantitative approaches; the benefit of qualitative research is that the information is richer and has a deeper insight into the phenomenon under study. The sample of this study consisted of ten (10) SAPS officials from the Newlands East police station (i.e. Social Crime Prevention Unit).

Sampling procedures

To select these participants, the researcher used the purposive sampling technique as it was envisaged that these participants would possess rich information on the study subject and their experiences would be of importance in this study. The members of this unit respond to crime in the area, residential burglary included. Denscombe (1998) explains that with purposive sampling, the researcher already knows something about the specific people selected to participate because they are seen as a unit of analysis that will produce the most valuable data and they are selected with a specific purpose in mind.

Data collection techniques

Since there are several different types of interviews, the purpose of this interview was used to find rich empirical data. Therefore, the researcher used semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Gray (2013:384) also emphasises that semi-structured face-to-face interviews are non-standardised and are used in qualitative analysis. De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delpont (2011:342) explain that researchers who use semi-structured interviews will gain a detailed picture of a participants' beliefs about, or perceptions or accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. This method gives the researcher and participant much more flexibility in asking and answering questions and it will allow the respondents according to Lichtman (2014:248) to tell their story in their own words.

III. Method of data analysis

To analyze the data which was provided by the SAPS officials, the researcher used thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data as it organizes and describes data in detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006:18). The thematic analysis helped in sourcing out helpful data from all the aggregate data gathered and recognizing patterns of importance over the information that responded to the research questions and objectives of this study. The researcher read the data multiple times, especially the unanalyzed ones, to become acquainted with its content. By doing such, the researcher distinguished vital components and topics of the information that were applicable to answer the problem, questions and objectives of this study. The researcher then divided the information into themes and looked for common denominators and differences within and across the material and these common denominators and differences formed themes.

IV. Findings and discussion

Lack of Community Participation in the fight against crime

To be effective in policing in the community there must be a relationship between the police officials and community members, particularly in communication and co-operation. When asked about their challenges in responding to burglary at residential premises, the participants highlighted that there is no cooperation between the SAPS and the communities. As a result, the crime of burglary continues to be a problem in the Newlands East Policing Precinct. Their comments emphasised the fact that there is no single entity that can effectively deal with burglary at residential premises. However, it is a responsibility of every individual within the community and without co-operation they are fighting a losing battle. Some participants' responses are recorded verbatim to underscore this finding:

"It becomes very different for us to effectively respond to burglary at any given time without the assistance of the community. An effective way in responding to burglary at residential premises is through community policing and neighbourhood watches but most people in Newlands do not participate in community policing".

"The community is mostly reluctant to assist us in terms of community policing. In fact, I

think all police stations have the same problem, you are just chasing after crime without the assistance of the community. Without the community unfortunately I'd say we're fighting a losing battle when it comes to responding to crime".

"One of our challenges is communication, people are reluctant to give us information or become registered informers. You see we have a CPF- Community Policing Forum and neighbourhood watches and we have meetings but it is only when crime affects them then they want to come, complain and assist in responding to burglary at residential premises".

"One of the challenges is establishing a relationship between the SAPS and the community, we haven't covered the whole community since people do not all respond at the same time. We just need to work hard to get all of them to co-operate with us as our work as the police will only have a better influence on crime statistics with their assistance".

It is evident from the analysis that not all community members are engaged in addressing this crime and the structures in the SAPS that are established to address the burglary crime together with the community are not effectively implemented with success in the community. A central and well-articulated gap relates to co-operation with the community in responding and preventing burglary at residential premises. This gap relates to the community members not taking an active part in the community forums established in the community to communicate, co-operate and address this crime together.

The general conclusion that can be drawn from these responses is that the police officials are clear that if all the community members would co-operate in terms of community policing, house burglaries could be prevented. This general conclusion regarding CPFs structures such as neighbourhood watches being effective is in harmony with one of the preventative measures mentioned by (Kesteren, John van, Mayhew, and Nieuwbeerta, 2000; Zinn, 2010) for residential burglary prevention. In general, that neighbourhood watch can prevent burglary at residential premises for example, if people are away for extended hours or on vacation, the community may know and be able to keep a watch on the house. Furthermore, the community members can patrol to see if no suspicious activities are happening. As this program normally goes together with the presence of prominently placed signs indicating the active existence of a Neighbourhood Watch program or CPF in the community, as a result this can deter burglary by increasing an offender's perceptions of the associated risk and aid in the detection and apprehension of suspicious persons.

Shortage of manpower and resources

The SAPS officials also felt that one of the biggest challenges that hinders them from effective burglary prevention is the station's shortage of manpower and vehicles. Without sufficient resources and workforce, the local SAPS felt that they cannot properly carry out their duties effectively. Below is an excerpt that exemplifies their responses:

"Our biggest challenge is manpower, we cannot cover the whole area on our own and the community is mostly reluctant to assist us in terms of community policing. Given the manpower however, I think we would be able to respond effectively to residential burglary because we will be able to allocate more vans for patrols and increase police visibility".

"There's is a shortage of members in the police station. Take one road in the area, let's say

Earlsfield Drive, the number of people that live in that road, I would say are two times more than the police man we have in the station and that's just one road. The only problem is that we cannot be everywhere at the same time in Newlands but given the manpower we would". "The biggest challenge is that there are insufficient resources, such as vehicles and manpower, to conduct patrols on the street."

The necessity for sufficient human resources in the South African Police Services is non-negotiable. For the SAPS to function properly and carry out their duties effectively in terms of delivering services to the community the SAPS require sufficient human resources, particularly at the police station level. Resource constraints and increasing demand for service delivery would make it nearly impossible for the SAPS to function properly. Therefore, based on the above responses it is evident there is an urgent intervention needed from the National Government to allocate more vehicles and employ more members in the station as the shortage of these affects crime levels negatively in the community. These findings are in line with Van Zyl et.al. (2003) findings that the SAPS have a huge responsibility of serving communities, however they have limited resources in terms of vehicles and personnel to successfully and effectively respond to burglary at residential premises.

Community's tolerance to crime

Another theme that emerged from the analysis is the high tolerance for criminality in the community. The analysis revealed that there is an element of criminal protection by some community members. This challenge also indicates a lack of trust that the community members have for the police officials, which is an issue of concern because in order to be effective in policing, the police officials cannot be isolated from the community they are serving. Below are responses that highlight this theme:

"Well, one of the challenges that we are experiencing is that sometimes community members do not want to work with us the police. So, it happens that if they have information, they do not want to share the information with us, especially if that housebreaker is a member of the family, or else a friend they tend to protect they own and do not want to give out information".

"People just do not want to work with the police especially if they are not affected by the crime. They do not want to be witnesses of it even if they have seen something. When people do not want to be witnesses, criminality will continue".

"You find that in certain areas the community members fear certain criminals and so they do not come out and talk to the police because they have this perception that we go back and tell the criminals who gave us the information, which is not true, we do not work like that".

The mentioned challenge points to a great tolerance of crime in the community. It is worth noting that the response of family members, friends as well as acquaintances in the community being aware of criminals who engage in criminal activities in the community is in harmony with the findings of Zinn's (2010) study, which indicated that community members are usually aware of criminals who engage in criminal activities in the community in order to make a living.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, it is evident that challenges exist that hinder the local SAPS in responding to burglary at residential premises in their area of policing. The challenges included the community members not wanting to work with the police especially in terms of community policing and giving information. This revealed that there is an element of criminal protection by some community members. This challenge also highlighted a lack of trust that the community members have for the police officials which is an issue for concern because in order to be effective in policing, the police officials cannot be isolated from the community they are serving.

Recommendations

The findings from this study may be used as a guide by the community members to identify and understand the importance of a joint effort between the community and the police to fight burglary at residential premises. In addition, the police to recognise issues that affect the co-operation of the community. In this section, the recommendations are made and summarised below,

- **Government intervention:** It is recommended that the government should assist the station by allocating more vehicles to help increase police visibility in the area as well as employ more officials in the station for more manpower. Given that the SAPS are responsible for preventing, combating, and investigating crime and protecting and securing South Africans and their property as stipulated in the Constitution section 205(3), they need enough manpower and resources to perform their core duties effectively.

- **Trust building:** Trust amongst the SAPS officials and the community must be established. It is envisaged that this will enable the officials to get important information from the community which may lead to a joint effort in fighting burglary at residential premises. This may be established by organising activities such as sporting events, since these help bring individuals closer together and give the youth something to do and, as a result, discourage them from participating in illegal activities.

Cooperation will bring us together: Community members are urged to take responsibility for their own safety, as no single entity can effectively deal with burglary at residential premises. Residential burglary is one crime that requires active community participation as critical element of a safe and secure society. Therefore, the community should be taught that fighting crime is the responsibility of every individual within the community. It is recommended that community members be part of the CPFs or Neighbourhood Watches, which are established in the community and take an active part in establishing them in areas which have not been established. By taking an active part in the mentioned organisations, community members can be mindful of their roles and responsibilities, as well as the challenges that the SAPS encounter in trying to respond to residential burglary. It is imperative that every person views themselves as role players in the fight against crime and a joint effort to policing is the only avenue for taking responsibility towards building a safer community. Furthermore, it is recommended that SAPS management and the CPF executive

management should encourage their members to attend all the meetings organised to address crime in the communities. Active participation in these meetings ensures the effectiveness of partnerships in policing.

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