

# Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

Volume One - Number Six - August 2001

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## Youth and their experiences of crime

There is an urgent need for safer environments to be created for young people and for youth to be exposed to interventions that allow them to develop new, proactive skills to cope with the harsh realities of their environment, according to **Bashi Devnarain** of the Independent Projects Trust.

A student who witnessed her peers shoplifting is filled with fear. When she was told to 'keep her mouth shut', she asked what was in it for her. In response the shoplifters calmly showed her a bullet, warning her to remain silent.

A participant in a research project concerned with young peoples' experiences of crime gave the account of this incident. The project, entitled 'Crimes I have seen', was commissioned by the Crime Reduction in Schools Project (Crisp), which was formerly based at the University of Natal and has since been incorporated into the Independent Projects Trust.

The project aimed to obtain a clearer understanding of young peoples' experiences of crime and to inform interventions that address their needs. Learners between the ages of 10 and 19 years from a range of urban schools were invited to compose and submit accounts of the crimes that they had witnessed. Few of the learners, however, can be regarded simply as witnesses of crime. A great majority of learners were either directly or indirectly involved as victims, survivors, and/or perpetrators of criminal activities.

The preliminary report carries an analysis of 100 submissions, which were selected randomly. A final report will become available once the other 300 submissions have been worked through. The children who wrote the first 100 submissions were from 15 different communities in the Durban area, including Umlazi, Sea View, KwaMashu, Newlands East, Westville, Hillary, KwaNdengezi, Phoenix, Umbilo, Inanda, the Bluff and Yellowwood Park.

Some express contention about their place of residence stating that it is ridden by crime, violence and swearing and that it is, in the words of one participant, "not conducive for us to grow up in".

Of the 100 people making submissions, 97 indicated with whom they reside. Of these only 43 were living with both parents. Most others lived with guardians, aunts or uncles, friends, single parents and grandparents. In some accounts young people are blatant about their unhappiness with their living arrangements, especially where parents are absent and youth have to assume adult roles.

There is a growing awareness among young children about crime as a 'social ill' and many feel

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that people must band together to fight crime. Comments made in the submissions include:

- Crime affects me in lots of ways, my father was hijacked, it was very scary
- I think crime is the root of all evil
- Crime is like a disease (disease) we are trying to fight
- The fear and terror we live in will never end
- Crime is nasty
- Hope no one robs my work when I'm big
- Poor commit crimes because of economic necessity
- Old grannies are getting raped, we will never be free

A number of children indicated that they had witnessed crimes covering a wide spectrum. Five children had observed gang activity. It is apparent that children from households where adults are unemployed may become involved in gangs. Such children are easy targets for gangs wanting to boost membership. Youth at school are also pressured to distribute drugs, such as mandrax, at schools where there seems to be a ready market for such drugs.

Eight young people providing submissions said that they had witnessed domestic violence. One child lived within an abusive household situation, while another thought that it was right for her parents to be divorced since all that they did when together was fight. One youth provided an account of a son stabbing his mother on Christmas Day.

The children and their families would benefit greatly from the dissemination at school level of information relating to domestic violence legislation. This could help to curb the disintegration of families and communities.

Parents were the perpetrators in two instances of excessive corporal punishment. This points to the fact that creative alternatives to discipline are also necessary at parent level.

The children reported nine accounts of car or vehicle hijacking, including three in which mention was made that a gun was used in the execution of the crime. Six of the seven cases of rape reported involved women and three cases were concerned with gang rape. A family member of the survivors was the perpetrator in two cases, while one case involved a brother's friend who is known to be HIV positive.

Extreme violence and aggression accompanied the 10 acts of murder that were included in the submissions made by the children. The use of guns was mentioned in six cases. The incidents included the following:

- grandparents shot dead;
- grandmother of a friend shot two days before Christmas;
- two taxi drivers shot dead in separate incidents;
- a man shot on the street;
- a father killed by 'gunrunning men';
- a man pelted by rocks;
- a brother stabbed to death;
- an old woman accosted and hit to death with an iron pole; and
- the murder of a child's father - "they slaughtered him like a cow".

Thirty-three children reported witnessing robberies where victims included a blind man and

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essential service workers. In one account, service providers working in a township were held at gunpoint and robbed of their belongings. One was shot dead and the other severely injured. The child wrote: "...they were left lying on the street while neighbours shut their doors for they were too scared of getting involved".

One of nine children who had witnessed accidents wrote: "I have seen some of the most terrible things in the world." In one incident a school child was knocked over by a bus in which the writer was a passenger. She suspected that the bus driver was drunk. Passengers were asked to remove their belongings after the accident and the driver fled in the vehicle. A member of the public reported the case to the police.

Most of the accidents reported were attributed to drunken driving, speeding and disobeying traffic rules. The most frequent victims were children.

### Youth and firearms

In another study, **Colin Collett-van Rooyen** and **Nompilo Xaba**, also of the Independent Projects Trust, surveyed 530 people aged between 12 and 25 living mainly in the Umlazi area, south of Durban. The respondents, 68% of who were between 15 and 18 years old, were all attending school. The study was conceptualised and conducted in an effort to begin to understand young people's attitudes towards, and exposure to, firearms.

The following information was obtained:

- 10% claimed to have used a firearm
- 4.8% admitted to owning a firearm
- 37.2% planned to own a firearm in future
- 68.6% said no firearms were kept in their households
- 18.1% said at least one firearm was kept at home
- 30.7% said that a family member had sustained firearm-related injuries
- 25.9% felt that all women should carry firearms
- 19.3% felt that all men should carry firearms

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- 32.6% indicated that firearms made them feel afraid
- 53.4% said that South Africa should not be a 'gun free' society

It is clear that young people are experiencing firearms as part of their daily lives. Their experience of weapons goes beyond the passive, to active use, despite the fact that the use would have been illegal for people of their age. Young citizens must become the focus of firearm education. This education must focus on sharing with young people the dangers of firearm use, the legislation around firearm acquisition and use, and guidance in decision making about firearms. Attention should also be paid to the potential emotional trauma experienced by young people, when many of their family members have been injured in firearm-related incidents.

### Feelings associated with the witnessing of crime

In addition to participants expressing a fear of being implicated or being seen as a witness to a crime, children reported that there was a fear among families of losing children and belongings to criminals in their communities. One participant wrote: "Children grow up in the world of fear and grow with amiss memories."

Other children reported feeling doubt in connection with the incidents of crime that they had witnessed. A 10-year-old child said that he does not live with his mother because she died when he was young. However, he is obviously unsettled by the explanation adding "that is what my father tells me".

A frequently reported feeling in connection with crime is confusion. They are confused because the world is not a safe and secure environment. Their understanding that playing in a park is safe is often violated by the harsh realities of violence and crime. They are suddenly aware that their context is not safe. They are also confused about why innocent families become victims of criminals. One child spoke of men who demanded to take away her older sister, but they did not get her.

Children expressed disappointment on a number of issues such as having to relocate due to crime. This involves unhappiness and disruption within the family and school environment and a required readjustment to new surroundings.

Other disappointments expressed included the lack of freedom of speech, in that women did not seem to have the right to say 'no' and that children were being sold as sex objects. One child wrote: "I have seen parents selling their children for money. Do you think selling your child will give you the world?" The account was filled with undertones of resentment towards parents and other adults who abuse the rights of children.

Police procedures and conduct were also questioned by the youth. The image of the police has been tainted by what these young eyes have witnessed. The ability of the police to maintain law and order in the country was under serious question by the participants. A child reported that at

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one gruesome crime scene "nobody called the cops fearing disappointment". They reported that the police failed to deliver, did not respond, responded late, were drunk on duty, did not give feedback about investigations, were condescending towards the public and made excuses such as having no vehicles or saying that there is nothing that they could do.

The children reported seeing police members smoking dagga (cannabis) with gang members. They felt that nobody would investigate police brutality and that the police were above the law. One participant said: "It tears my heart to pieces to know that people in the townships will always be victims of police." Another said: "They don't break the law, (they) only twist it."

The students asked questions about what the police were doing to improve their communities and whether it is wise to have police if they are not doing their job properly. They also asked what the government was paying the police for.

This lack of confidence in the police often surfaces in the underreporting of crime, the degree of which must not be underestimated. Children are explicit in their submissions with regard to the need not to divulge personal information. Many children indicated a preference for death rather than being called to testify as a witness. One student said: "I've made a decision of rather dying softly than physically get beaten to open my mouth."

There is sufficient data to indicate that an array of intense feelings is evoked in children who have in some way experienced crime. Children are often left to their own devices to manage and deal with these feelings, personal conflicts and dilemmas. There are already numerous challenges and difficulties associated with being a young adult and additional unresolved, intense issues may impact further on their ability to cope.

In the submissions analysed there has been no mention of any form of counselling. Within the education system a formally trained guidance counsellor is a luxury at many schools leaving children with little or no supportive structures to turn to. Given the nature of their experiences and the fact that less than half of the respondents lived with both parents, the need for some form of support is perhaps even more pertinent.

### **Analysis, comment and recommendations**

The analysis of these submissions begs a few questions: In what way are school authorities and children critically evaluating their development or non-development? In what way are we modifying our approach to deal with the complexities that face the youth? How interconnected are all the organisations that deal with youth issues?

One cannot emphasise the need for the collaboration of school personnel, parents, members of the community and governmental and non-governmental organisations. For complex reasons, the involvement of parents in school is minimal. At a national level one would like to see a formal participation plan for parents, guardians and caregivers entrenched in the Schools Act to create links and build relationships between home, community and school life.

Context-based parent meetings might be a way of building the links, since it is less intimidating for people to relate to others within their own contexts. In dealing with this issue generally, cognisance must be taken of the varied living conditions, life spaces and community contexts of children.

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Special effort must be made to educate youth about the impact and effect of becoming involved in criminal activities. Concomitant efforts must be made to steer our young people towards more constructive ways of engaging themselves in society. Special attention could be given to disrepute and criminal records; court appearances, warnings and their implications; and information about the legal system to correct misconceptions and inaccuracies in understanding.

One participant had a first-hand experience of court procedures because he had been charged with shoplifting. His comprehension of the process is fraught with inaccuracies that could impact on whether he continues to be involved in criminal activities. He said that his "free lawyer" proved that he was underage and that he was not supposed to be imprisoned. Little attention is paid to the fact that he may indeed have been guilty of a crime. It is important to determine whether the youth that make appearances in court are briefed about legal procedures and debriefed after sentencing to ensure that they fully understand their actions and the decisions taken by the court. The implications may include limited opportunities for future employment and the manner in which the community views the individual.

### **Conclusion**

This study suggests that there is an increasing awareness of the self-centred principles that underlie most criminal behaviour. Submissions made by youth about their experiences of crime are indicative of the extensive and intensive nature of the cruelty inflicted by humans on other humans and animals with no sign of abatement of violence, selfishness and self-centredness. The study has reinforced the belief that the integration of principles of altruism, which involve deeds done out of genuine concern for others, rather than for oneself, must reverberate through curricula and society at large.

*The Independent Projects Trust is a Durban-based non-governmental organisation. The information contained in this article first appeared in 'insight@ipt'.*

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