

Unisa criminologist Rudolf Zinn's assessment of crime in South Africa

No one is safe. Not even in your home, let alone on the street or in a shopping centre. No matter how much money is spent on securing homes, malls and neighbourhoods, criminals will continue to kill and maim - unless you take responsibility for your own safety.

This was the message from the country's top criminologists as another three Pretoria families were ripped apart last weekend by violent criminals hellbent on wreaking destruction.

With hijackers and house robbers committing an average of 105 offences before they are caught for the first time, criminals, according to Unisa criminologist Rudolf Zinn, are becoming more and more daring and violent.

"The police's poor record at crime prevention added to a conviction rate of between 7 and 11 percent for serious and violent offenders, and a general lack of vigilance among South Africans is what drives the country's crime rate.

"This can be seen by the sheer number of crimes occurring every year which are constantly on the increase, despite the increasing number of people joining the police service," Zinn said.

Nearly 2.1-million serious crimes were reported to police in South Africa in the 2008/2009 financial year.

Of these, 18 148 were murder cases and 18 438 house robberies. Business robberies increased by 41.1 percent to 13 920, while house robberies increased by 27 percent. Hijackings increased by 5 percent to 14 915.

In Pretoria 582 residents were murdered, 1 205 motorists hijacked, 953 businesses robbed and 1 719 families attacked in their homes.

"The South African Law Commission last year revealed that the conviction rate for serious and violent crimes was between 7 percent and 11 percent, which means that these criminals are repeatedly getting away with their actions," Zinn said.

"International studies show that the longer criminals get away with committing crimes the more violent they become, which is exactly what we are seeing in South Africa, with the average hijacker and house robber committing more than 100 offences before they are caught," he said.

Zinn said this was exactly where the country's policing problem lay.

"Because police are not able to collect enough evidence properly to trace the offender and to get court convictions, offenders repeatedly get away with their crimes," he said.

In order for people to be safer they had to undergo an adjustment in attitude. "People need to know that they are never 100 percent safe. Once they know this, they can start taking steps to

make themselves safer, and this is where vigilance becomes important.

"In interviews I conducted with convicted hijackers they said they often aborted their attacks the moment people noticed them, while house robbers said they specifically targeted security estates because they knew residents were lax about their security, leaving their doors and windows open.

"They know that these residents will not be suspicious of them walking around the estates because they assume that they had been cleared by the estate's security guards, when in fact they had not," Zinn said.

"You can't predict where the next attack is going to be, but you can do a lot not to become a victim by being vigilant," he said.

"People need to take their security seriously and listen to warnings issued by police, community policing forums and neighbourhood watches."

What we often see with attacks such as house robberies and hijackings is that people become lax around their routines." Zinn added.

"They don't change their routes or times they go to and from home and often they keep their same routines even after they have been attacked, making themselves a target all over again," he said.

Pretoria University criminologist Dr Christiaan Bezuidenhout said it was a myth to believe one was 100 percent secure.

"By putting up high fences and having armed response guards one is creating a false sense of security.

"The only way all South Africans are going to be secure is through vigilance. We have to stop our 'Harry-casual' attitude and belief that because we have street committees, community policing forums and a police service we are safe.

"Crime is occurring in South Africa because we have motivated offenders, suitable victims and a lack of visible policing.

"These three things, which allow crime to thrive, will not exist if we are vigilant and proactive," he said.

Bezuidenhout said the government's recent change in attitude towards crime had to be bought into by all South Africans.

"The police cannot operate without intelligence, which is why we need to be their eyes and ears. It is a 50-50 partnership with communities needing to play their part, especially as criminals are born and created in our communities.

"There are many people who are aware of criminals and their activities, but do not become involved in the fight against crime because they are afraid, which is ridiculous.

"Anonymous tip-offs help to save lives," he said.

Unisa criminologist Professor Anthony Minnaar said that no matter what security measures were in place, a determined criminal would get through them.

"While we can delay and detect criminals with security systems, the ultimate answer to security and personal safety is vigilance.

"People need to be aware of their environment and surroundings," he said.

"Attacks often occur because of human error. If you do not lock your doors and put your alarm on at night your security measures are useless and will fail to keep you safe," he said.

Minnaar said community safety had to be looked at "holistically".

"All neighbourhood watches fail if they do not co-operate with the police, yet the police have to play their part by responding to and investigating crime properly," he said.

Here's what to do to avoid becoming a victim

- Don't create a pattern. Patterns are very useful to criminals who keep your home under observation and plan the attack long before they carry out their assault.

Vary the time you come home, leave for work, your routes and the time you turn your security lights on and off

- Rather have a palisade fence than a wall as criminals do not like to be seen
- Have both large and small dogs. Small dogs are far more alert and wake up the larger dogs when intruders enter
- Keep bushes and shrubs cut back around your gates and walls
- As with hijackings be aware of vulnerable and weak spots around your home
- Lock your doors and windows at night and activate your alarm systems
- Report suspicious people to police and alert neighbours to suspicious movements and people outside homes and on the street
- Know your neighbours' telephone numbers and contact numbers for the police emergency centre and alarm company's control rooms

- Remove odd bits of rubbish from your property and neighbours' properties' they could be markers for criminals planning attacks
- Teach your dogs to accept food only from you
- If you have a burglary be extra alert and cautious. The break-ins are often criminals' way of testing your home's security system, you, your security company and the police's response times
- Have a security plan which everyone in the family knows. These should include a safe room to hide away in from assailants, emergency numbers, a cellphone hidden away in a safe place with emergency numbers and a medical kit
- Have copies of your gardener's and domestic worker's identity documents, residential addresses and contact details of their families
- Never resist

Their methods

- Observe houses - your movements are under observation often for days or weeks
- Note your movement and security patterns before striking
- Use various methods to get information from domestic workers and gardeners on your security systems, valuables and movements
- Operate in groups of two or more and are heavily armed, often with an assortment of weapons
- Strike, usually during the early hours of the morning or when you arrive or leave home, operate quickly and use various forms of violence to cause fear and intimidate victims into surrendering
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