

A Profile of the Murder Victim in South Africa as an Aid to Prevention

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Few things in life evoke such terror as murder. Research conducted by Brown on the counselling of victims of violence indicates that each murder produces about ten persons in need of counselling (Brown 1991, p. 184).

Reported crime in South Africa is increasing at an alarming rate with the murder rate alone increasing by 135 per cent over the past ten years (South African Institute for Race Relations 1993). The murder rate in South Africa is estimated at 98 per 100 000 of the population in 1992 which compares poorly with the American figure of 10 per 100 000. In less than three-and-a-half years in South Africa 52 800 people have died violently with just under 9000 of them the victims of 'political unrest' (*Annual Report of the Commissioner of Police 1993*).

Very little research has been conducted in South Africa on the topic of murder. The extensive research that has been conducted on the death penalty by Naude and Ladikos in 1992 has as its population only murderers on death row, whereas the research by Ndabandaba (1987) is on violence in general and does not cover the topic of murder exclusively. It is therefore not always plausible to make direct inferences between the research carried out in South Africa due to the different accent that the various researchers placed on murder. At a conference in Soweto on 11 June 1992 with the theme 'violence and possible solutions for peace in Soweto' the need was expressed by the Regional Commissioner of Police in Soweto for research on the topic of murder (Snyman 1992). The research project that forms the basis of this paper is an attempt to throw light on the subject.

Definition of Murder

To define murder is not as easy as it may superficially seem. Murder is the general term for the killing of one human being by another. There are some instances where the killing of a human being is regarded as justifiable, for example through the implementation of the death penalty; excusable when no intent is present when a person kills someone by accident; and other instances where the killing of a human being is inexcusable, for example when an individual plans a murder and executes his plan (Nettler 1982, pp. 2-4).

Political violence is of special concern in South Africa when defining murder. Manganyi and Du Toit differentiate between political violence and other forms of violence, (and therefore implicitly murder due to its violent nature) 'by claims to a special moral or public legitimation for the injury and harm done to others, as well as by the representative character of the agents and targets of these acts of violence' (Manganyi & Du Toit 1990, p. 6). The police records reflect the difference between political violence and criminal violence. In the present political climate in South Africa 'political' murder is regarded as more serious by the media and the public in general than 'criminal' murder. This notion aggravates the plight of the indirect victims of 'criminal' murder.

For the purposes of this study murder will be defined as an unlawful and intentional act that caused the death of a fellow human being (De Wet & Swanepoel 1960, p. 23).

A Profile on the Murder Victim in Soweto

The main aim of the research conducted on murder in Soweto is to establish whether a profile can be drawn on the victim and perpetrator of murder, and the crime situation to identify pointers towards a prevention strategy. The investigation was designed around the requirements of a probability survey to obtain descriptive data.

Soweto is one of the largest cities in South Africa, comprising 98 square kilometres, with an estimated population of four and a half million people (Van den Heever 1994). The population is virtually homogeneous due to the fact that Soweto was established under the apartheid legislation as a township for black people. The majority of the inhabitants fall into the low income level. Due to the fact that South Africa is still a fragmented society in terms of residential areas as the Group Areas Act was abolished only in 1991, six of the eight police districts in Soweto were included in the research project, namely Jabulani, Moroko, Orlando, Meadowlands, Dobsonville and Diepkloof as mainly people from the so-called black population group reside there. In the other two police districts mainly Coloured and Indian residents live.

During 1991 a total of 1294, and in 1992, 1450 murders were reported to the police in Soweto (*Annual Report of the Commission of Police 1993*). In 1991 only in 51.78 per cent of these reported murders were the perpetrators arrested and in 1992 only in 48.15 per cent of the cases were the murderers apprehended.

Simple random sampling was used and every tenth file included in the sample was included. Two hundred and eighty one (281) files were studied

comprising of 277 files drawn in the sample and four of the files used in the pilot study. The sample of murder dockets for 1991 and 1992 which are closed were studied and a research schedule on each was completed. The frequency of each of the variables was drawn to enable the researcher to compile profiles on the victim, the offender, the crime situation, the time spatial distribution and the manner in which the arrested accused is disposed of.

In order to compile a profile on a crime, data on the incidence of crime in a specific area can be obtained from three sources, namely official statistics; studies based on information obtained from victims of crime; and studies based on information obtained from the perpetrator of the crime. Information for this study was gathered from official sources only, namely police dockets. Although the researcher realised that the validity of official sources are questionable due to factors like under reporting, it was nevertheless decided to use this source as murder has one of the highest report rates (Conklin 1989, p. 26) and none of the other two sources of research data would provide the bulk of information in the limited time available.

Apart from the advantages of official sources to this study, there were mainly two major drawbacks that hampered the data collection. A number of murder dockets were incomplete and the researcher had to read in some instances through all the statements to find essential facts. Furthermore, an official distinction is made between so-called 'political murders' and 'criminal murders' with the dockets included in this research project covering only the last category of murders.

Profile of the Murder Victim

A victim is anyone who experiences injury, loss or hardship due to a cause out of his or her control. A murder victim is the individual whose life was taken in an unlawful and intentional manner (Karmen 1992, p. 4). Although this study deals only with the direct victim of murder, it is important to remember that approximately ten people are directly and severely traumatised by a single murder. Brown states that 'death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live' (Brown 1992, p. 184).

The majority of the victims, 86 per cent, were male. Sixty-nine per cent of the victims were between the ages of 21 and 40 with 70 per cent of them being of single marital status. Over a quarter of the victims, namely 27 per cent were unemployed with the rest occupying various professions.

Most studies on homicide describe the murder victim as young males with a peak in age distribution between 25 and 34 (Allen 1980, p. 35). The majority of the victims in the study by Naude and Ladikos were black males but, contrary to the Soweto study, most of them were married and employed. Very little attention is paid in the literature to the employment status of the victim of murder. Hawkins cites in his study on homicide amongst black Americans the high rate of unemployment amongst the blacks in America as the leading cause of their higher than average involvement in crime both as victims and perpetrators (Hawkins 1986, p. 40). In South Africa during 1993 it is estimated that approximately half of the adult population is unemployed. In this study on

murder in Soweto the profession of the victim can have a precipitating role to play. The victims who are employed in the mining and manufacturing professions usually live in hostels where, due to poor living conditions and the political conflict between different hostels they are more exposed to potential conflict situations. The victims whose professions require them to commute between their homes and places of work by train expose themselves to a greater extent than people who need not commute or who can afford private transport.

Profile of the Perpetrator

Only in 2 per cent of the cases included in the Soweto study was the murder committed by a female. Six of the perpetrators were under the age of 18 with the biggest concentration, 74 per cent in the age group 21 to 40. Most of them were unmarried with a third unemployed. Forty per cent of the perpetrators had a criminal record; 20 per cent having a first offence, 19 per cent between two and five previous convictions and 1 per cent more than five convictions. Just under half of these previous convictions were for crimes against the person.

The literature on murder indicates that homicide is primarily committed by unmarried young men (Wolfgang & Weiner 1982, p. 22). This fact is supported by the findings of Naude and Ladikos as their profile of the convicted murderer on death row is also a black unmarried male between the ages of 22 and 31, but, in contrast with the Soweto data, 65 per cent of the group on whom the profile is based, was employed at the time the murder was committed (Naude & Ladikos 1992, pp. 34-41). Little reference could be found in the literature on the criminal record of the murderer, but it is generally presumed that, because an emotional outburst is a strong emotion associated with murder that a pattern of murderous behaviour is more the exception than the rule.

Profile on the Crime Situation

The profile of the crime situation will be discussed in terms of the relationship between the victim and offender prior to the murder; the motive for the murder; the role of alcohol; the weapon and methods used to commit the murder.

The relationship between the victim and offender

Murder is in essence the result of an intense conflict between at least two people that is resolved by violence and results in one of the parties being killed. The relationship structures of the victim is often the first point of start for the investigating officer when looking for the perpetrator. The specific relationship between the victim and offender can be categorised as: the victim and offender are both members of the same family; the victim and offender are acquainted; and the victim and offender are complete strangers to each other.

In 44 per cent of the cases of murder in Soweto the victim and murderer knew each other very well by being related or good friends.

Research on murder shows that the frequency of strangers is relatively low in homicide (Hawkins 1986, p. 60, Harries 1990, p. 117) but the possibility exists that a disproportionate number of instances where relationship was not known,

entails strangers. Curtis' findings that one-third of homicides occur between intimates compare unfavourably with the Soweto data (1974, p. 50). The relationship between the victim and the convicted murderer in the research by Naude and Ladikos indicates that in less than half of the cases, namely 46 per cent were strangers to each other with the relationship between the rest of them varying from lover to employer/employee (1992, p. 60). The study by Ndabandaba into violent crimes in black townships contradicts Curtis' findings and is more in line with the Soweto research results, in that in about half of the murders studied, there was a prior history of hostility and even overt aggression between the victim and murderer. In two-thirds of the cases the victim initiated the interchange with the offender stating his intent to harm the victim and then killing the victim (Ndabandaba 1987, p. 73).

It can therefore be deduced that although spouses and good friends are a main source of pleasure in one's life, they are equally a main source of frustration and hurt. Few others can anger one so much and there is more social transaction time between acquaintances for tension to develop.

The role of alcohol

Alcohol and crime, and then specifically interpersonal violence, has always been inextricably entwined, but the nature of the relationship between alcohol and crime is not a simplistic one. To assume that the relationship is causal is to oversimplify the issue as other factors associated with the murder will be negated. Alcohol is but one, albeit an important, link in the overall chain of causative factors (Walfish & Blount 1989, pp. 370-86).

Alcohol played a major role in the commission of murders in Soweto. In 48 per cent of the cases it was determined that alcohol was consumed by either both or one of the parties and in 39 per cent of the cases the role of alcohol is unknown. In only 12 per cent of the cases it was determined that alcohol played no role.

Mushanga found in the research he conducted on homicide in Uganda a high correlation between alcohol usage in either the victim or the perpetrator or both, and homicide (1974, pp. 124-30). Reports from medical examinations on murder victims in the USA revealed that in eight American cities the percentage of corpses testing positive for alcohol ranged between 38 per cent and 62 per cent. Alcohol is more consistently implicated than drug use in interpersonal violence with fatal outcomes (Karmen 1992, p. 79). This suggests that the more alcohol there is in the blood streams of individuals, the more these individuals are likely to engage in violence which can easily lead to murder.

Weapons and methods to commit murder

Mushanga found in his Uganda survey that people will use whatever weapon is available to inflict death and also people will use what is culturally defined as an offensive or defensive weapon and method when a situation arises which requires the use of violence beyond mere physical force (1972, p. 55).

Eighty-one per cent of the murders investigated in Soweto were committed with a weapon. A knife or other sharp object were used in 53 per cent and a gun in 26 per cent of the cases. The Okapi knife, a folding pocket knife with a very

long thin blade which can be bought at minimal cost at almost any local *spaza* shop featured in virtually every case in the Soweto research where a knife was used. The methods used to murder a person when a weapon was not used varied between strangling, stoning and burning. A method of killing which emerged in recent years is throwing a person off a moving train. This is one of the most feared methods of murder in Soweto.

In the United States firearms are used in about 60 per cent of murders, with knives and other edged weapons accounting for approximately 20 per cent of the cases. In the remaining 20 per cent of the cases methods like drowning, burning and poisoning were used (Macdonald 1986, pp. 38-56). A firearm, knife, panga and limpet mine were used as weapons in 67.3 per cent of the cases investigated by Naude and Ladikos with other methods like stoning and burning used in the remainder of the cases (1992, p. 67). About 47 per cent of the murder cases investigated by Mushanga in Uganda were committed by domestic articles like the spear, sharpened stick and panga that are common in most local homes and used for domestic and agricultural purposes. In the majority of the cases various instruments like bottles, stones and iron bars were used or the victim was killed through poisoning, strangling or brute force (1972, pp. 54-72).

The research by Curtis that points out the fact that the proportion of firearm killings was higher in non-clearances than when other weapons or methods were used, can explain the fact that in Soweto on average only 50 per cent of the perpetrators of murder were arrested in 1991-92 (1974, p. 101). The greater impersonality and efficiency that firearms provide for the criminal enhances his chances not to be apprehended.

Summary of the Profiles

From the research conducted on murder in Soweto it appears that the majority of the victims were young unmarried males who were employed in a variety of professions. The perpetrators were also young unmarried males with two-thirds being employed in various professions. Forty per cent of them had a criminal record of which approximately half were for crimes against the person. In almost half of the murder cases the victim and perpetrator knew each other well by being friends or acquainted to each other. In the majority of the cases the violent act had its origin in interpersonal conflict between the victim and his murderer. Alcohol played a major precipitating role in the murders investigation. The majority of the murders were committed with a weapon of sorts with knives and guns featuring prominently. Most murders were committed over weekends and at night either in public places or inside the home of either the victim or the perpetrator. Less than half of the perpetrators were arrested and of these only 63 per cent were found guilty and sentenced.

As the profile on murder in Soweto indicates, a young, unmarried and employed male is at risk to be attacked and murdered by another young, unmarried male who he is friends with or related to. If interpersonal conflict develops between them, usually over a weekend and at night when they socialise in either of their homes or a public place and consume alcohol, he is at risk of being mortally wounded with either a knife or a gun.

Prevention of Murder in Soweto

According to the profiles sketched the following prevention strategies are suggested:

On a micro level education is needed at many levels.

- The public must be made aware of their own character flaws like a short temper or emotional outbursts and gaps in knowledge that make them susceptible to the perpetrator. An aggressive attitude towards people and an inadequate handling of stress and frustration will lead to confrontation with other people. Better methods are needed to help the perpetrator handle his or her aggression. Both the potential victim and perpetrator must be educated on available community resources and how to use them. Violence must be viewed as an unacceptable way of resolving interpersonal conflicts and healthy conflict resolution strategies must be taught to children from an early age. Schools, clinics and church organisations can play an important educative role in this respect.
- The abuse of alcohol does not only lower inhibitions which can involve a person more easily in a confrontation than when the person was sober, but also lets the person associate with people and places where conflict can very easily arise. Public places and alcohol use together are major contributors to potentially dangerous and lethal situations. The availability of alcohol can never be restricted, but the public must be educated on responsible alcohol consumption. Liquor manufacturers and retailers should realise their social accountability by promoting responsible use of alcohol.
- Health care providers need to recognise murder as one of South Africa's major public health problems. The risk to become a victim of murder is as great as to become the victim of cancer or a heart attack. Comprehensive education over a wide field is needed to enable a variety of people like social workers, teachers, police officers and nurses to develop preventive techniques. Referrals for appropriate intervention, help and follow-up should be made.
- Parents need to understand the need to supervise their children better to identify flaws and gaps in their personalities and lifestyles before the child becomes involved in potential conflict situations.
- Schools need to revise their curricula to provide more relevant education for those students developing crime patterns. Better counselling is also needed. Crime prevention programmes should be introduced to schools at all levels for example children in nursery schools should be taught not to accept gifts from strangers and the older child must be made aware of the risk they take when hitch-hiking and the harm that can be inflicted when carrying or using a weapon like a knife or gun carelessly.

On a macro level the following needs to be done:

- The legitimacy of the criminal justice system must be established. This can be achieved by formulating laws and criminal court procedures that the public at large underwrites; establishing trust between the police and the public to enable them to function as partners against crime; and the imposition of sentences that are aligned with the needs of the public.
- The creation of employment opportunities, acceptable housing; sufficient recreational facilities and proper protection on public transport will decrease most of the trigger factors of homicide.
- The extension of already existing victim support schemes to handle the needs of all victims of crime and especially the indirect victims of murder.

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