

# MAKING THEIR MARK

## Perceptions and experience of policing in Meadowlands

Patrick Burton, ISS Research Associate  
Patric@iss.co.za

The Meadowlands police are faced with a disproportionate lack of resources and staff. In the meantime the people of Meadowlands experience high levels of crime that fuel a lack of faith in the police and perceptions of poor police performance. The police are seen as lazy, corrupt, and unwilling to venture into certain areas. The SAPS needs to determine whether these perceptions are justified, and whether there are simply insufficient resources at the station to meet the community's demands. Yet, despite the constraints facing the police, public interactions with the SAPS do in some instances result in improved perceptions of the local police. The community also sees the police as the first port of call in times of trouble.

The Soweto township of Meadowlands is not known for its high crime rate. Yet research indicates that residents of the area experience a prevalence of certain crimes that is not far behind places like Hillbrow and inner city Johannesburg, localities that are notorious for violent crimes (see previous article, *Crime in Meadowlands*).

In the face of these crimes, recent research by the Institute for Security Studies has shown that the Meadowlands police have to deal with the fact that the community they serve do not trust them and lack confidence in their ability to protect them. Despite this, the same research suggests that those people who do engage with the police are generally satisfied with their performance, and with the level of service that they deliver. The findings also suggest a number of strategies available to the police in developing a better relationship with the Meadowlands residents.

### **The Meadowlands community**

Meadowlands is a predominantly stable population.

The majority of residents own their houses, and have lived in the area for more than five years. Furthermore, the vast majority of the population are South Africans, with only a handful of non-South Africans identified in a local survey.<sup>1</sup> These characteristics hold their own implications for crime and policing in the area.

It has been argued that where people have a vested interest in their area, as indicated by home ownership, levels of crime are likely to be lower than in areas with a more transient population.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, people who own homes are likely to actively participate not only in maintaining their homes, but also in ensuring as far as possible that their environment remains pleasant and safe. Such people are often more likely to engage in partnerships between the community and the police, and to constructively engage with the police in crime prevention in their community.

Throughout South Africa a strong correlation has been drawn between foreigners and crime, most strongly evident in the Nigerian-drugs-sex work

relationships identified in areas such as Hillbrow. Common public perception, reflected in all forms of media, is that non-South Africans, particularly those entering South Africa across regional borders, are responsible for the increase in crime levels in the past decade. However, the two most recent victim and perception surveys conducted by the ISS (one of which was conducted in Meadowlands), question this assumption. Indeed, in one of the studies, Ted Leggett argues that foreign immigrants are themselves highly vulnerable to crime, and that the potential of coming into contact with the police is enough of a disincentive for illegal immigrants to enter into a life of crime.<sup>3</sup>

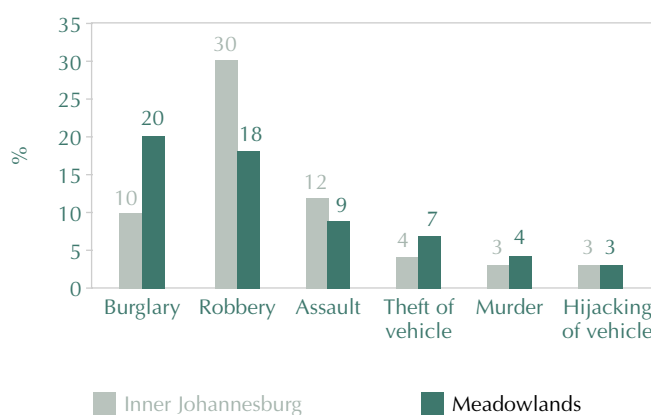
The residential built environment of Meadowlands varies. Most of the area is comprised of individual houses, generating an almost suburban feel. However, while the area under the police station jurisdiction is unusual for Soweto in that it includes no informal settlements, significantly, at least three hostels fall within the station's boundary.

While the dense population characteristic of informal settlements often gives rise to high crime rates, hostels present an equal challenge to police. Hostels are often as overpopulated, and not designed to house the numbers they do. They are also in many instances poorly maintained, sprawling and derelict. In the case of Dube hostel in Meadowlands, the buildings are poorly lit, and are surrounded by high grass. This makes it difficult for police to patrol, and even to respond to crimes reported in the area.

There are also a number of open spaces in Meadowlands, including public parks and open veld. The police have identified these as 'hotspots' – problematic areas where a disproportionate number of crimes occur. Yet, due to the lack of upkeep of these areas, they too are difficult to patrol, which impedes effective crime prevention.

While these hostels present a problem for the police in terms of crime prevention, they are by no means

Figure 1: Comparative levels of victimisation



Source: ISS victim surveys in Meadowlands, 2002 and inner Johannesburg, 2002

the main source or location of crime in Meadowlands.

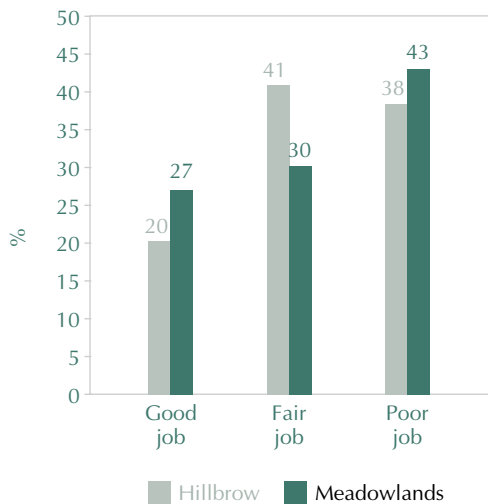
For whatever reasons, crime in Meadowlands is problematic for all concerned – the police and the community. The recent victim survey conducted in the area revealed that burglary is the crime most commonly experienced, followed by robbery and assault. These are serious crimes that in the latter two instances entail violence or the threat of violence (see *Crime in Meadowlands* in this issue). The levels experienced are not far behind those in inner Johannesburg, as Figure 1 above reflects.

The picture of Meadowlands painted thus far is of a relatively homogenous (in terms of nationality) community. Most people have been living in the area for some time, and therefore have, one may assume, a vested interest in maintaining a respectable environment. Yet, despite the absence of typical demographic characteristics (for instance impermanence and a high non-South African population), levels of violent crime in Meadowlands are high.

#### Perceptions of the Meadowlands police

The most recent victim survey conducted in Meadowlands explored the perceptions among both victims and non-victims of the police in their community. The immediate picture that emerges is

Figure 2: Perceptions of the police, Meadowlands (n=1,400) and inner Johannesburg (n=1,101)



Source: ISS victim surveys in Meadowlands, 2002 and inner Johannesburg, 2002

negative – perhaps unsurprising when considering the extent of crime. More than two out of five (43%) of the respondents surveyed thought that the police were doing a poor job, while almost another third (30%) thought the police were doing a fair job.

When compared to an area such as inner Johannesburg, where crime is only marginally more prevalent, the perceptions do not vary significantly. While a greater percentage of residents in Meadowlands thought the police were doing a good job, more Meadowlands residents also thought that they were doing a poor job, with the balance relatively uncommitted, reporting they did a fair job.

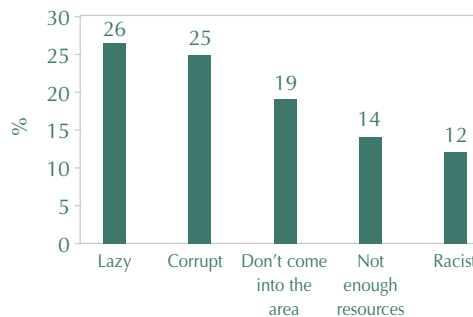
These perceptions may be influenced by factors other than personal experience, including the media and word of mouth. This is borne out by the fact that community members in Meadowlands who had in fact been victims of crime tended to think that the police were doing a good job, while a greater percentage of those who had not experienced crime thought the police were performing adequately or poorly. Furthermore, the perceptions of the public on police performance are also premised on a

common assumption of what the police ought to be doing. As Ted Leggett points out, there is a range of functions and expectations attached to police performance, as well as various indicators of what constitutes good performance.<sup>4</sup> A decrease in official recorded crime rates is not an adequate measure; yet it is the one most influential in shaping public opinion.

Practically, from the perspective of the police, merely knowing that the public does not have a high opinion of their performance is hardly helpful. It is only by unpacking the reasons for these perceptions that such information becomes useful to the police. And in examining the reasons, a number of questions need to be asked. Is it indeed the high rate of crime in Meadowlands that causes the public to think poorly of the police, or is it in fact other aspects of police performance?

In reality, the reasons for the negative public perceptions of the Meadowlands police may have less to do with crime levels and more with experiences of police behaviour. The latter is undoubtedly, in the eyes of the Meadowlands community, a reason for their dissatisfaction: the local police are seen by many as being lazy and corrupt. There is also the perception that they avoid entering certain areas that they should be policing. Nevertheless, the public do recognise the limitations under which the SAPS is working: more

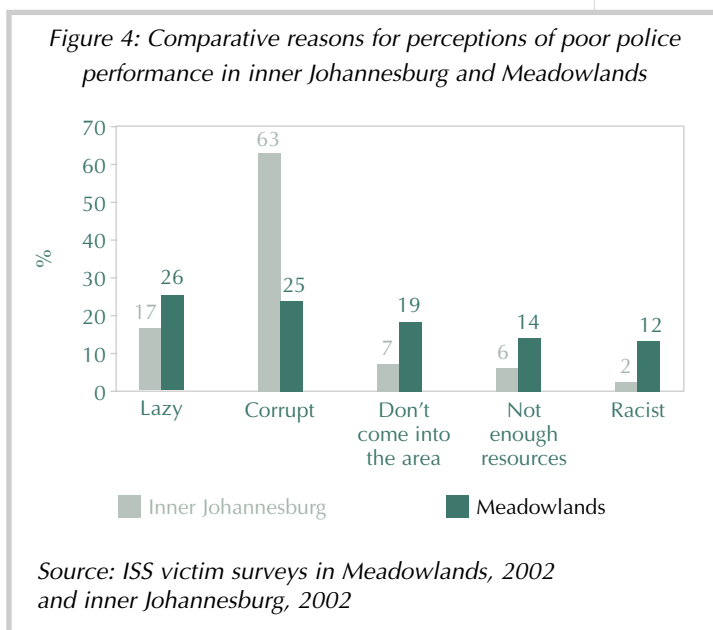
Figure 3: Reasons for perceptions of poor police performance in Meadowlands (multiple response, n=1,367)



Source: ISS victim surveys in Meadowlands, 2002

than one tenth of those who thought that the police are doing a bad job thought that the primary reason for this was a lack of resources (Figure 3).

Again, however, it is useful to measure this against perceptions of the police in other areas. In inner Johannesburg, for example, perceived corruption is a far greater concern than in Meadowlands, while laziness is less of a concern (Figure 4).



How seriously these perceptions need to be regarded, and the manner in which the police choose to address them, largely depends on how and where they come from. If the Meadowlands community view the police as lazy and corrupt because this is how the media portrays all police in South Africa, there is little that the Meadowlands police can do to counter these perceptions, other than embark on a campaign to aggressively advertise their successes. However, if the police are perceived as lazy because people have reported crimes, or sought assistance from the police, and have not received the necessary assistance, this is a more fundamental concern, one that needs to be dealt with at station level. Similarly, if members of the public have encountered police soliciting bribes, this requires an urgent response.

It would indeed appear that these perceptions are substantially informed by personal interactions with

the police, as the following points illustrate:

- almost three quarters of those interviewed had been to the police station;
- half of those who had been to the station reported that their visit actually improved their perceptions of the police;
- the majority of those who said they viewed the police as doing a bad job had in fact visited the police station on at least one occasion;
- those who had not visited the police station

were significantly more likely to say the police were doing a good job, or a fair job, than those who had visited the station.

These findings suggest that, while some interactions with the SAPS are positive, and improve people's opinions of the police, much of the dissatisfaction with the police stems from direct interaction with officials. Interestingly, this differs from findings of other studies, where interaction with the police tended to impact positively on perceptions of policing.<sup>5</sup>

Perceptions of laziness are easily substantiated. In the client service centre (CSC), how did the frontline police react

to complainants? Did they provide a prompt service? Were clients kept waiting while police chatted behind the counter? Were people told that the police could not help? Do the perceptions of laziness extend beyond the frontline staff to the detectives? Were there sufficient personnel to deal with the demands of the public in the CSC? Was there any follow-up on cases, or any feedback provided to complainants? Questions such as these are addressed in some service delivery studies undertaken at police stations, but were unfortunately not explored in the Meadowlands victim survey.

When trying to understand perceptions of police performance, the issue of personnel and resources, and whether these are sufficient, is important. It is common knowledge that in some areas the South African Police Service is understaffed. Indeed, this was one of the key observations made during a

time-use study conducted by the ISS at the Meadowlands police station in October 2002.<sup>6</sup> At the time, the Meadowlands station was staffed by 210 police officers, serving an estimated 373,966 people over an area of 25 km<sup>2</sup>. This gives a police to public ratio of 1:1,670 – four times the national average.<sup>7</sup> Under-staffing is further exacerbated by members who are declared medically unfit for duty, or who are booked off sick on any given day.

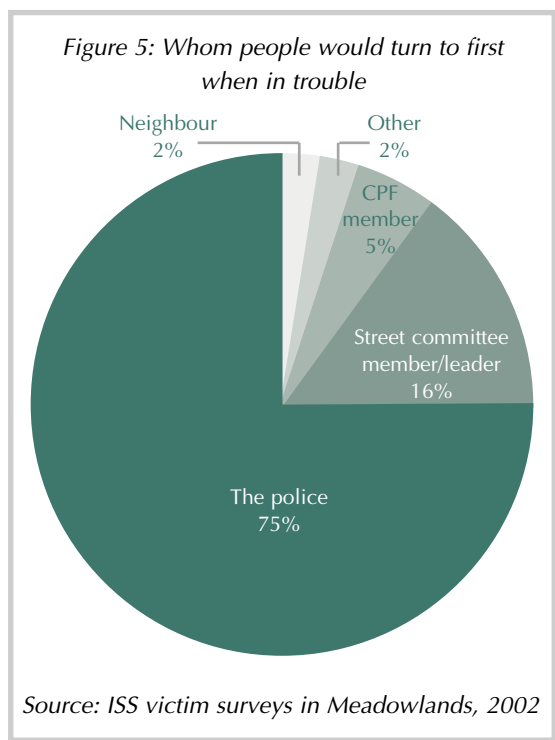
Perceptions of laziness, commonly reported in the survey, may also be closely related to the reported perception that police do not enter certain parts of Meadowlands. Although the police station is located in the middle of Meadowlands, it has been noted that in some locations the environment is as unsafe for police as for the public, and is almost impossible to police. Long grass, poor lighting and bad roads make areas around the hostels, for example, very difficult to patrol.<sup>8</sup> At night, the limited availability of flashlights make it even more difficult to patrol and to investigate incidents in these areas.

The police are also often tied up with non-policing matters, serving the needs of the community in ways that detract from the time available for crime prevention and law enforcement (see text box).<sup>9</sup> While this might elevate the police as problem-solvers, and build relations between the public and the police, if it detracts from their ability to perform their core functions, it will inevitably precipitate lawlessness and poor public perceptions of policing.

During the ISS time-use study in Meadowlands, the police attended to several matters unrelated to crime. In one incident police were requested to intervene in a family dispute when a mother had left her children in the care of their elderly grandmother who was a pensioner and unable to look after the youngsters. The mother had gone on a drinking spree and had allegedly verbally abused the caregiver and taken her pension money. Police were asked to locate her and to mediate to resolve the problem. This exercise took more than two hours and involved four police officers.

However, an interesting fact emerges when looking at the perception that the police (in Meadowlands) do a poor job because of corruption. Most of those citing corruption as a reason for poor performance had not interacted with the police, thus lending validity to the assumption that such opinions must be based on media and word-of-mouth reports, rather than on personal experience. This is perhaps unsurprising given the attention that corruption in the public sector as a whole is given in the media.

Despite these negative perceptions, the community still appears to have some level of trust in the police. When asked to whom they would turn in the case of trouble, three quarters of the public in Meadowlands said they would seek help from the police (Figure 5). This is significant in a community such as Meadowlands, which, given its relative stability and established population, might be expected to have well-developed family and neighbourhood networks. This presents an interesting dilemma for the SAPS: the police are seen as a reliable source of assistance and support, yet are believed to be generally weak when it comes to performing their core functions effectively.



This also confirms the role the police play in general community affairs, particularly with regard to dispute resolution. The fact that the police remain the first source of help for people in trouble suggests that they have filled an important niche within the community, especially given that various forms of community cohesion appear to be lacking in Meadowlands. However, of primary importance to the police is their ability to perform their core functions; support and facilitation roles are secondary.

Analysts have argued for a greater involvement of volunteers and community members in frontline clerical and support positions in the client service centres in police stations. It is perhaps these same people who should be fulfilling some of the support roles that the police currently perform in the community, thus freeing SAPS members to better perform their designated functions. Meadowlands police officials already engage constructively with many community organisations in the area, and in many regards have set a precedent for community involvement for other police stations to follow.

The tendency by the public to see the police as the first port of call for those in trouble also highlights the fact that, despite negative perceptions of police performance, there remains a foundation on which trust in the police's crime prevention and detection activities can be rebuilt. This will however be dependent on the availability of sufficient resources at station level.

### Conclusion

The Meadowlands police are faced with a crime scenario not that different from notorious areas such as Hillbrow and central Johannesburg: they are under-resourced, with a police-to-public ratio four times the national average. The Meadowlands police also serve a community who believe they are doing a poor or fair job, ascribed largely to laziness and corruption. Yet the opinions of those who have engaged with the Meadowlands police have in some cases improved, suggesting that the police are not performing as badly as general public perception would suggest. This is particularly the case given their limited resources and the environmental challenges that make their job even more difficult.

The survey suggests that the police perform an important function in providing support to the community, and are generally trusted by the community in times of trouble. These strengths can be used to consolidate relations with the public. Having said this, the police ultimately need to focus on providing effective services in line with their core functions. One means of achieving this is to engage community participation in the client service centre and other similar roles, leaving the police to patrol and focus on crime prevention and detection.

### Endnotes

- 1 P Burton and M Sekhonyane, *Crime and Policing in Meadowlands, Soweto*, ISS Monograph (forthcoming), Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2003.
- 2 This argument was proposed by the previous mayor of New York City, and was in part justification for the clean-up of the built environment within the city as one component of his crime reduction strategy.
- 3 See P Burton and M Sekhonyane op cit; and T Leggett, *Rainbow Tenement: Crime and policing in Inner Johannesburg*, ISS Monograph No 78, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, April 2003.
- 4 T Leggett, *What do the police do? Performance measurement and the SAPS*, ISS Paper No 66, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, February 2003.
- 5 E Pelsler, J Schnetler, and A Louw, *Not Everybody's Business*, ISS monograph No 71, ISS Pretoria, March 2001.
- 6 M Sekhonyane, *Productivity measurement in the SAPS: A Case Study in Meadowlands*, Unpublished ISS study, 2002.
- 7 M Sekhonyane op cit.
- 8 Ibid, pg 2
- 9 M Sekhonyane, op cit.