

4. VIOLENT CRIME AT PETROL STATIONS – THE ISSUES



1. Introduction

Almost every day, an act of criminal violence takes place at a petrol station somewhere in South Africa. In the worst incidents, several people are murdered. Invariably, those who work at the petrol stations are traumatised and fearful. This is particularly the case when a petrol station is subject to repeated attacks and armed robberies. One high-risk metropolitan petrol station surveyed in the RISE study reported it had experienced 50 armed robberies in the past five years.¹ Victims of the violence, whether they are managers or forecourt workers, are convinced they bear the brunt of it. They return to work fearful for their lives, resentful of their vulnerability and desperately worried for the well-being of their families and colleagues.

According to the RISE survey, two thirds of petrol attendants are fearful some of the time they are at work. Just over a third say they are afraid all of the time. This level of anxiety is a factor not only of the actual levels of violent crime, but also of the physical vulnerability of forecourt staff as a result of their working environment. Petrol stations are designed to allow easy and quick access often from major transport routes while cash is constantly on the premises.

Neither is it only actual physical violence with which forecourt staff have to contend. Drunken behaviour and verbal abuse are common phenomena. Attendants and managers never know whether these situations will develop into assaults, vandalism or worse. Among those stations which had not been robbed, managers and owners said they 'lived in fear' of an armed robbery occurring and actually expected it to happen at some point.

According to the RISE survey: 'These participants responded to questions about whether or not their station had been robbed with pessimistic and defeatist comments such as "not yet" or "touch wood". Owners and managers reported that the constant threat of armed robberies was one of the most stressful aspects of their jobs. This was compounded by their fears that their own lives as well as those of their employees were at risk' (RISE, 2002).

In spite of companies' best intentions and the odd exception, there is little training actually being conducted and thousands of forecourt workers and managers are being left to deal with serious crime and its consequences as best they can. It is inevitable that the helplessness and victimisation suffered during incidents of violent crime and associated events have their spin-offs on the families and communities of those most directly affected. About 90% of the petrol attendants surveyed have at least two dependants with half having four or more.

The statistics, as displayed and analysed below, indicate that the problem of criminal violence is extremely bad in South Africa, though it shows signs of stabilising. With new entrants about to join the retail fuel sector in the wake of deregulation, with violent crime prevalent and with joblessness and poverty deepening by the day, it has become crucial for the sector to come up with innovative measures to combat the targeting, death and victimisation of the people who manage the business at the retail level.

2. Crime patterns in South Africa

It is common knowledge that South Africa suffers from one of the highest rates of violent crime anywhere in the world. Inherent to the problem is the lack of deterrent provided

¹ This was an Engen station in Khayelitsha (RISE, 2002: 44)

IN TERROR AND IN SILENCE

by an inefficient and ineffective criminal justice system, rising poverty levels and deepening joblessness. In addition, the police service is under-staffed, under-resourced and has struggled to contain crime levels.

Community anti-crime structures are operational in many areas but their development is uneven at best. Under the circumstances, the private security industry has thrived, but at a cost. Not every family, or every business, can afford the expense of private security. At times, even when private security is in place, this is still insufficient to deter the growing number of organised criminals and gangs who prowl for easy pickings, especially under-protected cash.

According to an analysis of the most recent crime statistics, violent crime continues to make up a substantial proportion of the total crime experienced in South Africa. In the period January-September 1994, violent crimes comprised 30.1% of all crimes recorded. During the January-September 2001 period, this had increased slightly to 32.5%. All other crime categories experienced a slight decline as a proportion of the overall number of recorded crimes (Schönteich, 2002).

The analysis noted that South Africa continues to suffer from an 'extraordinarily high' level of violent crime. While the rate of increase of this category of crime appears to have slowed, the period of this stabilisation remains too short to draw any firm conclusions about whether this trend will continue over a sustained period (Schönteich, 2002).

The crime analysis noted that in the January-September period between 1994 and 2001, the number of recorded violent crimes increased by 36%, more than any other crime category. Schönteich also observed that for the January-September period between 2000 and 2001, robbery with aggravating circumstances and common robbery experienced the greatest increase of 10% and 7% respectively (see figure 4.1).

It is worth noting that violence in the Western Cape, where the RISE report was conducted, has experienced a significant increase in the rate of robberies with aggravating circumstances. During January-September 1994, the Western Cape's rate of aggravated robberies was 24% lower than the national average. In 2000 the figure was roughly the same as the country as a whole. By 2001, the aggravated robbery rate in the Western Cape was 17% higher than in the country as a whole (Schönteich 2002).

While the analysis indicated that there was some good news in the latest statistics: recorded crime was increasing at its lowest rate in years. Schönteich warned, however, that 'while the country needs good news about crime, South Africans should not be fooled into believing that the country is about to enter an era of low crime levels. The first nine months of 2001 witnessed an average of 55 murders, 137 rapes, 558 robberies and 1 350 assaults a day – and that is before unrecorded crime is taken into account.'

Statistics of this kind, together with the trends they elucidate, are bound to find expression at the country's 4 900 petrol stations.

VIOLENT CRIME AT PETROL STATIONS – THE ISSUES

Figure 4.1: Percentage change in selected crimes recorded, January-September 2000 – 2001

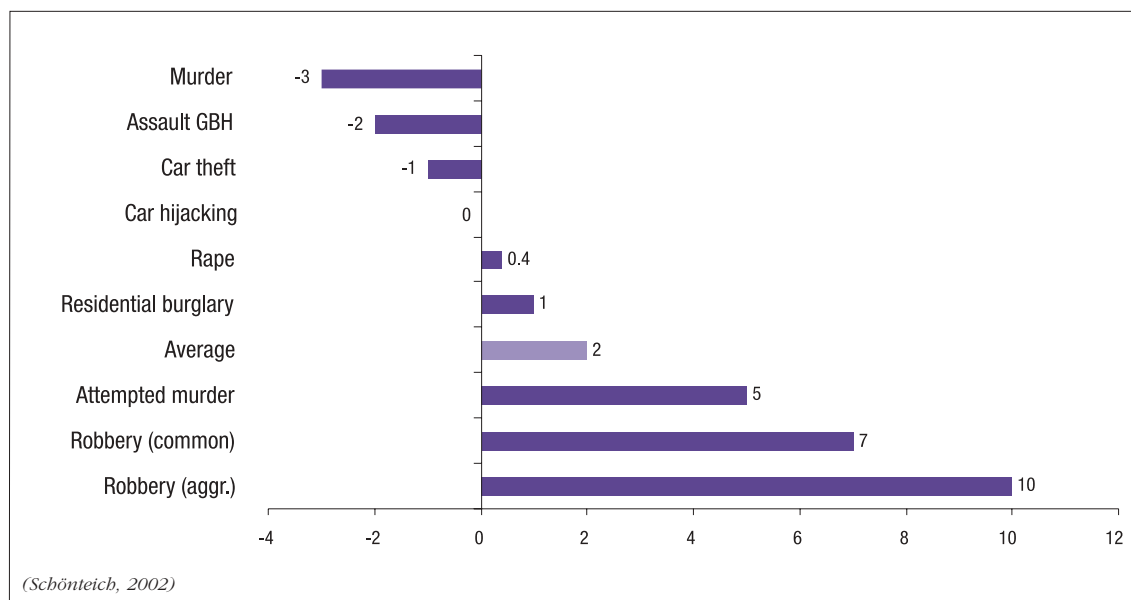


Table 4.1: Selected Crime Statistics 1997 – 2001 (SAPS)

Crime category	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Robbery with aggravating circumstances	2336	3361	3780	4819	6201
Other robbery	3422	4383	5171	6105	7145
Burglary and attempted burglary: business premises	7528	8895	8645	8361	8090
Shoplifting	4811	4871	5175	5280	5461
Theft of motor vehicles and motorcycles	4422	5497	5860	5678	6130
Theft out of or from motor vehicles	18446	23632	23297	22765	24988
Carjacking (accounted for under robbery with aggravating circumstances)	148	183	228	284	333
Hijacking of trucks (accounted for under robbery with aggravating circumstances)	18	34	47	83	92

(RISE 2002)

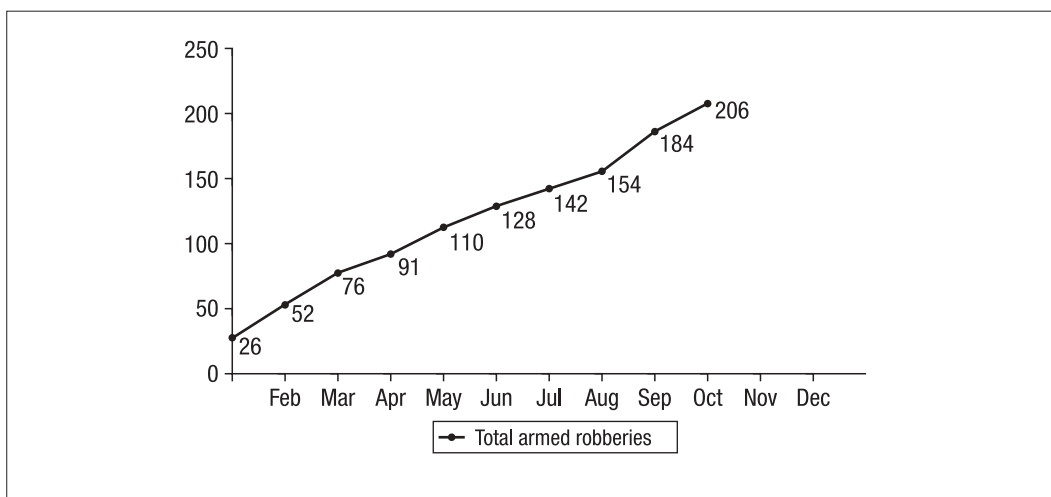
3. Crime patterns at petrol stations

In a report published in 2001, the Fuel Retailers' Association (FRA) issued the following warning: 'Security at fuel retail outlets has become a critical issue. Criminals are targeting service stations and the crime rate is exceptionally high. There is a serious need to protect customers and dealers and, in particular, tourists... It is vital that industry wide norms be adopted to make the industry safer and less hazardous and life threatening' (FRA/SAFDA, 2001).

The report and its urgings were an acknowledgement of a problem that has been growing in severity over the past few years. According to a report conducted on behalf of the industry by research group eMIRG, an average of 60% of some 426 sites surveyed in the 36 months prior to July 2002 had experienced violent crime.

The report stated that the day of highest risk is Monday with morning the worst followed by late evening. This is believed to be the case due to the build-up of weekend takings ahead of early week banking. It was also found that January (16%) was the worst month, followed by September. About 75% of the incidents reported were armed robberies. One oil company reported a 146% increase in robberies at its sites between January and end September 2001 compared to the previous year.

Figure 4.2: Armed robberies at service stations 2002 – three oil companies



(Oil Industry Retail Security Forum)

According to statistics from the eMIRG study, broad trends include:

- most attacks at petrol stations occur between midnight and 9am (54%)
- 6am to 9am is also particularly bad (24% of attacks)
- 12% of cases involve physical injuries to staff and/or civilians
- 7.6% of incidents involved loss of life
- in 18% of cases, shots were fired
- in 75% of the cases where shots were fired, they were shot by the attackers

VIOLENT CRIME AT PETROL STATIONS – THE ISSUES

'The cold reality is that the potential for loss of life is alarmingly high in attacks on petroleum sites,' the report said. 'As a rough indication, one in five armed robberies will involve shots being fired, and in nearly half of these cases, loss of life will be sustained' (FRA Total Incident Report survey, 2002).

Naturally, the oil companies are sensitive about the circulation of detailed information regarding crime statistics from their premises and affiliated sites as well as the plans for combating crime. Such information may alert the criminals to new areas of vulnerability and could also affect the businesses themselves, impacting on the livelihood of many people. It is certainly not the working group's intention to expose people in the industry to new risks. While we have had access to specific facts and statistics, we will discuss them in a general way as well as in a responsible way. The working group is keenly aware that lives are very much at stake.

Certainly few industry players would dispute that 'cash losses through excessive robberies is ... a matter of concern', as the SBAB put it (SBAB, 2001). The working group discovered, however, that very different perspectives on crime exist depending on whether you are discussing the issue with the oil company, the dealer or the attendant. For the attendants, as indicated by the RISE survey, drunken behaviour and patrons driving off without paying were most commonly identified as the two biggest problems at petrol stations.

Some 46% of attendants said verbal abuse constituted a significant problem. A fifth of attendants cited armed robbery as a problem. Significantly, 92% of all attendants interviewed by RISE believed that attendants were specifically targeted in criminal attacks. When asked who else was targeted, only 17% of attendants believed management was targeted by criminals (RISE, 2002). Individuals who were drunk and gangs were identified by attendants as the main agents responsible for crime. Less than 20% of attendants believed organised criminal groups were behind petrol station crime.

There did seem to be a difference, from the RISE survey, in how violent crime had affected different petrol stations according to the oil company with which they were associated. Five of the Engen stations had experienced an armed robbery. Understandably, most of these owners and managers identified robbery as their biggest risk. Two Total and three BP, Caltex and Shell stations, respectively, were reported to have experienced an armed robbery. Interestingly, none of the BP owners and managers identified armed robbery as their biggest risk. Though admittedly a small sample, more than half the owners and managers surveyed in the RISE research indicated they had been victims of crime at their places of work.

Respondents highlighted it was 'common knowledge' that petrol stations dealt in cash and that, at any given time, cash was available on site. The cash-based nature of the business left owners and managers feeling vulnerable. Owners and managers reported pervasive shoplifting and a resigned helplessness to prevent it. Records of shoplifting were not kept while corrective measures frequently bordered on vigilantism (RISE 2002).

Owners and managers concurred that crime was most likely to occur in the forecourt or shop and the most dangerous times were in the evenings when the station was 'very quiet' or during shift changes when the station was 'busier than usual' and attendants going off duty were tired, anxious to leave and less attentive. Monday mornings or the

first working day after a long weekend were identified as particularly vulnerable times due to the higher cash holdings at outlets.

The majority of owners and managers surveyed believed two factors rendered petrol stations 'very high risk': the availability of cash on site and, second, the 24-hour nature of operations which 'invited' crime which tends to happen at night.

Another aspect of the crime situation concerns credit card fraud, the cost of which is borne by the retailers. The levels of credit card fraud have become 'unacceptably high', according to the Small Business Advisory Bureau (2001). The bureau called for further negotiations to take place between the fuel retailers associations and the banking sector to make normal credit cards acceptable on driveways. It is worth adding, however, that incredibly high levels of credit card fraud experienced in the shops and related retail activities of petrol stations suggest that allowing the purchase of petrol with credit cards is not necessarily the solution to the crime problem.

4. Literature: forecourt crime and workplace violence

Forecourt crime is best thought of as a variation on the theme of workplace violence. Criminological interest in workplace violence has grown considerably over the last decade or so. Workplace violence is defined by the USA-based National Institute of Occupation Safety and Health as 'any physical assault, threatening behavior, or verbal abuse occurring the work setting. Workplace may be any location, either permanent or temporary, where any employee performs any work-related duty' (Hartford Loss Control Department, 1999).

Workplace violence includes violence perpetrated by strangers, customers/clients, co-workers and/or personal relations within the workplace setting. General risk factors associated with on-the-job violence include the following: contact with the public; exchange of money; delivery of goods/services, a mobile workplace; working with volatile persons in health care and criminal justice settings; working alone or in small groups, working late at night or during early morning hours; working in high crime areas; guarding valuable property.

A scan of electronic research holdings relating to petrol station safety suggests that it is a crime issue of some importance in the developed world. It would seem that a fair amount of effort has been directed toward the compilation of reliable crime information and the development of crime prevention strategies suited to the safety concerns of the forecourt. For example: according to American crime data armed robberies account for close to 50% of all violent acts in the workplace. Employees at businesses such as convenience stores, bars, restaurants, petrol stations and liquor stores are the most likely to encounter on-the-job violence.

Workplaces with the highest rates of occupation homicide include taxicab services, liquor stores, gas stations and protective services. Crime data extrapolated from the Uniform Crime Report of 2001 indicates that robberies from convenience stores, gas stations and bank robberies constituted 6.4%, 2.9% and 2.1% of the total robberies in 2000 (Erickson, RJ & Erickson, SJ 2001).

VIOLENT CRIME AT PETROL STATIONS – THE ISSUES

That petrol stations may constitute a crime ‘hot spot’ is also confirmed by criminological research in other quarters of the world. Research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology on robberies at petrol stations too suggests that petrol stations constitute a particularly dangerous workplace in need of a tailor-made crime prevention strategies.² With regards to the latter, preventative strategies advocated range from environmental design (fortifying cash handling situations or moving toward cashless transactions/physical separation; visibility and lighting, and the provision of security devices) to administrative controls and behavioural strategies (safety training of personnel).

Strategies to minimise harm through victim counselling and the provision of insurance against armed robbery have also been advocated. Deliberate efforts to maximise the chances of prosecution include training in the preservation of the crime scene, identification of offenders and increasing participation of witnesses in prosecution.³

One striking example of an oil industry-wide initiative to address forecourt safety is that of the British Oil Security Syndicate (BOSS).⁴ Formed in 1991, steered and funded by UK-based petroleum companies, the BOSS initiative is supported by the Petrol Retailers Association (PRA), the United Kingdom Petroleum Industry Association (UKPIA) and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO). The core aim of BOSS is to reduce crime at service stations.

During 2000 the Scarman Center at the University of Leicester conducted a nationwide Forecourt Survey. This survey provided a detailed inventory of the security needs of service stations and their experiences of criminal victimisation. According to the survey forecourt crime costs the UK oil industry about 47.2 million pounds per year. Top of the list of such costs in 2000 was credit card fraud (£12.2 million) and driving off without paying (£11 million). In January 2002 BOSS organised a conference on forecourt crime which was attended by 350 petrol retailers and police. Each retailer was presented with a ‘toolbox of strategies’ aimed at crime prevention.

Another crime prevention initiative steered by BOSS is Forecourt Watch. This initiative works as an early warning system with police dispatching voicemail messages about crime incidents at petrol stations to petrol retailers.

It has been claimed that this initiative has already resulted in a ‘substantial reduction of forecourt crime’ such as drive-off, burglary and robbery.

Initiatives undertaken by the British Oil Security Syndicate provide an enviable example of a strategic response on the part of the oil industry to the complex and costly issue of forecourt crime as it confronts employees within the sector. There are encouraging signs that some oil companies (BP in particular) operating on South African soil are engaging with forecourt safety as a workplace issue with some urgency.⁵

2 See <http://www/aic.gov.au/publications/crimeprev/retail/ap1.html> 2002/10/07.

3 See <http://www/aic.gov.au/publications/crimeprev/retail/ap1.html> 2002/10/07.

4 See <http://www.b-o-s-s.co.uk/press16.htm> 2002/10/18.

5 See http://www.bp.com/location_rep/south_africa/env_perf/forecourt_safety.asp 2002/10/21.