“Why fix it if ain’t broke”: Nature and extent of crime in the railway environment in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the nature and extent of crime in the railway environment in South Africa. Crimes against Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa, Transnet Freight Rail, Gautrain, and commuters are prevalent and the victims are being exposed to serious damage emanating from criminal activities. The challenges and implications for individuals and businesses, rich or poor consumers are recurrent themes in this study. A qualitative research approach was adopted to follow a non-probability purposive sample comprising 25 participants from the South African Police Service Rapid Rail Police Units. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews from research participants deployed in the Division: Visible Policing. The findings highlighted that the most prevalent crimes are cable theft, robberies and malicious property damage. The targeted trains are the Metro trains that operate locally, as they transport many commuters because it is the affordable mode of public transport in South Africa. The perpetrators also target this mode of transport because the train stations have an open system where perpetrators can easily access the entrance, therefore some do not even buy tickets and board the trains illegally. It is understood that Gautrain have a closed system and the security is advanced and watertight because of extra security measures such as the closed-circuit television cameras. Based on the findings, effective implementation of policies to improve safety is essential. Critical dialogues between all relevant stakeholders.

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Introduction

South Africa is faced with the escalation of crime and the citizens are no longer feeling safe in their homes and public space (Schöenteich & Louw, 2001). In this study, public space includes the railway environment and associated environs where commuters board trains to and from work. Public transport plays a major role in building the country’s economy in the sense that most of South Africa’s middle and lower class citizens use the train as the preferred mode of transportation. Trains became a favourable mode of transport to many customers as the fares are found to be cheaper compared to other modes of transport. However, railway transport systems are targeted by criminals. The local trains are mainly operating in some provinces, for example, Gauteng and Western Cape Province while the rest of the provinces offer long-distance trains. Maluleke (2010:5) argues that numerous South African rail commuters who use the trains every day are vulnerable and being exposed to many terrifying criminal elements.

It must be acknowledged that the costly mistake made by the newly elected democratic government of South Africa, under the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC), was to destroy almost anything that works and resembles the artefacts of the apartheid system. This includes the well-functioning of the effective railway policing system that was abolished in the 1980s (Pirie, 1990). January, Mofokeng and De Vries (2018:18-19) posit that the South African Railway and Harbours Police Force (SAR &

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which was commonly referred to as the South African Railway Police (SARP) was a dedicated, highly trained specialised force in the railway environment with the necessary resources and specialities to adequately prevent crime in the railway environment. Owing to a political decision, it was during 1986 that the government dissolved the railway police force and transfer its resources to the then South African Police (SAP) and later the South African Police Service (SAPS). The purpose of the dissolution and transfer of the resources was to make use of the resources in aid of the broader responsibility of the then SAP and to avert the political onslaught in the country (Geldenhuys & Kotzé, 1983). In October 1986, the 16,500 members of the Railways Police were amalgamated with the SAP to beef them up as the apartheid state buckled to socioeconomic, race relations and political pressures. This was one of the greatest mistakes by the government as many criminals, petty thieves, and criminal syndicates, could not believe their luck and migrated to the rail environment. Today, the railway environment and commuters are being exposed to criminal activities due to the main cause of rapid road deterioration over the past 30 years. The decline of railway commuter transport systems has triggered the constantly rising volume of vehicles on public roads. Low-income commuters suffer a double blow due to escalating fees as they hop from one mode of public transport to another. For example, the taxi industry has collapsed and is confronted by serious taxi violence, whereas metro buses are not reliable due to constant mechanical breakdowns and labour unrest. This article discusses challenges that confront a railway environment that may now be likened to a ‘paralysed and dysfunctional system’ that is beyond repair (January & Mofokeng, 2017).

**Literature Review**

The Department of Transport is responsible for the regulation and coordination of transportation in South Africa. It is the custodian of all types of transport in the country, including the state railways. Madzivhandila (2019:1) posits that the railway environment is operated by different companies which are the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA), Transnet Freight Rail (TFR), and Gautrain (in partnership with Bombela Concession Company). Even though different entities are operating in the railway environment, the trains used to commute on the daily basis are Gautrains as well as the Metrorail that operate on the local level and long distances trips. Gautrain is an express rail system that is a public-private owned entity and operates only in Gauteng province, South Africa (Thomas, 2013:77-94). The other two are the Blue train which is mainly used by tourists and TFR that are used for transporting goods. Most commuters prefer Metrorail trains, as they are the cheapest mode as compared to Gautrain. Makatile (2021:np) supports and posits that Metrorail is South Africa’s biggest and preferred provider of passenger and commuter rail services. Geldenhuys (2020:23) points out that the Rapid Rail Policing Unit is mandated to execute a range of crime prevention duties which includes:

- i. Rendering a visible policing service within the rail environment to address the safety of commuters, passengers, freight and the rail transport system;
- ii. Conducting a preventative and reactive policing service within the rail environment;
- iii. Providing a rapid rail policing service within the rail environment; and
- iv. Performing crime prevention and crime combating operations in the rail environment.

**Nature of crimes mainly occurring in the railway environment**

Since the dissolution (Pirie, 1990) of the SAR & HPF, the railways became progressively more unsafe and unsecured transportation system. Against the backdrop of operational decline, managerial lack of accountability and other factors such as corrupt practices within PRASA (Smit, 2019), commuters were exposed to criminal activities in the railway environment and the railway infrastructure was the target as well (January et al, 2018). The crimes that are mainly committed in the railway environment are robberies, pickpocketing, assaults, theft of railway tracks and cables, malicious damage to properties and rape. Mlamla (2019:np) posits that more than 2000 incidents of contact crimes on railways were recorded by the Rapid Rail Police for the 2018/19 financial year. The statistics recorded a slight decrease of 176 incidents - from 2381 in 2017/18 to 2205 in 2018/19. The crimes were categorised as murder, attempted murder, sexual offences, assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm, as well as aggravated and common robberies. Mlamla (2019:np) further highlights that the United Commuters Voice (UCV) spokesperson Joao Jardim indicated that over 200 people have been robbered on a moving train on the central line. That is not considering the pickpocketing happening every day at various hotspot stations such as Bellville, Mutual, Bonteheuwel, Langa, Nyanga, Parow, Woodstock and Goodwood.

**The extent of crime in the railway environment**

Geldenhuys (2020:22) posits that commuters also face the risk of becoming a victim of crime in the railway environment. Some of the commuters board the trains intending to commit a crime (January et al., 2018; January & Mofokeng, 2017). Simelane and Greg Nicolson (2015: np) highlighted one of the incidents that happened in Soweto where four men entered the train coach with guns and robbed commuters of their phones and money while on the coach floor. Everyone was searched and one commuter drew out his gun and shots were exchanged, leaving one person dead and two injured before the robbers could flee. Mashoko and Shivambu (2015:251) provide that South Africa has a high fatality rate of 5.85 per million train-km when compared to other countries from Europe, the United State of America, South Korea, and Australia. This shows that SA still has work to do as far as improving railway safety and security. Furlong (2015:np) mentions that many commuters have stories to tell about robberies and assaults on trains, sometimes where the robbers threatened passengers with knives and guns. Furlong (20155:np) further indicates
that one commuter, Mr Jasper Schoonraad, who is a crewing agent at Marine Crew Services SA, has witnessed and experienced numerous actual and attempted robberies on trains in the Western Cape province in South Africa. Although railway environments experience a high crime rate, Thaw (2020) highlights that the police have scored successes in efforts to clamp down on crime affecting the country’s railway network. There are often crime prevention operations involving the SAPS, the passenger rail agency, Telkom and Tshwane metro police officials to clamp down on copper theft and tampering with railway essential infrastructure. For example, in one of the crime prevention operations in Mpumalanga province, three men, including an employee at a scrap metal business, were arrested in connection with the theft of rail infrastructure valued at over R1 million.

Makatile (2021:np) reports that Rail infrastructure has virtually gone extinct. Train stations like New Canada, Westgate, Klipfontein and many others around Johannesburg are shells, stripped down to the last metal. The scrap metal business is thriving on the back of the dying railway transportation industry. Many fingers are pointed at the drug addicts who have found a goldmine in the decaying train stations that are now without security personnel to operate and guard the infrastructures. Makatile (2021:np) further stresses the extent of the nature of the railway environment by mentioning that if one grew up on the trains, and was familiar with the railway stations, you would think the pictures of these Metrorail premises were scenes out of a war zone. Burroughs (2020:np) reports that hundreds of kilometres of overhead cables, signalling wires and catenary masts have been stolen, affecting every Metrorail route in Gauteng province, South Africa’s economic hub (Thomas, 2013:77-94). The train stations have also been destroyed on the commuter rail corridors around Johannesburg, with buildings reduced to rubble and platforms torn up by thieves looking for signal wiring.

Toyana and Sishi (2020:np) indicate that when South Africa closed large parts of its economy and transport network during its COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, organised, sometimes armed gangs moved into its crumbling stations to steal the valuable copper from the lines. Simelane (2020:np) highlights that many train commuters have no choice but to travel on more expensive modes of transport after extensive vandalism and pillaging of the rail infrastructure, especially during the operation of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. Simelane further substantiates that at about 2.25 pm on 28 July 2020, he witnessed the shameless theft of rail infrastructure during lockdown restrictions. Between the Midway and Lenasia train stations, five men, dug in up to the waist, were “eating” (stealing) cables. “Eating” is a word informally used to describe the theft of electric cables for resale at the scrapyards. He walked along the rail towards the group of men as they excavated cables with picks. They were not bothered by passersby watching them. They were not bothered that motorists driving in and out of Lenasia were also probably spotting them. They even joked about how everything had been “eaten”. Grobler (2020:np) highlights that four people appeared in the Stillfontein Magistrate Court in the Northwest province in connection with alleged stolen Transnet rail tracks worth about R8 million. They were accused of damaging essential infrastructure and theft of ferrous metal which form part of essential infrastructure. The railway tracks weighing more than 130 000kg were allegedly found and seized for further investigations during the search. These forms of organised crime disrupt railway services and power outages that support trains and various telecommunication systems.

Methodology

For this paper, a phenomenologically grounded approach was used to explore the extent of disturbing safety and security measures around the railway transport system in South Africa. De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport (2011:65) points out that qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where the participants experience the issue or problem under study. Twenty-five (25) research participants from the SAPS participated in the study. The total number of members from each unit varied, depending on the availability of the members. The sample units are those SAPSRRPU officials who work in the railway environment. The participants were interviewed to identify the challenges that they face when performing their duties in the rail environment, in addition to some other relevant information about policing this kind of environment. These officers are deployed and responsible for railway crime-prevention duties.

The paper followed a six-phase process as outlined by Tracy (2010). The first phase involved the familiarisation of the data by reading and re-reading the data to identify important ideas. Secondly, provisional codes were created from the ideas identified in the previous phase. The transcripts were printed out in full and notes were made to assist with the identification of provisional themes. Thirdly, codes were combined and reorganised to create broader themes. Fourthly, the combined codes were refined to identify links between them. In the fifth phase, the themes were named, and finally, the themes were presented as the research findings. For this study, ethical clearance letters were granted to offer the research team permission to conduct research in the SAPS.

Findings and Discussions

In analysing the data sets, nine independent recurring themes emerged out of several themes directly from the interviews conducted with the research participants. These themes were systematically organised and integrated into subheadings under the research findings and discussion. The following sections provide the accounts filtered from the empirical data, comprehensive experiences and an understanding of the nature and extent of crime in railway policing.

Observations of crime prevention duties by South African Police Service Rapid Rail Police Units

Crime-prevention duties in the railway environment are performed by the South African Police Service Rapid Rail Police Units (SAPSRRPU). However, the duties performed in the railway environment are not different from those performed by ordinary police officials at the local police stations. The only difference is that the prime function of SAPSRRPU is to perform their duties within
the railway environment, though the participants indicated that they sometimes support police stations or clusters with crime-prevention operations when manpower is required. Members of the SAPSRRPU are deployed on the mainline trains, namely, the Shosholoza Meyl and Blue Train. The SAPSRRPUs are responsible for long-distance trips and cross-border policing, including conducting disruptive operations. These Units also police the local trains, which are Metrorail and Gautrain.

The assertions from the participants confirm that the SAPSRRPU members are not confined to working in the railway environment, outside the railway space they do assist with crime-prevention duties in cluster police stations’ vicinities when there is a need to do so. In answering the questions on crime-prevention duties, the majority of the participants agreed that most of their duties in the railway environment entail patrolling in the rail reserves. These include platforms, subways and train bridges, as a way of intensifying visibility, stop-and-search exercises in the railway environment and surroundings, and deployment in the long-distance trains to other provinces. The officers are deployed on trains to ensure the safety and security of commuters/passengers. They conduct searches to check whether dangerous weapons and illegal goods are being carried and transported to prevent and protect other commuters from harm. Stop-and-searches in the trains are not so different from the ones conducted during roadblocks or inside normal buildings. If there is reasonable suspicion that illegal parcels are on the train, the train driver is requested to stop the train for the search to be carried out, and thereafter the train proceeds with the journey.

It emerged during the interviews that there are additional supporting functions in the SAPSRRPU that include sections such as Crime Information Management Office (CIMO), and Monitoring and Evaluation. Monitoring and Evaluation are responsible for overseeing the crime-prevention duties to ensure that assigned duties are carried out as prescribed by the organisation. The participant indicated that they visit corridors to ensure that there is compliance with SAPS’s regulations. The CIMO is also one of the SAPSRRPU’s sections established at the unit level that deals with the analysis of crime information. The analysis includes crime patterns and crime threats, which help provide the operational commanders with details of the hot spots, days and times of the occurrence of crime, as well as the type of perpetrators and the modus operandi used by criminals to carry out criminal activities. As a result of the analysis of crime, members are deployed accordingly, and this helps to reduce crime levels in the railway environment, as the members know which area to concentrate on for crime-prevention purposes.

The above analysis supports the assumption that crime can be reduced by paying attention to its tendencies, for example, crime analysis is one of the tools that indicate where the crime is mostly taking place. The SAPSRRPUs are not only policing the railway surroundings and protecting the railway assets, but they are also concerned with the safety of the commuters, such as the dangers that the commuters expose themselves to, for example walking between the rail tracks and performing risky “staff riding or train surfing” atop train coaches while the train is moving in high speed (Hesselink, 2017, & Lumenta, Vierhapper, Kamolz, Keck & Frey, 2011:1427-1434). Several participants substantiated that some commuters walk between the railway lines, which is dangerous, since it is likely that they will be hit by a train, therefore the police officials also guard against activities that might endanger the commuter’s life (Hesselink, 2008:117). From the data extracted from the participants under the Crime Prevention Duties by SAPSRRPU theme, it appears that the SAPSRRPU members perform different roles but all tasks are aimed at reducing the crime level in the railway environment. The SAPSRRU have different sections. Some are deployed on local and long-distance trains for crime-prevention purposes and those who are in the support service, for example, the crime analysts who provide CTA and CPA and those who are in the monitoring and evaluation section.

On-the-job training of railway police

The training of members to acquire knowledge and skills is on-the-job training method. It was noted that the SAPSRRU also provides training to their members as a way of developing them. It also emerged that after the completion of the course, the members can identify train cables. If a person is found in possession of cables, it is easier to ascertain whether the cables belong to the railway or not, and if the person cannot account for possession of the cables, an arrest can be effected. During the interviews, the majority of the members indicated that they attend training in respect of railway policing, though not everybody attends the courses that are related to railway policing-related. When the member joins the unit, he/she has to attend an orientation session which is meant for all members who are recruited into the rapid rail police. It is a type of introductory session for the members and is normally for one day. There is a one-week training course that is offered to members, and it is called the Rapid Rail Police Training Programme. The majority of the members went through the training using the railway police training programme.

This short course is meant for crime prevention functions. The research participants mentioned that the course is useful for members to perform crime-prevention duties anywhere, including the railway environment. It does not mean that if one did not attend the railway orientation it is impossible to effectively execute their duties. Some indicated that the experience they have gained in working in the SAPSRRPU helped them in the execution of their duties. One of the participants indicated that some of the courses attended are not necessarily intended for railway policing, and did not find them useful, for example, the crime investigation course. Investigators are based at the police stations and when a crime is reported, the case is assigned and investigated by the specialised detectives.

Nature of crimes in the railway Environment

The basis of this theme refers to the type of crimes committed within the railwaymilieu. The crimes are categorised in the same way as crimes that are committed in the community, for example, thefts, assaults, alcohol abuse, drugs and robberies. The only difference
is that they are committed against the commuters and the railway infrastructure. There are only a few crimes that are categorised as railway-related crimes, for example when a person is hit by a train while walking on the railway tracks. It was indicated that the crimes that are committed most by the perpetrators are cable/copper theft, robberies, rapes and malicious damage to property by the torching of train coaches. It appears that cable theft is a major problem in the railway environment and it affects and disrupts the movement of the train. As a result of certain damages, commuters are prevented from reaching their destination on time until the stolen infrastructures are restored. This impacts negatively on commuters because some lose their jobs as a result of late arrival. Another factor is that the activities that some of the commuters engage themselves in are likely to endanger their lives. The majority of participants mentioned that there is a tendency by some of the commuters to perform staff riding while it is in motion or cross the railway lines unaware of trains (Mackay, 2009; Hesselink, 2008; & Lumenta et al, 2011). Some commuters do not purchase boarding tickets.

Maluleke (2010:28) mentions Bosman train station is the main railway station within the Central Business District of Pretoria and serves as the core transport interchange for the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality and other mainline centres to Johannesburg, Mamelodi and Saulsville. The environmental design of the railway environment contributes to generating crime (Cozens & Van der Linde, 2015). The surroundings of the train stations contain bushes where commuters could have the opportunity to commit various types of crimes. The routes leading to the Metro train station entrances are not supervised and consist of an open system that presents opportunities for perpetrators to commit crimes. For example, from Pretoria station to Soshanguve, a perpetrator can commit a crime and jump off the train between the railway stations because frequent stops within a short distance and there are bushes around the stations. In contrast, Gautrain is perceived to be a crime-free zone because it has a closed system, for example on the route from Pretoria station to Hatfield, perpetrators cannot commit a crime and decide to jump off before the train reaches the next railway station, as it is always under the control of the guards. Most of the Gautrain stations have walls on the sides, and since the perpetrators cannot easily gain access to the train, they have to go through the right access control. Once Gautrain leaves the station, there is no easy way to illegally access the train, as there is a supervised security access control and the train runs at high speed, which prevents criminals from jumping on and off the train, unlike the Metrorail trains.

The participants inferred that there are different views in terms of the nature of the crimes taking place in railway environs. However, robberies and theft of cables appear to be a major problems in the railway environment. Cable theft means a financial loss to the custodian of trains since replacing those cables is very costly to the service providers. Crimes such as malicious property damage emanate from the burning of train coaches as a result of angry commuters being upset when trains are delayed or cancelled because of power outages and missing rail tracks. Some of the participants said that when trains are delayed, commuters become angry as some lose their jobs when they are late for work. It is alleged that sometimes commuters are not expeditiously informed by the train station management about the disruption and delays. The angry commuters end up frustrated and vandalising the railway assets. The other crimes that perpetrators engage in are less serious and involve contravening transport regulations by crossing the railway lines (where they are often hit by moving trains), boarding the train without a valid train ticket and staff riding (Mackay, 2009). These activities are considered to be contravening the South African Transport Services regulated by the Legal Succession Act No. 9 of 1989.

**Prevalence of crime in the railway environment**

This theme explains the frequency with which crime occurs in the railway environment, that is, the most problematic days and times when crimes are committed. The commission of crime varies from time to time, depending on the available opportunity. It is said that crime is usually committed during the day when it is quiet on the train. Perpetrators usually target people who are travelling alone in the train coaches or if there are only a few people at the railway station. During peak hours, crimes such as robbery do not usually occur, as the trains are full of commuters. It is only the snatching of bags that usually takes place, or pickpocketing without the victims noticing. Some of the policing areas experience a high influx of commuters, for example, Park Station in Johannesburg and Pretoria Station.

It has been noted that participants have different views regarding the occurrence of crime. Those who work at the head office indicate that crime happens daily because they receive daily crime statistics from all the provinces. Officials at the head office are responsible to consolidate the crime statistics from different policing areas. They receive crime statistics on a 24-hour basis. For example, participants in the Krugersdorp area indicated that sometimes nothing is reported the whole day; however, in some provinces, crime takes place daily at the railway stations. Some participants indicated that on the Metro trains it happens every day when the train is not full in the absence of police.

**Targeted trains**

As mentioned in previous data analysis, there are various types of trains in the railway environment that are policed by SAPSRRPUs. It was discovered that the most targeted trains are the Metro trains, which operate locally. The participants mentioned some reasons as to why those trains are targeted. Metrorail trains transport a high number of commuters compared to other trains because fares are cheap and most commuters can afford them. Several participants said that some commuters do not buy tickets and they board the train illegally, to commit crimes. The Gautrain has some extra security measures put in place to extend the safety and security of the commuters and its infrastructure. To mention, there are closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras on the trains where video footage can be transmitted and viewed if a crime has been committed, thus the perpetrator can easily be apprehended. The parking facilities
for Gautrain commuters are secure; however, monthly fares are charged for parking and those who do not want to use parking facilities leave their cars unattended without guards outside the railway station. The participants indicated that those who leave their cars outside the train stations are likely to be victims of theft out of motor vehicle and damages on return to collect their vehicles.

Malicious property damage occurs when electric and copper cables are stolen from trains, leaving the trains inactive. This harms commuters, as they cannot board the trains as alluded in respect of the Metrorail trains. The participants indicated that when riots that concern train delays and other incidents arise, the Public Order Policing (POP) that deals with crowd management is ordinarily called to control the situation. The security measures around Metrorail stations are poor and easily bypassed by commuters for several reasons. However, the Shosholoza Meyl train system is a long-distance train that travels from one province to another and perpetrators do not get the chance to board the trains. This type of train has clear lines of communication between the train manager and the police. And should something happen, the train manager could easily communicate with the train driver, whereas on Metrorail trains, there is no such communication. There are clear indications that the most targeted trains belong to the Metro railway system.

Perpetrators of crime

According to the participants, some people board the trains illegally to commit crimes as mentioned in previous sections, especially targeting commuters on the Metro trains. It is emphasised that these perpetrators are mostly the youth and school dropouts. From what has been stated by the participants, the perpetrators committing these crimes range from 18 to 38 years old, and of these, most fall in the category of youth and are mostly males. In the preceding section, several contributing factors lead to these types of crimes.

Social factors conducive to crime in the railway environment

It emerged during the interviews that there are various reasons for the youth to commit the crime, though some participants indicated that they find the reasons not sufficient to justify the youth’s actions. The reasons for committing crimes in the railway environment are abject poverty, unemployment, and substance abuse. They must sell whatever they have stolen to buy drugs. Peer pressure is prevalent among youth as some criminals are school dropouts and find themselves roaming the streets and resorting to crime.

Relationship between SAPSRRPU and other Stakeholders

Under this theme, participants referred to the relationship that the police have with the custodian of the railways, which is PRASA, and other security companies that are posted there. The police and other stakeholders need to work together to prevent and fight crime. Even when challenges arise, the stakeholders could be able to solve common problems with ease. The SAPSRRPUs are deployed in the railway environment and private security companies work together with railway police to intensify the security for the commuters. A participant indicated that the relationship between the security stakeholders is not always on good terms with each other. Sometimes they fight over the mandate to perform their duties. It is understood that some roles that the private security officials perform can only be fulfilled by the police.

From what has been presented above it could be assumed that there is mostly a good relationship between the SAPSRRPU and the security companies that are posted in the railway environment, even though a few participants indicated that they sometimes experience some challenges. In the beginning, when they had to work together, they were requested to do things that they were not supposed to do, but most of the participants indicated that the relationship was good.

Challenges experienced by SAPSRRPU

The data indicate various problems and challenges but they were mostly concerning the organisation’s lack of resources, both physical and human resources. Another challenge concerns the treatment of lower ranks by senior managers. Participants felt that they were not rewarded sufficiently in proportion to the functions performed in railway environs. In respect of the railway police, the staff members’ concerns were regarding the shortage of manpower. The experience has shown that the more police officials are deployed in the railway environment, the more the crime level decreases. High visibility of police in these areas dissuades criminal activities, lessen the opportunities for criminals to perpetrate different types of crimes and reinforces safety and security amongst commuters.

According to the participants, police officers do experience operational problems in some of the trains in the execution of their duties. Gautrain has its governing policies that are a challenge to the police. For example, police are deterred to search commuters, even if they suspect commuters might have stolen properties. These types of restrictions hinder the police from effectively executing their pertinent duties while performing their functions within Gautrains stations and other associated premises. The participants mentioned that one of the problems faced in their functionary is hygienic factors of the work environment. It is a challenge when they have to attend to crime scenes where a commuter has been hit by the train. Their health is threatened because they do not have hygiene materials for instance first-aid kits to protect themselves against any form of health hazards to assist commuters as some situations demand.

When the trains are full and police cannot perform their duties effectively in such crowded conditions. They carry firearms and there are possibilities of being disarmed when the trains are full. The officers’ safety is not guaranteed. The challenges are mainly lack of resources, their Commanders (as they feel they are somehow not treated well, as mentioned by a few participants), the railway’s management with the issue of their policies, as well as the commuters themselves, who do not respect the lower rank members as they feel they have more rights than the police.

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An overview of service delivery improvement

The starting point in this section is that service delivery is one of the critical functions that each state organisation has a responsibility to provide to its clients. In this case, the stakeholders, such as PRASA, Gauteng Provincial Government, and Transnet Freight Rail, as the custodians of the trains, have the responsibility of ensuring that commuters are safe, and the transportation service is fully provided. One of the provisions in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 is that every citizen of the country must be protected and feel safe in a broader context. The police are deployed in the railway environment for crime-prevention purposes in line with section 205 of the Constitution and they know the challenges and factors that contribute to the commission of the crimes. During the interviews, participants suggested some of the strategies that could be applied to improve service delivery in the policing of illegal activities, organised criminal structures and oversight in the railway environs. The police officials interviewed indicated that service delivery could be improved utilizing awareness campaigns, fencing of the open spaces often used as illegal access to train stations without buying boarding tickets, and additional resources, both physical and human.

Conclusion

A subject as complex as that of the nature and extent of crime in railway environs cannot exhaustively be addressed in one paper. However, the interpretation of the above-highlighted themes and policing aspects conjure up sophisticated levels of how the old and working South African railway policing system was broken leading to a dysfunctional railway transportation system. Studies indicate a different kinds of crime and incivilities in the railway system. Coppola and Silvestri (2020:1127) found thefts, harassment, and aggression to be the most negatively impacting safety and security in railway environments. Chowdhury and van Wee (2020:102) and Chowdhury (2019:855) found women to be victims of harassment, being followed, and theft. But when Shibata, Hanyu, Hata and Yamaoka (2014:210) compared expected and experienced unpleasantness, the expected unpleasantness for rare events, (fire incident, being attacked) was significantly higher than the experienced unpleasantness of the same event. The stakeholders, including the railway management, have to come on board to reduce crime in the railway environment. For example, PRASA should close off the open areas where perpetrators can without restraint gain access to railway infrastructure to commit a crime.

According to the majority of research participants, crime is committed every day and anytime, though reporting depends on the dynamics of the areas. Research studies indicate that daytime is generally perceived as safer than nighttime (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022, 2021; Shirgaokar, 2019). Research indicates that crowding, that is, too many people, also induces anxiety in travellers (Sundling & Ceccato, 2022; Vanier & de Jubainville, 2017) because potential offenders may act anonymously (Stark & Meschik, 2018). In a study by Thompson, Hirsch, Loose et al., (2012) (cited in Sundling & Ceccato, 2022:113) women found crowded carriages unsafe as there could be men who covertly tries to get closer to them, and men are anxious not to be perceived as intentionally getting closer to women. It is important for active stakeholders, including the railway management, to lead and campaign for railway safety and security to reduce the level of crime in the railway environment. For example, PRASA should close off open areas where perpetrators can gain access to commit crimes.

Crime is a global phenomenon and in many countries, the government encourages state organisations to put into operation cost-effective crime prevention strategies that will enable quality service delivery. The scourge of poor services from dysfunctional public entities and other private stakeholders as a result of corruption has immensely contributed to the failing state of service delivery in the railway system in South Africa. This study explored and analysed the role of the SAPSRRPU in crime prevention within the railway environment. The SAPS, local municipalities, and the Railways stakeholders should work together to ensure that access to the train stations is limited to those commuters using the transport system for valid reasons. There must be an increase in awareness campaigns conducted by all the stakeholders to alert commuters about their safety and security. The crime must be thoroughly investigated so that the criminal justice system becomes effective to achieve its purpose. If criminals are arrested and prosecuted there will be fewer repeat offenders. The training of police officials as well as railway security personnel will contribute to curbing crime in the railway environment.

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