

Action needed by authorities, church and society to curb crime wave

Alain Walljee

On 28 August 2024, I read a Herald Live headline on social media, “Call for curfew to be imposed in crime host spots...”

The online post noted that in the week prior to the article at least 40 people had been murdered in Nelson Mandela Bay.

Allow me to paint a picture of just some of the recent incidents of crime in our metro.

On 20 August 2024, four people were shot and killed in Bethelsdorp’s Extension 32.

Pictures of the bloodied bodies circulated on social media. The next day a Somalian was shot and killed in Missionvale.

On 23 August teachers and learners were robbed at Alfonzo Arries Primary School in Booysenspark. Two days later someone was fatally shot at Sasol Petrol Station in Stanford Road, Korsten.

On Wednesday, 28 August, two male bodies were pulled out of the Swartkops river both tied by their hands and feet. Earlier that same day the Ward 19 councillor was robbed, carjacked, kidnapped and shot.

A shared screenshot of a police report for the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro District showed that between 23-26 August 2024 – just four days – that there had been 21 residential burglaries, 19 robberies with firearms, 18 assault GBH, 17 murders, 11 house robberies, 10 attempted murders and 9 carjackings.

Gang related shooting occurs daily in Helenvale, Schauderville, Arcadia and other parts of the Northern Areas.

One of the challenges is that, although shots can be heard at some police stations, they are not officially reported and therefore the depth of the situation in the Northern Areas cannot be truly appreciated by the powers that be.

We need shot-spotter technology, aerial surveillance (such as drones and cameras), as well as increased police capacity and resources.

We need specialized police units on the ground to raid gang hangout spots and drug-posts and to respond to random shooting in communities.

How many murders per day will it take to bring in the army to at least help stabilize the situation in some areas in Nelson Mandela Bay?

The police in NMBM are sorely outnumbered and outgunned and then there is the little impediment of our current legislation that obviously favour the criminal and inhibit law enforcement.

While I admire our national effort to ensure individual civil rights, I am of the strong opinion that we need urgent legislative reform to reverse the current environment created by our law that nurtures criminal activity and weakens law enforcement and disenfranchises innocent victims of the ongoing crime.

Someone who commits crime suspends their own right to be treated with dignity and I believe our law must ensure that.

It was HG Wells who wrote, "Crime and bad lives are the measure of a State's failure, all crime in the end is the crime of the community."

Apartheid and its oppressive police state left such a bad taste that post 1994 we wanted to ensure that the police never had so much power again.

But that knee-jerk reaction in our legislation and policies created a democracy that empowers lawlessness.

On the other hand, as a former police officer, I witnessed first-hand how some parts of our communities and weak witness protection by SAPS empower criminals:

Parents hide their suspect sons from the police.

Parents and relatives hide illegal firearms and weapons used in the commission of crimes.

When the police shoot a suspect who had just shot someone else and who was shooting at the police, the community would gather to retaliate against the police instead of assisting the police.

Prosecution of crime is inhibited because people are too afraid to testify in criminal cases because they will be taken out and the police are either too indifferent to that fact or ill-prepared to provide protection for witnesses.

I personally had to provide comfort to a family and host the funeral for a family whose son was shot and burnt beyond recognition after being promised witness protection by the investigating officer who convinced the mother to have her son testify against suspects who had murdered another person.

It is failings on the part of national government, the police and the community that have us where we are today.

Ecclesiastes 8:11 states: "When a crime is not punished quickly, people feel it is safe to do wrong".

Couple that failure with socio-economic issues, the breakdown of the traditional family, child-headed households, absent fathers and a litany of other issues and it almost feels like the battle is impossible to win.

I once read a quote by US Senator, Robert Kennedy, that said, "every society gets the kind of criminal it deserves." This statement gives me a headache just to think about its implications. It causes me to ask probing, emasculating and yet empowering questions. What have we done to deserve the levels of crime we are experiencing in our city?

Well, more importantly, what must we do now to stop the spate of crime in the metro and what must we do in the medium and long-term?

I am afraid that without a comprehensive plan that involves political will and legislative reform from the highest level of government, the situation on the ground will only get worse.

Church leaders must step up and take the initiative to make it happen.

Alain Walljee, pastor Bay Christian Church, Gqeberha.