



## **Reclaiming the Streets of Three Rivers: Eblockwatch and CPTED**

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### **Background**

Three Rivers is a middle income residential area in Vereeniging, a city 70 km south of Johannesburg, South Africa, consisting of approximately 4000 residential units, with a total population of 12000 residents. This neighbourhood has been a hot spot area for several years, especially in respect of property crimes such as burglary, theft out of motor vehicle and theft of motor vehicle.

The author is an experienced crime analyst of the South African Police Service (SAPS) and, since 1995, a resident in Three Rivers. This community safety strategy was already compiled in 2001, however never implemented or tested in practice. It was only after a shocking houserobbery in his street in May 2003, that he realized the community needed to be united and fight back against crime.

In order to understand the crime situation and the impact thereof on the community in Three Rivers just the following:

- Burglaries at Residential Premises were recorded at an average of 19 cases per month from January 2003 to June 2003
- Theft out of Motor Vehicle recorded at an average of 14 cases per month from January 2003 to June 2003
- Theft of Motor Vehicle recorded at an average of 13 cases per month from January 2003 to June 2003

Considering the average loss per Burglary at around R20 000, it translates to R380 000 that is lost on a monthly basis. If vehicle theft is taken into consideration at an average of R50000 per vehicle, it also translates to a monthly loss of R650 000. In the first six months of 2003 property in excess of R6 million was lost in Three Rivers due to property crimes.

The financial burden is extremely heavy, especially if one also considers the rising cost of short term insurance and security services provided by private security companies.

However, the worst part of all this crime is not the loss of property, but the invasion of one's privacy, as well as the forced changes in the behavioral patterns of residents and businesses. The emotional scars are rarely seen in public. It is only through the erection of high walls, pallisade fencing and the installation of high tech security systems that one can detect the fear of crime among the community.



It is the fear of crime that paralyzes a community and gives criminals the control over the streets in a neighbourhood. However, in May 2003, this situation was changed forever in Three Rivers.

## **Introduction**

### *Community Safety Strategy*

In May 2003 an emergency community meeting was held and a comprehensive community safety strategy was introduced. Approximately 90 residents attended the meeting and committed themselves to assist with this strategy.

The common vision was to create a safer and better community for all the residents and businesses situated within Three Rivers. The strategic objectives were the following:

- The encouragement of community participation in community safety projects
- The establishment of an active and dynamic partnership between the community and the local authorities
- The promotion of an open and accessible community safety network
- The development of innovative and sustainable projects to enhance community safety

### *Action Plan*

In order to realise the vision of a safer and better community an Action Plan was compiled and implemented. Most of the elements contained in this plan, are embedded in national policies, such as the White Paper on Safety and Security published in 1998 by the Department of Safety and Security, and are implemented by the local police authorities.

A lack of resources often limits the practical implementation of these policies. Therefore, this strategy made sure that all these policies are taken into consideration and implemented.

### *Community Safety Audit*

A thorough analysis and audit of the crime situation were conducted to determine the hot spot areas in Three Rivers, as well as the main causes of crime. The crimes most frequently committed in this neighbourhood were all property crimes, such as Theft, Burglary, Theft out of Motor Vehicles and Theft of Motor Vehicle.

It was also determined that certain areas, such as River Square, a regional shopping complex; the mini dumps, where household refuse are taken; and apartment blocks were hot spot areas.

The seasonal fluctuation of crime trends was also taken into consideration, for example, the high incidence of Burglary during February 2003 and March 2003. Being aware of these trends more attention were given to these crimes in February and March 2004. This often meant allocating two or three additional vehicles during



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identified periods, in the end resulting in a visible reduction in Burglaries. Crime analysis formed the basis of many of the crime prevention operations.

#### Community Policing Forum (CPF)

The Community Policing Forum (CPF) is a statutory body implemented at all levels of the SAPS. The main functions of the CPF are to improve community and police relations, to oversee policing at the local level and to mobilise the community and facilitate community participation in safety and security issues.

This means that the community of Three Rivers is represented at the Vereeniging CPF through the Chairperson of the Sector Crime Forum. Any problems that are being experienced with policing in the community are submitted at the monthly CPF meetings. These meetings are also used as a platform to discuss various projects and to exchange ideas in terms of best practices.

#### Sector Policing

The White Paper on Safety and Security (1998:17) defines sector policing as the division of areas into smaller managerial sectors and the assignment of police officers to these areas on a full time basis. These police officers regularly patrol their own sector and are able to identify problems and seek appropriate solutions. Sector policing encourages constant contact with members of local communities.

It was only in December 2003 that the Vereeniging Police Station was able to implement sector policing. Dixon and Rauch (2004:24) confirm this delay by stating that in spite of repeated public statements about the introduction of sector policing, the SAPS policy documents on the approach were taking very long.

A sector team consisting of a Sector Commander and 8 police members was allocated to the suburbs of Three Rivers, Peacehaven and Risiville. One vehicle has been allocated to this sector team. The sector team works 12 hour shifts and two members are allocated per shift. The Sector Commander, Insp Deon Landman, is on duty 24 hours per day to supervise the activities of the team.

#### Sector Crime Forum (SCF)

The Draft National Instruction on Sector Policing (2003:3) defines a “sector crime forum (SCF)” as a structure in a sector (affiliated to the local CPF) where the community and police are represented to discuss the safety and security issues of that sector.

The SCF committee for Three Rivers was elected during August 2003 and plays a vital role in facilitating the monthly community meetings. These meetings used to be attended by an average of 50 residents per month, but has lately decreased to around 20 per meeting. The cold winter nights might be an inhibiting factor in this regard.

The SCF is supported by all roleplayers in the community, especially business and local government. The Ward Councillor of the Emfuleni Local Municipality, Ms Michelle Dreyer, regularly attends these meetings and uses the opportunity to consult with the community on issues such as street lights not working, long grass in open spaces and poor conditions of the roads and the parks. This is in line with the

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strategic objective of this strategy, namely to establish an active and dynamic partnership between the community and the local authorities.

Businesses are also supporting the SCF and has sponsored a cellphone and cellphone car kit fitted into the sector vehicle. This has enabled the community to be in constant contact with the sector team on a 24-hour basis, facilitating fast response to emergency calls.

#### Monthly Newsletter / Information Management

A monthly newsletter is compiled by the Eblockwatch Centre, containing information on crime trends, contact information of the cellphone of Sector vehicle and the community centre. The date, time and venue of community meetings are also published in the newsletter.

The key to this strategy is **information management**. This means that all types of information need to be directed to a central point, processed and disseminated to all the roleplayers as quick and effectively as possible.

**Eblockwatch** is a Web-based information management system. In short, all the cellphone numbers of residents and businesses are registered on the Eblockwatch website. If any suspicious activity is observed, the community centre is contacted. The information is then immediately disseminated to the Police, Police Reservists and Security companies. Urgent alerts, general crime prevention hints and notifications of public meetings are sent via SMS and e-mail to all registered members.

This site can be found at <http://www.eblockwatch.co.za>.

#### Community Centre

After the meeting of May 2004, Mr Harry Katrikilis, a director of the Fourway Group, a complex consisting of Fourway Motors, a well-known Landrover dealership, a petrol filling station and a supermarket, offered to build a community office at their complex. This office became the central point to manage and co-ordinate this strategy.

The community centre is a small office built in partnership with local businesses, which also supplied the office equipment. On completion of the office in September 2003, a group of local residents took over the administration and management of the office.

The centre is managed by a retired law enforcement officer, Mr Piet Nienaber, and he is assisted by Mr Fanie Powell, a retired official from local government and Ms Elsie Jacobs. The Centre Manager is responsible for the day to day management and administration of the centre. This also implies the management of the duty roster, by mobilizing members of the community to perform telephone duties at the centre.

The sector team also works from this office, but only uses it to perform administrative tasks. For the largest portion of the shift the sector members are out in the neighbourhood performing policing duties.

The mere existence of this office has created a very positive impact on community safety in Three Rivers. It has also created a crime prevention and law enforcement

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presence in the community, leading to criminals being more cautious and actually avoiding Three Rivers. Various residents and businesses have commented that vagrancy and loitering has visibly decreased in this neighbourhood.

### **Implementation Of Social Crime Prevention**

The White Paper on Safety and Security (1998:20) states that social crime prevention addresses those factors that contribute to the occurrence of crime, and requires a focus on three broad and overlapping target groups or areas:

- Offender based strategies focus on those known to be criminals, or thought to be at risk of offending, and aim to ensure positive behavioural changes
- Victim based strategies focus on support for those who have become victims of crime by providing information aimed at minimising the likelihood of victimisation.
- Environment based strategies aim at altering social, economic and other related factors which contribute to the occurrence of crime.

The implementation of Social Crime Prevention in Three Rivers has seen a dramatic emphasis on victim empowerment, by addressing Domestic Violence and assisting victims through general support and advice or by referral to professional counselling.

Social Crime Prevention has also led to closer contact between the victims of crime and the Sector Team. Whenever a crime has been committed, especially in cases of burglary or armed robberies, the Sector Commander visits the scene and discusses possible weak points in terms of security or personal safety with the victims. This has dramatically improved community police relationships.

The issue of illegal liquor outlets, in South Africa known as shebeens, has been a cause of concern for many years. Whenever a shebeen is identified in the neighbourhood, the sector team acts against the owners by confiscating the liquor and imposing fines. It is a common knowledge that a high percentage of contact crimes, such assault, rape and murder, is caused by the abuse of liquor.

### **Implementation Of Situational Crime Prevention**

The White Paper on Safety and Security (1998:21) states that situational crime prevention strategies aim to diminish opportunities for crime by modifying the situations in which offending occurs. This encompasses crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED), focusing on making the built environment less conducive to crime.

Coetzer (1999:4) lists the following fundamental environmental design principles:

- Location
  - Image and Aesthetics
  - Surveillance and Visibility
  - Territoriality and defensible space
  - Access
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- Target hardening

The general principles of CPTED namely territoriality, surveillance and motivational reinforcement are all applied in this strategy.

Through awareness campaigns and visible action by the Sector Team, the residents and businesses became aware of their ability to make the streets safer. The community became more confident to report any suspicious activity knowing that the sector police is permanently in the area and will react immediately on information, giving the community power over criminals. The Eblockwatch Centre plays a leading role in facilitating the management of information between the community and the Police.

The levels of passive surveillance have been raised through the use of Eblockwatch, creating an invisible but very powerful electronic neighbourhood watch. The criminals became aware that their presence is monitored, reported and immediate action is taken against any criminal activity. This has led to a visible and dramatic decrease in property crimes in Three Rivers.

The positive impact of the strategy also motivated the sector cops to work harder, because of the decrease in complaints to be attended, they have more time to concentrate on arrests for petty crimes, such as loitering, drunkenness or drinking in public, once again enforcing territoriality. Their commitment was rewarded by them being selected the best shift (best sector) of the Vereeniging Police Station for December 2003 and January 2004.

### **Enforcement Of Municipal By-Laws And The Road Traffic Act**

Nel et al. (2000:7) states that crime prevention is generally understood in terms of three approaches:

- Law Enforcement
- Situational Prevention
- Social Prevention

According to Nel et al. (2000:18) the following core functions of local government could assist in law enforcement:

- Enforcing municipal by-laws: street trading, littering, noise pollution, land invasion
- Traffic Police: enforcing traffic laws, providing visible policing
- Providing security: protecting council staff and assets, rapid response, patrols
- Assisting police: joint operations, patrols, searches
- Reducing public disasters by enforcing by-laws

An excellent example of law enforcement was the frustration of a group of residents, residing in Golf Road, a narrow road with a high volume of traffic serving as a link between the Vereeniging CBD and River Square, a regional shopping centre in Three Rivers. The residents were unable to enter into their premises or to exit because motorists were speeding and illegal overtaking took place on a regular basis. This

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problem was discussed with the Chief of Traffic at a SCF meeting. The result of this meeting was visible speed law enforcement, a solid white line, prohibiting any overtaking and visible road traffic signs. Traffic volumes decreased and the residents expressed their satisfaction with the increased law enforcement activities.

### **Conclusion**

The question that needs to be asked, is whether or not this strategy has indeed created a safer and better community in Three Rivers?

When the levels of reported crime is considered as a performance indicator, the following comparative statistics for the periods January 2003 to June 2003 and January 2004 to June 2004, are very positive:

- Theft (General) -18.99% (237 cases / 192 cases)
- Burglary (Residence) - 44.83% (116 cases / 64 cases)
- Theft of Motor Vehicle -50.00% (82 cases / 41 cases)
- Theft out of Motor Vehicle -58.75% (80 cases / 33 cases)
- Burglary (Business) -64.00% (25 cases / 9 cases)

It also needs to be determined whether or not the strategic objectives of the strategy have been realized?

The encouragement of community participation in community safety projects

In May 2003 only 21 members were registered for Three Rivers on the Eblockwatch website, by the end of June 2004 more than 700 members were registered. This is a clear indication of community involvement. More than 15 calls are dealt with on a daily basis at the Eblockwatch Centre.

The establishment of an active and dynamic partnership between the community and the local authorities

The monthly meetings of the Sector Crime Forum are attended by the local Ward Councillor and other officials of the Emfuleni Local Municipality. This has created an excellent opportunity for the community to discuss and receive feedback on issues related to local government.

The Sector Team has built a positive relationship with the community and regular feedback to victims of crime has improved community police relations. The commitment of the Sector Team was rewarded by them being selected the best shift (best sector) of the Vereeniging Police Station for December 2003 and January 2004. These awards form part of the Friendly Supermarket's project to reward service excellence by members of the Vereeniging Police Station.

The promotion of an open and accessible community safety network

The levels of passive surveillance have been raised through the use of Eblockwatch, creating an invisible but very powerful electronic neighbourhood watch.

The development of innovative and sustainable projects to enhance community safety

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A few projects have been identified to enhance community safety in Three Rivers, such as the establishment of a Domestic Watch, empowering domestic workers with the necessary information and general hints to improve personal security and to be more aware of their responsibility in terms of crime prevention.

In closing, it can be said that this strategy has improved the community safety of Three Rivers. In terms of The Civitas Model, as developed by Saville et al. (2001:2), a safe place happens by creating a sense of community and neighbourhood ownership, in the end a “conscious community”.

This is, indeed, a tribute to community policing and testimony to the power of a conscious community taking control of their own safety by reclaiming the streets of Three Rivers through Eblockwatch and CPTED.

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