

WARNING WARNING WARNING WARNING

UNDER SIEGE

Have you been the victim of a violent crime or know someone who has? seventeen investigates how South African teens are coping in these scary times.

by elsibe loubser mcguffog

Lately you can't open a newspaper or watch TV without coming across stories about teens affected by violent crime. It's unsafe to walk in your neighbourhood and your parents are scared to drop you off at the mall. House robberies and hijackings are everyday

occurrences. We seem to live in a culture of violence; we've practically become prisoners of our own fear and the hope for a safe future in SA has become a distant dream. We spoke to teens about living through the fear, and to experts about how best to keep hope alive in spite of the high rates of violent crime in SA.



RAPE HORROR

18-year-old Jamie experienced one of the most horrific crimes – rape – in her own house, while her entire family was held hostage.

“In October 2007, a group of guys broke into our house. They tied up my dad and got my mom to get us out of bed; I was in my pyjamas. My first instinct was to protect my brother. I’d asked the perpetrators if I could cover up with a duvet, so I snatched my brother to me and held him under it. We had to kneel down at gunpoint: it was paralyzing. They then began asking my dad questions about our car; he was mute from fear. So I answered. They didn’t like my answer, so one of the guys slapped me. I was scared and offered one of the robbers my flute. They were ransacking the house, unplugging the TV, and because they’d hurt my mom really badly there was blood all over the carpet. I just knew that I was next. One of the guys dragged me

to my room. I started to offer anything of value, and I then went to the bathroom to get my watch. The guy came inside and locked the door. Then he raped me... I remember just lying there surrounded by the blood. When he was done, he escaped through the bathroom window. Inside the house, I could still hear the other guys on the rampage. Amazingly we all survived. I had to go through a two-hour, heartless check-up at the hospital, and later went for three sessions of trauma counselling. It’s been hard. But my parents brought me up in a way that helped me get through this: to have backbone. I went straight back to school. My teachers and school friends were totally amazing. I give talks at primary schools now; I want to help young kids who might experience trauma in the future. I’m determined to make the most of life.”



66%
OF SA TEENS, FROM ALL RACES, SAY THAT CRIME IS SOMETHING THEY DISLIKE ENOUGH TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY.

ARMED STRUGGLE

Alex, age 18, was the victim of a house robbery, in which he and his father were shot – and both of them decided to fight back.

“My family and I stayed in a house in a security complex. It had a security gate, electric fence, and a security patrol car. One night in November 2007, five guys broke in. I awoke to three of the guys at my bedroom door. I got up and approached them, to retaliate. There was a struggle and one of the guys got behind me and shot me in my hindquarters! They then went through to my parents’ bedroom. One of the guys shot my dad in his side. The guy aimed at him again, but missed. The robbers didn’t manage to steal much, probably because we retaliated. They wanted to tie us up, but they didn’t get to. The security car only came round after the police arrived. Maybe they felt intimidated, or maybe they knew about it... we don’t know. And we probably never will know.”

My dad and I were in hospital for four days. My brother had witnessed it, and my sister couldn’t sleep for months afterwards.

It’s kind of weird because my uncle called my dad’s cellphone a few days afterwards and got through to someone – we wonder if the police had tried to do that themselves.

I was angry at first. And straight after something like this happens to you, you find yourself stressed, checking doors, looking to see if one of the guys is walking down the street. Moving houses helped, and so did our faith. As a family, we’re a lot closer. And I’m not the only victim: I have one or two guy friends who have also been victims of crime. We don’t talk about it. I think you must just get over it, and keep it to yourself. I’m not expecting any feedback from the police. But I’m glad we retaliated.”



80%
OF SA TEENS SAY THAT THE DEATH PENALTY SHOULD BE BROUGHT BACK.

EXPERTS SAY:

Berenice Meintjies, a clinical psychologist from KZN, says that “Jamie acted in a very smart way. Asking permission for things, like covering herself with the duvet, helping her brother, offering things to the attackers (we call this placating) are all good moves. There are **no rules for how to behave** though. You need to trust your survival instincts.” Haseena Parker, a social worker/trauma counsellor from Cape Town, emphasises that **strong family support** helps you to recover easier. “It’s good to **keep your usual routine** going, such as going to school. School and family can be supportive.” Jamie’s choice to speak to others about it is a coping skill called processing. Another processing skill is to listen to sad music and cry while thinking about the trauma event.

EXPERTS SAY:

Haseena says that “retaliation is risky. But guys are under pressure ‘cause they are told by the messages in society (like in adverts or movies) to fight back.” “The way Alex is dealing with it is to put it behind him and not talk about it. If you’re a victim, you must **trust your own healing process**,” says Berenice. Alex may not want to share with his guy friends, but he and his family have processed it. At times, a victim will need to push the emotions away and **avoid** the pain. (Good techniques are physical exercise, watching comedies or listening to happy music.) But you have to balance this with **processing** the memory of the trauma so that the memory doesn’t get a life of its own and jump up to haunt you when you might not feel emotionally in control.



your crime questions answered:

Q: I'VE NEVER BEEN A VICTIM OF CRIME, BUT I'M STILL REALLY PARANOID, LIKE AT NIGHT OR WHEN I'M HOME ALONE. WHY IS THAT? - KELLY, 16

A: We read and hear about crime the whole time, so it's natural to feel paranoid. You can reduce that feeling by making friends in your neighbourhood. Learn relaxing techniques too. And talk to someone you trust about how you're feeling. Getting involved helps, like helping crime victims; it takes away the passive, victim feeling.

Q: I'VE BEEN A VICTIM OF VIOLENT CRIME, AND I'M THINKING OF LEAVING THE COUNTRY TO STUDY OVERSEAS. IS IT THE ANSWER? - KERRY-LEIGH, 18

A: The "brain drain" is an economic worry for SA. However, international experience is always useful. If you go, you'll still need to work through feelings of fear you might still have, if fear is your driving force for leaving. Also beware that the trauma could follow you and leave you feeling violent, edgy or isolated.

Q: MY MOM FREAKS OUT WHEN SHE SEES A YOUNG BLACK MAN WAITING AT THE TRAFFIC LIGHT. DOES THAT MAKE HER RACIST? - ERLA-MARIE, 14

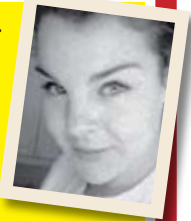
A: Crime can change your beliefs and attitudes towards other people. Because of demographic, historical and economic reasons, much of the crime in South Africa is perpetuated by young black men. But difficult as it is, don't ever judge. In South Africa at the moment, people are stressed and it is tempting to allow this stress to fuel our racism. We need to fight against this tendency in ourselves.

Q: MY DAD SAYS THE POLICE ARE USELESS. ARE THEY REALLY? WHY CAN'T THEY CATCH ALL THE PERPETRATORS? - NTEBO, 16

A: It's very natural to want to blame the government, the police and your security company if you feel they let you down. But the reality is that police and the government can't do it on their own. If everyday people are the eyes and ears of the police, then we can work against crime together. To operate individually has limitations; look out for each other in your community by forming a crime watch.

Teens making a difference

Kate, 18, is the head girl at Trinityhouse High School, and she's taking bold action.



👏 Our school held a march on 21 February 2008. About 5 000 people attended; it was beyond awesome! By organising the march, we collected R80 000 – which we've donated to the local police. The march was a silent tribute to Emily, a Grade 7 pupil who died as an innocent victim in a shoot-out between security cops and criminals. We also held it for all the crime victims all over South Africa. We're launching a website to start an email petition, and teens can register on the site. Getting involved diminishes the feeling that it's all so totally uncontrollable. Pointing fingers makes it worse, 'cause then you're being forced to rely on everyone else for your protection. Being proactive creates a sense of purpose and grounding. 🙌



LENCE HELPDESK VIOLENCE HELPDESK VIOLEN

We all have inbuilt violence-coping mechanisms within us. You'll automatically respond by fleeing, freezing, befriending, or fighting back.

Research shows that the key to recovering from trauma is how people around you behave towards you. If you know a crime victim, learn how to be a good listener: Google tips, or get advice by calling a trauma unit.

Poorer communities are just as vulnerable, if not more! seventeen Amanda recently had to move from a safe neighbourhood to a particularly violent informal settlement – and it opened her eyes. "A shack isn't safe; people can break in. Being outside at night is not an option. My BFF was raped on her way home late from the taxi rank."

It's not only the murderers and rapists who are participating in the violent culture. Bullying, disrespectful remarks, or cruel treatment of animals are also violent actions that add to our culture of violence. Don't be part of it. Mediating conflict and practising kindness can help get rid of violence.

reaching out:

- If you want to sign Kate's petition, go to www.youthagainstcrime.co.za
- If you want to get involved in anti-crime work, find a charity at www.sangonet.org.za
- For trauma counselling or advice, try The Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture on **021-4657373** or www.trauma.org.za. Or The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation on **011-4035650**. Or Sinani, KZN's Programme for Survivors of Violence, on **031-3053497**.

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