

Territorialising homes: Prolonged and return burglaries in South Africa

Brandaan Huigen

*Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Free University of Berlin, Landoltweg 9-11,
14195 Berlin, Germany*

brandaanhuigen@gmail.com

This article draws on ethnographic data from South Africa to show that while burglaries may commonly be once-off incidents, many households are repeatedly victimised. In such situations, victims are retargeted and intimidated by the same burglars. Through two exemplary cases of middle- and lower-middle-income households, which are examples of 'return' and 'prolonged' burglaries, I illustrate that these burglaries are defined by four main characteristics: long duration, the targeted theft of possessions, remaining marks and the close proximity of burglars. I suggest that these burglaries are a way of laying claim to households through symbolic means, rather than physical confrontation. This has lasting social, emotional and financial repercussions for the victims. As relating to repeat-victimisation, burglaries deserve further attention from analysts.

Domestic burglary, property crime, violence, symbols, repeat victimisation, South Africa

Introduction

South Africans are understandably fearful of becoming victims of violent property crime.¹ Those who have experienced a home robbery, and survived, are usually left with emotional and sometimes physical trauma. While home robberies have been a source of morbid fascination for South Africans and analysts,² a similar property crime type has not received much attention. Burglaries are not as memorable as those well-known stories of armed men managing to intrude the home of an unsuspecting family, when victims are sometimes tortured, murdered and/or raped. Burglaries are not typically associated with such gratuitous violence. This is because the perpetrators usually intrude the home when the inhabitants are away. Despite their attention, residential robberies are rare compared to residential burglaries throughout South Africa.³

This article's aim is to show that burglaries are also property crimes that are violent. Their kind of violence is quite different.⁴ Burglaries affect residents on an emotional, social and financial level, rather than being a direct physical assault on them. This is especially the case with repeat-victimisation burglaries (or 'repeats'), when burglars target the same household a short while after an initial incident, leading to a "contagion-like process" of retargeting.⁵ In many countries, it is commonly thought that repeats become contagion-like because burglars want to exploit further opportunities of the household, such as stealing the replaced property.⁶ These are either undertaken by the same burglars of the initial incident,⁷ or by different burglars who happen to also see good opportunities in a given residential area.⁸

What is often lost in national and international research on domestic burglaries, which overly rely on statistical data rather than the first-hand experiences of victims,⁹ are the details of recurring entry attempts, styles of intrusion and the duration of such intrusions by the same perpetrators. In

South Africa, repeats especially occur when victims are retargeted by the same perpetrators who live near to them. Judging by the behaviour of burglars on the residential premises, and inside the home, this reaches a situation where homes can become 'territorialised'. Such territorialisation does not only occur through the repeated intrusions of the same burglars to remove property, but their readiness to use symbolic gestures for purposes of intimidation. Particularly 'return' and 'prolonged' burglaries, two types which share these characteristics, add to the daily unease of victims, when burglars seem to lay claim to their homes as repositories for stolen goods. These victims feel that they have lost control over household security and safety, even with sturdy defences. Such ordeals last for longer periods than the once-off burglary incident, already an alienating experience which many readers may identify with, but often a recoverable shock if no further incidents occur for a long time. Compounding the situation of homes becoming territorialised is the difficulty to convict the perpetrators for the overburdened South African Police Service (SAPS) and the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA). Without witnesses, the burglars often avoid arrest or remain in custody for brief periods of time, remaining in or returning to the communities where they repeatedly burgle.

My analysis on return and prolonged burglaries draws on ethnographic data which was collected in Cape Town between 2018 and 2019, in a police precinct known as Kraaifontein. After introducing the burglary problem of South Africa more generally, and how this crime is framed by analysts and authorities, I will focus on two cases from my thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork. The first is of a lower-middle-income and single-parent household, of the coloured population group, in the central area of Kraaifontein. The second is of a middle-income household, of the white population group in northern Kraaifontein. The purpose of these cases is to illustrate the experiences of such households when it concerns particular types of burglaries - return and prolonged burglaries - which entail the retargeting of victims. The crass nature of these burglaries is especially defined by four main characteristics. These are the durations of their intrusions, the theft of certain belongings, the preparedness of these burglars to leave material traces as 'marks' to intimidate the victims and the residential proximity of burglars to the victims. I consequently show that while the extractive character of these burglaries does not entail direct contact between perpetrators and victims, these can also be violent through indirect methods that are especially symbolic in nature.

Criminal context and methodology

A wide range of actors provided their time to speak to me about property crime in Kraaifontein. After receiving permission, I was mainly based at the Kraaifontein police station where I could interact with Visible Policing officers, unit commanders and detectives. I also conducted a docket analysis of closed Housebreaking and Theft (i.e., residential burglary) and Home Robbery cases in the station's archive, mainly of recent incidents in the precinct. When I was present in Kraaifontein, gang activity was especially located in the townships, spilling into the surrounding areas. This contributed to an annual murder tally of 186 individuals during 2018/19 alone. This figure also made Kraaifontein a site of military deployment of the South African National Defense Force in 2019. Other homicides were attributed to fatal robberies, both in homes and public space, but especially interpersonal violence over weekends with high alcohol consumption.

Kraaifontein has the highest incidents of burglaries of the Western Cape province of South Africa. It was the eighth worst burglary precinct in South Africa after Vanderbijlpark in the Gauteng province. There were about 1000 burglary incidents and much fewer home robberies in

2018/19.¹⁰ Burglaries were fairly evenly dispersed across the precinct, with the exception of coloured-majority townships that were gang strongholds. Few burglaries were reported here. The most valuable property was commonly stolen in lower-middle-income and middle-income areas outside townships, considering the relative material wealth of households here. I came into contact with burglary victims based on random sampling throughout Kraaifontein's neighbourhoods. The majority of the interviewed respondents had experienced more than one burglary incident since living in Kraaifontein. New incidents were likely not connected to the initial burglary, and sometimes there were years without experiencing another burglary incident.

Although, about a quarter had experienced intensive periods of burglaries occurring in quick succession, and the suspects were usually known. For this article I will concentrate on the experiences of the Nel and April households as reflecting exemplary types of repeats, common in their respective areas of residence. I conducted multiple home visitations to each household over a six month period to keep track of new incidents and the family's emotional state. At their homes they could talk about the incidents and show me what happened. There was also general telephone communication throughout and after this period. Apart from victims, I also relied on eleven underworld informants. These underworld informants could be grouped into two categories: insiders and active offenders. The insiders knew how Kraaifontein's underworld functioned through social (e.g., by being the family or friends of gang members), professional proximity or past involvement. Some insiders were trusted by active offenders, leading me to interviews with two gang leaders and three active theft offenders who were also gang members. Three of the active offenders spoke voluntarily to me, while two theft offenders were paid a small fee for their time. Most underworld informants were interviewed several times depending on certain events that unfolded during my fieldwork and information which needed clarification. All participants in my fieldwork and some places have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Most interviews were conducted in Afrikaans, the main language of everyday communication in Kraaifontein, and translated by the author.

Residential burglaries in South Africa

Many types of property crimes affect South Africans. These are commonly divided into two general categories: robbery and theft, which include various subtypes. Robberies that occur in public space and inside homes entail that armed perpetrators direct violence at their victims to get the property that they want. Residential robberies are dangerous situations, carrying the possibility of other contact crimes, such as physical assault, rape and/or the murder of victims. Thefts do not include this immediate possibility of contact crimes, whether it is shoplifting, general theft or burglaries, the perpetrators are usually stealthy. Residential burglaries, under this category, do not include the immediate capitulation of the victim(s). Yet, they occur far more frequently than residential robberies in South Africa, especially in cities and large towns. In the 2018/19 financial year alone, the SAPS recorded around 220000 residential burglary cases as opposed to around 22400 residential robbery cases,¹¹ almost a tenfold difference.

An important reason for high burglary rates in South Africa are social and economic inequalities. Where the distribution of material wealth is unequal in an urban environment and region, there are bound to be property crimes. Burglary rates in South Africa are higher in police precincts that are the wealthiest among their neighbours.¹² Accordingly, Demombynes and Özler state that burglars who reside in socially and economically deprived areas,¹³ usually travel to

neighbourhoods where the expected material returns from burglaries will be the highest.¹⁴ But while environmental, socioeconomic and historical factors often propel offenders to target suburbs,¹⁵ burglaries do not only affect wealthier segments of the population. Lower-income residents also often become victims.¹⁶

During my own fieldwork, it became clear that there was another general reason why certain households were targeted in Kraaifontein, common across most socio-economic divides. Besides other factors, such as the home's security features and getaway routes,¹⁷ the availability of specific goods inside homes determined whether to target a household or not.¹⁸ As observers have noted elsewhere,¹⁹ the prevalence of burglaries goes in tandem with an illicit market for particular commodities. As the strong market pull from Asia for abalone, with this exotic produce subsequently being poached from the South African and shores by transnational syndicates,²⁰ similar principles apply to 'hot products' found inside homes.²¹

Career burglars are specialised at locating and stealing these hot products, usually expensive, portable and branded commodities. After theft, these stolen goods are taken to an intermediary (or 'fence'), who forms part of the criminal network, in exchange for drugs or money. Compared to other African countries, South Africa's globalised economy has provided a particularly high density of such commodities owned by many residents, who may also not necessarily be affluent. Coupled with low conviction rates of theft transgressions, this makes South Africa an ideal 'harvesting ground' for transnational organised crime, often interlinked with other illicit trades and local gang formations.²² In Kraaifontein, many gang members were unemployed men who became career burglars. They mainly stole in-demand commodities for a methamphetamine (*tik*) addiction and out of obligations towards gang leaders. Leaders were the suppliers of narcotics. But loose from their obligations towards leaders, gang-affiliated burglars also sometimes disposed of stolen goods into the local informal economy through 'side-jobs'.

Housebreaking and Theft

Having sketched the main driving forces behind prevalent residential burglaries in South Africa, this article's primary concern is to show how this crime takes place and affects people. In South African criminal law, as it is applied by SAPS officers and the Criminal Justice System, a residential burglary incident constitutes two components. First, an accused must have the intention of breaking into the premises unlawfully. He/she has to be a stranger when breaking-in, who did not have permission from the owner to do so. After unlawfully entering, the second offense is usually the theft of property inside the premises. While these are two offenses, when proven, this is treated as a single offense for the purposes of punishment.²³ This is why residential burglary incidents are documented as Housebreaking and Theft (HT) cases on dockets. These were some of the most common dockets in the archive that I frequented. Although, such closed case dockets usually indicated unsuccessful convictions. A HT case is often difficult to prove, usually because there are no witnesses.

Around the world, burglaries entail the targeted intrusion of a home by burglars for the purposes of removing the valuables of residents who are away.²⁴ But unlike this understanding of how a burglary incident most frequently unfolds, the reality is more complicated, especially in South Africa. Often the perpetrators do target a home while residents are present. I came across incidents when residents woke-up the next morning to find the physical damage of forced entry, and their belongings stolen. Other times, sleeping residents woke-up from the suspicious noises of suspects trying to enter the home, especially breaking glass, dogs barking or a window being

fiddled with. The waking resident would then commence to confront the suspects, after which the suspects usually scattered from surprise. There were also incidents when the suspects were already inside the home, still managing to snatch some valuables while being shouted at to leave. The reason why these scenarios were not home robberies was because the likely or clearly armed suspects did not confront the residents with the immediate intent to harm them. The theft of property, or its intended theft, did not take place by intentionally using violence or threats of violence to force the handing over of property.²⁵ Their intent was rather to burgle.

Apart from these invasive incidents, there were two types of intrusion into homes that severely impacted Kraaifontein residents, despite the victims not having directly seen the burglars during the intrusions: prolonged and return burglaries. Aiden Sidebottom has elaborated on the distressing phenomenon of the latter.²⁶ He showed that in Malawi relatively wealthy homes that did not look like the usual lower-income dwellings, experienced repeat-victimisation in crime-prone areas.²⁷ These homes are where burglars usually find enduring success in removing valuables. This form of repeat-victimisation was a comparable experience to the Aprils, the first case that I will discuss.

The prolonged burglary is also a form of repeat-victimisation. Although, this entails that burglars spend long periods of time inside the home while the residents are known to be away for a long time. This was the experience of the Nels, discussed in the second case. While return burglaries constitute sporadic intrusions, with prolonged burglaries the burglars spend hours in the home. Both prolonged and return burglaries are rather intimidatory in nature on a symbolic level, than being physically dangerous for the inhabitants. Although, these incidents do not rule out the possibility of physical violence in the future.

Incidents

The Nels lived across the N1 national highway in Kraaifontein's northern middle-class suburbs, where burglars residing in a nearby informal settlement, known as *Die Gat*, often orchestrated prolonged burglaries over the December holidays, when many residents left to visit family elsewhere in South Africa. The Aprils lived in older central Kraaifontein, a previous white working-class area during apartheid, but now home to different population groups. This area was prone to repeat burglaries committed by proximate offenders, originally from other areas, residing in occupied central homes left virtually abandoned by previous owners. While both households could afford building insurance, which covers the home for structural damages, they could not afford household insurance for their possessions, or private security companies. They heavily relied on the services of the SAPS. Although, the Nels lived in an area with a dedicated neighbourhood watch. This organisation was founded by residents in response to the burglary problem.

Type 1: Return burglary

Shereen April was a divorced mother of three children. A lot had happened to the family in Sonsig Avenue since they moved into the home in 2012, not knowing about the prevalence of crime in the area. The persistent targeting of her home especially began after the corner house of Sonsig Avenue was occupied by a new family. It was known in Sonsig Avenue as the *hoekhuis* (meaning the 'corner house' in Afrikaans). Since the *hoekhuis* was occupied by an older woman with her adult children, Shereen had experienced a number of major burglary incidents and attempts

between 2016 and early 2019. Ten burglaries during this period had seen the successful removal of property, five of which were tied to the *hoekhuis* with certainty. There were also incidents of trespassing to intimidate Shereen when no property was stolen. Shereen noted the following about the *hoekhuis*:

Now this is the problem in our road. The house on the corner, that woman's son is a 28s gangster. He's not the violent 28s gangster; he's more into drugs. So at the moment he's drawing other people, from other sides, to this house. So they're busy breaking-in during the night. At my neighbour, about a month ago, they broke-in twice. The mother doesn't want to know anything about her son [and his activities]... Bennie doesn't want to be associated with the theft, so he lets them steal [accomplices from other areas].

(In-depth interview, February, 2019)

The son in his thirties, Bennie, who was often present in the *hoekhuis*, was regarded as the main problem. He was a member of the 28s prison gang. Apart from living in the *hoekhuis* some 50 metres away from Shereen, he had a shack (*hok*) over the N1 highway in *Die Gat*, a place where he usually took the stolen goods. Shereen was vulnerable to observation from the *hoekhuis* when she left the home alone for work everyday, often working over weekends. Her routines were known, with Bennie often perched on the low garden wall of the *hoekhuis*. With the help of younger men from the southern townships and northern *Die Gat*, who apparently revered Bennie, Bennie would not always join to commit the burglaries. But he was regarded as the orchestrator of criminal activity in the direct vicinity of the *hoekhuis*.

Since 2016, Shereen and her children have lost valuable property to burglaries, especially flat screen televisions (TVs), DVD players, smartphones, gaming consoles, tablets, branded *tekkies* (sneakers), jewellery, branded clothing, appliances and construction tools. The wheeled municipal dustbin was also often taken to transport the loot. The intruders knew exactly which items they wanted. They left the other articles of the home alone, stealing only what Shereen considered her luxuries and tools. She was particularly saddened with the loss of what she called her 'massive' TV, which she had spent her savings on. The lounge looked bare with the loss of a big TV screen and other possessions. The boys were especially bored without a *Playstation 3*, and prone to spend time on the street, which Shereen wanted them to avoid for fear of them being influenced by gangsters. In early 2018, the financial burden of property stolen during this incident alone totalled to about R25 000. Without household insurance, this left little money for other necessities, such as school fees, clothes and food.

This incident in early 2018 was followed by three burglaries during my fieldwork. Shereen was always convinced that Bennie and his 'clique' were responsible. In the last incident, they had forced entry to the backroom of the tenant, after they did not manage to open the security gate of the back door, which was upgraded in 2018. They still shattered the glass door in front of the security gate. The desperation used to gain entry was visible. The strength of Bennie and his assistants was regarded as remarkable, with chunks of wall being removed at the security gate. These broken walls and gates could not immediately be repaired by the building insurance repairmen after an initial incident, leaving the home and possessions vulnerable to more intrusions. In these situations, Shereen and the woman tenant were nervous, and wanted a 'giant' man to protect them from these offenders. A male acquaintance of the tenant came to sleep over.

Bennie had indirect ways of communicating with Shereen. Shereen and her sisters were convinced that these were premeditated gestures to intimidate her. The sisters, who visited to support Shereen after the incident, still had fresh memories of what Bennie had left behind after the early 2018 incident. For this incident Bennie had briefly been arrested, even showing the police where the TV was being kept. After his release, Bennie had subsequently left a ‘strange scissor’ on Shereen’s premises. It was not exactly a scissor in its entirety, but one of the two cutting blades of a stolen garden scissor. This single blade had been sharpened into a lean and forearm-length metal instrument with jagged and rusted edges, designed to rupture flesh during robberies, and certainly to show victims the possibility of the worst case scenario - stabbing the victim to death (see Figure 1). Apart from this homemade knife left on the premises, the morning after the most recent incident, after the sisters had visited the evening before, Shereen had discovered shattered glass strewn before the front door. It was the glass of the door that was shattered by the intruders less than 24 hours earlier in an attempt to gain entry. Shereen had cleaned this broken glass and disposed of it into her wheeled municipal dustbin. After spending a nervous night with broken security defenses, lying on guard in her bed, Bennie still managed to sneak the glass from the dustbin and strategically spread it in front of the door. The next morning, as Shereen left her front door, she walked into the strewn glass. This second gesture of strewn glass came after Shereen had angrily approached Bennie’s mother in the *hoekhuis*, who admitted that her son had stolen the property. Bennie did not take kindly to Shereen’s interference.

Type 2: Prolonged burglary

The Nel household was located in a typical middle-class residential area, with cul-de-sacs, small green playgrounds, but not particularly leafy. Reynard and Janeen Nel, the parents of two daughters, bought an affordable three-bedroom home here in 2009, about 350 metres from *Die Gat*. Since 2009, they had experienced attempts at forced entry, but never experienced a prolonged burglary before. This incident took place from the days leading up to the 2019 New Years and shortly thereafter, while the family went on Christmas holiday. The incident constituted multiple intrusions over a ten-day period. The burglars who intruded, known by the gang alias’ Gizzie, Adder and Rocco, belonged to the same prison gang as Bennie — the 28s — residing in *Die Gat*. With this incident, the burglars did not only leave with the commonly stolen goods, as was anticipated by the family, but other unexpected valuable objects. These were rather considered as objects of ‘sentimental value’.

The family viewed the incident as an intrusion into their home which was purposefully perverse in nature. This was despite the Nels not having faced or seen the burglars during the incident, except on their CCTV footage. The three burglars had systematically pillaged the home of various belongings and had a debauchery inside. Throughout the ‘stay’ the burglars also drank three whiskey bottles of *Johnnie Walker Black Label* from the spirits corner in the lounge, along with eating leftovers from the fridge, and non-perishable delicacies, like chocolates. Everything was turned upside down, but there was a neat pile of selected items that the burglars had placed on the kitchen counter to remove at a later stage.

With the return of the rattled Nels from holiday, who had been notified by the SAPS about the incident, the parents dropped the children at the neighbour. The difficult task of cleaning the mess had to be endured, especially for Reynard, who suffers from depression. Considering his condition, and the added stress of the whole ordeal, Reynard was unable to cope with the prospect of cleaning. They hired a cleaning service who did not know where things had to be placed. But ordering the

mess into heaps made it more bearable and created a sense of order. The couple's previous perception of a 'normal' burglary had completely changed, for which Reynard had taken calculated precautions, namely, hiding and taking along precious electronics, as well as adding thick bolts to sliding doors. As he noted:

What I also learnt was that my old view was wrong; they'll come in for the TV, and hi-fi's and electronics. That they'll come in, the alarm will go off, they'll grasp a few things, and they'll run. I never bargained that they would stay ten days in my home. If I had bargained on that, I would have hidden a lot more stuff... But on the other hand, every time you go on holiday, you might as well move homes, because every time you must pack up and pack out afterwards. So that also doesn't work. So I went for the fact that they don't want to steal that stuff; they would see it's [the TV] not here and take a few stuff and run...

(In-depth interview, January, 2019)

The expensive laptops, being portable, were taken along in anticipation of a 'normal' burglary; usually a once-off and quick intrusion for electronics. The large TV was hidden in an unsuspecting spot in the home. Had Reynard known about the brazen nature of intrusion during the festive holiday, when burglars had time to rummage, he would have taken extra precautions. But moving additional belongings, or having these hidden, was in any case impractical. Of the possessions that were left behind and visible, the burglars stole objects like perfume bottles, a branded jacket, silver cutlery, cosmetics, gaming consoles, power tools, audio equipment and jewellery that had high retail value. They still managed to squeeze R30 000 worth of goods from the interiors, the most valuable being construction tools.

Ornaments were also stolen from a glass cabinet. These were specially handmade by Reynard's deceased grandfather, and given to him as a boy. Before their theft, they were prominently placed in the glass cabinet of the lounge. Alongside these was his father's medal from World War II which Reynard had inherited. They could be put on display in the burglar's own home, but Reynard showed revulsion about the prospect that these would be turned into scrap metal, and subsequently regarded as worthless. Similarly, Janeen's Roman Catholic Rosary was stolen. She could not fathom why this had to be stolen as it was made from worthless materials. The contents of miniature champagne bottles from the couple's wedding day twenty years ago, were finished by the burglars. All these items held memories and values, and were consequently considered as irreplaceable.

Apart from these 'sentimental' objects that were stolen or violated, the family were also shocked at what the burglars left behind. As with the Aprils, these marks seemed to be premeditated gestures. Of one such gesture, Reynard said: 'They urinated on my daughters panties. They didn't just do this once, because it was soaked in urine. So much so that the structural insurance... They are going to build a new cupboard for my daughter because the scent absorbed into the wood' (In-depth interview, January, 2019). Moreover, the burglars tried to make fires inside the home in strange spots:

Then at three spots, there were attempts at arson in the house. They put a burning candle under our bed in our bedroom. Then they also burnt a candle under my

daughter's desk, with this candle also burning out. And the wax also went into the carpet... And inside my one little daughter's cabinet, they lit papers on fire.

(In-depth interview, January, 2019)

In all likelihood, according to Reynard and Janeen, the trio realised that their faces may have been captured by the CCTV cameras, and there was mounting evidence of their intrusion. Burning the house down would destroy the evidence of their intrusion. But then outside on the premises, the t-shirt of a burglar was left clearly visible in the avocado tree, as well as a homemade crowbar used as a tool to gain entry. Certainly, if the burglars cared about leaving evidence, these visible pieces of evidence would be removed by them. The whole scene with remaining marks, and what had been stolen, disturbed the Nels for months to come. They felt that the burglars had purposefully desecrated their home without reason.

Territorialising

As the above cases show, such incidents are frightening for the victims. What set these apart from the usual burglary, was that it was an experience without a clear ending. This was because of the repeated targeting of the same households by the same perpetrators, with the victims constantly anticipating another burglary. This had major financial, social and psychological repercussions. The more time the same burglars had to access the same homes, the greater the loss of property over the long-term. Some victims who I spoke to received psychiatric treatment. They were on medication to reduce their hyper-alert behaviours which caused insomnia. This was attributed to the loss of their property and the fear that the burglars may return for the remaining or replaced belongings, and to hurt them. Consequently, homes could hardly be left unattended, with burglar bars, dogs, gates, alarm systems and self-armament providing little comfort. The burglars had taken control over the household.

Let me analyse in more detail how and why return and prolonged burglaries could be considered as attempts by burglars to territorialise certain homes. I will do so by comparing how return and prolonged burglaries are particularly characterised in Kraaifontein by four main features.

Durations

In their study on why homes were retargeted, Ronald Clarke and colleagues categorised two types of repeats: early and delayed repeats.²⁸ The former meant that burglars retargeted the home before thirty days, and the latter, that burglars retargeted the home after thirty days. They found evidence in the United States especially of delayed repeats. With important differences, the Nel case showed early repeats and the April case delayed repeats. The Aprils had experienced a number of successful burglaries over a longer period of time, whereas the Nels experienced multiple successful burglaries within a 'single' incident over a shorter period of time. In both cases the same suspects retargeted the respective homes, but with different timeframes.

Whenever the Aprils had to leave home for work and school, the home was left vulnerable. Shereen also sometimes had to work over weekends and some evenings for an additional income, with the children sent away to spend time with their father. For Bennie, and/or his accomplices, there was no time to stay inside the home for prolonged periods, as the inhabitants hardly left for

very long. While there were longer periods of the Aprils not experiencing problems, usually when Bennie had been temporarily arrested, there were times of intense retargeting over a few weeks, and months. Some of these incidents saw the actual intrusion of burglars, other times there were attempts late in the night. As was shown, the burglars also entered the premises to intimidate Shereen. All these incidents of the same burglars returning are hard to place into a neat timeframe and rather haphazard.

At the Nels the concern of burglary was more pronounced during the festive holidays, when they had to leave for long periods of time to visit family in Mossel Bay. Throughout the year, Janeen was at home as a stay-at-home mother. It follows that the burglars had far more time to intrude the home and rummage through the interiors when all the inhabitants were visibly away. Although, during the burglary, the burglars were technically not inside the home for a consecutive period of time, 'living' in it, until the Nels' return. They entered and left the home over a ten-day period, conducting multiple return burglaries, usually arriving in the late afternoons to midnight, and leaving again by sunrise. Next to the decreased vigilance of the neighbours, by late-afternoon, and especially in the dark evenings, it became clearer that the inhabitants would not return from their holiday. Moreover, the same burgling trio did not always spend time with each other, but came in alternating pairs, and sometimes alone, to remove property. At this time of the year they were busy, according to the neighbourhood watch, 'Christmas shopping' at various uninhabited homes, including the Nels.

Property

The international experience shows that an important reason why burglars sometimes retarget specific households is because the home has become a consistent repository of valuables for burglars and middlemen.²⁹ Burglars may have had to leave in a rush with an insufficient amount of valuables after the first intrusion, wanting to return to fetch what property remains. They may also return once the victim replaces what was stolen, now knowing more details about the household - both physical and social - making it an easier place to target than a new household.³⁰ Similarly, at the Aprils, Bennie and his accomplices targeted specific valuables that were generally stolen in Kraaifontein, particularly portable electronics. When Shereen's massive TV was stolen, she replaced it with another, but smaller, flat screen TV. Whenever Shereen seemed to replace what was stolen, she was targeted once more, until the point that she virtually had no more valuables left. Without any property steal, there was no point in burgling. While the rhythms of intruding or peace largely corresponded with Shereen's own consumer habits, or lack thereof, at the Nels it was not this clear.

The Nels had taken precautions to hide the TV and take the more portable electronics with them. The burglars were consequently not able to locate everything they usually steal, specifically devices and screens, but did find some jewellery and power tools throughout the ten-days. These are considered as semi-precious commodities by local gangs. What was completely unexpected was that the burglars also stole inexpensive but symbolically valuable objects, which did not have a wide-ranging secondhand market. These symbolic objects could not be bartered for the *tik* that the burglars generally wanted from their leaders, a narcotic often used by burglars belonging to the so-called Number Gangs.³¹ The symbolism that these objects contained related to memories of marriage, deceased parents and religious values for the Nels. The theft of such objects seemed premeditated in the sense that the burglars wanted to purposefully scar the inhabitants, and spite them for not having the other in-demand commodities. While electronics and other commodities

could eventually be replaced by the victims at retail stores with enough money, these symbolic objects were regarded as inseparable from the family's heritage, and consequently irreplaceable. Reynard was never going to get the artefacts back which represented, in material form, his father and grandfather. Having touched on the possible reasons for removing certain possessions from the home, I will now look at what burglars left behind.

Marks

In England, Tony Chapman observed that the sense of comfort that a home brings, that residents have before being targeted by burglars, was spoilt after the intrusion.³² Similarly, in both cases, the victims immediately correlated a sense of alienation from their usual places of comfort to the mess left behind by the burglars, or visible damage to the home at entry points. While in April's case the mess was pronounced at entry points and cupboards, at the Nels, the sight was clearly horrendous. The burglars had time to rummage, and they helped themselves to all kinds of food and heavy liquor. Adding to this brazenness of burglars literally making themselves at home, were what seemed to be other premeditated and mysterious marks to communicate with the victims. As the symbolic objects of the Nels, these marks were also symbols, which means that the material properties of the remaining objects transmitted specific meanings to the victims viewing them.³³

While the individuals viewing them interpret the objects subjectively, the inherent material properties of these objects also transmit meaning on a meta-level.³⁴ In other words, the objects are understood to mean something in a particular social situation and place, namely, an invasion of domestic space.³⁵ Because these objects are known to have been created by dangerous people, these signal the predatory behaviour of the perpetrators directed at the victims. When placed inside the home or on the premises in a particular way, marks consequently personify the presence of burglars and their ability to invade. The marks show the claiming of the home's interior and the possibility of future returns to it. In extreme instances, these also show the possibility of homicide.

At the Nels, one of these marks was the daughter's panty, soaked in urine, and spots where fires were started. For Reynard and Janeen, the panties were consciously soaked in urine, because there were no irregular drops of urine which had dripped over and around the clothing item. The item had repeatedly been urinated on in a targeted way, to a point that it was completely soaked. Soaking the panty with the bodily excretion of dangerous men, was an act of humiliating the teenage daughter and family. The strong scent of urine is hard to eliminate, which demarcates the burglar's presence inside the home, even when gone. What was a conundrum were the spots where fires were started, perhaps relating from methamphetamine usage or light. Although, starting a fire inside a stranger's home is certainly going to be read as a hostile act.

When it comes to other and perhaps clearer marks that intimidate the victims, Shereen was left with two marks during my fieldwork. The first was a previous gardening tool that was changed into a jagged knife for robberies, which was placed on her premises. The second was strewn glass before her front door. Both were placed after respective incidents and events, namely, when Bennie had either been released from custody, or when he knew through his mother that Shereen had opened a case against him. The knife and glass consequently conveyed to Shereen that he was showing who was in control. He would not disappear from her life because burglary cases generally do not lead to prosecution without witnesses. He had the freedom to intrude her home and steal whenever he wished. He could even kill her if she did not watch out. Apart from a weapon manufactured by criminals, likely by Bennie himself, he used the material remnants of the housebreaking scene, broken glass, to highlight Shereen's defenselessness.

What all these marks as symbols further indicate, is that the burglars did not mind leaving forensic evidence at the scene, during and after an incident. Usually, professional burglars are shown to be clean, making sure not to leave evidence that can link them to the crime scene.³⁰ Members of the so-called Crowbar Gang were a classic example of this in Kraaifontein, even somewhat admired for their cleanliness.³¹ But often the reverse was true, where very few forensic investigations successfully led to Housebreaking and Theft prosecutions, which resident career burglars knew. Both prolonged and return burglaries allowed for the remainder of marks precisely because of their repeated nature, which inevitably leads to more indirect contact between perpetrators and the victim's home.

Vulnerability and urban proximity

Analysts have suggested that certain households are more at risk to repeats when the targets are considered as 'easy,' in combination with owning in-demand valuables.³⁶ This was similarly stated to me by a local gang leader responsible for orchestrating burglaries. At risk in Kraaifontein were especially frail and single occupants, with weak home security features. Such security features could often be weakened with intrusions, with victims unable to keep-up with repairs. Although, these vulnerabilities were largely offset by not owning expensive valuables. As the leader told me in figurative language, 'it's easy to target an old woman, but if her handbag has nothing inside it, he'll [the offender] be very angry with himself' (In-depth interview, March, 2019). In other words, there is no point in pursuing an easy target without valuables.

Shereen felt vulnerable as a single-parent and woman, who missed having a man to protect her. Kraaifontein has a generally conservative religious population, mainly Christian, but also Muslim, where men were expected to defend their families as the 'protectors' from criminals. They often had to lie on guard half-awake in the front lounge, where intruders were thought to most likely break-in at night. Burglars were particularly afraid of armed male residents, even acquiring charms from diviners to alleviate their anxiety of getting shot or beaten. But this did not deter their pursuit of reaching the property if it was valuable enough. Taking on the protector role, Reynard had often felt compelled to check-up on noises at night to chase away burglars. As the only adult in the front of the home, where burglars usually arrived, single-mothers like Shereen also took on this role.

In both cases, however, household vulnerability was also attributable to the proximity of resident burglars. Unlike the usual idea in South Africa that burglars reside in townships, travelling some distance to suburbs to burgle, repeat offenders were practically neighbours of their victims. It was only in northern Kraaifontein that the Crowbar Gang reflected the classic example of burglars arriving by car from Cape Town's other townships, specifically Delft and Philippi, targeting suburban lounges with flat-screen TVs through their famous 'smash-and-grab' burglaries. Although, generally speaking, burglars were locals, who could walk into and observe their direct residential surroundings for burgling opportunities. When visiting the Aprils, I could also see Bennie perched on the low garden wall, not too far away, looking at the homes. Having the right location and time to observe the routines of residents, and what they owned, was a fundamental advantage. Acts of intimidation could also be carried-out. Where the Nels resided, the burglars from *Die Gat* wandered into the suburbs adjacent to this small informal settlement, analysing who was away or asleep, and what they owned.

After apartheid, Kraaifontein underwent major urban changes which provided this proximity between victims and perpetrators, a problem more familiar to township residents.³⁸ Before their

arrival, the suburb of the Aprils had undergone a so-called ‘white flight’,³⁷ with some houses of residents from the apartheid era left abandoned or cheaply rented out. The relocated property owners who still owned houses could not legally evict the new inhabitants who were unable to pay rent. Gang members and their families had also moved into these houses, with their criminal contacts frequently visiting. The *hoekhuis* is an example of this, when such houses become satellite bases of trans-local criminal networks. These bases have had a direct impact on the surrounding burglary rates, with the added problem that *tik* is also available for local and younger residents, who steal to satisfy an addiction. The gang-affiliated inhabitants have the aim to extract property from neighbouring homes and smuggle valuable stolen goods out of the area. As a result, these houses have also been a cause for the local housing market to become unstable. This instability made Shereen stuck and unable to sell her house when she desperately wanted to move away. Few people are prepared to buy homes in a neighbourhood with a criminal reputation, unless this aspect is unknown to potential buyers. Indeed, it only later occurred to Shereen that the previous owner of her home, a resident from the 1950s, had moved away because of property crime incidents. By the end of my fieldwork, tenants did not even want to rent the backroom from Shereen out of fear of becoming victimised.

Die Gat was itself a rather peculiar situation of proximity between victims and perpetrators: a pocket of poverty between middle-class suburbs. This settlement grew in the 1990s from being a small Moravian community with some dispersed cottages, to many scattered dwellings and backyard structures made of corrugated iron sheets. Some of these dwellings also became nodes of criminal activity, especially of gang members belonging to the Number Gangs. One such dwelling is where a General of the northern 28s lives, to whom lower-ranking burglars bring stolen goods in exchange for *tik*. This includes Bennie from central Kraaifontein, who also has a dwelling in *Die Gat*.

Conclusion

Prolonged and return burglaries in South Africa are a way of laying claim to specific households by resident burglars, often gang members, who repeatedly target the same victims. Territorialisation is achieved through retargeting and especially by committing gratuitous acts, that are in essence symbolic, within the premises and interiors of homes. Through the removal or placement of symbolic objects, these always refer back to the perpetrators and what they are capable of, especially their ability to intrude, defile and deprive the household of material wealth on a recurring basis. I would suggest that these types of burglaries do not only have a practical dimension, that of quickly looting the appropriate property, but are also designed to further torment the victims by establishing control over them and their homes.

Number Gang mythology seems to legitimate such repeats in an urban environment with material inequalities. Specifically white households are viewed by burglars as previous colonial oppressors, from whom wealth may be redistributed by men who are bandits, to fellow destitute people.³⁹ As I was told, ‘we’re taught in prison to only steal from the *boere* [white-Afrikaners], and not from our own [previously disadvantaged]’ (In-depth interview, July, 2018). Although, it is hard to comprehend how Shereen as a person of colour, a struggling single-mother, fits into this Robin Hood myth.⁴⁰

Though not a reflection of all burglary incidents, prolonged and return burglaries were surprisingly common during my fieldwork in Kraaifontein, where many residents were not once-

off victims. Further research on repeat-victimisation burglaries is required, especially in other high property crime precincts across South Africa and Africa. While burglaries are clearly one of the most common property crimes in South Africa, little attention has been given to understanding their often aggravated and gratuitous characteristics. Similar to the focus of the SAPS, home robberies are regarded as a priority crime amongst researchers, while burglaries can be similarly disturbing crimes. Exactly because the SAPS is overburdened with priority crimes - murder, rape and robbery - it is almost impossible to give residential burglary cases adequate attention in such precincts, despite their frequent occurrence. Without witnesses, these are perhaps even harder crimes to solve than contact crimes.

Considering this security vacuum, the main recommendation of this paper is for residents in high crime precincts not to own presently popular commodities, but rather older models and technologies, as this would reduce the risk of homes becoming repositories for stolen goods. Burglars are unlikely, for example, to steal an old-fashioned 'box' TV, when the secondhand demand is presently strong for in-fashion flat screen TVs. Adding more home security features, while possessing such in-fashion commodities, will not necessarily keep offenders out. Unfortunately, this would mean that residents sacrifice the very modern commodities that define their identities and are often necessary for work (e.g. laptops, smartphones, etc.).⁴¹ Even if ridding the home of the 'bait' which lures burglars inside, this does not always guarantee safety. The case of the Nels shows that burglars will sometimes leave during periods of the year with seemingly worthless objects. But to steal bric-a-brac is not the initial goal of an intrusion.

Notes

1. STATS SA, 'Victims of Crime Survey'.
2. See, Zinn, *Home Invasion*; Newham, 'Reclaiming Our Homes?'; Strydom and Schutte, 'A Theoretical Perspective'; Bruce, 'Anger, hatred of just heartless?'
3. STATS SA, note 1 above.
4. Chapman, 'Spoiled Home Identities.'
5. Johnson, 'Repeat burglary victimisation'.
6. Johnson, note 5 above. Also see Farrell and Pease, *Once Bitten, Twice Bitten*; Bernasco et al., 'Learning Where to Offend'.
7. See Kleemans, 'Repeat Burglary Victimisation'; Bernasco, 'Them again?'
8. Johnson, note 5 above.
9. For exceptions in South Africa see Wilson, 'Residential Burglary in South Africa'; Snyders and Landman, 'Perceptions of Crime Hot-Spots'.
10. See SAPS, 'Crime Statistics'.
11. SAPS, note 10 above.
12. Demombynes and Özler, *Crime and Local Inequality*.
13. Also see Breetzke and Horn, 'A Geodemographic Profiler'.
14. Demombynes, note 12 above.
15. See for example Breetzke and Cohn, 'Burglary in Gated Communities'; Clark, 'The near repeat'.
16. Wilson et al., 'Residential Burglary in South Africa'.
17. See Clark, note 15 above.
18. Cf., Wilson, note 16 above.

19. Sutton, 'Stolen Goods Markets'; cf. Gerber and Killas, 'The Transnationalization of Historically Local Crime'.
20. See Steinberg, 'The illicit abalone trade'; Scheper-Hughes, 'Rotten trade'.
21. Clarke and Webb, *Hot Products*.
22. Cf., Shaw, 'West African Criminal Networks'.
23. Joubert, *Applied Law for Police Officials*.
24. Mawby, *Burglary*.
25. See Burchell, *Principles of Criminal Law*.
26. Sidebottom, 'Repeat burglary'.
27. Also see Trickett, 'What is different about high crime areas?'.
28. Clarke et al., 'Explaining Repeat Residential Burglaries'.
29. Sutton et al., *Handling Stolen Goods and Theft*; cf. Schneider, 'Reducing the Illicit Trade'.
30. Clarke, note 28 above.
31. Cf., Steinberg, *Nongoloza's Children*.
32. Chapman, note 4 above.
33. Robb, 'The Archaeology of Symbols'.
34. Turner, 'Social Skin'.
35. Blok, 'The Enigma of Senseless Violence'.
36. Clarke, note 24 above.
37. See, Carrier and Hayman, 'Consumption and Political Economy'; Grant and Thompson, 'City on Edge'.
38. See, Glaser, 'Violent Crime in South Africa'.
39. Cf. Steinberg, note 31 above.
40. Another justification provided was that *tik* addiction starts to control burglars.
41. See Miller, *Consumption and its Consequences*'.

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