**Home Invasion in South Africa**

*(1874, John Camden Hotten, The Slang Dictionary: Etymological, Historical, and Anecdotal: an expression to satisfy a doubting person;* ***"Oh! it's as safe as Houses"*** *i.e., perfectly safe, apparently in allusion to the paying character of house property as an investment)*

Not in South Africa!

Home robbery (home invasion or robbery at residential premises), unlike house breaking (burglary), must be regarded as a violent crime due to the fact that people are at home when the perpetrators enter the home of the victim. Occupants are put at risk of personal injury (torture in many cases of farm attacks) and severe emotional trauma in the place where they are supposed to feel safest. This is the reason why home robberies are perceived by households as the most feared crime in South Africa. *(2014/2015 Victims of Crime Survey, Statistics South Africa).* An analysis of reported crime indicates that although crime levels in respect of robbery at residential premises show a 2.7% increase in the current financial year (2016) and it is unlikely that this crime will be curbed by the SAPS.

Home robberies barely make the news anymore in South Africa, unless someone is seriously injured. But what do we really know about home robberies? We know that this crime is a growing problem across the provinces. We know that in 2016, 20 280 cases were reported. We know that the police are not able to curb this crime (with the level of competence in the SAPS it is no wonder). Overall, only 61, 4% of affected households reported the incident to the police. The decision whether to report the incident depended heavily on the severity of robbery. For example, in cases where a person was injured, 83% reported the matter to the police. When nobody was injured, only 56% of incidents were reported. Almost half of those who failed to report did not believe the police could or would do anything about the incident. **SAPS and National Victims of Crime Surveys (NVCS)(Stats SA) analysis** indicate that 75% of home robberies occur at night, with the most vulnerable times being in the late evening between 21:00 and 23:59 and very early morning between 00:00 and 02:59. More than half (55%) of home robberies take place at these times, in all likelihood because people’s guards are down when they are relaxing or asleep. Two-thirds (66%) of home robberies are committed by small groups of two to three robbers. Most robbers were said to be males between 15 and 34 years of age.

Weapons were used in almost all cases (99, 9%) by those committing home robberies. Interestingly, the 2012 NVCS data revealed that firearms were only used in a quarter of cases and knives were present in a further quarter. Police statistics indicate a higher level of firearm use compared to the NVCS: SAPS docket analysis shows that three in every four home robberies (77%) were committed with firearms. This discrepancy may say more about reporting patterns than the nature of the crime: it is possible that the presence of a firearm increases the likelihood of the incident being reported to the police as. The SAPS found that in 56% of cases, robbers gained access to the premises by forcing the victims to let them into the house. In just over 40% of cases the perpetrators managed to gain access to the premises and surprised the victims. In 4% of cases the robbers were let into the home by the victim, who didn’t realise that they were criminals.

The 2012 NCVS found that 80% of households did not resist the intruders. Those who resisted were more likely to suffer injuries. Of those who resisted, 40% were injured, and of those who didn’t resist, only 13% were injured. Overall, injuries were sustained in 20% of cases. In half of these cases, someone was admitted to hospital but no deaths were reported.

In 2006/7, Rudolph Zinn, a senior lecturer at Unisa conducted research into the reasons why this crime is so prevalent in SA. (See his book based on his research *Home Invasion: Robbers Disclose What You Should Know*) The information in this book was validated by the findings from a recent case docket analysis done by the police of a 1000 home robbery cases reported to them.

This is what he found:

**On burglaries:** Burglary is the biggest crime hitting neighbourhoods. There are over 240 000 burglaries every year in South Africa Most burglaries take place during the day when people are at work. They will usually pick a neighbourhood and go from house to house, ringing doorbells or intercoms to see if anyone is home.

They want to get in and out as quickly as possible so any noise, like dogs on the property, would act as a deterrent.

He said burglars tried to avoid houses with low walls, or fences you could see through from the street as they wanted to be able to work undisturbed and unnoticed.

Sliding doors are an easy way for burglars to get into the house. All they have to do is lift it up off its rails and they are inside the house.

**On robberies at residential premises:** Robbers, however, are a different breed of criminal. Zinn found that the average home robber is in his 20s, a young man who is nevertheless a very experienced criminal who has committed over 100 crimes by the time he is arrested. He plans his robbery in advance (and very meticulously), after first obtaining inside information about the house and its residents. He often uses extreme violence, and will harm his victims if they put the robbery at risk. These men are very violent and have said in interviews with me that they are willing to use lethal force. House robbers do not like surprises and prefer striking when their victims are home.

The reasons for targeting certain homes and neighbourhoods were largely influenced by the availability of informants and perceptions of the family’s affluence.

They scout a neighbourhood to see how tight the security is. A patrol or neighbourhood watch factors in 68% on whether they go in or not, so having a good neighbourhood watch in the area can be a major deterrent.”

Zinn found that 77% of the robbers he interviewed said they had help from a source inside the house — a domestic worker, a gardener or a building contractor.

They want to know the layout of the house, where the safe is, and what the security system is like so they can get in and out as quickly as possible.

These men go for cash and jewellery, things that do not have serial numbers and cannot be linked back to the crime scene.”

Zinn said robbers were less likely to hit a home that had a perimeter alarm (either beams or an electric fence with alarm) as they said it gave the home owner more time to arm themselves and call police.

He added that robbers usually went into houses between 4 pm and 11 pm as people were at home and did not have their alarms set yet.

He said people who advertised home businesses or that they were selling a car were often targeted as burglars and robbers expected them to have large amounts of money in their homes.

**What can be done to prevent robberies at residential premises?**

Zinn found that the increase in home robbery has occurred because perpetrators see it as a high-gain low-risk undertaking. The only way that these crimes will be reduced is if the risk of going to jail for committing these robberies increases significantly. This will only happen if:

* home owners secure their premises
* there are improvements in crime intelligence, investigations and forensic capacity,
* greater collaboration between the police and prosecutors.

Home owners must implement multiple security layers such as perimeter security (electric fences with alarms), security lights, CCTV systems, alarm systems and even the presence of small dogs inside the home (large dogs outside the house is easily poisoned).

An effective armed response service contracted to come to the aid of the home owner in case of burglary or home robbery when alarms are activated.

However, determined and well-organised perpetrators can overcome all of these security measures.

Further security measures recommended:

* Secure all garden equipment after use. Spades picks and axes could be used to attack you or to break into the house. The tidier the premises are, the less likely it will attract attention.
* Test your security equipment regularly
* Be alert.
* Keep emergency numbers close by.
* Keep security gates locked.
* Ask for identification if somebody presents himself as a municipal, Eskom or SAPS official.
* Pretend that there is someone in the house with you, especially when you are alone.
* Maintain good communication with your neighbours, community watch and local CPF
* If an intercom system is required, use the new digital type systems that connect the person using the intercom to the cell phone of the home owner thereby giving the impression that the homeowner is at home.
* Make sure security systems are used, switch them on.
* Ensure vegetation does not pose a threat to your safety. Bushes near the entrance to the premises should be removed.
* The alarm system should be configured in such a way to allow remote panic activation.
* The CCTV system should be able to allow you to view the system remotely.



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*Forte Risk Management and Forte Tactical Response provide comprehensive security services in Gauteng.*

**Additional Sources:** Lizette Lancaster, Manager of the [Crime and Justice Hub](https://issafrica.org/crimehub), ISS Pretoria, Insight into the criminal mind Bongani Fuzile (Daily Dispatch Online), How robbers and burglars operate, 2015-05-23 10:22, Chelsea Pieterse