

Deciphering why petrol stations have become hot spots for crime in South Africa

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Abstract: In the ever-evolving landscape of criminal activity, petrol stations in South Africa have emerged as a prime target for malicious actors, capturing the attention of law enforcement agencies, researchers and various authorities. The rise in criminal activities at petrol stations in South Africa has become a mounting concern, with researchers and law enforcement agencies striving to understand the root causes and devise sustainable ways to curtail the scourge. This study explores the underlying factors that have contributed to the surge in criminal incidents at these perceived safe havens, delving into the empirical drivers of this alarming trend. The study employed a qualitative research approach which operated within the exploratory research design. A purposive sampling technique was utilised to select 10 petrol stations around Gauteng province. In this view, petrol attendants, petrol station owners and members of the security patrols participated in the study. A total of 30 participants gave their insights to the study. The findings revealed that petrol stations have become hunting grounds because of the availability of an assortment of items. Furthermore, the study established that the flourishing of crime syndicates, the environmental design of most petrol stations, limited to no periodic police patrols and outdated security systems are contributing factors to this conundrum. This paper posits that the transformation of petrol stations into preferred hunting grounds for criminals in South Africa is a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by the interplay of a lack of technological advancements to combat crime, pitfalls in the broader security landscape in the country and lack of pragmatism in implementing the Crime Prevention through Environmental Design strategy.

Keywords: Causes, Community safety, Criminality, Organised crime, Petrol stations, South Africa.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of petrol station-related crimes in South Africa reflects the broader challenges faced by the country as it is regarded as one of the most dangerous countries in the world (Mlepo, 2022). As Martin-Howard (2023) argues, South Africa records more than 2.1 million crimes annually and this plunges the socioeconomic development and community safety aspirations of the country at stake. From time to time, South Africa witnesses soaring acts of criminality associated with gun violence and shootings (Govender, 2020). The South African Police Service (SAPS) latest quarterly crime statistics released in June 2024, show that cases of 'other serious crimes' have increased by 2.7% in South Africa. A catalogue of these crimes includes farm attacks, carjacking, femicides, murder, rape, random tavern shootings, armed robberies, theft, cash-in-transit heists, and gun violence (Rakubu and Olofinbiyi, 2022).

Every community, business, institution and person are vulnerable to crime in South Africa (Buthelezi, 2020). It should be noted that petrol stations play a significant role in the mainstream economy (Pasara, et al., 2022). Petrol stations are also commercial sites for fast food restaurants, ATM banks, postal services, convenience stores, bakeries, and carwash facilities among others (Du Toit, 2016). Conveniently for consumers, most petrol stations are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and most of these services are rendered. In this view, petrol stations are a source of employment, supply fuel, and provide convenient stores for motorists and travellers among other contributions (Garidzirai, 2018).

Motorists, travellers, and community members use petrol stations for topping up fuel, recess, and buying other supplies (Pasara et al., 2022). While any business can be vulnerable to robbery, fuel stations in South Africa have become an easier target for criminals because of how easily they can access and exit without hindrances (Qonono, 2024). Petrol stations used to be safe havens for motorists, commuters and the general public. However, in recent times, petrol stations have become a prime target for criminals evidenced by harrowing criminal activities reported at these key economic hubs across South Africa (Qonono, 2024). Rakubu (2023) asserts that at least violent crimes are committed every day at a petrol station in South Africa. Research further indicates that research indicates that there are approximately 1100 criminal incidents that occur at petrol stations every year, while up to 42 people are killed at petrol stations annually across South Africa (DU Toit, 2016; Rakubu et al., 2023).

Since January 2024, media outlets have been awash with harrowing news of crimes that are flourishing at petrol stations in South Africa, issuing a stunning warning to motorists and travellers. Cases of car hijackings, ATM bombings, stock theft, and cell phone robberies are deemed rampant across South Africa. As Mlepo (2022) posits, petrol stations, with their high foot traffic and the presence of cash, valuables, and vehicles, have become attractive targets for organized crime syndicates and opportunistic individuals. This phenomenon reflects the broader challenges faced by the country in tackling crime (Rakubu et al., 2023). The magnitude of this phenomenon requires empirical research to unearth the factors that exacerbate the new dimensions of criminality. This is against the backdrop that there is a paucity of research that has zoomed into crime patterns related to petrol stations. A study of this nature is imperative to furnish law enforcement agencies, the business community, and community members with proactive steps to mitigate the risks faced by petrol stations and create a safer environment for communities and businesses.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study used the Crime Patterns Theory (CPT) to diagnose why petrol stations have become a prime target for crime in South Africa. The CPT emphasises when and where crime occurs instead of focusing on the criminal (Higgins and Swartz, 2018). The goal of the CPT is to envisage the relationship between the occurrence of crime and the locations in which they occur (Hiropoulos, and Porter, 2014). Some of the theoretical underpinnings of the CPT point to how criminal opportunities and occurrences are influenced by urban context and design (Brantingham and Brantingham, 2016). The CPT is further buttressed by crime generators and attractors (Brantingham and Brantingham, 2014). In this view, crime generators refer to areas that attract great numbers of people but this attraction to the location is not related to criminal motivation (Higgins and Swartz, 2018). On the other hand, crime attractors are areas that create well-known criminal opportunities, and therefore, highly motivated offenders with the intent to commit a crime go to these areas with the specific purpose of committing a crime. Consonant herewith, crime generators and attractors are areas that provide criminal opportunity and create crime hot spots (Hiropoulos and Potter, 2014).

According to the CPT, certain types of facilities may increase the risk of crime in their surrounding areas (crime generators). Examples of these types of facilities include schools shopping centres, stations, and parks (Groff and McCord, 2012) among a plethora of others. In South Africa, few studies have similarly identified so-called crime generators (Higgins, Swartz, 2018). That said, the CPT is relevant to this study as it provides lenses for understanding why and how new crime patterns such as targeting petrol stations emerge from time to time. The theory is relevant in dissecting how location affects the likelihood of criminal activities. Furthermore, the theory also helps in examining specific times when petrol stations are more vulnerable to crime. Importantly, the CPT can guide the exploration into the physical environment of the petrol stations and how it creates fertile grounds for criminality to flourish.

3. Literature Review

The literature on petrol stations as targets for crime is still evolving in the South African context. However, as Mlepo (2022) posits, the prevalence of petrol stations as prime targets for criminal activities in South Africa is a pressing issue that warrants in-depth examination. From the viewpoint of Thenga (2020), criminals often target petrol stations due to their inherent vulnerabilities, such as the

presence of cash, valuable goods, and isolated locations (Mlepo, 2022). The criminal activities, ranging from hijackings, cash in transit robberies, smash and grabs, ATM bombings, scamming of travellers, and theft to arson have resulted in significant losses for businesses that rely on these transportation networks, threatening trade participation and economic growth in the region (Mlepo, 2022). Other forms of violence include drive-offs which occur when a customer drives off after the car is filled up without paying; card-skimming of other customers' cards and verbal abuse, assaults or threats of petrol attendants (DU Toit, 2016). Crimes at petrol stations further expand to criminal activities against cargo transport, including hijackings, theft, and arson, has been a significant concern for businesses relying on South African roads (Mlepo, 2022). According to Thenga (2020), law enforcement agencies in South Africa have struggled to effectively combat these issues due to the lack of necessary skilled personnel, the flourishing of criminal syndicates, corruption and often working in silos. Maluleke et al., (2022) weigh in by denoting that one of the primary drivers of this trend appears to be the lucrative nature of the crimes committed at petrol stations.

An exploration by Thenga (2020), revealed that the compounding problem behind the proliferation of crimes at petrol stations is the perceived decrease in police presence and community-based crime prevention efforts. This has left neighbourhoods, citizens, and businesses including petrol stations, more susceptible to criminal activities (Maluleke et al., 2022). According to Rakubu et al., (2023), criminals have exploited this situation, knowing that the police are focused on other priorities, leaving these locations largely unprotected. As put across by Maluleke et al., (2022), the increase in cybercrime in South Africa, particularly targeting perceived government corruption, has also raised concerns about the security of petrol stations, which may be vulnerable to digital attacks. As internet connectivity and access continue to grow in Africa, the risk of cyber-incidents targeting the vulnerable petrol station industry is expected to increase (Rakubu et al., 2023). As crime rates have soared, individuals, businesses, and even the state have been compelled to invest heavily in security personnel, hardware, and technology to safeguard their assets and operations (Mlepo, 2022). This financial burden has placed a significant strain on the resources of these entities, underscoring the urgency for a comprehensive and cost-effective approach to addressing the security challenges at petrol stations (Rakubu et al., 2023).

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Study Context

Whereas petrol station-related crimes are a growing concern countrywide, this study used Gauteng province as a case. In this view, participants were drawn from petrol stations in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Gauteng province was selected drawing from Qonono (2024) who inferred that petrol stations in Gauteng are open 24 hours, seven days a week, and owned by companies such as Shell, Engen, BP, Puma, Total Energies and Sasol. Reports in the media also encapsulated that most petrol-related crimes occur at petrol stations in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Focusing on petrol stations in Gauteng, allowed the researchers to understand the diverse issues behind the surge in crimes at petrol stations. The researchers believed that the findings of this study provide insights into the dynamics of the problem faced by some of the petrol stations countrywide.

4.2. Research Approach and Design

The nature of this study required a research design that brings the participants' perspectives, experiences and interpretations to the fore. In this regard, the qualitative research approach was employed to gain finer details on the perceived causes of crimes at petrol stations. According to Bryant and Charmaz (2019), qualitative methods are suitable for providing contextual and rich descriptions of local realities. Also, qualitative research captures the depth and richness of individual perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2017). As Rubin and Babbie (2016) put across, in qualitative research the meanings and interpretations attached by people to the phenomena are explored, described, and construed in a natural setting. This study required a direct interface with the participants to establish their perspectives about the subject matter in a natural setting. The nature of the study also required the researchers to visit the petrol stations and engage with the targeted participants. The qualitative research approach operated within the exploratory research design. Rubin and Babbie (2016), denote

that exploratory design is appropriate to use when investigating an under-researched topic or new topic where little is known about it so that precise questions are generated for future research. As hinted before, there is a paucity of research on the cause of the soaring crimes at petrol stations in South Africa. This necessitated the utilisation of the exploratory research design.

4.3. Sampling, Sample Size and Data Collection

Since the primary focus of the study was petrol station owners, fuel attendants and security officials at petrol stations, a purposive sampling technique was adopted. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), purposive sampling allows the selection of participants according to the needs of the study aimed at clearly bringing out the phenomena under investigation. The advantage of using purposive sampling is that it enables the researcher to select participants who can answer the questions designed for the study based on their knowledge and experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The selection of petrol station owners, fuel attendants, and security officials was hinged on the fact that they have organic experiences of the crime patterns that unfold at their workplaces. The purposive sampling technique led to the selection of 30 participants to give their insights into the study. These were distributed as follows; 8 petrol station owners, 12 fuel attendants, and 10 security personnel. As Creswell and Poth (2018) posit, qualitative research is more concerned about the richness of the information gathered and not the number of participants reached out to. This is because of the likelihood of reaching data saturation during the data acquisition process. Data saturation is when the information being gathered starts to become repetitive and no new information emerges (Rubin and Babbie, 2016). In-depth semi-structured interviews were used as data collection methods.

4.4. Data Analysis

The qualitative data was analysed following the inductive route using the Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) whereby themes emerge from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The researchers followed the TCA data analysis phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019) which involve; familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, search and review of themes, searching, defining and naming of themes, interpretation, and compiling of information.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section highlights the findings that emerged from the semi-structured interviews with the participants. It provides the major themes that emerged from the data. These will be supported by direct verbatims from the participants. Each theme will be discussed in comparison with the theoretical proponents and literature.

5.1. Location and Accessibility

In identifying the causes behind the surge in crimes at petrol stations, the study established that location and accessibility were providing criminals with the courage to target. From the submissions made by most petrol station owners, it emerged that most petrol stations are located near major urban centres and roads which make them easily accessible to customers and criminals. Sometimes petrol stations are found in isolated locations. The petrol station owners had the following to say:

“...The nature of our business requires us to be strategically located where customers can easily access the services. That is why petrol stations are on major roads and in open spaces. This has made us to be easy targets because criminals access and exit easily...” (Petrol Station Owner, Johannesburg).

“... You may agree with me that most petrol stations in our country are not barricaded. That is why we have criminals who come and fill up their tanks and drive off. Even car hijackers, capitalise on the easy accessibility of the stations.” (Petrol station owner, Pretoria).

The study also established that issues to do with location and accessibility give the offenders confidence to execute their plans without fear of being intercepted. It also emerged from the interviews that people causing havoc at petrol stations study the set-up of these enterprises and the issue with easy accessibility contributes to the surge in crimes at petrol stations. This gives credence to the Crime Patterns Theory which asserts that location affects the likelihood of criminal activity (Higgins and

Swartz, 2018). This also gives credence to a study by Chikomba (2014) who posits that the strategic location and accessibility of these petrol stations make them vulnerable to various types of crimes, ranging from robbery, theft and robbery to violence and even vandalism (Chikomba, 2014). The researchers denote that the location and accessibility of petrol stations are vital factors in understanding and devising ways to address the issue of crimes associated with these establishments. This is because easy accessibility instils a sense of confidence in the offenders to cause havoc at these petrol stations knowing that by the time the police react, they would have escaped.

5.2. Availability of an Assortment of Goods and Items

In deciphering the factors contributing to petrol stations as hot spots for crime, the study established that the availability of various goods and items at petrol stations has made them easy targets for offenders. It should be noted that every and not all petrol stations in South Africa have mini supermarkets and fast food divisions. Some petrol stations have banking facilities such as ATMs. The availability of a whole range of products makes them easy targets for criminals. One of the petrol attendants had the following to say.

“...It is very uncommon for these criminals to walk away with nothing whenever they touch base at a petrol station. This is because there is a lot they can find in one place...” (Petrol attendant, Johannesburg).

“.... These people (offenders), target ATMs, customer’s cars, cell phones, and stock in the shops. They come with confidence that they won’t walk away empty-handed...” (Security personnel, Pretoria).

This study infers that the availability of diverse goods and products at petrol stations serves as attractors of crime as encapsulated in the Crime Patterns Theory. In this view, the theory denotes that crime attractors are areas that create well-known criminal opportunities, and therefore, highly motivated offenders with the intent to commit a crime go to these areas with the specific purpose of committing a crime (Hiropoulos and Porter, 2014). In light of the findings, Govender (2020) asserts that the presence of easily portable and valuable items, such as cigarettes, alcohol, and high-value electronics can attract criminal elements to target these locations. The findings further corroborate the interrogations by Du Toit (2016) who opines that the shift in the retail landscape of petrol stations from solely specialising in fuel sales to offering a wide range of merchandise has raised questions about the role these establishments play in facilitating criminal activities. The researchers contend that a wide range of crimes committed at petrol stations such as car hijackings, cell phone robberies, shoplifting, ATM bombings, and scamming bears testimony that criminals target the availability of various items at these establishments.

5.3. Outdated Security Systems and Low Police Visibility

The study also established that the dynamism of crime trends and patterns is not in tandem with the level of security measures at petrol stations. This is further compounded by low police visibility in many areas. It emerged from the interviews that current security systems at most petrol stations are not evolving with the sophisticated ways of criminality. From the submission made by petrol attendants and petrol station owners, the availability of cameras is not even a deterrence to these criminals as they look at the cameras and smile. The participants had the following to say.

“.... I can safely say crime is evolving but our security measures are stagnant. We have not yet embraced technology to the extent where we can curtail crime through technology....” (Petrol station owner, Pretoria).

“...Another challenge that makes crime flourish is the limited or no police visibility, especially at night. Private securities always arrive late and most of them are not equipped to counter these criminals...” (Petrol attendant, Johannesburg).

“... It is very rare to see security personnel or police camped at petrol stations. Criminals capitalise on this and attack. We are not safe and our clients are not safe. We need to beef up our security systems...” (Petrol station owner, Pretoria).

The study further established that the distance between most petrol stations and police stations compounded by resource constraints in the South African Police Service inculcates a sense of confidence that by the time the police react, criminality would have been executed. It also emerged that most criminals understand the security pitfalls at most petrol stations and that petrol attendants are not

trained to counter crimes. Therefore, this creates fertile grounds for crime to flourish. According to Rakubu et al., (2023), outdated security systems and low police visibility lead to a slower response rate when crime occurs. Criminals who target petrol stations have confidence that they can operate without swift interference from law enforcement. This is because a plethora of crimes are opportunistic and capitalise on the absence of strong security measures.

5.4. Crime Syndicates

In dissecting the factors contributing to crime at petrol stations, the study established that crimes at petrol stations continue to surge at the behest of crime syndicates. Sentiments across all study sites converged in ascertaining that a network of organised criminal groups capitalise on the vulnerabilities of petrol stations and wreak havoc. The syndicate may involve petrol attendants, the police and private security personnel. The perceptions of the participants emerged against the backdrop that organised crimes are rife and they pose a hurdle for law enforcement agencies to combat them. One of the participants had the following to say.

“... You may understand that we have rogue elements in the security cluster who work with criminals to destabilise any ecosystem. The issue of criminal syndicates cannot be ruled out when we talk about the surge in crimes at police stations...” (Petrol station owner, Johannesburg).

In light of the above, Minnaar (2015) opines that in South Africa corruption within law enforcement agencies enables crime syndicates to operate with impunity. As such, in the same way, crime syndicates are etched in other organised crimes such as smuggling of drugs, illicit cigarettes and trade as well as cash-in-transit robberies in the same way such can not be ruled out when dissecting petrol stations-related crimes in South Africa. At the time of writing this article, News 24 newspaper of 14 July reported a case of three police officers who were arrested for robbery of a cell phone at a petrol station in Free State. It can be posited that crime syndicates capitalise on the weaknesses of most petrol stations and execute their plans without any deterrence. In most cases, they work on inside information. These syndicates, driven by their insatiable greed and disregard for the law, have devised sophisticated schemes to exploit the vulnerabilities of petrol stations.

5.5. Environmental Design

The findings of the study revealed that the environmental design of most petrol stations in South Africa makes them susceptible to crime. In this view, it was established that the layout and physical environment of most petrol stations make them unable to deter crime. In this regard, the researchers observed that some petrol stations are located in areas surrounded by trees and uncut grass. This creates fertile grounds for opportunists to execute their plans at petrol stations and disappear without being apprehended. The following narration confirms this.

“... The design of most of our petrol stations makes it unsafe to operate free from crime...” (Petrol attendant, Pretoria).

This study draws from the Integrated Violence and Crime Prevention Strategy (ICVPS) which serves as an implementation tool of the White Paper on Safety and Security adopted in 2016 and aspires to enhance safety through environmental design (Rakubu et al., 2023). The study argues that Crime Prevention through Environmental Design remains a boardroom deliberation which is devoid of implementation. On that note, it is the duty of petrol station owners in partnership with municipalities to ensure that the environmental design of petrol stations does not serve as attractors of crime as buttressed by the Crime Patterns Theory (Brantingham, and Brantingham, 2016).

6. Conclusion

This study highlighted the causes of crime at petrol stations in South Africa. From the study's findings, it can be posited that the rise of crime at petrol stations makes customers perceive these establishments as unsafe which may make them avoid visiting. This impinges on the business operations of most petrol stations which on the other hand may make them a larger target for criminals. In summing up, the prevalence of criminal activity at petrol stations in South Africa is a complex issue with multifaceted implications. The combination of lucrative targets, reduced law enforcement presence,

crime syndicates, outdated security systems, location and accessibility highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to address this pressing challenge. Addressing the problem of petrol stations as targets for criminal activities in South Africa will require a multifaceted approach, including strengthening law enforcement capabilities, improving security measures at petrol stations, and enhancing the legislative environment to provide corporations with the necessary protection and support.

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