

Grahamstonians living in fear

What will a group of third year Journalism and Media Studies students find when they venture into the Neighbourhoods to investigate crime? The answers might be surprising.

Very few topics of conversation conjure heated responses like crime. Whether it's the inefficiency of the police, the promises of politicians or the brutality of the crime, everyone has an opinion. Somerset Heights, Oatlands North and Currie Park are hardly the epicentre of

Grahamstown's criminal underbelly. Most residents can afford to rely on Hi-Tec rather than a police force you can very well describe as inefficient and unreliable.

Some of you are even taking matters into your own hands; relying on paintball guns, revolvers and savage (if only in looks alone) dogs to guard your homes.

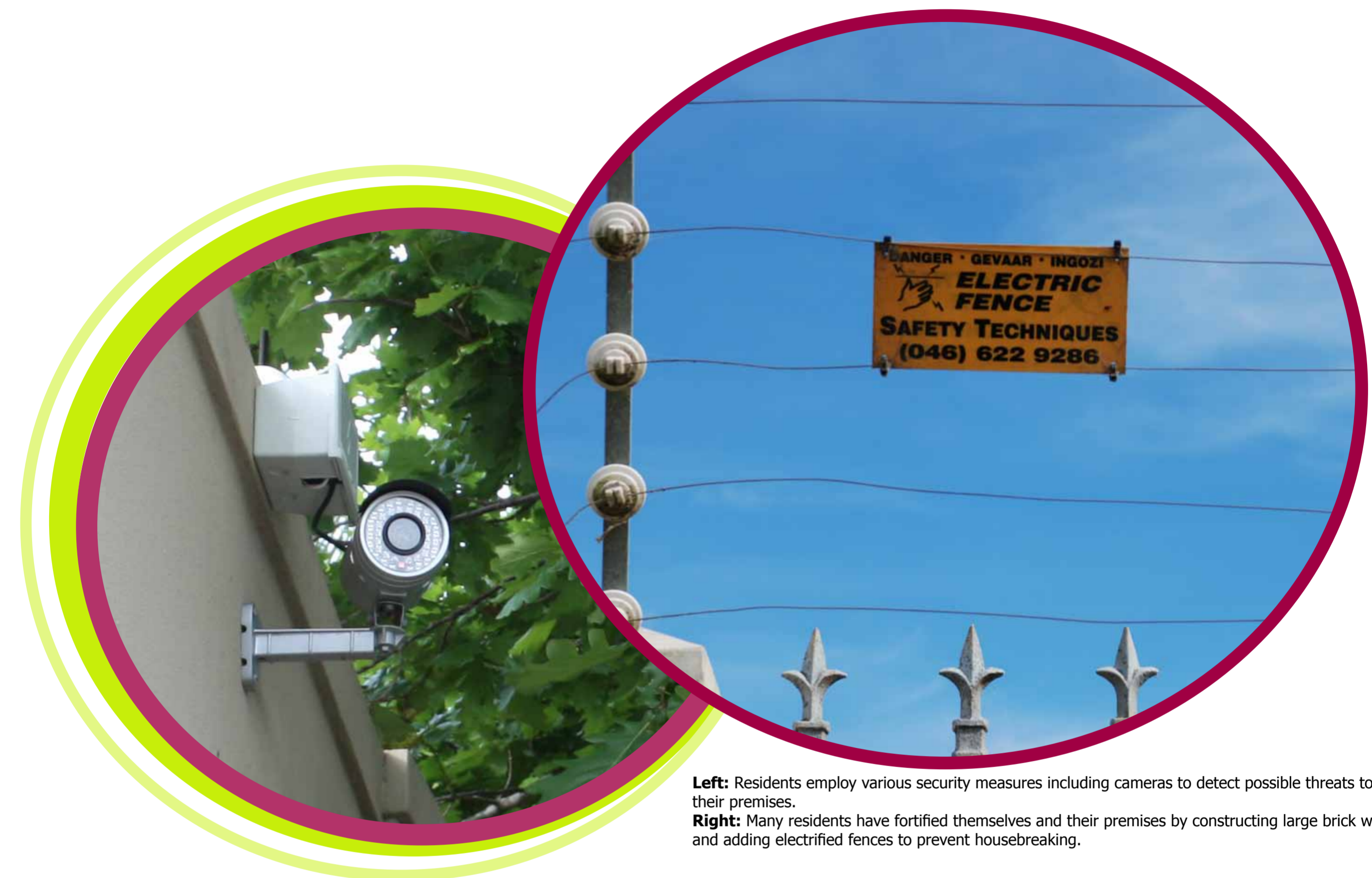
A tour of the neighbourhood is revealing; picket fences are being replaced with metres of cement.

Electrified fencing and barbed wire are no longer an exception to the norm.

Clearly community members are more fearful than ever before. But as outsiders we asked ourselves: is this the best way to create a sustainably safer community?

Are private security and vigilantism the best ways to combat rampant crime and even more rampant fear? Or can you find ways to become less isolated, working together as a community to ensure your safety? Is it possible to restore some confidence in the police and by doing so bring the two parties together to better the current situation?

We think so, but only you are qualified to answer these questions.



Left: Residents employ various security measures including cameras to detect possible threats to their premises.

Right: Many residents have fortified themselves and their premises by constructing large brick walls and adding electrified fences to prevent housebreaking.

The Psychology of fear

By Stacy Moreland

Maybe a curious shadow sweeps across the window. Maybe a peculiar noise echoes in the dark. At night our subconscious minds are left to wonder "what if?" while an endless newsreel of South Africa's latest crime statistics plays relentlessly in our heads. Clearly how safe we are has nothing to do with how safe we feel.

Deon Bovey has lived in Oatland's North for two years and says, "This is modern life, a neighbourhood watch could work, but everyone keeps too much to themselves, that's just the way it is." It appears that we have retreated to our domestic fortresses where varying levels of paranoia incite us to build higher walls around our families, leaving our neighbours to do the same.

However, the need to insulate ourselves against crime-caused fear has little to do with a reduction in actual criminal activity. The South African Stress and Health Survey found in 2008 that a third of our population will experience some form of violence in our lifetime. However Samantha Fox, who is currently completing her Masters in Counselling Psychology specialising in trauma counselling, says that it is possible for anyone to suffer from "vicarious victimisation". We live immersed in negative media, horrifying statistics and gruesome images. In this environment our empathy for others often makes us feel subconsciously victimised even when we ourselves are not the victims of crime. Without our knowledge we adopt a state of hyper-vigilance, ready to respond instinctively by 'fight or flight'. Simply put: we live in fear.

Neighbours Wayne Rathbone and Richard MacNally live me-

tres apart, yet they adopt very different approaches to the fear of potential attack. But both are certain that they feel absolutely safe and secure. Evidently 'safety' is as much a state of mind as a reality.

The Rathbones adopt a free-spirited approach. "We've been known to go to sleep with our keys still in the outside of our front door". The minor incidents of theft they've experienced they attribute to their own carelessness, such as the loss of a ladder left in the front yard or entry via a window left wide open to allow newly varnished floors to dry. "The location," they say, "that's where the real crime is".

While the Rathbones' relaxed attitude keeps them feeling secure Richard MacNally has reacted to threats by ensuring his property keeps intruders out, even throwing the odd firecracker to scare off "kids messing around". The MacNallys feel safe because they are actively protecting themselves. "I manage our security here, we've been here for six years now and not one problem".

Our homes should be places of refuge, where we can recuperate from the stresses beyond their walls. Yet despite our best attempts to protect ourselves we cannot always be successful. In June this year Ann Pott's 17-year-old daughter was mugged. In her wallet was her home address and since then their family home in Espin Drive has been targeted by criminals on numerous occasions.

Random violent acts such as a brick thrown through a window have left the family living in constant fear. "I think they have a personal vendetta against us," says Ann. Her 13-year-old daughter has become so traumatised by the constant fear that she cannot

fall asleep without her mother watching over her every night.

Stress is a natural response - an evolutionary tool that gives us the adrenaline rush required to evade, fight and survive. But our bodies and minds cannot cope with constant stress and the repercussions of post-traumatic stress should not be underestimated. Fox says that while post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is fairly rare everyone experiences some of the symptoms of PTSD when faced with violence in their own homes. She likens the human memory to a cupboard. "When you have a traumatic experience, that memory is just thrown into the cupboard, you don't have time to order and arrange it, parts might get lost." The lost parts of a traumatic experience often emerge as nightmares, flashbacks or intrusive thoughts. Every individual is different but experiencing difficulty concentrating, irritability, disturbed sleep and emotional 'numbness' may all be signs that a friend or family member is not coping with their traumatic experience.

When faced with a situation like this Fox suggests that the most important thing is to "create an environment of social support - where adults can talk it out and children can play it out". Parents should consider making a visible reassuring change to the security in or around their home. Children don't necessarily need to feel that their house is impenetrable, but rather a sense of "that was then, this is now" which allows them to let go of traumatic memories.

Clearly neighbours aren't just the people who live on either side of us and home isn't only behind our garden gate. Living in fear is a phenomenon which shows that when crime touches one of us, it affects all of us.

When the Community Speaks

Despite a disappointing turnout, the community meeting held on Saturday was extremely informative for all those who attended.

On Saturday the 17th October a group of Rhodes journalism students, having completed their investigation of crime in Currie Park, Oatlands North and Somerset Heights, were ready to present their findings to the community. Having distributed 400 fliers advertising the event and hung posters in all three neighbourhoods a substantial turnout was hoped for. As 11am approached it became apparent that this was not to be – attendance was disappointing.

Those present expressed frustration at the evident apathy of their neighbours and criticised the isolated mentality of suburban living as a major obstacle to reducing crime. While researching their articles, sound slides and documentary the students had found that residents were highly preoccupied with the perceived failings of the police as well as fears for the safety of their families and property – yet few are willing to engage with these fears in a meaningful way. Sadly this perception was reinforced by the poor response to Saturday's meeting.

Despite the poor turnout, Inspector Milanda Coetzee of the South African Police Service stood up to give a thorough presentation to those attending. Accompanied by Sergeant Gaye Mackenzie (the newly appointed head of Sector Three) she responded to residents' complaints concerning a lack of visible policing in their area.

To place crime in Somerset Heights, Oatlands North and Currie Park in relative perspective week by week, Coetzee explained that statistics clearly revealed that, while the CBD and Grahamstown East experience high instances of serious and violent crimes, the three neighbourhoods in question often went without a single reported incident.

Of course this may demonstrate a lack of faith in the justice system rather than the reality of crime in these communities and some of those attending freely admitted that the only reason they felt compelled to report crime was because insurance required them to do so. They described the process of reporting as an exasperating one in which they spent hours at the police station dealing with a "frustrating and ineffective system". Inspector Coetzee stressed that if residents don't report crime then the time and resources available will be allocated elsewhere as the crime prevention system focuses on the 'hotspots' throughout the town.

Inspector Coetzee's statistics also revealed a worrying trend. As wealthier suburbs increasingly rely on private security companies to secure their homes criminals are choosing to risk confronting surprised residents rather than a team of armed response guards.

Homes are being targeted between six and nine at night when it is

likely that the occupants are at home and alarms are deactivated, obviously at greater risk to their safety. Inspector Coetzee also reminded residents that the biggest concern for the broader area of Grahamstown West is the theft of laptops, a million rand of which has already been reported stolen this year.

In conclusion Inspector Coetzee stressed that she found students' initiative very helpful as there are few forums in which the Grahamstown community can effectively air their concerns. She asked those listening to remember that the policemen and women of Grahamstown are members of the community too and their concern for the safety and security of Grahamstown should not be doubted.

As wealthier suburbs increasingly rely on private security companies to secure their homes criminals are choosing to risk confronting surprised residents rather than a team of armed response guards



Top: Neighbourhoods where there are large open spaces seem to experience more crime. Police believe that criminals use open spaces as hiding places.

Centre: Residents in Somerset Heights, Oatlands North and Currie Park believe that places like rubbish dumps in their area tend to bring vagrants into the neighbourhood.

Bottom: Some residents have very little faith in the South African Police Service (SAPS) and tend to rely more heavily on private security companies.

Safeguarding tips from the SAPS

These are practical hints to follow to make sure you are safe. However, these hints are so simple and practical that one usually forgets them or does not regard them as important enough. But it may mean the difference between a home owner who is safety conscious and a victim.

If possible, it is advisable to join your local neighbourhood watch or community forum. Contact your local police station for further information.

Avoid unnecessary routines, as they make your behaviour predictable and make you an easy target.

WHEN YOU ARE AT HOME:

-Single women must avoid using titles such as miss - especially at highly visible places like post boxes and doors and in telephone directories.

-When you are home alone, do not leave doors open while you are busy in another room. Remember, most rapes take place in the victim's own home.

-Do not go to bed if you have not locked your home. At least lock the safety gates.

-Ensure that your family know all the emergency numbers, otherwise, write these down and keep them close to the telephone.

-If you possess a firearm, lock it away safely in a safe. Keep the key safe and know where it is so you can easily reach the firearm.

-When you are alone at home, you should not open the door for anybody, unless you are expecting somebody.

-Should it occur that you are alone at home and are confronted by a stranger, you must not let it become evident that you are home alone.

-When you go to bed you should always lock the doors inside the house

IF YOU ARE CONFRONTED:

-Try not to come between the housebreaker and his escape route.

-If you are confronted by a stranger inside the house, try to lock yourself into a room, which is not accessible to a stranger.

-When you are in bed and find a strange person in your room, try to stay still and calm and pretend you are asleep.

-If you are asleep and are woken up by a housebreaker do what he says.

-Try to memorise the intruder's face so that you can describe him to the police.

WHEN ARRIVING HOME:

-Leave outside lights on when you go out and you know you will be returning later.

-If you have dogs, wait until they approach you before entering your home.

-Ensure that the keys with which you will open the door, are in your hand. Do not scratch round looking for keys.

-Lock the door behind you when you enter the house.