

“They come here to steal” Policing migration

Immigrants, legal and illegal, in South Africa experience the sharp end of the law. **Anthony Albeker** accompanied the Yeoville police on patrol and experienced why corruption is an almost inevitable result of the way migration is policed.



Yeoville is a run-down inner-city suburb in Johannesburg, and its police station is a dilapidated affair. It opened about a decade ago in a small house and was intended to relieve the pressure on the Hillbrow police station which had been responsible for policing the area. Now, its paint is peeling and its walls are cracked. In the parking lot, always a chaos of vehicles, a litter of prefabricated offices show signs of damp and decay.

The police station is not an easy place for police officers to work, neither are the area's streets and buildings. Many of the buildings are over-full and under-maintained evident in crumbling floors, broken

windows and disconnected electricity and water mains. The streets are a tactical nightmare, with too many people, too many escape routes and too little natural surveillance.

You might think that conditions like these are reason to expect that crime levels would be higher in Yeoville than in other police precincts. And they are: urban decay breeds crime and it is relatively easy for offenders to lose themselves simply by moving from one anonymous building to another.

For many of Yeoville's cops, however, the social, economic and political forces that led to this state of affairs, and the real source of crime problems, can be reduced to

two words: illegal immigrants. Whether or not there is merit to this, and a few experts think there is, when police officers have a view of a group of people, it has real effects on real people's lives. As importantly, police attitudes to migrants, as well as the role they are expected to play in enforcing migration law, affects the quality of policing. And not in a good way.

A typical day in a patrol van in Yeoville will involve attending one or two crime scenes and the handling of the myriad disputes that arise when too many people are packed into too small a space. In between those calls, however, they are dedicated to keeping a beady eye out for illegal foreigners.

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"Why are they here?" I asked cops and, almost without exception, the answer was, "They come here to steal." If I pointed out that migrants come here to work whether legally or illegally, in the formal or informal economy, for others or for themselves, the typical response was that this was also a form of theft. These jobs should be for South Africans, I was told more than one occasion. And if foreigners have them instead, then deserving South Africans were denied an income.

That this argument finds little support among those who have studied migration, both because it is economically flawed and because it fails a basic test of justice towards people who simply want to make a better life, is irrelevant. For most police officers, migrants spell trouble. The fact that many are here illegally is for them all the proof that is needed for that belief.

Sorting the legal migrants from the illegal, however, is a far harder task than it might sound. The main problem is the scale of migration and its effects across the community. I saw this one morning after I asked two of the stations more active friskers to drive me



through Yeoville's streets and give me a sense of who was living in the community. It turned out to be an education in just how large and diverse the proportion of foreigners is. "This is where the Angolans live," they said at one point. Then, a little later, "Here you find the Congolese" or "This whole area is Little Harare." Finally, late in the morning, one announced, "Welcome to New Lagos."

The fact that there are so many foreigners in Yeoville has a number of implications for the police. The first is a sense of the futility of the work, "It's hard to make a difference," I was told. "Maybe you pick up one or two illegals in a day, but there are hundreds of them. And new ones come in all the time."

The second is that most foreigners are in the country legally, so merely asking to see their papers can sometimes seem an expression of xenophobia. The perception and the reality of police xenophobia makes building decent police-community relations almost impossible.

Third, migrants tend to be highly mobile, making it harder to find victims and witnesses and suspects. Many, even those in the country legally, often prefer to avoid contact with the authorities, making the gathering of information, intelligence and even complaints harder to do.

A fourth problem is that those who are in the country legally assist their compatriots who are not, either hiding them or helping them get papers legitimating their presence. Those papers may be obtained through fraud and corruption.

And therein lies the real problem for the police when it comes to enforcing migration law. There are simply far too many gaps in the system through which the corrupt or the corruptible might sneak. And the effects are making the police a less effective organisation. Consider an incident I witnessed one rain-soaked morning while patrolling Yeoville's streets.

At one point, the two officers I was with that day flashed down a car carrying two men and two women. They turned out to be visitors from West Africa. They were



Liberian shoemaker in Johannesburg City

in the country legally, as the visas in their passports confirmed. What interested me, however, was something else that was in their passports: each contained a crisp blue hundred rand note.

After the cops had waved the four on their way, I asked them what they made of those notes in the passports. They denied seeing them. "Take my word for it," I said, refusing to believe that they hadn't seen the money that had been in their hands for at least a minute while they poured over the documents. "The money was there. Do you think they thought you'd expect to be bribed?"

Neither officer was prepared to say, but there is a vast library of stories that suggests that migrants, legal and otherwise, are treated by some police officers as human ATMs.

Illegal migrants' problems stem from their status. Without papers or formal rights to be in the country, they are at the mercy of any cop who might demand a bribe in exchange for turning a blind eye.

One might think that foreigners who are in the country legally would be in a less vulnerable position. And, legally at least, they are. On the other hand, their papers are extremely valuable. Cops can use that fact by refusing to return them unless they are paid. This is less a demand for a bribe than an act of extortion. And it was with this in mind that I thought the four West Africans chose to hand money over to the cops with their documents.

Why does the policing of migration breed corruption in the police? Part of the problem lies in the gaps in the moral scaffolding that the policing institution has erected around its members. But at least as important is the fact that the way migration is policed puts migrants and law enforcement officials in situations which are ripe for corruption.

Migrants are here because they want to be. That being so, they are usually willing (if they can) to pay bribes to remain here rather than be deported. Police officers do their

work in the streets and houses of the community, where no one can monitor how and when they choose to enforce the law. So you have willing bribers and unobserved potential bribees. Add to this the fact that many police officers don't like foreigners and so don't always feel constrained to treat them fairly. There is also the knowledge that the repatriation of any single illegal migrant will make little difference to the overall numbers of migrants, and the resulting sense of futility makes taking a bribe much easier.

The policing of migration in this manner is bound to become corrupt. What makes matters worse, however, is that it is not just migration enforcement that is undermined. It is hard to believe that cops who start out taking bribes from migrants will refrain from doing so in other circumstances. It is also not desirable that police focus their attention on migrants because of possible self-enrichment while other law breakers are going about their own business. The trouble, of course, is that migration rules must be enforced. It is very hard to know how to do this without creating space for corruption.

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