

THE CONSEQUENCES OF VEHICLE HIJACKING

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INTRODUCTION

Although incidents of vehicle hijacking are spiralling world-wide, vehicle hijacking has been identified as a priority crime in South Africa. The status it has acquired is directly related to the serious implications it holds for the individual in terms of the physical, emotional, financial and social consequences associated with it, as well as the negative local and international response it elicits.

The inclusion of violence or threats of violence, as well as the theft of a vehicle in definitions of vehicle hijacking, often leads to confusion regarding the classification whereby hijacking is alternatively classed as either a violent crime or a property crime. This may be attributed to the fact that vehicle hijacking is primarily a form of theft as a vehicle is taken from the victim, thus constituting a property crime. In this regard researchers (Block, 1989:235; Steenkamp, 1997:19) emphasise that during a robbery the primary aim is not to injure the victim, but to obtain valuable goods such as a vehicle. On this basis police and members of the criminal justice system as well as those in the helping professions often treat such victims as victims of a property crime (i.e. in the same manner as burglary victims) without acknowledging the trauma they have experienced. Lack of knowledge of the fact that violence and threats of violence are used to facilitate the robbery, and that hijacking without an element of violence is not a possibility, often leads to these important elements being ignored. A further reason for this may be inadequate knowledge about the serious consequences of vehicle hijacking.

The aim of this exposition is therefore to shed some light on the position of trauma victims of vehicle hijacking experience, to emphasise the far-reaching consequences of this priority crime, and to highlight some of the problems that are experienced with currently available support. This is done in the hope that such information will not only broaden the knowledge of social workers, but also encourage them and others in the helping professions to treat victims of vehicle hijacking in the same way as other victims of violent crimes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Although research undertaken in South Africa to date has focused on the nature and extent of vehicle hijacking, there is little empirical information on the experience of victims. It was therefore decided to investigate the costs and consequences of this crime for the victims of a vehicle hijacking. Because people who had been high-jacked were inaccessible, a sample was drawn according to the purposive theoretical and snowball sampling methods and a mailed questionnaire was sent to 110 victims.

FINDINGS

An analysis of the data indicates that hijacking victims are severely traumatised during a hijacking. Although it is difficult to compare the reactions of victims or the wide range of individuals' diverse actions, the following consequences or costs could be identified:

FINANCIAL COSTS

The greatest financial loss incurred is usually that of the motor vehicle that is hijacked. Considering that a private vehicle is the largest financial investment that an average person makes during his or her lifetime – apart from fixed property – a hijacking is often one of the most significant financial setbacks that a person can experience.

Eighty-one of the respondents (73,6%) who participated in the research indicated that they also suffered other financial losses which could be attributed to the hijacking. These included medical costs, increased insurance premiums, reduction or loss of no-claim bonuses as well as insurance payments based on the market value of the vehicle instead of the replacement value. Victims also suffered financial losses in terms of personal items such as CDs, cell-phones, sports equipment, groceries, handbags, clothing, golf clubs, study material and even business documents that were in the vehicle at the time of the hijacking. A total of 23 (20,9%) respondents reported that they were also robbed of cash.

The costs of obtaining alternative transport, the inconvenience associated with recovering the property, delays at insurance companies and the replacement of vehicles in cases where they could not be found, all added to the hijacking placing a heavy financial burden on victims and their families. One victim even mentioned that he had to pay for traffic fines incurred *after* his vehicle had been hijacked.

Victims are also often financially handicapped because of factors such as medical costs, the loss of working hours and security costs (e.g. installation of an anti-hijacking system).

Physical Consequences

On the basis of information furnished by the respondents it became evident that driving a motor vehicle exposes South African citizens to one of the most violent and unpredictable crimes in the world. Of the 110 victims who participated in the research, 62 (56,4%) were threatened verbally. In accordance with the findings relating to these victims, menacing remarks made during the hijacking could be divided into two categories, namely death threats and orders, which included demands to hand over the vehicle's keys, to keep quiet and/or to get out of the vehicle. Foul language was also frequently used. Although undesirable language cannot be compared to violent action, it also affects victims negatively and is often experienced just as traumatically as when an individual is injured physically. One respondent, for example, stated that "no physical violence was used, but the whole nature of the incident was a violent violation of my rights as a law-abiding human being".

One hundred and two (92,7%) respondents were threatened with a firearm. Only eight (7,3%) of the respondents indicated that a knife was used during the hijacking.

Fifty-six respondents (50,9%) were exposed to physical violence. Altogether 32 (29,1%) of the respondents were pushed around, shaken, pulled from the vehicle or thrown to the ground. A total of 15 (13,6%) were shot and 11 (10%) severely assaulted, while 10 (9,1 %) were struck (mostly against the head) with the butt of the firearm. Five (4,5%) respondents were hurt in other ways. One respondent's head was banged against the lid of the boot; two other respondents were jumped upon and sat on. The remaining two respondents' jewellery was viciously wrenched off them. One respondent reported that one of the hijackers even bit her finger in an attempt to remove her wedding ring.

Although Garbor, Baril, Cusson, Elié, Le Blanc and Normandeau (1987:89) point out that victims do not necessarily sustain injuries during robberies in general, it is clear that vehicle robbery in

South Africa often does result in serious injuries. The physical injuries sustained by the respondents under review vary from gunshot wounds, bruises, abrasions and cuts on the head to permanent damage of the shoulders, back and head. One respondent was shot in the back and consequently paralysed for life. Two (1,8%) victims were also raped.

It appears that even when there is no loss of life, victims are often injured to such an extent that long-term medical treatment and in some cases even hospitalisation is required. A total of 22 (20%) of the respondents received medical treatment after the hijacking. Most of them were treated for head and body injuries as well as shock. One of the victims spent 21 days in the intensive-care unit of a hospital.

Psychological harm

Research has shown that the emotional effects of serious crimes such as rape and robbery on an individual are often more harmful or traumatic than, for example, the loss of property or being physically injured (Lurigio, Skogan & Davis, 1990:51).

It is important that people giving crisis support to hijack victims keep in mind the fact that reactions to victimisation vary and that the psychological impact of crime differs from individual to individual. In order to determine the extent of emotional trauma as well as the possibilities of recovery, social workers could use the following five categories as a guideline to assess the victim's emotional situation:

- Pre-victimisation factors;
- Factors that were present during victimisation;
- Post-victimisation factors;
- Participation in the criminal justice system;
- Social support.

Pre-victimisation factors

Pre-victimisation factors refer to factors or conditions that were present before victimisation occurred and could have a definite influence on later psychological adjustment.

Pre-victimisation adjustment

The crime victim's pre-victimisation adjustment is a strong predictor of the measure to which the victim will recover and adjust after victimisation has taken place. Victims of violent crime who exhibit pre-existing emotional and psychological problems such as anxiety attacks and obsessive-compulsive behaviour will have more difficulty than those whose social functioning and emotional state were normal prior to victimisation (Burgess & Holstrom, in Lurigio *et al.*, 1990:54). If a victim has received psychological treatment prior to victimisation and has a history of alcohol abuse and/or suicide attempts, then adjustment after the incident could also be problematic.

Life stressors

Researchers such as Lurigio *et al.* (1990:54) have also examined the link between life stressors and victim recovery. Victims who are persistently exposed to life stressors, such as economic difficulties and life changes (which could include divorce or death of a partner), may have serious post-crime adjustment problems.

Previous exposure to crime is also an important life stressor that can affect victim recovery and is generally associated with serious symptoms as well as poorer adjustment. One respondent who participated in the current study highlighted this factor. This woman had lost her son and daughter-in-law in previous hijackings and was paralysed in a separate hijack incident. The emotional trauma she experienced due to these two incidents of victimisation led to an emotional breakdown and eventually long-term psychotherapy.

However, in contrast with the above, there is also a possibility that continuous life changes and serious life stresses may equip the victim with more effective coping skills, thus facilitating post-crime adjustment and recovery.

Factors present during victimisation

The following factors that are present during a hijack incident may also impact on the emotional recovery after victimisation:

The features of the crime incident

The severity of victim symptoms is directly related to the degree of violence or injury that occurred during the hijack incident. The amount of physical injury, as well as the victim's subjective interpretation of the danger and threat during the crime (or the fear of death), has a clear impact on post-crime recovery. Sales (in Lurigio *et al.*, 1990:56) found that the subjective danger and/or perceived threat that a victim experiences during a crime incident can often have more disruptive effects than the physical injuries they can sustain.

The type of crime

A few comparative studies have indicated that victim adjustment and recovery take longer in the case of robbery and assault than in the case of burglary. Resick (in Lurigio *et al.*, 1990:57-58) conducted a longitudinal study comparing the reactions of rape and robbery victims. She indicates that victim reactions in the cases of rape and robbery are for the most part similar. Although reactions to rape are often more serious with regards to aspects such as sexual dysfunction and tend to be of longer duration, the emotional trauma due to a robbery incident, such as vehicle hijacking, must not be underestimated.

Post-victimisation factors

Post-victimisation factors refer to factors or conditions that are present after the hijacking has taken place and which may have an impact on the psychological adjustment of the victim. Post-crime perceptions of the incident and its causes are important factors that may have a clear impact on victim recovery and adjustment.

Self-blame

Self-blame refers to the tendency of victims to make personal attributes about the causes of their victimisation. Lurigio *et al.* (1990:58) identify two types of self-blame, namely behavioural and characterological self-blame.

a) Behavioural self-blame

Behavioural self-blame takes place when the victim attributes the causes of victimisation to his or her own actions or behaviour. Not noticing warning signs before a hijacking or injuries sustained due to resistance during a hijacking may, for example, lead to behavioural self-blame.

b) Characterological self-blame

This type of self-blame takes place when victims attribute the causes of their victimisation to personality traits and inadequacies that are difficult to change, for example, low intelligence and/or physical defects.

According to Friedman (in Lurigio *et al.*, 1990:58), crime victims who attribute their victimisation to their own actions or behaviour manifest fewer psychological disturbances than victims who attribute their victimisation to established personality traits and physical or other inadequacies. The latter leaves victims with little confidence that future victimisation can be prevented, while behavioural self-blame opens up the possibility of controlling or preventing future victimisation through behavioural changes. Characterological self-blame is also often associated with depression and helplessness.

Cognitive restructuring

Cognitive restructuring is a coping mechanism in which victims re-interpret their experience in order to reduce the adverse effects of the incident. According to Lurigio *et al.* (1990:59), cognitive restructuring can take on various forms which include:

- finding meaning in the episode;
- engaging in downward comparisons (e.g. thinking about their victimisation as leaving them better off than other victims);
- amplifying the incident;
- evaluating the event as a personal growth opportunity or believing that it may bring some or other benefit.

Cognitive restructuring is often used because victimisation tests the emotional “power” of victims and has an impact on the personal assumptions they hold about the world around them. Janoff-Bulman and Frieze (1983:3) furthermore distinguish between three basic assumptions that are influenced during victimisation, namely:

a) The assumption of invulnerability

Individuals often believe that they are not vulnerable to crime and that they will never be victimised. Victimisation destroys this assumption and manifests itself in the victim's preoccupation with the fear that they will be victimised again.

b) The assumption of a positive self-image

Generally speaking, people have positive images of themselves as well as their abilities, which implies that a relatively high level of self-worth is maintained. However, victimisation interferes with this perception and creates a feeling of unworthiness, impurity and self-blame. The positive self-image is therefore changed into a negative one.

c) The assumption that the world is significant

People believe that the world is a predictable, manageable and understandable place. Victimisation destroys this assumption as well as the victim's feeling of stability and security. Suddenly the world is a mixed-up, disorderly place and victims often show no comprehension of the victimisation experienced.

Through cognitive restructuring these assumptions are restored and victims obtain meaning from the negative incident. Research by Silver, Boon and Stones (1983) indicated that if victims understand their victimisation (make sense out of it), they report less psychological distress, greater self-esteem and better social adjustment (Lurigio *et al.*, 1990:60). Thus, if victims believe that they are better off than other victims, or learn something positive from the incident, emotional recovery and adjustment after victimisation are facilitated.

Participation in the criminal justice system

The participation of victims in the prosecution of criminals is commonly described by researchers like Kelly and Ruff (in Lurigio *et al.*, 1990:60) as a stressful and disruptive experience that impacts negatively on their recovery and adjustment after victimisation.

Symonds (in Lurigio *et al.*, 1990:60) is of the opinion that victim involvement in the criminal justice process can often be seen as a form of secondary victimisation. Due to the fact that victims are viewed only as a source of information, they are often not always treated the same way as offenders are. This insensitivity towards crime victims, as well as long periods of waiting, loss of wages, poor protection against intimidation, difficult questioning by police officers and attorneys as well as unnecessary trips to court can influence emotional recovery after victimisation.

However, participation in the criminal justice process does not always impact negatively on the victim and might even contribute towards the emotional recovery of the victim, particularly in cases where the criminal is found guilty as a result of constructive contributions by the victim.

Social support

Social support is a further element that has an impact on the psychological well-being and emotional adjustment of crime victims. A direct link has been proven between the support of family and friends and positive adjustment after victimisation. Apart from professional help, the tolerance, sensitivity and continuous reassurance of significant others in the lives of crime victims contribute towards their maintaining a positive self-image and experiencing fewer symptoms such as depression.

Irrespective of whether the hijacking is violent or non-violent in nature, it appears that most victims experience it as traumatic. Even during incidents where victims are not injured physically, the psychosocial damage is considerable (Nevin, 1995: 48). This is confirmed by the fact that 93 (84,6%) of the victims included in this study admitted that hijacking affected them emotionally. Victims are confronted with overwhelming feelings of shock, disbelief, confusion, helplessness as well as feelings of powerlessness and a loss of control during a hijacking.

Although the reactions of victims following exposure to vehicle hijacking may vary depending on the above-mentioned five factors, psychological harm can be divided into four categories, namely emotional, cognitive, biological and behavioural reactions.

Emotional reactions

Emotional reactions include disbelief, fear, anxiety, anger, bitterness, a heightened fright response and depression.

Sixty (54,6%) of the respondents indicated a fear of any sudden movement and a fear to go out or to drive alone. Fear of a recurrence of the incident, as well as fear of firearms and strange persons approaching the vehicle, was also reported. In four of the cases (3,6%) the fear of firearms later manifested itself as a phobia.

A total of 48 (43,6%) of the victims reported that they constantly felt anxious and tense, while 23 (20,9%) indicated that they suffered from depression. A heightened fright response and a hypersensitivity to sound were also reported by 30 (27,3%) of the respondents.

Anger is another emotional reaction that can manifest itself after a hijacking. A total of 73 (66,4%) of the respondents reported that they experience feelings of anger. On the one hand, this anger was directed at the legal system, which – according to the victims – was not able to effectively prevent vehicle hijacking. Responses such as "crime does pay", "criminals laugh openly at the justice system" and "if this can happen outside my gate, what type of country are we living in?" illustrate victims' negativity in this regard. On the other hand, anger is directed at persons from other races. Especially white respondents expressed angry feelings towards black individuals in general. These responses, which were probably still a legacy of the apartheid era in South Africa, were verbalised by 42 (38,2%) of the respondents. A total of 18 of the respondents even went so far as to say that they hate black people. Researchers such as Reid (1997:30), however, explain that "racist feelings are common in cases where the criminal is of one race and the victim of another".

The feelings of bitterness experienced by 49 (44,6%) of the respondents as a result of the hijacking incident, were reflected in statements such as "hijackers attach no value to life and property", "my living rights have been taken away from me", "my life has been invaded by a criminal event", and "who gives hijackers the right to change my life so drastically?"

Cognitive reactions

Cognitive reactions to the hijacking include self-blame, flashbacks and a re-experiencing of the hijacking drama.

Self-blame or the tendency to attribute the hijacking to personal factors occurred among 21 (19,1%) of the respondents. The feeling that they should have done more to prevent the hijacking, accompanied by the shame for not noticing the warning signals or for not being in control of the situation despite knowing that it is unrealistic to oppose an armed robber, were reported by these respondents.

Recurring thoughts and flashbacks of the incident (e.g. recalling the weapons that were used, the way in which the vehicles were robbed, as well as the threats and violence to which they were exposed) were reported by 47 (42,7%) of the victims. The respondents also pointed out that these flashbacks often feel so real that it was as if the trauma was being experienced again. Cowley (1997:4) indicates that victims often experience the full intensity of the hijacking for the first time during a flashback or when they think about the event.

Biological reactions

Biological reactions such as insomnia, nightmares or recurring distressing dreams as well as a loss of appetite are also common. A total of 31 (28,2%) of the respondents suffered from sleep disturbances and 12 (10,9%) from loss of appetite. Altogether 14 (12,7%) of the respondents stated that they were tearful after the hijacking and three (2,7%) admitted that their palms were sweaty every time they thought about the incident. Heightened physiological excitation was also reported by 18 (16,4%) of the victims.

Behavioural reactions

Behavioural reactions of victims mainly include social withdrawal and the avoidance of places and situations associated with the crime. Altogether 37 (33,6%) of the victims stated that they did not want to drive again immediately, that they did not want to do so unnecessarily or on their own and

that they tried to avoid the area, traffic lights and/or shopping centre where the crime had taken place. A total of 28 of the 58 respondents (48,3%) who were hijacked at their homes and who obviously could not avoid the place of hijacking, stated that they feel anxious every time they approach their home.

According to Morrison and O'Donnell (1994:28), the biological, emotional and behavioural reactions set out above are characteristic of a post-traumatic stress disturbance. Post-traumatic stress disturbance often follows a traumatic event that falls outside the limits of normal human experience and holds a serious threat to the person's life or physical integrity (Cowley, 1997:3; Louw, 1989:144). Such victims often experience their world "as if they are in a dream", are emotionally blunted, lack energy and often require crisis counselling and psychotherapy.

SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

The unpredictability of vehicle hijacking and the violence associated with it, as well as the fact that it is mostly committed by strangers, means that it is one of the crimes most feared by the public (Interdepartmental strategy team 1996:41, 52). A double element of fear applies in most hijacking cases, namely fear of loss of property and the fear of dying and/or of being injured.

Owing to the necessity and utility value of a vehicle in modern society, individuals are very dependent on vehicles for transport. This again contributes to all road-users – to a certain degree – being vulnerable to crime. In contrast to most personal property, which is static and can therefore be effectively protected by using certain security measures, vehicles constantly move from one place to another. This means protection is not always practicable, hence increasing the potential for robbery.

Hulme (1995:2) adds that the interior of a vehicle is one of the most dangerous places in South Africa. Myerson (1995:24, 96) concurs, adding that "no area is safe, no vehicle untouchable, no electronic system infallible and no vehicle hijack-resistant". In this regard, Mkhondo (1994:10) states that "many people now believe that driving a car is almost akin to signing a death warrant. If negligent drivers on the road miss you, car-jackers will get you". Similar quotes in the daily press, over the radio and on television, confirm the anxiety elicited by hijacking in South Africa. Myerson (1995:97) supports this by saying that South African citizens' fear of hijacking is generally greater than their fear of vehicle accidents and other forms of robbery.

Fear, however, is not the only social consequence of vehicle hijacking. Loss of feelings of safety and security are also often associated with this crime. An increase in expenditure incurred to install security mechanisms in vehicles (e.g. tracking systems) and respondents' reporting on actual changes in their life-styles (e.g. no longer driving alone at night, carrying firearms and establishing vigilante groups) further confirm that the social consequences of vehicle hijacking cannot be underestimated.

PROFESSIONAL HELP

It is evident from the above discussion that the emotional trauma and the shock associated with a crime such as vehicle hijacking is often worse and takes longer to work through than is generally believed. Conspicuous, however, is the fact that only 37 (33,6%) of the respondents who participated in the research received psychological treatment and/or crisis counselling directly after the hijacking. Taking into consideration that 56 (50,9%) of the respondents were exposed to physical violence and 93 (84,6%) admitted that they were emotionally traumatised by the hijacking, the number of victims eventually receiving help, therapy or treatment, is small. Possible reasons for this could include the following:

- Victims may feel that their emotional reaction to the hijacking is not justified (possibly because of the community's view that hijacking is "only" a property crime).
- Symptoms do not necessarily manifest directly after the trauma and professional help is not considered initially. (The person may, for instance, also be shy to admit that he/she cannot work through the trauma – this applies especially in the case of men.)
- Victims differ and have divergent needs. Some victims can, for instance, work through the trauma with the help of friends and family, while others require professional help.
- Support services for crime victims are limited (Snyman, 1997:167).
- Victims do not have knowledge of existing support services.
- Services are often inaccessible in terms of placement and service costs.
- Existing support services also tend to focus on victims of "traditional" violent crimes such as rape (Nel, 1996:19) and social workers, psychologists as well as volunteers working at victim support services do not always realise that hijacking is a violent crime and that these victims need *at least* crisis counselling.
- There is often a discrepancy between a victim's needs and the services that offer support to a victim. In the case of vehicle hijacking it may be that the immediate need of a victim is of a practical nature (e.g. immediate transport to pick up children from school). Victimologists such as Friedman, Bischoff, Davis and Person (in Lurigio *et al.*, 1990:166) emphasise that support services do not always pay enough attention to practical factors and/or assistance and should always take this into consideration when giving crisis support to crime victims.

Although all the above factors cannot be addressed immediately and attention should be given to the marketing of existing support services as well as the placement, service costs and focus of these services, priority attention should be given to the trauma and needs of hijack victims.

Twenty-nine of the 37 respondents (78,4%) who consulted social workers and psychologists for professional help mentioned that the opportunity to talk about the hijacking to a professional person contributed significantly to emotional recovery after victimisation. Although the nature of the support varied from hypnosis, short-term psychotherapy (on average three sessions), sleep therapy, the use of medication (such as antidepressants) to shock treatment, discussing the trauma served as catalysts and reduced the psychological effects of the hijacking.

Although the sample of the study is small and generalisations would be dangerous, the value of discussions (even in a narrative form) or debriefing should not be underestimated. According to Reid (1997:157), the ventilation or articulation of impressions, reaction and feelings may help victims of hijacking events cognitively (to make sense of it) by reducing stress, alleviating long-term psychological symptoms and mobilising internal as well as external resources (such as inner strengths and/or external social networks).

CONCLUSION

It is evident that vehicle hijacking, contrary to what is commonly believed, is a violent crime and that the impact of hijacking does not end on the day the crime takes place. The effects of the crime continue to reverberate on various levels. Direct victims are seriously traumatised by the hijacking and professional help and assistance are often essential in order to help hijacking victims reach a stage where they can again drive a vehicle with confidence. In order to achieve this, it is

imperative that those in the helping professions take note of the consequences of this crime and treat its victims as individuals traumatised by a violent attack.

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