

Criminals have gone to town

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Metro police officers stationed at the corner of Ingcuce Road (Albert Street) and Denis Hurley (Queen) Street in the Durban CBD. Businesses are being driven out of central business districts across the province due to crime. Leon Lestrade African News Agency (ANA)

Durban - BUSINESS owners, under siege from brazen criminals, are leaving CBDs across KwaZulu-Natal in their droves.

In addition to crime, dilapidated infrastructure, poor amenities and a lack of service delivery have added to their woes.

And, this move is expected to hit municipalities hard, as the business exodus would deprive them of much needed tax revenue.

Business organisations are urgently calling on the government to address the issues to reverse the growing trend.

To fight crime in Durban's CBD, acting mayor Fawzia Peer will today oversee the demolition of three derelict buildings, which have become drug dens, brothels and homes for vagrants, along the Mahatma Gandhi Road node.

Palesa Phili, chief executive of the Durban Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said crime continued to impact negatively on businesses. She said the chamber would like to see a decrease in office vacancies and greater support by local government to businesses within the inner-city.

“Reduced crime and grime, as well as better amenities and infrastructure, will make Durban’s inner-city more attractive and actively reverse trends like businesses and ratepayers leaving the city centre,” she said.

She said businesses were forced to close down, move or bring operations to a halt, as a result of the crime.

“Reducing and, eventually, eliminating the effects of crime remains a key objective of the Durban Chamber and its Safety and Justice Forum. We encourage members and organised businesses to join this forum, in order to tackle this critical business challenge,” Phili said.

Businesses in the Pietermaritzburg and Isipingo CBDs have also been hard hit by crime.

Operating a business in the capital city was no longer viable for some entrepreneurs.

A long-established Pietermaritzburg shelving and furniture business owner, who did not want to be named, said he has been operating for 30 years, but had now reached a point where he needed to relocate or close down.

“My businesses are making less than 50% of the revenue we used to make when crime was not as bad,” he said.

He said his stores were constantly being targeted and, as a result, he continued to lose clients.

“My businesses operate with the gates closed and locked. We screen people before they walk in. I have one staff member whose only job is to open and close the gate,” he said.

He said even though shopping malls were more expensive, his clients preferred to go there because it was safer.

According to the businessman, all small retailers in the city were suffering.

He said he had forked out thousands of rand installing CCTV cameras, erecting barbed wire, fitting alarm systems and hiring burglar guards at his stores.

Melanie Veness, chief executive of the Pietermaritzburg Chamber of Business, said: “Aside from financial losses from brazen business robberies, KZN businesses are having to spend excessive amounts on security to try and keep their customers safe.”

In northern KZN, Veness said customers were robbed while doing daily shopping and, recently, patients and visitors to Westville Hospital were robbed of their belongings.

“I’ve had reports of staff being threatened if the company refuses to pay ‘protection money’ in Tongaat,” she added.

Business Against Crime SA project manager Naeem Rahiman said crime not only affects a company's bottom line but also the morale of the staff.

"Skilled staff with experience are being lost due to increasing crime," he said, adding that the knock-on effect was that stores were forced to close down, employees lost their jobs and mall owners were left with vacant rental space.

Economist Dawie Roodt said the increase in crime against businesses in KZN and nationally would likely be reflected in the 2019 crime statistics.

"From personal experience and from talking to local business people, crime seems to be a major and growing issue.

"It is not only about business losses or businesses closing down, but also about the future investors that are spooked," he said.

In his budget speech last week, KwaZulu-Natal Department of Transport, Community Safety and Liaison MEC Mxolisi Kaunda said the province was experiencing high levels of crime.

Spokesperson Mluleki Mntungwa said the department had not received information about high levels of fear by businesses due to crime.

"As a department, we are going to conduct an assessment on the functionality of our community crime-fighting structures and the police stations in the areas, that were identified as hot spots, to see how we can defeat the surge of crime," said Mntungwa.

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