

Experts say darkness reduces one's ability to judge the security of their surroundings and creates a good cover for criminals to escape.

BY YAHUDUKITUNZI

When darkness falls over large sections of Kampala Metropolitan Area and other towns, it is no longer just a matter of night replacing day. In many neighbourhoods, the darkness feels deeper, heavier—almost deliberate. Streets that were once illuminated by solar lamps now lie in shadow. The poles still stand, but the lights are dead. And in that darkness, muggers are thriving.

Over recent months, residents across vast swathes of the country have reported a surge in violent crime. The pattern is disturbingly consistent: attackers strike on poorly lit roads, emerging from dark corners to snatch phones, handbags and wallets before vanishing. Boda boda riders describe ambushes along dim stretches. Pedestrians say they now avoid certain routes entirely after sunset.

But the problem goes beyond petty muggings. Police have named hotspots across the Kampala Metropolitan Area where house break-ins, coordinated robberies, number plate thefts and even brutal murders have shaken residents and sparked outrage on social media.

A dim-out

Urban crime has multiple causes—youth unemployment, drug abuse and organised gangs. But a growing number of residents and analysts are asking whether failing street lighting has quietly aided this surge. Darkness is convenient for criminals. And the question many are asking is simple: why are these lights dying?

"Even the Bible says thieves rob at night.

Why? Because during the day, thugs are limited—there is light. Crimes are acts of darkness in essence and reality. When there is darkness, it creates good cover for criminals, allows them space to escape, and gives the public fewer advantages in identifying them," Mr Fred Egesa, a security analyst, observed.

"When it rains, thugs attack. Darkness contributes to crime, and in some areas, criminals deliberately destroy solar lights to enable them to strike communities and steal."

Several years ago, the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) rolled out an ambitious solar street lighting project. The goal was clear: brighten major roads, eliminate black spots and improve safety.

Solar technology was presented as cost-effective and sustainable, reducing dependence on unreliable grid power.

Initially, the results were impressive. Roads once feared at night were bathed in white light. Businesses extended operating hours. Residents reported feeling safer walking home.

Today, much of that promise has faded. In many areas, solar panels are missing. Batteries have been stolen. Some lamps flicker weakly; others are completely

How crime thrives in darkness at midnight



Residents walk past a solar streetlight that was destroyed on Yellow Knife Road in Masaka City last year. Criminals have been exploiting darkness in many urban centres to execute their missions. PHOTO/FILE

level, darkness reduces one's ability to judge the security of their surroundings," Mr Grace Matsiko, the chairperson of the Uganda Private Security Association (TUPSA), told *Saturday Monitor*.

"Whether on the street, the road, or even at home, when there is no light, it becomes difficult to detect threats. Even if a neighbour raises an alarm after being attacked, fear often prevents others from rushing out to help," he added.

More bodies needed

Mr Matsiko urged the government to strengthen security by increasing manpower and adopting advanced technology.

"While cameras exist, they are too few and cannot effectively monitor crowded areas," he said, stressing that technology should complement physical security provided by human personnel.

"To compound matters, foot patrols are conspicuous by their absence," Mr Egesa noted. With about 65,000 officers nationwide, many are tied up

Communities must play a role," Mr Matsiko said.

He also raised concerns about local governance, noting that some LC1 leaders were allegedly elected by individuals with criminal ties. In certain cases, he claims, LC1s connive with criminals and suspects quickly secure bonds, undermining justice.

The recent wave of crime has been marked by attacks on pedestrians, motorists stuck in traffic jams and residents in their homes. Victims have also been targeted after withdrawing money from banks or mobile money agents. Criminals have used weapons such as pavers, machetes and guns to rob victims, with some incidents resulting in serious injuries or deaths.

Despite previous police operations, the surge has renewed public calls for stronger and more effective measures to curb insecurity.

Mr Matsiko said the rapid growth of urban centres without proper planning has become a recipe for disaster. He cited areas such as Katanga in Bwaise slum,

POLICE REPORT

According to the police crime report, 8,163 robbery cases were reported countrywide in 2024 compared to 7,772 in 2023, representing a five percent increase.

Assistant Commissioner of Police Kituuma Rusoka, the Police Spokesperson, told *Saturday Monitor* that crime is caused by many different circumstances and prevention requires a multifaceted approach. He highlighted the importance of lighting as a key aspect of crime prevention, noting that having lights at premises and along roads significantly enhances safety and security.

described the Northern Bypass as a "no-go zone", where thugs attack people daily.

Vandalism pangs

The Uganda Police Force reacted to the surge in criminal activity within the Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area by reshuffling its leadership. Commissioner Richard Ecega, the former Kampala Metropolitan Police Commander, was relieved of his duties and replaced by Assistant Commissioner of Police Ezekiel Emtu, who previously served as Commandant of the Police Training School in Kabalye, Masindi District.

A police officer at the rank of Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP), who requested anonymity, told *Saturday Monitor* that policing resources are under strain.

"Operational budgets for [the Force] have tightened, affecting fuel for patrol vehicles, equipment maintenance and deployment capacity," the officer said.

The absence of police officers and poorly lit areas have, said businessman Jimmy Mutebi, created "fertile ground for opportunistic offences".

Mr Allan Kyobe Ssempebwa, the senior communications officer at the Ministry of Works and Transport (MoWT), however, said the government is committed to ensuring that towns are well lit, particularly in areas with high concentrations of pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

He described vandalism as disruptive, pointing to the recently installed solar lights on the Kampala Northern Bypass.

"When you damage these lights, you don't know who will be affected—it could be your own relatives who suffer as a result of darkness in such areas," he said, adding that sections along Kisasi and Bwaise have been vandalised yet "replacing a single lighting pole can cost up to Shs10m."

It is not just the capital grappling with vandalised street lighting infrastructure. The Uganda Support to Municipal Infrastructure Development programme

Siraji Magazazi, a retired UPDF soldier commonly known as Yellow Man, said.

Suffering a stillbirth

One local official admitted privately that the installations "suffered a stillbirth". Engineers cite several possible causes: substandard materials, poor installation practices and lack of routine maintenance. Solar systems require battery replacement and technical follow-up. Without a maintenance budget, small faults escalate to failure.

According to a 2024 Technical Study on Energy Efficient Public Lighting in USMID-AF Implementing Cities/Municipalities (MLHUD/USMID-AF/CONS/22-23/00010), conducted in response to national concerns over failing street lighting systems installed along road infrastructure, a comprehensive assessment was undertaken under the USMID programme.

The consultant carried out technical field evaluations of installed streetlights across 22 beneficiary cities and municipalities. Baseline data was collected from a sample comprising 2,406 streetlights under USMID1 and 6,694 under USMID-AF.

The study revealed critical issues affecting performance. While material specifications improved in the transition from USMID1 to USMID-AF—particularly in solar panels, batteries, LED lamps and anti-vandalism mechanisms and many lights still fell short of required standards.

According to the Works ministry's Urban Roads Design Manual (2023), all USMID1 lights performed below standard due to material degradation, and only 54.7 percent of those installed under USMID-AF were within acceptable limits.

Long road ahead?

Maintenance remains a major challenge, as local governments lack dedicated funding for public lighting systems. Neither local revenue nor Road Fund contributions provide specific budget lines for upkeep, leaving infrastructure vulnerable. Additionally, the design approach relied on the traditional Lumen Method, which focuses on luminance output rather than modern methods that ensure uniform lighting, eliminate shadows and reduce glare.

Compounding these challenges are widespread cases of vandalism and theft of street lighting materials. Weak anti-vandalism shields and limited community sensitisation have left installations exposed, leaving communities in darkness.

The study developed a 10-year lifecycle costs for solar-powered, grid-powered and hybrid street lighting systems to guide authorities in formulating detailed maintenance plans. It states that Shs100,000 is required for basic quarterly maintenance per light, excluding spare