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Factors contributing to the prevalence of campus crime at a rural-based South African university: A criminological inquiry

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Abstract: Campus crime remains a persistent and complex challenge within South Africa's higher education sector, particularly in rural-based universities where socio-economic vulnerability, institutional fragility, and environmental risk factors intersect. While considerable scholarship has examined campus crime in urban and international contexts, limited attention has been devoted to rural universities in developing countries, despite their heightened exposure to structural inequality and limited security capacity. This paper critically examines the factors contributing to the prevalence of campus crime at a rural-based South African university through a qualitative criminological inquiry informed by Routine Activity Theory, General Strain Theory, and Social Disorganisation Theory. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with students, residence wardens, and security personnel. The findings reveal that an interplay of weak security infrastructure, socio-economic deprivation, substance abuse, institutional governance failures, environmental vulnerability, and cultural normalisation of deviance shapes campus crime. The study argues that campus crime cannot be addressed through surveillance and policing alone, but requires integrated, context-sensitive interventions that engage social, institutional, and community dimensions of crime prevention. The article contributes to criminological scholarship by advancing a theoretically grounded and empirically informed understanding of campus crime in rural higher education settings and offering policy-relevant insights to strengthen campus safety governance in South Africa.

Keywords: campus crime; criminological theory; rural universities; routine activity; social disorganisation; South Africa; strain theory

Introduction

Campus crime has emerged as a significant concern within higher education systems globally as universities increasingly confront incidents of theft, violence, sexual victimisation, and substance-related misconduct [1]. Institutions of higher learning, historically conceptualised as relatively insulated environments dedicated to intellectual development and social mobility, now reflect broader societal patterns of criminality. This transformation has prompted sustained scholarly inquiry into the nature, causes, and consequences of crime within university spaces and its implications for student well-being, academic success, and institutional legitimacy [2].

In the South African context, campus crime must be situated within a broader landscape of structural inequality, socio-economic marginalisation, and persistent high levels of violent crime. South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies globally, with extreme disparities in income, access to education, and employment opportunities [3]. These inequalities continue to shape everyday social relations and create criminogenic conditions that extend into higher education institutions [4]. Universities are embedded within communities marked by poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, and weak social services, making them vulnerable to both internal and external forms of criminal activity.

Rural-based universities occupy a particularly precarious position within this landscape. Unlike urban institutions that benefit from proximity to policing resources, transport infrastructure, and technological surveillance systems, rural

universities are frequently located in geographically isolated areas characterised by limited state presence, poor lighting, weak road networks, and expansive open campuses that are difficult to secure [5]. Their proximity to economically deprived communities further intensifies exposure to opportunistic crime, including theft, robbery, and gender-based violence. Students often reside off campus in informal housing or travel long distances using unsafe transport systems, increasing their routine exposure to victimisation [6].

Despite these vulnerabilities, scholarly attention to campus crime in South Africa has largely focused on metropolitan universities, leaving rural institutions underrepresented in empirical research. Existing studies frequently adopt descriptive approaches that document prevalence rates without sufficiently interrogating the deeper socio-structural, institutional, and cultural mechanisms sustaining crime [7]. Moreover, much of the international literature is rooted in Western contexts, where campus governance structures, security capacity, and socio-economic conditions differ substantially from those of South African rural universities [1]. This gap necessitates locally grounded, theoretically informed research that captures the unique dynamics of rural campus crime.

This article examines the factors contributing to the prevalence of campus crime at a rural-based South African university through a criminological inquiry that integrates theoretical perspectives with qualitative empirical data. By foregrounding the experiences of students, residence wardens, and security personnel, the study seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of crime prevalence toward a more explanatory understanding of how structural inequality, institutional practices, and environmental vulnerabilities converge to produce criminogenic campus spaces.

Problem Statement and Research Gap

Although campus crime has been widely researched internationally, rural-based universities in South Africa remain insufficiently explored as distinct criminological sites. These institutions operate within socio-economically marginalised environments characterised by poverty, youth unemployment, weak infrastructure, and limited policing capacity. Students and staff are increasingly exposed to theft, assault, sexual victimisation, and substance-related violence, which disrupt academic life and undermine institutional stability [4 and 6]. Yet institutional responses remain largely reactive, prioritising surveillance and security deployment rather than addressing the structural and environmental conditions that facilitate crime.

The existing literature is dominated by quantitative victimisation surveys and security audits conducted in urban universities, offering limited insight into the lived realities of rural campuses [1]. Furthermore, South African studies often treat campus crime as a managerial or security issue rather than a broader social and criminological phenomenon shaped by inequality, strain, and social disorganisation [7]. There is limited integration of criminological theory, particularly Routine Activity Theory, General Strain Theory, and Social Disorganisation Theory, into empirical analyses of campus crime in rural contexts.

This paper addresses this gap by providing a theoretically grounded, qualitative examination of the factors contributing to campus crime at a rural-based South African university. It seeks to illuminate how socio-economic deprivation, institutional governance failures, environmental design, and cultural norms intersect to sustain patterns of offending and victimisation. In doing so, the article contributes to criminological scholarship by extending theoretical insights into an under-researched institutional setting and offering evidence-based recommendations for campus safety policy and practice.

Context and Literature Review

Campus crime is not unique to South Africa. International research demonstrates that theft, substance abuse, and sexual violence are common across university settings in both developed and developing countries [2 and 1]. In the United States, studies have documented high rates of property crime and alcohol-related violence, particularly within residence halls and social venues. European research similarly identifies student victimisation as closely linked to nightlife culture and routine activity patterns. In sub-Saharan Africa, campus crime has been associated with weak institutional governance, overcrowding, and limited security capacity [10].

South African scholarship highlights additional contextual vulnerabilities. Ngcece (2018)[5] argues that the porous boundaries of many rural campuses allow both internal and external offenders to operate with minimal detection. Govender [6] demonstrates that fear of crime negatively affects student well-being and academic performance, particularly among female students. Dlamini and Olanrewaju [8] identify strained relationships between universities and the South African Police Service (SAPS) as a major impediment to effective crime response. These studies collectively suggest that campus crime must be understood not merely as individual misconduct but as an outcome of institutional weakness and social disorganisation.

Socio-economic deprivation has emerged as a consistent predictor of campus crime. Students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds experience strain associated with unmet material needs, leading some to engage in theft, fraud, or drug distribution as coping strategies [9 and 7]. Peer influence and substance use further reinforce deviant subcultures, normalising violence and vandalism as routine aspects of student life [11]. At the institutional level, weak governance, inconsistent disciplinary practices, and inadequate security training undermine deterrence and erode trust in authority structures [12].

However, much of this literature remains fragmented and insufficiently theorised. Few studies integrate multiple criminological perspectives to explain how individual motivation, environmental opportunity, and structural inequality converge within campus spaces. Moreover, rural universities remain marginal within this body of knowledge, despite facing heightened exposure to both internal and external criminal threats. This study responds to these gaps by synthesising criminological theory with qualitative empirical evidence from a rural-based university.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by three complementary criminological perspectives: Routine Activity Theory [13], General Strain Theory [9], and Social Disorganisation Theory [14].

Routine Activity Theory posits that crime occurs when motivated offenders encounter suitable targets in the absence of capable guardianship. Within university settings, inadequate lighting, limited access control, and insufficient security patrols reduce guardianship and increase opportunities for crime [15]. Rural campuses, characterised by open spatial designs and weak surveillance systems, provide ideal conditions for such convergence.

General Strain Theory explains deviant behaviour as a response to stressors arising from blocked economic and social opportunities. Financial hardship, academic pressure, and unemployment prospects generate frustration that may be expressed through criminal adaptation [9]. This framework is particularly relevant in rural universities where students often experience acute material deprivation.

Social Disorganisation Theory situates crime within communities marked by weak social cohesion, limited collective efficacy, and institutional instability [14]. The interaction between rural campuses and surrounding marginalised communities creates conditions of fragmented social control and blurred boundaries between formal and informal regulation.

Together, these theories provide an integrated lens for analysing campus crime as the product of environmental opportunity, socio-economic strain, and institutional disorganisation.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the underlying factors contributing to the prevalence of campus crime at a rural-based South African university. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of crime within their institutional environment [16]. Rather than quantifying incidents of crime, the study sought to understand the social, institutional, and environmental processes that shape offending and victimisation on campus. The research was informed by an interpretivist paradigm, recognising that crime on campus is socially constructed through everyday interactions between students, staff, and institutional authorities. This approach allowed for the examination of meanings attached to security, deviance, and institutional control within the specific context of a rural university.

The study was conducted at a rural-based South African university located in a socio-economically marginalised region characterised by high unemployment, limited infrastructure, and weak municipal services. The institution is surrounded by informal settlements and rural communities, which have implications for campus security and access control.

Participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement with or exposure to campus safety issues. The sample comprised:

- Student leaders (n = 10),
- Student Support Department (n = 6)
- Protective Services Department-Campus security personnel (n = 16).
- Students (n= 30)
- Legal Services (n= 2)

These groups were selected because of their strategic positions within the university's governance and safety structures. Snowball sampling was subsequently employed to identify additional participants with relevant experiences.

Data were generated through semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. An interview guide was developed to explore perceptions of campus crime, contributing factors, institutional responses, and suggestions for improvement. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted in English, with occasional code-switching to isiZulu where necessary to facilitate clarity and comfort. Focus group discussions were conducted with student participants to encourage interaction and collective reflection on shared experiences of safety and victimisation. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data following Braun and Clarke's [17] six-step framework: familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Analysis was both inductive and deductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data while also being guided by the theoretical framework of Routine Activity Theory, General Strain Theory, and Social Disorganisation Theory. Moreover, credibility was enhanced through triangulation across participant groups and member checking, whereby preliminary findings were discussed with selected participants for validation. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to account for the researcher's positionality and potential bias.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research ethics committee. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports. Given the sensitive nature of crime and victimisation, participants were provided with information about counselling services where necessary.

Internal biases in the collected data were mitigated through several methodological strategies designed to enhance credibility, reliability, and analytical rigour. First, the study employed data triangulation by collecting information from multiple participant groups, including students, student leaders, residence wardens, campus security personnel, student support staff, and legal services representatives. This diversity of perspectives reduced the risk of relying on a single narrative or institutional viewpoint and allowed the researchers to cross-validate emerging insights across different stakeholders involved in campus safety.

Second, methodological triangulation was applied through the use of both semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. Individual interviews enabled participants to express personal experiences and perceptions of campus crime in a confidential setting, while focus groups encouraged collective reflection and the identification of shared patterns of victimisation and security concerns. Comparing data from these two methods assisted in identifying inconsistencies and confirming recurring themes. Third, member checking was implemented during the analytical phase. Preliminary interpretations and thematic findings were discussed with selected participants to verify whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. This process reduced the risk of researcher misinterpretation. Finally, researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. The researchers continuously reflected on their positionality, assumptions, and potential influence on data interpretation. This reflexive practice helped ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than preconceived expectations about campus crime.

Discussion of findings

The analysis revealed six interrelated themes that explain the persistence of campus crime: weak security infrastructure, socio-economic deprivation, substance abuse and peer influence, institutional governance failures, environmental and spatial vulnerability, and cultural normalisation of deviance. These themes are discussed in relation to criminological theory.

Weak Security Infrastructure

Participants consistently identified inadequate security systems as a primary contributor to campus crime. Limited CCTV coverage, poor lighting in key areas such as pathways and parking lots, and insufficient patrol personnel were cited as major vulnerabilities.

A security officer stated:

"We are too few to patrol such a large campus. Some areas are completely dark at night, and criminals know where to operate."

Students expressed a lack of confidence in institutional protection:

"You only see security after something has already happened. There is no prevention, only reaction."

These findings resonate strongly with Routine Activity Theory, which emphasises the absence of capable guardianship as a key condition for crime[13]. Poor surveillance and weak access control created spaces where motivated offenders encountered suitable targets without deterrence. Environmental criminology further explains how poorly designed spaces increase opportunities for crime [15]. The results suggest that campus security failures are not merely operational shortcomings but structural enablers of victimisation.

Socio-Economic Deprivation

Socio-economic hardship emerged as a dominant driver of crime. Participants linked theft, fraud, and drug dealing to financial desperation among students and surrounding community members.

A student leader explained:

"Some students steal because they have no food, no money, and no support from home."

Security personnel reported that stolen laptops and cell phones were often sold in nearby informal markets. These findings align with General Strain Theory, which posits that individuals experiencing blocked opportunities and material deprivation may resort to illegitimate means to achieve survival or success [9].

The rural context intensified this strain. Limited employment opportunities and inadequate financial aid exacerbated students' vulnerability. Crime thus became a coping mechanism embedded within structural inequality rather than isolated moral failure. This supports Makhaye's[7] argument that campus crime reflects broader socio-economic injustice rather than purely individual deviance.

Substance Abuse and Peer Influence

Alcohol and cannabis use were identified as major facilitators of violent incidents, vandalism, and sexual misconduct. Weekends were described as peak periods for assaults and property damage.

A residence warden observed:

"Most fights happen when students are drunk. They lose control and start damaging property or attacking each other."

Peer influence reinforced risky behaviour. Participants described a student culture in which excessive drinking and disorder were normalised as part of university life. This reflects differential association and subcultural explanations of crime, where deviant norms are learned and reinforced through peer groups [18 and 11].

Substance abuse also weakened informal social control mechanisms, contributing to moral disengagement and increased tolerance for violence. These dynamics demonstrate how individual behaviour is shaped by collective student subcultures within a permissive institutional environment.

Institutional Governance and Policy Gaps

Participants highlighted significant weaknesses in institutional governance. Communication breakdowns between security services, student affairs, and management delayed responses to incidents. Disciplinary processes were perceived as inconsistent and lenient.

A student commented:

"People know nothing serious will happen to them, so they continue with bad behaviour."

This erosion of procedural justice undermined institutional legitimacy and compliance [19]. When rules were applied selectively, students became cynical and disengaged from formal authority structures. These findings support Govender's (2020) argument that ineffective governance contributes directly to crime persistence in higher education institutions.

Institutional disorganisation mirrors Social Disorganisation Theory, which emphasises the role of weak institutional controls and fragmented authority in facilitating crime [14]. Universities, like communities, require cohesion and clear norms to maintain order.

Social Disorganisation and Environmental Factors

The campus's geographical location within a semi-rural area surrounded by high-crime communities increased exposure to external offenders. Participants reported frequent intrusions by non-students who accessed the campus through unmonitored routes.

A security officer stated:

"Anyone can just walk in. There are too many open entrances."

Poor environmental design, including bushy areas, abandoned buildings, and unregulated transport hubs, created criminogenic spaces. These findings reflect environmental criminology's emphasis on spatial opportunity structures [15]. The campus environment itself facilitated crime by failing to impose natural surveillance and territorial control.

The blurred boundary between campus and community weakened collective efficacy and social control, consistent with Social Disorganisation Theory.

Cultural and Behavioural Dimensions

An emerging theme was the cultural tolerance of deviant behaviour. Acts such as cheating, alcohol abuse, harassment, and minor theft were trivialised as "part of student life."

A participant noted:

"People don't see these things as serious crimes. They think it's normal at university."

This moral disengagement eroded informal regulation and encouraged repeat offending. Ross and Rasool [4] similarly argue that weak ethical cultures within universities reinforce cycles of misconduct. The campus thus became a microcosm of broader societal patterns of declining moral accountability.

Integrated Discussion

The findings demonstrate that campus crime is produced through the interaction of environmental opportunity, socio-economic strain, and institutional disorganisation. Routine Activity Theory explains how weak guardianship and spatial vulnerability create opportunities for offending. General Strain Theory accounts for the material pressures that motivate criminal adaptation among students. Social Disorganisation Theory situates these behaviours within fragile institutional and community structures marked by weak cohesion and governance.

These theories collectively reveal that campus crime cannot be reduced to individual pathology or security failure alone. It is a systemic problem rooted in inequality, governance deficits, and cultural norms. Crime prevention strategies that focus exclusively on surveillance and punishment neglect the social and institutional conditions that sustain criminal behaviour.

A Critical Analysis

The findings of this study demonstrate that campus crime at a rural-based South African university is not the product of isolated deviant acts but rather the outcome of a complex interaction between socio-economic strain, environmental vulnerability, institutional disorganisation, and cultural norms. This complexity challenges simplistic security-oriented responses that frame crime as merely a problem of inadequate policing or individual misconduct. Instead, the evidence points to the necessity of understanding campus crime as structurally embedded within broader inequalities and governance deficits.

Routine Activity Theory offers a powerful explanatory lens by illustrating how the absence of capable guardianship and the presence of suitable targets converge within poorly regulated campus spaces. However, while this theory explains opportunity structures, it does not sufficiently account for the socio-economic motivations driving offenders. This limitation is addressed through General Strain Theory, which highlights how financial hardship, academic pressure, and uncertainty about future employment create emotional strain that may manifest in criminal adaptation [9]. The rural context amplifies these strains due to limited employment prospects and scarce institutional resources.

Social Disorganisation Theory further situates campus crime within fragile institutional and community structures marked by weak collective efficacy, blurred boundaries between campus and surrounding communities, and limited trust in formal authority [14]. The findings reveal that institutional governance failures, such as inconsistent disciplinary procedures and poor coordination between security and management, mirror the breakdown of social control typically

observed in high-crime neighbourhoods. Universities, therefore, function as micro-communities subject to the same structural vulnerabilities as their surrounding environments.

Critically, the study also exposes the cultural normalisation of deviance within student subcultures. The trivialisation of alcohol abuse, harassment, and minor theft reflects a form of moral disengagement that weakens informal social regulation. This dimension is often neglected in campus safety strategies that prioritise technological surveillance over ethical development and social cohesion. Ross and Rasool [4] argue that without cultivating a shared moral order, universities risk reproducing broader societal patterns of violence and impunity within academic spaces.

Taken together, these findings support a multi-theoretical explanation of campus crime that integrates situational opportunity, socio-economic pressure, and institutional weakness. The critical implication is that effective crime prevention must be multidimensional. Surveillance and access control are necessary but insufficient unless accompanied by social, institutional, and cultural interventions that address root causes.

Policy and Practice Implications

The results of this paper have important implications for higher education policy, campus governance, and crime prevention strategies, particularly within rural-based universities.

Integrated Campus Safety Governance

Universities should establish integrated safety governance structures that bring together security services, student affairs, academic departments, and external stakeholders such as the South African Police Service (SAPS). Fragmentation between these actors undermines rapid response and accountability. A centralised campus safety committee with clear reporting lines and decision-making authority can improve coordination and information sharing [8].

Investment in Environmental Design and Infrastructure

Consistent with principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), universities must prioritise improved lighting, controlled access points, CCTV coverage, and the elimination of criminogenic spaces such as abandoned buildings and bushy walkways.[15] These interventions enhance natural surveillance and territoriality, thereby strengthening guardianship in line with Routine Activity Theory.

Socio-Economic Support and Student Welfare

Addressing strain requires expanding student support mechanisms, including food security programmes, emergency financial assistance, and counselling services. Universities should recognise that theft and fraud may emerge as survival strategies among economically marginalised students. Interventions that alleviate financial pressure are therefore crime prevention measures rather than merely welfare initiatives [9].

Substance Abuse Prevention and Peer Education

The strong link between substance abuse and violence necessitates proactive prevention strategies, including peer education programmes, stricter regulation of alcohol consumption in residences, and partnerships with health services. Universities should challenge the cultural normalisation of excessive drinking and deviance through values-based education and student leadership initiatives [11].

Strengthening Institutional Justice and Accountability

Procedural justice must be central to campus governance. Transparent and consistently applied disciplinary processes can restore trust in institutional authority and reinforce norms of compliance[19]. When students perceive fairness, they are more likely to internalise rules and cooperate with security efforts.

Community–University Partnerships

Given the porous boundaries between rural campuses and surrounding communities, crime prevention cannot be achieved in isolation. Collaborative partnerships with local municipalities, traditional leaders, and community organisations can enhance informal social control and collective efficacy. Such partnerships may include joint patrols, information-sharing platforms, and community development initiatives aimed at reducing crime spill-over.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that campus crime at a rural-based South African university is driven by an interlocking set of socio-economic, environmental, institutional, and cultural factors. Weak security infrastructure, financial deprivation, substance abuse, governance failures, spatial vulnerability, and the normalisation of deviance collectively sustain conditions conducive to crime. These findings confirm that campus crime is not simply an internal administrative problem but a criminological phenomenon embedded within broader patterns of inequality and social disorganisation. By integrating Routine Activity Theory, General Strain Theory, and Social Disorganisation Theory, the paper provides a comprehensive explanatory framework that moves beyond descriptive accounts of crime prevalence. It reveals how opportunity structures, social pressures, and institutional weakness converge to produce criminogenic campus environments. The research thus contributes to criminological scholarship by extending theory into an underexplored institutional setting, rural higher education in South Africa.

The policy implications underscore the need for integrated, context-sensitive crime prevention strategies that address root causes rather than symptoms. Enhancing campus safety requires not only technological surveillance and policing but also socio-economic support, ethical development, procedural justice, and community collaboration. Such an approach aligns with broader goals of social transformation and educational equity within South Africa's higher education sector. Future research should undertake comparative studies across multiple rural and urban universities to develop a national framework for campus safety grounded in empirical evidence. Longitudinal studies examining the impact of integrated interventions would further strengthen policy development. Ultimately, creating safe university environments is essential for protecting students' right to education, promoting academic success, and reinforcing universities as spaces of dignity, security, and social development.

In interpreting the findings of this study, careful attention was given to mitigating potential internal biases that could arise from qualitative data collection. The research design incorporated several strategies to ensure that conclusions were grounded in credible and balanced evidence. Data triangulation played a central role in this process, as information was obtained from diverse participant groups, including students, student leaders, campus security personnel, residence wardens, student support staff, and legal services representatives. The inclusion of these varied perspectives reduced the likelihood that the findings reflected a single institutional or participant bias and allowed the researchers to identify converging patterns across different stakeholder experiences. In addition, methodological triangulation through the use of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions strengthened the reliability of the data. Insights obtained from individual narratives were compared with collective discussions, enabling the researchers to confirm recurring themes while identifying and interrogating any inconsistencies. Member checking further enhanced the trustworthiness of the results, as selected participants reviewed preliminary interpretations to confirm that their views had been accurately represented.

Through these measures, the study ensured that the conclusions drawn were not based on isolated perceptions but on consistent evidence emerging across participant groups and data sources. Consequently, the findings offer a credible and contextually grounded understanding of the structural, environmental, and institutional factors that contribute to the persistence of campus crime in rural university settings.

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