

## **Rural Crime: A Proposed Victim Trauma Model for South Africa**

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### Abstract

This study addresses the complex issue of rural victimisation in South Africa, examining the prevalence of crime and the resulting fear among rural communities. It contributes to understanding rural victimisation and promotes trauma-informed strategies to address the multifaceted impacts of crime in rural areas. By analysing trauma, the study aims to highlight the distressing experiences caused by crime and the need to restore victims' sense of safety and control. A multi-dimensional framework with two main objectives is employed. Firstly, it explores trauma's profound emotional, psychological, social, and professional impact on rural crime victims. Secondly, the article advocates for comprehensive victim support encompassing mental health, safety, and security to aid recovery and resilience after victimisation. Furthermore, the research promotes implementing trauma-informed care guided by safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment principles. By incorporating concepts like realisation, recognition, response, and resistance, this approach aims to create an environment conducive to healing and growth for rural crime victims. The study's outcome is creating a proposed rural crime victim trauma model grounded in empirical evidence. This model offers a comprehensive understanding of victim trauma and underscores the importance of tailored interventions for sustainable recovery.

**Keywords:** rural victimisation, trauma-informed strategies, victim support, trauma model, rural crime

Situated at the southern tip of the African continent, South Africa is home to an estimated population of approximately 62 million people. The country is divided into nine provinces, with most residents concentrated in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Western and Eastern Cape Provinces (Stats SA, 2023). Despite a pronounced trend towards urbanisation, agriculture remains pivotal in South Africa, carrying significant social and economic importance. The agricultural sector employed over 780,000 individuals in 2020 and contributed 2.53% to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Stats SA, 2020). Characterised by a dualistic farming system, South Africa's agriculture is divided into commercial and non-commercial segments (Sihlobo, 2023). However, despite agriculture and the critical role of rural areas in South Africa, research on rural crime has received limited attention, resulting in a lack of critical information on addressing these crimes and the associated trauma (Clack & Bunei, 2024). Additionally, the official National Crime Statistics Records (SAPS) maintained by the South African Police Service do not provide specific data on the occurrences of agricultural crimes during a given period. Instead, these offences are classified under broader categories such as contact crimes, aggravated robbery, or property-related crimes. While some agricultural crimes with specific reference to farm attacks are frequently reported in the media, especially by farmers' unions, they are not officially included in the crime statistics (Geldenhuys, 2020).



South African Provinces

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_South\\_Africa\\_with\\_English\\_labels.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_South_Africa_with_English_labels.svg)

Rural crime in South Africa, particularly farm attacks and livestock theft, poses significant threats to the safety and well-being of farming communities (Clack & Minnaar, 2018). These crimes inflict severe physical, emotional, psychological, and professional trauma on victims, disrupting their lives and instilling a pervasive fear of crime. The impact

extends beyond immediate victims, affecting their families, communities, and the broader socio-economic fabric of rural areas (Geldenhuys, 2020). Despite the prevalence of these crimes, there is a lack of comprehensive data and significant underreporting due to mistrust in law enforcement and barriers to reporting (Clack, 2018).

This article adopts a multi-dimensional framework with two primary objectives. Firstly, it delves into the complex realm of trauma, focusing on the profound emotional, psychological, social, and professional impacts on individuals in rural areas who have fallen victim to crime. The goal is to unravel the layers of trauma experienced by these victims, exposing the full spectrum of their suffering and its extensive consequences. By thoroughly analysing this trauma, the study underscores the urgent need to restore victims' shattered sense of safety and control over their lives.

Secondly, the article emphasises comprehensive victim support encompassing mental health, safety, and security to aid recovery and resilience after victimisation that extends beyond mental health concerns to include broader safety and security aspects. The aim is to facilitate and expedite the victim's journey toward recovery and resilience after their traumatic experience. By examining the multi-dimensional impact of trauma and championing a victim-centric approach, this study aims to provide a thorough understanding of the challenges faced by rural crime victims.

The scope and impact of rural crime, including the psychological, social, and professional consequences for victims, are not well understood. By examining the multifaceted effects of trauma on rural crime victims and promoting a victim-centred strategy to help their rehabilitation and resilience, this study is essential to closing this gap. It also emphasises the significance of treating trauma-related symptoms like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to promote full recovery. This study is necessary to give rural crime victims a better understanding and more helpful support systems because of a lack of thorough research in this area in South Africa.

### **Defining Rural within a South African Context**

Numerous scholars in the field of rural criminology have made extensive efforts to define the "rural" concept, as evidenced by the work of Ceccato and Abraham (2022), Donnermeyer (2020), Hale et al. (2022), McIntyre et al. (2017), and Rennison and Mondragon, (2022), among others. It is essential to recognise that the definition of "rural" varies based on geography, economy, culture, rural development progress, and localised perceptions of rurality (Qi, 2022, p. 208). Therefore, acknowledging the absence of a one-size-fits-all definition for rural areas and recognising the significance of rural areas in researching rural crimes is paramount, as emphasised by scholars such as (Hale et al., 2022) and Carcach (2000). As Chabal (2009) emphasises, concepts and terms are not one-size-fits-all but emerge from local, historical, and contextual contexts. On the other hand, establishing a clear and contextually relevant conceptualisation is critical for the research area. Scholars such as Scott and Biron (2016) and Rennison and Mondragon (2022) reiterate this point.

In a South African context, defining "rural" poses a significant challenge because the vastness and diversity defy a single, universally applicable definition (Clack & Bunei, 2024). For this research, "rural" refers to country districts outside urban or peri-urban areas distinguished by an agricultural lifestyle. In other words, farming communities centred on small towns and villages serving rural areas typically sparsely populated and isolated from urban areas (Clack & Minnaar, 2018; Minnaar, 2016). Therefore, we deal with types of crime, trauma and victimisation experienced in rural areas within the working definition.

### **Types of Crime, Trauma and Victimisation Experienced in South African Rural Areas**

Rural areas have unique structures and connections with crime and criminality, although some people perceive rural areas as idyllic and safer than the urban equivalent (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Bunei & Barasa, 2017; Doorewaard, 2020; Hodgkinson & Martino, 2023; Holmes & Jones, 2017; Sinethemba & Beyene, 2022). The apparent lack of attention to crime in rural areas is associated with the belief in a contrast between urban (known for higher crime rates) and rural areas (being perceived as friendlier, healthier, and problem-free) (Hodgkinson & Martino, 2023; Holmes & Jones, 2017; Neubacher et al., 2024). Low crime rates in rural areas are perceived as a token that crime and safety are not problems or priorities for rural residents.

Debating possible decreases in violence rates in rural areas, research (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Hodgkinson & Martino, 2023; Holmes & Jones, 2017; Meško, 2020) indicates that the probability of violence decreases as independence and self-reliance are compromised and cohesion (being united with strong personal interactions between rural communities' members) is strengthened in rural communities. Therefore, locals in rural communities are likely to know one another socially, and this form of informal protection directs lower crime rates in rural settings (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Meško, 2020; Neubacher et al., 2024). Rural characteristics such as geographical isolation and remoteness positively affect residents' views on safety, while dissimilarity increases concerns about less dense and open areas (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Bunei & Barasa, 2017; Holmes & Jones, 2017; Neubacher et al., 2024). Strengthening this, it was found that rural elderly display positive perceptions of safety owing to elevated community bonds and protectiveness (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022).

As with urban crime, all types of crimes occur in rural areas (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Doorewaard et al., 2015; Hodgkinson & Martino, 2023; Holmes & Jones, 2017; Meško, 2020; Neubacher et al., 2024; Van der Westhuizen & Adams, 2022). Examples include economic, narcotic-related, violent and non-violent, and sexually related crimes and victimisations that occur frequently in rural settings. Unpacking the specific types of rural crimes, include: abduction, arson, armed robbery, assault, attempted murder, home invasion, child abuse (i.e., emotional, physical, psychological, neglect, and sexual), corruption, cruelty to animals, domestic violence, gang violence, human trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, LBQTI+ related crimes (i.e., trans-gender victimisation), rural organised crime syndicates and mafias (i.e., stock theft organised syndicates and construction mafias operating in rural areas in South Africa), rape, serial crimes (i.e., serial murders and rape), theft (i.e.,

agricultural equipment, feed supplements, fuel, jewellery, livestock, money, supplies, vehicles, and weapons), torture (i.e., mutilation of animals), and xenophobia (hate crimes) (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Bunei & Barasa, 2017; Doorewaard, 2020; Doorewaard et al. 2015; Illidge, 2024; Meško, 2020; Neubacher et al., 2024; Sinethemba & Beyene, 2022; Swartz, 2023; Van der Westhuizen & Adams, 2022).

Given all the different crimes experienced in rural areas, Donnermeyer (2014) categorises agricultural crime into extraordinary and ordinary crimes. Extraordinary crimes, such as organised drug production and terrorism, are infrequent but highly damaging, impacting victims, the agricultural sector, and the national economy. Ordinary crimes occur more frequently, including theft of livestock, machinery, farm equipment, vandalism, and property damage from trespassers. Similarly, Grote and Neubacher (2016) highlight different types of rural crimes, classifying them into farm, environmental, wildlife, violent, and corruption. Both perspectives inherently address the same types of crime, with Donnermeyer (2014) focusing on the frequency of occurrence and Grote and Neubacher (2016) focusing on the specific crime categories.

In South Africa, the available academic literature has primarily focused on two aspects of rural crime, namely, farm attacks and livestock theft. Farm attacks are known as violence against farmers, farmworkers and their families, often resulting in death and severe injury, besides suffering from theft, robbery and other violent acts against them (Clack & Minnaar, 2018a). Livestock theft is a crime defined as both a property crime and an economic crime. Within the frameworks of Donnermeyer (2014) and Grote and Neubacher (2016), this discussion briefly explores the extraordinary and ordinary crime experiences in South African rural areas. Understanding the prevalence and significance of these two types of crime is crucial to comprehending the trauma endured by residents and those economically active in these communities.

### ***Violent Crimes***

Farm attacks are considered the most notorious crime in rural areas of South Africa and are often perceived as a uniquely South African phenomenon (Akinola, 2020; Bezuidenhout, 2012; Moolman, 2000b, a; Roelofse & Helm, 2012; Strydom & Schutte, 2005a, 2005b). While the definition of a farm attack is indeed specific to South Africa, violence and murders in rural areas are global issues. What distinguishes farm crimes in South Africa is the alarming number of farmers, farmworkers, and their families who are attacked or murdered. According to TAU (2024), statistics indicate that between 1999 and February 2024, there have been 2,267 murders of farmers, farmworkers, and their family members, alongside 6,413 attacks. This high incidence of violence underscores the severity of farm crimes in South Africa.

Examples of heinous crimes are common in South African media, and we only mention the following examples as illustrations. Masuku (2023, p. 41) discloses that in many rural communities, cow dung is used for fuel in rural areas. However, stock theft has reduced the availability and resulted in households resorting to wood for fires. This has led to women

and girls collecting firewood in the forests many hours a day. This exposes them to the danger of being raped and killed. Pursuant to the aforementioned, Swartz (2023) reports about a brutal and monstrous farm murder where a farmer and his wife were coldheartedly assaulted by four perpetrators looking for money. The farmer and his wife were tied up and relentlessly beaten. The attackers then resorted to an angle grinder and an electric drill. The assailants also pointed a gun at the farmer's wife's head. The farmer and his wife were stabbed with knives, and the farmer was shot in the face with his rifle (Swartz, 2023).

Furthering the discussion on violent crime in rural areas, Abraham and Ceccato (2022) and Neubacher et al. (2024) state that victims of rural crime often display higher lenience for certain acts (i.e., assault and domestic violence) than in urban areas. This is linked to 'privacy norms' commanding that people in rural areas keep themselves from interfering with their neighbours' private matters (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022). Often, vast distances between houses and dwellings in rural areas exist, making it difficult for neighbours to discover acts of violence that have occurred (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Doorewaard, 2020; Neubacher et al., 2024). Furthermore, barriers exist in reporting crime and in getting support, evidently for female victims of violence, and factors such as isolation (because of long distances), gender-role dynamics with couples, and poverty (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Chakraborti & Garland, 2003; Měsko, 2020).

Female victims of crime and trauma in rural areas customarily have access to less cash and vehicles/transport when compared to the men and their extended families mostly control those resources (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022). Also, for many female victims of violence, seeking assistance and escaping from their residences is difficult (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022). Adding to this, not all rural areas have women's shelters, some shelters are far away, while the distance to travel to the shelters is impaired by inadequate public transportation and a lack of or irregular access to mobile phones and the internet (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022). In most cases, a 'code of silence' associated with fear of exclusion (i.e., barring) if the violence becomes public and the endorsement of patriarchal community values contribute to the low rates of reported violence against women in rural areas (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022). The factors mentioned above hamper reliable official data on violence against women (i.e., domestic violence) in rural areas (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Chakraborti & Garland, 2003). Likewise, crimes against farmers are mainly underreported partly because farmers mistrust the ability of the police to assist them (Měsko, 2020; Neubacher et al., 2024). Against this background, low levels of satisfaction with the police are associated with the farmers' fear of crime in rural areas (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Měsko, 2020; Neubacher et al., 2024).

### ***Farm Crimes***

Within this category, we deal with ordinary economic crimes and provide a glimpse of the extent and nature of these crimes. Agri SA commissioned a National Agricultural Sector Crime Survey by The Bureau of Market Research at the University of South Africa to address this research gap. The study involved a sample of 1,326 commercial farmers (Tustin & van Aardt, 2018). According to the findings of Tustin and van Aardt (2018), approximately

70% of commercial agricultural units in South Africa fell victim to various forms of crime in 2017. The most prevalent agricultural crimes experienced included theft of livestock (39.7%), theft of farm infrastructure (37.2%), theft of farm tools and equipment (34.7%), theft of game and illegal hunting (28.5%), and burglary (25.1%). In contrast, the 2017 census of commercial agriculture conducted by Statistics South Africa (with the sample size not published) reported that about 29% of commercial agricultural units experienced one or more of the following crimes in 2017: livestock theft (36%), theft of produce (26%), theft of supplies (25%), violent crimes (5%), and other crimes (8%) (Stats SA, 2020).

A more recent study by Clack in 2021, involving 730 farmers, revealed their exposure to a range of crimes, including livestock theft (46%), theft of machinery (7.8%), theft of farm supplies (33.2%), theft of firearms (3.8%), theft of non-mechanized equipment (36.9%), theft of personal belongings (10.4%), and theft of farm produce (22.4%). It is worth noting that these studies focused exclusively on commercial farmers, and there are critical distinctions between them. Agri SA distributed their questionnaire to members of affiliations and organisations, while Stats SA distributed their questionnaire to Value-Added Tax registered farmers, and Clack used social media for sampling (Clack, 2022; Stats SA, 2020; Tustin & van Aardt, 2018). One notable difference among these studies in South Africa is the estimations of the number of farmers affected by crime, with Agri SA estimating 70%, Stats SA at 29%, and Clack at 82%. This substantial variation highlights the potential influence of response bias, as Agri SA and Clack employed approaches that may introduce social desirability bias. At the same time, Stats SA followed a more comprehensive omnibus approach addressing various topics that could be perceived as demanding. Moreover, the differences in the questions asked in these surveys may also contribute to the discrepancies.

However, one consistent finding across all these studies is the prevalence of livestock theft as the most significant agricultural crime affecting farmers in South Africa, with figures ranging from 36% to 46% (Stats SA, 36%; AgriSA, 39.7%; Clack, 46%). This underscores the pressing need for research and policy measures to address this issue in the country.

### ***Corruption in Rural Areas***

Corruption is a significant issue in the rural areas of South Africa, driven by multiple factors that exacerbate its prevalence and impact. Key drivers include human greed, a lack of ethics among public officials, a lack of commitment and accountability, and public officials' low salary levels, which create bribery incentives. Additionally, a weak legal system and a scarcity of resources in these areas further entrench corrupt practices (Shongwe, 2018).

The effects of corruption in rural South Africa are wide-ranging and deeply damaging. It contributes to the impoverishment of most of the population while enriching a politically connected minority (Lekabe, 2024). This dynamic undermines democracy and hampers service delivery, often leading to widespread service delivery protests. Corruption also creates inequality and an unfair distribution of government services, further marginalising vulnerable populations (Shongwe, 2018).



Examples of corruption in South African rural areas illustrate the problem's pervasiveness. Illidge (2024) reports on dangerous construction mafias operating in the rural regions in KwaZulu-Natal province, whereby 13 suspects were arrested for posing as 'construction business forums'. Construction mafias have become a plague in the construction industry in South Africa, 'demanding a 'security fee' from contractors working in areas in which the mafias operate. These mafias use intimidation strategies and violence to get contractors to conform to their demands (Illidge, 2024).

### **Fear of Crime and Trauma**

Fear of crime significantly contributes to the trauma experienced by people living in rural areas, mainly due to factors like isolation, criminal use of technology, fear of violent repercussions, lack of confidence in the police, and limited access to victim services (Smith, 2020). The concept of fear of crime lacks a universally accepted definition but is commonly described as an emotional response characterised by a sense of danger and anxiety related to physical harm (Garofalo, 1981). In a 2021 survey (Clack, 2023), this phenomenon was explored through three key questions. The first question aimed to gauge respondents' perceptions of crime in their local area, while the second question delved into their specific perceptions of a particular crime. The third question, closely linked to the first two, sought to uncover whether respondents relied on official crime statistics or if sources like social media and hearsay primarily influenced their fear of crime. Regarding the question, "How would you generally classify crime in your local area?" responses were measured on a Likert scale and revealed the following distribution: very serious (52%), a little bit serious (34%), neutral (16%); not very serious (4%); and not at all serious (0%). With a substantial skew towards the "very serious" end of the scale, accounting for 86% of respondents, it becomes evident that many of the participants harboured a heightened fear of crime in their local communities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This article adopts a multi-dimensional framework driven by two primary objectives. Firstly, it delves into the intricate realm of trauma, focusing on its profound emotional, psychological, social, and professional ramifications on individuals living in rural areas who have fallen victim to various forms of crime. By undertaking a comprehensive analysis of trauma, this study endeavours to shed light on the profoundly distressing experiences endured by these victims, underscoring the urgent necessity to restore their shattered sense of safety and control over their lives.

The first objective, therefore, seeks to unravel the layers of trauma experienced by rural crime victims, ultimately aiming to expose the full spectrum of their suffering and its far-reaching consequences. It strives to highlight the extent to which criminal victimisation disrupts the lives of individuals within rural communities, encompassing the immediate emotional and psychological trauma and the broader social and professional disruptions that often ensue.

Secondly, this article strongly emphasises implementing a victim-centred approach, placing the well-being and recovery of the victim at the core of its focus. It zeroes in on trauma-related symptoms commonly experienced by rural crime victims. Through this lens, the article advocates for a holistic and all-encompassing approach to victim support, extending beyond alleviating mental health concerns to encompass the broader facets of safety and security. The aim here is to facilitate and expedite the victim's journey towards recovery and resilience after the traumatic experience of victimisation.

The dual objectives, exploring the multi-dimensional impact of trauma and championing a victim-centric approach, converge to promote a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by rural crime victims and to advocate for a more effective, empathetic, and supportive framework aimed at aiding their recovery and fostering resilience in the aftermath of victimisation.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative systematic literature review was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of trauma, victimisation, victims' reactions to trauma, trauma approaches, the impact of trauma on victims, and focusing on victims of rural crime. Applied research was employed for a practical approach regarding factors influencing trauma and victimisation for victims of rural crime (Hauser et al., 2023). Purposive sampling (a non-probability sampling method) was used to guide the researchers with literature-worthy information linked to the study's aim and objectives (Booth et al., 2021; Obilor, 2023). Literature was located from scientific journals, books, and academic websites (i.e., Google Scholar). Braun and Clarke's (Byrne, 2022) thematic analysis was used to analyse the data according to key themes. The quality of the research was ensured with the following principles (Patias & Hohendorff, 2019): (1) dependability (for transparency, the research process for selecting the literature, criteria used, and the method of analysis were documented); (2) transferability (providing a thorough description of the context of the literature included in the analysis); (3) credibility (including various sources and triangulating the data to confirm consistency and validity); and (4) confirmability (upholding a reflexive stance by avoiding biases and personal beliefs).

### **Trauma's Impact on Rural Crime Victims**

Trauma often provokes a disturbance of beliefs that results in victims questioning fundamental assumptions about fairness, future dreams, life, perceptions of others, and safety (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). Notably, rural crime victims are affected by trauma on emotional, financial, psychological, physical health, security, social, and spiritual levels with dire long-term or lasting outcomes (i.e., despair, fear, helplessness, isolation, physical disability, economic losses, hardship, loss of lives, poverty, and PTSD (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Doorewaard, 2020; Masuku, 2023; Neubacher et al., 2024; Pasiwe et al., 2021; Ripley et al., 2019). Commonly, many victims of rural crimes in South Africa endured physical injuries, such as gunshot wounds, stabbings, and other immediate physical injuries (Doorewaard, 2020; Swartz, 2023).

Many rural crime victims in South Africa are ‘serial’ (sequential and repetitive) crime and trauma survivors, showcasing extended experiences of prior victimisation and psychological traumas related to crime (Doorewaard, 2020; Masuku, 2023). Some of the victims avoided addressing their past traumas and this makes them more susceptible to prolonged (i.e., PTSD) or acute trauma responses (i.e., anxiety and major depressive disorders) (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Ripley et al., 2019; Senker et al., 2023; Sheynin et al., 2021).

Rural crime victimisation, subsequent trauma, and emotional repercussions not only affect the direct victims, family members, friends, workers (and their families), community, cultures, society at large, the criminal justice system, economy, mental health, health and security service industries but, the crime trauma is further extended to the police officers attending to rural crime and trauma support providers (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Masuku, 2023; Senker et al., 2023; Swartz, 2023). For victims of rural crime in South Africa, trauma creates a sense of commonality (i.e., being in the same situation and being vulnerable targets), acknowledging difficulties in dealing with the loss and trauma, and for many victims, receiving the necessary support (Eagle, 2015).

The pervasive impact of trauma on rural crime victims can be subtle (i.e., concentration problems), dangerous (i.e., withdrawal), or detrimental (i.e., PTSD) (Center for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US), 2014 ; Ripley et al., 2019; Senker et al., 2023; Sheynin et al., 2021). In particular, the impact and outcome of physical injuries and medical damage are often closely related to the availability of medical services and resources (i.e., medical doctors, specialists, and medical facilities) to assist and treat victims of crime in rural areas (Doerner & Lab, 2008) as medical treatment for victims of rural crimes often encompasses burns, brazen assault wounds inflicted with knives and other objects such as angle grinders, electric drills, screwdrivers, pangas (machetes), as well as gunshot wounds and heart attacks (Doerner & Lab, 2008; Pasiwe et al., 2021; Swartz, 2023).

Efforts to cope with rural crime trauma may result in compulsive behaviours such as gambling, overworking, suppression, denial of emotions, and substance abuse (Center for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US), 2014; Ripley et al., 2019). Some victims of rural crime may cope with trauma by resorting to alcohol and drug abuse and unsafe behaviours (i.e., promiscuous) (Center for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US), 2014). Mental health experts (Center for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US), 2014) argue that individuals who abuse substances (alcohol and drugs) and experience trauma have poorer quality treatment outcomes than those without histories of trauma. For victims of severe trauma, alcohol abuse is often perceived as self-destructive behaviour and a form of ‘self-medication’ for victims of trauma, as alcohol helps to numb and self-soothe unresolved trauma and emotions for victims who want to avoid or displace the trauma associated with crime. Similarly, traumatic stress might upsurge the risk of mental illness for victims of urban crime (Center for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US), 2014). One elevating fact related to victimisation and trauma is that many victims of rural crime experience psychological or

post-traumatic growth that is related to the victims' repetitive trauma, and some of the victims develop positive coping mechanisms to regulate the consequences and effects of the trauma(s) (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Senker et al., 2023).

### **Reactions of Victims of Trauma and Victimization to Rural Crime**

Many factors contribute to victims of rural crimes' responses to trauma, being it on an individual level, as a group, or as a community (Center Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US), 2014; Illedge, 2024; Měsko, 2020; Neubacher et al., 2024). Some victims may experience minimum reactions after trauma, which might lead to a crisis later in life (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014).

Determinants that influence victims of rural crime trauma responses are individual traits and qualities, life histories, the type of victimisation, characteristics of the trauma endured, amount and length of trauma exposure, sociocultural history, cultural meaning of traumatic events, number of losses associated with the trauma, history of trauma events, available resources internally (i.e., coping skills) and externally (i.e. family support), and community reactions (i.e., intolerance to rural crime) (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Senker et al., 2023).

Alternatively, Neubacher et al. (2024) highlight ambivalent responses that many victims of rural crime ponder over, such as trust/mistrust in authorities, reporting/not reporting victimisation and crimes, accepting/not accepting alternative conflict reimbursements, processing the experiences of crime, deciding to move/migrate/emigrate, and elevating security safeguards. Victims of crime encounter and interpret criminal acts differently (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). Biopsychosocial (biological, psychological, and social) and cultural factors (i.e., customs and norms) influence victims of rural crime reactions to trauma (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). These reactions to crime can be temporary or prolonged with acute symptoms and mental health effects (i.e., anxiety disorders and substance abuse) and medical complications (i.e., disability caused by crime) (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014).

PTSD is commonly associated with victimisation and trauma (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Doorewaard, 2020; Ripley et al., 2019; Seynin et al., 2021) providing elaborate discussions on PTSD and other trauma-related symptoms is, however, beyond the scope of this article, aiming to develop a multi-dimensional framework for victims of rural crime trauma.

Henceforth, existential reactions may include enhanced use of prayer, despair about humanity, lack of self-efficacy, and renewal of faith in the goodness of others (i.e., receiving assistance from others) (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). Behavioural and emotional reactions to trauma can include agitation, anger, anxiety (i.e., phobia), dampened (blunted) affect, denial, depression, confusion, constriction of feelings, detachment/disassociation (impacting intimate and interpersonal relationships), disorientation, exhaustion, fear of trauma repetition, feeling overwhelmed, out of control and

vulnerable, grief reactions, guilt (including survivor guilt), hostility, instability, irritability, sadness, shock, mood swings, numbness (i.e., hiding what is going on inside emotionally), and physical arousal (as a result of surviving) (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Ripley et al., 2019; Senker et al., 2023; Sheynin et al., 2021).

Other responses encompass apathy, appetite disturbances, argumentative behaviour, concentration problems, depersonalisation (i.e., floating above air), difficulty expressing oneself, distortion of time and space, eating disorders, increased use of alcohol, identification with victims, drugs, and tobacco, identification with victims, interpersonal conflict, memory problems, self-harm behaviours (to cope with emotional or physical distress), racing thoughts, restlessness, and withdrawal (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Ripley et al., 2019; Senker et al., 2023; Sheynin et al., 2021). Rural crime victims' immediate physical reactions to trauma might comprise blood pressure problems, extreme exhaustion/fatigue, faintness, increased heartbeat, gastrointestinal distress, greater startle responses, muscle tremors, nausea, respiration problems, shivering, sweating, and uncontrollable shaking (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014).

Possible delayed behavioural reactions of victims of rural crimes might include ongoing anxiety, emotions, or sensations linked to the trauma, autoimmune and chronic disruptive respiratory disease, decreased resistance to colds and infection, digestive changes, flashbacks, high-risk behaviours (i.e., violence), increased cortisol levels, long-term health effects (i.e., heart and liver problems), reduced activity level, sleeping problems, somatisation (i.e., elevated concerns about body aches), and nightmares (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Sheynin et al., 2021). Additional delayed cognitive reactions entail problematic decision-making, generalisation of triggers (i.e., a victim who was attacked during daytime might avoid being alone during the day), intrusive memories, reactivation of historic trauma events, self-blame, preoccupation with events, magical thinking (i.e., believing that certain behaviours will protect against future trauma), relationship turbulences, and suicidal ideation before the trauma (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Sheynin et al., 2021).

### **Victim-Centered and Trauma-Informed Approach**

A trauma-informed approach recognises the harms that occur to rural crime victims (Senker et al., 2023). Trauma experts (Sheynin et al., 2021) recommend that early intervention can alter the path of developing PTSD and other disorders to recovery if trauma intervention follows directly after exposure to crime. It aims to reduce harm with a compassionate, empathic and sympathetic approach by addressing the victims' assumptions (about safety and security), coping ability, functioning, resilience, and relationships, assisting them to conquer their experience of trauma, and viewing trauma reactions as 'normal reactions to abnormal situations' (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Senker et al., 2023). The trauma-informed approach, furthermore, strives towards an in-depth awareness and understanding of trauma and its impact on victims from an ecological and cultural lens, recognising the context in which the trauma and victimisation occurred (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). A social-ecological model encompasses a

general framework guiding victims, families, and communities affected by trauma; it highlights the effect that various situations can have on providing behavioural health services to victims of rural crime who have experienced trauma (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014).

For some victims of rural crime, methods of adapting and coping may be difficult, and others who seem to adapt and cope previously might struggle to cope with new trauma (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). Recurring trauma experiences may result in secondary trauma and symptoms, which can ignite the risk of externalising and internalising behaviour among children, such as bullying and problems with problematic social relationships (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). Family members are often on the firing line, experiencing the traumatic reactions (i.e., angry outbursts, anxiety, and overreactions) of a family member who was traumatised by crime (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). Being ‘trauma aware’ includes the recognition of the effects of trauma on victims, significant others, family members, first responders, the police, the community, medical professionals, behavioural health professionals, and broader social networks (i.e., the Criminal Justice system) (Center of Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014).

The ideal situation for victims of rural crime to express their experiences and trauma speaks to the following core principles (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; Presence, 2021; Senker et al., 2023):

1. Collaboration - active interaction with victims, providing them with ‘a voice’.
2. Safety – enhancing emotional and physical safety.
3. Choice – in shared decision-making.
4. Trustworthiness – transparency with trauma assistance and service.
5. Inclusivity – promoting environments that support belonging and inclusivity.
6. Empowerment – with the level of choice and control of mental health services over life events.
7. Realisation – acknowledging trauma, checking in regularly, and asking questions.
8. Recognising – recognising signs of trauma, identifying triggers, and facilitating effective response.
9. Having a system to respond to trauma – providing the opportunity for therapeutic services.
10. Resisting re-traumatisation – enhancing support and recognising risk areas/factors.

### **Trauma-Informed Care Principles**

Adapting trauma-informed principles to victims of rural crime, it is important to comprehend how trauma affects victims’ lives and how victims respond to intervention. This, in turn, is aligned to the following notions (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022; Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; FBI, 2019; Meško, 2020):

**□ Understanding Trauma:**

- Understanding the prevalence and impact of trauma on victims, family members, neighbours, community, and society at large (including first responders, police, and the Criminal Justice System).
- Recognising that trauma can affect victims' receptiveness to intervention.

**□ Creating Trauma-Aware Attitudes and Responses:**

- Establishing trauma-aware attitudes and responses.
- Supporting the delivery of trauma-sensitive services.
- Preventing support and actions that could trigger re-traumatisation (e.g., creating self-doubt, displaying judgmental attitudes).

**□ Intervention and Support:**

- Establishing referral processes for intervention and support for victims of rural crime.
- Building a continuity of trauma care and support.
- Re-evaluating each trauma-support effort through a trauma-aware lens.

**□ Collaboration and Community:**

- Enhancing collaboration between victims, family members, trauma survivors, and the community.
- Understanding ambivalent attitudes and feelings (e.g., mistrust in the police) towards authorities.
- Building resilience by recognising and relying on individual strengths, fostering the ability to thrive beyond trauma and victimisation.

**□ Recovery and Wellness:**

- Focusing on recovery by improving victims' health and wellness towards a self-directed life.
- Promoting significant daily activities (e.g., family caretaking).
- Re-establishing a sense of purpose, meaning, and personal goals.
- Revising and balancing priorities.
- Establishing/re-establishing positive bonds and relationships that cultivate friendship, hope, love, support, and understanding.

**□ Coping and Adaptation:**

- Enhancing internal coping and thinking patterns.
- Creating flexibility to adapt to change.
- Reinstating beliefs before trauma, a sense of self-efficacy, and the ability to experience positive emotions.
- Preventing secondary trauma (indirect exposure to trauma).

□ **Empathy and Respect:**

- Showcasing empathetic, sympathetic, and compassionate attitudes and support.
- Understanding the impact of historic (past) trauma and victimisation experiences.
- Avoiding labeling, stigmatisation, and humiliation of victims and their experiences.
- Steering clear of confronting victims (e.g., stating that they are resistant).
- Not forcing one's own beliefs, norms, values, and practices on victims.
- Recognising that each victim's trauma experience and circumstance is unique.
- Treating victims with respect and respecting their personal space, beliefs, culture, and sexual orientation.

### **Coping with Trauma**

The following can assist victims of rural crime in coping with the trauma and loss (FBI, 2019): (1) talk to someone about your trauma experience and your feelings and contact a friend when you panic or feel overwhelmed; (2) acknowledge the pain you feel; (3) keep a journal of your emotions and the challenges you experience; (4) try not to be alone all the time, seek company with others; (5) self-care is of paramount importance, mentally and physical – eat healthy and regularly, rest and sleep enough; (6) create a routine again, but do not overdo it; (7) steer your decision-making towards establishing a feeling of control over your life; (8) find time to exercise and relax; (9) list daily tasks and manage your stress levels; and (10) lean on the things that helped you cope during difficult times in the past and concentrate on things that make you positive, gave you joy and hope.

In contrast, situations to avoid when experiencing trauma include (FBI, 2019): (1) do not 'self-medicate' on alcohol or drugs to numb or relieve emotional pain as addiction creates new problems, and it postpones healing; (2) stick to making daily decisions and avoid making life-changing decisions; (3) do not blame yourself; you did not orchestrate the crime; and (4) express your emotions and do not bottle them up.

Providing more detail on coping with trauma as a result of rural crime victimisation, expert guidance is provided by mental health professionals (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). First, 'support structure', though trauma affects personal and intimate relationships, victims of rural crime must be encouraged to establish (or re-establish) a support system, as social support and positive relationships serve as protective factors and ease traumatic stress. Many times, victims of trauma avoid family and friends, believing that they will not understand what they are going through, perceiving them as untrustworthy, or being scared they (the victims) will be perceived as emotionally draining and as a burden (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). Along with this, trauma victims who display severe emotional or physical reactions (i.e., anger outbursts) might avoid contact with loved ones because they feel that they cannot control themselves or predict their reactions. Other trauma victims might feel embarrassed about their stress reactions, and this can affect their personal and intimate relationships (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).



Second, ‘support with empowerment’, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness are strongly associated with trauma, and, in many instances, such feelings drive victims to reclaim control of their lives (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). The loss of control over daily lives or behaviours (i.e., through alcohol abuse), and feelings of anger, fear, and sadness are disheartening to victims of crime and trauma. Through empowerment, trauma victims can regain some control over their lives and behaviours and build on their strengths (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). Third, ‘acknowledge grief and bereavement’, experiencing loss after trauma is a familiar feeling (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). Loss can be psychological (i.e., not feeling safe anymore) or physical (i.e., the death of a loved one) and is associated with grief, which can be emotionally overwhelming to the trauma victims. Bereavement can lead to increased alcohol and drug use to cope with the loss, and risk factors associated with long-lasting bereavement can include lack of social support, coexisting stressors (i.e., the loss of a loved one and feeling unsafe), a revival of PTSD symptoms; elevated levels of uncertainty about the loss; a dependent relationship before the loss; and the sudden, unexpected and shocking death of a loved one (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). Fourth, ‘monitor and facilitate stability’, intervention (i.e., professional assistance) is vital for victims of trauma and victimisation who display increased trauma symptoms, such as distress and difficulty in dealing with the impact of trauma (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). However, victims should have some level of psychological stability in order to partake in trauma assistance efforts. Awareness of indications of destabilisation include (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014): (1) enhanced unsafe behaviour, such as elevated substance use or self-harm behaviour; (2) inflated distressing symptoms, such as anger, anxiety, depression and withdrawal; (3) increased symptoms of trauma such as increased dissociation; (4) overwhelming feelings of helplessness or hopelessness; (5) not being able to commit and complete commitments (i.e., work responsibilities and addressing trauma symptoms); (6) heightened isolation; and (7) visible decrease in daily activities (i.e., taking care of self, children and hygiene practices).

### **Rural Crime Victim Trauma Model**

Developers of ecological models, such as Bronfenbrenner, (1979); and Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994), support trauma-related interventions and strategies (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014). Premises of an ecological model include (Center for Substance Treatment (US), 2014): (1) the impact of victims of trauma and victimisation; (2) recognising the difference between and the link directing victims’ behavioural, biological, and sociocultural needs, as well as available resources; (3) intervention, treatment, and prevention approaches to incorporate blended strategies to address individual-specific, interactive, and community systems; (4) focusing on positive protective factors that shield against or decrease the impact of trauma, and negative risk factors (i.e., increased dissociated and isolation); and (5) including culture and developmental processes to be in line with the involvement and features of the victims and the community’s functioning, norms, values and challenges experienced), being cognisance of culture-specific influence on trauma, seeking

assistance, the level of availability, and accessibility of resources (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014).

To promote trauma-support attitudes and efforts for victims of trauma and victimisation of rural crime, the following premises for a concept multi-dimensional framework are proposed by the authors of this paper (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000; Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), 2014; McCann et al., 1988; Senker et al., 2023; Winkel et al., 2003):

- Understanding that rural areas are isolated from quick access to medical facilities, family members, friends, neighbours, and the police can increase trauma for the victims.
- Early detection and recognition of rural crime trauma and victimisation, including a prevention-oriented viewpoint of trauma and victimisation, incorporating the direct community, police and providing a knowledgeable support service available to victims of rural crime.
- Training first responders, such as police officers, to detect serious symptoms of trauma for immediate referral for professional support.
- Organising community members as an informal support team and professional trauma-response persons available for intervention and support of victims.
- Implementing a victim-centered approach, where the victims' best interest towards understanding, support, guidance, understanding, safeguarding, and addressing the victims' trauma and victimisation experience on all levels (i.e., physically, mentally, and socially).
- Being sensitive and understanding about of the impact of crime on victims of rural crime (i.e., economically, physical health, social implications).
- Addressing and understanding victims of trauma and victimisation reactions/responses to rural crime (i.e., PTSD symptoms prior to trauma and victimisation, history of substance abuse, isolation, mental health issues, family problems, and self-harm behaviour).
- Applying a victim-centered and trauma-informed approach (i.e., an informal support structure and professional rural support).
- Adhering to trauma-informed care principles when assisting victims of rural crime.
- Creating a safe environment focusing on 1) Interpersonal aspects (i.e., immediate relationships with family, friends, history of trauma, and peers); 2) Community and organisational factors (i.e., community socio-economic status, neighbourhoods, school system, social support networks, and the workplace that directly influence the victim's relationships); 3) Societal components (i.e., the larger systems such as the Criminal Justice System, laws, policies, and social norms); 4) Cultural and Developmental factors (i.e., individual, collective and cultural norms, cognitive development, and ethnicity); and 5) Period of Time in History (the importance of the trauma event's occurrence to prevent a ripple effect on the victim's index trauma and functioning).

## Conclusion

The intricate landscape of rural crime and violent crimes in South Africa's agricultural communities demands urgent and focused attention. The agricultural sector, vital to the nation's economy, is plagued by both underreported and severe violent crimes that inflict profound trauma on individuals and destabilise entire communities. The emotional, psychological, social, and professional ramifications of livestock theft, violent crimes, and other agricultural offences are profound, disrupting livelihoods and leaving long-lasting psychological scars on farmers, their families, and rural communities.

Disparities in crime reporting methods, as evidenced by varying statistics from Agri SA, Stats SA, and Clack, highlight significant gaps in understanding the true extent of these crimes. These discrepancies underscore the necessity for a comprehensive and consistent approach to crime reporting and data collection, which is essential for informing effective policy measures. Furthermore, the entrenched fear of crime and violence among rural residents, exacerbated by limited access to support services and geographic isolation, amplifies the trauma experienced by victims.

Adopting a victim-centred approach is crucial in addressing the multifaceted trauma experienced by rural crime and violent crime victims. This approach should improve immediate psychological distress and foster holistic recovery incorporating safety, security, and social reintegration. Special attention must be given to the unique challenges faced by female victims, often deepened by gender-role intricacies and poor access to resources, calling for modified support mechanisms that highlight women's well-being and empowerment.

The broader societal implications of rural and violent crimes extend beyond direct victims, affecting families, communities, and the Criminal Justice System. The emotional and psychological toll on law enforcement officers and trauma support providers further intensifies the need for a systemic approach to address these crimes and their consequences. Implementing trauma-informed care principles tailored to the unique context of rural environments is essential. Understanding the pervasive impact of trauma on victims, their families, and the broader community is crucial for developing effective interventions. Recognising how trauma affects victims' receptiveness informs the creation of trauma-aware attitudes and responses, ensuring that services provided are sensitive to the needs of victims of rural crime and that it affects and avoids re-traumatisation.

Key elements include establishing robust referral processes, a continuum of care for victims, and a collaborative community effort involving victims, their families, and local stakeholders. Building resilience and fostering recovery involves improving victims' health and wellness, re-establishing a sense of purpose, and enhancing coping mechanisms to assist with change. Empathy and respect are fundamental in treating victims, emphasising the importance of understanding their unique experiences and avoiding stigmatisation or judgment.

Developing an ecological model that incorporates behavioural, biological, and sociocultural factors is essential in crafting comprehensive trauma-related interventions. This model should consider the isolation of rural areas, early detection of trauma, training for first responders, and community organisations for support, while a victim-centred approach sensitive to the economic, physical, and social impacts of crime and violence is paramount.

By adhering to trauma-informed care principles and creating safe environments across interpersonal, community, societal, cultural, and historical dimensions, we can effectively support rural crime and violent crime victims in their journey toward healing and recovery. This multi-dimensional framework addresses immediate trauma and fosters long-term resilience and well-being, ultimately strengthening the fabric of rural communities. Collaboration among policymakers, law enforcement, and community stakeholders is imperative to create a safer and more supportive environment for rural and violent crime victims, reinforcing the fabric of rural society and its critical role in the nation's development.

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