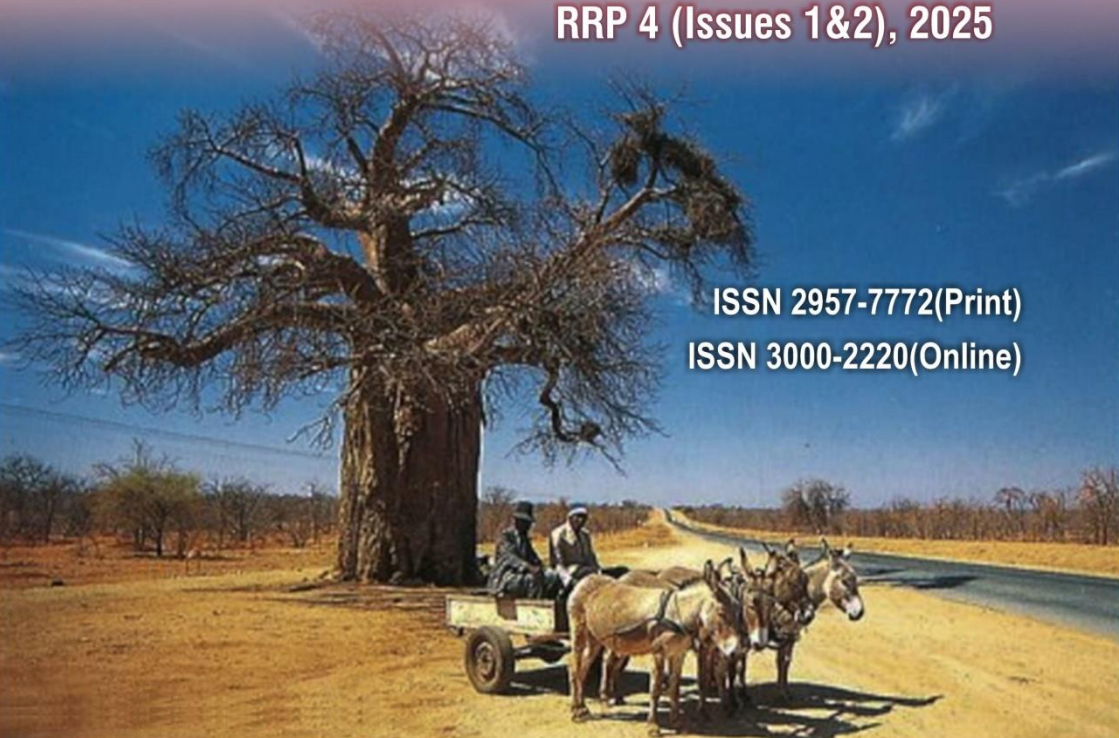




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JOURNAL PURPOSE

The purpose of the *Review of Rural Resilience Praxis* is to provide a forum for disaster risk mitigation, adaptation and preparedness.

CONTRIBUTION AND READERSHIP

Sociologists, demographers, psychologists, development experts, planners, social workers, social engineers, economists, among others whose focus is that of rural resilience.

JOURNAL SPECIFICATIONS

Review of Rural Resilience Praxis

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SCOPE AND FOCUS

As much as the urban territory is increasing by each day, the rural economy, especially in many developing countries, still retains a great proportion of the extractive and accommodation industry. Retaining some space as rural remains critical given the sectors role in providing ecosystem services to both wildlife and humanity. In this light, rural resilience as practice beckons for critical studies especially in the face of the ever-threatening extreme weather events and climate change that then impact on the livelihoods and lifestyles of the rural communities. Review of Rural Resilience Praxis (RRRP) comes in as a platform for critical engagement by scholars, practitioners and leaders as they seek to debate and proffer solutions of the rural sector and trying to champion the philosophy of the right to be rural. The issue of conviviality between the different constituencies of the sectors, compiled with the competing challenges of improving rural spaces while also making the conservation and preservation debates matter is the hallmark of this platform of criticality. The journal is produced bi-annually.

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Economic Shocks as Reference Point to the Quest to Curbing Rural Crimes

SHEANESU KWENDA¹ AND THEBETH R. MASUNDA²

Abstract

The article explores the intersection of economic challenges, rural well-being and criminal behaviour in Zimbabwe. The study focuses on the lived experiences and perceptions of people in Chikomba and Buhera rural districts of Zimbabwe on the criminal dynamics in the face of economic challenges. A qualitative methodology is adopted where in-depth and key informant interviews were used to explore the extent to that poverty, unemployment and declining agricultural productivity contribute to criminal activities. The Strain Theory and the Rational Choice Theory are employed to analyse the criminal tendencies shown by people and understand the meaning behind such behaviour. The findings show that economic shocks tear apart traditional livelihoods, resulting in the breakdown of the social fabric, where due to desperation, some engage in criminal activities. Furthermore, the gendered impacts of economic shocks are highlighted as women are disproportionately affected. The article highlights the need for community-driven solutions. These include local governance strengthening, livelihood diversification and fostering resilience via sustainable rural development. The study submits that mitigating the economic causes of rural crime requires holistic and participatory methods to prioritise empowerment initiatives instead of punitive measures.

Keywords: *rural livelihoods, economic instability, criminal behaviour, poverty dynamics, agricultural collapse, community resilience*

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INTRODUCTION

Economic shocks that are characterised by rapid and severe interruptions of income and livelihoods, have become main drivers of social instability in rural contexts. These challenges are rooted in recurring droughts, hyperinflation, limited access to markets and the collapse of the agricultural sector and have deepened socio-economic vulnerabilities and a surge in rural crime. Organised criminal activities, such as cattle rustling, have become common crimes in these districts. Regardless of the growing significance of rural crime, most studies on crime focus on the prevalence and drivers of urban crime in Zimbabwe. These include investigating youth delinquency, gang violence, as well as unemployment-driven criminality (Ifeanyichukwu, Hussaini and Otigbuo Patience, , 2025). Hence, rural crime remains a relatively under-researched phenomenon. Thus, an urban bias has become glaring as seen in crime-related policies. As a result, interventions inadequately account for the unique socio-economic and structural experiences of rural dwellers, thereby risking the perpetuation of urban-biased policies while the socio-economic realities of rural contexts are neglected (Chimhowu and Hulme, 2006). The study addresses this lacuna in literature by examining the lived experiences of Chikomba and Buhera residents to bring to light how economic shocks shape rural crime dynamics.

This study seeks to answer the following:

1. What are the main economic factors driving rural crime in Chikomba and Buhera districts?
2. How do rural people view and respond to crime in the context of economic hardships?
3. What gendered dynamics influence the experiences and impacts of rural crime?
4. What interventions can be proposed to mitigate rural crime?

This research is guided by the Strain Theory and the Rational Choice Theory to understand the topic. The Strain Theory contends that there is a disconnection between societal expectations and available means for achieving these expectations. This disconnection, especially in the context of extreme poverty and inadequate employment opportunities, usually pushes people towards crime as a survival strategy (Agnew, 1992; Garcés-Ozanne

and Sullivan, 2014). On the other hand, the Rational Choice Theory puts emphasis on the calculated decisions individuals make in the face of limited alternatives. For example, livestock theft and black-market initiatives are resorted to after the cost and benefit analysis of engaging in criminal activities as a result of the absence of viable livelihoods sources (Cornish and Clarke, 1986). The amalgamation of these perspectives enabled the study to unearth the systemic and individual factors that motivate rural crime in the context of economic adversity.

Further, the study goes beyond a general focus on rural crimes, as it examines the gendered dimensions of the same. It stresses how women disproportionately experience the effects of economic interruptions and crime. Women, especially household heads, are usually more susceptible to economic shocks, leading to amplified cases of transactional survival strategies as well as vulnerability to crime-related victimisation (Mawere, 2019). Thus, this research contributes to available literature as it advocates for an intersectional approach, acknowledging how poverty, gender and rurality interact in shaping crime and vulnerability. The findings have substantial implications for both policy-makers and development experts. Focusing on the voices of rural communities promotes holistic, community-driven solutions that prioritise resilience-building, diversification of livelihoods and strengthening of local governance. In this light, a contrast to punitive measures that often exacerbate marginalisation, is preferred. The research supports participatory methods that address the root causes of crime via socio-economic empowerment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study utilised the Strain Theory and the Rational Choice Theory in unpacking the socio-economic shocks that motivate crime in Chikomba and Buhera districts of Zimbabwe. These theories are suitable in situations where economic hardships and declining agricultural productivity disturb traditional livelihoods and force individuals to participate in criminal activities. The Strain Theory (Merton, 1938) contends that societal matrices impose pressure on individuals, leading to deviant or criminal behaviour, especially if legitimate avenues of achieving culturally valued goals are blocked. This theory argues that there is a disconnect between societal expectations of economic success, security and social stability and the structural opportunities

accessible to attain these goals. In rural contexts such as Chikomba and Buhera, this divide is worsened by frequent droughts, inadequate markets and the decline of traditional agro-based livelihoods — the primary survival means. When orthodox means of livelihoods are no longer viable, individuals may resort to criminal activities as alternative ways of economic survival (Garces-Ozanne and Sullivan, 2014).

Although the Strain Theory offers a solid basis for understanding rural crime, it is not without its limitations. For instance, it does not account for how certain individuals or groups within the same socio-economic conditions might choose not to engage in criminal behaviour, highlighting the complexity of human responses to strain. Some critics argue this theory oversimplifies human behaviour by assuming a linear relationship between economic deprivation and criminality (Agnew, 1992). Therefore, while the Strain Theory is useful in explaining the social fragmentation and desperation associated with economic shocks, it may not fully account for the agency and decision-making processes involved in committing crime.

The Rational Choice Theory (Becker, 1968) focuses on the decision-making processes of those involved in criminal activities. It postulates that individuals evaluate the possible risks and rewards for participating in criminal activities and make premeditated decisions based on these calculations. This theory remains useful in exploring crimes such as organised crime which demand a degree of planning because it emphasises the significance of assessing the possible benefits versus the perceived risks. In the context of Chikomba and Buhera, the Rational Choice Theory explains why individuals might choose to participate in livestock theft and illicit trading where the benefits seem to outweigh the perceived risks.

Although the Rational Choice Theory is crucial for comprehending how individuals make planned decisions to engage in crime, it fails to fully address the underlying systemic issues that generate these unlawful opportunities. While it accounts for individual decision-making, it tends to downplay the structural constraints that limit the decision-making power of individuals, such as social and economic inequality. For example, individuals may make decisions based on limited choices available to them, which the Rational

Choice Theory may fail to fully capture (Cornish and Clarke, 1986). To broaden the theoretical lens, the study also incorporates the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) to explain how criminal behaviour is learned through interactions with others. In rural settings like Chikomba and Buhera, social networks and peer influences play a significant role in normalising criminal behaviour, particularly when traditional means of survival are no longer viable. For example, youths may learn criminal behaviours such as cattle rustling as a result of family or community involvement. As a result, cycles of crime are perpetuated.

Additionally, the Routine Activities Theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979) helps contextualise crime within the changing daily patterns of rural life. As economic shocks disrupt traditional agricultural schedules, new opportunities for crime emerge, such as the targeting of vulnerable households or communal resources. This theory emphasises that crime is more likely to occur when a motivated offender, a suitable target and a lack of capable guardianship intersect. Rural areas like Chikomba and Buhera cast sharper shadows, as these phenomena appear to be impoverished community structures and poor visibility of law enforcement.

With both structural and individual-level factors taken into account, this combined theoretical framework allows for a detailed understanding of the complexities surrounding rural crime. While the Strain Theory explains the broader socio-economic pressures and the Rational Choice Theory sheds light on the decision-making process, the Social Learning Theory and the Routine Activities Theory provide additional insights into the mechanisms and environmental factors that enable criminal behaviour. The integration of these perspectives enriches the analysis, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and criminal dynamics in Chikomba and Buhera.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Economic shocks that affect agrarian economies have been broadly documented as major causes of rural crime. The impact of frequent agricultural failures in India, characterised by droughts, crop failures and market inaccessibility, are major drivers of stealing, violent quarrels and land-

related conflicts (Das, 2018). Rural households are left with limited survival options, thereby increasing their susceptibility to criminal activities. In rural Brazil, droughts intensify the violence crime rate. The submissions above put emphasis on the socioeconomic triggers of crime (Palacios and Alvarez, 2022). However, their analyses are geographically and contextually restricted. Thus, they offer limited insight into African rural communities where informal economies and cultural norms shape crime in a different manner.

For Galtung (1969), there is interplay between resource scarcity and rural crime. This scholar posits that systemic inequality is a precursor to social uncertainty. Relying on this perspective, marginalised individuals in rural communities are more likely to experience economic shocks as a result of exclusion from political and economic systems. This leaves them vulnerable to crime as both perpetrators and victims. Be that as it may, Galtung's macro-level approach does not include specificity required to comprehend localised differences in rural crime dynamics. This shortcoming calls for the need for research concentrating on community-specific experiences and responses to economic shocks.

In the context of southern Africa, economic shocks usually manifest through environmental stressors. These stressors include droughts which have significant consequences for rural livelihoods and crime. Drought-induced resource scarcity is a major factor promoting theft and violent conflicts in southern Africa (Maphosa, 2021). The same study shows that limited access to water and grazing land results in increased livestock theft because farmers are resorting to desperate means to safeguard their livelihoods. Even though Maphosa (*ibid.*) offers valuable insights into the regional trends of rural crime, the study does not offer nuanced means through that specific rural communities' experience and respond to economic shocks. Chikomba and Buhera experience unique socio-economic challenges that include limited market access and the decline in orthodox agriculture. These issues contribute to unique crime dynamics. This calls for localised studies that focus on how specific economic shocks intersect with cultural and social factors in motivating rural crime.

The existing literature in Zimbabwe has focused largely on urban crime. For instance, Nyabvedzi and Chirisa (2012) focus on security issues and the built

environment nexus in urban areas. The study does not deal with the unique dynamics of rural crime. Conspicuously, urban-focused studies often downplay the gendered aspects of crime, but are critical in rural communities. Women in rural contexts encounter unique vulnerabilities during economic shocks. To address these gaps, there is need for a shift in focus — from urban to rural crime dynamics — emphasising community-driven solutions.

Although gendered impacts of economic shocks on rural crime are important, they remain under-explored. Women usually bear a disproportionate burden in times of economic hardships. This is worse in rural communities, as traditional caregiving roles and limited access to resources further their vulnerabilities. For Das (2018), in India women are disproportionately impacted by agricultural crises and the situation is compounded by their exclusion from decision-making processes and access to vital resources. Palacios and Alvarez (2022) submit that economic instability in South America worsens gender inequalities. However, these studies are urban focused. Resultantly, the unique challenges encountered by women in rural settings are neglected. This gap calls for more inclusive studies that prioritises the experiences of women in rural settings.

In Southern Africa, women are frequently marginalised in community-level initiatives (Mubangizi, 2020). Orthodox security methods such as neighbourhood patrols, are chiefly male-dominated. This results in inadequate protection and representation for women in decision-making processes (Maphosa, 2021). Women are excluded, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of these crime prevention initiatives. To address this gap, the study prioritises the perspectives of women in Chikomba and Buhera. This may enhance the knowledge on the interaction of economic shocks, gender and rural crime.

Economic shocks interrupt individual lives and significantly impact the socio-economic and cultural fabric of rural communities. In rural Zimbabwe, livelihoods are predominantly agro-based and informal trade, and are significantly prone to instabilities induced by droughts and inflation. Consequently, economic distress leads to social fragmentation, distrust and the deterioration of communal support networks. This social disintegration may lead to increased criminal behaviour because individuals and families grapple

with economic hardships. Cattle have a symbolic and economic significance in rural Africa. Thus, cattle theft undermines both economic stability and cultural identity. The disintegration of rural economies results in a surge in smuggling and thievery driven by necessity and opportunity (Scoones *et al.*, 2020).

While informal trade networks function as important support systems for rural households in times of economic crises, they can also enable criminal operations. Informal economies present the intricacy of rural crime dynamics. This shows the need for interventions that deal with economic resilience and law enforcement.

The above literature shows important insights into the link between economic shocks and rural crime. However, there are notable gaps. Studies offer overarching generalisations that lack the precision essential to understand contextualised crime dynamics in rural Zimbabwe. Also, the notion of environmental stressors and resource scarcity has been noted as significant on this subject, but neglects the lived experiences of rural populations. Further, the gendered nature of rural crime is not sufficiently dealt with regardless of its significance in the formulation of inclusive and successful interventions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design is used to examine the economic catalysts of rural crime in Zimbabwe, focusing on Chikomba and Buhera districts. A qualitative methodology is adopted because it emphasises understanding the lived experiences, views and narratives of persons who are directly affected by rural crime. Creswell (2014) argues that qualitative research is critical for examining complex social phenomena, such as crime, in their specific cultural and socio-economic contexts. The study utilised in-depth interviews with a sample 25 participants (20 crime victims and five key informants). These participants were drawn from Buhera and Chikomba districts. Both districts had 10 crime victims each who were interviewed to ensure equal representation between the two districts. The 20 crime victims consisted of 12 women and eight men. On the other hand, key informants (traditional leaders, local authorities and non-governmental organisation [NGO] representatives) provided contextual information about the topic. The key informants provided

a broader perspective on socio-economic developments and the gendered aspects of rural crime. The interviews were conducted over a period of 40 to 60 minutes and in the homes or public centres of the interview participants, thus providing a relaxed and familiar atmosphere that would hopefully promote openness. The interviews were semi-structured and adhered to consistency, allowing participants to articulate their lived realities in their own words. The open-ended nature of the interview questions prompted participants to explore the impact of economic disruptions and community-based remedies. This approach is in line with Rubin and Rubin's (2012) submission that comprehensive interviews are essential in illuminating the complexities of social phenomena.

To choose participants, purposive sampling was utilised. Participants with firsthand knowledge or experience of rural crime were recruited. This method was selected to guarantee that the gathered data were appropriate and informative. Focus was on individuals capable of providing in-depth insights into the research topic. The victims of crime were chosen on the basis of their experiences with theft, cattle rustling and other forms of rural crime, while key informants were chosen on the basis of their important societal roles. This enabled them to give comprehensive contextual data. Unfortunately, purposive sampling runs the risk of developing selection bias with over-representation of certain perspectives. Attempts were made to balance this selection bias with exposure to wider participants, thus including individuals from different social and economic backgrounds, as well as different ages and gender groups.

Data saturation was also observed, there was no emergence of new themes after interviewing the 20th crime victim, thus confirming the sufficiency of the sample size to garner a comprehensive understanding of rural crime. This sample size achieved a balance between depth and breadth. This is in line with qualitative research's emphasis on the richness and depth of data. According to Patton (2015), smaller intentionally chosen samples are optimal for qualitative research because they enable researchers to focus on obtaining comprehensive, context-specific data. Notwithstanding, the research has a limitation: the possibility of social desirability bias, as participants may tailor their responses depending on what they believe is expected of them. To minimise this, interviews were held in a non-judgmental manner, with stress

on confidentiality and the importance of honest responses. Research ethics were upheld as informed consent from all participants was sought and granted. To protect the participants' identities, data was anonymised and pseudonyms used.

Thematic analysis was utilised to examine the data collected from in-depth and key informant interviews. This method was selected because it is flexible and suitable in identifying patterns and themes in qualitative data. The analysis commenced with familiarisation, during which the study transcribed and examined interview audios to get a comprehensive grasp of the data. This was succeeded by coding, during which reoccurring themes and concepts were discerned and classified. The codes were further categorised into overarching themes that were examined in relation to the study's research objectives and conceptual framework. Thematic analysis ensured the conclusions were data-based. Braun and Clarke (2006) endorse thematic analysis because it is robust, adaptable and effective, particularly for examining complex social phenomena. In order to strengthen the analysis, independent coding checks by the research were conducted during the coding process. Any discrepancies in theme identification were resolved through discussion to ensure an objective interpretation of findings. Additionally, findings from this study contribute to wider discourses on the intersection of economic vulnerability and rural crime, flowing with much of the existing literature on poverty-related crime and informal justice mechanisms in developing contexts.

FINDINGS

Participants were coded to guarantee clarity, ethics and analytical relevance. In-depth interviews with crime victims were assigned a simple numeric code (P1 to P20). This was done to maintain anonymity and organising responses systematically. Key informants' codes started with "KII" to signifying their status, then followed by a role and a numeric district identifier adopted in the study. "C" for councillors (for instance, KII-C1, KII-C2), "T" represents traditional leaders (for instance, KII-T1, KII-T2) and "BL" for business leader (KII-BL). The numbers 1 and 2 simply represent District 1 and 2.

CASE STUDY 1: CHIKOMBA – ECONOMIC SHOCKS AND LIVESTOCK THEFT

ECONOMIC SHOCKS AND LIVELIHOOD DISRUPTION

Responses from the participants highlight how financial crises induced by drought have directly devastated people's livelihoods and pushed them into hopelessness. Participants' accounts show the serious dependence on cattle as a form of income and social stability. This is related to the difficulties encountered by the broader society.

The droughts have made us suffer so much in this community. There are some families we used to envy with large herds, but they now have nothing ... and because of these droughts, people struggle to make ends meet and some young men now engage in stealing people's property and cattle (KII-T1).

KII-T1's story supports other participants' testimony as it stresses the impacts of droughts on the community. The same applies to the link between poverty and crimes inspired by survival. These accounts describe a system of vulnerability in that resource exhaustion makes societal difficulties worse.

In June last year I woke up to find my four cows gone. After some weeks, some local boys confessed to stealing my cattle saying they were doing it for survival (in-depth interview with P7).

P7's account highlights how livestock theft damages community ties and has a significant emotional and financial cost. Recognising the criminal's desperation shows that both parties are aware of the underlying socioeconomic forces.

We are encountering more cases of cattle theft than in the past because of desperation. Most of these crimes are organised by our own local people who are trying to survive out of it. This is creating much tension and conflicts in the community (KII-C1).

KII-C1's observations support P7's account by emphasising the stress livestock theft imposes on the community and its effects on social cohesiveness. These narrations underscore the thin line between criminal acts from survival in the context of tough economic circumstances.

COMMUNITY RESPONSES

Although community leaders meet to discuss the cattle theft, it is always agreed that such should be settled via legal routes. Although the offenders may pay some fine,

victims continue struggling as they will not recover their herds (in-depth interview with P7).

This account draws attention to the idea that traditional legal systems are inadequate in handling the intricacies of today's economic crimes. Although group initiatives attempt to provide solutions, they usually fail to give victims meaningful and tangible compensation. This shows structural difficulties in utilising the traditional means as strong deterrence. These stories display the necessity for structural frameworks to mitigate the socio-economic issues that drive crime.

To protect our animals, we have tried setting up patrol units but we struggle to keep up due to limited resources. The patrols are, therefore, not effective (in-depth interview with P15).

P15's narration shows that there are limitations in implementing grassroots remedies, particularly in the context of the already overburdened community resources. This underscores the need for outside stakeholder to assist local initiatives.

Traditional justice and community patrols are not sufficient. The rate of crime is now on the increase, so we now need the government's support to restore our cattle and give access to water (in-depth interview with P1).

P1's statement underscores the insufficiency of traditional and conventional ways in addressing systemic difficulties. It shows that there is an urgent need for institutional and governmental action to proffer innovative solutions.

Case Study 2-Buhera

Our fields no longer yield enough to eat, let alone sell, due to unpredictable rainfall. In the past, we relied on agriculture to support ourselves. Now its difficult and people are selling illegal drugs to make ends meet (in-depth interview with P4).

This demonstrates the ripple effects of economic collapse, demonstrating how unpredictable climate patterns have disrupted agro-based livelihoods. People resort to actions that weaken the moral and social foundation of the community out of a desperate search for alternatives. P4's statement not only

captures the personal loss, but also paints a picture of collective despair that characterises Buhera's current socio-economic reality.

Organised crime has taken over the void left by the demise of official employment in Buhera. Most affected are young people in particular. Due to the lack of employment and the decline in agriculture, many young people engage in illegal activities to earn a living (KII-C2).

KII-C2's perspective supports P4's experiences by placing the issue in the broader sociopolitical and economic context. This perspective draws attention to structural failures that catalyse the growth and spread of organised crime.

Serious narcotics are frequently sold to our youths. It's no longer just marijuana. These activities are also coordinated by outsiders, making it difficult to control (in-depth interview with P6).

The above account shows the existence of a sophisticated network of illegal business of drugs. The evolution from small-scale marijuana to a well-organised cross-border smuggling network reveals the extent to which organised crime has permeated the local people.

Other narratives highlight the wider sociocultural repercussions of organised crime, ranging from disruptions in education to the breakdown of families. The remarks made by participants stress the challenge in dealing with powerful and well-connected individuals.

Resource scarcity and economic despair combine to make life unbearable for the people. This motivates survival instincts to turn into violent fights, widening rifts among members of the community.

This community has seen a surge in violence associated with competition for land and other resources. The failure of agro-based livelihoods has made land more precious for various uses, including unlicensed marijuana cultivation and other informal businesses (KII-BL).

The observations by KII-BL show the increased value of land as a means for survival. These observations are in line with P19's account. The fragmentation of conventional livelihoods catalyses the emergence of risky alternatives. This highlights the recurrence of poverty and violence.

CASE STUDY 3: GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF RURAL CRIME

Domestic violence cases have increased in rural areas due to economic difficulties. P8 had the following to say:

When my husband lost his job... He became angry all the time and I was the one who faced his frustrations (in-depth interview with P8).

This statement shows that intimate partner violence is sometimes a reflection of economic stress. Women excessively carry the burden of men's anger. They are vulnerable to abuse emanating from patriarchal control with unemployment exacerbating the situation.

KII-BL considered the wider effects on society. He had this to say:

Families are being torn apart by economic hardships... Because they rely on their spouses for survival, many women choose not to report them (KII-BL).

This statement highlights the taboo around domestic abuse in low-income households. Due to their financial dependence on their partners, women hardly ask for assistance even when they are abused.

Commercialisation of young women has become the norm because of extreme poverty. Families who fail to provide for their basic needs marry off their daughters as a survival strategy.

Forced marriages are becoming normalised... Parents perceive marriage as a means to secure a better future for their daughters... (KII-T2).

KII-T2's statement shows that economic crises and cultural norms intersect in reinforcing negative behaviours. Forced marriages prolong cycles of poverty and disempowerment, in addition to undermining the autonomy of young women.

Crimes of desperation, like transactional sex, have become more common in rural regions as survival tactics.

Transactional sex... exposes them to multiple risks, including exploitation, sexually transmitted diseases and violence (in-depth interview with KII-BL).

The harsh realities that women encounter in settings with little resources are revealed by this story. As a last alternative for survival, transactional sex

exposes women to serious hazards on social, emotional and physical levels. These vulnerabilities were brought to light by KII-BL who stated that

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study provide a clear indication of how economic shocks worsen vulnerabilities. The same fuels rural crime in Zimbabwe, particularly in Chikomba and Buhera districts. In light of the literature and conceptual frameworks, each theme under the cases of organised crime, livestock theft and gendered aspects of rural crime is examined below.

While livestock is a crucial source of income and social capital for rural dwellers, it has been severely devastated by recurring droughts in Chikomba rural district. Participants reiterated how this loss of income drives individuals into a state of desperation, leading to criminal activities. The Strain Theory (Merton, 1938) explains this issue. It argues that individuals invent deviant methods when they fail to achieve societal goals (such economic stability) through permissible ways. Aligning with this finding are Mubangizi (2020) and Maphosa (2021) who show how environmental pressures influence resource-related criminalities in Africa. Economic hardship is exacerbated by the decline in agricultural output, which also corrodes conventional coping methods such as communal farming and resource-sharing. The findings reveal the manner through which economic shocks affect not only rural dwellers' livelihoods, but also the social solidity of entire communities. Consequently, an environment that encourages criminality is fostered. This converges with Das's (2018) findings from India, where agricultural crises weaken conventional support networks. This makes rural residents more vulnerable to violence and crime. Additionally, the Social Learning Theory explains how livestock theft has become normalised in these rural communities as individuals learn and internalise deviant behaviours. This becomes more serious when such behaviours are not met with maximum sanctions, as well as social condemnation.

The major cause of cattle theft in Chikomba district is not criminal intent, but economic desperation. Participants pointed out that rather than stealing livestock for financial gain, criminals frequently do it to pay for necessities like food and tuition. Here, the Rational Choice Theory (Becker, 1968) sheds

light on how people balance the benefits and hazards of stealing when faced with financial hardship. While the immediate benefits of stolen cattle make theft an alluring choice for impoverished households, the perceived risks are reduced in rural locations due to the limited enforcement capabilities. Palacios and Alvarez (2022) found similar survival-driven crimes in South America during economic collapse, which is consistent with this pattern. The communal nature of rural Zimbabwe adds a special element that causes social disintegration and tensions, especially considering that, in other instances, the perpetrators are known in the community. In this case, the Routine Activities Theory posits that cattle theft is facilitated by the confluence of the following elements: motivated offenders (who are also desperate individuals), suitable targets (vulnerable livestock) and the absence or lack of able guardians (under-resourced law enforcement).

The findings demonstrate that the main strategies for combating cattle theft in Chikomba are community patrols and conventional legal institutions. Resource limitations and the growing sophistication of theft networks limit the effectiveness of these measures, despite their relative success in discouraging theft. Modern economic crimes are difficult for traditional justice systems based on restitution and reconciliation, to handle, especially when stolen livestock are sold beyond the region. This echoes the difficulties pointed out by Maphosa (2021), who observe that the scope and complexity of resource-related crimes in rural Southern Africa frequently exceed traditional systems. The results highlight the necessity of structural interventions, like livelihood programmes funded by the government, to promote neighbourhood initiatives and deal with the underlying reasons of cattle theft.

The emergence of organised crime, including drug smuggling and illegal trading, has become a serious problem in Buhera. This has been linked to the shortage and decline of formal employment, compounded by deteriorating agricultural production. Participants reported that many people, mostly young men, are forced to participate in these illegal initiatives because of the shortage of acceptable economic opportunities. The claim by the Strain Theory is relevant here that individuals are forced to look for alternate means of survival when they are deprived of legitimate opportunities. The Social

Learning Theory is pertinent as it gives clarity on how peer pressure, shared reasoning as well as imitation, facilitate the spread of organised criminality.

The accounts from participants exhibit that offenders weigh the perceived benefits of drug trading and smuggling against the risks of getting arrested. In this regard, the explanation of the Rational Choice Theory is useful, as individuals participate in criminal activities after considering the pros and cons of such acts. The results are consistent with Palacios and Alvarez's (2022) observations in South America where organised criminal networks that preyed on destitute masses grew as a result of economic crises. However, in Buhera, the communal and informal nature of rural economies introduces unique complexities, such as the involvement of local and external actors in smuggling networks. The Routine Activities Theory explains the rise of smuggling, reduced state presence in rural communities, suggesting that motivated criminals get suitable opportunities with very limited risk. This is so, particularly in the informal sector where the trading of illicit goods is facilitated.

Land disputes have become a significant problem in Buhera. Participants reported cases of violence over land access for illegal businesses such as illegal cultivation of marijuana and other informal enterprises. The contestations for land represent the confluence of resource shortage and economic decline. This is in tandem with the notion of structural violence submitted by Galtung (1969), which stresses that resource scarcity and institutional inequalities catalyse conflict in marginalised areas. The violent nature of these conflicts further underscores the extent to which ineffective traditional governance systems are at dealing with organised crime in rural settings. It was noted that by bringing in money and weapons, externals often intensify tensions, thereby making it more difficult to settle conflicts. These findings demonstrate that there is need for coordinated measures that address the shortage of resources and the factors that motivate organised crime, such as unemployment and poverty.

These results exhibit that curbing organised crime in Buhera is fraught with complications and complexities. These include the shortage of law enforcement resources and accusations of corruption. Reports from

participants point to the fact that it is complicated to halt smuggling, as smuggling networks are complex with powerful individuals involved in the network. This converges with regional patterns observed by Maphosa (2021), who submits that due to insufficient institutional responses, organised criminal webs usually function with impunity in Southern Africa. A similar form of criminality is observed by Scoones *et. al.* (2020). Relying on the findings of the present study, curbing organised crime demands a multi-layered approach. Such an approach should integrate economic revival initiatives and enhancement of police enforcement. Similarly, alternative livelihoods tied to youth empowerment initiatives are key community-based initiatives that might reduce organised crime in a significant way.

Participants' accounts point to the idea that economic shocks have amplified the incidence of domestic violence in the two districts under study. Women were reported to be the main targets of their male partners when men had to deal with their economic frustrations. This negative and harmful behaviour can be understood through the lens of the Strain Theory. The theory argues that household tensions brought by economic shocks, can result in ferocious outbursts. This is in line with experiences of women in other parts of the world. For example, in India, economic crises disproportionately affect women as they worsen their exposure to domestic abuse and variety forms of exploitation (Das, 2018). However, in Zimbabwe, this issue is made more complex by culturally ingrained gender roles and norms. Thus, many women are afraid to disclose abuse and suffer stoically. This is so because they fear social stigma and being economically cut off since they dependent on their spouses. This demonstrates an urgent need for interventions that address not only the economic basis of domestic violence against women, but also cultural dimensions of the same.

The results show that economic desperation is the primary cause of the alarming rise in forced marriages. Unable to provide for their children, parents see marriage as a means of securing bride prices or easing financial strains. Economic shocks and patriarchal control are issues that are conspicuously manifested. Patriarchal values, for instance, put a higher price on men and their domination over female agency. These findings are consistent with comparable practices in societies in Southern Africa that experience economic

hardships (Maphosa, 2021). On the hand, women who experienced economic difficulties resorted to transactional sex. It was reported that they participated in this enterprise not because they wanted to but as a last resort to provide for their households. This can be understood by Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence. The concept of structural violence demonstrates the manner through which systemic injustices drive marginalised individuals and communities into exploitative circumstances as portrayed by the findings of the current study.

These findings indicate that economic shocks, systemic injustices and personal initiatives intersect in fuelling crime in rural settings. At theoretical level, the deliberate decision-making processes of offenders help in understanding this subject in line with the Rational Choice Theory. Further, the Strain Theory remains critical in understanding systemic factors that motivate criminal acts. The Social Learning Theory clarifies how deviant behaviours are socially transmitted as well as normalised, particularly in tightly-knit rural communities. Similarly, the Routine Activities Theory helps in understanding situational factors and weak guardianship establishments that drive rural crimes. These frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of the socioeconomic factors that shape the dynamics of rural crime. It is against this background that policy-makers ought to prioritise policies that aim at addressing both systemic and individual factors. These include enhancement of law enforcement, gender-sensitive initiatives and financial aid programmes. The above-mentioned initiatives could promote resilience and sustainable development in rural Zimbabwe, thereby addressing the underlying causes of crime in rural settings.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study results show how socioeconomic problems faced by these districts are closely linked to rural crime. Traditional livelihoods have been destroyed by economic shocks. This has created a conducive environment for criminal activities. These crimes are not isolated occurrences; rather, they are signs of systemic economic vulnerability, exacerbated by a lack of resources, social disarray and insufficient governance frameworks. When legal possibilities are unavailable, individuals are forced to innovate through deviant activities out of desperation, that can be understood through the perspective of the Strain

Theory. This is resonated by the Rational Choice Theory which argues that organised and survival crimes are premeditated because individuals weigh perceived advantages versus perceived disadvantages, especially when they are experiencing economic challenges. This underscores the need for holistic interventions to address both the structural and individual aspects of crime in rural areas. While community endeavours to mitigate the scourge of rural crime remain critical, their limitations call for more extensive structural changes. The findings exhibit that, to guarantee sustainability and community ownership, efficacious remedies should integrate local knowledge and capacities to mitigate the underlying socioeconomic problems.

The government and its partners should put in place initiatives that diversify income streams. This reduces over-reliance on conventional agriculture which is no longer viable in the context of climate change. Such an approach may be effective in addressing the economic shocks that drive rural crime. Initiatives that promote small-scale irrigation, climate-resilient agriculture and livelihoods diversification (beekeeping, poultry farming and crafts) may be important in boosting household income. Empowering individuals, particularly the youths to participate in non-agricultural income-generating projects may be achieved via entrepreneurial and vocational skills training. To ensure sustainability and acceptance at community level, these projects should be tailored for local settings. In the long term, such initiatives could ameliorate the desperation that drives rural crime.

The ministry of Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage, and partners should provide long-term solutions that include giving local communities the tools they need to create and carry out crime prevention plans. Increasing patrols, encouraging communication between victims and offenders, and using established legal processes to resolve disputes, are a few examples of community-based strategies. Contemporary methods, such as the formation of alliances with regional law enforcement agencies and integration of community policing ideas should be utilised to augment existing initiatives. These strategies may improve solidity, accountability and trust through the participation of communities in co-developing solutions.

The Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development should actively participate in addressing the many vulnerabilities women face. Women's economic and social empowerment must be given top priority in gender-sensitive interventions through focused initiatives. Access to education, vocational training and microfinance programmes can give women the tools and resources they need to be more resilient. Similarly, community education campaigns focusing on promoting gender parity and challenging stigma associated with reporting abuse should be espoused.

Strengthening local governance structures through training, resources and partnerships with governmental and NGOs can increase their effectiveness in addressing these challenges. Specific measures include giving traditional leaders the tools to mediate resource conflicts, assisting local councils in implementing development projects and encouraging cooperation between local authorities and law enforcement agencies. Transparent and accountable governance structures can ensure that interventions are responsive to local needs and build community trust.

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