

The nature and impact of crime experienced by social work students at a previously disadvantaged university

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Abstract

This study investigates the nature and effects of crime experienced by social work students at a previously disadvantaged rural South African university. Drawing on cognitive behavioural theory (CBT), the research examines how victimisation shapes students' experiences and well-being. The study was guided by an interpretivist research paradigm and adopted an exploratory qualitative research design. The target population was third-year social work students who had experienced victimisation at the previously disadvantaged rural university, and a purposive sampling technique was employed to select ten participants who had experienced crime. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis approach. The findings reveal that the most prevalent forms of campus crime include theft and gender-based violence (GBV), both of which have significant psychological and relational consequences for survivors. The study found that campus crime undermines student well-being, erodes trust, and disrupts social stability. It concludes that existing institutional safety strategies are inadequate and often fail to provide sufficient support to survivors. The study recommends the development of trauma-informed mental health services, the strengthening of inclusive security frameworks, and the implementation of survivor-centred policies within higher education institutions.

Keywords: *campus safety, South Africa, student victimization, cognitive behavioural theory, university crime*

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1. Introduction

Crime remains a major social challenge in South Africa, with the crime rate steadily increasing and generating widespread fear and uncertainty (Modise, 2025). According to Fathi (2016), crime is broadly defined as an act, or failure to act, that violates the law and is punishable by penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment. In South Africa, this persistent problem affects all sectors of society, including students in higher education (Eagle, 2015).

Criminal victimisation, which involves physical harm or material loss resulting from unlawful acts, is widely recognised as a distressing experience. Janssen et al. (2021) and McGarry and Walklate (2015) argue that victimisation undermines subjective well-being, often resulting in both physical and psychological harm. Beyond these immediate effects, crime also has profound emotional and behavioural consequences. Rühls et al. (2017) note that victims frequently experience frustration, anger, and depression, while Averdijk (2011) explains that such experiences alter individuals' perceptions of safety and future risk. These psychological effects often lead victims to avoid places perceived as unsafe and to modify their daily routines. Furthermore, Potter et al. (2018) emphasise that the consequences of crime extend beyond immediate harm and create long-term disruptions that weaken social order and social stability.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) underpins all legislation, guaranteeing the rights to life, safety, and security and obliging the state to protect citizens, including those in universities. The South African Police Service (SAPS) Act (1995) mandates SAPS to prevent and investigate crime, often in collaboration with campus security. The Higher Education Act (1997) empowers the Minister of Higher Education to ensure that universities maintain safe learning environments. Despite these legislative frameworks, educational institutions remain vulnerable. Govender (2020) notes that crime has increased due to larger student populations, expanded residences, and satellite campuses. Offenders frequently target students and staff on and off campus, sometimes escaping institutional jurisdiction. Moore et al. (2025) argue that universities mirror wider social challenges, which complicate the duties of campus security. Although campuses are statistically safer than surrounding communities, perceptions of insecurity persist, fuelled by theft, assault, and sexual violence (Whissemore, 2015).

The vulnerability of disadvantaged rural universities is shaped by systemic, financial, and infrastructural constraints. These institutions, often serving marginalised communities,

operate with fewer resources than their urban counterparts (Damoah et al., 2023). The open design of campuses fosters learning but also enables criminal access (Bataille & Cordova, 2014). Dense student populations, late-night building use, and residences heighten risks. Langford (2004) contends that universities are viewed as sanctuaries for intellectual and social development; therefore, violent incidents evoke heightened concern. This violence may include sexual assault, harassment, theft, hazing, stalking, hate crimes, and self-harm, with serious consequences such as reduced academic performance, lower retention, and strained resources.

Empirical studies confirm these patterns. Mkhize et al. (2022) identify theft of laptops, phones, clothing, and vehicles as common, alongside housebreaking and substance abuse. Similarly, du Toit (2015) stresses that rising crime strains protective services. Inadequate safety discourages student participation and may deter parents from sending their children to unsafe campuses. To address these challenges, protective services enforce regulations, protect property, and preserve order (Carrico, 2016; Hardeo, 2013). Some universities have introduced visible patrols to secure infrastructure and regulate conduct. Mkhize et al. (2022) argue that such initiatives reflect institutional commitment to safe learning.

This study examines the types of crime experienced by social work students at a disadvantaged rural South African university, addressing a gap in the literature on rural higher education. Social work students face dual vulnerability: they are exposed to campus crime like their peers but also encounter high-risk environments during fieldwork, marked by violence and poverty. This dual exposure heightens susceptibility to victimisation and secondary trauma, making their experiences more complex than those of students in other disciplines.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Crime in South Africa and Higher Education

Crime remains a significant social challenge in South Africa, affecting individuals across all sectors of society (Ross & Rasool, 2019). Speaking at the release of the Fourth Quarter Crime Statistics, the Minister of Police, Senzo Mchunu, acknowledged the country's high crime levels and expressed deep concern over the situation. He noted that crime transcends social and demographic boundaries, with recent statistics indicating a rise in sexual offences, including rape and other forms of contact sexual violence, as well as an increase in commercial crime (Republic of South Africa, 2025). Although universities are generally

regarded as safe spaces, studies have shown that individuals residing or working on campus often experience fear related to crime (White, 2019). Criminal activities are prevalent on many university campuses, affecting both students and staff. The Minister of Police also alluded to the rise in crime at South African universities but indicated that exact crime statistics are unavailable because many cases go unreported (Republic of South Africa, 2025).

Scholars have increasingly examined student safety, perceptions of crime, and their impact on academic engagement (Mkhize et al., 2022). Globally, crime within universities has become more common (Forbes-Mewett et al., 2015; Chekwa et al., 2013), which reflects broader societal challenges. African universities face similar issues, with research in Ghana reporting burglary and violent incidents that disrupt learning (Owusu et al., 2016). In South Africa, violent campus crimes, including murder, sexual assault, and assault, are increasing due to expanding student populations, residences, and satellite campuses (Mdlungu & Tshivhase, 2020; Govender, 2020). At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, student residences are regarded as high-crime areas, with frequent theft, break-ins, and sexual assault (Makhaye, 2016). Repeated and widespread reports of violence at universities in the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, and KwaZulu-Natal have also been documented (Sepadi & Chadyiwa, 2025). Perceptions of insecurity are shaped by previous incidents, unfamiliar environments, and the presence of unmonitored outsiders (Hardeo, 2013). Such fears can motivate students and staff to transfer to institutions perceived to be safer.

2.2. Consequences of Crime and Victimisation in Higher Education

In response to growing concerns about GBV in higher education, the South African Department of Higher Education and Training introduced a policy framework to guide universities in addressing GBV on campus (Jagath, 2023; Mofokeng & Tlou, 2022). In line with this framework, the university featured in this study implemented a Policy on Harassment, Sexual Harassment, and Gender-Based Violence in 2019, which was updated in 2024. The policy outlines disciplinary actions, including warnings, suspensions, and expulsions, and provides support services for both survivors and perpetrators, including legal aid, psychosocial support, and protection services (Gwiza & Hendricks, 2025). While the policy is intended to foster a safer campus environment, concerns remain regarding its effectiveness in ensuring justice for survivors. Campus crime undermines the effectiveness of university security services and increases public demand for stronger policing (Mkhize et al., 2022; Mlamla,

2019). Security personnel often struggle to keep pace with growing student enrolments and leave campuses vulnerable as open public spaces (du Toit, 2015).

Crime disrupts education and erodes victims' confidence, sense of control, and well-being while imposing financial and emotional burdens on individuals, families, and communities (Sadowski, 2021; Rogers & Maytan, 2019). Ross and Rasool (2019) emphasise the broader systemic consequences of crime, and argue that it damages South Africa's international reputation, discourages foreign investment, and hinders economic growth because of persistent negative perceptions. Crime victimisation has far-reaching effects on social cohesion, trust in institutions, and prospects for sustainable development.

According to Hanson et al. (2010), crime may impair parenting abilities, hinder job performance, increase the likelihood of unemployment, and strain intimate relationships. These disruptions can undermine an individual's ability to function effectively in social, familial, and occupational roles. Experiencing crime can also reduce participation in social activities and hinder the ability to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Research has shown that individuals who have experienced sexual assault often encounter difficulties participating in social and recreational activities (Hanson et al., 2010). In addition, some victims report socio-emotional difficulties, including severe emotional distress, strained relationships with family or friends, and challenges in professional or academic settings (Coen & Thompson, 2022).

Research also suggests that individuals assaulted by strangers often experience more severe health consequences than those assaulted by acquaintances. Police data analyses indicate that assaults committed by strangers, particularly those involving groups, are associated with higher levels of physical harm. Victims commonly report physical injuries, emotional and social distress, and persistent physical or psychological symptoms lasting for a month or longer (Hullenaar et al., 2022; Lantz, 2021). Beyond direct consequences such as financial loss and physical injury, crime may result in emotional distress, including anger, frustration, and symptoms of depression. It can also alter individuals' perceptions of their surroundings and future threats, and oftentimes lead to behavioural and lifestyle changes, such as avoiding places or situations perceived as unsafe (Rühs et al., 2017).

According to Janssen et al. (2021), violent victimisation significantly diminishes individuals' sense of safety, trust in others, and satisfaction with their neighbourhood. Although there is broad agreement regarding the significant effects of crime on victims and

survivors, studies differ concerning the duration of these effects. Some research highlights the long-term or even permanent consequences of crime (Sadowski, 2021; Petty, 2014), whereas Janssen et al. (2021) found that the emotional well-being and overall life satisfaction of most victims are not permanently affected, wherein many individuals begin to recover from the effects of victimisation within approximately 18 months. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2019) emphasises that responses to crime vary according to personal, social, and contextual factors, and that there is no universally appropriate way for victims to respond. Many victims experience anger, fear, depression, isolation, and sleep disturbances following victimisation.

Practical concerns such as obtaining medical care, filing insurance claims, and missing work are also common following victimisation. Beyond emotional distress, crime can result in physical harm, financial hardship, and strained family and social relationships. Dinisman and Moroz (2017) highlight that the effects of victimisation vary considerably, which influence physical health, financial stability, educational and employment opportunities, and overall emotional well-being. Despite these differences, many victims report feeling emotionally affected and less secure after their experiences. A recurring need identified among victims is consistent support, such as a reliable relationship with a caseworker and guidance throughout the criminal justice process.

Students across all disciplines, both in South Africa and internationally, are exposed to crime in various forms. Social work students, however, are uniquely affected when they become victims of crime, often experiencing long-term psychosocial distress (Munyoro & Mavhungu, 2022). This distress stems from feelings of helplessness, particularly when they find themselves unable to protect themselves. Ironically, these students are being trained to support society's most vulnerable individuals through statutory interventions, advocacy for social justice, counselling, and general guidance. When social work students are themselves exposed to criminal victimisation, it can significantly undermine their sense of agency and professional identity (Munyoro & Mavhungu, 2022).

2.3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in cognitive behavioural theory (CBT), which provides a framework for understanding how individuals interpret and respond to events (Kendall & Kriss, 1983; Butler et al., 2006; Butler & Beck, 2000). Rooted in the work of Beck (1964,

1976), CBT proposes that our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours are interconnected. According to the cognitive model, it is not the events themselves that dictate how people feel, but rather the personal meaning they assign to those events (Westbrook et al., 2011; Beck, 1964). For instance, individuals experiencing depression often interpret situations through a particularly negative lens, which then shapes their emotional and behavioural responses (Beck, 1967).

This theory is especially relevant when considering the experiences of crime victims. CBT provides a framework to analyse how crime-related trauma affects cognition, how students interpret their world and their safety, and how this influences their emotional well-being and functioning. CBT emphasises that distorted or irrational thoughts can contribute significantly to emotional distress and behavioural problems. When people are psychologically distressed, their interpretations of everyday situations can become exaggerated or unrealistic, influencing them to act in ways that reinforce negative outcomes (Hollon & Beck, 1994; Beck et al., 1979).

Victims of crime may develop social anxiety, often avoiding environments they perceive as unsafe. This anxiety is understood as a rational reaction to the perceived threat of further harm, especially given the emotional aftermath of crime, which can include trauma, shock, anger, and a breakdown in trust (Knaus, 2014; Burgess et al., 2010). Wilcox et al. (2003) distinguish between two dimensions of crime-related fear: the emotional fear of victimisation and the cognitive perception of personal risk. These fears reflect how negative cognitive patterns can shape victims' behaviour, leading to avoidance and heightened distress. This framework proposes that it is not the events themselves, but how they are perceived and interpreted, that ultimately shapes the emotional and behavioral reactions (Beck, 1964). Thus, CBT is relevant because it offers a theoretical lens to interpret psychological consequences of crime.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study followed an interpretivist paradigm, which prioritises understanding individuals' subjective experiences and acknowledges the existence of multiple, coexisting realities (Davies & Fisher, 2018). As a qualitative research paradigm, interpretivism

emphasises the meanings individuals assign to their lived experiences and how they construct their social worlds (Hiller, 2016).

An exploratory qualitative research design was employed to explore and understand the participants' lived experiences. Rather than seeking to predict or explain human behaviour, qualitative research was used to capture the depth and complexity of experiences of campus crime. Central to this approach is the analysis of how participants express and interpret their social realities in their own words (Ormston et al., 2014). By collecting rich, detailed narratives, the study examined the impact of victimisation on the participants. Throughout the research process, the researchers remained committed to accurately representing the voices and reflections of those who took part in the study (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

3.2. Population and Sampling

The study focused on social work students who had experienced crime. Given the impracticality of accessing all young adult crime survivors in South Africa, the research concentrated on a more specific target population: third-year social work students at a rural university in the Eastern Cape. Narrowing the population in this way enabled the selection of a more manageable and relevant sample. Social work students were chosen because their experiences differ from those of students in other disciplines due to their dual exposure to academic demands and high-risk fieldwork.

Purposive non-probability sampling was used to select participants. This approach, which is commonly employed in qualitative research, is appropriate when the aim is to gain an in-depth understanding rather than produce generalisable findings (Rai & Thapa, 2015). The researchers purposively selected individuals who met specific inclusion criteria, consistent with recommendations from previous studies (Vehovar et al., 2016). This sampling strategy enabled the collection of meaningful data that directly addressed the research questions.

Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: must be third-year social work students; must have experienced victimisation due to crime; must be proficient in English; and must not be part of the researchers' personal networks or professional caseloads.

To ensure a safe and open environment for disclosure, the researchers made efforts to build trust with each participant. Ten participants who met the inclusion criteria were ultimately selected. This sample size was considered sufficient because data saturation was achieved, meaning that no new themes or insights emerged during the final interviews.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was selected for its flexibility, allowing the interviewer to probe participants' responses and seek clarification where necessary (Roulston & Choi, 2018). The interviews were guided by an open-ended interview schedule aligned with the research questions, ensuring the collection of relevant data (Chan et al., 2013). Their conversational nature enabled the researchers to adapt questions in response to participants' narratives.

All participants provided informed consent for the interviews to be audio-recorded, ensuring the accuracy of the data. Supplementary field notes were also taken during the interviews to support deeper probing and clarification, in line with Josselson's (2013) recommendations. A consistent interview procedure was followed throughout the study. The duration of each interview depended on the participants' availability and the depth of their reflections on their personal experiences of crime.

3.4. Data Analysis

The initial phase of data analysis involved converting the audio-recorded interviews into written transcripts after each interview session. The researchers undertook the transcription process themselves to enhance their familiarity with the data, consistent with the recommendations of Guest et al. (2020). This direct engagement with the transcripts enabled the researchers to recognise the point of data saturation, at which no new themes, patterns, or insights emerged from subsequent interviews.

The data were then analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. As described by Clarke et al. (2015), thematic analysis provides a systematic approach to identifying and interpreting patterns in qualitative data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach, the analysis began with familiarisation through repeated readings of the transcripts, followed by the generation of codes representing key features relevant to the research questions. Related codes were then grouped into themes, which were subsequently reviewed, refined, defined, and named to capture their underlying meanings. The final analysis was written by integrating the identified themes with the existing literature and supporting them with participants' accounts, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings.

3.5. Research Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Fort Hare. Ethical approval and clearance to conduct research involving human participants were obtained from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee. The study adhered to standard ethical principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent, avoidance of harm, and the protection of privacy and confidentiality.

The researchers acknowledged the potential emotional risks associated with discussing experiences of crime victimisation and took appropriate measures to minimise harm. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Vulnerable individuals were excluded from participation, and arrangements were made with a private social worker to provide free counselling if needed, as stated in the informed consent form.

Participation was entirely voluntary. Prospective participants received clear information about the study before providing consent. Verbal consent was obtained initially, followed by written informed consent, which was shared via WhatsApp. Interviews were scheduled at times convenient for the participants and conducted in private locations to ensure comfort and confidentiality.

Participants' identities were protected through the use of codes (e.g., "Participant 1"), and all data were stored securely. Personal identifiers were omitted from both the transcripts and audio recordings; however, complete anonymity could not be guaranteed because the interviews were conducted face to face.

The researchers maintained transparency throughout the study by ensuring that participants were fully informed about its purpose and procedures and by remaining available to address any questions or concerns. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were debriefed and invited to share their reflections. The availability of free counselling support was reiterated in the event that participation caused emotional distress.

4. Findings

To ensure confidentiality and uphold ethical research standards, each participant was assigned a code. All participants identified as African, with a gender distribution skewed towards females, seven women and three men. Their shared academic affiliation and student

status offered a coherent basis for exploring the experiences and perspectives relevant to the study's focus.

Theme 1: Types of Crime

Gender-based violence. The study revealed that GBV is a persistent and deeply concerning issue within university settings. It disproportionately affects students, particularly female students, and manifests in various ways, including unsolicited physical contact, inappropriate remarks, and suggestive gestures. Some participants disclosed that they had experienced sexual harassment during their academic journeys, noting that such incidents have had enduring impacts on their psychological well-being, academic achievement, and overall sense of safety. They noted that despite the existence of institutional policies, awareness campaigns, and support services aimed at preventing and responding to sexual misconduct, the problem continues to undermine efforts to build safe and inclusive learning environments.

Participant 5 narrated:

“I was harassed by a male student on campus. I was from the library at around 21:00 in the evening and on the way to my residence I bumped into a male student who was drunk from alcohol and he started forcefully touching me and almost became violent with but since he was drunk and did not have much balance, I managed to escape and run to my res.”

Participant 7 stated:

“I got sexually assaulted during the late hours of the night while I was walking back to campus by a male student who was from disco tavern. The male student was following me until we entered the campus and when I turned to the auditoriums going to my residence, he quickly jumped on me and started forcing himself on me and as I refused, he started kicking me and punching me and some other 2 students rushed towards us and helped me escape.”

Theft. The study revealed that theft is a frequent and growing problem on university campuses, with students being the primary victims. Their vulnerability stems from routinely carrying high-value items such as laptops, tablets, mobile phones, and academic materials among others.

Participant 6 shared:

“I got robbed in the campus while I was visiting my girlfriend at Zola residence. It was load shedding when I was approached by two guys and when they arrived at me they created an unnecessary conversation by asking me the directions of

Jabavu residence. While I was comfortable explaining they took out a knife and I had no choice but to give them my cell phone then they were gone.”

Participant 9 said:

“The only crime I’ve experienced was being robbed/pick pocketed on my first day on campus back in 2021, where I was lost looking for directions to Tyali residence and 3 gentlemen offered to help me and on our way they somehow saw my wallet in my pocket. I realised when I was at the destination that my wallet had been pick pocketed. It had my ID, license and registration cash and all my grocery money.”

Theme 2: Impact of Crime on Students

Psychological functioning. Findings indicate that crime victimisation can significantly disrupt an individual’s psychological well-being, and university students are particularly vulnerable due to their academic pressures. Students who have survived crime reported experiencing a range of emotional and psychological challenges, such as heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, and signs of PTSD. It was also found that the impact often extends beyond mental health, affecting academic performance and social engagement. Some reported difficulties concentrating and declining academic outcomes due to emotional distress. Socially, some also withdrew from peers and avoided interactions, further deepening their sense of isolation. Financial strain was another common consequence, especially because they had to bear the cost of replacing stolen belongings.

Participant 2 stated:

“It affected my life greatly because I no longer had a laptop to use for the semester and had no funds to replace the one that was stolen so doing my work was difficult since I had to borrow laptops from my friends to write tests and assignments and sometimes do work on my phone. It also affected me emotionally because I was distraught most of the time due to my frustrations of not being able to do my work.”

Participant 3 explained:

“The impact of the crime caused me to endure a variety of emotions and as a result I lost a lot of weight after the incident. I was shocked that it had actually occurred to me because I never imagined being robbed in broad daylight. I had to give it time to sink in that some of the things he took were gone forever because they held sentimental value before attempting to move on. I took my sadness and rage out on people and lost control of my temper. I still experience flashbacks that make me feel scared or angry, but mostly I don’t feel safe if I’m not with someone.”

Participant 5 mentioned that:

“It affected me negatively because I experienced a range of mental health conditions including stress, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and then I started having educational difficulties such as poor concentration in class and my performance dropped, low self-esteem. It was a very hard for me to form and maintain relationships it has a negative impact on my life because I have rapidly developed a variety of problems like insecurities, poor social skills and impulsiveness in relationships.”

Strained relationships and isolation. The study found that student survivors of crime encountered strained relationships with family and friends following their traumatic experiences. Trauma responses such as fear, anxiety, and emotional numbness also led survivors to withdraw, further intensifying feelings of isolation and social disconnection.

Participant 2 recalled:

“It made me have insecurity and fear, making me more cautious about my surroundings and the company I keep. I also had strained relationships due to mistrust and concerns about my safety.”

Participant 4 mentioned that:

“I drifted away from everyone I did not want anyone to feel sorry me.”

Participant 7 asserted that:

“Crime has negatively affected my relationships. It’s hard to let in people and trust them, especially since I’m from a small town where unemployment is high and youngsters have resorted to crime. My house was robbed twice in a space of two years by family members, because of crime I’m always skeptical and constantly have to look over my shoulder.”

Loss of trust in others. Students who experienced crimes struggle to trust others in the aftermath of trauma. The experience of victimisation undermines their sense of personal safety and security, resulting in heightened feelings of vulnerability and fear. This erosion of trust has extended beyond the perpetrator to include friends, family members and peers, making it difficult for survivors to form or maintain meaningful relationships. The loss of trust manifested in various ways, such as reluctance to engage in open conversations, withdrawal from social settings, or increased suspicion towards others’ intentions.

Participant 3 reiterated that:

“...I have lost the ability to trust people. I put myself first and work to see any suspicious conduct so that I can immediately escape the situations. I need to follow my instincts and protect myself from those who have bad intentions since the indications are always present.”

Participant 4 said that:

“...it affected my ability to trust, I did not trust any student since then. I did not want to even hang my washing on lines anymore.”

Participant 5 shared that:

“Yes it affected me, I will never trust anyone again more especially “men.”

Participant 7 narrated that:

“Yes, it has affected my ability to trust, because even the people you know can commit the most violent criminal acts.”

5. Discussion

The narratives reveal that GBV is a predominant form of crime experienced by social work students at the institution. Student accounts describe incidents of sexual harassment and physical assault perpetrated by male students, often under the influence of alcohol. These incidents typically occur at night in poorly monitored, vulnerable areas of the campus, often near student residences underlining specific spatial risk zones. These are not isolated or petty crimes; they constitute serious acts of sexual violence and bodily harm. They also reflect broader patterns of both structural and interpersonal violence that women face on South African campuses. The findings of this study therefore resonate with a substantial body of literature that underscores the pervasive nature of crime and its impact within higher education settings. The prevalence of GBV revealed in this study aligns with broader trends in academic spaces. As noted by Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020), approximately one in three female undergraduate students (32%) reported experiencing sexual harassment. Similarly, their study found that 25% of female postgraduate students and 20% of male students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels had encountered comparable violations. University students are particularly vulnerable to crime, especially in under-resourced and high-crime areas. This vulnerability is further compounded in previously disadvantaged universities, which often lack adequate campus security infrastructure. The prevalence of crime both within academic settings and during fieldwork placements underscores the double jeopardy faced by

social work students, who must navigate their academic responsibilities while operating in unsafe environments.

The findings illustrate the gendered but widespread nature of sexual harassment in higher education, affecting students across different levels. Despite the presence of institutional policies, awareness campaigns, and student support services aimed at preventing and addressing sexual misconduct, this study shows that these interventions fall short of ensuring a safe and inclusive academic environment. The persistence of sexual harassment in the presence of formal mechanisms suggests a disconnect between policy and practice. This finding is consistent with critiques in the literature, which point to universities' often inadequate, inconsistent, or even dismissive responses to reported incidents (Engle, 2014). These dynamics not only undermine institutional accountability but also create environments in which survivors may feel silenced, unsupported, and vulnerable.

The narratives provide valuable insight into the types of crime experienced by social work students at a previously disadvantaged rural South African university. Students appeared to be particularly vulnerable to crime both on and off campus. In the narratives, theft or robbery occurred within or near the university premises, underscoring significant security challenges in areas that should ideally be safe, such as residences or common spaces. These incidents reflect broader patterns observed in research on campus crime, where students are frequently targeted due to their perceived vulnerability, possession of electronic devices, and, in some cases, unfamiliarity with their surroundings. International research by Winterdyk (2017) supports this, identifying theft and burglary as the most frequently experienced crimes among students globally.

Similarly, a South African study by Ross and Rasool (2019) found that students often fell victim to crimes committed by opportunistic offenders. Common incidents included the theft of laptops and mobile phones, and robberies in student residences or communes, often involving threats with weapons. Badiora (2017) also identifies theft as the most commonly reported crime on university campuses. The data suggests that theft is not only widespread but also facilitated by specific environmental and social conditions characteristic of higher education institutions. Participants most frequently cited the loss of mobile phones, laptops, tablets, and other electronic devices items that are both valuable and easily portable reflecting broader national and global patterns in campus crime. These patterns highlight the urgent need for improved campus and student safety measures.

The CBT provides a useful framework for understanding how individuals' thoughts and perceptions influence their emotional and behavioural responses to traumatic experiences (Beck, 1967) such as crime. In this study, the student narratives reveal the psychological, academic, and social effects of crime at a historically disadvantaged university. The findings show that students' personal interpretations of these incidents play a central role in shaping their emotional responses and coping mechanisms. Experiences of crime were found to significantly impact social work students, often triggering distress, heightened anxiety, and a reduced sense of safety on campus. These outcomes align with CBT, which posits that cognitive distortions and fear-inducing thoughts can intensify emotional suffering and social withdrawal following victimisation (Beck, 1976). The findings affirm existing literature on the psychological functioning of university students who are crime survivors, highlighting that they frequently report higher levels of psychological distress than their non-survivor peers.

A key insight from the data is the high prevalence of trauma-related symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD among affected students. These outcomes echo previous research showing that trauma exposure during tertiary education can have long-term mental health consequences, particularly when institutional support is lacking or perceived as inadequate (Cripps, 2016). The study thus underscores the urgent need for more responsive, trauma-informed mental health interventions within university settings.

The findings align with the principles of CBT, which suggest that psychological distress can distort an individual's interpretation of everyday experiences, and may lead to exaggerated perceptions that reinforce harmful behaviours and outcomes (Hollon & Beck, 1994). For victims of crime, such distress may manifest as heightened social anxiety and prompt them to avoid places they associate with danger. This avoidance can also contribute to a breakdown in interpersonal trust (Burgess et al., 2010; Knaus, 2014). Consistent with the theory, the impact of crime extends beyond individual trauma that deeply affects interpersonal relationships and social support systems.

A prominent theme emerging from the data is the erosion of trust within close relationships which is supported by previous research (Lurigio, 2017; Herman, 2015). Participants reported strained connections with family members, friends, and peers, often due to difficulties trusting them or as a way of protecting themselves from further victimisation. These strains are frequently rooted in altered emotional states, such as anxiety, guilt, and shame and in the perceived inability of others to understand or validate their trauma (Lurigio, 2017;

Herman, 2015). In many cases, this disconnection led to social withdrawal, with survivors deliberately isolating themselves from previously supportive environments. These psychological effects are consistent with Janse van Rensvurg (2012) that exposure to violence and crime can significantly impair mental health and academic performance.

For social work students, the impact is intensified by the emotional demands of fieldwork, which often involves engagement with traumatised communities. In some cases, students have even begun to question their choice of profession because of the risks they have encountered. These experiences contribute to behavioural changes that further complicate interpersonal relationships and deepen feelings of alienation. Thus, campus crime is not only a source of personal trauma but also a disruptive force that reverberates throughout survivors' relational networks.

6. Conclusion

This study argues that crime profoundly undermines the academic, emotional, and social well-being of social work students in rural university settings. Although institutional safety policies and support services are in place, many students continue to experience trauma resulting from incidents such as sexual harassment and theft, with enduring consequences for trust, learning, and mental health. The findings further indicate that existing institutional responses are inadequate, exposing significant gaps in protection and psychosocial support.

While current services provide assistance to survivors, challenges related to accessibility, adequacy, and responsiveness persist. More consistent and comprehensive support systems are needed within universities. Future research should explore the experiences of students who do not access available support services and identify ways to address this gap. Particular attention should be given to the role of residence wardens by strengthening their capacity to provide sensitive and appropriate support. Developing strategies to enhance wardens' effectiveness is essential to establishing a comprehensive framework for student support in university residences.

The study was limited to 10 third-year social work students, which restricts the transferability of the findings to other contexts. Discussing experiences of victimisation also posed emotional risks. Although counselling referrals were made available, some participants

may have withheld information because of the sensitive nature of the topic, thereby limiting the depth of the data collected.

Higher education institutions and key stakeholders, including the Department of Higher Education and the South African Police Service (SAPS), should adopt integrated and proactive approaches to campus safety. Collaboration should ensure that effective practices implemented at well-resourced universities are extended to historically disadvantaged institutions. Safety policies should move beyond documentation and be implemented transparently and consistently to foster a student-centred culture of safety. Priority interventions include accessible trauma-informed mental health services, survivor-centred reporting mechanisms, and investment in security infrastructure, such as closed-circuit television (CCTV), adequate lighting, and access control systems. Security personnel should be appropriately trained, vetted, and monitored, while university curricula, particularly in social work programmes, should incorporate trauma-informed practice and coping strategies.

Given that many universities are located in high-crime areas, the SAPS should strengthen partnerships with higher education institutions through joint patrols, visible policing, and liaison officers working closely with student affairs divisions and campus security. Addressing campus crime requires the creation of safe, inclusive, and supportive environments in which students and staff feel protected and empowered.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the University of Fort Hare. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics.

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