



TACKLING RURAL CRIME IN GAUTENG

Are we asking the right questions?

To develop an appropriate and holistic policy response, crime, and especially rural crime must not be seen as solely a policing problem. It is in fact a societal problem requiring that we adopt a transversal approach seeking to ask the right kind of questions from all stakeholders, to arrive at the most impactful solutions.

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Tackling Rural Crime in Gauteng- Are we asking the right questions?

Abstract

Although rural crime is a global phenomenon that affects all rural communities around the world, studies have shown that developing countries are especially susceptible (Grote & Neubacher, 2016). In the South African context of a painful apartheid induced past, combined with a crippled economy and an uncertain future, crimes in rural communities and especially on farms, hold a unique and nuanced place of horror in the hearts of most South Africans.

This author is wearing two hats. The first is that of a liberal politician, invested in the values of an open, opportunity based society, and committed to bring about reconciliation and redress in this country. The second hat is the frayed and sun-bleached one of a small scale commercial farmer in the far western corridor of Gauteng who lives the daily rituals of a community under siege.

This paper proposes that, to develop an appropriate and holistic policy response, crime, and especially rural crime must not be seen as solely a policing problem. It is in fact a societal problem requiring that we adopt a transversal approach seeking to ask the right kind of questions from all stakeholders, to arrive at the most impactful solutions.

Such an approach allows for the boundaries of the investigation to be pushed beyond simply finding and blaming a culprit and trying to secure a criminal conviction.

This paper further explores the toxic environment created by failed government strategies, sensationalist media reporting, interest groups trying to create a racial agenda, and other social-economic factors. The stories told are the daily experiences of farmers, farmworkers and their families in rural Gauteng and how they are collaborating in creative ways to keep safe.

Finally, in proposing solutions this paper will consider the elements of a successful rural crime fighting policy including the frontiers brought about by digital disruption of the agricultural sector, and how technological innovation can be utilised to augment rural safety strategies.

Introduction

South Africa has been plagued by rising incidences of rural crime since the dawn of democracy in 1994; from gruesome murders and violence to farmers, their families, and farm workers, to alarming rates of livestock and agricultural commodities theft in these communities

According to Defense web, a leading African defence news portal, living on a farm or a smallholding in Gauteng and, on top of that, being older than 60 years of age place people

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in the category of being the most vulnerable targets for farm attacks in South Africa.

Gauteng is the most dangerous province in the country for farm and smallholding residents (Van Zyl, 2011)

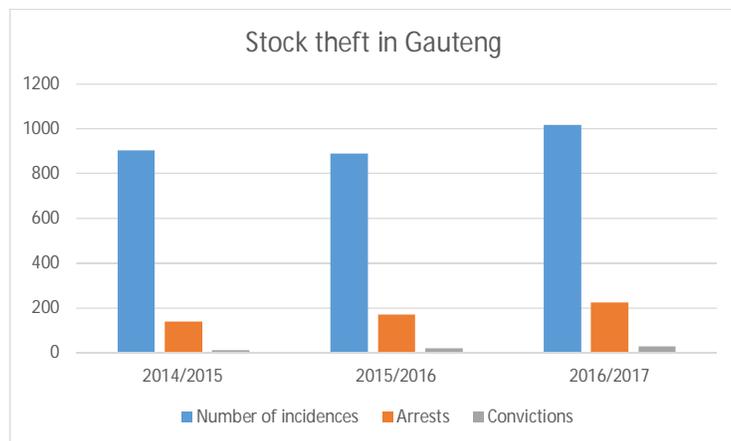
More than 19.8% of the 3 319 farm attacks recorded over the 23-year period between 1990 and 2012 occurred in Gauteng

The development of a Rural Safety Strategy in June 2011 by the South African Police Service was catalysed by the rampant escalation of violent crimes in rural communities; The strategy was developed as an intervention that would combine all the policing forums in a coordinated sector policing manner to address the rising incidents of rural crime. However, these interventions have yielded very little to no success.

A reply to a legislature question regarding stock theft reveals the startling disconnect:

Stock theft in Gauteng			
Period	Number of incidences	Arrests	Convictions
2014/2015	903	139	13
2015/2016	888	170	19
2016/2017	1016	225	29

Table 1: Stock theft in Gauteng



Graph1: Stock theft in Gauteng 2014-2016

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In 2014 the South African Human Rights Council hosted a public hearing where all rural crime affected stakeholders gathered and heard from the victims what it was like to live with the fear of violence in the remote rural communities (HRC, 2014).

Consider the real costs to the economy when a farm ceases to operate due to the death or departure of the farmer. Beyond the loss of the gross annual earnings of the business, a farm community is left behind, employees and their families left destitute and unemployable. This affects the food security of a community and the continuity of a skills and knowledge set that ensures biodiversity and food sovereignty.

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We need to start asking the following questions:

What makes a farm community vulnerable to violent crime- is it isolation, is it remoteness, or the fact that rural safety strategies have become eclipsed by the scourge of drug abuse and crimes on women and children in Gauteng.

What creates the perception that these crimes are politically and racially motivated? There are countless social media accounts and blogs that suggest a racial agenda. Although these posts are widely shared, retweeted, and commented upon, they are mostly devoid of any statistical and empirical evidence to support the claims made. Often, the emotional response of social media users trigger highly divisive racist rhetoric that is neither helpful nor instructive.

The media also plays a role in stoking real or imaginary fires of racial hatred through selective reporting or casting stories in such a light that they elicit manufactured moral outrage.

On the 28th of February this year, Julius Malema said in the National Assembly: "People of South Africa, where you see a beautiful piece of land, take it, it belongs to you" (Herman, 2016)

In May, President Zuma remarked in a speech to traditional leaders that "the Constitution is an obstacle to land reform", a view that he had to retract somewhat a few days later. (Mailovich, 2017)

What are the grassroots impacts when the leaders we follow make these remarks?

Why are farmers stereotyped as rich racist elitists who treat their employees as sub-human when the research does not support this notion?

Why are some farmers leaving the sector unable to get their farms sold?

What are the impacts of all the above factors on the social cohesion of a rural community?

The voices of the directly affected are often obscured by political leaders, social commentators and twitter trolls and remain mostly unheard. Farmers and farm workers want the South African Police Force to priorities their plight and recognise the severity and the unacceptable high levels of crime in their areas.

Geographical parameters of the Study

The study area where the research was conducted falls under the Merafong City Local Municipality which is one of the three local municipalities in the Westrand District Municipality. According to statistics South Africa, Merafong has an estimated population of 188 843 (Statistics S.A. 2016 community survey). Agricultural activities where farming take place in this western corridor of the Gauteng Province have been on the decline since 2001, and employment in this sector has been on the decrease. The figure below illustrates the trends in Agriculture in Merafong since the last community census survey by stats SA--2011.



- There was a sharp increase in GDP contribution of the agricultural sector between 2008 and 2009 indicated by the blue line.
- There was an increase in the contribution to employment of the agricultural sector over the period 1995-2000. Employment in this sector has been in decline since 2001

Source 1: Merafong Local Municipality IDP 2016/17

With decreasing employment in the agricultural sector, expansion in the sector is hampered. According to the Merafong Local Municipality 2017/18 IDP, Merafong has high potential agricultural areas with potential for intensive agricultural production (Municipality, 2017/18). Therefore, there is a need for increased productivity and crop diversification to contribute positively to the Gauteng western corridor's gross domestic product.

Rural areas are spaces where infrastructure and human settlement occupy a small fraction of the land; the space is predominantly dominated by fields, woods, forests and pastures (GDARD, 2017). Developing countries and emerging economies have discovered that rural communities can manage their own local economic development efforts when they are empowered. The Gauteng Rural Development Strategy was developed to ensure that the province "creates vibrant, equitable and sustainable rural communities" and ensure food security for the residence of Gauteng (GDARD, 2017). It is very easy to see how rural crime impedes development in these communities. Crime is disabling these communities from taking control of their lives to confront the problems of poverty and underdevelopment. The objectives of rural development cannot be realised in Gauteng if crime is left unmanaged and uncontrolled. There is no rural crime intelligence centre to coordinate rural police action in Gauteng and many areas of Merafong have little or no effective policing operations.

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The Focus Group Study

The Democratic Alliance in the Gauteng Provincial Legislature believe that the scale, cost, social impact and other effects of crime in rural areas are underestimated, under-reported and not fully understood. To provide a platform for the voices of affected communities, a focus group study was conducted with community members who were directly affected by rural crime in the Merafong area. Because of the emotive and sensitive nature of the discussion topics, a snowball sample was chosen from a research population limited to members of the chosen community policing forum.

The following questions guided the discussion

- How has rural crime affected your life and your business?
- What types of crimes are prevalent in your rural area?
- What do you think is the motive for the attacks?
- Do you think rural crime is a serious problem in South Africa? Why?
- What solutions can the government implement to support farmers?
- What solutions can the communities implement to support farmers?
- What would make your life easier on the farm in 2017

The Effects of Rural crime on this farm community: Key findings from the focus group

Participants remarked that their own crime prevention activities are increasingly impacting on the time available for income producing farming activities and in some instances a conscious choice is made between engaging in crop cultivation or rather patrolling and monitoring the area to prevent stock theft.

A lot was said about the South African Police Services. There is a recurring perception that police services have collapsed under the sheer volume of crimes committed in Gauteng. The relationship between organised agriculture and the police is adversarial to the point of breakdown with farmers complaining that police members do not take statements, do investigations or even make arrests. Allegations were repeatedly made that certain police officers receive protection fees from crime syndicates. In return they would cover up the RF numbers on their vehicles, and ensure passively that there are no obstacles encountered by syndicates moving stolen stock to abattoirs or auction yards. Even when persons are identified as having custody of stolen livestock, no action is taken. During CPF meetings farmers would plead with police to take action in identified crime hotspots, to no avail.

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The perception that police appear to be enabling the criminals rather than protecting the farm communities have become conventional wisdom. SAPS are accused of being ignorant of the areas they service, not being able to find specific farms and not knowing the community leaders and opinion makers of the area. At a CPF meeting attended by the author, community members expressed to police that they had no choice but to take matters into their own hands because of police inaction. SAPS officers present at the meeting were completely unmoved.

Crimes that are prevalent in the Western Corridor of Gauteng are stock theft; robberies, rape, murders and drug trafficking. It is not clear to what extent the combination of drug trafficking and stock theft is prevalent in other areas in the country and more research is indicated to determine what factors about the political economy in Gauteng enables a business case for drug and livestock trafficking, if any.

Farmers suggested that the motives for the attacks appear to be a combination of easy opportunities, an absence of law enforcement, easy access to abattoirs and colluding auction yards via a choice of road infrastructure and easy access to nearby townships and the eager market they present. During the winter fire season, veld fires provide a further opportunity where homesteads are left vulnerable while firefighting activities are conducted to protect grazing land.

In response to the crime situation this community has united around the fact that they face the same daily struggle, irrespective of socio-economic or demographic dividers. Communication applications such as WhatsApp provide a cheap and effective means of keeping members informed of crimes in the area, and is used daily to mobilise the community to assist with veld fires, apprehending stock thieves or assisting families in the aftermath of a crime. Farmers are encouraged to register the identification details of everyone who lives on the farm with the CPF group, and photographic images of suspect motor vehicles and license plates are often shared to the platform. More research must be conducted to determine the unseen psychological effects that this form of communication has on users

In terms of interventions required from government participants indicated strongly that interventions are needed to address the resourcing, training and application of specialised units within SAPS. A return to good old fashioned visible policing was a popular theme. Furthermore, a need to develop an application to recognise animals branding at sales points, a service level agreement with cellular service providers for better signal strength in rural areas, and improved collaboration within communities were added to the solutions mix. Rural communities need to become empowered, united, and technologically resourced to ensure their shared future. This author believes that social cohesion can even be enhanced through the implementation of a community based safety strategy.

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Frontiers for the 4th industrial revolution

Technological innovation is already causing widespread disruption in the agricultural sector. Venture capitalists in the Agriculture sector have realised that feeding the world is not the only or even the best reason to invest in agriculture- there is a real potential to make money.

Santiago Tenorio is group business development investment director at Cascade Global. Cascade is an early stage investor in emerging technologies across artificial intelligence, robotics, and life sciences.

He told Agfunder News: "We are seeing technology applied in new and innovative ways. Artificial Intelligence techniques such as machine learning are harvesting data from farms in ways that would have been unfathomable 10 years ago. Novel sensor technologies are bringing a new level of precision to the industry. Robotic harvesters are automating processes, taking the strain from people. And large-scale data collection and analysis is set to disrupt entire markets."

Criminals that target farmers scope the area for days before they attack, often to ensure the presence of cash, weapons and vehicles.

Effort should be made to harness innovation to reduce criminal opportunity.

Technology such as Shot Spotter, a real-time gunshot detection and alert system, is already yielding promising results in the City of Cape Town, and because of the relatively small size and high density of Gauteng, could be replicated here.

Geofencing is the use of the Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite network and/or local radio-frequency identifiers (such as Wi-Fi nodes or Bluetooth beacons) to create virtual boundaries around a location. The geofence is then paired with a hardware/software application that responds to the boundary in some fashion as dictated by the parameters of the program. Could we use a geo-fencing application to support on farm access and security systems?

Autonomous farm vehicles and drones can navigate the farm terrain and are increasingly used for crop harvesting and surveillance.

'Farms in a cloud' allow farmers to have access to their stock data anytime and anywhere with no software installations, maintenance or backups needed. Importantly it provides up to date information on the structure of the herd.

There are many more examples of innovation that will change the rural landscape in years to come. The critical question for government is how to respond in such a way that new technologies can amplify one another and address a wide range of societal issues through effective collaboration.

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The Democratic Alliance response to Rural Crime

The Democratic Alliance believe that:

It is important for attacks to be classified as a separate category of crime for statistical purposes going forward. This classification must include farmers, farmworkers and farm dwellers. This is essential to ensure that any intervention can be accurately measured in terms of its impacts on society.

The SAHRC Report on National Investigative Hearings into Safety & Security Challenges in Farming Communities concludes unequivocally that the causes for 'farm attacks and murders' is not race. The general view is they have robbery as their main aim with money and firearms being the primary target. The observation of an increasing number of black farmers being affected also supports this view. To militate against racially motivated "fake news" and stop the stereotyping of farmers, government must be consistent in its condemnation of all forms of racially motivated rhetoric that seeks to divide South Africans. The selective ringing silence of the current government is damaging our aims of reconciliation and redress.

Special SAPS rural safety units must be deployed once again with appropriately resourced and trained officers. Farm attacks must also be classified as a priority crime so more resources can be allocated to Rural Safety Units.

The reservist programme in farm areas must be properly implemented with concerted effort to recruit and train farmers, farm workers and farm dwellers.

Attention must be paid to the ability of Metro governments, Social Development and the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to collaborate with farming communities via Metro Police forces, social work interventions and extension services, who all work in farming communities on a daily basis. Such a transversal approach is yet unexplored and will allow government to address the risks associated with higher food costs and household food insecurity because of crime

More money should be spent on innovation and harvesting of "big data" to enhance crime intelligence in rural communities.

Increased access to health, social support, and education must be ensured for farmworkers and dwellers. This is a fundamental Human rights issue and farmers must be treated equally in this regard.

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Conclusion

An appropriate policy response for government to tackle rural crime in Gauteng will require new thinking. An overwhelming amount of data is becoming available because of technological innovation and the Internet of Things. Often, government actors, including SAPS members, extension officers and social workers all work in the same rural communities, and interact with overlapping data sets, but they are not yet collaborating effectively.

Communities themselves must strive for empowerment and social cohesion to develop a shared future based on the values of respect, reconciliation and redress.

The possibilities of City-led initiatives to enhance rural safety in Gauteng must be further explored as the city region is expected to continue expanding.

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