



Livestock Theft in the Media: Quantitative Reporting Trends Across South African Provinces (April 2018 to March 2025)

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Abstract

This study examines how livestock theft – the most common rural crime in South Africa – is portrayed in the media across the nine regions between April 2018 and March 2025. Using quantitative media visibility analysis, it evaluates the alignment between public discourse and criminal prevalence by comparing digital media mentions of “stock theft” and “veediefstal” with official crime statistics. The results show a glaring disparity: while livestock theft remains under-reported in the media, farm murders – an unrelated but more sensational rural crime – receive disproportionate coverage, particularly in Indigenous and Afrikaans-language media. Urban provinces garner the most media attention despite having lower theft rates, underscoring linguistic and infrastructure biases. The increased media references coincide with the National Livestock Theft Prevention Forum (NSTPF) receiving statutory funding in 2022, indicating that institutional involvement can enhance visibility. Using Tabbert’s linguistic framing and Shoemaker and Reese’s news production theory, the study argues that media coverage is manufactured rather than reflective. It concludes that the South African media coverage of livestock theft is skewed by language and geography, sidelining rural communities and distorting public understanding. A more inclusive media is essential to ensure justice, equity and visibility for all.

Keywords: veediefstal; livestock theft; stock theft; media coverage.

Introduction

Crime reporting in South Africa often reflects a distorted perspective that amplifies sensational narratives while sidelining the everyday realities of rural communities (Ceccato, 2016; Jewkes & Linnemann, 2022). Media coverage of “farm attacks” and “farm murders” has dominated public discourse for years (Rafaely & uMbuso weNkosi, 2023), drawing international attention and political commentary (e.g., from US President Donald Trump), despite representing only a fraction of farm-related crimes (White House, 2025). This disparity is not merely an editorial choice: it shapes public perception, policy priorities and resource allocation.

What remains largely invisible is livestock theft, the most prevalent rural crime in South Africa (Clack & Minnaar, 2018). Livestock theft has serious financial and psychological consequences for both commercial and subsistence farmers, yet it receives little coverage or scholarly attention, despite tens of thousands of cases being reported annually. A recent Google search (April 2018–March 2025) found 3150 media reports on farm attacks and 8340 on farm murders – equal to 23 mentions per farm murder and 1.6 per attack. Language representation showed further gaps: only 3150 cases were reported in Afrikaans, compared with 8350 in English. While these figures suggest patterns of linguistic exclusion and unequal media representation,



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the example pertains to farm attacks and murders rather than livestock theft. Therefore, direct evidence of linguistic exclusion in the reporting of livestock-related crimes remains to be demonstrated.

The problem is compounded by English-language dominance, which marginalises Afrikaans and Indigenous narratives, particularly in rural provinces. Media visibility concentrates in urban centres, leaving high-crime regions under-represented. Thus, livestock theft remains under-reported in the media and under-recognised as a serious criminal and social issue.

Much of the disproportionate coverage is fuelled by claims that farm crimes constitute a politically motivated genocide (Heese, 2025; White House, 2025) – a narrative repeatedly refuted by research finding no evidence of political intent (Clack & Minnaar, 2018; Hornschuh, 2007; Mistry, 2003; Strydom & Schutte, 2005). This disconnect between media framing and scholarship, as well as the limited research, highlights the need for more rigorous inquiry.

Farm crimes encompass a wide range beyond murder: violent acts (assault, domestic violence, armed robbery), economic offences (livestock, crop, and machinery theft), environmental degradation and corruption (Donnermeyer, 2025; Grote & Neubacher, 2016). Among these, livestock theft “stock theft” in English and “veediefstal” in Afrikaans – is the most prevalent (Clack, 2024b; Tustin & van Aardt, 2018). Its impacts are both financial and emotional. Although ancient, the reporting and discussion of livestock theft have evolved with the advent of digital and social media (Clack, 2015, 2024a, 2024b). Donnermeyer (2025) notes that the media mention function as grey literature for rural crime research.

This study situates livestock theft within the media–crime–society nexus, examining how it is portrayed in South African digital news. Understanding the media’s role in constructing awareness of rural crime requires analysing frequency and geographical framing. Coverage influences perceptions of safety, criminality, and state effectiveness, shaping opinion and policy, while public discourse can drive media interest. By assessing the volume and distribution of media mentions across South Africa’s nine provinces (see Figure 1) over a six-year period, this research aims to uncover the visibility – or invisibility – in public discourse of livestock theft and how this compares with its actual prevalence.

Figure 1

Maps Showing South Africa (Green) on the Africa Map and the Nine Provinces.



Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Background

The terrible loss of life in South Africa due to farm murders and attacks is highly distressing and deserves solemn recognition. The loss of any life is a tragedy, and the emotional and psychological toll on families and communities cannot be understated. However, these violent crimes only make up a small portion of the broader range of rural criminality (Clack & Minnaar, 2018), even if they rightfully raise public concerns and media attention. The media's excessive emphasis on farm killings, which are often driven by sensational narratives, has overshadowed other persistent and damaging crimes, particularly livestock theft.

Livestock theft is South Africa's most widespread rural crime, with over 26 000 cases reported annually (SAPS, 2025), far surpassing the incidence of farm murders and attacks (TAU-SA, 2025). However, despite its prevalence and significance, livestock theft remains under-reported in the public discourse and is largely ignored by the media. This imbalance distorts public understanding and influences policy priorities, leaving thousands of affected farmers without adequate visibility or support. To close this gap, crime reporting must adopt a more evidence-based and inclusive strategy that recognises all types of harm and actively connects with the reality of rural life.

Media narratives have long influenced public perceptions of crime, technology, race, and inequality in South Africa, often preceding sensational or politically charged events with more nuanced, ongoing and everyday problems (Pfeiffer, 2005). The media's ability to exaggerate anxiety and misrepresent reality is highlighted by the striking contrast between falling national crime rates and growing societal concern (Govender, 2013; James & Collins, 2011; Makombe et al., 2020). Sensational reporting often eclipses more balanced narratives, distorting the public's sense of risk and skewing expectations of criminal justice systems.

This marginalisation is compounded by linguistic bias. English dominates digital news reporting, sidelining Afrikaans and indigenous languages such as isiXhosa and isiZulu – languages spoken in many of the provinces hardest hit by livestock theft. This pattern is evident not only in crime reporting but also in coverage of communication technologies. For instance, MXit, a widely used mobile messaging application among South African youth in the 2010s, was portrayed in the media through predominantly adult, moralising voices. This exclusion of youth perspectives created a moral panic and stigmatised the platform (Chigona & Chigona, 2008). Such discourses demonstrate how the media can marginalise certain voices while reinforcing societal fears.

Media framing continues to echo colonial legacies, portraying rural Black communities through deficit lenses while privileging urban, white and affluent perspectives. Govenden (2023) critiques the persistent portrayal of blackness as synonymous with criminality and dysfunction, arguing that post-apartheid media often reproduces colonial stereotypes. Chiumbu (2016) similarly contends that coverage of critical events such as the Marikana massacre mirrored elite-centric narratives, reinforcing what she terms the "colonial matrix of power." Krüger (2017) adds that disparities in media access and representation have entrenched these inequalities, whereby wealthier, urban (often white) communities receive diverse and nuanced media coverage, while rural, Black populations are rendered invisible or misrepresented.

The structural dynamics of news production further entrench these disparities. Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) theory of news production explains how news content is shaped by various factors within the media system, highlighting that news is not simply a reflection of reality, but a product influenced by social, organisational and cultural processes. According to Shoemaker and Reese, news production involves multiple stages, from sourcing and selecting events to framing and presenting stories, each influenced by pressures such as deadlines, editorial policies, audience expectations and economic interests. These constraints and routines lead journalists and media organisations to prioritise certain events or perspectives, thereby shaping the public's understanding of issues. The theory emphasises that news is constructed through complex interactions among media professionals, institutions and broader societal forces rather than being an objective account of facts (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In South Africa, du Plessis (2003) illustrates that news content is shaped not only by journalistic routines and organisational priorities, but also by broader ideological forces. The study of crime reporting across two South African cities revealed that media outputs are tailored to reflect the values and interests of their target audiences, often reinforcing existing sociocultural biases.

Despite the growing academic interest in urban crime and media framing, rural crimes – particularly livestock theft – remain under-represented in the scholarship. However, livestock theft has serious socioeconomic consequences for rural communities and contributes significantly to the sense of insecurity among farmers (Clack, 2024a; Draca & Machin, 2015; Khoabane & Black, 2012). The lack of media attention to these crimes may marginalise them in public debates and policy-making, reinforcing existing inequalities.

The National Livestock Theft Prevention Forum (NSTPF), through the Red Meat Producers Organisation (RPO), is self-mandated to coordinate the prevention and management of livestock theft through structured collaboration among commercial and emerging livestock producers, the police, the justice system and agricultural departments. Central to its role is collecting, analysing and disseminating information on livestock theft trends, prevention strategies and control measures (RPO, n.d.). Although the NSTPF's formal objectives primarily target identified stakeholders such as government agencies and industry institutions, the media are not explicitly included as a key audience. However, given the media's significant role in shaping public discourse and raising awareness, engaging with media outlets on emerging trends and preventive measures aligns with the NSTPF's broader mandate. The NSTPF's institutional responsibility is further underscored by its annual statutory funding – R2 million (US\$111,000) since 2022 – emphasising its duty to promote transparency, support evidence-based policy and contribute effectively to national efforts to combat livestock theft (RPO, 2024).

This study addresses the significant gap in media representation and academic research concerning rural crimes, particularly livestock theft, in South Africa. Despite the profound socioeconomic impact of livestock theft on rural communities, this crime remains under-represented in digital news media and public discourse compared with urban crime, farm murders and farm attacks. By analysing the frequency and regional distribution of livestock theft mentions in South African digital media from 2018 to 2025, and comparing these trends with official crime data, this research seeks to determine how much media coverage reflects on-the-ground realities. Ultimately, the study contributes to a more inclusive and equitable understanding of rural crime representation, shedding light on its broader implications for public awareness, justice and policy development.

Research Design

This study employs a media monitoring and content trend analysis design, utilising a publicly accessible online search tool (Google Advanced Search) to assess the volume and geographic distribution of digital media mentions of livestock theft in South Africa. The keywords “livestock theft” and “stock theft” (these words are used interchangeably in South Africa), and “veediefstal,” were selected for their prevalence in English and Afrikaans reporting, respectively. The analysis covers the period from April 2018 to April 2025, aligning with the South African Police Service (SAPS) financial year, which runs from April to March annually. This alignment ensures that media reporting trends correspond with the official crime reporting periods used by SAPS.

Each search was refined using Google's advanced search features to specify South Africa as the region, and results were grouped according to the nine South African provinces to understand localised media attention. This allowed for the identification of regional disparities or concentrations in reporting. The analysis does not focus on the content of each mention, but rather the frequency and distribution over time and geography, making it a quantitative media visibility study (Gruenewald, Parkin, & Chermak, 2018). No ethical clearance was required for this research, as it relies exclusively on publicly available information and does not involve human subjects or sensitive data. Artificial intelligence was used solely for grammar correction and language refinement, not to interpret findings or results.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated:

Q1: How often have the terms “stock theft” and “veediefstal” been used in media coverage of the National Livestock Theft Prevention Forum (NSTPF) or the Red Meat Producers Organisation in South Africa between April 2018 and March 2025?

Q2: How often have the terms “stock theft” and “veediefstal” appeared in media sources in South Africa from April 2018 to March 2025?

Q3: How does the volume of media mentions vary across South Africa's provinces?

Q4: What does the variation in media attention suggest about regional perceptions and prioritisation of livestock theft as a criminal issue?

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research approach, utilising secondary data sources to systematically analyse the frequency and distribution of media coverage related to livestock theft. Rather than generating new data through surveys or interviews, the research draws on existing online content, allowing for a broad and data-rich analysis of public-facing narratives (Johnston, 2014). The methodology specifically excluded the use of Google Scholar, as this platform predominantly indexes academic sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings and theses (Halevi, Moed, & Bar-Illan, 2017). Including Google Scholar would have confined the results to scholarly literature, thereby omitting the broader spectrum of media content – such as news articles, online reports, blogs, and other non-academic coverage – more indicative of public discourse and media visibility.

Given the study's objective of assessing how frequently livestock theft appears in general media reporting, Google Search was selected as a more suitable tool, as it includes mentions from Facebook, Instagram and X, which are commonly used as tools for community policing and mass emergency response (Ceccato, 2016; Clack, 2015). It offers access to a broader range of secondary data reflecting public communication and reporting trends (Smith, 2008). Keyword searches were first conducted using the terms “RPO with livestock theft and stock theft”¹ and “RPO with veediefstal.” In the subsequent keyword search, the terms “livestock theft and stock theft” and “veediefstal” were used to assess the prevalence of media references across different online platforms quantitatively. This enabled the research to identify patterns in media attention and visibility related to livestock theft, providing insight into its representation in the public domain.

Data Collection

The data were gathered using Google Search and its advanced tools to conduct systematic keyword queries. Five primary search terms standard in South African vocabulary were used: “RPO,” “NSTPF,” “livestock theft,” “stock theft” and “veediefstal,” as explained in the methodology. Searches were limited using Google's Advanced Search function, where the author(s) used “all these words” for the main search terms and “this exact word or phrase” for the provincial names.

Searches were limited in the following ways:

- The geographic domain for both the “stock theft” and “veediefstal” searches was restricted to South Africa. To improve or refine the results, a second search iteration was added, in which these two terms were searched for in each province.
- The period from April 2018 to March 2025 was selected to align with the South African Police Service (SAPS) financial year (April–March) and to correspond with the introduction of quarterly crime statistics reporting, which began in April 2018. Prior to this, SAPS released crime statistics only on an annual basis (Kempen, 2019).
- Each of the nine provinces was included (by specifying regional identifiers in the search where applicable – for example, “stock theft Limpopo,” “veediefstal Vrystaat”).
- Caution was taken with the North West Province, as many areas have this identifier; the search was narrowed down to South Africa as a region. The South African linguistics use a different spelling from that used by the rest of the world.
- As for Gauteng and the Western Cape, it was found that many documents were court documents on SAFLII; therefore, these documents were excluded.

The number of search results (hits) was recorded to indicate relative media attention. While this method does not assess the quality or sentiment of the coverage, it provides a proxy for public visibility and concern. The survey considers materials published by media outlets, including those disseminated through their official social media channels, as identified via Google Search. However, the searches were conducted exclusively through Google, not directly within social media platforms, and content from non-media social media sources (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, X) was excluded.

To enhance consistency in the data-collection process, all searches were conducted in incognito mode to minimise personalisation bias that could influence the number or type of results shown based on previous browsing history. A standardised browser setup and a South Africa-based IP address were used to ensure the search results reflected the local digital media landscape. Additionally, duplicate articles and irrelevant hits – including unrelated uses of the keywords or repeated postings of the same article across different platforms – were manually reviewed and filtered to improve the accuracy and relevance of the media mention counts.

The recorded data were captured in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, where initial organisation and cleaning were performed for the data in Figure 2 and Table 1. The dataset was then exported to SPSS version 29 for descriptive statistical analysis and the generation of the scatterplot (Figure 3) to visually represent patterns in media visibility across provinces and over time.

Results and Findings

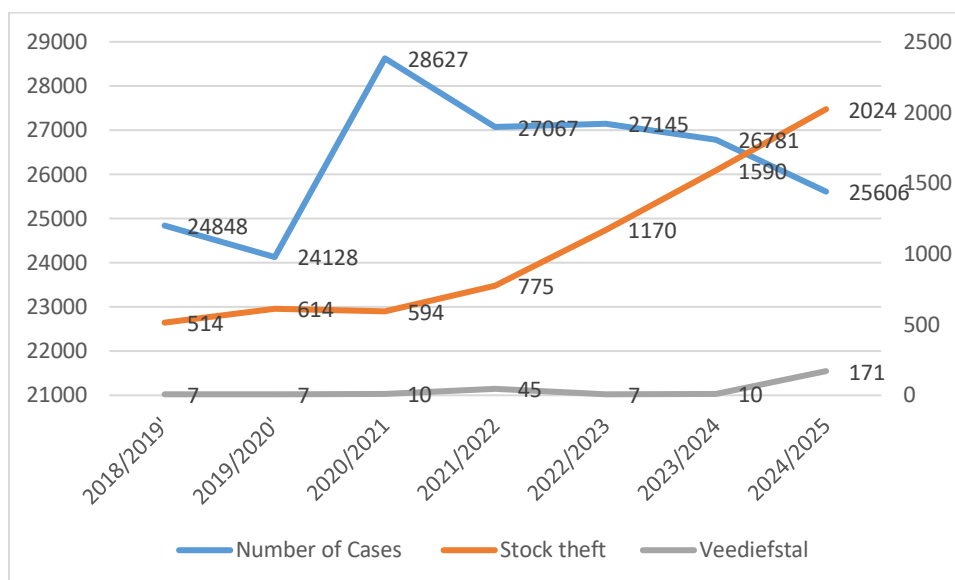
Q1: Between 2018 and 2025, how frequently have the terms “stock theft” and “veediefstal” appeared in media coverage alongside mentions of the Red Meat Producers Organisation or the National Livestock Theft Prevention Forum (NSTPF) in South Africa?

The annual trends in livestock theft cases recorded in South Africa from 2018/2019 to 2024/2025 are depicted in Figure 2, along with the frequency of RPO and media mentions. To illustrate the data, the study used a combination chart since there are limited media mentions of stock theft and “veediefstal.”

Figure 2 presents a comparative view of the number of reported livestock theft cases in South Africa and the frequency of digital media mentions using the keywords “RPO,” “stock theft” (English) and “veediefstal” (Afrikaans) from 2018/2019 to 2024/2025.

Figure 2

Trends in Reported Livestock Theft Cases and Media Coverage with the Words “RPO,” “Livestock Theft, Stock Theft” and “veediefstal” in South Africa (2018–2025)



A clear divergence emerges between the actual incidence of livestock theft and the increasing attention it receives in media reporting, particularly from 2022 onwards. Between 2018 and 2021, reported cases of livestock theft fluctuated moderately, peaking at 28,627 in 2020/2021 and gradually declining to 25,606 by 2024/2025. The trend in media coverage, especially in English, reveals a significant and sustained rise. Mentions of “stock theft” increased from 514 in 2018/2019 to a striking 2,024 in 2024/2025, a fourfold increase. While remaining low and sporadic in earlier years, mentions of Afrikaans rose sharply from just 10 in 2023/2024 to 171 in 2024/2025, indicating a sudden surge in public discourse within Afrikaans-speaking media circles. Importantly, this is only where the three terms converge in one search, e.g., RPO and Stock Theft, and RPO and “veediefstal”.

A key contextual factor during this period is the statutory funding introduced in 2022, in which the National Stock Theft Prevention Forum (NSTPF) began receiving R2 million annually through Red Meat Industry Services (RMIS) (RPO, 2024). This statutory funding may have enhanced the NSTPF’s capacity to conduct coordinated outreach, research, and public communication. It is plausible that this financial support contributed to the surge in media visibility from 2022 onwards, as the

forum would have had greater resources to engage the media, distribute crime statistics, and raise awareness among rural communities and policymakers. Although not measured separately, it is worth noting that in English, RPO and Red Meat Industry Services (RMIS) are frequently found together in most searches.

The simultaneous rise in media coverage and decline in livestock theft cases, from 28,627 cases in 2020 to 26,781 cases in 2024 (Clack, 2024a), may be the result of a reinforcing dynamic in which more media attention may have raised institutional responsiveness, public awareness, or community vigilance, or other factors—such as underreporting or targeted policing. To confirm its effect on farmers reporting incidences of livestock theft, more research is necessary to determine the true impact of this occurrence.

Q2: How often have the terms “livestock theft, stock theft” and “veediefstal” appeared in media sources in South Africa from 2018 to 2025?

The analysis of media mentions for the keywords “livestock theft, stock theft” and “*veediefstal*” across the nine provinces of South Africa from 2018 to 2025 and the ratio of mentions per livestock theft case yielded the results shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Provincial Distribution of Media Coverage of Livestock Theft in South Africa (2018–2025)

Province	Stock theft (A)	“Veediefstal” (B)	A+B combined	Number of cases reported	The ratio of media mentions and the number of livestock theft cases
Eastern Cape	1200	71	1 271	47 291	0.0269
Northern Cape	616	79	695	5 326	0.1305
Western Cape	860	153	1 013	6 103	0.1660
KwaZulu-Natal	900	118	1 018	46 565	0.0219
Free State	803	179	982	24 491	0.0401
North-West	692	82	774	21 807	0.0355
Limpopo	873	118	991	38 083	0.0260
Mpumalanga	821	82	903	21 053	0.0429
Gauteng	938	68	1 006	8 005	0.1257
Total	7 703	950	8 653	218 724	0.0396

Table 1 reveals that between 2018 and 2025, the terms “stock theft” and “veediefstal” appeared 7703 and 950 times across South African digital media, totalling 8653 mentions. This shows that the English term “stock theft” dominates media coverage, likely due to the prevalence of English in mainstream news and the limited reach of online Afrikaans outlets.

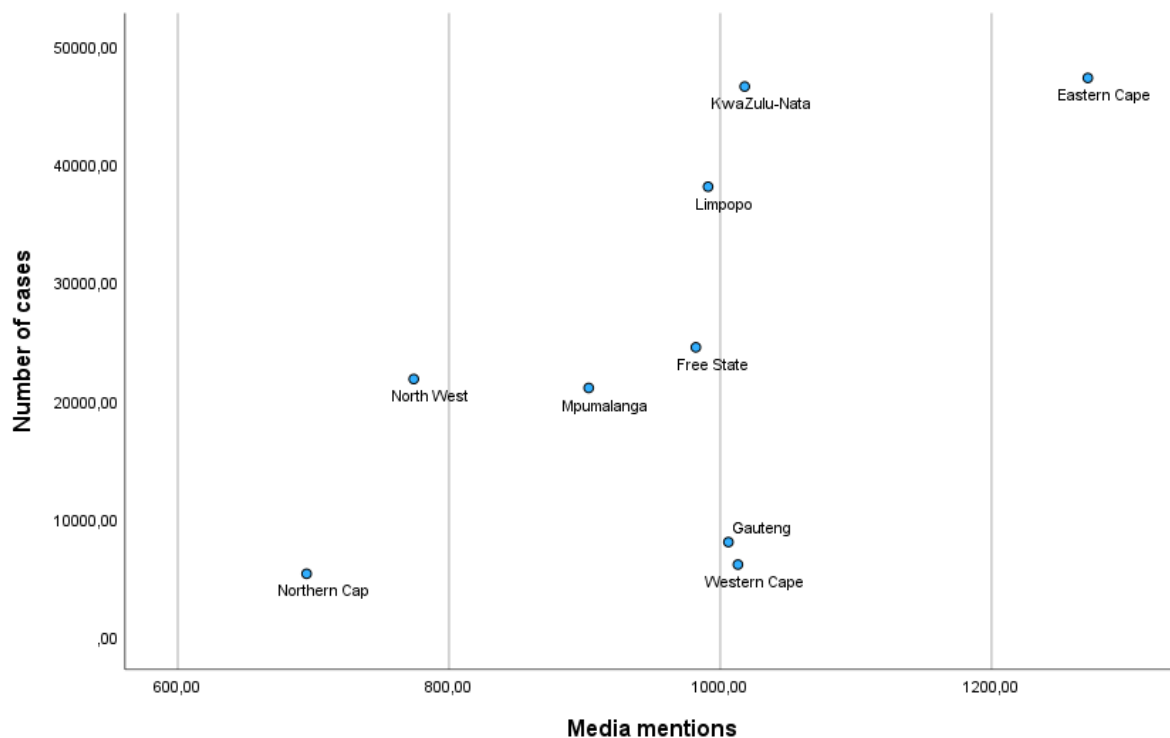
Examining mentions relative to reported cases, the Western Cape has the highest ratio at about 0.166 mentions per case, followed by Northern Cape (0.131) and Gauteng (0.126). Provinces like KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo have much lower ratios, around 0.022 and 0.026. Nationally, the average ratio is approximately 0.040 mentions per case. These differences may reflect regional variations in media focus and public interest. Overall, the disparity in term usage and mentions per case highlights how language and location shape media visibility of rural crime in South Africa. Furthermore, the information correlates with the scatterplot in Figure 3.

Q3: How does the volume of media mentions vary across South Africa’s provinces?

Figure 3 compares reported stock theft cases across provinces with media mentions, while Table 1 combines English and Afrikaans coverage. Each data point represents a province, enabling a visual assessment of the link between crime prevalence and media attention.

Figure 3

Provincial Distribution of Media Coverage on Livestock Theft and the Number of Cases Per Province in South Africa (2018–2025)



The scatterplot shows a weak, inconsistent distribution, supported by a Pearson correlation of $r = 0.01$ ($p = 0.978$), indicating no significant linear relationship between stock theft cases and media coverage. Provincial patterns, however, reveal disparities. The Eastern Cape appears in the upper-right corner, with high case numbers and media mentions. This alignment may reflect the province's rural economy, linguistic demographics (isiXhosa), or active reporting culture. KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo fall in the upper-middle region, showing many cases but only average coverage, suggesting under-reporting or low media visibility despite severe crime levels. By contrast, the Western Cape and Gauteng report fewer incidents yet receive disproportionately high attention, likely due to urban-based media concentration. The Northern Cape shows low case numbers and low mentions, sitting in the bottom-left quadrant. North West and Mpumalanga occupy the mid-range in both variables, but no clear overall trend emerges.

Q4: What does the variation in media attention suggest about regional perceptions and prioritisation of livestock theft as a criminal issue?

The variation in media attention highlights a disconnect between the reality of stock theft and its media portrayal, shaping regional perceptions and prioritising livestock theft as a public concern. With relatively few reported cases, provinces such as Gauteng and the Western Cape receive disproportionately high coverage – likely due to dense media infrastructure, political significance, and urban readership. Despite lower crime burdens, this visibility amplifies the perceived severity of stock theft in these areas.

By contrast, rural provinces such as the Northern Cape, Mpumalanga and North West face substantial livestock theft yet receive limited coverage, reducing public pressure on authorities, resource allocation and policy urgency. The limited use of Afrikaans terms such as “veediefstal” further suggests that the crime is reported mainly in English outlets, potentially overlooking cultural and linguistic contexts where it is most acute.

Overall, provincial coverage variation reflects reporting trends and shapes how livestock theft is socially, politically and institutionally prioritised. This underscores the need to critically examine media representation when assessing responses to rural crime and justice in South Africa.

Discussion

South Africa's print media sector is a complex and evolving system shaped by concentrated ownership, linguistic diversity and uneven regional development. The landscape is dominated by four major publishing houses – Media24, Caxton & CTP Publishers & Printers, Independent Media and Arena Holdings – and reflects broader societal disparities in language use, media access and representation (Paremoer, 2012). These disparities directly affect how rural issues, including crimes such as livestock theft, are reported across provinces and languages (Ceccato, 2016). Plaasmedia publishes two magazines, *Veeplaas* and *Stock Farm*, which focus on the red meat industry. Although situated in Gauteng, they are distributed nationally, and for the year 2024 they dedicated a monthly section to livestock theft, which contributed to the rise in media mentions in 2024.

Media Representation of Rural Crime in South Africa: Farm Murders and Attacks Versus Stock Theft

The study reveals a stark disconnect between the prevalence of livestock theft and its representation in South African digital media. Despite being the most common rural crime, with over 218 000 occurrences documented between 2018 and 2025, livestock theft remains largely invisible in public discourse. On the other hand, farm murders and attacks – which are far less frequent – receive far more media attention. This imbalance is not incidental; it reflects the dynamics described by Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) news production theory, which posits that news is not a mirror of reality but a product of editorial routines, institutional pressures and cultural framing.

The media's prioritisation of farm murders, which are sometimes presented in politically charged narratives of racial violence or "white genocide," serves as an example of how coverage is influenced by ideological alignment and emotional resonance. These stories are emphasised because they align with prevailing narratives and spark public interest, not because they are statistically representative. Livestock theft, by contrast, lacks sensational appeal and is often excluded from mainstream reporting, despite its devastating economic and social impact on rural communities. Farm murders and attacks are significantly over-represented relative to their actual incidence, with media-to-crime ratios as high as 23 mentions per farm murder and 1.6 per farm attack. This highlights the degree to which farm crimes dominate news narratives, disproportionate to TAU-SA statistics (TAU-SA, 2025). This over-representation reflects the media's role in selection and prioritisation, whereby journalists and editors emphasise events that resonate with political or emotional narratives, often at the expense of balanced reporting. This selective amplification aligns with Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) argument that newsroom routines and external societal pressures influence which stories gain prominence.

The framing of farm crimes within a politically charged narrative, often cast as evidence of a targeted genocide, further illustrates how cultural and ideological processes shape news content. This framing persists despite consistent academic findings refuting such claims (Clack & Minnaar, 2018; Hornschuh, 2007; Mistry, 2003; Strydom & Schutte, 2005). Such politicised narratives underscore Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) point that news is constructed to reflect broader societal discourses, influencing public perceptions through emotionally laden storytelling rather than objective fact.

In contrast, stock theft – which occurs far more frequently – attracts comparatively muted media attention, with a media-to-crime ratio of around 0.0396 mentions per reported case. Despite its prevalence, stock theft receives less sensationalised coverage, suggesting differential media priorities shaped by political, emotional and cultural factors. This reveals institutional and economic pressures within media organisations, where language accessibility and market considerations influence story selection (Ceccato, 2016; Chiumbu, 2016; du Plessis, 2003; Jewkes & Linnemann, 2022; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

The scarcity of recent academic research on farm crimes highlights a critical gap between public discourse and scholarly inquiry. This imbalance perpetuates misconceptions and hampers informed policy development, demonstrating the consequences of news production processes that prioritise sensationalism over evidence-based reporting (Clack, 2013; Maluleke et al., 2014, 2016; Rafaely & uMbuso weNkosi, 2023).

Ownership Concentration and Provincial Presence

Another noteworthy finding of this study is the regional variation in media coverage. While provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape, which are most affected by livestock theft, are under-represented, Gauteng and the Western Cape – with relatively low rates – attract disproportionate attention due to urban infrastructure and proximity to newsrooms. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) found a similar pattern in the United States, where coastal regions were over-covered while the

Midwest was under-covered. Media24 and Caxton dominate community publications in South Africa, while Independent Media and Arena Holdings focus on metropolitan news (Rakgogo, 2024). This concentration raises concerns about editorial diversity, particularly in regions with fewer alternatives.

All four major players operate extensively in Gauteng, the country's economic and media hub. Titles such as *The Star*, *Pretoria News* and *Sunday Times* circulate widely, serving a multilingual population where isiZulu (19.8%), English (13.3%), Afrikaans (12.4%) and Sesotho (11.6%) are most spoken (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Despite this diversity, English dominates professional and media discourse (Alexander, 2025), limiting access for non-English-speaking communities.

The Western Cape also exhibits linguistic diversity: Afrikaans (49.7%), isiXhosa (24.7%) and English (20.2%) (Alexander, 2025). Media24's *Die Burger* and Independent Media's *Cape Argus* and *Cape Times* are key titles (Paremoer, 2012), but primarily in English and Afrikaans, marginalising isiXhosa-speaking populations in rural districts (Rakgogo, 2024). In KwaZulu-Natal, isiZulu is the predominant language, spoken by approximately 77.8% (Alexander, 2025). Publications such as *The Mercury*, *Daily News* and *Isolezwe* exist, but only *Isolezwe* caters for isiZulu, with limited rural reach (Paremoer, 2012; Mdlalo et al., 2019).

Other provinces – Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, Limpopo and Mpumalanga – have fewer major titles and depend on regional or community papers (Paremoer, 2012). These areas are underserved by mainstream media, heightening informational marginalisation. For example, in the Eastern Cape, where 78.8% of people speak isiXhosa, coverage is limited beyond capitals (Alexander, 2025). Similarly, where the majority of residents speak Sepedi (52.9%), Xitsonga (17%) and Tshivenda (16.7%), the dominant languages of print media remain English and Afrikaans, creating a disconnect between linguistic demographics and media accessibility (Statistics South Africa, 2023).

Language, Media, and Crime Representation

The linguistic study of media mentions shows “stock theft” (7703 mentions) far outnumbers “veediefstal” (950 mentions). According to Tabbert's linguistic framing theory, language reflects and creates reality. Afrikaans-speaking and Indigenous-language populations are marginalised by English dominance, especially in provinces such as the Free State, Northern Cape and Limpopo.

This bias has consequences. Afrikaans, isiXhosa, isiZulu and Sepedi – languages spoken in the areas most affected – are under-represented in digital media and poorly indexed by Google Search. Their experiences are often absent from national narratives, thereby weakening their influence on opinion and law. Still, the rise of “veediefstal” in media mentions from 2024 to 2025 suggests that targeted outreach or improved indexing may alter the trend. Figure 2 suggests that fewer cases paired with higher media attention indicate how effective communication and enforcement may reduce crime and strengthen rural communities.

The predominance of English and Afrikaans in print reflects historical privilege and structural inequities shaping access to public discourse (Rakgogo, 2024). The overwhelming use of “stock theft” over “veediefstal” illustrates English dominance in media archives, excluding Afrikaans and Indigenous languages (Makananise, 2025). This obscures rural experiences, especially in the Free State, Northern Cape and North West (Alexander, 2025).

Analyses reveal a gap between incidence and representation between 2018 and 2025. Cases from rural, non-English provinces (e.g., Limpopo, Eastern Cape and North West) were less often featured in major papers (Alexander, 2025). Even when reported, they appeared in English, with little in local languages. Indigenous-language reports, when published, were often paraphrased in English for search visibility, as revealed in Google Search. Due to the absence of multilingual tools, a comprehensive analysis of such coverage remains difficult.

This under-representation contributes to the invisibility of rural crime and reduces affected communities' ability to raise awareness or seek justice. Commercial priorities and linguistic accessibility push outlets towards urban, English-speaking audiences, further marginalising others (Mdlalo et al., 2019). Research confirms that linguistic marginalisation shapes which narratives gain attention (du Plessis, 2018; Xeketwana & Anthonissen, 2025). In the case of livestock theft, the rarity of “veediefstal” in digital media highlights a gap in linguistic inclusion, since Afrikaans-language outlets are less indexed by search engines (Makananise, 2025).

Weak Correlation Between Media Coverage and Crime Data

The statistical analysis reveals an almost non-existent correlation between the number of livestock theft cases and media mentions across South African provinces ($r = 0.01$, $p = 0.978$) (Figure 3). This suggests that the severity of the crime does not

necessarily drive media attention. Instead, media visibility appears to be influenced by provincial infrastructure, urban concentration and access to journalistic platforms (Ceccato, 2016; Seipp et al., 2024).

For example, the Eastern Cape has high case numbers and significant media mentions, which may reflect strong local media networks and heightened public concern, although the findings of Alexander (2025) suggest less coverage. In contrast, despite recording some of the highest theft volumes, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo receive only moderate media attention, despite KwaZulu-Natal having a dedicated IsiZulu newspaper (Alexander, 2025). This under-representation may stem from weaker media infrastructure or limited journalist access in these predominantly rural provinces (Tallert et al., 2019).

Conversely, Gauteng and the Western Cape, which recorded relatively low livestock theft cases, feature disproportionately high media mentions. These provinces are home to South Africa's major media houses and newsrooms, which likely results in over-representation of crimes occurring within urban-adjacent areas. This aligns with the broader pattern identified by Clack (2018), who noted a persistent urban bias in crime reporting practices.

Policy Implications of Uneven Media Visibility

The imbalance in livestock theft reporting has important consequences for public awareness, government resource allocation and policy development. Provinces such as the Northern Cape, Mpumalanga and North West – which experience significant livestock theft – may lack attention in the media and state responses and prevention efforts (du Plessis, 2003). Without adequate coverage, there is little public pressure on officials to act decisively, allowing the problem to persist unchecked (Meiring, 2020). Furthermore, as Clack (2024a) argues, the under-reporting of stock theft reinforces a fragmented understanding of livestock theft in South Africa. It also complicates the efforts of researchers and policy-makers who rely on media monitoring data to identify crime hotspots and allocate resources for intervention.

The Role of Language in Shaping Crime Narratives

Language plays a decisive role in shaping public understanding of crime, particularly through the media, where it acts as both a mirror and a maker of societal discourse. Because most individuals do not directly encounter crime or criminals, their perceptions are largely shaped by the language used in media reports. The way crime is described, framed and repeatedly communicated through news and commentary influences how the public perceives criminal activity and how society responds to it (Tabbert, 2013). The under-representation of “veediefstal” in the findings highlights a cultural-linguistic challenge in framing rural crimes, such as livestock theft. Language not only reflects reality, but also shapes it. If Afrikaans-speaking farming communities see their concerns represented predominantly in English-language media, they may perceive a disconnect between their lived experiences and the national narrative. This could erode trust in media institutions and further entrench a sense of marginalisation (Wasserman, 2020). Media organisations, search platforms and policy-makers must address these disparities by supporting multilingual journalism, improving access to local media in rural areas and ensuring that crime coverage reflects the linguistic and cultural diversity of South Africa's rural regions (Mdlalo et al., 2019).

Study Limitations

Google Search and printed newspaper results are subject to slight fluctuations due to changes in search algorithms and the frequency with which content is indexed, which may affect the consistency of result counts over time. Furthermore, the method employed does not distinguish between different types of media sources – such as traditional news outlets, blogs or social media posts – treating all indexed mentions equally, regardless of source credibility or reach. Additionally, some regional or smaller publications may not be fully indexed by Google, which could lead to the under-representation of certain provinces in the overall count. Despite these limitations, the methodology remains a practical and cost-effective means of evaluating the media landscape related to livestock theft in South Africa, offering valuable insights into the visibility and regional emphasis of this rural crime over time.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has set out to analyse the presence and patterns of livestock theft in South African digital news media between 2018 and 2025, investigating how frequently this rural crime is reported, how such coverage is distributed across provinces and how closely it aligns with official crime data. By comparing media mentions with the actual number of reported cases, this research sought to evaluate the extent to which media visibility reflects on-the-ground realities and how disparities in coverage might shape public awareness, influence policy responses and impact rural communities' ability to seek justice.

Although encouraging, the findings regarding the RPO and stock theft mentions cannot be stated as a fact, as there are too many variables to consider. The rest of the findings reveal a marked disconnection between the prevalence of livestock theft and its representation in the media. Despite the high incidence of such crimes in provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and the North West, these areas remain under-represented in digital news coverage. Conversely, provinces with relatively low levels of livestock theft, such as Gauteng and the Western Cape, receive disproportionate media attention, mainly due to their proximity to major media houses and superior journalistic infrastructure.

This imbalance is compounded by linguistic marginalisation. Media outlets and search engines continue to favour English-language content, which marginalises communities that communicate in Afrikaans, isiXhosa, isiZulu and other Indigenous languages. The limited presence of keywords such as “veediefstal” and isiXhosa or isiZulu equivalents in search data indicates a broader structural issue: rural crimes are under-reported and linguistically excluded from dominant media narratives. As a result, the reality of rural crime is often rendered invisible, weakening the capacity of affected communities to raise awareness or pressure authorities into acting.

The implications for justice and policy-making are significant. Policy-makers frequently rely on media reports to identify crime hotspots and allocate resources. If these reports are skewed towards urban centres or dominant-language regions, rural areas suffering from serious crime may be systematically overlooked. Thus, a distorted media landscape does not merely obscure the public’s understanding of rural crime: it has tangible effects on how, where and whether interventions occur.

These findings carry significant implications for justice, policy-making and the broader question of rural visibility in South Africa. Policy-makers rely on media coverage to identify crime trends and allocate resources. However, if media reporting is uneven and linguistically narrow, it risks distorting the policy-making process by downplaying the severity of rural crimes. Consequently, affected regions may not receive the attention, funding or strategic support necessary to effectively combat livestock theft. Furthermore, researchers, NGOs and the general public – who often use the media as a proxy for understanding crime – are similarly misled, reinforcing a fragmented and unequal understanding of rural criminality.

To respond to these challenges, a more inclusive and intentional media framework is needed to reflect South Africa’s linguistic diversity and geographic inequalities. Strengthening local journalism in rural areas, improving infrastructure for news production outside urban centres and supporting Indigenous language media content are all essential steps. At the same time, digital platforms and academic search engines must be equipped to recognise and index multilingual content more equitably, ensuring that language does not become a barrier to visibility or research. Policy-makers should also integrate diverse data sources beyond media reports when responding to livestock theft and similar crimes. This includes official crime statistics, community-based reporting and locally informed qualitative insights.

Moreover, rural communities must be supported in becoming producers of their narratives. Empowering these communities through citizen journalism, training and media literacy can create a more grounded and representative information ecosystem. When local voices can tell their own stories – in their languages – they become active participants in shaping public discourse and influencing policy outcomes.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the representation of livestock theft in South African media is deeply uneven, shaped more by language, location and infrastructure than by the scale or impact of the crime itself. By analysing media coverage and crime data between 2018 and 2025, it becomes clear that rural crimes continue to be marginalised in the public eye, with profound implications for justice, policy and social equity. Addressing this imbalance is not only a matter of improving media practices, but also of recognising the rights of all communities – regardless of language or geography – to visibility, voice and protection under the law. Only through a more inclusive and representative media landscape can the whole reality of rural crime be acknowledged and meaningfully addressed.

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