



Police Perspectives on Livestock Theft Prevention in South Africa: Rural Policing Challenges, Community Engagement and Policy Implications

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Abstract

Livestock theft remains a serious rural crime in South Africa; however, the perspectives of the South African Police Service (SAPS) officers combating it are seldom explored. This qualitative-dominant fixed-methods study draws on surveys and interviews with 33 officers from Stock Theft and Endangered Species Units across all provinces. Using rural criminology, police legitimacy and procedural justice frameworks, it examines officers' experiences, challenges and views on Livestock Theft Prevention Forums. Ten key themes emerge, including persistent shortages of staff, vehicles and investigative resources; weak compliance with identification laws; uneven stakeholder participation; interpersonal and racial tensions; and communication barriers that hinder trust and cooperation. Officers noted the benefits of technologies such as WhatsApp groups, closed-circuit television (CCTV), drones and the Eyes and Ears (E2) initiative, but also that offenders adapt to more organised and violent strategies. The study highlights how structural constraints and legitimacy issues shape prevention outcomes and offers practical reforms to strengthen police capacity, legal compliance, technology use and rural safety collaboration.

Keywords: Livestock theft; rural policing; South African Police Service (SAPS); community engagement; procedural justice; Stock Theft and Endangered Species Units (STESUs).

Introduction

Rural crime warrants sustained scholarly attention due to its damaging effects on the economy, food security and rural well-being. Crimes in South Africa's rural areas remain comparatively under-researched within the humanities and related disciplines (Fredriksen Goldsen et al., 2019). Among these, livestock theft is one of the most persistent and costly, affecting commercial, emerging and communal farmers. This article uses the terms "stock" and "livestock" interchangeably to refer to farm animals, while noting that "stock" may be misinterpreted in commercial contexts. Although existing research largely focuses on farmers and agricultural organisations, far less is known about the experiences of the South African Police Service (SAPS) officers tasked with investigating and preventing these crimes. This gap is significant, given livestock theft's impact on rural livelihoods, the agricultural sector and the broader socio-economic situation, as well as the fragmented nature of current research (Mzingelwa & Mutula, 2025).

The authors argue that officers in Stock Theft and Endangered Species Units (STESUs) operate under demanding conditions characterised by vast geographical coverage, long travel distances, limited resources, strong community expectations and increasingly sophisticated criminal methods. Their frontline perspectives offer a critical yet under-explored dimension of



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livestock theft prevention. Recent scholarship reflects growing engagement with rural crime, including multidisciplinary work on environmental offences, water theft, livestock theft, rural policing and criminological theory in rural contexts (Mulrooney et al., 2026). This study builds on that literature by shifting attention from general rural crime descriptions to the operational realities of specialised officers.

Rural policing nevertheless faces substantial challenges. Officers often work with inadequate resources, limited staffing and expansive response areas where backup is scarce. The nature of rural policing also demands a generalist approach: officers must maintain close community relationships while addressing diverse social problems, unlike the more specialised focus common in urban contexts (Weisheit et al., 2005). These pressures extend into private life, with documented negative effects on officers' families (Buttle et al., 2010), and are intensified in remote areas with minimal human and financial resources (Whiteside et al., 2023). Accordingly, this study examines how these constraints shape the functioning of livestock theft-prevention structures, rather than merely restating known limitations.

Livestock theft in South Africa has escalated over decades and is increasingly linked to organised syndicates rather than opportunistic offenders, driven by sustained demand (Maluleke, 2023). Internationally, it has evolved into a commercialised, mobile and sometimes violent criminal activity (Mdoda, 2025). Across all farming sectors, victims experience severe financial losses (Clack, 2024), accompanied by emotional distress due to the cruelty inflicted on animals (Maluleke et al., 2016). Low conviction rates, delayed police responses, resource limitations and weak accountability further exacerbate the problem (Clack, 2018; Geldenhuys, 2020).

Specialised SAPS units, particularly STESUs, play a central role in prevention and investigation, coordinating efforts with farmers, communities and stakeholders (Clack, 2015). However, their insights into operational constraints, evolving offender behaviour and the effectiveness of existing measures remain under-documented. This exploratory study addresses that gap by analysing officers' perspectives on their work environment, challenges and required reforms. It situates the analysis within rural criminology, procedural justice and police legitimacy in order to better understand the spatial, relational and institutional dynamics shaping livestock-theft prevention.

The article proceeds with a literature review, followed by the research design and methods, a results section outlining 10 key themes, a discussion linking findings to existing scholarship and a conclusion proposing practical interventions to strengthen livestock-theft prevention in South Africa.

Literature Review

Livestock theft remains one of the most persistent and socially damaging forms of rural crime in South Africa. Its effects extend beyond the immediate loss of animals to include economic hardship, weakened food security, disrupted livelihoods, emotional distress and reduced confidence in rural safety systems (Clack, 2026; Maluleke et al., 2016; Mzingelwa & Mutula, 2025). Although the phenomenon has attracted growing attention in recent years, the literature remains fragmented, with studies variously focusing on offender behaviour, farmer vulnerability, economic impacts, legal compliance and prevention strategies (Breetzke et al., 2023; Lombard & Bahta, 2019; Maluleke et al., 2022). Far less attention has been paid to the perspectives of police officers tasked with preventing and investigating crime, despite their central role in the functioning of specialised stock-theft policing structures (Clack, 2015, 2025b; Pelser et al, 2000; SAPS, 2018). This gap is important because understanding implementation problems from the perspective of those responsible for enforcement can reveal why prevention structures work unevenly in practice.

South African scholarship has shown that livestock theft is not merely an opportunistic property crime, but often a more organised and adaptive offence shaped by local conditions, market incentives, and enforcement weaknesses (Maluleke, 2023; Mdoda, 2025). Earlier work by Doorewaard et al. (2015) and Doorewaard (2020) helped expand criminological understanding by examining offender profiling and assessment practices in relation to livestock theft, while Lombard and Bahta (2019) demonstrated the economic consequences of sheep and goat theft and identified several factors that heighten vulnerability. More recently, Maluleke et al. (2022) highlighted the role of contextual pressures during the COVID-19 lockdowns, showing that theft patterns can shift in response to broader social disruptions. Breetzke et al. (2023) further extended the literature by applying spatial theory to livestock theft in the North West Province, highlighting the geography of offending and the importance of place-based analysis. Collectively, these studies show that livestock theft is a complex rural crime that requires both contextual and theoretical interpretation, yet they still leave limited room for examining the institutional experiences of SAPS officers working within specialised prevention structures (Doorewaard et al., 2015; Lombard & Bahta, 2019; Maluleke et al., 2022; Breetzke et al., 2023).

The broader rural crime literature helps to explain why livestock theft poses such a persistent challenge. Rural areas are often characterised by long response distances, limited police visibility, poor infrastructure and dispersed populations, all of which complicate routine policing and rapid intervention (Donnermeyer, 2016; Grote & Neubacher, 2016; Pelser et al., 2000; Weisheit et al., 2005). Pelser et al. (2000) argue that rural policing in South Africa is shaped not only by general policing weaknesses, such as resource shortages and limited investigative capacity, but also by the added burden of geographic isolation and skewed resource allocation. These conditions make proactive crime prevention difficult, and often force police to rely on fragile networks of cooperation with farmers, community members and other stakeholders (Clack & Minnaar, 2018; Weisheit et al., 2022). In livestock-theft contexts, the problem is intensified because offenders can exploit remote terrain, weak surveillance and delayed reporting. At the same time, police units are expected to cover broad areas with limited personnel and transport (Clack, 2026). This combination of spatial isolation and institutional constraint helps to explain why livestock-theft prevention often falls short in practice, even where specialised policing structures exist.

Specialised stock-theft policing in South Africa has a long and uneven history in its own right (Aerni-Flessner et al., 2021; Eloff, 1988; Oosthuizen, 2012). The development of dedicated units reflected recognition that livestock theft required more targeted intervention than general policing alone (Clack, 2015; SAPS, 2020). Over time, however, organisational arrangements have shifted repeatedly, with changes in structure, command and resource allocation affecting consistency and continuity (Myburgh, 2009; Oosthuizen, 2012; Redpath, 2002). The literature indicates that while specialised structures can improve coordination, their effectiveness depends heavily on staffing, training, clear mandates and local implementation capacity (Clack, 2025b; SAPS, 2025). This is particularly important in rural settings where police visibility and responsiveness are crucial to public trust and reporting behaviour. As a result, the existence of a formal structure does not guarantee effective prevention if its operation is undermined by uneven resources, weak oversight or poor inter-agency coordination (Prinsloo & Kingshot, 2004; SAPS, 2020). This background is important for the present study because it helps explain why officer perspectives are necessary to assess how these structures function in practice.

A central feature of livestock theft prevention in South Africa is the use of collaborative structures such as Livestock Theft Prevention Forums (LSTPFs), Provincial Stock Theft Prevention Forums (PSTPFs), National Stock Theft Prevention Forums (NSTPFs) and Stock Theft Information Centres (STICs) (Clack, 2015; Masuku & Motlalekgosi, 2021; SAPS, 2020; Sihlobo, 2023). These structures are intended to bring together police, farmers, agricultural organisations, prosecutors and other stakeholders to share information, coordinate responses and strengthen prevention (Clack, 2015). In principle, they reflect a participatory model of rural crime governance in which prevention is shared across sectors rather than left solely to the police. In practice, however, previous research and policy discussions have highlighted uneven participation, unclear roles, inconsistent attendance and tensions among stakeholder groups (Clack, 2025a; Sihlobo & Kirsten, 2025). Such problems are significant because collaborative structures are only effective when they are perceived as inclusive, credible and capable of producing concrete action (Sihlobo, 2023; SAPS, 2020). This is where procedural justice and police legitimacy become especially relevant because they help to explain why collaboration may fail when participation, fairness and trust are weak.

The literature on rural policing suggests trust and legitimacy are especially important in small communities where social relationships are dense and police officers are highly visible (Donnermeyer, 2025; Tankebe, 2013; Weisheit et al., 2022). Procedural justice theory is therefore useful in understanding livestock-theft prevention because it highlights the importance of fairness, voice, neutrality and respectful treatment in shaping cooperation (van der Heyde et al., 2023). When farmers and other stakeholders believe police processes are fair and responsive, they are more likely to report incidents, share information and participate in prevention efforts. Police legitimacy theory further extends this argument by focusing on public perceptions of police authority, competence and trustworthiness (Marigat, 2023; Tankebe, 2013). In livestock theft settings, legitimacy matters because effective prevention depends not only on formal enforcement powers, but also on rural communities' willingness to work with the police, attend forums and support investigations. Where officers are seen as inconsistent, unresponsive or ineffective, cooperation may weaken even when formal structures remain in place (Clack, 2025a; Maluleke et al., 2016). Together, these theories explain why formal prevention structures can exist without generating sustained cooperation or effective action.

At the same time, the literature shows that policing livestock theft is constrained by factors beyond mere relational issues. Legal compliance, traceability and regulatory enforcement are also central to prevention (Clack, 2024; SAPS, 2018). The marking and identification of animals, documentation of ownership and control of livestock movement all affect whether stolen animals can be traced and recovered. Studies of agricultural crime prevention elsewhere have consistently shown that permanent identification, secure record-keeping and visible property marking are among the most practical deterrents (Donnermeyer, 2025; Maluleke & Mulrooney, 2026; Mulrooney & Harkness, 2023). In the South African context, however, officers and researchers alike have noted gaps in compliance, uneven enforcement and limited awareness of relevant legislation (Clack, 2026; Maluleke et al., 2014; SAPS, 2018). These weaknesses create opportunities for offenders and complicate prosecution,

particularly where livestock is moved across wide rural spaces or sold through informal channels (Maluleke et al., 2016; Wallace, 2025). This legal dimension is important because it shows that prevention depends on both policing practice and regulatory compliance, not on enforcement alone.

Technology has also become an increasingly important dimension of livestock theft prevention. Officers and stakeholders have pointed to the value of WhatsApp groups, CCTV, drones and intelligence-sharing initiatives such as Eyes and Ears (E2) as practical tools for improving communication and detection (Clack, 2022; Leparie et al., 2021; Mulrooney & Harkness, 2023). However, the literature also cautions that technology cannot overcome structural limitations on its own (Mzingelwa, 2024). In rural and remote areas, connectivity problems, weak digital infrastructure and patchy institutional support can reduce the effectiveness of even well-designed communication systems (SAPS, 2022; Pelser et al., 2000). This means technology should be understood as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, stable institutional capacity and collaborative relationships (Weisheit et al., 2022). For the present study, this is significant because it shows that technology can improve coordination, but only when it is supported by infrastructure, trust and consistent implementation.

The existing literature therefore points to a recurring tension: livestock theft prevention structures are often conceptually sound, but their implementation is uneven. This is evident in South African discussions of special units, prevention forums and traceability systems, where the formal design of policy is frequently stronger than the day-to-day reality of rural policing (Clack, 2025b; SAPS, 2020). What remains insufficiently explored is how SAPS officers themselves experience this gap between policy and practice. Their perspectives are important because they work directly within the structures being evaluated and are therefore well placed to identify operational barriers, stakeholder tensions and practical opportunities for reform (Peterson, 2024; Weisheit et al., 2022). By centring these perspectives, the present study contributes to rural criminology and stock theft scholarship by moving beyond external assessments of the problem and towards an analysis of how prevention is experienced inside the policing system.

This study is thus positioned at the intersection of rural criminology, procedural justice and police legitimacy. Rural criminology provides the spatial and structural context for understanding why livestock theft is difficult to police (Donnermeyer, 2025; Grote & Neubacher, 2016). Procedural justice explains how fairness, communication and participation influence cooperation within prevention forums (van der Heyde et al., 2023). Police legitimacy theory adds a further layer by showing how trust in police authority affects rural stakeholders' willingness to engage in collective prevention (Marigat, 2023; Tankebe, 2013). Together, these perspectives provide a framework for analysing the organisational, relational and contextual dimensions of livestock-theft prevention in South Africa, and for understanding why formal structures may exist without necessarily producing consistent practical outcomes.

Methodology

The study follows a quantitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, and the survey sample was purposively selected from members of the Stock Theft and Endangered Species Unit (STESU) of the South African Police Service (SAPS). Although SAPS is a large national organisation with 1154 police stations and 187,681 personnel distributed across the nine provinces (SAPS, 2025, p. 12), the relevant population for this study was not SAPS, but the much smaller specialist stock-theft component within it. By 2024, SAPS operated 93 STESUs supported by satellite offices, with approximately 956 officers assigned to stock theft functions nationally (SAPS, 2024). This means the eligible population was specialised, access-restricted and relatively small, rather than broad and diffuse.

Participants Sampling and Data Collection

Participants were deliberately selected from STESUs for their direct involvement in livestock theft investigations and participation in Livestock Theft Prevention Forums. Given the specialised and operationally sensitive context within which these officers operate, a non-probabilistic sampling approach was more appropriate than a purely random design. Access to participants was constrained by institutional approval processes, operational demands and officers' willingness to participate, as noted in the methodological literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Palinkas et al., 2016). Accordingly, the sample should be understood as purposive and functionally bounded to the specialist stock theft policing population, rather than representative of SAPS staff.

For the quantitative component, a structured sampling framework guided questionnaire distribution across provinces. Two primary criteria informed this process: the presence of specialised policing units and the relative burden of livestock theft cases in each province. The number and geographical distribution of STESUs were used to establish the institutional population frame. In contrast, provincial livestock theft prevalence, based on reported case patterns, was used to reflect crime intensity.

This approach enabled the allocation of target participant numbers for each province that reflected both organisational capacity and the scale of the problem, rather than relying on arbitrary sampling distributions.

The questionnaire was designed using Microsoft Forms, which facilitated efficient digital administration, data capture and management (Rada, 2019). It was distributed to provinces electronically via WhatsApp. Data collection was conducted across all nine provinces between September and October 2025, following formal SAPS approval through provincial Strategic Management Sections. Questionnaires were disseminated primarily via WhatsApp, which served as a supplementary communication and recruitment channel because participants were geographically dispersed, operationally mobile and not always accessible through office-based communication alone, and it is a preferred mode of communication in South Africa (Du Plessis, 2018). Participation was entirely voluntary and response rates were influenced by operational realities, including officers' availability, workload pressures and varying levels of institutional engagement.

The qualitative component sought deeper insights through key informant interviews (Köhler, 2024). The interviews were conducted with six provincial coordinators and one national coordinator, all of whom held ranks ranging from Lieutenant Colonel to Brigadier. An initial target of one interview per province was set to ensure national representation. However, despite repeated attempts to establish telephonic or email contact, no responses were obtained from KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape due to non-responsiveness. Gauteng is therefore slightly over-represented in the qualitative sample, as it includes both provincial-level participants and personnel from the national head office. This, however, provided a useful combination of operational and strategic perspectives.

Overall, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach that captured both breadth and depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The cross-provincial distribution of questionnaires ensured broad geographic coverage, while the targeted interviews provided more nuanced qualitative insights. This approach is consistent with methodological recommendations for research involving specialised and access-restricted populations (Peterson, 2024; Weisheit et al., 2022). Table 1 summarises participation patterns across provinces, demonstrating geographic spread despite operational constraints. Although the total sample comprised 33 quantitative and qualitative responses, this was considered adequate for an exploratory study focused on a small, specialist policing population. The purpose was not statistical generalisation, but the identification of informed patterns, contextual variation and recurring themes across a geographically dispersed but bounded group of officers. Furthermore, data saturation was evident in the qualitative findings, as recurring themes emerged across provinces despite uneven participation, thereby strengthening the study's validity (Saunders et al., 2018). The achieved sample therefore provided sufficient geographic diversity and contextual depth to support meaningful exploratory analysis.

Table 1

Provincial Distribution of Participating SAPS Livestock Theft Officers

Province	Interviews (n)	Questionnaires (n)	Total participants	Recruitment notes
Eastern Cape	1	7	8	High engagement
North West	1	5	6	High engagement
Free State	1	5	6	Varied engagement
Limpopo	1	3	4	Varied engagement
Gauteng	2	3	5	Varied engagement
Western Cape	1	2	3	Varied engagement
Northern Cape	0	1	1	Officers are largely unwilling; the provincial office questioned the research purpose.
Mpumalanga	0	0	0	No responses despite multiple attempts via the Strategic Management Section
KwaZulu-Natal	0	0	0	No volunteers; Strategic Management uncontactable
Total	7	26	33	Purposive across 9 provinces

Source: Author's calculations (SAPS-approved aggregates).

The highest participation came from the Eastern Cape and North West provinces ($n = 14$ combined), with targeted interviews complementing broader questionnaire responses. No participants were recruited from three provinces despite repeated attempts to contact provincial offices. Access challenges included non-responsiveness to multiple contact attempts and, in some cases, hostility during initial telephone engagements. These barriers are consistent with the gatekeeping dynamics and organisational resistance frequently reported in rural criminology policing research (Fitz-Gibbon, 2016; Peterson, 2022). While participation was uneven across provinces, thematic saturation was achieved across the available data, supporting the adequacy of the sample for the study's exploratory aims (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Accordingly, the study prioritises contextual depth and the richness of STESU officers' lived experiences rather than statistical representativeness, acknowledging the access limitations characteristic of operational policing environments.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from open-ended questionnaire responses and interview notes were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Because the interviews were not transcribed verbatim, the researcher relied on repeated readings of the written responses, detailed notes taken during each interview and short post-interview synopses prepared immediately after each conversation. These materials were compared across participants to identify recurring ideas, similar concerns and notable differences. Initial codes were generated manually by marking repeated phrases, issues and examples in the notes and synopses; related codes were then grouped into broader categories and refined into themes. The researcher remained actively involved throughout the process by revisiting the data, comparing emerging interpretations and checking whether the developing themes were sufficiently supported across provinces. Credibility was strengthened through the use of multiple data sources, cross-case comparison, thematic saturation and triangulation with the quantitative survey responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This approach ensured that the findings remained grounded in the data despite the absence of a verbatim transcription.

Quantitatively, Likert-scale responses were exported from Microsoft Forms to Excel, recoded numerically (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), and imported into SPSS as ordinal variables with value labels. Descriptive statistics, means, standard deviations, frequencies and crosstabs by province revealed broad perceptual patterns that complemented and triangulated the qualitative themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This convergent mixed-methods integration provided comprehensive insight into officers' lived experiences, policing obstacles and context-specific recommendations for enhancing rural safety and livestock theft prevention in South Africa.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Clearance Committee of the College of Law, University of South Africa. Permission to conduct the research was also obtained from the SAPS Section: Research Governance Component: Research, guided by SAPS National Instruction 4/2022: Research in the Service. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising responses and removing identifying details, such as province and police station names.

Results, Findings and Discussions

This study contributes an under-explored officer-centred perspective on livestock theft prevention in South Africa by showing that the main challenge is not the absence of formal structures, but rather the uneven translation of those structures into consistent practice across provinces. By combining rural criminology, procedural justice and police legitimacy, the study explains how geographic distance, weak institutional coordination and low-trust relationships jointly shape the effectiveness of prevention forums and investigative responses.

The analysis of policing perspectives on livestock theft prevention produced nine major themes derived from detectives in the Stock Theft and Endangered Species Units (STESU) of the SAPS. These themes capture operational challenges and officers' suggested improvements within the Livestock Stock Theft Prevention Forums (LSTPFs) and related policing structures. Quantitative Likert-scale survey data provide additional insight by indicating the degree of agreement, disagreement and uncertainty across key governance and operational indicators. Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings show that although structural frameworks are in place, their implementation remains uneven across provinces, and resource limitations, governance concerns and competing operational demands significantly constrain the effectiveness of livestock theft-prevention efforts.

Structural Issues and Stakeholder Involvement

The quantitative results from the survey showed that 90% officers who responded to the distributed 33 questionnaires viewed the structures of the National Stock Theft Prevention Forum (NSTPF), Provincial Stock Theft Prevention Forums (PSTPFs) and Stock Theft Information Centres (STICs) as conceptually sound and with potential to support the existing collaborations. However, approximately 80% of respondents selected Neutral or Unaware, suggesting uneven visibility of these structures at the operational level. Over 90% of STESU officers showed only moderate agreement that the national structure made a meaningful contribution to reducing livestock theft. The quantitative results also shared that the PSTPFs were rated more positively than the NSTPF, but their representations received mixed scores. In addition, nearly half (48%) of the respondents disagreed or were unsure that communal and commercial farmers were equitably included. Finally, respondents agreed that the model remains sound, but execution remains patchy.

Qualitatively, the STESU officers described uneven stakeholder representation within the LSTPFs. Communal and emerging farmers were often absent, despite being highly vulnerable to livestock theft. One officer stated that “minimal involvement of communal farmers” undermined meaningful dialogue. Another argued that NSTPF representation should be standardised across all districts to ensure reporting consistency. South Africa’s nine provinces are divided into 52 districts, but this does not affect the number of police stations. Crime statistics are provided per district and police station (GOGTA, n.d.; SAPS 2025). While 27 STESU officers acknowledged that LSTPFs “bring parties together,” others criticised meetings for devolving into sessions dominated by complaints and unmet promises. This inconsistency across provinces indicates that the structural frameworks exist, but their implementation in practice remains uneven.

The results and findings of this study confirmed that livestock theft policing in South Africa continues to be shaped by the same rural, organisational, and structural dynamics outlined in the literature review. The historical development of specialised SAPS STUs and LSTPF emerged precisely because rural crime requires unique policing approaches (Gaub & Muñoz, 2024; Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2013). Another practical factor that is often overlooked is “meeting accessibility.” The STESU officers noted that STIC meetings are “not near settlements,” meaning they are far from where rural communities live. This exacerbates attendance fatigue and undermines representativeness; improving venue siting and transport support is a low-cost, high-impact fix. Participation and representation indicators at the STIC level showed mixed support: 50% of respondents agreed that STICs function well, while others signalled disagreement or uncertainty.

The study results and findings also confirmed that structural issues and stakeholder involvements can be better explained using the procedural justice theory, which can help to explain reasons for inconsistent communication and weak community engagement undermining livestock theft-prevention efforts (van der Heyde et al., 2023). The LSTPFs were designed to build trust, strengthen communication and support collaborative prevention strategies (Clack, 2015; SAPS, 2020). However, the study’s results reveal persistent communication challenges, including a lack of case feedback, irregular meeting schedules and meetings dominated by complaints rather than problem-solving. This resonates with the study’s themes of communication, information flow, tools and legal and regulatory compliance.

Resource Constraints and Operational Capacity

Resource shortages emerged as the strongest quantitative finding, with 78% of officers identifying shortages of vehicles, personnel and equipment as significant barriers to effective livestock theft prevention. Officers frequently described how these constraints contributed to delayed response times, inadequate investigative follow-up and limited patrol capacity. Typical comments included, “There are no resources” and “SAPS makes promises but no action.” Beyond resource shortages, participants also highlighted concerns relating to accountability and officer safety. More than 50% of respondents attributed operational failures to corruption within the police service, with one officer explicitly identifying ‘SAPS corruption’ as a contributing factor. Corruption in the SAPS is currently a daily news story in South Africa following the appointment of the Madlanga commissions (Ramaphosa, 2025). Other STESU officers described the challenges of operating in increasingly dangerous environments, noting that “Gangsters are attacking our officers ... I need support from the Police Service every time.” Competing policing priorities also affected operational capacity. In Western Cape and Limpopo provinces, officers reported that responsibilities related to endangered species crime received greater attention than those for livestock theft investigations. As one participant explained, “Livestock theft is not our main challenge – it is endangered species that need our attention.”

Collectively, these findings suggest that operational effectiveness is heavily dependent on the availability of sufficient resources to support prevention, investigation and enforcement activities. Consistent with findings within the rural criminology sphere, officers in this exploratory study highlighted how vast distances, dispersed communities and rugged terrain affect their ability to respond quickly and conduct effective patrols (Donnermeyer, 2016; Grote & Neubacher, 2016). This aligns with the results,

in which resource shortages were the most common complaint (78%) in the Likert-scale survey, reinforcing that rural constraints remain the dominant operational barrier.

A further, newly salient pressure is the emergence of competing policing priorities within the SAPS STESUs' remit. Several officers reported that, in some provinces, endangered species protection eclipses stock theft work – even though both fall within the same specialised units. This competition for attention and resources helps explain uneven local responsiveness and may amplify perceptions of neglect among livestock producers. From a rural criminology perspective, this supports the argument that context matters: provincial ecologies of crime shape the effective mandate of local units, sometimes in ways that diverge from national expectations. Such concerns indicate that institutional and governance challenges may further undermine the effectiveness of livestock theft policing, particularly where officers perceive inadequate organisational support.

Communication, Information Flow and Tools

Many officers agreed that communication tools supported coordination, but large proportions selected Neutral on indicators related to communication consistency, feedback and information flow. This silence may reflect several factors: limited direct experience with formal information-sharing systems (hence uncertainty), variable functionality of communication channels across districts and a tendency to remain neutral in surveys due to organisational pressures or sensitivity around internal processes. The current national policing context – including high operational stress, scrutiny from commissions and internal conflicts – may also encourage respondents to answer cautiously rather than to attribute blame. Furthermore, officers praised WhatsApp groups for enabling rapid, real-time sharing of information about suspicious vehicles and livestock movements. They described them as practical, low-cost coordination tools that filled gaps left by formal systems. However, rural connectivity problems, especially “network problems” in remote areas, regularly undermine the effectiveness of digital communication. In districts with limited or non-functional STICs, rural safety meetings often served as substitutes for formal channels, illustrating how informal practices compensate for unevenly implemented formal structures.

From a procedural justice perspective, inconsistent feedback and opaque information flows erode perceptions of competence and fairness, diminishing the procedural benefits intended by LSTPFs (van der Heyde et al., 2023). Technology emerged as a promising, if unevenly implemented, opportunity. The background notes international models leveraging drones, CCTV, electronic tagging and improved digital reporting systems (Leparie et al., 2021; Mulrooney & Harkness, 2023). The results show strong officer support for these interventions, with additional specificity on South Africa's E2 (Eyes and Ears) initiative – a formal partnership between SAPS, Business Against Crime SA, private security and approved rural/farming structures that enables real-time intelligence-sharing via SAPS Operational Command Centres. This corroborates officers' reports of E2's utility in tracking suspicious vehicles and coordinating swift responses (SAPS, 2022). Nonetheless, officers also described rapid offender adaptation: once thieves detect CCTV coverage, they avoid monitored routes and walk stock for 40–60 kilometres to bypass cameras. Quantitative findings also highlight technology as an increasingly central issue, with technology-related topics appearing in 40% of LSTPF discussions, confirming growing stakeholder recognition of its importance despite uneven implementation.

Legal and Regulatory Compliance

The quantitative survey revealed uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of legislative enforcement, compliance with livestock branding requirements and oversight of livestock movement regulations. About 100% of the SAPS officers identified non-compliance with the Animal Identification Act 6 of 2022 as a major contributor to livestock theft. Unbranded animals, poor record-keeping and livestock left unattended on communal land hindered recovery and prosecution. Officers also highlighted significant Criminal Justice System (CJS) challenges: “Prosecutors are not familiar with livestock theft cases ... and some police officials do not know what to do when someone transports stock.” Many recommended reinstating livestock inspectors, who historically maintained registers and supported lawful livestock transactions.

Legal and regulatory compliance is another area of strong alignment between the background, literature and results. The background emphasises the critical importance of branding, documentation and enforcement of the Animal Identification Act 2022 (Maluleke, 2023; SAPS, 2020). International literature similarly identifies traceability as a core component of livestock theft prevention (Blancou, 2001; Maluleke et al., 2014; Wallace, 2025). The results reveal widespread non-compliance with branding requirements, weak oversight of auctions and unregulated livestock movements at night. Significantly, officers added a nuanced training message: livestock owners also require targeted education on legal requirements. Survey items on training reflected this: respondents were divided on whether adequate training was provided, with high uncertainty and low strong agreement – highlighting training as a systemic weak point for both police and producers. The observed disconnect – legislation exists, but compliance and enforcement lag – helps to explain low conviction rates and public perceptions of criminal justice ineffectiveness, reinforcing legitimacy deficits.

Training and Awareness

Survey responses regarding training availability were evenly split between Agree, Neutral and Disagree, suggesting inconsistent access across provinces. Qualitatively, officers stressed the need for internal SAPS training and broader farmer education. Twenty-six participants emphasised that livestock owners lacked knowledge of legal responsibilities under the Animal Identification Act 2022 and the Stock Theft Act 57 of 1959. Officers argued that training for both police and farmers is essential to prevent livestock theft, ensure accurate reporting and improve recovery outcomes. Awareness campaigns focusing on livestock marking were particularly praised. One officer noted: “Awareness campaigns play an important role ... better marking of livestock and follow up afterwards.”

Training gaps for both police and producers constitute a modifiable weakness in the system. In rural criminology terms, improving local capability – through targeted STESU training curricula, farmer outreach and follow-up evaluation – could increase accurate reporting, support lawful transactions and improve case outcomes (Ceccato, 2025). This is consistent with prevention frameworks that combine situational measures (branding, marking) with capacity-building. Officers’ emphasis on owner education and the reinstatement of inspectorate functions aligns with prevention models that pair regulatory frameworks with implementation capacity and stakeholder literacy.

Crime Trends and Broader Security Issues

Survey responses showed limited confidence that livestock theft was under control. The most (90%) frequent selection was Partially, followed by Neutral, indicating widespread concern about escalating criminal activity. Officers described a shift from opportunistic theft to violent robbery, particularly in the Eastern Cape (Peires, 1994; Scrolla.Africa, 2021). One officer summarised: “Livestock is no longer stolen but robbed.” Offenders were also reported to be adapting to technology. CCTV and E2 (Eyes and Ears) surveillance initially improved detection, but criminals responded strategically. As one officer explained, perpetrators increasingly moved animals on foot to cover a wider area “to avoid the cameras.” Officers also raised concerns about criminal infiltration into farming communities and the employment of undocumented workers, suggesting links between labour practices and livestock theft networks.

The results provide evidence that livestock crime is evolving, with some regions experiencing a shift from theft to armed robbery and the increasing involvement of organised groups and undocumented foreign nationals. This mirrors global rural crime trends flagged in the background, which warn that rural crime networks are increasingly organised and sophisticated (Clack, 2024; Donnermeyer, 2025). In such contexts, traditional policing alone is insufficient without stronger intelligence-gathering, cross-border cooperation and inter-agency coordination, including leveraging E2 as a structured public–private bridge for rapid situational awareness and response. Offender adaptation to CCTV and E2 intelligence demonstrates an intelligence cycle arms race: as policing instruments improve, offenders change tactics (e.g., longer on foot movements) (SAPS, 2022). This underscores the need for adaptive, intelligence-led responses, cross-border cooperation and multi-agency coordination – especially where organised groups exploit labour vulnerabilities and take advantage of porous borders (Aerni-Flessner et al, 2022).

Social and Stakeholder Dynamics

Survey data indicate that while agricultural groups often collaborated well, political tensions and organisational conflict undermined the effectiveness of some LSTPFs. Qualitatively, officers described racial tensions with statements such as “white farmers do not want to engage with black farmers,” as well as expressing generalised distrust of SAPS. Some LSTPFs were “poorly attended because there is no trust in the police.” Interpersonal conflict also surfaced, summarised by one officer as simply “Egos.”

These dynamics suggest that improving social cohesion is as important as addressing operational deficiencies. Social cohesion and relational trust are prerequisites for multi-stakeholder governance. The qualitative evidence that racial tensions and mistrust reduce forum attendance shows that structural fixes alone (committees, STICs) are insufficient. The results highlight significant inconsistencies in LSTPFs’ functioning across districts and provinces: uneven representation of communal and emerging farmers; attendance fatigue; racial tensions; interpersonal “ego” conflicts; and mistrust of SAPS (Clack, 2025). These findings echo the literature on collaborative rural governance (Masuku & Motlalekgosi, 2021). Procedural justice and legitimacy theories reinforce that perceived fairness, transparency and competence shape willingness to cooperate; therefore, interventions should include trust-building measures (neutral facilitation, accessible venues, community liaison roles). Quantitatively, provincial PSTPFs were rated more positively than national ones. However, representation received mixed scores, and nearly half of the respondents disagreed or were unsure that communal and commercial farmers were equitably included. The model remains sound, but execution remains patchy.

Technical and Structural Barriers

Quantitatively, respondents expressed high levels of uncertainty concerning the impact of technical and geographic barriers. Over 90% of participants selected Neutral when assessing whether geography or infrastructure affected LSTPFs' functioning. Qualitatively, officers described persistent connectivity problems (network issues), geographically inaccessible meeting venues, and a limited number of functional STICs. In the South African context, "settlements" refer to dispersed rural villages and farming clusters, making meeting logistics difficult (Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development 2022).

These barriers underscore the need for greater investment in rural policing infrastructure and communication systems. Geographic and infrastructural constraints are classic impediments to rural criminology (long travel times, poor roads, limited connectivity) (Donnermeyer, 2016; Grote & Neubacher, 2016). Participation and representation indicators at the STIC level showed mixed support, with roughly half agreeing that STICs function well, and many others signalling disagreement or uncertainty. Low-cost operational fixes – siting meetings nearer settlements, transport support, mobile STIC outreach – emerged as pragmatic responses that could materially improve representativity and sustained participation without large capital investment.

Police Legitimacy and Institutional Challenges

Police legitimacy theory provides an additional layer of insight into the challenges identified by officers. According to the theory, public cooperation depends on perceptions of police fairness, competence and integrity (Marigat, 2023; Tankebe, 2013). The background highlights long-standing concerns about inconsistent enforcement, corruption and weak investigative standards within SAPS (Prinsloo & Kingslor, 2004). The results confirm that these issues remain prevalent, with officers citing corruption, broken promises, weak investigations and even officer safety threats ("gangsters are attacking our officers") as recurrent sources of strain. Such experiences plausibly erode legitimacy in the eyes of rural communities and can deter farmers from fully participating in forums or from providing timely information. Likewise, weak prosecutorial knowledge of livestock theft statutes contributes to poor conviction rates, reinforcing perceptions of an ineffective and unreliable criminal justice process (Maluleke et al., 2016).

Quantitatively, this aligns with the survey pattern, in which respondents expressed only modest agreement that national structures drive enforcement, legislative change or improved policing outcomes, with large proportions selecting Neutral/Unaware. The findings confirm that institutional and governance challenges may further undermine the effectiveness of livestock theft policing, particularly where officers perceive inadequate organisational support.

Integrated Conclusions

LSTPFs' performance emerged as another critical area where theory and empirical findings align. The background describes the evolution of LSTPFs as multi-stakeholder structures integrating SAPS, farmers (commercial, emerging and communal), prosecutors and industry bodies (Clack, 2015; Sihlobo, 2023). Overall, the alignment of background context, theoretical insights and empirical findings demonstrates that livestock theft in South Africa is a complex rural crime that requires context-sensitive policing, strong partnerships, procedural fairness, legitimacy and adequate resourcing. Officers recognise the value of specialised units, community forums and technological innovations; however, persistent structural weaknesses and uneven implementation undermine their effectiveness. The quantitative results – with patterns of modest agreement, high uncertainty and persistent Neutral responses across multiple governance indicators – reinforce the central finding that the structure is accepted. However, its impact is unevenly felt across communities.

Systematic reform, improved training (police and producers), better coordination (including E2) and targeted resource allocation remain prerequisites for a resilient rural safety architecture. In such contexts, traditional policing alone is insufficient without stronger intelligence gathering, cross-border cooperation and inter-agency coordination.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study provides an officer-centred perspective on livestock theft prevention in South Africa, demonstrating that the primary challenge lies not in the absence of formal structures, but in the uneven translation of these frameworks into consistent and effective practice across provinces. While structures such as the LSTPFs, PSTPFs and STESUs are widely regarded as conceptually sound (Clack, 2015; SAPS, 2020), their implementation is fragmented, constrained by resource limitations, weak institutional coordination and variable stakeholder participation. The findings reinforce that livestock theft is shaped by the intersecting dynamics of rural geography, organisational capacity and social trust, as conceptualised within rural criminology

(Donnermeyer, 2016; Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2013), procedural justice (van der Heyde et al., 2023) and police legitimacy (Marigat, 2023; Tankebe, 2013).

Empirically, the study reveals that resource shortages – particularly in personnel, vehicles and investigative capacity – remain the most immediate constraint on effective policing. At the same time, governance weaknesses, including inconsistent communication, limited feedback mechanisms and uneven stakeholder representation, undermine the functioning of collaborative prevention structures. The findings further highlight persistent legal and regulatory gaps, especially in relation to compliance with the Animal Identification Act 2022, as well as broader criminal justice system challenges such as weak prosecutorial capacity and low conviction rates (Geldenhuys, 2020; Maluleke, 2023).

Importantly, the study shows that livestock theft is evolving in line with international trends, becoming increasingly organised, mobile and in some contexts violent (Clack, 2024; Donnermeyer, 2025; Mdoda, 2025). Offender adaptation to technologies such as CCTV and E2 initiatives (SAPS, 2022) underscores the need for more agile, intelligence-led policing approaches. At a relational level, trust deficits, social fragmentation and exclusion – particularly of communal and emerging farmers – continue to weaken cooperation and participation in prevention forums (Masuku & Motlalekgosi, 2021).

Taken together, these findings confirm that livestock theft prevention in South Africa is a complex governance challenge requiring coordinated, context-sensitive interventions. The evidence suggests that strengthening rural safety is less about introducing new policies and more about improving the implementation, coordination and legitimacy of existing systems. In response, several policy and operational implications emerge. First, strengthening SAPS capacity and professionalisation is essential. This includes targeted resourcing, specialised training for STESU members and prosecutors, and improved rural policing tools adapted to challenging terrain. At the same time, internal accountability and integrity mechanisms must be reinforced to address concerns about corruption and weak organisational support (Ramaphosa, 2025).

Second, governance and coordination must be standardised and clarified within livestock theft-prevention structures. Clearly defined roles, consistent reporting systems and regularised feedback mechanisms are necessary to improve the functioning of LSTPFs and related bodies. Equal representation of commercial, communal and emerging farmers must also be prioritised to ensure inclusive and effective participation (Clack, 2015; SAPS, 2020).

Third, technology should be institutionalised as a core component of rural policing. While tools such as WhatsApp networks and the E2 initiative have proven effective in practice, their implementation remains uneven. Scaling up digital communication systems, surveillance technologies and livestock traceability mechanisms – supported by training and compliance enforcement – offers a practical pathway to improving coordination and detection (Blancou, 2001; Leparie et al., 2021; Mulrooney & Harkness, 2023).

Fourth, legal and regulatory compliance must be strengthened. Improved enforcement of livestock identification, movement controls and auction monitoring is essential, alongside renewed consideration of livestock inspectors to support compliance and oversight (Maluleke et al., 2014). Crucially, both police and livestock owners require ongoing education to ensure that legal frameworks translate into practical prevention outcomes.

Fifth, rebuilding trust and strengthening community engagement remain central to effective rural crime prevention. Procedural justice principles highlight the importance of fairness, transparency and respectful engagement in fostering cooperation (van der Heyde et al., 2023). Interventions should therefore prioritise relationship-building, inclusive dialogue and the co-production of safety strategies with farming communities, traditional leaders and civil society organisations.

Sixth, geographic and infrastructural constraints must be addressed through practical, context-sensitive solutions. These include improving rural communication systems, decentralising meeting locations and adopting mobile service-delivery approaches to enhance accessibility and participation (Donnermeyer, 2016; Grote & Neubacher, 2016).

Finally, the increasing organisation and mobility of livestock theft networks necessitate stronger intelligence-led policing and cross-border coordination. Enhanced information-sharing between SAPS units, border authorities and agricultural stakeholders – supported by initiatives such as E2 – will be critical in responding to evolving criminal patterns (Aerni-Flessner et al., 2022; SAPS, 2022).

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that while South Africa has an established framework for livestock theft prevention, its effectiveness is undermined by uneven implementation, limited capacity and weak institutional coordination. Addressing these gaps requires a balanced approach that combines improved resourcing, stronger governance, technological innovation,

legal enforcement and trust-building. Collectively, these measures reinforce the central finding that sustainable livestock theft prevention depends not only on formal structures, but on their consistent, context-sensitive and legitimate application within rural policing environments.

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