

Policing Beyond the State: South African Police Service Officials' Perspectives on Informal Safety Mechanisms and Community-Led Crime Control in Rural Eastern Cape

Thompho Tshivhase^{1*} 

Lutho Ngozi² 

Nonceba Patience Tenza³ 

Zizo Jobela⁴ 

AFFILIATIONS

^{1,2,3,4}Department of Criminology, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: tshivhase@ufh.ac.za*

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Abstract: Crime prevention in rural South Africa is significantly hindered by geographical isolation, limited policing resources, and socio-economic inequalities that undermine formal safety systems. In many rural communities in the Eastern Cape, these challenges raise questions about the effectiveness of crime prevention beyond state policing. This study examines SAPS officials' views on how informal community-based safety mechanisms support crime prevention and social order in rural areas. The aim of the study is to elucidate how, according to SAPS officials, community-led initiatives contribute to safety governance and interact with formal policing structures in the rural communities of the Eastern Cape. Guided by Routine Activity Theory, this qualitative case study collected data through semi-structured interviews with 10 SAPS officials at selected rural police stations in the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality. The findings indicate that, SAPS officials perceive community patrols, neighbourhood watches, traditional leaders, and WhatsApp networks as key to improving surveillance, information sharing, social cohesion, and guardianship in rural areas. Participants indicated that these measures complement formal policing, showing that crime prevention is co-produced through community-law enforcement collaboration.

Moreover, SAPS officials' findings indicate that rural communities actively help maintain safety, rather than passively receiving policing services. This study advances rural criminology and community policing by highlighting SAPS officials' views on informal safety systems where police capacity is limited. It calls for stronger collaboration among communities, traditional authorities and SAPS to improve rural safety. Findings are limited by a single-perspective qualitative design based only on SAPS accounts. The study also supports Sustainable Development Goal 16.

Keywords: Informal policing, rural crime prevention, traditional leadership, co-production of safety, community safety, Eastern Cape.

1. Introduction

Crime and insecurity continue to present significant challenges for many rural communities across South Africa. In the Eastern Cape Province, these issues are exacerbated by vast geographical distances, dispersed settlements, socio-economic deprivation, high unemployment levels, and limited policing resources. Consequently, rural communities often face delayed police responses, reduced police visibility, and difficulties in accessing formal criminal justice services. Despite these constraints, many communities have developed and sustained local mechanisms to maintain social order and prevent crime (Modise, 2025; Tyabazayo, 2023). Understanding these informal safety practices is crucial for gaining a comprehensive understanding of crime prevention in rural contexts.

The literature on rural policing has traditionally emphasised the institutional shortcomings within formal policing systems, such as personnel shortages, inadequate infrastructure, limited mobility, and resource constraints that undermine police effectiveness (Rantatalo et al., 2021; Kumar, 2022).

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These challenges are particularly pronounced in rural areas, where police stations often serve large geographical regions with limited personnel and operational resources. While these concerns are important, this perspective frequently portrays rural communities as passive recipients of policing services and overlooks their active participation in local safety governance. As a result, insufficient attention has been paid to understanding how communities themselves contribute to crime prevention and social regulation. Emerging scholarship on community safety and the co-production of security suggests that crime control is increasingly shared among a range of actors, including residents, community organisations, traditional leaders, and formal law enforcement agencies. In many rural settings, informal mechanisms such as neighbourhood watch groups, community patrols, traditional dispute-resolution processes, and informal information-sharing networks play a vital role in preventing criminal opportunities and promoting collective efficacy. These locally embedded practices often complement formal policing efforts and help maintain order where state capacity is limited (Terpstra & Fyfe, 2019; Loader & Walker, 2007).

This study is grounded in Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), which asserts that crime occurs when a motivated offender encounters a suitable target without capable guardianship. This theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how community-based safety initiatives can reduce criminal opportunities by increasing guardianship, enhancing surveillance, and strengthening informal social control. When community members organise patrols, monitor suspicious activities, and collaborate with local authorities, they effectively fulfil guardianship roles that deter criminal behaviour and diminish opportunities for offending. In rural communities, local residents, traditional authorities, and community organisations often take on these guardianship roles when formal police presence is limited.

The study is based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with ten (10) South African Police Service (SAPS) officials stationed at selected rural police stations within the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape Province. This article presents a secondary thematic analysis of data initially gathered to examine the impact of resource constraints on rural policing. Although the interview guide was not specifically designed to investigate community-led safety mechanisms, participants consistently highlighted the roles of community patrols, traditional leaders, neighbourhood watch groups, and other informal safety initiatives in supporting policing efforts. These recurring accounts provide sufficient depth and relevance to address the current study's research objective. However, the findings should be interpreted within the context of a secondary analysis based on the perspectives of SAPS officials, and future studies should involve community members and traditional leaders to yield a more comprehensive understanding of community-led crime prevention.

1.1 Problem statement

Crime prevention in rural South Africa faces numerous challenges, including geographical isolation, limited policing resources, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. In many rural areas of the Eastern Cape Province, communities experience reduced police visibility, delayed response times, and difficulties accessing formal criminal justice services. As a result, residents often depend on informal community-based safety mechanisms to address crime and maintain social order. These mechanisms include neighbourhood watch groups, community patrols, traditional leadership structures, community meetings, and informal information-sharing networks.

Despite the prevalence of these community-led initiatives, existing research on rural policing and crime prevention in South Africa has primarily focused on the limitations and resource constraints of formal policing institutions. While such studies offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by the South African Police Service (SAPS), they often overlook the significant role that communities play in preventing crime and promoting safety. This has led to a limited understanding of how

informal community-based safety mechanisms operate, how they contribute to crime prevention, and how they interact with formal policing structures in rural settings.

Furthermore, although previous research has examined rural policing resource constraints (Rantatalo et al., 2021; Kumar, 2022), Community Policing Forums and police-community partnerships (Tyabazayo, 2023; Faull, 2022), informal policing practices (Chaana et al., 2024), and the co-production of safety in predominantly urban contexts (Mangai et al., 2023), there is relatively little empirical research specifically focused on how SAPS officials perceive the contribution of informal community-based safety mechanisms and traditional governance structures to crime prevention in rural Eastern Cape communities. Consequently, policy discussions and policing strategies frequently underestimate the value of local knowledge, collective action, and informal social control in enhancing community safety.

Addressing this knowledge gap is crucial for developing contextually relevant crime prevention strategies that acknowledge the realities of rural communities and strengthen collaborative approaches to safety governance. This study, therefore, seeks to examine SAPS officials' perspectives on the role of informal community-based safety mechanisms in crime prevention within rural communities of the Eastern Cape Province. Specifically, it explores how, according to SAPS officials, community-led initiatives contribute to maintaining social order, reducing criminal opportunities, and supporting the co-production of safety alongside formal policing institutions.

1.1.1 Research question

The study is guided by the following research question: *How do informal community-based safety mechanisms contribute to crime prevention and the maintenance of social order in rural communities of the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa?*

1.1.2 Research objectives

The study seeks to:

- Examine the informal, community-based safety mechanisms employed to prevent crime in the rural communities of the Eastern Cape Province.
- Explore how these mechanisms contribute to the maintenance of social order and community safety.
- Investigate the relationship between community-led safety initiatives, traditional leadership structures, and formal policing institutions.

2. Literature Review

This literature review critically assesses the theoretical and empirical research on informal policing, community-led crime prevention, social control in rural areas, and the co-production of safety. It draws from both international and South African scholarship to identify key themes, conceptual frameworks, and empirical evidence pertinent to the rural Eastern Cape context. Rather than simply summarising previous studies, the review evaluates the effectiveness of existing frameworks in explaining crime prevention outcomes in under-resourced rural areas and highlights gaps that this study aims to address.

2.1 Informal policing and community safety

Informal policing refers to non-state mechanisms through which communities regulate behaviour, deter crime, and resolve disputes (Miller, 2025). An increasing body of international research acknowledges that policing, broadly understood, extends well beyond the activities of state police forces (Schuck, 2019; Baker, 2002). Chaana et al. (2024) assert that in various parts of sub-Saharan Africa, informal safety mechanisms have historically preceded, and in some instances outlasted,

formal state policing institutions. These mechanisms encompass vigilante groups, community patrols, traditional courts, and neighbourhood watch structures, among others.

In the South African context, informal policing operates within a complex legal and political landscape. Since the transition to democracy, Community Policing Forums (CPFs) have been formalised as a bridge between communities and the SAPS (Tyabazayo, 2023). However, numerous scholars note that CPFs remain constrained by resource limitations and uneven institutional support, particularly in rural areas (Faull, 2022; Modise, 2024). Beyond CPFs, communities continue to rely on informal arrangements that operate outside the formal CPF structure, which are often more responsive to local conditions and social norms.

Mangai et al. (2023) argue that in Johannesburg, communities and the police act as co-producers of crime prevention, with residents playing an active role in intelligence-gathering and surveillance. While their study is set in an urban context, the co-production framework they employ is increasingly recognised as applicable to rural settings, where community members may occupy an even more central role due to the physical distance from police stations. A critical limitation in the existing literature, however, is the tendency to frame informal policing in purely reactive terms as a response to state absence. This framing underestimates the cultural depth and organisational sophistication of informal safety systems, particularly in communities with robust traditional governance structures. This study challenges that framing by examining informal policing as a proactive and culturally embedded practice.

2.2 Community-led crime prevention

Community-led crime prevention involves intentional efforts by residents, community organisations, and local leaders to reduce crime and enhance safety, often without the involvement of state institutions (Siegelaaar & Bhengu, 2023). In rural South Africa, these efforts manifest in various ways. One of the most common and visible forms of self-organised safety is night patrols, where groups of community members monitor their neighbourhoods after dark (Clack & Maluleke, 2024). These patrols serve a dual purpose.: deterring potential offenders through visible presence and providing an early warning system that can alert both community members and, when feasible, the police.

Neighbourhood watch structures similarly rely on the social bonds within a community to establish informal surveillance networks (MJ, 2023). Residents remain vigilant for unfamiliar individuals or suspicious activity and communicate through informal channels, and increasingly, through mobile communication technologies such as WhatsApp groups. As Modise (2024) notes, these informal communication channels have gained particular significance in rural areas where communication infrastructure is often unreliable. The utilisation of WhatsApp to report crime, disseminate information, and coordinate responses represents a form of community-led technological adaptation that has emerged organically without state initiative.

Malatjie et al. (2023) found in their study of rural policing in Limpopo that community members play an active and often decisive role in identifying suspects, reporting crimes, and assisting police in investigations. Their findings resonate with those of Whiteside et al. (2023), who, in an Australian rural context, similarly found that community knowledge and local intelligence are essential resources upon which formal police depend. These convergent findings across diverse settings support the theoretical assertion that community-led crime prevention is not a marginal activity but a foundational component of the rural safety architecture.

A significant gap in the literature is the limited attention paid to how community-led systems interact with traditional governance structures in African rural contexts. Studies tend to treat community action and traditional leadership as separate phenomena, when in practice they are often deeply

intertwined. This study contributes to addressing this gap by examining how traditional authority figures and ordinary community members co-produce safety in the rural Eastern Cape.

2.3 Social control, traditional authority, and rural order

According to Siegel and van den Bunt (2020), social control encompasses the mechanisms through which a community enforces conformity to norms and deters deviant behaviour. In rural communities, informal social control mechanisms are often rooted in long-standing social relationships, cultural expectations, and community institutions. Kumah et al. (2025) argue that the close-knit nature of many rural communities means that social pressure—where individuals are aware that their behaviour is being observed and will have social consequences—can serve as a powerful deterrent against antisocial conduct. Traditional leadership structures, particularly the roles of chiefs and headmen, are central to rural social control in the Eastern Cape. Clack and Bunei (2025) highlight that within the Xhosa cultural context prevalent in much of the rural Eastern Cape, traditional leaders possess both moral authority and practical dispute-resolution functions. They may adjudicate conflicts, impose community sanctions, and mobilise community members to address security concerns. This role is distinct from, yet complementary to, formal criminal justice processes.

Hepburn et al. (2022) observe that rural crime control across contexts operates through a layered system in which formal and informal mechanisms interact. While state policing establishes the legal framework, the daily maintenance of order often relies on informal actors, family networks, community elders, and neighbourhood associations that regulate behaviour through social norms and peer pressure. This layered understanding of crime control is particularly relevant in the rural Eastern Cape, where formal policing resources are limited, and informal institutions wield significant social authority. However, the literature has not yet adequately theorised the specific mechanisms through which traditional authority either amplifies or constrains community-led crime prevention, a gap this study aims to address.

2.4 Co-production of safety and the rural policing context

The co-production framework conceptualises safety as jointly produced by state and non-state actors (Mangai et al., 2023; Schuck, 2019). Co-production transcends a service-delivery model of policing, wherein the state provides safety to passive recipients, moving towards a partnership model in which communities actively engage in their own security. This transition is particularly significant in rural contexts, where the state's capacity to deliver services is structurally restricted. Faull (2022) contends that community partnerships and shared-resource approaches are essential for improving service delivery in rural policing. However, the literature on co-production has predominantly been developed in urban and suburban contexts, where community-police partnerships function within environments characterised by relatively accessible formal infrastructure. The applicability of co-production frameworks to deeply rural, geographically isolated, and resource-deprived contexts necessitates more thorough theorisation. This paper asserts that, in the rural Eastern Cape, the co-production of safety is not merely a policy aspiration but an observable daily reality. The policy challenge lies not in creating co-production where it does not exist, but in recognising, supporting, and appropriately formalising the co-production that is already operational.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study applies Routine Activity Theory (RAT), developed by Cohen and Felson (1979), as its primary analytical framework. RAT posits that crime occurs when three elements converge in time and space: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. According to Benson (2020), the theory emphasises the situational conditions that facilitate crime, rather than concentrating solely on offender motivation. In rural settings characterised by limited formal police capacity, the guardianship element is particularly significant. When police are unable to respond

promptly or maintain consistent patrols, the responsibility of guardianship shifts to the community itself.

The central argument of this paper is that communities in rural Eastern Cape do not merely passively fill the guardianship gap but rather do so through active, organised, and culturally embedded mechanisms. Community patrols, traditional authority structures, neighbourhood watch systems, and digital communication networks all serve as forms of capable guardianship that mitigate criminal opportunity, even in the absence of or delays in formal policing. This application of RAT to community-based informal guardianship expands the theory beyond its conventional focus on formal police presence, in accordance with Makhanye's (2021) assertion that RAT should be applied to under-resourced policing contexts in South Africa.

The limitations of RAT are also acknowledged. Benson (2020) observes that the theory does not elucidate what motivates offenders, focusing instead on the situational conditions that enable criminal behaviour. Modise (2024) cautions that RAT may oversimplify complex institutional realities, such as poor morale, political interference, and structural neglect, which are prevalent in rural policing environments. This study applies RAT critically, utilising it as a useful analytical lens while remaining mindful of the broader structural, socioeconomic, and historical conditions that shape both crime and guardianship in the rural Eastern Cape.

4. Materials and Methods

This section delineates the methodology employed for the study. In accordance with the principle that methodological rigour necessitates transparency and justification at every stage (Coombs, 2022; Ngulube & Ngulube, 2022), each component of the methodology is presented and justified independently in the following sections.

4.1 Research approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach to understand social issues through the views and real-life experiences of the participants. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited to exploratory inquiry in policing and criminology, where the goal is to understand complex social dynamics rather than to measure or generalise across large populations (Bachman et al., 2019). A qualitative approach was chosen because the phenomena under investigation – informal community safety mechanisms, traditional authority, co-production of policing, and the lived experience of rural crime prevention – cannot be adequately captured through numerical data. Understanding how police officers perceive and describe community-police relations and informal safety structures requires rich, descriptive data generated through in-depth engagement with participants (Gamage, 2025). This approach enabled the collection of nuanced, contextually grounded insights that would not have been accessible through a quantitative design. The limitations of qualitative research are acknowledged; findings are context-specific and cannot be statistically generalised to wider populations (Gamage, 2025). Consequently, the study's analytical insights must be understood as contextually grounded and theoretically transferable rather than empirically representative of all rural Eastern Cape policing environments.

4.2 Research design

A qualitative, single-holistic case study design was employed for this research. The bounded case focused on rural policing and community safety within the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality, located in the Eastern Cape Province. Although interviews were conducted at several selected rural police stations, these stations were regarded as embedded settings within a singular municipal case rather than as distinct cases. The objective was not to compare individual police stations but to achieve an in-depth understanding of the perceptions held by SAPS officials regarding informal community-based safety mechanisms operating within this specific rural municipal context.

Consequently, the case study design provided contextually grounded insights into the interaction between formal policing and informal community safety practices.

4.3 Study site and population

The study was conducted at selected rural police stations within the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality, Eastern Cape. This region is extensive, characterised by communities that are widely dispersed, inadequate road infrastructure, limited communication networks, and elevated levels of unemployment and poverty. Such conditions complicate formal policing and concurrently prompt communities to depend on their own safety measures, which is the primary focus of this study. The research specifically targeted police officials operating in these rural stations, including station commanders, detectives, operational members, and community policing officers. These officials were selected due to their work experience and expertise, which provide valuable insights into the challenges associated with formal policing and the significance of community-based safety initiatives.

4.4 Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to select ten (10) officials from the South African Police Service (SAPS) at three designated rural police stations within the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality as study participants. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling strategy in which participants are intentionally chosen based on characteristics pertinent to the research questions (Campbell et al., 2020; Denieffe, 2020). This approach is particularly suitable for qualitative research, where the objective is to generate rich, contextually grounded insights from individuals who possess the specific knowledge and experience necessary to address the study's aims, rather than to achieve statistical representativeness. The Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality is served by several SAPS stations, including Alice, Fort Beaufort, Seymour, Adelaide, and Chungwa. For the purposes of this study, rural police stations were defined as those serving predominantly rural communities characterised by dispersed settlements, traditional leadership structures, agricultural activities, and limited access to public services and policing resources. Based on these criteria, three rural police stations were purposively selected as they provided the most relevant context for examining informal community-based safety mechanisms in rural settings.

To ensure the reliability of the information and its foundation in authentic experience, only officials who had served at their current stations for a minimum of five years were included. This criterion was established to guarantee that participants possessed substantive, experience-based knowledge of local policing dynamics, community relations, and the informal safety mechanisms operating in their areas. The ten participants were distributed across the three selected stations according to staff availability and operational responsibilities. The sample comprised station commanders, detectives, operational policing officers, and community policing officers to capture diverse professional perspectives on policing and community safety. All participants were assigned identification codes (Participant 1 through Participant 10) to maintain anonymity throughout the processes of data collection, analysis, and reporting.

A recognised limitation of purposive sampling is that the findings cannot be statistically generalised to the broader population of rural police officers in South Africa (Denieffe, 2020). This limitation is acknowledged as appropriate given the study's qualitative and exploratory aims.

4.5 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, originally conducted as part of a broader study examining the resource constraints affecting rural policing. Although the interview guide primarily focused on policing resources, operational challenges, and coping strategies, participants consistently discussed community patrols, neighbourhood watch groups, traditional leaders, and

community cooperation when articulating how they managed policing challenges. Consequently, this article presents a secondary thematic analysis of the interview data. This secondary analytical focus is acknowledged as a limitation, as the interview schedule was not originally designed specifically to investigate community-led safety mechanisms.

Interviews were conducted individually with each participant at their respective police stations, in settings that afforded privacy and minimised the risk of professional repercussions for candid disclosures. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The duration of each interview was approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The semi-structured format was justified by the study's focus on lived experience and subjective meaning-making, consistent with its qualitative and interpretivist orientation (Oranga et al., 2023).

4.6 Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework described by Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, and Terry (2019). They further argued that thematic analysis is a flexible and theoretically accessible qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns of meaning within a data set. This method is particularly appropriate for research aimed at understanding participants' experiences and generating contextually grounded theoretical insights. The analysis proceeded through six phases.

In Phase One, the researcher familiarised themselves with the data through repeated readings of interview transcripts and listening to audio recordings, noting initial impressions. In Phase Two, initial codes were systematically generated across the entire data set. In Phase Three, these codes were grouped into potential themes that represented broader patterns of meaning. In Phase Four, candidate themes were reviewed for internal coherence and external distinctiveness in relation to the full data set. In Phase Five, the themes were named and defined. Finally, in Phase Six, the report was drafted, incorporating supporting participant quotations that illustrated each theme. A hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis was adopted. Initial open coding was conducted inductively from the interview transcripts, after which related codes were organised into broader themes informed by Routine Activity Theory and the literature on community safety. Initial codes included community patrols, night watch, traditional leaders, WhatsApp reporting, community intelligence, crime reporting, and resource shortages. Through iterative comparison, these codes were refined into four overarching themes: (1) community patrols and local vigilance; (2) social control mechanisms; (3) the role of traditional leadership; and (4) community-police collaboration.

4.7 Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the assurance that the findings genuinely represent the participants' perspectives and experiences, rather than reflecting the assumptions of the researcher (Forero et al., 2021; Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, trustworthiness was established through a focus on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, wherein participants were invited to review summaries of their interview responses and to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. Prolonged engagement with participants at their respective stations further contributed to credibility by facilitating a contextually grounded understanding of the research setting. Transferability was supported through a detailed, context-rich description of the research site and findings, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other rural policing contexts. Dependability was ensured through the maintenance of a comprehensive methodological audit trail documenting all research decisions. Confirmability was supported through peer review with the research supervisor and reflexive journaling to identify and manage potential researcher biases.

The study relied on a single participant group (SAPS officials) and a single data collection method (semi-structured interviews). Consequently, methodological and source triangulation were not

feasible. This limitation is acknowledged and should be considered when interpreting the findings. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, at which point no substantially new themes emerged in subsequent interviews concerning community-based safety mechanisms. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the research process to document methodological decisions, emerging interpretations, and potential researcher biases.

4.8 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities at the University of Fort Hare. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, with participants being thoroughly informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Informed consent was secured from all participants prior to the commencement of each interview. Confidentiality was upheld throughout the research process: no names, ranks, or station-specific details that could identify individual participants were disclosed in any reporting materials. Participants were assigned anonymised codes for all data collection, analysis, and dissemination. All transcripts and audio recordings are stored securely and are accessible only to the researcher and supervisor.

5. Presentation of Results

Four interconnected themes emerged from the data regarding informal community-led safety mechanisms in the rural Eastern Cape: community patrols and local vigilance, social control mechanisms, the role of traditional leadership, and community-police collaboration. Each theme is presented below, along with supporting participant accounts.

5.1 Community patrols and local vigilance

Participants explained that community members do not simply wait for the police to act; instead, they take it upon themselves to protect their neighbourhoods. One common practice is night patrols, during which groups of residents monitor their areas after dark. Although these patrols are not official, they occur regularly and have become part of the community's way of life. Participant 6 noted that, due to the police's limited resources and their inability to cover large areas effectively, community members have stepped in to help prevent crime in their neighbourhood:

"Due to our delays, communities may even resort to taking the law into their own hands."
(Participant 6)

Another participant highlighted that during the community patrols, community members night watch as another method that is used by community members and stated that:

"Community members have organised night watch responsibilities; however, these practices are not official, so this may lead to unintended mob justice, even murder of the suspected criminals, and mostly police officers remain unaware of who was involved in these movements." (Participant 10)

The participant spoke about this carefully due to the risks involved, but it demonstrates how far communities will go to organise themselves when the police take time to respond. The mention of mob justice, for example, where a rape suspect was attacked and killed by community members before the police arrived, highlights the extreme side of this situation. However, in less extreme cases, community efforts include organised patrols, keeping watch, and using informal methods to share information.

Several participants noted that community members maintain personal contact with local police officers, bypassing formal emergency channels in favour of direct communication. Participant 7 explicitly recommended that police stations allocate cellphones with WhatsApp to improve community communication, acknowledging that community-initiated contact was already serving as an important safety mechanism:

"I think that can be improved by allocating cellphones in police stations with WhatsApp, so that it becomes easy for the community to report crimes. I believe that is one technological aspect that can help improve the interaction between the community and the police."
(Participant 7)

According to SAPS officials, community members have increasingly adopted digital communication platforms to address communication challenges arising from limited police resources. The use of WhatsApp groups as informal neighbourhood alert systems constitutes a community-led crime prevention infrastructure that operates independently of state initiatives.

5.2 Social control mechanisms

Apart from organised patrols, the findings show that communities also maintain order through social pressure and local ways of resolving disputes. In small rural communities where people know each other well, reputation matters, and this can discourage people from behaving badly. Community members often rely on their knowledge of who lives where, who spends time with whom, and what is normal or suspicious in their area.

Participant 5 noted that community members engage police officers through volunteering and through organising crime prevention activities at the community level, a process that effectively extends the reach of safety-oriented behaviour beyond formal structures:

"The police department usually faces challenges with limited resources, so the informal social control mechanism plays an important role in maintaining order in rural areas."
(Participant 5)

In many rural communities, conflicts that could escalate into crimes are often resolved within the community before police involvement. Elders, family heads, or community meetings are used to address these issues early on. This form of prevention may not always be reflected in official crime reports, but it plays a vital role in keeping communities safe. Individuals step in to mediate disputes, apply pressure on those known for causing trouble, and uphold acceptable behaviour through informal yet effective means.

Participants reported that some community members expressed dissatisfaction with police response times and visibility. For example, Participant 2 emphasised that:

"Some community members see the police as 'lazy' because they respond slowly, and communities tend to strengthen their own ways of controlling crime". (Participant 2)

This does not mean there is no order; rather, the responsibility for maintaining safety shifts from the police to the community, which can supplement formal policing efforts. This may lead to more comprehensive crime prevention strategies in rural communities.

5.3 The role of traditional leadership

The findings show that traditional leaders play an important role in keeping rural communities safe, even though this is not always fully recognised. In the rural Eastern Cape, chiefs and headmen exert strong influence and are respected within their communities. Many participants mentioned that these leaders help maintain order, resolve disputes, and organise community responses to crime. They are trusted, integral members of the community, and possess a cultural authority that the police do not always have.

Participant 1 explained that one of the most effective ways their station manages its limited resources is by working closely with community structures, including traditional leaders. This collaboration facilitates the sharing of information and the organisation of community responses to crime:

"Engaging community leaders in volunteer work, partnering with local organisations for support or services, and organising community members for crime prevention relationships within the community, is usually one of the important strategies" (Participant 1)

In the same vein, another participant added that:

"Traditional leaders play an important role in mitigating crime in rural areas. They usually handle the less serious crimes, including theft, misconduct, robbery, and assault and direct the more serious ones, such as rape and murder, to the police." (Participant 4)

Traditional leaders are often the first point of contact for community members with safety concerns. Rather than reporting directly to the police, which may involve travelling long distances and facing uncertain outcomes, people typically approach a headman or chief first. The leader then determines whether the issue can be resolved within the community or if it should be escalated to the police. In this way, traditional leadership functions as a screening system that helps manage and direct cases appropriately. Additionally, traditional leaders have the authority to impose informal punishments, such as public warnings, community service, or social exclusion. These measures help correct behaviour and discourage wrongdoing, even without involving the formal justice system.

5.4 Community-police collaboration

Although community-led systems often operate independently, the findings also indicate a degree of cooperation between communities and the police. This cooperation is not always official or structured; rather, it frequently occurs through personal relationships, informal communication, and informal agreements. Nonetheless, it demonstrates that both sides are willing to collaborate in addressing crime. Community Policing Forums (CPFs) are intended to serve as the formal structure for this type of cooperation, but participants noted that they encounter numerous challenges in rural areas. In the same vein, Participant 4 added that CPFs cannot function effectively without sufficient resources:

"Honestly, no, although we do have community policing forums, but there isn't much they can do without the right equipment/resources." (Participant 4)

Even where Community Policing Forums are not working well, informal cooperation between the police and communities continues. Communities often share information with trusted officers, help identify suspects, and provide support when the police do not have enough resources.

Another participant explained that:

"Communication and collaboration between the CPFs and police officers can also be improved through informal means, including situations where CPFs have the personal phone numbers of officers." (Participant 9)

This bypasses formal reporting systems and allows for quicker responses. The importance of community information is evident throughout the data, as police officers in these rural areas rely heavily on what community members tell them to investigate cases, identify suspects, and respond to incidents. This illustrates that safety is established through cooperation, as neither the police nor the community can effectively maintain security on their own.

6. Discussion of Findings

This study investigates the role of informal community-based safety mechanisms in crime prevention and the maintenance of social order within rural communities in the Eastern Cape Province. The findings indicate that community patrols, neighbourhood watch groups, traditional leadership structures, and informal communication networks significantly contribute to local safety governance. These results suggest that crime prevention in rural areas is not exclusively reliant on

formal policing institutions but is realised through collaborative relationships among communities, traditional authorities, and the South African Police Service (SAPS).

6.1 Safety as co-production: moving beyond state-centric models

The findings of this study support the idea that safety in rural communities is co-produced by multiple actors, rather than solely the responsibility of the state. As Mangai et al. (2023) argue, safety is increasingly understood as a shared responsibility involving law enforcement agencies, community members, local organisations, and traditional authorities. The experiences shared by participants demonstrate that this collaborative model is not merely theoretical; it is a part of the everyday reality of crime prevention in the rural Eastern Cape.

These findings align with the principles of Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), which highlights the importance of capable guardianship in preventing criminal opportunities. Participants noted that community patrols, neighbourhood watch groups, and local communication networks enhance surveillance and enable quick responses to suspicious activities. These mechanisms bolster guardianship within communities and reduce opportunities for crime. Accordingly, the findings affirm previous studies that have identified community participation as a vital component of crime prevention, especially in areas where formal policing resources are limited (Terpstra & Fyfe, 2019; Loader & Walker, 2007). The study also revealed that traditional leaders continue to play a significant role in maintaining social order through dispute resolution, mediation, and the promotion of community cohesion. These findings suggest that traditional leadership structures serve as crucial mechanisms of informal social control and community governance within the study area. By mobilising community participation and resolving conflicts before they escalate into criminal incidents, traditional leaders contribute to local safety in ways that complement formal policing efforts.

These findings challenge state-centric approaches to crime prevention that primarily emphasise police performance and institutional capacity. While resource constraints undoubtedly impact policing effectiveness, the results indicate that, according to SAPS officials, rural communities actively contribute to maintaining order and preventing crime through locally developed mechanisms that rely on social networks, trust, and collective responsibility. Since these conclusions are based solely on the accounts of SAPS officials, they should be interpreted as reflections of police perceptions of community agency rather than direct evidence from community members. Nevertheless, these perceptions suggest that police officials regard community-based safety initiatives as valuable contributors to local crime prevention. The practical implication is that rural safety policies should move beyond narrow institutional approaches and acknowledge community-based safety initiatives as legitimate and valuable partners in crime prevention. Strengthening collaboration between SAPS, traditional authorities, and community safety structures may enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of rural crime prevention efforts. Future research should include the perspectives of community members, traditional leaders, and representatives from Community Policing Forums to validate and extend these findings.

6.2 The structural significance of informal safety systems

The findings indicate that informal safety systems are neither peripheral nor temporary responses to policing challenges; rather, they constitute an integral component of rural safety governance. Community patrols, neighbourhood watch groups, traditional leadership structures, and WhatsApp-based communication networks were consistently identified by participants as significant mechanisms for maintaining order and addressing local security concerns. These findings support Faull's (2022) assertion that collaborative partnerships and resource-sharing arrangements are essential for effective policing in rural environments. However, the present study extends this argument by demonstrating that informal community structures often function as primary rather

than supplementary mechanisms of crime prevention. In many of the communities discussed by participants, local safety initiatives operate continuously and provide forms of surveillance, conflict resolution, and information sharing that formal policing institutions cannot consistently deliver due to resource limitations and geographical constraints.

The findings further reinforce previous research on informal social control and collective efficacy, which suggests that robust community networks contribute significantly to crime prevention. The effectiveness of WhatsApp communication groups, for example, illustrates how communities adapt available technologies to enhance local safety and facilitate rapid information sharing. Similar results have been reported in studies examining the use of digital communication platforms to strengthen community-based crime prevention and collective action. Furthermore, the study found that informal safety systems derive their effectiveness from social relationships, local knowledge, and community legitimacy. Unlike formal policing structures, which may be constrained by organisational procedures and limited visibility, community-based actors possess an intimate understanding of local dynamics and are often able to identify emerging problems before they escalate. This finding highlights the unique contribution of informal safety mechanisms within rural crime prevention strategies.

The findings, therefore, suggest that policy interventions should concentrate on supporting and reinforcing existing community-based safety structures rather than replacing them with externally imposed solutions. Practical measures may include providing training opportunities for community patrols and neighbourhood watch groups, strengthening Community Policing Forums, improving communication channels between communities and SAPS, and formally recognising the role of traditional leaders in local safety governance. Such interventions would build upon existing community strengths while enhancing cooperation between formal and informal safety actors.

The findings demonstrate that informal community-based safety mechanisms are structurally important components of crime prevention in rural Eastern Cape communities. Their contribution extends beyond compensating for policing limitations and reflects a broader system of co-produced safety in which communities actively participate in maintaining social order and reducing criminal opportunities.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study explored the role of informal community-based safety mechanisms in crime prevention and the maintenance of social order in rural communities of the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. It aimed to understand how community-led initiatives enhance local safety in areas where formal policing resources are often limited by geographical, infrastructural, and operational challenges.

The findings indicated that community patrols, neighbourhood watch groups, traditional leadership structures, and informal communication networks play vital roles in enabling rural communities to participate actively in crime prevention. These mechanisms improve local surveillance, facilitate the rapid sharing of information, foster social cohesion, and help resolve disputes before they escalate into criminal incidents. Additionally, community members frequently take on guardianship roles that reduce opportunities for crime and strengthen local safety.

The research supports the relevance of Routine Activity Theory in explaining crime prevention in rural contexts. Informal community-based safety mechanisms serve as forms of capable guardianship that deter criminal behaviour and contribute to maintaining social order. The findings also illustrate that safety in rural communities is co-produced through collaborative relationships among community members, traditional leaders, and the South African Police Service, rather than being solely the responsibility of formal policing institutions.

The study met its objectives by identifying the key informal safety mechanisms in rural communities, examining their contributions to crime prevention, exploring their relationship with formal policing structures, and analysing their significance through the lens of Routine Activity Theory. These findings add to the growing body of literature on rural criminology and community safety, emphasising the importance of community agency in local safety governance.

In conclusion, the study asserts that informal community-based safety mechanisms are not merely reactions to inadequate policing capacity; they are a crucial element of crime prevention in the rural communities of the Eastern Cape. Therefore, effective and sustainable rural safety strategies should acknowledge and build upon the contributions of communities, traditional authorities, and other local actors involved in maintaining social order.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Regular engagement between police officials, neighbourhood watch groups, community patrols, and Community Policing Forums should be encouraged to improve information sharing and collaborative crime prevention efforts.
- Community patrols and neighbourhood watch groups should receive appropriate training, guidance, and basic resources to enhance their effectiveness while ensuring compliance with legal and human rights standards.
- Traditional leaders should be formally included in local crime prevention initiatives and community safety planning processes, given their influence in dispute resolution, community mobilisation, and social regulation.
- Existing informal communication networks, including WhatsApp-based reporting systems, should be strengthened and integrated into broader community policing strategies to facilitate timely information sharing and coordinated responses to crime.
- Policymakers should design rural crime prevention strategies that acknowledge the contribution of informal community-based safety mechanisms and promote collaborative approaches to safety governance.

7.1 Limitations

This study presents several limitations. First, the findings are derived exclusively from interviews with SAPS officials, reflecting their perceptions of informal community-based safety mechanisms rather than the direct experiences of community members, traditional leaders, or Community Policing Forum members. Second, the data were originally collected for a broader study investigating resource constraints impacting rural policing and were subsequently re-analysed to examine community safety mechanisms. Although participants engaged in extensive discussions on these issues, the interview guide was not specifically designed for this purpose. Third, the qualitative case study concentrated on one rural municipality in the Eastern Cape, and as such, the findings are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable.

The implementation of these recommendations may fortify collaborative crime prevention efforts and enhance safety governance in rural communities of the Eastern Cape Province, as well as in comparable rural contexts across South Africa.

8. Declarations

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation (T.T., L.N., N.P.T. & Z.J.); literature review (T.T. & L.N.); methodology (T.T., N.P.T. & Z.J.); software (N/A); validation (T.T., N.P.T. & Z.J.); formal analysis (T.T., L.N., N.P.T. & Z.J.); investigation (T.T., L.N., N.P.T. & Z.J.); data curation (T.T. & L.N.); drafting and preparation (T.T. & L.N.); review and editing (T.T., N.P.T. & Z.J.); supervision (T.T.); project administration (T.T.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access will be granted to researchers who meet the criteria for data sharing established by the institutional review board or ethics committee.

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