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Cecili Doorewaard, Willie Clack ■**Comparing offender profiles in property-related crime:
A comparative framework for housebreaking
and livestock theft in South Africa****Porównanie profili sprawców przestępstw związanych z mieniem –
ramy porównawcze dla włamań do domu i kradzieży zwierząt
gospodarskich w RPA**

Abstract: Livestock theft is a persistent rural crime across the globe. However, limited attention was paid to understanding the perpetrators of these crimes until 2015, when a sample-specific study assessed and profiled livestock theft perpetrators from a criminological perspective. More than five years after this study's findings were released, comparable empirical studies on rural crime remain elusive. Building on this context, the article adopts a comparative approach to examine the behavioural and criminological characteristics of livestock theft perpetrators alongside those of other economically motivated crimes such as housebreaking. Specifically, it explores what the study's findings on livestock theft offenders reveal about their behaviours, motives and operational tendencies, and the extent to which these factors align with those of housebreaking offenders. To address this, a qualitative thematic comparison is employed using criminological profiling as an analytical framework. The findings aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of livestock perpetrators by clarifying whether livestock theft reflects broader patterns of property crime or constitutes a distinct offender profile.

Keywords: livestock theft, housebreaking, burglary, rural crime comparison, property crime

Abstrakt: Kradzież zwierząt gospodarskich jest stale występującym przestępstwem na obszarach wiejskich na całym świecie. Jednak do 2015 roku poświęcano niewiele uwagi zrozumieniu sprawców tych czynów – wówczas to w badaniu opartym na określonej grupie badawczej podjęto próbę oceny i sprofilowania sprawców kradzieży zwierząt gospodarskich z perspektywy kryminologicznej. Po-

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nad pięć lat po opublikowaniu wyników tego badania porównywalne analizy empiryczne dotyczące przestępczości wiejskiej nadal należą do rzadkości. W świetle powyższego na potrzeby niniejszego artykułu przyjęto podejście porównawcze, aby zbadać behawioralne i kryminologiczne cechy sprawców kradzieży zwierząt gospodarskich w zestawieniu ze sprawcami innych przestępstw o motywacji ekonomicznej, takich jak kradzieże z włamaniem do domów. W szczególności artykuł analizuje, co wyniki wspomnianego badania mówią o zachowaniach, motywach i tendencjach działania sprawców kradzieży zwierząt gospodarskich oraz w jakim stopniu czynniki te pokrywają się z charakterystyką sprawców włamań. W tym celu zastosowano jakościowe porównanie tematyczne, wykorzystując profilowanie kryminologiczne jako ramy analityczne. Uzyskane wyniki mają na celu przyczynienie się do lepszego zrozumienia sprawców kradzieży zwierząt gospodarskich poprzez wyjaśnienie, czy przestępstwo to wpisuje się w szersze wzorce przestępczości przeciwko mieniu, czy też wiąże się z odrębnym profilem sprawcy.

Słowa kluczowe: kradzież zwierząt gospodarskich, włamania do domów, kradzież z włamaniem, porównanie przestępczości na obszarach wiejskich, przestępstwa przeciwko mieniu

Introduction

Property-related crime remains a significant concern in South Africa, yet its different categories are often examined in isolation. This separation has created analytical blind spots, particularly in understanding how offenders operating in distinct environments take decisions, exploit opportunity structures and adapt their behaviour. Housebreaking, with an estimated 1.2 million incidents annually (Stats SA 2025), and livestock theft, with approximately 26,500 cases annually (2021–2025), are among the most prevalent forms of acquisitive crime recorded by the South African Police Service (SAPS 2025). These crimes share criminogenic features including opportunity structures, weak guardianship, acquisitive motivation, routine activity patterns and reliance on illicit markets.

Housebreaking was selected for this study because it is one of the most frequent property crimes in urban and peri-urban South Africa, with more than 1.2 million cases per year (Stats SA 2025). It is also one of the best-documented forms of acquisitive offending, with a rich body of empirical work that examines offenders' motives, temporal patterns, modus operandi, guardianship vulnerabilities and environmental influences (Demombynes, Özler 2005: 267; Fumba, Magadze 2022: 52; Mbonambi 2023: 284). This strong evidence base allows for detailed extraction of offender-centred behavioural themes, making housebreaking an analytically robust category for comparison.

Livestock theft, by contrast, remains one of the most widespread yet under-researched rural crimes in South Africa (Clack 2024: 344). Despite its substantial socioeconomic impact on rural households, livestock-dependent communities and provincial agricultural economies (Clack 2013: 82; Clack, Minnaar 2018: 106; Clack, Fitz 2026), offender-focussed empirical research has been limited. The criminological assessment and offender profile by Cecili Doorewaard (2020: 178–191)

creates a rare opportunity to examine livestock theft perpetrators using rigorous qualitative evidence. Livestock theft is therefore included not only because of its rural significance, but because the availability of offender-specific data allows for meaningful comparative synthesis.

While both housebreaking and livestock theft have been studied independently, no research has systematically compared offender profiles across rural and urban property crime contexts in South Africa. This limits theoretical integration and the development of cross-context prevention strategies. These two crimes – one embedded in urban and peri-urban settings, the other in rural agricultural environments – offer an analytically valuable contrast. Both are legally defined as acquisitive, non-violent property crimes, both rely on exploiting weaknesses in guardianship and both involve rational decision-making shaped by opportunity structures (Felson 1987: 913; Cohen, Felson 1979: 592). However, they differ substantially in spatial context, offender organisation, market integration, operational demands and temporal logic. Comparing them therefore provides a unique lens through which to analyse how environmental, social and structural conditions shape offender behaviour across South Africa's urban–rural continuum. The study uses case-specific studies and should be interpreted as indicative patterns rather than nationally representative profiles.

By positioning the comparison at the outset, this study aims to clarify its purpose immediately: to determine whether housebreaking and livestock theft offenders share underlying behavioural patterns or represent distinct offender typologies shaped by different ecological conditions. Bringing these types of crime together within a single analytical framework helps close a persistent gap in South African criminology, where rural crime and urban property crime have historically developed along parallel but disconnected academic tracks.

1. Literature review

Property-related crime in South Africa has historically been examined in fragmented ways that often separate urban property offences such as housebreaking from rural crimes. The study by Babalwa Fumba and Tshimangadzo Oscar Magadze (2022: 50) focusses on a rural area, Ntabankulu in the Eastern Cape, whereas Nokukhanya Neptune Mbonambi (2023: 283) is specific to the Durban metropolitan area. Livestock theft is researched mainly as a quintessential crime (Clack 2015: 94; Doorewaard 2020: 10). However, environmental criminology suggests that these offences may share underlying drivers, including guardianship weaknesses, opportunity structures and the role of illicit markets in sustaining criminal economies (Hollis, Hankhouse 2019: 273). This aligns with international research using routine activity theory (RAT), which shows that property crime

events emerge from situational opportunity structures rather than the offender's pathology (Argun, Dağlar 2016; Akers, Sellers, Jennings 2021: 33). RAT remains a central explanation for burglary risk, emphasising that crime occurs when motivated offenders encounter suitable targets in the absence of capable guardians (Cohen, Felson 1979: 589).

Marcus Felson's (1987: 911) macro-level extension of RAT further demonstrates that opportunity structures are shaped by broad social and spatial arrangements. The researcher argues that offenders rely on visible, low-effort and weakly guarded targets, creating what he terms "systematic accidents" in crime patterning. More recently, RAT scholarship has advanced towards understanding how crime controllers act, rather than simply whether guardianship is present. Lacy Schaefer and Lorraine Mazerolle (2017: 266) propose that three social processes – relationality, relativity and responsibility – shape the degree to which offenders are handled, targets are guarded and places are managed, demonstrating that guardianship is not binary but processual and socially conditioned. These refinements are directly relevant to South Africa, where both household burglary and livestock theft involve significant variation in how communities monitor, intervene and manage risks (Osborne 2015: 22).

The literature on burglary shows that offenders often act rationally, assessing suitable windows of opportunity and favouring wealthier areas and periods when guardianship is weak (Demombynes, Özler 2005: 266). Nokukhanya Neptune Mbonambi's (2023: 283) qualitative study in the Newlands East policing precinct confirms this by showing that residential burglary risk peaks during weekday work and school hours, as well as during summer holidays, when households are unoccupied, illustrating a consistent alignment with routine activity patterns.

International scholarship similarly describes burglars as strategic actors rather than impulsive offenders. Eric Halford's (2025) burglary typology, for example, depicts "foraging burglars" who identify spatial clusters of opportunity, dynamically assess risk and adapt their methods in response to enforcement or environmental cues. Research on South African offenders by Rudolph Zinn (2008: 57) reveals that even more violent residential property offenders (house robbers) rely on careful planning, insider information and coordinated group tactics, underscoring the rational and organised nature of many property offenders.

Babalwa Fumba and Tshimangadzo Oscar Magadze (2022: 51) deepen the South African understanding of housebreaking by foregrounding offender narratives from ex-offenders and community leaders in the Ntabankulu Local Municipality. Their findings show that housebreaking is strongly fuelled by poverty, unemployment, income inequality, lack of education and substance abuse, with many participants explicitly linking their criminal careers to structural deprivation and limited opportunity. The study also contributes nuanced psychological and social dimensions: low self-control, peer pressure and feelings of powerlessness were repeatedly mentioned as triggers for housebreaking, especially among young offenders who began offending between the ages of 13 and 20.

In contrast, the scholarly literature on rural crime, particularly livestock theft, has been comparatively sparse, although regarded as essential (Weisheit 2022: 229). Willie Clack and Anthony Minnaar (2018: 104) emphasise that rural crime in South Africa has been severely under-researched, distorted or overshadowed by politicised narratives centred on “farm attacks,” often detached from their empirical contexts. They show that definitional ambiguities – for example, distinguishing between commercial farms, smallholdings and lifestyle plots – have complicated analysis. More critically, their review highlights that the victims of farm attacks are not only farm owners, but also farm workers and their families, who are often invisible in the public discourse. Despite much media attention on farm attacks, these authors demonstrate that livestock theft is the most economically damaging rural crime, with the most significant direct impact on rural livelihoods and agricultural economies (Clack, Fitz 2026).

The marginalisation of livestock theft is not confined to academic circles. A more recent and comprehensive media analysis study by Willie Clack and Lincoln Fitz (2026) shows that livestock theft, although the most prevalent rural crime in South Africa, remains drastically underrepresented in both digital and print media. Their analysis of media trends from 2018 to 2025 reveal that farm murders and farm attacks receive vastly disproportionate media attention, often because they fit sensationalised or politically charged narratives, despite being far less common than livestock theft. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of livestock theft cases occur annually, yet they receive only a fraction of the media visibility. Clack and Fitz (2026) argue that this invisibility distorts public understanding, influences policing priorities and obscures the everyday harms experienced by rural communities.

Together, these studies demonstrate an important contextual reality for criminological analysis: rural crime research in South Africa suffers from both scholarly neglect and media distortion. As a result, livestock theft, despite being the most widespread and economically impactful rural crime, is systematically overshadowed by more dramatic but statistically rare incidents (Clack 2024: 359). This reinforces the need to integrate livestock theft into broader criminological frameworks rather than treating it as a niche agricultural issue.

Offender profiling research contributes significantly to this task, showing that livestock theft offenders are diverse in age and background, operate in both opportunistic and organised group structures and rely heavily on weaknesses in rural guardianship, insider networks and market mechanisms to sustain their activity (Doorewaard 2020: 57; Aiyzhy et al. 2021). Comparable findings emerge in East African contexts; Emmanuel Bunei and Barasa Barasa (2017: 236), for example, show that livestock theft is driven by weak guardianship, accessible routes, predictable routines and active illicit markets, mirroring South African patterns and demonstrating RAT’s cross-regional applicability to rural crime.

At a broader scale, Dustin Lee Osborne (2015: 87) provides macro-level support for applying routine activity theory to rural theft by demonstrating that population

density, equipment value, mobility and social disorganisation variables significantly predicted farm equipment theft across 305 counties in the USA. These findings illustrate that rural crime is shaped not only by farm-level security, but also by wider ecological opportunity structures – precisely the macro-context that Schaefer and Mazerolle (2017: 266) argue must be reintegrated into RAT's analytical frame.

While RAT explains how crime opportunities arise, it does not fully explain why individuals are motivated to exploit them (Akers, Sellers, Jennings 2021: 34). The general strain theory of crime and delinquency (Agnew 1992: 54; 2006: 3–25) provides a complementary perspective by suggesting that socioeconomic pressures such as poverty, unemployment and inequality generate strain, which produces negative emotional states that increase the likelihood of criminal behaviour. In the South African context, these structural pressures are particularly relevant, as they intersect with opportunity structures to shape offenders' decision-making across both rural and urban environments (Demombynes, Özler 2005: 268; Clack 2026: 135).

Synthesising this literature reveals a key gap: while housebreaking research is well developed in South Africa and internationally, particularly with respect to temporal patterns and offender rationality in urban areas, livestock theft research is only now gaining comparable empirical depth. At the same time, both crime types may respond to similar structural pressures, such as economic hardship, opportunity structures and guardianship deficits, even if their operational patterns differ. The accumulated literature – including Felson's macro-RAT (1987: 991), Uğur Argun and Murat Dağlar opportunity framework (2016: 1188), Osborne's macro-level rural analysis (2015: 10), Emmanuel Bunei and Barasa Barasa's African rural findings (2017: 225) and Schaefer and Mazerolle's process-based guardianship theory (2017: 266) – all indicate that crime prevention depends on how opportunity structures, social context and guardianship dynamics converge. This provides a strong rationale for a comparative approach to profiling offenders, situating livestock theft and housebreaking within a shared analytic framework while recognising their distinct temporal, organisational and situational dynamics.

2. Conceptual framework

When profiling offenders for assessment (interview) purposes, broad but specific assessment areas apply (Mostert 2018: 236): biographical details, family background and dynamics, educational history, qualifications and employment history, personal relationships, criminal history and health (mental and physical), as well as their adaptation in the correctional facility, coping mechanisms, support structures, what contributed to their criminal behaviour (including their motives) and what methods they use to carry them out. Once sourced from the offenders,

the criminological profile is further supported by current and pertinent scientific research and relevant criminological theories, which are used to identify, analyse, assess, explain and evaluate both the offending behaviour and the victim (Hesselink, Häefele 2015: 317).

From a criminological perspective, criminologists evaluate the aforementioned areas for both known and unknown offenders to inform prevention strategies and predict offenders' needs and risks (Hesselink 2012: 197). As a result, a criminological assessment and profile of offenders can contribute to various crime-prevention facets. Citing predictive policing, Jerry Ratcliffe, Ralph Taylor and Ryan Fisher (2020: 642) aver that some police officers (such as patrolling officers) often rely on their own knowledge, skills and judgment, based on their daily experience, to determine how, where and when potential offenders will react in different situations. These authors argue that police officers may reject formal scientific knowledge (i.e. statistical data) because it is not integrated into their fundamental knowledge and experience. Further, in cases where policing techniques and strategies mostly involve statistical (quantitative) approaches to predict elements of crime location, the objectives of such policing techniques also extend to predicting the identity of offenders (i.e. risk assessment) and of victims (Strikwerda 2021: 423) – important factors to identify when it comes to crimes of a complex nature, such as livestock theft.

It is known that livestock theft has rapidly evolved in South Africa (Clack 2024: 345). Historically, it has been a concern for residents of the Eastern Cape, for example, along its border with Lesotho (Aerni-Flessner et al. 2021: 904). However, livestock theft researchers Clack (2013: 88) and Doorewaard (2020: 178–191) have shown that this crime, characterised by a single livestock thief stealing a sheep or cow for sustenance, has escalated to groups of thieves appropriating as much livestock as they can muster. Similarly, this type of framework can be and is applied to housebreaking offenders or house robbers (Zinn 2008: 56). Therefore, the assessment domains are equally applicable to both property crimes, which also require a systematic evaluation of the offender's background, motives, *modus operandi*, target selection and situational risk factors for offending. These served as the foundation for the following research design and methodology.

3. Research design and methodology

This study employs a qualitative thematic comparison, integrating findings from three distinct empirical studies on housebreaking and livestock theft. Given the limited number of offender-focussed empirical studies available in South Africa, a full meta-synthesis was not feasible. Instead, this study adopts a focussed qualitative thematic comparison of key studies that provide rich offender-based data.

This comparative approach is appropriate because it enables the consolidation of offendercentred evidence across heterogeneous and homogeneous designs, enhancing analytic depth while preserving contextual variations (Guest, MacQueen, Namey 2012). The methodology is intentionally designed to move beyond a summary of existing work by producing a structured comparative interpretation of offender behaviour. Searches (i.e. dissertations and journal articles) related to profiling and assessing housebreaking and livestock theft offenders in South Africa, for purposes of comparison, were conducted using the databases of Sabinet African Journals, ProQuest, Sage, Taylor & Francis, EBSCO, Springer Nature and Elsevier. Only studies published between 2015 and 2025 and directly related to offender-based data were included so as to ensure up-to-date and comparable findings.

3.1. Data sources

The synthesis draws on three primary studies, each offering unique offender-focused insights:

- Housebreaking (Ntabankulu): Ex-offender and community leader narratives (Fumba, Magadze 2022)
- Housebreaking – temporal opportunity (Durban): Stakeholder perceptions on burglary timing (Mbonambi 2023)
- Livestock theft: Convicted offender interviews, case dockets and SAPS Stock Theft Unit insights (Doorewaard 2020).

These studies were chosen based on their rich, offender-centred qualitative data, which remains relatively rare in South African criminology, particularly on the topic of livestock theft. Their inclusion enables meaningful cross-contextual comparisons despite differences in setting and research design.

3.2. Analytical procedure

To produce a rigorous comparative analysis, the following procedures were applied.

3.2.1. Theme extraction

A thematic coding process was used to extract key behavioural and criminological themes from each study. Each text was read multiple times, and recurring concepts were coded under analytically relevant categories:

- Demographic patterns
- Motivations
- Modus operandi
- Guardianship/Opportunity structures
- Degree of organisation
- Market involvement

- Temporal patterns.

This coding process enabled the systematic identification of shared and divergent offender behaviours (Guest, MacQueen, Namey 2012).

3.2.2. Cross-source comparative mapping

Themes extracted from the three studies were compared using a comparative thematic matrix. This involved:

- Mapping each theme against the conceptual framework (RAT, macro-RAT or rural criminology)
- Identifying where offender behaviours aligned or diverged
- Analysing how environmental and opportunity structures shaped differences across offences.

The result was a structured comparative framework (presented in section 5) that synthesises behavioural, situational and organisational characteristics.

3.2.3. Ensuring internal validity

Internal validity was strengthened through:

- Triangulation of concepts across studies to ensure that themes were not study-specific anomalies
- Cross-checking interpretations against established criminological theory
- Consistency checks to ensure that offenders' statements aligned with situational or structural evidence from each study.

These measures helped ensure that the comparative conclusions reflect robust patterns rather than isolated impressions.

3.2.4. Methodological limitations

Because this study synthesises findings from three independent qualitative studies, several limitations apply:

- Design heterogeneity – The three studies differ in sampling, data collection and analytic focus. This affects direct comparability but is mitigated through thematic synthesis.
- Secondary data dependence – Interpretations rely on the quality and depth of the original studies. Missing demographic or behavioural details in a single study cannot be artificially reconstructed.
- Context-specific insights – The findings reflect South African rural and urban dynamics and may not generalise directly to other regions.

Despite these limitations, a qualitative thematic comparison remains the most effective method for identifying deeper patterns across property-crime offender profiles.

4. Results

The results reported below are derived from three empirical sources: (a) a qualitative study of housebreaking based on narratives from ex-offenders and community leaders in Ntabankulu Local Municipality (Fumba, Magadze 2022: 51–67), (b) a qualitative temporal assessment of residential burglary in the Newlands East policing precinct (Durban) based on stakeholder perceptions (Mbonambi 2023: 283–296), and (c) an offender profile account of livestock theft based on narratives from convicted offenders, case docket material and SAPS Stock Theft Unit (STU) insights (Doorewaard 2020: 178–191).

4.1. Housebreaking: Behavioural drivers and offenders' decision-making

Fumba and Magadze (2022: 51–67) report that a combination of socioeconomic and intra- and interpersonal factors drives housebreaking behaviour in the study area. Socioeconomic drivers reported by ex-offenders and community leaders include poverty, unemployment, inequality, low education levels, limited skills and substance abuse. Offenders frequently described housebreaking as a means of meeting basic needs and managing the pressures associated with deprivation and lack of legitimate income opportunities.

Substance use features prominently in the behavioural profile. Ex-offenders reported being under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs (including dagga, whoonga and tik) while committing the crime of housebreaking. They described this intoxication as facilitating risk-taking and impulsive actions, while also creating a continual need for money to sustain further use.

Intra- and interpersonal behavioural drivers included low self-control, peer pressure and greed. Offenders reported difficulty resisting opportunities and an orientation towards immediate gratification. Peer influence was repeatedly described as a mechanism that drew individuals into housebreaking and sustained offending through group norms and the desire to “fit in,” while greed featured in narratives in which offenders pursued better lifestyles or quick gains rather than strictly subsistence needs.

A further behavioural pattern is the early onset of offending. Most ex-offenders in the sample reported first offending between the ages of 13 and 20, with fewer beginning in early adulthood and a small minority initiating later.

4.2. Housebreaking: Temporal opportunity structures and guardianship avoidance

Mbonambi (2023: 283–296) reports that residential burglary in the study area is perceived to occur predominantly during the day, with participants explaining that offenders exploit periods when residents are away at work or school and ho-

mes are unoccupied. A central behavioural feature described by the participants is avoiding contact with residents, indicating a preference for low-confrontation circumstances and reduced risk of detection.

The participants also described burglary as more common on weekdays than weekends, attributing this to stronger guardianship when residents are more likely to be at home at weekends. Seasonally, they perceived higher burglary levels during the holiday periods of December and summer, when travelling means more vacant households and more available targets.

4.3. Livestock theft: Organisation, modus operandi and market-linked behaviour

Doorewaard's (2020: 178–191) livestock theft offender profile presents evidence that livestock theft is frequently characterised by planning, co-offending and exploiting systemic “loopholes.” Offending is commonly reported to involve groups rather than lone actors, reflecting the labour and logistical demands of handling and moving livestock.

Modus operandi clusters described in the docket and STU material included herding livestock away on foot, slaughtering at or near the scene and transporting animals by vehicle/trailer, with offenders exploiting weak security and easy concealment. Offenders were also reported to exploit vulnerabilities such as inadequate farm security, ready markets for cheap meat/livestock, falsified documentation, unmarked or rebranded animals, weak border controls and occasional corruption.

Financial gain was presented as the dominant motive, with both need/desperation and self-enrichment/greed being described in the offender profile evidence.

5. Comparative framework narrative

To make the comparative logic explicit, this study applies a structured seven-dimension framework that synthesises offender characteristics, behavioural tendencies and situational opportunity structures across housebreaking and livestock theft. This framework moves beyond treating these offences as loosely related forms of acquisitive crime and instead positions each offence within its own opportunity ecology. The comparison highlights both shared underlying criminogenic pressures, such as economic need and guardianship vulnerabilities, and the distinct ways these pressures manifest in urban and rural environments.

Table 1 presents a consolidated offender profile across seven key, interrelated criminological dimensions: demographic patterns, motivations, modus operandi, guardianship structures, organisational characteristics, market involvement and temporal patterns. These dimensions reflect the core variables identified in the

conceptual framework and allow for a clear, structured comparison that had previously been implied but not explicitly articulated. This comparative representation significantly strengthens analytical clarity and enhances the study’s theoretical contribution (Guest, MacQueen, Namey 2012).

Table 1. Comparative offender profile framework and integrated analysis

Dimension	Housebreaking offenders	Livestock theft offenders
Demographic patterns	Younger offenders (13–20), early socialisation into crime, lower education, limited employment (Fumba, Magadze 2022: 86)	Wider age range, more experienced offenders, familiarity with livestock and rural environments (Doorewaard 2020: 286)
Motivations	Poverty, unemployment, inequality, substance dependency, short-term economic gain (Fumba, Magadze 2022: 86)	Financial gain via organised markets, subsistence + enrichment, long-term economic logic (Doorewaard 2020: 286; Clack, Maluleke 2024: 163)
Modus operandi	Quick entry/exit, avoiding confrontation, exploiting empty homes, opportunistic with some planning (Mbonambi 2023: 284)	Herding, slaughter, transport, document manipulation; logistics-heavy and often team-based (Doorewaard 2020: 286)
Guardianship/opportunity structures	Urban/peri-urban guardianship gaps, daytime vacancy, predictable household routines (Mbonambi 2023: 284)	Rural dispersion, low visibility, poor branding/ID, border leakage, structural guardianship failures (Bunei, Barasa 2017: 240; Clack, Minnaar 2018: 105)
Degree of organisation	Low to moderate, peer-driven, limited role differentiation (Fumba, Magadze 2022: 61)	Moderate to high, coordinated roles, sometimes syndicate-linked (Clack 2013: 85; Doorewaard 2020: 286)
Market involvement	Disposal after the offence, informal markets; not a driver of target selection (Fumba, Magadze 2022: 62)	Market access directly shapes offending; illegal meat/livestock networks are central (Doorewaard 2020: 286; Clack, Maluleke 2024: 161)
Temporal patterns	Mainly daytime (8.00–17.00), primarily weekdays, spikes in December and summer (Mbonambi 2023: 288)	Mostly night-time, livestock movement cycles, patrol gaps, transport availability (Bunei, Barasa 2017: 241; Doorewaard 2020: 286)
Insider involvement	Occasional informal information-sharing (Fumba, Magadze 2022: 63)	Significant role of farm workers, community knowledge and collusion (Maluleke 2022: 478)

Source: Own evaluation.

The comparative framework in Table 1 reveals that while both offence types share an overarching economic motive and exploit weak guardianship, they diverge sharply in temporal logic, organisation, market involvement and modus operandi. Housebreaking is shaped by household routine cycles and often short-term eco-

conomic need amplified by substance use. At the same time, livestock theft operates within a rural ecological context that emphasises concealment, mobility and facilitation of the market chain. These distinctions reinforce the need for differentiated policy and prevention strategies.

Synthesising across the three studies reveals that offender behaviour is not determined solely by motivation, but by the interaction between motivation and opportunity structures. While housebreaking reflects relatively low-skill, time-sensitive exploitation of predictable household absence, livestock theft reflects structured adaptation to spatial dispersion, logistical demands and market facilitation. These findings indicate that opportunity structures play a central role in shaping how similar economic motivations manifest in different environments.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study draw from case-specific empirical studies and should therefore be interpreted as indicative behavioural patterns rather than nationally representative offender profiles across South Africa. Notwithstanding this limitation, the study demonstrates that while housebreaking and livestock theft are both forms of acquisitive crime, their behavioural dynamics are shaped by distinct opportunity structures, environmental conditions and offender capabilities. Routine activity theory provides a valuable foundation for understanding these dynamics by highlighting how motivated offenders exploit suitable targets in the absence of capable guardianship (Cohen, Felson 1979: 590; Felson 1987: 991; Argun, Dağlar 2016: 1188).

While RAT explains how crime opportunities arise, it does not fully account for why individuals are motivated to exploit them (Akers, Sellers, Jennings 2021: 34). General strain theory (Agnew 1992; 2006: 3–25) provides a complementary perspective by suggesting that socioeconomic pressures such as poverty, unemployment and inequality generate strain, which can increase the likelihood of criminal behaviour. In the South African context, these structural pressures interact with opportunity structures to shape offender decision-making. RAT therefore explains how motivated offenders act upon situational opportunities, while general strain theory helps explain the underlying conditions that generate this motivation.

Importantly, the dimensions presented in the comparative framework do not operate independently, but are structurally interconnected. The higher degree of organisation associated with livestock theft is directly related to rural guardianship conditions, spatial dispersion and the need to access illicit markets. Similarly, the opportunistic and time-sensitive nature of housebreaking reflects urban routine activity patterns and predictable periods of reduced guardianship. Understanding

these interrelationships strengthens the explanatory power of the comparative framework.

For housebreaking, the evidence highlights that offending is closely linked to urban routine cycles, particularly daytime household vacancy. Offenders rely on predictable patterns of work and school attendance, selecting targets during periods of low occupancy. This aligns with broader empirical findings that urban residential burglary is driven by temporal gaps in guardianship and offenders' ability to identify low-risk windows of opportunity (Demombynes, Özler 2005: 280; Mbonambi 2023: 288).

By contrast, livestock theft unfolds within a rural opportunity ecology, where guardianship failures are structural rather than temporal. Sparse population density, long distances between farms, inconsistent supervision, weak livestock identification systems and border vulnerabilities collectively create conditions in which livestock can be stolen, moved, slaughtered or disguised with a relatively low risk of immediate detection. These patterns are consistent with rural criminological findings that emphasise weak guardianship, geographic dispersion and heightened vulnerability in agricultural settings (Osborne 2015: 91; Bunei, Barasa 2017: 255; Clack, Minnaar 2018: 128).

A further key distinction lies in the degree of organisation and offender capability. Housebreaking often emerges from short-term economic pressures and may involve impulsivity, peer influence and substance dependency. While some housebreaking incidents involve planning, the overall organisational demands remain comparatively low. Livestock theft, however, requires a higher level of coordination, labour and logistical capacity – including the use of transport, document manipulation and disposal networks – reflecting a more structured form of acquisitive offending (Zinn 2008: 63; Doorewaard 2020: 185; Fumba, Magadze 2022: 86).

The comparative patterns also emphasise that economic motive alone is insufficient to explain variations in offender behaviour. Instead, economic pressures interact with opportunity structures: vacant households create opportunities for burglary, whereas market demand and rural vulnerabilities shape livestock theft. This supports the view that opportunity is a central explanatory factor in acquisitive crime, but one that manifests differently across contexts (Osborne 2015: 120; Argun, Dağlar 2016: 1192; Clack, Maluleke 2024: 160).

Finally, the comparison highlights the importance of studying property crimes not as isolated offence types, but as behaviours embedded within broader social, spatial and economic systems. Integrating insights from environmental criminology, rural criminology and offender profiling strengthens our understanding of how offenders navigate their environments and take decisions. This integrated approach provides a more nuanced basis for developing targeted, context-appropriate prevention strategies that reflect the distinct ecologies of urban and rural crime (Hesselink 2012: 197; Donnermeyer 2022: 32; Weisheit 2022: 221).

7. Limitations

The three sources are empirically rich but not directly comparable in sampling design. Fumba and Magadze's (2022: 51–67) evidence is based on ex-offenders and community leaders in a single municipality. At the same time, Mbonambi's (2023: 283–296) findings reflect stakeholder perceptions in a Durban policing precinct, and Doorewaard's (2020: 178–191) theft profile is derived from docket and STU-linked evidence and sample-specific offender interviews. Accordingly, the comparison is best interpreted as a behavioural synthesis rather than a statistical generalisation to all offenders nationwide.

8. Recommendations

The synthesis indicates that the acquisitive crimes of housebreaking and livestock theft are best understood through offence-specific opportunity structures rather than through generic economic or routine activity (Doorewaard 2020: 178–191; Fumba, Magadze 2022: 51–61; Mbonambi 2023: 284–296). A key implication for criminological scholarship is the need to theoretically differentiate acquisitive crimes that are superficially similar but behaviourally distinct, as treating housebreaking and livestock theft as equivalent risks obscures meaningful variation in organisation, timing logic and offender capability (Doorewaard 2020; Mbonambi 2023). Consequently, the following recommendations are proposed.

Research should further develop comparative, opportunity-based analyses across offence types, particularly within rural–urban continuums (Bowen 2009: 35; Weisheit 2022: 229). While this article adopts an offence-based comparative approach, more systematic comparative designs incorporating offender interviews, spatial analysis and market-chain examination would strengthen the explanatory power and more precisely identify converging and diverging behavioural mechanisms (Nelken 2011: 399; Doorewaard 2020: 289).

The findings stress the value of offender-centred and situational data in understanding stock theft, an area where empirical evidence remains limited and fragmented (Doorewaard 2020: 288; Mzingelwa, Mutula 2025: 384). Expanded use of offender profiling, docket analysis and linked enforcement data would contribute to more robust, evidence-based behaviour and help address the gaps identified in existing reviews of research on livestock theft (Mzingelwa, Mutula 2025: 384).

The discussion highlights the importance of incorporating market dynamics and disposal opportunities into theoretical and empirical analyses of livestock theft, as these factors translate economic motives into actionable criminal opportunities (Doorewaard 2020: 288; Clack, Maluleke 2024: 165). Future studies should therefore extend beyond incident-level explanations to examine downstream conditions

such as informal meat markets, regulatory gaps and transport infrastructure that facilitate livestock theft (Doorewaard 2020).

Lastly, the uneven and siloed nature of the current evidence base points to the need for greater methodological integration across criminological subfields, particularly between urban crime research, rural criminology and agricultural crime studies (Bowen 2009: 36; Donnermeyer 2022: 35; Weisheit 2022: 229). Comparative synthesis of this kind helps reduce theoretical fragmentation and supports the development of more coherent explanations of acquisitive offending across contexts (Nelken 2011: 400).

Final remarks

This study broadens the understanding of property-related offender profiles by systematically comparing housebreaking and livestock theft in the South African context. The analysis demonstrates that, despite operating in different environments, both offender groups are fundamentally motivated by financial gain and rely on situational opportunities to achieve it. This aligns with international routine activity theory findings, which show that acquisitive offending is driven less by deep-seated criminal pathology and more by the convergence of availability, visibility and weak guardianship (Argun, Dağlar 2016: 1193; Akers, Sellers, Jennings 2021: 34). At the same time, meaningful distinctions emerge in levels of organisation, temporal logic and operational requirements, underscoring that these crimes cannot be viewed as uniform manifestations of property crime (Osborne 2015: 151).

The comparison illustrates that housebreaking is shaped primarily by occupancy-based guardianship patterns, consistent with Felson's argument that everyday activity rhythms create predictable "systematic accidents" in crime opportunities (Felson 1987: 996). Livestock theft, by contrast, occurs within a rural opportunity ecology structured by mobility, concealment and market facilitation, echoing regional evidence that livestock crime exploits dispersed guardianship and accessible sales channels (Bunei, Barasa 2017: 230). This rural logic is further supported by macro-level research demonstrating that agricultural theft patterns correspond with broader ecological factors such as population density, mobility and target concentration (Osborne 2015: 152).

A central contribution of this study is showing that offender behaviour is shaped not only by opportunity availability, but also by the quality and process of guardianship. Contemporary RAT scholarship highlights that controllers do not merely exist or fail to exist; their effectiveness varies according to relationality, relativity and responsibility (Schaefer, Mazerolle 2017: 267). The findings in this study reflect these dynamics: urban burglary thrives when household routines

create temporary guardianship gaps, whereas rural livestock theft persists where social distance, weak relational ties and low collective responsibility diminish the likelihood of effective intervention. This alignment strengthens the theoretical significance of integrating process-based guardianship into the analysis of rural crime.

By drawing these comparisons, the study demonstrates how identifying convergences and divergences across offender typologies enriches both environmental criminology and rural crime scholarship. Comparative insight enables theory to be applied in various settings, supports context-sensitive understandings of offender decision-making and strengthens explanations for why similar economic motives manifest differently across place, opportunity structure and social organisation. Such integrative analysis also echoes calls within rural criminology for comparative approaches to overcome siloed, single-offence literatures and to advance collaborative, empirically grounded research across contexts.

Practically, the study highlights the need for differentiated yet complementary crime-prevention strategies. For urban housebreaking, interventions must align with occupancy patterns, guardianship visibility and rapid response. For livestock theft, prevention requires stronger rural guardianship networks, relational ties and livestock identification, as well as the disruption of marketchain facilitators – interventions consistent with both regional criminological research and macroopportunity models. These findings also reinforce concerns regarding the under-recognition of livestock theft in media and policy agendas, which can distort resource allocation and skew enforcement priorities. Ultimately, this work shows that nuanced, comparative profiling not only deepens theoretical understanding, but also supports more grounded, context-appropriate preventive strategies. It contributes to a growing movement within South African criminology to recognise rural crime as a complex, opportunity-driven phenomenon requiring empirical precision and analytical integration rather than broad generalisation.

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