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STUDENT CRIMINAL VICTIMISATION: A CASE OF SOUTH AFRICA**Anathi Beauty Mabungela ^{1*}, Davids Denver ², Nyusani Sixolile ³, Sonwabiso Gwabeni ⁴,
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Abstract. The conventional perception of universities as tranquil spaces has been challenged by the recent increase in campus-related violence in South Africa. The rise in homicides, violent protests, and acts of self-directed violence has raised concerns among various stakeholders in higher education. The effectiveness of university policies and security measures has been the subject of numerous studies, as student safety and security remain ongoing concerns. This paper focuses on the role of security personnel in ensuring student safety at the University of South Africa. The study will be conducted using a secondary desktop study, employing PRISMA analysis. Routine Activity Theory will be used to analyse the research subject and provide insight into its current reality. This paper examines the role of security personnel in preventing students from becoming victims of crime. Utilising a systematic approach, this research seeks to enhance campus safety and security. The findings underscore that a combination of environmental, institutional, and behavioural factors influences Campus security. Poor infrastructure, including inadequate lighting and non-functional cameras, weakens safety. It is recommended that students refrain from using headphones, avoid walking alone at night, and move in groups to remain vigilant and reduce the risk of becoming targets. Additionally, the university community must work together to strengthen security measures and create a safer campus environment.

Keywords: campus violence; security personnel; Maslow's hierarchy of needs; Routine Activity Theory

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1. Introduction

Globally on university campuses, there are a number of safety issues (Ivančik & Andrassy, 2023). Security is a fundamental requirement for the development of both individuals and society. It is essential for the stability, development, and well-being of any population. In general, the term "security" is defined as a protection against vulnerability, violence, distress, and want, which all impede a citizen's progress and existential well-being. The term is used in various contexts. The absence of anxiety implies safety and want in the hierarchy of human needs. Criminal victimisation on university campuses poses significant psychological, academic, and physical obstacles. Students experience substantial psychological, financial, and academic repercussions as a result of their interactions with criminality, which is consistent with Cognitive Behavioural Theory.

Victimisation is a traumatic experience that frequently leads to long-term distress and emotional suffering. Victimised students report a variety of consequences, including chronic anxiety and frustration, physical injuries, and property loss (McGarry & Walklate, 2015; Janssen et al., 2021; Moletsane, 2023). White (2019) further states that campuses have experienced a variety of incidents, such as burglary, larceny, physical and sexual assault, and the use of weapons. In response, students implement cognitive and behavioural coping strategies. These include refraining from donning headphones while walking, avoiding hazardous areas, and walking in groups (Sumi et al., 2021; Maffini & Dillard, 2022; Mwiti et al., 2023). They have also suggested that institutional safety be improved through the implementation of CCTV surveillance, increased patrolling, and more rapid response mechanisms by university security (Moult, 2019; Roberts et al., 2022; Caulfield et al., 2025). In conjunction with effective security officer interventions and law enforcement support, these protective behaviours can decrease the probability of victimisation. Student mobility is influenced by the dread of crime, resulting in learners' avoidance of specific locations or their restriction of movement during particular hours. In contrast, regions that are perceived as secure are more likely to encourage extended stays and engagement beyond academic pursuits. Students are unable to fully utilise campus facilities due to crime-related fears, despite universities being open and accessible spaces that promote intellectual, physical, and social development (Makhaye et al., 2023).

In South Africa, institutions of higher learning have experienced a substantial increase in illicit activities over the past two decades, which is a cause for concern (Kandala, 2018). Despite the expectation that universities would provide a more secure environment than other educational institutions, they continue to encounter criminal activity that is comparable to that of township high schools (Mugume, 2017). In some instances, students are killed by peers or intruders who unlawfully obtain access to the premises, and they are frequently victimised on campus and in their residences. Higher education institutions are susceptible to illicit activities due to the numerous hazards they encounter, such as bullying, robbery, burglary, and sexual harassment. Institutional responses to past criminality that may not always be rehabilitative are underscored by the exclusion or barriers to admission that students with criminal records face in some instances (Custer, 2018; Semple et al., 2021). However, institutional policies and the efficacy of campus security structures continue to bear the majority of the responsibility for safety. Consequently, institutional management must prioritise campus safety (Mugume, 2017), and security personnel are indispensable in this regard. Their visibility, responsiveness, training, and collaboration with students are essential for minimising threats and maintaining a conducive environment for personal development and learning on campus.

This systematic evaluation examines the role of security officers in addressing criminal victimisation among university students, with a specific focus on campuses in South Africa's Kwa Zulu Natal Province. The study aimed to examine the underlying factors contributing to the vulnerability of students and identify the prevalent forms of victimisation they experience. The results indicate that students are at an increased risk as a result of a combination of personal lifestyle choices, inadequate campus security infrastructure, minimal guardianship, and high crime rates in the adjacent areas. This review emphasises the importance of security officers in crime prevention. It emphasises the necessity of enhanced institutional strategies that facilitate their efforts to safeguard students and improve campus safety by synthesising the existing literature.

2. Problem Statement

On the KwaZulu-Natal University campus, several safety issues exist. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) has implemented several security measures to reduce campus crime (Mkhize et al., 2022). Nevertheless, several criminal incidents have occurred, undermining the efforts of university security agencies and casting a negative light on the campus's reputation. These kinds of incidents not only make the university community members feel afraid, but they also damage the university's campus and South Africa's reputation (Mkhize et al., 2022). In recent years, police brutality and criminal victimisation have become urgent worldwide concerns, prompting demands for international initiatives to safeguard vulnerable people (Mensah et al., 2023). Academics argue that cultivating

a culture of human rights within law enforcement agencies may lead to enhanced policing efficacy and improved public safety outcomes (Champion, 2001; Annang et al., 2025). Nonetheless, higher education institutions have emerged as arenas of violence worldwide. This underscores the necessity of adopting a comprehensive strategy that fosters collaboration among many stakeholders to safeguard students against harassment within and surrounding university communities.

Makhaye et al. (2023) identified female students as victims of sexual assault at higher education institutions, citing inadequate security presence on the campuses examined. Participants in the survey indicated that private security firms infrequently performed patrols on campus (ibid). Students underscored the necessity for visible security staff, particularly during university activities and weekends, when occurrences of sexual offences apparently escalate. The same study participants criticised the university's security measures, arguing that despite the availability of resources such as contracted private security, psychology departments, and anti-harassment policies, these resources are not effectively implemented (ibid). The elevated levels of violence in South African universities signify a more extensive crisis within the education system, undermining the conventional global perception of universities as secure environments for learning and intellectual development (Hughes et al., 2019; Ajayi et al., 2021). Campus violence manifests in various ways, including as gender-based violence (GBV), self-harm, physical assault, and property damage, all of which detrimentally affect the educational atmosphere and jeopardise the safety of students and staff (Hamby, 2017; Griner et al., 2020; Mutongoza, 2023). The anxiety experienced by both students and instructors signifies a prevalent apprehension about campus safety. Despite numerous attempts to address these issues, their efficacy remains contentious (Scott & Hargreaves, 2015; Mootz et al., 2023; Jansen et al., 2024). Although violence on university campuses is a worldwide issue, South Africa faces particularly severe and understudied challenges in this domain (Burton & Guidry, 2021; Hannan & MacDonald, 2023). These challenges reflect broader socioeconomic issues, as South African communities contend with elevated crime and violence rates.

In instances of rape, arrest rates might be as low as 50%, and convictions are obtained in less than 10% of recorded cases. This widespread violence has resulted in its normalisation, fostering a culture in which violence is increasingly regarded as an acceptable mode of communication, especially in educational settings (Hamby, 2017). Despite universities implementing strengthened security measures, including improved lighting and stricter access control, violence continues to be a pervasive and entrenched problem. This persistence highlights the inadequacies of existing interventions (Davids & Waghid, 2016; Ajayi et al., 2021; Mutongoza, 2023; Mootz et al., 2023). Consequently, there have been persistent demands for enhancements, including the use of sophisticated security technologies such as fingerprint-controlled access (Singh & Ramutsheli, 2016; Mutongoza, 2023).

3. Literature Review

In the past, educational institutions were regarded as a haven for learning, free from criminal activity. However, the harsh reality is that they are no longer as secure as they were traditionally envisioned, due to the rising number of crimes committed there. Numerous studies have been conducted on the perception of crime and campus safety among university students (Jacobsen, 2017; Jennings et al., 2019). Although some studies have found a positive perception of campus safety, others have discovered a negative perception among university and college students. For example, a survey conducted by Merianos et al. (2017) on campus safety perception found that the majority of students reported feeling secure on campus. In contrast, about 16% of students reported feeling insecure on campus in a separate study (Jennings et al., 2019). The following crimes were of particular concern to students: larceny, stalking, physical violence, and sexual violence (Jennings et al., 2019).

Campus Crime in South Africa

The variances in the form and intensity of crimes committed on university campuses raise concerns regarding their impact on students and the broader university community. In South Africa, the effects of crime on university

campuses are also experienced by university security service providers, commonly known as Campus Protective Services (CPS). Despite offering analogous services on university campuses nationwide, the organisational name of these security service providers may vary from institution to institution. Irrespective of their operational methods and the services they provide, the security challenges they encounter may be similar (du Toit, 2019). Research indicates that crime has proliferated on university campuses in South Africa due to the rising number of students seeking and gaining admission annually (du Toit, 2019). The ratio of students to campus security personnel is markedly imbalanced. Inadequate security provisions exacerbate the disproportionate population ratio.

Specific campuses have malfunctioning or ineffective security apparatus, including defective Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) systems and batons, which hinder the campus security personnel's ability to execute their responsibilities efficiently. Furthermore, students' inexperience or lack of understanding of the prevalence of crimes on university campuses has rendered many of them susceptible to criminal activities. The prevalent offences on university campuses include assaults, rapes, homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, kidnapping, sexual harassment, murder, and drug-related crimes. Others benefit from technological improvements and the impact of globalisation (Rothe & Friedrichs, 2014). These encompass cyberstalking, cybercrime, cyberbullying, and unlawful distribution of copyrighted materials (Makhaye et al., 2023).

Need for Physical Security on Campus

Studies have demonstrated that sentiments of insecurity in higher education correlate with elevated depression and diminished self-esteem (Maffin & Dillard, 2022). Regrettably, the majority of students, particularly the victims, frequently hesitate to report these offences to university officials due to apprehension (Dastile, 2020). Consequently, physical security is crucial in mitigating crime at the institution (Moerschell & Novak, 2020). It is essential to guarantee the protection of staff, students, security personnel, construction workers, and university administration from criminal activities within the institution. Physical security measures at a university encompass a wide array of strategies to discourage prospective invaders, including advancements and updates in alarm systems and surveillance footage. Effectively executed physical security safeguards the facility, assets, and equipment from theft, sexual assault, assault, homicide, vandalism, and robbery.

The Perception of Safety and Security on University Campuses and its Effects on Students

Even though the majority of universities utilised protection service companies to ensure the safety and security of their campuses and off-campus residences, this approach had minimal effect on the reduction of campus crime, as evidenced by the increase in reported incidents of rape, theft, robbery, assault, and murder among students (Crawford, 2017). Despite the university's efforts to prevent crime by hiring numerous security personnel, many students are still struggling to come to terms with the fact that crime is still on the rise on their campuses. There is a widespread belief that the proliferation of these crimes is due to the inadequate screening of visitors and intruders at the gate. Furthermore, there is the presumption that the university's crime rate has increased due to insufficient nighttime patrols for students attending lectures and library classes. There have been numerous complaints about the dim lighting at the university, as the majority of the area is quite dark, particularly when approaching specific university structures. Consequently, there is a perceived lack of safety on campuses (ibid). Additionally, there are no security cameras or security guards outside to patrol and monitor particular residences, and some of the roads leading to them are not equipped with functional streetlights (ibid). Reports indicate that the Protection Services Department received a report from a criminal justice researcher identifying the factors that contribute to crime within the university (ibid).

The university community's perceptions of safety and dread of crime are also heightened as a result of campus crimes. Personal factors (e.g., age, race, and sex) and contextual factors (e.g., neighbourhood or campus characteristics, location of residence, and time of day) are among the numerous variables that influence the commission of such offences. Criminal activities on campus not only degrade the character of the learning

environment but also diminish the positive activities of individuals affiliated with the institution (Makhaye et al. 2023). Prospective students may be discouraged from enrolling in specific universities due to high campus crime rates, and parents may be similarly discouraged from enrolling their children in institutions that may be suitable (Makhaye et al., 2023). The public's perception of official crime rates was reasonably accurate, as indicated by the perceptions of crime.

Nevertheless, the university administration generally does not prioritise the severity of these crimes and reported incidents. The dread of crime at universities is influenced by a variety of personal and contextual factors, including the adequacy of lights on campus and vulnerability. The fear of crime on campus is a result of the low prospect, lack of cameras, and a significant amount of soil, which can be used as a refuge and raping areas by criminals. Consequently, students will be more apprehensive about crime when there is a low prospect, such as a lack of a clear open view of the area.

Types of Criminal Victimization Among Students

The issue of victimisation on college campuses has been the subject of extensive research and has been classified as a crime by a variety of experts. Arson, murder, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, weapon offences, substance misuse, sex offences, hate crimes, smoking, and alcohol use/abuse are among the most severe forms of campus crime that have been examined (Zheng, 2022). Nearly 28,500 criminal incidents were documented at postsecondary institutions in the United States in 2018. In 2021, the National Centre for Education Statistics reported that 12,300 forcible sex offences (43% of the total) occurred, as well as 9,600 burglaries (34%), 3,100 larceny (11%), 2,200 aggravated assaults (8%), and 800 robberies (3%). The frequency of sexual assaults on college campuses is alarmingly high. By the conclusion of their fourth year, 8.4% of males and 31.5% of females reported experiencing sexual assault, while approximately 30,000 college students were surveyed (Cantor et al., 2019). Scholars have long examined the factors that influence the formal reporting of victims' experiences, as they are associated with the prevalence of victimisation and non-reporting. Numerous factors contribute to the reluctance of victims to come forward, including a lack of faith in the police's ability to provide sufficient assistance, dependence on the offender, and feelings of guilt or fear (Daigle et al., 2016; Felix et al., 2021).

Students' Criminal Victimization: Contributing Factors

Global studies have identified the most robust correlation between criminal victimisation and alcohol and substance addiction on college campuses. Various forms of violence on campuses, such as larceny, vandalism, sexual assault, and battles, are the result of students' excessive alcohol consumption. These incidents are exacerbated by the perceived lack of self-control among intoxicated individuals, which in turn promotes such behaviour. Additionally, social factors contributing to sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of criminal victimisation on college campuses include inadequate monitoring, geographic isolation, and accessibility, as well as insufficient illumination, security, and campus-wide cameras (Dastile, 2020). The victim's relationship with the offender is another victim-related factor that can increase the likelihood of sexual harassment, burglary, and rape among female university students (Bohmer et al., 2021). The notion that strangers typically commit assaults is directly contradicted by the research conducted by Bohmer et al. (2021), which indicates that crimes on university campuses often involve familiar men and women (Bohmer et al., 2021).

4. Theoretical framework

The authors have selected routine activity theory to analyse criminal victimisation from a specific perspective. Routine activity theory offers a critical framework for interpreting and explaining the trends and contributing factors of criminal victimisation in South African universities. Initially developed by Felson & Cohen (1980), the theory elucidates the increase in aggregate predatory crime rates in the United States following World War II. The theory posits that criminal victimisation occurs when three essential elements are present: a motivated offender, an incompetent or absent guardian of property or individuals, and an appropriate target (White, 2019).

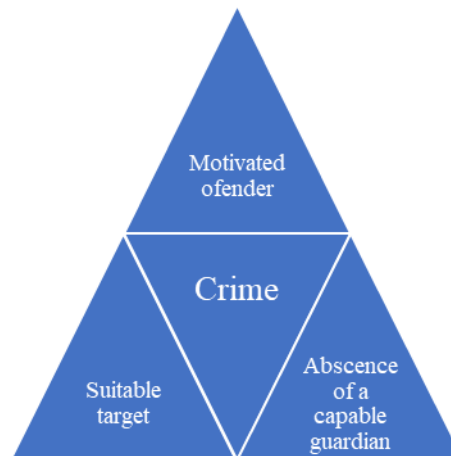


Figure 1. The Crime Triangle – Routine Activity Theory

Source: authors, based on reviewed literature

Motivated Offender

Motivated offenders are individuals who possess both the capacity and the motivation to engage in criminal activities (Felson & Lawrence, 1980). Motivated offenders are students who engage in excessive drinking at parties with the explicit intention of perpetrating crimes or whose cognitive abilities, such as self-control and intentions, are so significantly impaired by alcohol that they demonstrate a loss of control, according to this study.

Suitable Target

A suitable target may be a person or property that a motivated offender can easily identify and interact with to victimise. The offender's specific intention and the availability of opportunities may influence their decision to select one target over another. Burglary and theft can be committed against nonhuman objects, such as expensive cell phones or valuable necklaces, while a person possessing or wearing such items may attract the attention of a motivated offender. Nevertheless, the target's appropriateness is the primary factor in determining whether the offence will be committed.

Absence of Capable Guardians

Individuals or objects that are capable of deterring illicit behaviour through their mere presence in space and time may serve as capable guardians. Even when a motivated offender has selected a suitable target, this form of informal or formal guardianship can prevent malfeasance. For example, the proximity of a police officer may serve as an incentive for a potential criminal to reconsider initiating an assault. Security cameras, burglary alarms, fences, and walls are examples of nonhuman objects that can serve as guardians.

The present study connects with routine activity theory through an analysis of the interactions among three factors that contribute to criminal activity on campuses: motivated offenders, available targets, and the absence of guardians. It highlights how students can be victims of crime and suggests ways to make South Africa safer, such as encouraging anti-bullying initiatives and critical thinking skills. The research aims to assist universities in creating effective crime prevention plans by examining these variables on remote campuses. Ultimately, the theory provides a framework for understanding campus crime and vulnerabilities, helping universities develop effective crime prevention strategies.

5. Methodology

Search Strategy

A structured search was conducted using various academic databases and search engines, including ResearchGate, Google Scholar, and numerous Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)-accredited journal platforms. The search strategy employed Boolean operators and keyword combinations to refine the results. The primary search criteria were "criminal victimisation," "university students," and "impact of security officers." To encompass a broader range of pertinent literature, the following terms were included: "safety," "security," "institutions of higher learning," "sexual harassment," "gender-based violence (GBV)," "robbery," "South African Police Service (SAPS)," and "community policing forums."

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: were published within the past decade; discussed one or more of the main concepts outlined above; and were focused on contexts within South Africa.

The following criteria were used to exclude studies: those originating outside of South Africa; those published more than 15 years ago; and those not aligning with the thematic focus of safety, security, or related victimisation issues within higher education institutions.

Screening and Selection Procedures

All publications that were identified were vetted in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines. Before conducting full-text assessments, titles and abstracts were evaluated for relevance. The PRISMA flow diagram was used to record the quantity of studies identified, screened, excluded, and subsequently incorporated for qualitative synthesis.

Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis methodology was implemented. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore phenomena through the perspectives of participants in their natural settings, offering an in-depth understanding (Mabungela & Davids, 2024). This involved the iterative reading and coding of the included studies to identify recurring patterns, emergent themes, and gaps in the literature. Concurrent data collection and analysis were conducted to facilitate the real-time familiarisation with content and the refinement of emerging categories. Themes such as student vulnerability, institutional response, crime prevention measures, and campus security were identified, categorised, and grouped into broader concepts. A total of 55 articles were utilised after careful consideration and screening. The screening procedure, as outlined in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram below (see Table 1 and Figure 1), served as a guide for this study. The screening process narrowed the data down to three themes, which are discussed below (see Figure 2).

Table 1. Documentary Matrix

Block 1	Block 2	Block 3
Security officers	Criminal victimisation	Lecturer Halls
Campus patrol	Theft	Students Residents
Surveillance systems	Assault	Recreational areas
	Substance abuse	
	Fear of crime	

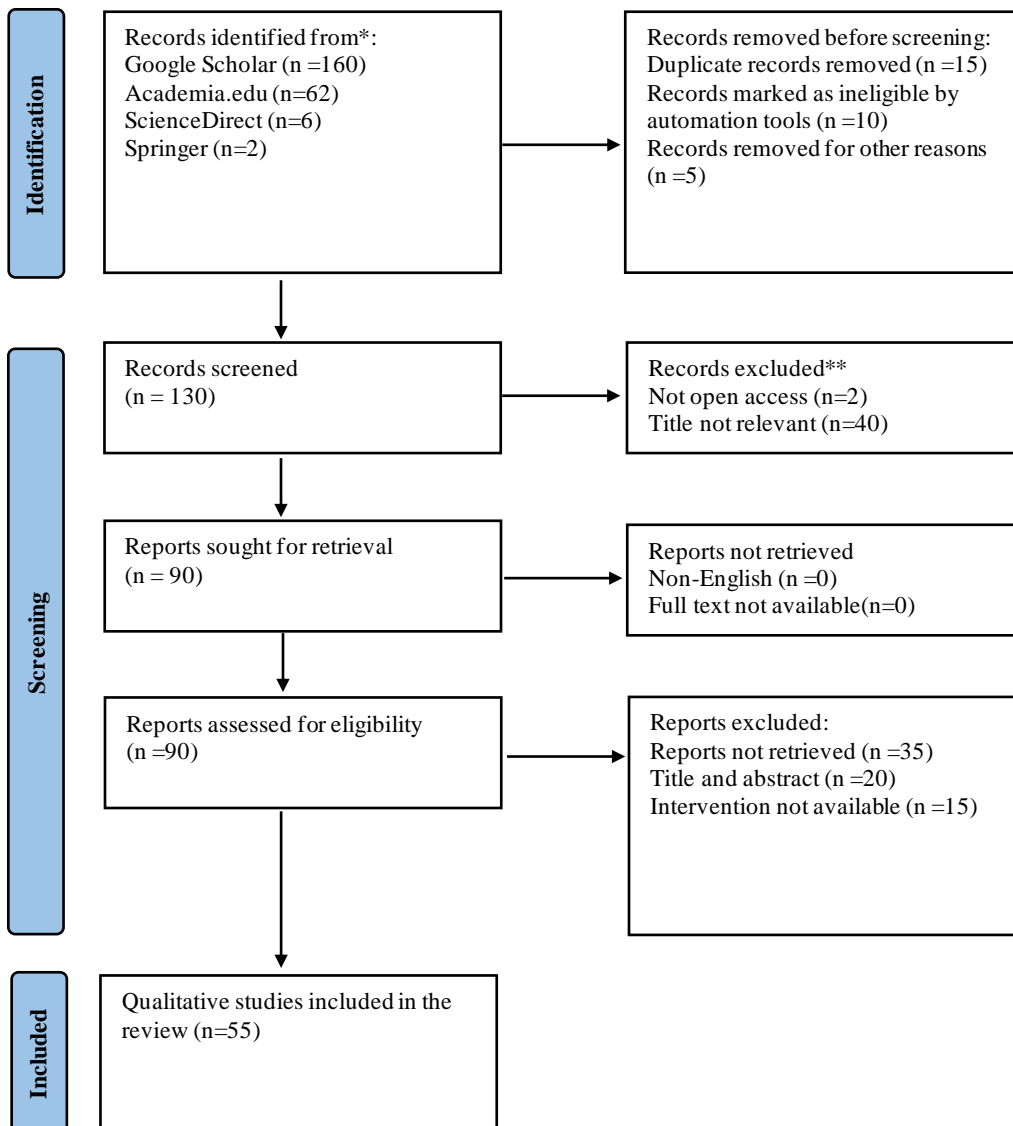


Figure 2. Prisma Diagram

6. Discussion

The systematic review indicates that criminal victimisation among university students is both pervasive and multifaceted, encompassing a variety of offences, including robbery, sexual harassment, assault, and rape (Fisher & Sloan, 2022). These crimes are not only prevalent but also significantly underreported, primarily as a result of students' lack of confidence in the capacity of campus authorities to respond effectively, as well as dread and shame (Daigle et al., 2016; Felix et al., 2021). The review also emphasises the increasing prevalence of cyber-related offences, such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking, and digital theft crimes that traditional campus security models are inadequately equipped to address (Rothe & Friedrichs, 2014). The operational and structural deficiencies of campus security systems are among the most noteworthy discoveries.

Numerous universities are plagued by inadequate student-to-security personnel ratios and inadequate physical infrastructure, including non-functional CCTV systems, dimly illuminated walkways, and unsecured access points (du Toit, 2019). These deficiencies compromise the security officers' capacity to detect and prevent crimes effectively. Students continue to report feeling insecure, particularly in isolated areas of campus and at night, despite efforts to outsource security services to private firms (Crawford, 2017). Students' susceptibility to crime was also identified as a significant factor, influenced by environmental risk factors such as the absence of street illumination, the lack of patrols, and the darkness of passageways. Moreover, substance abuse, particularly the misuse of alcohol and narcotics, was consistently associated with incidents of sexual misconduct, vandalism, and violence on campuses. These actions not only jeopardise the safety of the individuals involved but also jeopardise the safety of the broader campus community.

The review also observes that in numerous instances of sexual assault and harassment, the perpetrators are not strangers, but rather individuals who are familiar to the victims, frequently colleagues or acquaintances (Bohmer et al., 2021). This dynamic complicates the reporting and investigation processes, emphasising the necessity of security personnel receiving training in the management of sensitive interpersonal offences. Furthermore, the efficacy of any security system is compromised by students' general scepticism regarding the university's commitment to addressing criminal incidents, irrespective of its physical structure or staffing levels. Finally, it was determined that security officers frequently lack the institutional support, specialised training, and authority necessary to fulfil their responsibilities effectively. Numerous individuals are inadequately equipped to confront the psychological aspects of victimisation or to respond to intricate crimes, including cybercrime and sexual violence (Connell, 2016).

Recommendations

Efforts to address student victimisation are likely to remain fragmented and insufficient in the absence of a comprehensive institutional strategy that unites the efforts of security officers, student services, and university leadership. Suggestions: Universities should enhance and augment their security measures, including the use of CCTV cameras and increased patrols. Students must take self-protection measures, such as walking in groups or with peers, being more vigilant, and avoiding the use of headphones while walking. Collaboration among various stakeholders is impossible to overstate. The safety of the campus population must be ensured through cooperation between the HEI, private security companies, SAPS, community members, and other stakeholders. The HEI is committed to the strict implementation of its sexual harassment policy to safeguard its population, including those within its membership. While the majority of institutions are commended for devising the most effective policies to protect their members from violations, these policies are rendered impractical if they are not implemented.

Limitations of the study

Numerous constraints necessitate acknowledgement in this investigation. It is a systematic review that exclusively utilises secondary data from the existing literature, which may exhibit varying levels of methodological rigour, scope, and quality. The depth of contextual comprehension regarding operational challenges and lived experiences is restricted by the absence of primary empirical data, such as interviews or surveys with students, security officers, or university administrators. Furthermore, the review concentrates on literature from South Africa and specific international contexts, which may impact the generalisability of the results to universities in other regions or with varying institutional environments. It is also challenging to assess the long-term trends or the sustained impact of security interventions due to the scarcity of longitudinal studies. Additionally, despite the growing concern of cybercrime on campuses, there is a lack of research on the extent to which campus security personnel are prepared to address such crimes. Consequently, there is a lacuna in the evaluation of their evolving role in the digital era.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that campus security at South African universities, particularly at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, is undermined by a complex mix of environmental, institutional, and behavioural factors. Inadequate infrastructure, such as poor lighting and malfunctioning security systems, combined with insufficient patrols and weak policy enforcement, contributes to a heightened risk of student victimisation. Risky student behaviours, including late-night movement and substance use, further increase vulnerability, especially in areas lacking proper guardianship. The lack of coordination among stakeholders and the underreporting of crimes due to fear, shame, or mistrust in campus authorities conceals the accurate scale of the problem. Despite the presence of security measures, their limited effectiveness highlights the need for a more comprehensive, coordinated, and well-resourced approach to campus safety that addresses both physical and psychological dimensions of student well-being.

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