“You are reminded that you don’t have power”: The victimization of security guards working in Gauteng, South Africa

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Security guards face victimization in the workplace as well as through the nature of their employment as first responders to criminal activity. Consequently, these risks threaten their job satisfaction, well-being, and turnover rate in the industry. Exacerbating the problem further is the dearth of scientific studies and reliable reports on the victimization of security guards specific to the South African context. Thus, the goal of the study is to explore the victimization of security guards working in Gauteng, South Africa. This paper is informed by 14 qualitative one-on-one interviews with security guards. The narrative accounts provide rich and descriptive data which were thematically analyzed. The findings suggest that security guards experience victimization in terms of their working conditions and crime victimization while on duty. Moreover, the implications of victimization are exposed. Interestingly, a recurring theme throughout the paper is the sense of powerlessness experienced by the participants as substantiated through literature. This paper makes a unique contribution to industry and academia due to the dearth of scientific studies and reports on the victimization of security guards specific to the South African context. Additionally, the paper advocates for working towards sustainable solutions through work engagement, awareness, training, and effective management strategies.

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Introduction

In the private security industry, a high turnover rate is directly correlated to job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is dependent on factors such as adequate remuneration, ongoing and effective training, a challenging work environment, satisfactory resources, and clear regulations (Nalla & Cobbina, 2017). In addition, security guards face the risk of victimization in the workplace as well as the nature of their employment as first responders to criminal activity (Nalla et al., 2017). Consequently, these risks threaten the security personnel’s job satisfaction, well-being, and turnover rate in the industry.

According to a global survey on perceptions surrounding crime, Tshwane, and Johannesburg (Gauteng) are listed as the third and fourth most dangerous cities in the world (Waterworth, 2021). The South African crime statistics (2022/2023) reported an increase in contact crimes by 18.5 per cent, sexual offences by 11.0 per cent and other serious crimes by 19.9% (South African Police Service [SAPS], 2023). These crime statistics showcase the need for private security in South Africa. Consequently, the number of active private security guards outnumbers the number of South African Police Service (SAPS) officials by 383 per cent (BusinessTech, 2021).

People employed in protective services are vulnerable to violence at work (Buckley, 2016). Moreover, security professions involve work exhibiting a high threat of violence (Danielsson & Kääriäinen, 2017; Gadegaard et al., 2018; Heiskanen, 2007; Herrmann et al., 2022; Koeppen & Hopkins, 2021). Globally, the United States (U.S.) National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) recognises private security employment as the third-highest violence-exposed occupation (Herrmann et al., 2022). The nature of a security
guard’s work includes uniformity, working alone, regular human contact, shift work, handling valuables, and exposure to work settings where clients abuse substances and may act out in aggression. Due to the occupation being seen as menial, inferior, and held by uneducated individuals, security guards encounter verbal abuse, humiliation, and degradation from clients, managers, and employers (Danielsson & Kääriäinen, 2017; Hermann et al., 2022; Leino, 2013, Piispa & Hulkko, 2010). Thus, these risks expose security guards to various types of victimization at work. Comparatively, SAPS officials are offered an array of support services ranging from social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and doctors (Gumani, 2014). In contrast, security guards are not provided with the same benefits, despite both security guards and SAPS officials being at risk of similar vulnerabilities.

Exacerbating the problem further is the dearth of scientific studies and reliable reports on the victimization of security guards specific to the South African context. Thus, this paper makes a unique contribution as it explores the victimization of security guards as empirically informed by the narrative accounts of 14 security guards working in Gauteng, South Africa. It is organized as follows: an expose on private security in the South Africa context as well as victimization. Thereafter, the methodological framework is outlined and sets the tone for the findings and discussion. The paper concludes with its closing arguments, study limitations, and future insights.

Literature Review

In the South African context, the private security sector plays a pivotal role in safeguarding individuals, businesses, and assets in an environment marked by high crime rates and complex security challenges. This review examines private security in South Africa, with a focus on victimization within the industry. It explores the Victim Precipitation Theory as a framework and legislative measures for regulating victimization.

Private Security in The South African Context

South Africa’s security industry is increasing at a rapid speed and is considered one of the biggest in the world. There are 9000 registered security companies, an estimated 1.5 million qualified security guards, and approximately 450,000 registered active private security guards (Kippie, 2021). The size of the industry increases the victimization vulnerabilities of security guards because regulation of the industry is proving to be difficult to execute (Scheepers, 2019). Regulating and to an extent protecting security guards from any form of victimization is the responsibility of PSIRA which exists in the provisions of section 2 of the Private Security Industry Regulation Act 56 of 2001.

The primary goals of PSIRA include (Republic of South Africa, 2001):

i. Regulating the private security industry.

ii. Exercising effective control over the practice of the occupation of security service providers in the public and national interest.

iii. Promoting a legitimate private security industry that acts in terms of the principles contained in the legislation.

iv. Stimulating a private security industry that is transparent, professional, accountable, equal, and accessible.

v. Encouraging equal opportunity employment practices in the sector

Through the review of these goals, the Act appears silent on the treatment of security guards. While the Security Association of South Africa (SASA) acts as the watchdog in terms of industry compliance, it is noticeable that the role of organized labour unions is not visible in South Africa (SASA, 2022). This exposes the security guards to exploitation and victimization. South African citizens spend approximately R45 billion on private protection services. This amount is a third more than the government expenditure on SAPS (Van Rooyen, 2017). All the while, PSIRA’s vision is for the maintenance of authenticity, fair occupational practices, and transformation of the Private Security Industry (PSIRA, 2023). For the industry to be able to meet the needs of the clients, it needs healthy and well-cared-for personnel.

Victimization

Victimology is a sub-theme of criminology that studies victimization. It examines a victim’s qualities, psychological frame of reference, role in the criminal justice system, and circumstances that increase their vulnerability. Gaining insight into victimology aids in the development of efficient deterrence methods (Newburn, 2017). Victimization denotes the exploitation, harm, or oppression experienced by an individual because of someone’s actions or omissions. Consequently, it results in psychological, emotional, physical, sexual, or economic harm to the victim (Tapley & Davies, 2020). Victimization impedes assumptions most individuals inherently hold; the faith in personal immunity, the view that the world has meaning and purpose as well as positively perceiving oneself. When victimization occurs, it renders the victim powerless as they now realize their vulnerability and helplessness. The world is now viewed as unsafe, insecure, and malevolent. Furthermore, their sense of worth, competence, and self-image are questioned (Janoff-Bulman, 1985).
Three major theories dominate the field of victimization: victim precipitation, lifestyle, and deviant place theory. The following discussion attempts to place the victimization of security guards under the victim precipitation theory.

**Victim precipitation theory**

The victim precipitation theory proposes that certain qualities of a victim may provoke victimization. A victim could be targeted because of ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, gender, or occupation (Magadla & Obioha, 2021). Petherick (2017) puts forth that victims may actively or passively evoke the hostility that leads to their victimization. Passive precipitation is carried out by those who are more powerful than their victims and misuse their power to cause harm and distrust. The perpetrators and victims engage in a power struggle because of the unintentional threat the victims may pose to those in positions of authority.

**Legislation Regulating Victimization in South Africa**

The new Code of Good Practice on the Prevention and Elimination of Harassment in the Workplace, effective as of 18 March 2022 in terms of the Employment Equity Act (EEA) has been published by the Minister of Employment and Labour (Mather, 2022). This Code, on the Handling of Sexual Harassment Cases in the Workplace, revoked the Amended Code of Good Practice. Victimization in the workplace can form part of harassment that is stipulated in the Code.

According to Mather (2022), the ratification of the International Labour Organization’s Convention on the Eliminating of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work in November 2021 by South Africa was due to the publication of the Code. An inclusive, integrated, and gender-responsive approach to violence and harassment in the workplace is to be adopted in ratifying states as required by the Convention. The Convention guides the Code which aims to address the elimination and prevention of disparate harassment all together pervading the workplace.

Mather (2022) further provides a synopsis of the eight pillars of the Code applicable in protecting both the employer and security guards from victimization, which are as follows:

i. The Code applies to all employers and employees, both volunteers and applicants for employment regardless of their sector setting.

ii. Business owners, managers, job seekers, interns, apprentices, volunteers, clients, customers, suppliers, contractors, and any other persons having dealings with a business are included as the perpetrators and victims of harassment.

iii. Employees are protected against harassment by the Code in any work-related setting such as work-related trips and accommodation, training or social activities, and work-related communication.

iv. The concept of harassment is dealt with broadly by the Code, while sexual harassment and racial, ethnic, or social origin harassment are highlighted as specific forms of harassment.

v. According to the Code, ‘harassment’ is known to be unwanted (or unwelcome) conduct harming one’s dignity, creating an unfavourable work environment for employees, and is associated with the discrimination prohibited in terms of section 6(1) of the EEA.

vi. Abuses such as violence, physical abuse, psychological abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, gender-based abuse, and racial abuse are recognised as harassment in the Code, while race, religion, gender, or disability are risk factors of harassment in the workplace.

vii. The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000, the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995, the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993, and the Protected Disclosures Act 26 of 2000, require employers to comply with them to prevent workplace victimization and they are included in other relevant statutes the Code refers to.

viii. Proactive and remedial steps must be taken by employers to prevent victimization of any kind in the workplace, in terms of the Code which includes educating employees about risk factors and various forms of harassment, implementing ongoing awareness programmes, and an appropriate policy addressing harassment.

The Code introduces new requirements that employers will be required to adhere to, failing which they may be found liable in terms of section 60 of the EEA. This means that security guards who find themselves being victimized can report such victimization and such report be pursued following the stipulations of EEA.

**Research and Methodology**

**The goal of the study/research**

The goal of the study is to explore the victimization of security guards working in Gauteng, South Africa. Thus, the study is informed by the following research question, how are security guards working in Gauteng, South Africa victimized?
Research approach and design

The paper follows a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research endeavours to uncover a comprehensive understanding of the research participants as rooted in their specific context. Qualitative research calls for multiple and innovative ways of understanding. The necessity of creating new knowledge is underscored by the increasingly evolving social changes and complexities in society (Leedy & Omrod, 2019; Schurink et al., 2021). The research design involves all the planning and decisions made in the research process (Schurink et al., 2021). A phenomenological research design was used in framing the study. Phenomenology strives to provide explanations for social experiences through the perceptions of the research participants. This is done through the participants’ perspectives, memory, and experiences. Furthermore, these perceptions and experiences can only be conveyed and relayed by the participants themselves. Thus, adding immense value to the study (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

Sampling procedures

A non-probability method and purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used to gain research participants (Strydom, 2021). Purposive sampling targets potential participants based on the purpose of the study. It involves selecting participants who possess typical elements of the population being studied (Strydom, 2021). The authors approached registered security companies and invited their employees to take part in the study. The authors also approached known associates working in the security field to take part in the study. Snowball sampling entails requesting participants who have agreed to take part in the study to nominate potential participants to consider taking part in the study (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). The authors requested the participants who had already been interviewed to recommend known associates to also take part in the study. The unit of analysis consisted of any security guard working in Gauteng, South Africa. No participant was discriminated against based on gender, race, nationality, rank, or language.

Data collection

The study used semi-structured interviews to collect data with 14 participants. All participants were interviewed face-to-face, and interviews were arranged according to their preferences and convenience. Semi-structured interviews, with open-ended questions, were conducted in English and took between 15 and 25 minutes to complete. Notes were made to record emergent thoughts and ideas. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author who conducted the interview, with the permission of the participants. Ethical principles such as informed consent, voluntary participation, avoidance of harm, privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality were observed (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021).

Research sample

The sample consisted of 14 adult security guards working in Gauteng, South Africa. Five females and nine males were interviewed with working experience ranging from 1 to 19 years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
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<td>Participant 7</td>
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<td>Participant 8</td>
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<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Participant 12</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>Participant 13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: Authors

Data analysis

A thematic method was followed to analyze the data. In thematic analysis, patterns that emerge within transcripts are studied (Braun & Clark, 2006). Data were read and re-read, and preliminary codes were identified. Themes and sub-themes were deliberated on and then appraised. Thereafter, the themes were refined, and the findings were written in the form of a research article (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Prominent themes emerging from the data included working conditions, victimization, perceived fear, and safety. Furthermore, a recurring theme of powerlessness was evident across all the identified themes.
Findings and Discussions

The findings and discussion are grouped into the working conditions and crime victimization experienced by the participants while working as security guards. Moreover, the implications of the empirical findings are discussed.

Working conditions

An employee’s working conditions have a direct impact on their health, well-being, and job satisfaction (Morar et al., 2022; Sorensen et al., 2021; Tayali & Sakyi, 2020). Working conditions are a principal factor in maintaining job satisfaction (Taheri et al., 2020). Consequently, an array of benefits yields from healthy working conditions including improved health and job performance and a decline in the overall financial costs of the organization (Morar et al., 2022). Moreover, in a study conducted on government departments in India, it was found that a positive working environment was dependent on friendship and recognition (Taheri et al., 2020). Security guards operate through shift work to maintain succession throughout the day and to ensure uninterrupted guardianship (Morar et al., 2022). In a study conducted on 90 security guards, it was found that stress levels increased drastically during nightshift (Cannizzaro et al., 2020). Factors negatively affecting the well-being of security guards include inadequate support, stressful social interactions, lack of safety, and job strain (Tayali & Sakyi, 2020). Ultimately, these working conditions cultivate frustration, dissatisfaction, and powerlessness. Tumultuous interpersonal relations as expressed by Participants 7 and 8 are highlighted below:

“I started as a security officer, and I was promoted to team leader and that’s where I felt victimized. Security officers were not giving me support because I started as an intern and was then promoted. The security officers did not cooperate or take my instructions because they had little respect for me. Every little thing that I used to do; they would embarrass me. I don’t trust them. I even think they have the potential of poisoning my food because of the deep-seated hatred”. [Participant 7, female, 4 years of working experience]

“We were posted at a different company and our colleagues perceived us as spies. This perception did not sit well with us”. [Participant 8, male, 9 years of working experience]

Participant 7 shares her experience of being undermined, disrespected, unsupported, and humiliated. Furthermore, she details that her current working environment causes her to believe her life is threatened. She denotes this negative working environment as her promotion being perceived by her subordinates as unfair. Interpersonal relations between co-workers play a significant role in healthy working conditions. The attitudes and actions of Participant 7’s colleagues may be driven by her being viewed as inferior in terms of gender and working experience. The security industry is notorious for its gendered culture as the concept of protection is inherently allied with stereotypical masculine qualities such as physical strength, aggression, and courage (Jansen van Rensburg, 2021; Tennant, 2020). In the security industry, years of working experience are meaningful as it influences position, remuneration, and promotion criteria. Distrust is another factor experienced by the participants. Participant 7 speaks of her distrust of her colleagues while Participant 8 shares how he was not trusted and considered to be a spy. Covey (2006) in his work on leadership at the speed of trust motivates an organization to work towards being a high-trust environment. Such an environment fosters transparency, authenticity, accountability, and a sense of vitality in which employees operate in a positive momentum.

The operational requirements in the management of security guards also affect the security guard’s working conditions. Participants 9 and 14 narrate issues of placement, overtime, policy, and inhumane working conditions.

“Two days before the month end, I was informed that I would be posted to another position. I was not happy, but I was referred to the contract clause that I signed. This clause stated that the employer has a right to post me anywhere in the country. I had to resign because I was staying with my children and moving to Johannesburg meant my children were going to stay on their own without parental supervision.” [Participant 9, female, 15 years of working experience]

“The operations manager does not want to give overtime for guards. He will write it down on a piece of paper, then he’ll change the system to WhatsApp - sending messages on WhatsApp. The problem with WhatsApp is some of the guards do not have smartphones, and some do not have WhatsApp, even if they do, WhatsApp wants data and they don’t buy our data, so if you do not respond on WhatsApp, he will no longer call you for overtime. We spoke to the manager about the salary increase because the new site needs money and he said we are not supposed to ask for more money because we are not educated. The site where I work a 12-hour shift has no water or toilet. There are no security policies here since security started in 2018. There is no equipment, no radio, no batons, no firearms, and no whistles. There is nothing. This site is a challenge to me.” [Participant 14, male, 7 years of working experience]

Most participants raised the issue of post-reallocation as a major source of victimization at work. When conflict or an incident occurs at work, a convenient resolution for management seems to be to post the security guard at a different work site. This has major implications for the security guard as detailed by Participant 9. Job security (legal employment contract between employee and employer stipulating the assurance of continued employment) plays a pivotal role in cultivating positive work attitudes. Job insecurity generates feelings of insecurity, helplessness, and powerlessness. Thus negatively, impacting a healthy working environment (Hurr, 2022).

Despite PSIRA’s strict regulations, there are still incidences of non-compliance in the private security industry (Scheepers, 2019). Participant 14 shares how his working environment is not governed by policy and experiences deficiencies in basic equipment needed to execute the job satisfactorily. Incidents of security guards resorting to limiting their food and drink intake to avoid going to the...
issues surrounding safety and fear, while working, resonated as a pivotal concern among participants. Perceived safety and fear

Furthermore, victimization transpiring at the workplace has implications on the perceptions of safety and fear of security guards. These attacks involve threats, intimidation, displacement, arson, robbery, looting, assaults, and murder (Misago, 2019). Participant 14 recounts an incident in which a man was almost killed because he was believed to be a foreigner.

Furthermore, victimization transpiring at the workplace has implications on the perceptions of safety and fear of security guards.

Issues surrounding safety and fear, while working, resonated as a pivotal concern among participants.
"I feel unsafe to be driving a company car because I might be hijacked." [Participant 2, female, 2 years of working experience]

"I don’t feel safe because I am the first person who will be victimized because I am employed to safeguard the building, assets, and employees inside the building." [Participant 6, male, 12 years of working experience]

"I don’t feel safe because this building is rented and there are other people who just walk in without me knowing where these people are coming from. There is a lack of access control. We are sharing the building with another government department. We are using the same entrance/ lifts or stairs, therefore, there is a lack of control. When I used to work at the reception, I did not feel safe because we were near the bank. I felt unsafe because of the high rate of heists." [Participant 9, female, 15 years of working experience]

"This building is not guarded so when patrolling you are putting your life in danger because you can easily be attacked or shot. There is a lot of fighting and confusion. I don’t feel safe." [Participant 10, male, 4 years of working experience]

The juxtaposition of the security guard profession is that the same people entrusted with a protection and safeguarding capacity put their safety at risk thereby intensifying power imbalances (Provan et al., 2019). Most participants expressed experiencing feelings of fear and unsafety at work. Security guards are often first responders to crime (Nalla et al., 2017). This was experienced by Participant 13 when he found a dead body while on patrol.

"I don’t feel safe when posted near hostels, informal settlements, and bushvelds. I once found a dead body along the fence when patrolling." [Participant 13, male, 14 years of working experience]

In some instances, the organization may be over-reliant on the security guard as a means of protection and consequently neglect the implementation and maintenance of additional security measures as narrated by Participants 10, 13, and 14. Despite security being a crucial department in any organization, it is often under-budgeted (White, 2020). Inadequate security measures increase the risks, fears, and level of safety faced by security guards. Literature indicates that organizations that are transparent about their safety objectives accomplish improved safety performance and compliance (Curcuruto et al., 2020).

**Fostering Sustainable Solutions**

The paper advocates for working towards sustainable solutions through work engagement, awareness, training, and effective management strategies. Work engagement is a concept that emerged from the discipline of Positive Psychology and is increasingly being used in Occupational Health Psychology. It refers to the state of being engaged in one’s work that yields a range of benefits including positivity, fulfillment, and motivation. Engaged employees are energetic, enthusiastic, and fully immersed and dedicated to their job. Their job brings them pride and in turn, they find a large part of their identity in it. Moreover, work engagement is perceived as the reverse of work burnout (Bakker et al., 2008; Lai et al., 2020; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Advocating for work engagement in the context of the security guard profession will transform the nature of the profession by empowering security guards through initiatives aimed at cultivating positivity, pride, and identity. As a point of departure, the private security profession can use various verified measurement tools to measure work engagement among security guards such as the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale which has been tested in developed and developing countries (Bakker et al., 2008).

Most participants conveyed limited to no understanding of on-duty victimization. In many incidences, even when the concept was explained to the participants, they still struggled to understand. Awareness is needed for empowerment. Thus, the significance of understanding policy, procedures, labour law, and victimization is paramount to their holistic well-being. Lack of adequate and ongoing training is noted as a hindrance in the private security industry. To overcome such limitations, an updated curriculum and empowerment opportunities are proposed (Mbanu et al., 2021). Additionally, most participants noted that they were unaware of policies in place for reporting their workplace or crime victimization. In a study conducted on 132 countries of which 109 were developing, South Africa was reported to have comprehensive policies and regulations supporting occupational health in the workplace (Chirico et al., 2019). This is contrary to the findings of the study owing to the marginalized working community under study. If there were policies or clear procedures, it offered partial to no protection for the employee reporting victimization. The participants expressed that experience dictated their future decisions. Subsequently, being left unsupported in the past or witnessing other colleagues being unsupported discouraged them from reporting their victimization. Additionally, as mentioned under working conditions, the security guards also risked being reassigned to a different post when reporting or being involved in incidents. Ultimately, such limitations in operational procedures are disadvantageous and harmful to the well-being of security guards.

To strengthen occupational health in the South African, private security milieu, effective leadership and management strategies should be actively implemented. Such innovations should focus on building and maintaining healthy management and subordinate relationships. Effective management enhances a working culture of support, strategic alignment, work engagement, and job satisfaction (Clark & Taylor, 2018; Nielsen & Taris, 2019).

**Conclusions**

Security guards are at risk of an array of victimization due to the nature of their occupation. Consequently, their victimization has lasting effects on the well-being of the victims and in turn affects the security industry negatively. Thus, this paper contributes to
academia and industry as it unearths the narrative accounts of security guards working in Gauteng, South Africa. By exploring the participants’ narratives, comprehension of industry challenges and risks is enhanced. It highlights the vulnerabilities and power dynamics within the security guard profession. This insight is not only valuable for academia but also policymakers, industry stakeholders, and organizations employing security guards. Furthermore, the findings have implications beyond academia. Understanding the victimization of security guards can lead to improved working conditions, better protection mechanisms, and ultimately, a safer and more secure environment. This can positively impact the lives of security guards and the communities they serve. The paper is limited in terms of its small sample size. Nevertheless, the rich and comprehensive narrative experiences shared by the participants offer unique insights into victimization experienced by security guards in the South African context. Future studies should explore the victimization of security guards from a mixed-method perspective to gain quantitative data.

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