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# *Organised Crime in Late Apartheid and the Transition to a New Criminal Order: The Rise and Fall of the Johannesburg ‘Bouncer Mafia’*

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*The Johannesburg bouncer mafia, a series of violent and competing groups, dominated the city’s underworld from the late 1980s until the early 2000s. While the bouncer mafia was one of several emerging criminal networks at the time, although the most prominent in respect of Johannesburg’s changing illicit drug economy, they provide a useful example of how organised crime originated during South Africa’s transition: a fact often commented on, but little understood.*

*A study of the bouncer mafia may yield important conclusions for the rise and fall of criminal groups. Informed by the experience of members themselves, this account provides an opportunity to study the conditions under which organised crime groups take root during periods of political, economic and social transition, including how such groups recruit, consolidate, compete and how they may decline and be replaced. The narrative is told in three phases, their growth, consolidation, transition and decline.*

*The Johannesburg bouncer mafia was born out of a set of tough, white, working-class boxing and sports clubs in Hillbrow and south and east Johannesburg. Sharing a background of apartheid-era military service, the bouncers evolved from independent ‘heavies’ into a set of registered private security companies competing for turf and control of the illicit drug trade. Changes in the prevailing political and socio-economic environment of the country during the transition to democracy were reflected in structural changes in the city’s night-time economy; this led to the consolidation of the bouncer mafia, which, by early 2000, had concentrated into one company, Elite, assuming almost complete control of protection of the drug trade in clubs.*

*A series of prevalent factors and changes in the industry precipitated the dramatic decline of the bouncer mafia: socio-economic transition altered not only the racial profile of key areas, but also the face of policing, resulting in a weakening of the networks between bouncers and the police. The increasing recruitment of African bouncers by clubs themselves – primarily from Congo and Nigeria, they were cheaper than their white counterparts, more easily available when the former white bouncer recruitment networks dried up, and less prone to violence – facilitated a shift in control of the city’s drug trade to Nigerian criminal networks, thereby laying the foundation for a critical component of modern organised crime in Johannesburg.*

## **Introduction**

In the final days of white rule, and as the transition to democracy unfolded in South Africa, the considerable conflict and insecurity that gripped greater Johannesburg obscured a spate of violence in and around the city’s nightclubs.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the late 1980s and peaking in the

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<sup>1</sup> Telephone discussion with Gill Gifford, former journalist with *The Star*, Johannesburg, who covered the violence at the time, 4 December 2014. All such interviews for this article, by telephone or in person, were conducted by the authors.

early 2000s, an escalating series of murders and a plethora of violent assaults in Johannesburg's 'night-time economy' went largely unreported, apart from a few articles in the local press.<sup>2</sup> Unremarked on, this violence represented only the tip of the iceberg of a much larger process of criminal conflict and consolidation around control over Johannesburg's drug markets. That violence was in large part a result of the activities of an extensive criminal network referred to in the press and later by police as the 'Johannesburg bouncer mafia'.

In 1994, as South Africa heralded the end of apartheid and transition towards a more open and inclusive state, the Johannesburg bouncer mafia was one of the country's most prominent and violent criminal groups. At the height of their activities, the 'bouncer mafia' ran significant extortion rackets and trafficked drugs. There was a political imprint to their operation, both to the security services of the apartheid state and later to the security institutions of the new democracy. Figures in the bouncer mafia were connected to Ferdi Barnard and the Civil Co-operation Bureau (CCB) and later involved in the notorious assassination of Johannesburg mining magnate and African National Congress (ANC) funder Brett Kebble. Yet what was behind the violence in several of the city's more affluent areas has received no attention in academic studies and only passing coverage in more recent journalistic and personal accounts.<sup>3</sup>

This article, which provides a detailed examination of the evolution and decline of the bouncer mafia between the 1980s and the early 2000s, is an opportunity to examine more closely how organised crime seeded itself in South Africa's transition, a point often made but rarely examined. Understanding the social context in which they were formed, and the connections that they developed as practitioners of violence, sheds light on the nature of day-to-day white attitudes in the last days of apartheid and the first years of the new democracy. In turn, the narrative of the group's fragmentation and decline, which paved the way for the growth and consolidation of criminal networks from Nigeria and elsewhere, provides insight into the nature and resilience of South Africa's criminal economy today.

The article concludes by highlighting critical elements of this narrative relevant for global study of mafia groups and criminal networks, including the way in which mafia groups are formed and evolve, and explores the linkages between the 'upper' and 'under' worlds in the understanding of societal and political developments.

## Understanding and Researching 'Organised Crime' in South Africa

The high levels of organised crime experienced today in South Africa have been blithely identified as a product of the social, political and economic forces of the political transition from apartheid.<sup>4</sup> With only very few exceptions, however, the actual dynamics of this process have been little examined, leaving the rather unsatisfactory explanation that the political transition provided 'openings' into which organised crime somehow moved. Those studies that have been undertaken have tended to focus on foreign, mainly Nigerian, organised crime, with little recognition of any home-grown variety.<sup>5</sup> While there has been a body of analysis around the

2 Interview with police investigating officer and former bouncer, 28 November 2014. Some of the best reports are: G. Gifford, 'Killing Sparks Bouncer War Fears', *The Star*, 3 January 2003; F. Kockett, 'Night Club Bouncer "Part of Drug Mafia"', *Sunday Tribune*, Durban, 21 November 2004; A. Eliseev and L. Rondganger, 'Crackdown on Bouncer Mafia', *The Star*, 11 April 2007.

3 M. Wiener, *Killing Kebble: An Underworld Exposed* (Johannesburg, Pan Macmillan, 2011); S. Newman, *Lolly Jackson: When Fantasy Becomes Reality* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2012).

4 See M. Shaw, 'Crime, Police and Public in Transitional Societies', *Transformation*, 49 (2002).

5 M. Shaw, 'West African Criminal Networks in Southern Africa', *African Affairs*, 101, 404 (2002), pp. 291–316; T. Leggett, *Rainbow Vice: The Markets for Drug and Sex in the New South Africa* (Cape Town, David Philip, 2000).

development of gangs in the specific context of Cape Town,<sup>6</sup> this has been little developed for organised crime elsewhere in the country.<sup>7</sup>

The rationale of why so few examinations exist of the criminal activities of what could be regarded as 'organised crime groups' says a lot about the challenges of engaging in this area. It is, by nature, inherently dangerous and covert. Individuals who engage, or have engaged, in criminal activities and who are still alive are often reluctant to disclose the nature of the activity.<sup>8</sup> While historians may rely on archival material (a challenge in itself)<sup>9</sup>, much of this is unavailable to the criminologist examining the nature of more recent criminal phenomena. This is not to say that such research should not be conducted; on the contrary, but we should recognise some of the challenges of doing so.<sup>10</sup>

This article was derived through a review of the existing literature and other written sources, such as court cases and journalist accounts, the existence of which was limited in all cases. The best sources were individuals who had been (and in some cases still are) involved in crime. Twenty interviews were conducted with direct protagonists of the Johannesburg bouncer mafia, including individuals from all of the major groups involved.<sup>11</sup> They ranged in age from their late 30s to their 60s, and were active during the two to three decades with which the study is concerned. Information derived was triangulated against reports from other sources, and with available accounts from the news media.

The methodology relied on unstructured, relatively long interviews, which began with a general overview of how things developed from their perspective, and proceeded to ask more specific questions. Subjects were generally (sometimes laughably) eager to indicate that they were no longer involved or that this was a period in their lives that was in the past. Nevertheless, many talked quite openly, and recognised that their experience is an important part of the history of the city of Johannesburg.

The practicalities of conducting interviews resemble those of researchers elsewhere working on organised crime:<sup>12</sup> our respondents seldom agreed in advance to a physical meeting place; we assumed that they were wary of surveillance and we almost always arrived first at the interview venues. In one case, in a show of positive social mobility at a swanky shopping centre, an interviewee brought along his well-brought-up, school-uniformed daughter, who sipped her cool drink while her father related all manner of violent acts of the past, and a fractured childhood in south Johannesburg, where he slept in a room with several other siblings, left school at 14, and spent most of his time on the streets and in fights ('hey, that's just how it was'). His brother had been killed in a shoot-out. How different from her life now, he remarked. A reminder to

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6 Most recently, see D. Lambrechts, 'The Impact of Organised Crime on State Social Control: Organised Criminal Groups and Local Governance on the Cape Flats, Cape Town, South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38, 4 (2012).

7 For some important exception, see J. Wardrop, 'Soweto, Syndicates and Doing Business', in R. Rotberg and G. Mills (eds), *War and Peace in Southern Africa: Crime, Drugs, Armies and Trade*, (Washington DC, Brookings Institution, 1998). For earlier analyses, see C. Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1925–1976* (Oxford, James Currey, 2000); G. Kynoch, 'Marashe on the Mines: Economic, Social and Criminal Networks on the South African Gold Fields, 1947–1999', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26, 1 (2000).

8 See United Nations Centre for International Crime Prevention (UNCICP), 'Assessing Transnational Organized Crime: Results of a Pilot Survey of 40 Selected Organized Criminal Groups in 16 Countries', *Trends in Organized Crime*, 6, 2 (2000).

9 Some important historical work has covered the issue of 'organised crime' in Johannesburg, although it would not have gone under that name at the time. See, most recently, C. van Onselen, *Showdown at the Red Lion: The Life and Times of Jack McLoughlin 1859–1910* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2015), who heads one of his chapters 'Organised Crime in a Frontier Town'.

10 S. Winlow, D. Hobbs, S. Lister and P. Hadfield, 'Getting Ready to Duck: Bouncers and the Realities of Ethnographic Research on Violent Groups', *British Journal of Criminology*, 41, 3 (2001), pp. 536–48.

11 Interviews were conducted over a 6-month period in late 2014 and early 2015. To preserve their identity, interviews are footnoted with a general description of the interviewee.

12 Outlined in P. Rawlinson, 'Look Who's Talking: Interviewing Russian Criminals', *Trends in Organized Crime*, 11 (2008).

us that (in this case, ex-) gangsters have families too, and consequently interests to protect. Speaking to researchers anonymously is a favour that brings the interviewees little advantage, and carries risks. We took notes on a computer, which was permitted by all of our interlocutors, but did not propose using a recording device.<sup>13</sup>

While there is little doubt that the activities of the bouncer mafia would, under any definition, be technically understood as organised crime – given the focus on illegal profit, existence over a sustained period, a structured organisation, the use of violence or corruption<sup>14</sup> – the term was not used by our respondents to describe themselves. Most saw the connection, of course: targeted violence, systematic extortion, and control of the illegal drug trade seemed hard to portray as anything else, but many justified their work as ‘providing a service’, albeit for illegal profit, in a period of growing violence and lawlessness. By contrast, it should be recorded that the fact that this was serious organised crime did not escape the police, then or now: ‘these were the first serious groups we were dealing with, and by far the most violent criminal organisations’, recounted a serving police officer with extensive investigative experience.<sup>15</sup> This is only partly true: several other criminal networks grew in the 1980s, most prominently around mine hostels, within the burgeoning taxi industry, mutating out of self-defence units in townships, and the consolidation of long-standing gangs around Cape Town. The bouncer mafia may just have been more visible at the time, at least to white society, given its dominance of the high-end drug trade. Police officers were quoted in the press identifying the bouncers as ‘organised crime’ or ‘a mafia type set-up’.<sup>16</sup>

This article does not attempt to debate the merits of different definitions of organised crime. Instead, it has generally adopted the terms (‘crews’, ‘companies’, ‘groups’) that were used by the protagonists to describe themselves and the security companies under whose auspices their work was conducted. The ‘bouncer mafia’ as described below can be summarised as a network of nightclub security providers, bouncers who, through extortion and the consequent control of the drug trade (mafia-like activities) at entertainment venues, took on the characteristics of organised crime. This process entailed an extraordinary degree of violence as groups fought for control, the overall extent of which has not been recorded and is difficult now to distinguish in historical police statistics.<sup>17</sup> This is consistent with the study of bouncers and their links to organised crime, most prominently in the United Kingdom.<sup>18</sup> In South Africa, two aspects make the growth of the bouncer mafia particularly significant: they assumed initial control of the night time drug economy in the country’s largest city, and did so in a period of significant political, economic and social transition.

The link between drug markets and violence, as in the case of the bouncer mafia, has generated a significant international literature. It suggests that how and what types of violence result is highly context-dependent;<sup>19</sup> that ‘unstable’ or unconsolidated drug markets in particular are violence-prone;<sup>20</sup> and that violence within and between criminal groups is characteristic of cases where one group seeks to ‘monopolise market share or a particular geographic territory’.<sup>21</sup>

13 See Introduction to F. Varese, *The Russian Mafia* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001).

14 These factors are the elements most commonly identified in definitions of organised crime. See UNCICP, ‘Assessing Transnational Organized Crime’.

15 Interview with mid-level police officer now serving in a specialised investigative unit, 28 November 2014.

16 See, for example, G. Gifford, ‘Manhunt for Suspects after Gruesome Bouncer Killing’, *The Star*, 3 January 2003.

17 The authors made several attempts to do so, but the police data at the time do not contain enough detail to make a satisfactory distinction between crimes committed by ‘bouncers’ and other serious assaults.

18 D. Hobbs, P. Hadfield, S. Lister and S. Winlow, *Bouncers: Violence and Governance in the Night-Time Economy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005).

19 P. Andreas and J. Wallman, ‘Illicit Markets and Violence: What Is the Relationship?’, *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 52, 3 (2009), pp. 225–9.

20 H. Brownstein, S. Crimmins and B. Spunt, ‘A Conceptual Framework for Operationalizing the Relationship between Violence and Drug Market Stability’, *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 27, 4 (2000), pp. 867–90.

21 S. Schneider, ‘Violence, Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Markets: A Canadian Case Study’, *Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas*, 71 (2013), p. 138.

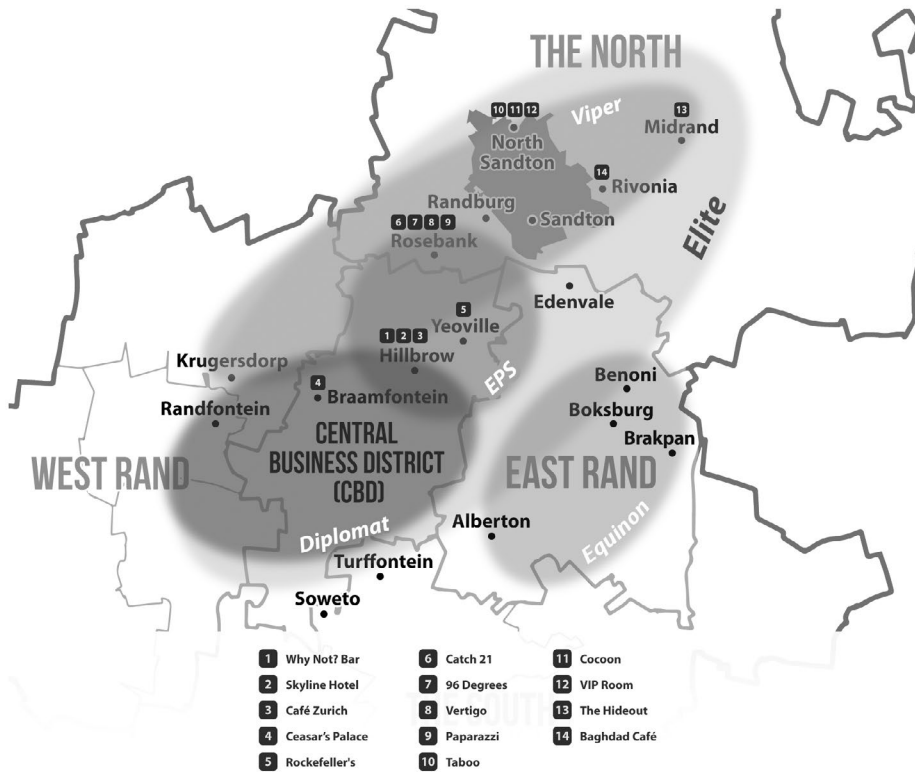


Figure 1. Changing bouncer turf in Johannesburg. (Source: information obtained in interviews.)

All of these factors are relevant in the period in which the Johannesburg bouncer mafia rose and fell.

### Formation: The New Night, Violence and Tribal Consciousness

After apartheid, nightlife in South Africa changed dramatically. Not only did clubs and bars proliferate in most South African cities, but (mirroring global trends) the ways in which people enjoyed themselves took on new dimensions as recreational drugs became more accessible and acceptable. This was overlaid by massive demographic and spatial changes in Johannesburg itself. To understand the phenomena fully requires a comparison with the night-time economy of the 1980s and before.

The older generation of former bouncers, who worked through the 1970s and 1980s, described a nightlife scene that was primarily (though not exclusively) oriented around the inner-city suburb of Hillbrow, although this also encompassed bars, particularly in hotels, in the East and West Rand (see Figure 1). They described a period in which bouncers worked independently, were hired directly by club owners, usually on a weekly wage and without the formality of a contract. Bouncers often worked alone and primarily broke up drunken brawls. 'People used the bouncers because if the police came three or four times you lost your licence because of "licentious behaviour"'.<sup>22</sup>

In this period, most bouncers were drawn from the white working-class neighbourhoods of south and east Johannesburg, communities that were a mixture of Lebanese, Portuguese,

22 Interview with a long-term bouncer who ran a company but was later pushed out of the industry, 28 November 2014.

Afrikaner and 'English' whites.<sup>23</sup> Our informants remember these neighbourhoods being marked by poverty, high levels of recreational violence and identity-based gangs: 'we grew up in the south of Jo'burg. If you couldn't look after yourself you didn't last too long', said one in a comment that captured the general sentiment. 'It was a very rough and tough area. Everyone was coming out of some kind of fighting family. We learnt to fight through street fighting, boxing, martial arts'.<sup>24</sup> Many were recruited into bouncing by older brothers who already plied the trade.

One former bouncer described a restricted set of options for a man without an education: 'we were very limited in the 80s. If you weren't a bouncer you were a debt collector. Or at day a debt collector, at night a bouncer'.<sup>25</sup> Another informant described growing up in a large, poor family in Fietas, an area that was later destroyed by forced removals near the suburb of Fordsburg. 'I left school in Std 5 [because of poverty]. Even today I don't have a matric certificate. I could either use my mother's money to go to high school or I could drop out and start earning a living as a bouncer'.<sup>26</sup> The R250 or R300 earned as a shift wage for a bouncer was considered to be 'good money', and extra cash could be made on the side selling steroids stolen from hospitals.

The wages a bouncer could command during this period depended on his reputation as a tough fighter. Many were trained boxers, and boxing clubs were important sites of recruitment up until the mid 1990s. Though some bouncers were recruited simply through social networks, knowledge of how to box was considered a prerequisite in the early period. There were no organised companies in the early 1980s, though towards the end of the decade, as the number of clubs grew, bouncers began to operate in small groups – 5 or 10 men – who would provide each other with back-up if incidents got out of hand.

Graham Diederiks was an early and prominent member of the industry who commanded a formidable reputation as a tough fighter in Johannesburg for several decades, and ran a free boxing school called 'Sambussa'. Diederiks later founded a major bouncing company called 'Diplomat', and obliged his employees to train at the Sambussa school. Lance Pretorius, who also became a leading figure in the bouncer scene in the 1990s, owned a boxing gym called 'Champions', in Pritchard Street in the central business district (CBD), at which many bouncers of the period trained. 'The boxing gyms is where it started', remarked one informant, 'that was the stomping ground of where decent bouncers came from'.<sup>27</sup> A parallel line of recruitment was through a local rugby club in south Johannesburg. In answering how he got involved, one well-known bouncer replied:

I played rugby. I met the guys. In fact I met the guy who was in charge of the bouncers. His name was ... he was the fly half. I was the centre, so I used to start going to the clubs and so when the next time there was a position available, it obviously got offered to me.<sup>28</sup>

Boxing or a game of rugby was not the only 'training' that bouncers underwent to hone their skills at breaking up (or starting) fights. In August 1967, military conscription became compulsory for all white males once they had finished high school, or as soon as they turned 16 if they were not at school. Military service could be deferred by undertaking a university

23 The history and culture of the 'Old South', the 'ugly stepchild of Johannesburg', is recounted in P. Harrison and T. Zack, 'Between the Ordinary and the Extraordinary: Socio-Spatial Transformations in the "Old South" of Johannesburg', *South African Geographical Journal*, 96, 2 (2014), pp. 180–97.

24 Interview with a bouncer involved in the early days of the industry, later owning a club, 6 December 2014. The nature of the times is well captured in a contemporary novel, which a hardened bouncer suggested we read. J. Paauw, *Little Ice Cream Boy* (Johannesburg, Penguin, 2009) is set on the West Rand, and is partly based around the life of Ferdi Barnard.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Interview with a bouncer involved from an early age throughout the most violent period, now a successful businessman, 29 January 2015.

27 The quote is from a bouncer involved in the early days, but was repeated in different ways by others, 6 February 2015.

28 Interview with a prominent member of the security industry and former bouncer, 4 December 2014.

degree, and some men left the country to avoid it. However, these were rarely options in working-class neighbourhoods like those in south and east Johannesburg. Several of the former bouncers we spoke to had been conscripted before they reached 18, having dropped out of school. 'I came out of school and got thrown into the army without any choice. I was 17 when I started military service ... After military training I got called up eight times for three months at a time [sometimes for service in Angola]' recalled one informant. He later came to value his military experience highly. 'In a way my boxing and military training played a major part in the disciplinary department when I controlled the public in Joburg's night spots'.<sup>29</sup>

Policemen would also moonlight as bouncers, right through to the late 1990s. 'I also bounced a bit for extra money', said one informant. 'Most cops did. You were still young, you could still work all night and go to work the next day'.<sup>30</sup> Our interviewees denied that this relationship facilitated corruption. 'It is these days that this happens ... But in those days it was unheard of'.<sup>31</sup>

In the particular social milieu of lower-class neighbourhoods, race was a defining feature: 'We were racists', admitted one interviewee, 'we were brought up to be racists. And I think that used to make us aggressive'.<sup>32</sup> In the words of one informant, this culture was marked with an obsession with establishing a name as a fighter of daunting prowess: 'there is something you have to understand about our tribe, that the indigenous doesn't have, and that is that reputation was everything'.<sup>33</sup> This was a period in which the ethnic, social and economic character of the city was changing, in particular in these areas. Hillbrow was also the first site of the relaxation of the Group Areas Act, and by the late 1980s was becoming a mixed suburb. Diedericks opened a bar call the 'Why not?', which catered to a racially mixed clientele, and which was subsequently bombed by the CCB in a covert operation in September 1988.<sup>34</sup> Over the next few years, Hillbrow would go into a rapid and dynamic period of change;<sup>35</sup> the area became a major locus of the drug trade, and buildings were left to fall into abject disrepair.<sup>36</sup> It also, however, remained a vibrant reception area for the city's new migrants, most of them African. Informants describe the change primarily in racial terms: 'things started to change in the early 90s. There was an influx of – more black clubs. The entertainment landscape changed and people moved out'. Former club owners said that the new residents were poorer and businesses weren't able to turn the same profits 'because the black pound was not a good pound'.<sup>37</sup>

Most of the former bouncers interviewed worked in Hillbrow in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They describe the period as the last years of a golden heyday in Johannesburg's history. Dozens of bars and nightclubs were concentrated in the blocks around Pretoria Street, and, for white Jo'burgers, it was the place to be seen on the town.

Hillbrow was unreal. It was like Vegas. It never went to sleep. It was buzzing seven days a week. Cafe Zurich and Cafe Vienne were the place to be, and guys would just rock up on the streets after their jols.<sup>38</sup>

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29 The quote is from a text message sent by a prominent former bouncer after we had interviewed him.

30 Interview with a serving police officer who was also previously a part-time bouncer, 28 November 2014.

31 Interview with a long-standing member of the bouncer fraternity, 4 December 2014

32 Interview with a bouncer who grew up in Hillbrow, 29 January 2015.

33 Interview with a former bouncer and club owner, 15 January 2015.

34 A limpet mine was used to try and implicate the ANC. This was an apparent revenge attack in response to two other ANC bombings. Several black patrons were killed.

35 The black population of Hillbrow (Africans, 'coloureds' and Indians) increased from 30% of the population to 70% between 1985 and 1991, rising to 88% by 2001. See O. Crankshaw and C. White, 'Racial Desegregation and Inner City Decay in Johannesburg', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 19, 4 (1995), pp. 622–38; O. Crankshaw, 'Race, Space and the Post-Fordist Spatial Order of Johannesburg', *Urban Studies*, 45, 8 (2008), pp. 1692–1711.

36 A. Morris, 'Tenant–Landlord Relations, the Anti-Apartheid Struggle and Physical Decline in Hillbrow, an Inner-City Neighbourhood in Johannesburg', *Urban Studies*, 36, 3 (1999), pp. 509–26.

37 Interview with a prominent Johannesburg club owner, 21 January 2015.

38 Interview with a former bouncer, now Johannesburg club owner, 29 January 2015.



**Table 1.** A guide to the Johannesburg ‘bouncer’ mafia**Tri Falcon**

One of the earliest groups, formed initially as a loose coalition of independent bouncers active in the CBD, which was then registered as a company in the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s Tri-Falcon was wiped out in a retaliatory attack led by Lance Pretorius.

**Diplomat**

One of the earliest groups to incorporate, bouncing bars owned by Graham Diedericks, which were among the first to cater to a mixed-race clientele. The professional ‘private security’ model was pioneered by Diedericks, based on his UK experience. Bouncers trained at his own boxing club, ‘Sambussa’. Diplomat expanded across the CBD and East Rand, up to Bruma in the north-east, and became one of the big three firms, controlling 100–300 bouncers at any one time. Diplomat merged with EPS after Lance Pretorius died and when EPS was under attack. Shortly thereafter, Diplomat itself started to feel ‘pressure’ from other groups, eventually including Elite. Diederick is retired and now works in a different sector.

**EPS**

Founded by Lance Pretorius with Jared Weer, EPS was active on the East Rand, and recruited from Pretorius’ club ‘Champions’. EPS was one of the strongest of the bouncer mafia, until the death of Pretorius in a 1997 shooting. After that, the group weakened, merged with Diplomat, but then failed to survive the challenge by Elite.

**Viper**

Founded by Arnie Williams and active in the west and north, with a strong concentration on the Johannesburg Waterfront. Viper was one of the big three of the bouncer mafia, and worked collaboratively with Diplomat, until they were also unable to withstand the aggressive challenge by Elite. Williams retired and has left the club bouncing industry.

**Elite**

Elite was formed by a breakaway of young up-and-comers from Viper and Diplomat, including Mikey Schultz and five other partners. The group mounted a violent and aggressive campaign against the incumbent big three, taking territory in the CBD and the north, and briefly also in the east. Elite was eroded by the challenges of controlling such a large geographic area, the loss of personal connections with the police, their own strategy of hiring African bouncers, and taking their own drugs.

**Equinon**

Equinon was a relatively small, discreet group that maintained operations on the East Rand. In the mid 1990s, it challenged EPS’s control of the CBD, but this was violently suppressed, and the group was pushed back to the east. Owing to their low profile, Equinon has survived, recruiting African bouncers, and is described as having a ‘vice-like’ grip in the east. It is led by Gerard Strydom.

Another informant, whose parents had owned a café in Hillbrow and who later went on to manage and own nightclubs in Yeoville, Rosebank and Sandton, remarked:

that’s where it started. It was modern day Soddom and Gomorrah ... It was the centre of things, though in the 80s, 90s there were one or two places in the north – the White Horse, and Sasha’s. But it was considered very far.<sup>39</sup>

The area was also a favoured location for European visitors and migrants, who brought a sidewalk café culture to the area. In the words of a prominent nightclub owner, Hillbrow was a ‘cosmopolitan metropolis’.

The transformation of Hillbrow encompasses the political, economic and spatial changes that would reshape Johannesburg nightlife completely by the end of the 1990s. In addition to the relaxation of apartheid laws and the advent of a democratic regime, Johannesburg’s economy boomed and stagnated in ways that both entrenched the existing divide between the affluent north and poor south, but also affected peripheral areas, as the locus of high-value day- and night-time economic activity shifted out of the CBD into the hubs of Rosebank and Sandton, and greenfield development pushed (white) middle-class residential zones ever further northwards.<sup>40</sup>

39 Interview with a prominent Johannesburg club owner, 18 November 2014.

40 For detailed overviews of urban change in Johannesburg in this period, see K. Beavon, *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City* (Pretoria, UNISA Press, 2004), pp. 237–82; J. Beall, O. Crankshaw and S. Parnell, *Uniting a Divided City: Governance and Social Exclusion in Johannesburg* (Abingdon and New York, Earthscan, 2002).

## Consolidation: From Protecting Patrons to 'Protection'

Aligned with the socio-economic changes of the various Johannesburg districts, in the mid 1990s the nightclub scene moved into new areas, markets and forms of recreation. In particular, drugs drove changes in the night-time economy and in turn shaped the way security was delivered, centred around the clubs, as they provided a source of revenue far greater than could be had from being a hired 'heavy'.

Informants uniformly describe the arrival of euphoric amphetamine drugs as a step-change: around 1995 ecstasy simply 'exploded'. 'In the 90s nightlife started changing. There were just more nightclubs, and the acceptability of taking, using, buying and selling drugs changed'.<sup>41</sup> This gave rise to a rave culture and created a need for clubs to provide access to an illegal high. In the CBD, 'Mother' and 'ICE' raves were held in Johannesburg Park Station and film studios, and the club ESP (formerly known as Idles) was a mecca for house music lovers. Though better known for its business district and mall, Rosebank became a nightclub hub, and 'thumped' from around 1994 to 2000, as did the neighbouring suburb of Illovo. In Rosebank and Illovo alone, there were 30–40 clubs and bars concentrated. Vertigo, 96 Degrees and Catch 21 were remembered as the 'hottest' clubs of the period. Until around 2000, Sandton didn't feature prominently, as it was still considered too far north, but since then it has become the major locus of trendy clubs (such as Taboo, VIP Room and Cocoon).

Even before ecstasy hit Johannesburg, bouncers had been moving towards greater forms of organisation. In Hillbrow, as early as the mid 1980s, more 'senior' bouncers would hire other men to make their service 'more reliable'. However, the first formal bouncer group that appears in the narratives of informants is 'Tri-Falcon' which started in the East Rand. One former member described getting his first job as a bouncer at a bar called The Runway, which was located near the airport: 'The Runway was rough – I mean it had had fatal shootings'. Here he met other bouncers who would later form the group: 'we started working and formed a loose association called Tri-Falcon and then [as] a company and we started picking up places.... Maybe 20 or 30 clubs at the height. But we started on the East Rand'.<sup>42</sup> Around the same time, Diedericks formed Diplomat, a legal company, with bouncers recruited mainly in Hillbrow. A former policeman called J.C. le Roux ran a more informal crew, which appears not to have picked up a name, in the east. Danie du Preez and Arnie Williams formed a group called Viper (see Table 1).

It was around the late 1990s that the term 'mafia' came to be applied to these increasingly organised sets of muscle, whose services were contracted out for private security, predominantly for night-time businesses. The registration of the fledgling bouncer groups as private security companies appears to have been drawn from the experience of the UK. It was an obvious move, in many ways, as it tied into an expanding private security market and gave a veneer of legitimacy to the operations. However, the registration of private security companies provided a 'legitimised way' (in the words of one practitioner) to conduct extortion. Extortion entered the market by different means and in different places across the city, but when drug profits increased, extortion became a standard way of doing business. The process was explained by one observer to a journalist at the time:

basically they go into a club and offer to take over the security. Then they put their price upwards from R350 per bouncer per night to R850. And then they put 10 guys on the door when you only need two.... Then they basically run the place and they can do what they want, and kick out who they want.<sup>43</sup>

41 Interview with a former police officer and bouncer, 28 November 2014.

42 Interview with owner of private security company at the time, 29 January 2015.

43 Quoted in *The Star*, 3 January 2003.

Even in the early days, the various companies competed with each other for market share, and battles over turf shook out weaker players. Despite the narrative that former members of the industry used, which often centred around individual incidents, there was an underlying logic to market control, and concerted attempts to take turf. Such battles for control left enormous damage, with patrons caught in the crossfire. It was in such a clash that Tri-Falcon came to an abrupt end in 1992, after two of its bouncers trampled to death Andrew Pretorius, the younger brother of boxing-gym owner Lance Pretorius. Lance Pretorius called in all of his bouncer friends, boxers and other fighters he knew the next day and they systematically removed Tri-Falcon from every club they controlled.

Pretorius ended up taking over the bouncer services at some of these clubs and some time later formed Executive Protection Services (EPS), which primarily controlled clubs in the north – Rosebank, Illovo, Sandton and Fourways. EPS grew to be, reportedly, the biggest crew in Johannesburg from around 1994 to 1997. Later they amalgamated with Diplomat (which then became the largest group, with 100–300 members), and lost territory to the East Rand-based group Equinon, which then became known as Equinon Protection Services.

Bouncer groups made money by hiring out their bouncers to clubs and taking a cut of their wages. Clubs were pressured in subtle and not so subtle ways to recruit the firms. A bouncer who worked for Elite described the heavy-handed tactics they used to get unwilling club owners to ‘hire’ their crew:

if a new club opened and he wanted to use his own security, we would sit down and chat with him and say it’s better you don’t use your own security. We would send guys to make trouble if they didn’t say yes. We would make trouble at the door when there’s a queue. They didn’t really have a choice.<sup>44</sup>

Some owners, by all accounts, called on the bouncer groups before they arrived to make trouble. Some were ‘persuaded’; some initially refused, and their business and patrons were attacked.

From 1995 onwards, drugs became another important source of revenue, which, as the ‘gatekeepers’ of nightclubs, the more organised bouncer groups were well placed to negotiate and control. By controlling the clubs and access to them, bouncers controlled which drug ‘runners’ could sell their wares, and, by ‘taxing’ them, took a share of the profits for ‘securing’ the space where drugs could be sold.

Informants involved in crews that operated earlier in the 1990s are more muted about their involvement in the drug trade and intimidation of club owners. They describe their offering to club owners as a voluntary protection ‘service’ and deny that they accepted the presence of any runners in the club. It may indeed be the case that some mid 1990s bouncer crews did not integrate with drug dealer networks on an organised basis, and that individual arrangements were worked out with club owners about when – or which – runners were allowed to operate. Club owners and policemen investigating bouncer crews from the period tell a more nuanced story about the nature of the relationship between nightclub owners and bouncer crews in the 1990s. One club owner professed an aversion to hiring bouncer crews because they always had ‘side agendas’.<sup>45</sup>

Personal relationships often set the tone for the control a club owner would have once a bouncer crew moved in:

certain club owners were friends with the guys that established the bouncer set-up and welcomed them, but then some others would be threatened and forced to accept it. On the other hand, some of the club owners were happy for bouncers to take control and manage the sale of drugs – not all were happy, but some felt it eliminated randoms [unknown persons] selling inside their clubs.<sup>46</sup>

44 Interview with a former partner in Elite, 29 January 2015.

45 Interview with a prominent Johannesburg club owner, 30 January 2015.

46 Interview with a former police officer and bouncer, 28 November 2014.

Another club owner described the risk that striking a bad note posed to a club owner:

what it was like was all based on their relationship with the owners. If the relationship was good, then it was easy. The bouncers who worked at your place were at your discretion. You could get people better at controlling the crowd, who didn't get into fights all the time. If you didn't have a good relationship, they would intimidate you and make it an objective to destroy your business.<sup>47</sup>

Bouncers were also hired for more direct forms of extortion – individual acts of intimidation usually targeted at debtors, competitors, and people mired in business disputes.

We got paid R400 a shift. [But for intimidation] we were offered R10K. You've never seen that money in your life ... People would come to you and say 'I have an issue with this guy. Sort him out. Break his legs'. At that time there was no CCTV. We would go to his house. Moer him. Kwa! Like that.<sup>48</sup>

However, it is unclear what scale this happened on and how involved bouncer crew management was, or whether this was merely an extension of an obvious synergy associated with violent people. Some bouncers also provided security at the myriad illegal casinos that dotted the city.

The connection to state actors, most notably the police, was, however, fairly widespread. As noted above, in the initial phase of the evolution, many bouncers were policemen by day, and it was police officers who often seem to have been positioned to organise the first contracts. As a prominent and (reportedly) straight member of the early fraternity reported:

the guy who had the contract there was an old Sergeant Major in the police. He was also the guy in charge of the state mortuary in Braamfontein. I swear to God. He had the [first] contract with the [hotel] group. His son used to work as a prison warder...<sup>49</sup>

State connections brought contracts, filled out the network, and provided 'useful links when the shit hit the fan', but the ultimate goal was profit.

The most strategic, capable and organised groups thus sat on the perfect storm of conditions: the corporate front allowed groups legally to become violent, to be deployed on a scale of varying degrees of legality, and to threaten legitimate businesses – the more illegal the greater the revenue to be earned. The ability to negotiate and secure drug profits strongly reinforced groups' capacity to control territory, and connections to the state brought both revenue and protection from prosecution. The groups most effective at trading in violence, drugs and corruption quickly consolidated their positions, and smaller players found themselves cut out of the market.

Thus, over the early–mid 1990s, the security market settled into a '*pax Mafioso*', where three dominant security companies controlled the market. This resulted in a period of relative calm, as a widely referenced agreement thrashed out between the three major bouncer crew owners – Diedericks (Diplomat), Pretorius (EPS) and Arnie Williams (Viper) – kept competition, and thus violence, to a minimum, compared to the earlier and later periods: Viper, EPS and Diplomat 'divided up the city', said one bouncer, 'and there was enough work to go around without stepping on each other'.<sup>50</sup>

The leaders of these groups also attempted to regulate the industry, proposing similar reforms to those that had been implemented in the UK. 'We tried to formalise it', recalled one former bouncer.

It was a Camelot moment around '93–'95. What we wanted to do was to try and reform the industry into a mainstream security [entity], so that everybody who worked in the clubs would be licensed and registered and it would be a legitimate business and everybody would be accountable.<sup>51</sup>

47 Interview with a former club owner, 29 January 2015.

48 Interview with a security company owner and long-time bouncer, 4 December 2014.

49 Interview with a long-time bouncer who began working on the East Rand, 18 March 2015.

50 Interview with a former security company owner and bouncer, 4 December 2014.

51 Interview with a bouncer company owner, 28 November 2014.

Less public were accusations that the agreement around turf also implicitly recognised control of the drug trade. That is also consistent with evidence that the agreement was fragile, with the incentive of greater profits still a driver for violence.

### Transition and Decline: A Fight for Territory, a Victor and Dissolution

Many who were involved in bouncing between 1995 and 1997 characterise the period as an ‘ecstasy-fuelled gentle period’. ‘After years and years of alcohol-related violence, I walked into a scene which was paradise. Everybody was loving each other ... We had two or three years of harmony, it was a honeymoon period’.<sup>52</sup> But the halcyon days were not to last long, as the South African drug market began to change significantly in the late 1990s,<sup>53</sup> and new drugs, the groups that controlled them, and the money associated with them fragmented the existing arrangement.

First, cocaine ‘flooded the Johannesburg market’, the bouncers reported, brought in by an earlier set of white traffickers with connections in Europe, and raised the profits but also the level of violence. This trend is confirmed by the available data for numbers of people treated for cocaine addiction in South Africa, which increased significantly in this period.<sup>54</sup> The second-largest cocaine seizures in Africa were made in this period in South Africa; the largest were in Cape Verde, which had become a prominent transit point for moving the drug to Europe.<sup>55</sup>

In parallel, around 1997, the Hell’s Angels, capitalising on the ease with which ephedrine could be bought in South Africa, began to manufacture crystal meth on a scale that brought it into the city’s clubs in a noticeable way.

When [ecstasy] hit the clubs, that was the biggest love drug. It went through a phase, but then that just blew out the water and everybody got more aggressive again. Somehow that whole thing just ended and everybody started fighting again. Things were nice and calm and then all of a sudden it went back to normal. I don’t know what changed.<sup>56</sup>

While it is hard to ascertain fully the degree to which ‘meth’ became a party drug, informants clearly remember a return to full-scale aggression in the clubs that they worked in, which was matched by a return to the turf wars among the Johannesburg bouncer mafia.

With these changing flows came changing power dynamics. One informant recalled a challenge by a smaller group, Equinox, to EPS control: ‘They tried to take over Jo’burg one night. They came to a club called Vertigo in Illovo. They thought “No, fuck you, we’re going to take over Jo’burg”. But let me tell you they got fuuucked up’. EPS called in Viper for back-up. The takeover was unsuccessful, but the fight was brutal. When an ambulance arrived to take injured bouncers away, a member of EPS reportedly grabbed its keys out the ignition and threw them away. ‘There was blood. They saw their asses. Some of our guys took out the ambulance key and threw it away. They said “No, today you are going to die”’.<sup>57</sup> By this point, the level of violence had brought the Johannesburg bouncer mafia a degree of notoriety in the press. Controversial Pastor Ray McCawley, himself a former bouncer, intervened to mediate between bouncer crews to reduce the violence.

52 Interview with a former bouncer and club owner, 29 January 2015. Similar sentiments were expressed in several interviews.

53 S. Pasche and B. Myers, ‘Substance Misuse Trends in South Africa’, *Human Psychopharmacology*, 27, 3 (2012), p. 338.

54 Of those arrested, for example, for various offences in Hillbrow in two months in 2000, just over 8% showed evidence of cocaine use, a figure likely to be much higher than even five years previously. C. Parry, A. Plüddemann, A. Louw, ‘The 3-Metros Study of Drugs and Crime in South Africa: Findings and Policy Implications’, *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, 30, 1 (2004), p. 177.

55 As reported in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report* (Vienna, UN, 2006), pp. 99, 89.

56 Interview with a long-serving Johannesburg bouncer, 14 November 2014.

57 Interview with a bouncer who participated in the night’s events, 29 January 2015.

But then a major turning point occurred in February 1997. Lance Pretorius, the legendary head of EPS, was shot and killed when he responded to a call for back-up at Baghdad Café on Witkoppen Road. Pretorius's death created a power vacuum in the Johannesburg bouncer scene. Other groups made bids for the territory that EPS had controlled, and turf-related disputes began. The remaining leadership of EPS decided to amalgamate with Diplomat, which made them the largest and most powerful group in the city, but the degree of control over such a large organisation and territory proved challenging, and smaller groups were continually nibbling at the fringes of the Diplomat empire. The threat to the territory controlled by Diplomat was 'never ending', according to one informant. For the next few years, there was serious violence between different groups: there were stabbings and shootings, most going unreported. Some informants say that this was matched by an increase of aggression on the part of clientele, now on 'heavier' drugs and increasingly bringing weapons with them into the clubs. In a particularly violent and widely reported case, an opposing group stabbed a bouncer to death in a car park with a carving knife, all of which was caught on a closed-circuit television (CCTV) camera.<sup>58</sup>

It was at this time that Johannesburg's most notorious bouncer crew, Elite, came into being. Founded by young bouncers from a number of different crews, including Diplomat and Viper, they were highly aggressive and ambitious. In less than a year, this extremely violent group quickly began seizing large chunks of territory, first from Viper, and then Diplomat, and assimilated a number of the smaller groups. Elite's takeover was characterised not only by inter-group violence but also by a rise in assaults and violence against the clientele of the clubs. The bouncers sought to wrest control of specific establishments from their former employers, settled scores and turned on the clientele, often for unspecified transgressions. In one notorious incident in 2004, 70 bouncers from Elite attacked a bar, trashing it and assaulting the patrons.<sup>59</sup>

The level of violence was extraordinary, and led to a public outcry that was hard for the police to ignore. In the previous era, it had been common for the police quietly to drop assault charges against bouncers who were seen as allies in controlling the clubs and providing security: 'a station commander in Hillbrow', reported one participant, 'made 30 cases go away like that. He knew he needed us'.<sup>60</sup> By contrast, the Elite regime crossed too many lines, in a period of growing racial sensitivity. In several cases, the predominantly white bouncers in the Elite crews assaulted non-white patrons, and this was widely vilified. One account has a black patron being called a 'coolie' before being beaten by six bouncers.<sup>61</sup> Under public pressure, a series of investigations began, overseen by a high-profile detective.

For a number of reasons, the new group had failed to retain the connections to local police, which had facilitated the privileged and complicit relationship enjoyed by bouncer groups in the past. Whether they jumped or were pushed, the heads of various bouncer groups left the scene at this time and moved on to different pursuits, taking their personal connections with them; few were prepared to concede in interviews how this process occurred, but it was clear that it was because things had got 'too hot' or 'too violent' or that 'younger bouncers were out of control'. At the same time – although the bouncers only implied this – there was a shift under way in the very nature of the police. As the post-apartheid transition played out from 1994 onwards, police in Johannesburg were likely to be black rather than white, and the personal connections that had allowed the industry to flourish in its early phases were increasingly falling away. Instead, dealings with the police were based less on relations of trust, and more on low-level economic exchange, small payments being made to 'keep the police sweet'. Whereas in the past, docket files were quietly buried because of a network of contacts, in Elite's ascendancy they would be 'lost' only 'for money'.

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58 *The Star*, 3 January 2003.

59 *The Citizen*, 20 April 2004.

60 Interview with a bouncer who worked extensively in Hillbrow clubs, 4 December 2014.

61 As reported by the *Saturday Star*, Johannesburg, 11 January 2003.

The growing use of CCTV and the increasing ubiquity of mobile phones exacerbated the challenges. Many of Elite's incidents were caught on record in the mid 2000s, a forerunner of the pressure that social media later would add, with bouncer assaults circulated widely. 'Social media has also changed things', reflected one former bouncer, 'things get all over the place. In our day we could trample people in a night club' and no one would really know about it. As a consequence, Elite became subject to scrutiny like no bouncer group before, from both the media and the police.

Elite introduced three important innovations into the bouncer market, which, interestingly, were to sow the seeds of their eventual downfall. First, they prized their autonomy: instead of relying on back-up from bouncers on call or other crews, Elite set up a mobile team to patrol its turf and respond to incidents as required. Secondly, they managed to negotiate a distribution monopoly with the Hell's Angels, which gave the biker group exclusive right to sell drugs in their clubs in exchange for Elite taking a cut of the sales and pick of the wares. Finally, Elite started to hire an increasing number of black bouncers, moving away from the cadre of poor, working-class white communities, from which they had originally recruited.

Migrants from Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Namibia and other countries (often referred to collectively as 'Nigerians') gradually became the mainstay of new recruitment. Apart from one example of a famed South African black bouncer – Tyson Mbata, who worked at the Randburg Water Front – the vast majority of new entrants were from further afield in Africa. Why this was the case seems to be based partly on a prejudice on the part of white owners that foreigners were bigger and more presentable than their local counterparts, and partly on the fact that the new arrivals were keen to find work.

Hiring 'Nigerians' quickly became a popular choice for club owners and bouncer crew heads for a number of reasons. Initially it was because they would work for less; shift wages for bouncers largely stagnated from 2000 onwards. As time went on, however, it became clear that the character of black bouncing was different: 'the one thing with the Nigerians, they are big and intimidating and they aren't here to make a name for themselves', said one informant.<sup>62</sup> This sentiment was a frequent refrain in our interviews: 'Nigerians okes [men] don't really fight with people. They are just there to be big and intimidating'.<sup>63</sup> Given the attention being focused on violence at the time, that the Nigerians were less aggressive was an important advantage.

The geospatial changes under way in Johannesburg turned Elite's use of mobile reinforcement teams from an initial advantage into a curse. As the rise of the northern suburbs created new markets, underscored by the growth of a nightclub-loving black middle class, the night-time economy was increasingly dispersed by sheer distance. A former member of a prominent crew in the late 1990s said: 'the bouncers were all over. There was difficulty providing back-up. The clubs were too far apart'.<sup>64</sup> Another, whose group had ceased to exist in the early 2000s, said,

how did we know the pressure was coming? [Operating at] clubs too far out. You can't believe the distances. [One] was somewhere in the bush and then we had places in Midrand. In the end it just became too much. It was too far, the distances we travelled.<sup>65</sup>

In the end, however, most informants agreed that internal politics, and the close relationship and focus on the drug world, were the causes of the group's eventual downfall, with their ultimate demise dated to around 2006. 'Elite? They got greedy. Six partners. How do you make money? Each one was trying to make a move, they all had side deals', said a bouncer who had already left the scene at the time.<sup>66</sup> 'They didn't just implode', said a private investigator

62 Interview with a former member of Elite, 27 November 2014.

63 Interview with a long-time bouncer prominent in north Johannesburg, 29 January 2014.

64 Interview with a bouncer active during the period, 4 December 2014.

65 Interview with owner of a Johannesburg security company, 16 January 2015.

66 Interview with a one-time Johannesburg bouncer with connections to Elite, 5 March 2015.

who investigated Elite, 'they fucked each other up. Then drugs fucked them up. And then the [media] exposure. And then putting the police on them'.<sup>67</sup> Eventually, under pressure from all sides, the Elite network of white bouncers tore each other apart, focusing more on the money and less on the control of the clubs

They were gradually replaced by the black bouncers whom they themselves had brought into the business. In the words of a key protagonist:

they [Elite] put the Nigerians there, you must not forget that ... they started moving away from the clubs, putting the Nigerians, the Congolese there because those were the okes that were making 200 bucks a night and running drugs in that specific club. [So he may be making less] but the Nigerians were also aware of what's happening ... so although they were not part of it at the time, they were part of it. So when they saw that this whole thing started imploding and that these guys used to come less and less to the clubs as they were too busy making money and sampling their own product, that thought gave them an opportunity and who would not take that?<sup>68</sup>

Thus, like their white forebears 20 years previously, black bouncers began operating solo, with direct contracts from club owners, and this increasingly became the norm in north Johannesburg. Those individuals, as has been documented elsewhere, facilitated access to the clubs for the Nigerian drug dealers who had begun to move into Johannesburg in the late 1990s, setting up shop in hotels in the then rapidly changing Hillbrow.<sup>69</sup> The new networks bouncing the clubs did not consolidate control over the drug market in the same way, however, largely because the nature of the drug-trafficking trade had also changed. With surveillance in clubs higher, and mobile phones making it much easier for people to arrange their drug transactions directly, the club became less pivotal. Furthermore, with the wider spectrum of drugs available, trafficked by different players, the drug market was more fragmented and complex, and stable agreements harder to negotiate.

By the mid 2000s, the landscape had completely changed, and the provision of security was a fundamentally different framework from the heyday of the Johannesburg bouncer mafias. The Nigerian protection market had subsumed that of the white bouncers, and the 'old system' of white cops and white bouncers was replaced by 'another system': Nigerian dealers, African bouncers and corrupt police. As former club owners explained, the situation is 'all changed': West Africans 'are not organised into companies in the same way. They are mostly employed directly by the nightclub. Though a lot of the old bouncers run a back-up service for big incidents'.<sup>70</sup> A current prominent club owner, who hires a mix of white (often ex-security forces) bouncers and foreign and South African black bouncers, but will not hire crews, told us, 'I use my own guys, for greater control, consistency, and discipline'.<sup>71</sup> Another informant commented that few club owners missed bouncer crews:

ninety-nine per cent of the problems in the nightclubs were the bouncers themselves. The bouncers were high as a kite in that era. That was the problem.... Nightclub owners at the moment prefer using less organised force. They have fewer incidents that way.<sup>72</sup>

This evolution is very much what is seen in the nightlife of Johannesburg today. According to one club owner, black club-goers make up 90 per cent of the market for high-end clubs. In the previous decade, it was perhaps 60 per cent white, 40 per cent black, and in the early 1990s 'middle-income' clubs were almost exclusively white.

In this transition, what has happened to the white bouncer? The original men who had run bouncer crews in the past are no longer young. Of those interviewed in the course of this study

67 Interview with a private investigator and former bouncer, 26 November 2014.

68 Interview with a prominent bouncer and current owner of a security company, 17 January 2015.

69 Leggett, *Rainbow Vice*, pp. 122–52.

70 Interview with a bouncer with six years' experience in Johannesburg clubs, 29 January 2015.

71 Interview with a prominent nightclub owner, 16 February 2015.

72 Interview with a former police officer and bouncer, 28 November 2014.



and their peers, their social trajectory appears to involve either dire failure (imprisonment, drug abuse, and death) or moderate to considerable success in the private sector. Of the latter, a number are now in the private security industry; a handful are directors of companies that provide services from guarding to event management and ‘tracing services’. Others have side careers in training boxers, mixed martial arts, and biker clubs. In this way, a few have achieved remarkable social mobility and live respectable lives: ‘I run a security company now. I employ 600 staff. We do events for [high-profile politicians] stuff like that. I can sleep with my eyes closed now’.<sup>73</sup>

In addition, apparently, there was little to hand down to the next generation. The social links and trust between these ‘old hands’ and ‘Nigerians’ do not make for effective criminal networks, and white men entering the market for muscle are no longer seen to meet the standards of the past. Several informants remarked, with varying degrees of disappointment or pleasure, that young white men do not seem to be as aggressive as they were in their day, and no longer possess the same fighting skills. The nostalgic formulation of this posits a decline in traditional white masculine values:

‘back then [white] men were men. You look at men today, you laugh, I look at my brother and my father, boxing in the 80s. That’s when the men who were 100 kilograms really earned it. Every one today who is 100 kilograms is on steroids. They were brought up with *vleis, rys, enaartappels*. Today’s man is not really a man.’<sup>74</sup>

This raises some hope that social conditions in white neighbourhoods are no longer such cauldrons of violence:<sup>75</sup>

the younger generation didn’t grow up like us. You’re still find if you go deep into the East and West Rand ... you might find those people. We grew up like aggressive people, maybe because of the army ... [Looking at my own sons] I can see a 100 per cent change of what we used to be.<sup>76</sup>

## Mafia Groups: Formation, Consolidation, Transition and Decay

The story of the rise and fall of the Johannesburg bouncer mafia is told in three broad phases, the analysis of which offers insights into the means and conditions by which organised crime groups form, control territory, expand and decay.

The story recounted above was all the more dramatic because it was described in greater detail and with searing honesty by protagonists recounting their own personal history. Parallels can be drawn with narratives from other contexts, and thus these accounts provide a useful, evidence-based contribution to broader criminological debates around mafia groups. More importantly, however, aligning this analysis against global contexts highlights why the conditions in the immediate pre- and post-apartheid era in Johannesburg were so well disposed to the seeding of organised crime, an assertion, as we suggested at the outset, often made but rarely interrogated.

The conclusions from a range of key works on the subject have established three criteria that must exist simultaneously as a prerequisite for mafia establishment and growth. The first condition is often a market shift, where a ‘sudden boom in a local market that is not governed by the state can lead to a demand for criminal protection’.<sup>77</sup> Varese concluded that such market

73 Interview with a former bouncer from south Johannesburg, 28 November 2014.

74 Interview with a former partner of Elite, 4 December 2014.

75 On violence and changing white identities, see D. Epstein, ‘Marked Men: Whiteness and Masculinity’, *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 14, 37 (1998), pp. 49–59; M. Steyn, *Whiteness Just Isn’t What it Used to Be: White Identity in a Changing South Africa* (New York, SUNY Press, 2001); C. Ballantine, ‘Re-thinking “Whiteness”? Identity, Change and “White” Popular Music in Post-Apartheid South Africa’, *Popular Music*, 23, 2 (2004), pp. 105–31.

76 Interview with a long-time bouncer, 26 January 2014.

77 F. Varese, *Mafias on the Move: How Organized Crime Conquers New Territories* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 195.

change is most obvious for a commodity that is illegal, such as drugs, and may grow rapidly as a result of factors of both supply and demand. But that change must take place against a broader set of factors, related to how that commodity is distributed and sold, most particularly where it can be safely sold: specific areas must be 'secured' for criminal activity.<sup>78</sup>

This is highly consistent with the findings of this study. While the system of bouncers existed previously, it was not until the boom in the local drug market that the market for security became organised. Drugs provided a high-value commodity that could be taxed for protection, and, interestingly, by the account of bouncers themselves, the nature of the available drugs seems commensurate with the levels of violence: ecstasy was associated with a period of 'peace and love'; cocaine and meth brought greater conflict with patrons, and, given their profits, significant conflict between different bouncer groups for control of the market.

A second precondition is the availability of a network individuals with the ability and predisposition to engage in violence, and a social and political context in which they can be recruited, often meaning that they will be drawn from a similar ethnic community or class. Thus Vadim Volkov observed how, in the case of the former Soviet Union, the criminal protection market grew because of the presence of young men who were drawn from boxing and martial arts, and sports clubs more generally.<sup>79</sup>

In a remarkably similar way, the bouncer crews recruited from a network of sports clubs, originally situated within the 'clubland' of Hillbrow. These young men were almost all white. They were distinctly, and self-admittedly, a product of their times, 'a tribe' in their own right: poor, often from south or east Johannesburg, hardened to an upbringing of violence, and schooled in the militaristic culture that dominated late-1980s South Africa. Military training, in some cases in special forces' units, often with service on the border, resulted in a relatively close web of contacts. Military training also served as an important self-identifier (coming up frequently in interviews), but at the same time it should not be exaggerated: several interviewees admitted that they had gone to the army young and were happy to leave.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, it is hard to escape the conclusion that all of those interviewed retained an identity as the last of a breed: young white men who had fought apartheid's last wars and retained, as a result, a degree of attitude and superiority, that 'we could do as we wished'.

A final set of conditions relates to the capacity of state institutions, which are either weak or compromised, unable to mount a response to the emerging criminal network until it is too late. This includes conditions under which the state may, for a variety of reasons, use a consolidating criminal organisation for its own ends.<sup>81</sup>

The pool of bouncer recruits did constitute, in the Johannesburg of the day, an initially loose but increasingly cohesive recruitment network for entrepreneurial violence. They coalesced around the protection of criminal markets largely because they could. There was no push back from the police, whose attention was either elsewhere, as South Africa's violent transition unfolded, or because they retained connections with the security establishment itself. What is clear is that those connections were both informal and formal: bouncers were often policeman, and cases were quietly buried because of those contacts. The connections between bouncers and the police must be seen as critical to bouncers' success, and the breakdown of this connection a key element in their later decline.

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78 *Ibid.*

79 V. Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002).

80 The conflicted views expressed by bouncers about military training as an important source of identity, yet one in conflict with their hedonistic lifestyle, is captured nicely in J. Hyslop, 'Why Did Apartheid's Supporters Capitulate? "Whiteness", Class and Consumption in Urban South Africa, 1985–1995', *Society in Transition*, 31, 1 (2000), pp. 36–44.

81 This may be more common than it appears. There is evidence, for example, that vigilante groups often morph into criminal ones, precisely because the state seeks to co-opt them and then are unable to move against them, once their position is entrenched.

It is clear that, for these three conditions to act together, there must be some significant disruptions or shifts in prevailing political, economic or social conditions. For this reason, political transitions, sustained periods of conflict or other dramatic ‘system disruptors’ have proven themselves to have the potential to give rise to new, and often criminalised, forces. In South Africa, the criminal opportunity for the rise of the Johannesburg bouncer mafia was created by the interlinkage between the national political transition, important shifts in the night-time economy, and changing drug markets. The decline of the group, the rise of African protection networks and Nigerian traffickers, and the changing nature of policing (and who the police are), can also be understood through this structure.

In short, the narrative of the Johannesburg bouncer mafia demonstrates, though both its rise and its fall, that the business of protection is highly localised, and focused where recruiting networks, connections and influence lie. And, as observed in a study of trafficking in other contexts, the flows of illicit commodities may be transnational, but their control is quintessentially local.<sup>82</sup>

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82 M. Shaw and T. Reitano, ‘The Political Economy of Trafficking and Trade in the Sahara: Instability and Opportunities’, paper in *World Bank Sahara Knowledge Exchange* series (Washington DC, World Bank, 2015). Also A. Shortland and F. Varese, ‘The Protectors Choice: An Application of Protection Theory to Somali Piracy’, *British Journal of Criminology*, 54, 5 (2014), pp. 741–64.