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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# GANGS IN LOCKDOWN

Impact of COVID-19  
restrictions on gangs in  
east and southern Africa



JULIA STANYARD

OCTOBER 2020





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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is based on the testimonies of countless people in Cape Town and across the East and southern African region who are living with the scourge of gang violence at a time of unprecedented upheaval and uncertainty. These testimonies, in some cases, reflect deeply traumatic experiences. Profound thanks are due to everyone who gave their time, insights and reflections, without whom this research would never have been possible.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This paper was put together drawing from fieldwork in Cape Town conducted by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) research team and Safety Lab between March and July 2020. Inputs also from GI-TOC team members Rukshana Parker, Joyce Kimani and Ken Opala. Drafting by Julia Stanyard, GI-TOC analyst.

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Cover: Members of the South African National Defence Force patrol the streets  
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## SUMMARY

As the coronavirus pandemic began to infiltrate East and southern Africa, authorities across the region imposed unprecedented restrictions on the movement and freedoms of their citizens. As many observers argued in the following months, the reliance on the police to enforce these restrictions turned a public-health crisis into a security and human-rights crisis. Overnight, many in poor and marginalized communities saw their legitimate livelihoods become impossible. But what became of the illegitimate livelihoods and illegal economies? How did groups that were already operating outside the law react to the lockdowns?

This study explores these questions by using Cape Town, South Africa, as a lens to analyze trends across

the East and southern African region. Drawing on in-depth reporting as well as interviews across the Cape Flats with gang members, community members and civil-society activists, the report charts the first hundred days of lockdown. This reporting is integrated with further research drawn from our network of researchers in Cape Town, other cities in South Africa and in Kenya and Tanzania.

The report concludes that the lockdowns have brought about significant change in a number of areas, namely how gangs operate economically; the political power they wield over communities; levels of violence and street-level crime; and the relationship between corrupt law-enforcement officials and gang members.

## Key points

- Gangs in Cape Town will emerge economically strengthened from the lockdown period. They have capitalized on the bans on cigarettes and alcohol imposed as part of South Africa's lockdown restrictions to gain a hold over illicit supply. Illegal markets (such as those for drugs) have continued to flourish while legal businesses have been closed and people have been locked out of legitimate livelihoods.
- This, in turn, has boosted the control that gangs can wield over communities. Vulnerable people pushed into poverty by lockdown may be more vulnerable to being exploited by or working for gangs. School closures have left children also more at risk of being recruited into gangs.
- Police forces and the criminal-justice system in South Africa have struggled to cope with the additional pressures imposed by both the coronavirus itself and policing lockdown measures. Greater powers accorded to police during lockdown have, in some instances, given more scope for corrupt officers to exploit and extort communities.





South African National Defence Force (SANDF) members have been deployed to counter gang violence and enforce COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.

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## INTRODUCTION

Police and security forces have played a leading role in enforcing lockdown restrictions across the world as states attempt to limit the spread of the coronavirus. In some cases, this securitized approach has seen incidences of discrimination, corruption, police brutality and abuse of power rise to new levels as police have been given unprecedented new powers to enforce lockdowns.<sup>1</sup>

Poor and marginalized communities have borne the brunt of the harshest effects of the coronavirus crisis and associated lockdowns. From the beginning of the crisis, civil-society groups and observers warned that social distancing was likely to be impossible in informal settlements;<sup>2</sup> how a lack of access to basic sanitation (including water, soap and protective equipment) rendered communities vulnerable; how those in informal employment would be vulnerable to COVID-19-related job losses;<sup>3</sup> and how pre-existing patterns of police abuse and violence would be exacerbated during a lockdown.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, criminal gangs readily adapted to the 'new normal,' exploiting social unrest and violence to boost their own localized political power while manipulating the situation to their own economic gain. Lockdown restrictions also shifted the relationships between gangs and corrupt elements of police forces.<sup>5</sup>

This report uses Cape Town in South Africa as a case study to analyze how gangs have adapted to the evolving lockdown situation, drawing upon a series of in-depth reports compiled by our research team in the gang-afflicted Cape Flats area. Through interviews across the Cape Flats with gang members and leaders and community members and civil-society activists, this reporting has tracked the evolution of the

*Criminal gangs readily adapted to the 'new normal,' exploiting social unrest and violence to boost their localized political power while manipulating the situation to their own economic gain.*

lockdown in Cape Town day by day since it was first imposed by President Cyril Ramaphosa on 27 March 2020.

This report shows that the lockdown has brought significant changes to gang activity on a number of levels. It has offered Cape Town's gangs new and unforeseen economic opportunities; it has boosted the social and political sway they hold over communities; it has shaped patterns of violence and street-level crime; and it has had a dramatic impact on law-enforcement and criminal-justice institutions.

This study compares these trends to those emerging both in other cities in South Africa and in Kenya and Tanzania. This comparison draws on research from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's (GI-TOC) network of researchers and analysts in the region, media reports, research studies and interviews with civil-society activists at the forefront of the response to gang violence.

## **Lockdowns in South Africa, Kenya and Tanzania**

In South Africa, the initial nationwide lockdown imposed on 27 March deployed the police and army to enforce restrictions preventing South Africans from leaving their homes except to seek medical care, buy essential supplies or collect a social grant, and prohibiting the sale of alcohol and cigarettes.<sup>6</sup> Restrictions were loosened on 1 June 2020, allowing businesses to reopen across a range of sectors,<sup>7</sup> but the ban on alcohol and cigarettes was relaxed only on 18 August.<sup>8</sup>

In Kenya, the measures imposed by President Uhuru Kenyatta included a dusk-till-dawn curfew (7pm to 5am) as of 27 March 2020 and a complete suspension of international flights.<sup>9</sup> Movement in and out of certain counties – including Nairobi and Mombasa – was prohibited, and certain areas within cities that were deemed 'high risk' (such as Eastleigh in Nairobi) were also sealed off. Other measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus, like the closure of all non-essential businesses and the requirement for public-transport vehicles to run at half capacity, were enforced nationwide.<sup>10</sup> Some lockdown measures on inter-county travel were relaxed on 7 July 2020 as the country entered a phased process of reopening.<sup>11</sup> The curfew, now between 9pm and 4am, was extended from 26 August for another 30 days.<sup>12</sup>

Tanzania, by contrast, took a different approach. While schools and universities were closed, public gatherings banned and non-essential travel outside the home discouraged, the fully restrictive lockdowns seen elsewhere were not imposed. However, President John Magufuli's administration came under fire for public statements that dismissed the severity of the virus and a lack of transparency over the country's COVID-19 situation.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, this study aims to draw out the commonalities and differences in a range of contexts – from Manenberg to Mathare – to ascertain what impact the coronavirus pandemic has had on communities affected by gang violence, and on the gangs themselves.





South African National Defence  
Force troops in Cape Town during  
South Africa's lockdown.  
*© Shaun Swingler*

# THE EVOLUTION OF A LOCKDOWN: THE FIRST HUNDRED DAYS IN CAPE TOWN

## Lockdown begins

The initial days of the lockdown in the Cape Flats were reported by our interviewees as a kind of calm before the storm. Gang activities – including drug markets and inter-gang violence – reportedly continued with a ‘business as usual’ attitude,<sup>14</sup> as did the daily activities of members of the community. This semblance of normality was punctured by the periodic interventions of police into the townships in attempts to enforce lockdown restrictions – often brutally<sup>15</sup> – but resistance continued.<sup>16</sup> Gang activities allegedly continued throughout the night when fewer police patrols were present.<sup>17</sup>

Community members interviewed argued that resistance to the lockdown stemmed from people’s need to continue working so as to feed themselves and their families,<sup>18</sup> and from mistrust of a police force, which has historically neglected these communities, suddenly and violently interrupting daily life.



Members of the military, the Police Gang Unit and Metro Police patrol the streets of Lavender Hill and Hillview warning people to stay at home on day five of lockdown, March 2020 in Cape Town. Stay-at-home orders from police forces were met with residents' mistrust, fuelled by historic neglect towards communities. © Brenton Geach/Gallo Images via Getty Images

For gangs, too, the sheer economic drive to make money through drug sales overrode any impetus to observe the lockdown. As one former member of the Americans gang argued:

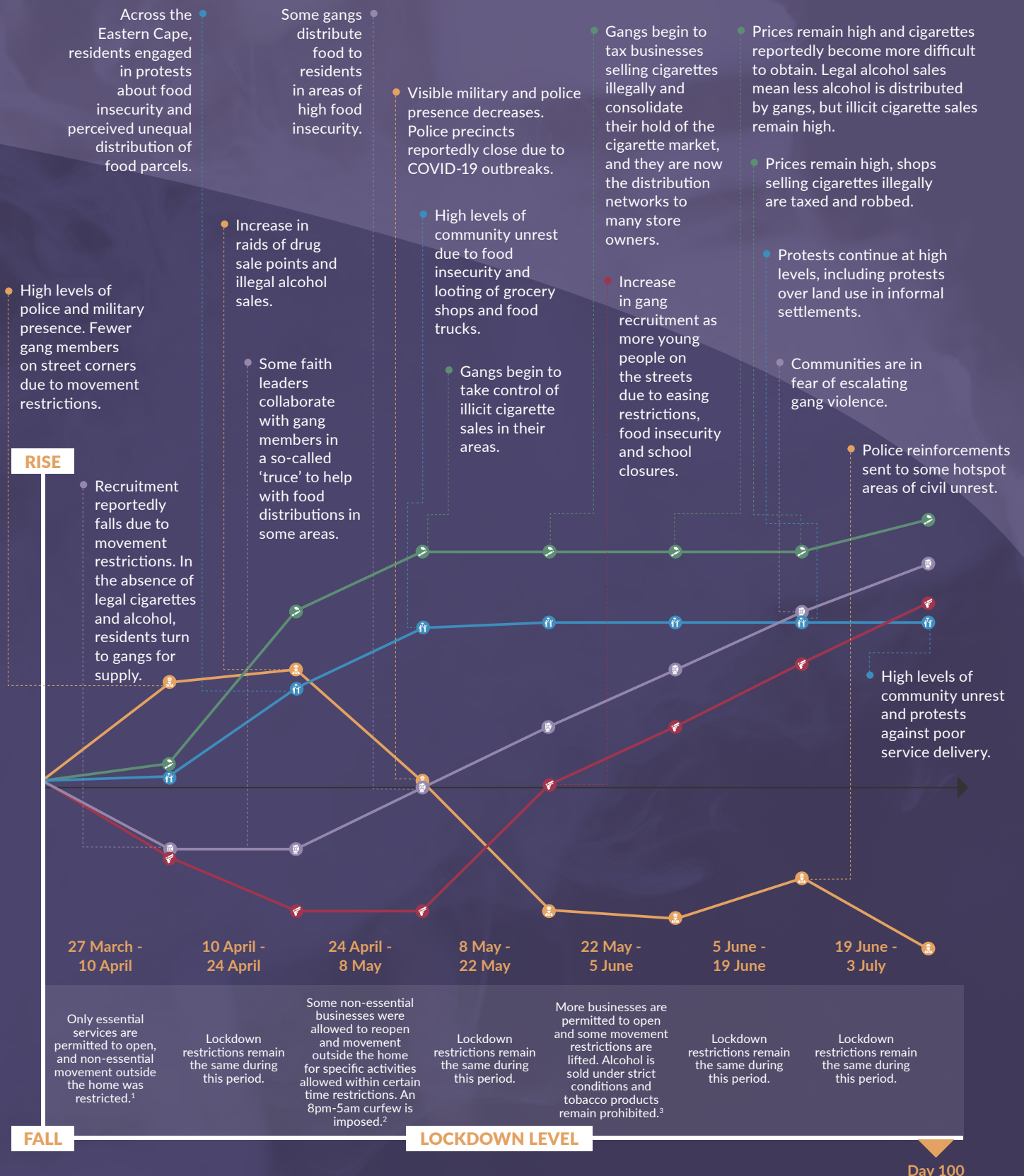
People [here] are addicted much more than people are infected ... do the math ... the gang bosses will continue to push their plague on these streets as a priority ... fuck what the president or what the world says about a lockdown. No one is 'locking down' drugs in Cape Town ... not gonna happen, my friend!<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the need to defend themselves against rival gangs still overwhelmingly outweighed the threat of police violence or even the virus itself.<sup>20</sup> In the words of one ex-gang member:

They are shooting gun[s] here in Heideveld ... nothing has changed. What are you speaking about a virus? I don't give a fuck about a virus ... here bullets kills you ... the gangs kill you ... what is most important here for the people is the food and just basic living, man ... the government don't give a fuck about us so the police also don't care about us ... so, guess what, we don't give a fuck about the police.<sup>21</sup>

Community members voiced fears that the lockdown would be a 'calamity' for the Cape Flats,<sup>22</sup> speculating that already high levels of unemployment, poverty and drug addiction would flare into violence under lockdown, and that job losses would leave people vulnerable to recruitment by gangs.<sup>23</sup>

## CAPE TOWN GANGS LOCKDOWN TIMELINE



Illegal cigarettes and alcohol markets



Gang recruitment and community relations



Levels of gang violence



Civil unrest, looting and protesting



Police and military presence



## Two weeks into lockdown

This fear was soon proved correct, as from around 11 April – after about two weeks of lockdown – the reports from Cape Flats communities began to change. The pressures from all sides – police restrictions on movement and the rising pressure of poverty – began to manifest in outbreaks of looting and civil unrest, adding to inter-gang violence.<sup>24</sup> Interviewees reported shops and businesses being raided by poor communities, with the army and police unable to contain the situation. While the looting groups started small, this quickly escalated into multiple incidences of large-scale public violence and the looting of grocery stores, alcohol stores and businesses across the Cape Flats.<sup>25</sup>

Some reports suggested that gang members were actually spurring on this public violence further, and used the situation to their benefit, exchanging contraband and redesigning operations while police were occupied elsewhere.<sup>26</sup>

## After 30 days

The gangs' performative acts of feeding the community seemed to be strategically wise. From around 30 days into lockdown, reports from civil-society figures in the Cape Flats emphasized that many impoverished families had reached crisis point, and that hunger, desperation and a lack of available other options were potentially driving gang recruitment. Continued looting was also contributing to a state of lawlessness.<sup>30</sup> In the words of one community member from Mitchells Plain: 'This lockdown changes things in a big way, because it

Gang turf wars and shootings continued, while communities reported that the police, active in enforcing lockdown rules, were unresponsive to reports of gang violence.<sup>27</sup> There were also reports from several areas of so-called 'gang truces,' with gang leaders publicly pledging to refrain from violence during the lockdown period and instead promote community initiatives (such as distributing food to poor families). However, community members interviewed dismissed such developments as stunts designed to capture the attention of the local and international media, offering a portrait of gang leaders as community-minded figures while diverting scrutiny from their ongoing criminal activities. In many of the areas where 'truces' were established, shootings were still reported.<sup>28</sup> As one member of the 27s gang put it: 'This truce should be disregarded as this type of media is dangerous as it misinforms the masses and that is exactly what the gang bosses want, as they then have the upper hand and they can pursue their illegal activities at full bore.'<sup>29</sup>

now fast tracks everyone into gang activity and gang membership because people are hungry and they will do anything to get money to buy food or drugs.'<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, gangs were able to continue moving commodities (such as drugs) into their territories and thereby maintain both their stream of income and position of supremacy.<sup>32</sup> While it was known that some police officers were involved in facilitating drug supply before the lockdown, some sources suggested that this trend had increased during the lockdown period.<sup>33</sup>

## After 40 days

From early May, around 40 days into the lockdown, the police presence in the Cape Flats reportedly began to decline, as officers became infected with the coronavirus and some police stations had to be closed to enforce health restrictions.<sup>34</sup> The lack of police presence reportedly bolstered the gangs' confidence to operate openly and with impunity. Community members described a lack of support from government, both in regard to surviving the lockdown and surviving gang violence.<sup>35</sup> In the words of activists and community members, the virus deepened the historic problem whereby these neglected communities have had to 'police themselves':<sup>36</sup>

## After 60 days

From late May, after around 60 days of lockdown, interviews with both community and gang members suggested that control over areas in the Cape Flats had been largely ceded by the state to the gangs. One gang member stated:

You see, the army and the police were here maybe a lot of times when this lockdown started ... but that is just how it is. They know that we the ones that purcelli [we are the ones who are in control and in charge here] ... it's not the army or the police or even the gang unit who have power here, we have power here! We have all the guns ... so many guns, we can easily outshoot them.<sup>39</sup>

Gang members also reported that it had become increasingly easy to mobilize community members to loot businesses alongside them.<sup>40</sup>

In interviews, community members increasingly contrasted their own situation – where lockdown had robbed almost every one of their livelihoods – with that of the gangs, who continued their operations without hindrance. By this point in lockdown, gun and drug

The police and the army came here at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, it was all just a big show because they did nothing to help us, there's not a day that goes by when we don't have gangsters shooting at each other here. We have absolutely no defence ... we are helpless.<sup>37</sup>

Turmoil in the gang ecosystem continued during this period as gangs continued to vie with each other for territory and assassinations were carried out, including against high-level gangsters, suggesting that younger members of gangs were fighting for the leadership.<sup>38</sup>

deals had become the key source of money and power in communities that had few other options.<sup>41</sup> Reports suggested that it had become increasingly common for vulnerable people to be drawn into working for gangs. In the words of one resident:

It is very difficult to live in Lavender Hill when you don't have money and opportunities ... I'm not proud of it, but I have hidden guns and drugs for the gang boss here in the area ... he treats us good and he takes care of us when we don't have money for food ... so what if I let them hide a gun or a bit of dagga [cannabis] here? Who else is helping me when I have no hope of getting any money?<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the following weeks, reports suggested rising antagonism between police and communities as protests increased in scale. Communities were frustrated by what they saw as the police operating with a political agenda – to enforce the ban on alcohol and cigarettes – rather than dealing with the 'real crimes' of shootings and gang violence,<sup>43</sup> or corrupt police operating on the orders of gang leaders.<sup>44</sup>



Supporters of the #ServeUsPlease protest on 24 July 2020 in Cape Town, South Africa. © Jacques Stander/Gallo Images via Getty Images

## After 90 days

After around 90 days of lockdown, interviewees reported that gangs had begun using new tactics to hijack cars in their territories, as well as citing increases in other forms of violence and robbery targeting members of the community.<sup>45</sup> Taking advantage of the greater freedoms on personal movement that had come with the shift to 'level 3' of South Africa's alert-level system some days earlier, gang members were reportedly carrying out far more personal robberies and pickpocketing.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast to the economic deprivation imposed by lockdown, it was widely seen that gangs had thrived by smuggling drugs and guns and expanding into the illicit market for cigarettes and alcohol (banned under lockdown).<sup>47</sup> Civil-society interviewees reported that children who were no longer attending school due to lockdown had become increasingly vulnerable to being enticed and coerced into working for the gangs.

As the lockdown reached 100 days, reports from interviewees became remarkably consistent, suggesting that the Cape Flats had reached a new normal whereby gangs had become more locally powerful, carrying out criminal activities openly and without fear of the weakened police and security forces.<sup>48</sup> In the words of one interviewee, 'it's like the gangsters are operating like it's a lawless society'.<sup>49</sup> For the wider communities, the prospects looked bleak. Roegchanda Pascoe, an activist from Manenberg, described the oppressive atmosphere in stark terms: 'You can sense it, you can smell it in the air, there's no hope.'<sup>50</sup>





The health crisis has increased youth's attraction to gangs, where they have found a sense of inclusion and purpose, as well as a form of financial stability.

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## KEY SHIFTS IN THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GANGS FROM CAPE TOWN TO NAIROBI

**O**ur interviews in Cape Town, along with additional reporting from across South Africa, Tanzania and Kenya, have revealed changes in the political economy of gangs in four inter-related areas:

- 1** The impact of lockdown restrictions on gang-related violence. This includes instances of police brutality against gang members; violence within and between gangs; and violence directed by gangs at the wider community.
- 2** Changes in the economic lives of gangs. This includes any new opportunities for gain which the lockdown restrictions have presented to gangs, as well as any effect on the existing illegal economies dominated by gangs.
- 3** Changes in the social and political power of gangs, in particular their ability to recruit new members and control territory.
- 4** How lockdown has impacted the criminal-justice system and patterns of corruption, specifically in terms of the state response to gang activities.

## Gang-related violence

*During nationwide lockdowns, police have been unable to simultaneously enforce lockdown restrictions and counter gang violence.*

In terms of inter-gang violence, Cape Town interviewees repeatedly emphasized that despite the extremely stringent lockdown measures, violent shootouts between gangs took place almost daily, resulting in gang members and bystanders being killed or injured. Indeed, several interviewees reported a perceived uptick in violence during the lockdown in Cape Town. However, other data suggests that this perception may not have been borne out in reality. Statistics on the frequency of serious crime in the Eastern Cape (including the Nelson Mandela Bay metropolitan area) indicate a significant decrease in all forms of serious crime, from murder and rape to serious assaults, in the early lockdown period between 27 March and 16 April 2020.<sup>51</sup> This trend continued throughout the April to May period,<sup>52</sup> when all crime types continued to decrease, with the notable exception of burglaries of businesses – a data point which supports the uptick in looting of businesses reported by interviewees in Cape Town.

While comparable statistics were not available for Cape Town itself, there is reason to expect that a similar decrease in serious crime may have occurred there too. The trauma unit at Cape Town's Groote Schuur Hospital – which treats more than 2 000 gang-related trauma cases each year<sup>53</sup> – reported a drastic reduction in trauma cases during the lockdown's first weeks.<sup>54</sup> The alcohol ban instigated in South Africa under lockdown is thought to be a major contributing factor to this reduction and the fall in Eastern Cape violent crime, but the overall reduction in violence, particularly of shootings, does suggest that the restrictions had some impact on gang activity. However, as these data points are primarily focused on the first week of lockdown, it may well be that any observed decrease was short-lived. Reports from gang-affected areas suggested that as the lockdown wore on, violence between gangs became more acute.

Reports from Nairobi did not suggest any increase in inter-gang violence.<sup>55</sup> However, interviewees monitoring gang violence in Nakuru, western Kenya, suggested that inter-gang conflicts had become more prevalent during the lockdown period.<sup>56</sup> This perception was supported by media accounts of inter-gang killings in the city.<sup>57</sup> Gangs in key suburbs have reportedly been seeking to expand their spheres of control and therefore have come into conflict with rivals. Some interviewees argued that looting and robberies by gangs have increased under lockdown in Nakuru, as gangs look to exploit the chaos of the situation and make up for other forms of lost income. As the control over territory also equates to control over looting and robberies within a given area (and the income derived from that), territorial conflicts have become more fiercely contested. However, interviewees emphasized that the rise in violence, while significant, was not a drastic escalation from pre-pandemic levels of violence.

Meanwhile, violence committed by police in the name of enforcing lockdown restrictions in East and southern Africa has captured headlines.<sup>58</sup> Organizations monitoring police brutality have painted a grim picture of death tolls at the hands of police.<sup>59</sup> One report by a government watchdog in Kenya released in late August suggests that almost half of all Kenyans have experienced mistreatment by police during lockdown.<sup>60</sup> Deaths have been particularly concentrated in informal settlements, and communities across Kenya and South Africa have clashed with police while protesting against the use of deadly force.<sup>61</sup> According to the Kenyan Independent Police Oversight Authority, the official count for the number of extrajudicial killings committed by police while directly enforcing the lockdown stands at 16, though dozens more may have gone unreported.<sup>62</sup>

Gang members are among the most likely to be summarily executed by Kenya's police, with media reports claiming that dozens of suspected gang members have been killed by police during the lockdown period.<sup>63</sup> Typically, these have been killings of suspected gang members involved in armed robbery,

instances of which have spiked during lockdown. According to one senior police officer in Kenya, this reflects a new strategy taken by the police to simply eliminate armed criminals so as to ease congestion in jails during the crisis, a situation created by the fact that courts were operating at reduced capacity.<sup>64</sup> The stark reports of police brutality in Kenya also reflect patterns of police violence reported in Cape Town.<sup>65</sup>

Gang violence directed at communities seemingly increased during lockdown, with reports from Cape Town, Nairobi and Nakuru in Kenya, and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania consistently citing a rise in street-level violent robberies and armed robberies of businesses, homes, people and vehicles during lockdown.<sup>66</sup> Interviewees consistently reported that these attacks were gang-driven and more brazen than those witnessed pre-lockdown.<sup>67</sup> As seen in the evolution of Cape Town's lockdown, this development has been driven by the inability of the police to simultaneously enforce the new mandate of lockdown restrictions and counter gang violence, and facilitated by the collusion of corrupt police officers who allow gangs to operate during lockdown with impunity.

## Gang economies

The ban on the sale of tobacco products in South Africa on 27 March 2020 and accompanying ban on the sale of alcohol (subsequently relaxed but then re-imposed)<sup>68</sup> was cited in interviews with gang members across Cape Town as the biggest change in gang economies under the lockdown. It was also, in their view, an important reason as to why the gangs will emerge from the lockdown period in a stronger economic position than ever.<sup>69</sup>

As has been widely covered in South African and international media, the tobacco ban has merely resulted in the majority of the estimated 7 million smokers in South Africa<sup>70</sup> purchasing cigarettes from illicit sources. Surveys of smokers under lockdown carried out by the University of Cape Town found that over 90 per cent of respondents had bought cigarettes.<sup>71</sup> In the absence of legitimate outlets, cigarette prices have soared: another survey by the university found that the average smoker was paying

250 per cent more for cigarettes than before the lockdown.<sup>72</sup> Overall, the ban has significantly boosted the scale and value of South Africa's already significant illicit cigarette market.

Illicit cigarettes are smuggled into South Africa from a variety of sources, and the barriers of entry into this market are low: any illicit entrepreneur who is able to procure cigarettes in one of South Africa's neighbouring countries can arrange with the numerous smugglers operating at border points to transport the shipment across – most notably over the Limpopo river, which is the border with Zimbabwe.<sup>73</sup> While gangs did not previously have a significant share of the tobacco market, their proficiency at smuggling and distributing other contraband has meant they are well placed to capitalize on the new illicit demand for cigarettes.<sup>74</sup>

Interviews with gang members across Cape Town revealed that many gangs have made cigarettes a significant part of their lockdown merchandise.<sup>75</sup> While

it is difficult to estimate the extent to which gangs may have profited from this market during lockdown, current and former gang members suggested in interviews that cigarettes are now 'big money' for gangs thanks to soaring prices.<sup>76</sup> Some gangsters have reportedly established contacts in neighbouring countries to source cigarettes, while others also procure their stock from ships docked in Cape Town's harbour.<sup>77</sup> According to one member of the Americans gang, gangs have drawn upon long-established contacts with harbour workers to smuggle alcohol and cigarettes from cruise ships in the harbour which, due to coronavirus restrictions, are not allowed to dock.<sup>78</sup>

Gang members also reported that they have become involved in selling illegal alcohol as well as cigarettes, reportedly using stock stolen from looted warehouses and businesses, which is then resold by gangs to illegal taverns in the Cape Flats. Both alcohol and cigarettes have provided gangs with new and lucrative sources of income from a wide base of customers who feel that these products have been unjustly denied them by the South African government.

As South Africa is the only country to have banned alcohol and tobacco, no similar boost to gang economies has been observed elsewhere in the region. In Kenya, where restrictions on bars opening and some restrictions on the sale of alcohol were imposed, members of the GI-TOC's research team reported that prices for alcohol had in fact fallen since lockdown, contrary to the rise which would be expected, perhaps suggesting an increase in moonshining and smuggling.

Alcohol and tobacco are by no means the only change in South Africa's gang economies. For hitmen operating in Cape Town, the lockdown has also offered some advantages. Several sources reported that the requirement for all citizens to wear face masks has made it easier for masked gunmen to move around the city without suspicion.<sup>79</sup> One interviewee cited the attempted assassination of prominent Cape Town attorney William Booth – who was attacked outside his home by two armed shooters wearing surgical masks in April 2020 – as an example of this trend.<sup>80</sup> As for potential assassination victims – such as those testifying against gang members in court proceedings – the lockdown restrictions on movement keeping people

in their homes has made it easier for would-be killers to locate their targets.<sup>81</sup>

There was no suggestion from interviews in South Africa or Kenya that the lockdown had brought about significant disruption to pre-existing illegal economies in which gangs are implicated, such as drug markets. While interviews in the early weeks of the Cape Town market suggested some volatility in drug prices,<sup>82</sup> the consensus across interviews was that pre-existing smuggling arrangements were able to continue during the lockdown. Often, the reason given for this continuity was that corrupt police officers regularly form part of the smuggling network, and therefore if anything had been given more license to operate under the lockdown than before.<sup>83</sup> The same reasoning was given for the ongoing activity of gun markets during lockdown.

Reports from Dar es Salaam differed, however, in that the pandemic-related restrictions were followed by a disruption in the supply of heroin in the city, leading to rising prices and unforeseen side-effects among users due to different chemical agents being used to 'cut' the drug before consumption.<sup>84</sup> Rising heroin prices were also reported to be driving an increase in street-level robberies, as some heroin users desperately sought more income to pay for the more expensive drugs, and abuse of sex workers by heroin users unable to pay for their services.<sup>85</sup>

As discussed above, rising frequencies of armed robberies of businesses by gangs and street-level violent robberies were reported across Kenya, South Africa and, to a lesser extent, Tanzania. A small number of interviewees in Nairobi and Cape Town suggested that after this looting, black markets in everyday goods and food items sprung up in poorer communities for those in search of cheaper food options during the deprivation brought about by lockdown.<sup>86</sup>

However, the economics of this rise in looting was described in different terms in each context. In Nakuru and in Dar es Salaam, interviewees argued that collusion between corrupt police officers enforcing restrictions and gangs was the key to the rise in looting: in Nakuru in particular, several interviewees argued that police officers were passing information to gangs about the whereabouts of police patrols, allowing gangs to target

businesses in other areas undisturbed. In Cape Town, the progressive deterioration of police capacity over lockdown and the rising lawlessness described by Cape Flats communities reportedly gave gang members the confidence to loot more openly and without fear of reprisal.

In Kenya, uniquely, some observers linked the rise in violent robberies to a decline in other illegal revenue streams. Gangs embedded in Kenya's public-transport sector – in particular *matatus*, or minibuses – were accustomed to extorting bribes from the industry.<sup>87</sup> However, the shutdown on movement within and between cities has decimated this revenue.<sup>88</sup> Some reports argued that this decline in revenue pushed some gangs to adopt more violent tactics.<sup>89</sup>

## Social and political power of gangs

The economic benefits which gangs have enjoyed under lockdown in a context of plunging legitimate employment has had a profound effect on the localized political power they are able to wield over communities, including their ability to recruit new members, coerce and persuade others into working with them, and shielding criminal activities from the police.

In South Africa and in Kenya, civil-society activists and community members alike voiced fears that the closure of schools as part of lockdown had left young people vulnerable and exposed to recruitment by gangs.<sup>90</sup> Not only does the lack of education leave young people idle and more likely to come into contact with gang members in their communities, but other efforts by civil society to counter gang recruitment (such as sports clubs) which are often mediated through schools are unable to take place during lockdown.<sup>91</sup> In addition, the lack of other legal opportunities for young people to make money – a pre-existing situation exacerbated by lockdown – has driven youth towards the gangs. As described by one interviewee working on gang monitoring in Nakuru, the prospect of inclusion, a sense of purpose and greater financial stability is a strong enticement for youth to join gangs.<sup>92</sup>

Interviews with current and former gang members in Cape Town confirmed these fears. In a series of 42 structured interviews conducted over the lockdown period, responses to the question over whether the coronavirus pandemic had impacted gang recruitment differed: some reported a material increase, but an almost equal number reported no change or a decrease in recruitment. However, when broken down chronologically, the interviews reporting that gang recruitment increased most sharply towards the latter end of the first hundred days of lockdown, and even a shift from active recruitment by current members to young people seeking out gangs for themselves. This would suggest that, as the impacts of lockdown and hunger have made themselves felt, and restrictions on movements on the street have been loosened, young people are both more able and more willing to become part of a gang.

Gang members reporting that recruitment had risen during the lockdown period in particular suggested that this was recruitment of young, school-age children.<sup>93</sup> This recruitment forms part of ongoing cycles of violence and inter-gang warfare. Children recruited may be a family member of those killed and are often recruited as shooters,

called upon to shoot a named target to prove their worth and resilience.

The pressures driving schoolchildren to join gangs also affect the wider community. Countless households and families which were reliant on informal and precarious employment have seen their means of making a living vanish under lockdown, and are now seeking other means of supporting themselves. Observers have warned that current support funds and food-distribution programmes in South Africa will not be wide or deep enough to overcome the devastating effect of job losses on food security, which may result in the threat of mass hunger.<sup>94</sup>

Faced with an immediate need to put food on the table, it is inevitable that some will be unable to resist the pressure of the gangs to work for and/or with them. This may be a matter of storing drugs or guns on behalf of a gang boss for safekeeping, or more actively taking part in gang activities and violence.<sup>95</sup> Some members of Cape Flats communities described gang bosses almost as a final safety net, yet this safety net comes with coercive conditions. As described by a former member of the Mongrels gang:

If that man don't go to that street corner to look for honest work, believe me, it's now easier for the gang boss to get his claws into that honest man and turn him into doing evil things for the gang ... you must understand how it works here ... the gangs prey on the weak ... if you are weak then they recruit you into becoming a runner or a holder or a look-out [one who delivers, one who stores contraband and one who informs the gangs of potential raids, respectively].<sup>96</sup>

Some interviewees described the increasing pull of gang recruitment as not purely an economic proposition. The stress of lockdown has, in many ways, brought about the fragmentation of communities and degraded the state institutions that are intended to protect communities in crisis. With children out of school and adults out of work, many interviewees described a sense of hopelessness and loss of identity alongside the monetary deprivation that lockdown has entailed.<sup>97</sup> By contrast, gangs have maintained a unified identity and appeared to prosper – a state of affairs that

has boosted their status and power in the eyes of the community. In the words of one member of the Americans gang in Hanover Park:

Of course it will be about guns and drug deals, what else? That is the only source of money here in Hanover Park ... it's the only thing that means power and that can bring you maybe an identity if you can say so ... because that power can buy you cars and clothing and bring lots of money and that will obviously bring you respect which means a lot to everyone here because respect counts for a lot here in Hanover Park.<sup>98</sup>

The inadequacy of governments' response to the coronavirus pandemic has compounded the issue. Police brutality in enforcing lockdown restrictions has deepened the already endemic mistrust between poor communities and the state, and may drive vulnerable youth to join gangs as a form of protection.<sup>99</sup> One civil-society activist working on promoting community policing and police–citizen trust in Nakuru identified police brutality as their biggest obstacle in fighting gang violence, given that it compounds the pre-existing conditions that bring about gang violence.<sup>100</sup> Gang members in Cape Town reported that mobilizing the community to loot businesses and riot against police became easier as lockdown went on, as grievances mounted against the deprivation and injustice imposed by the lockdown.<sup>101</sup>

Gangs have exploited this mistrust of the police, making efforts to paint themselves – by contrast – as a force for good in their communities. Gang 'truces' in Cape Town became a much-discussed phenomenon in the wake of the lockdown, with images of gangsters downing their guns and joining forces to deliver food parcels to the communities they have long terrorized grabbing the attention of the international media. These stories joined a rash of other international media reports about gangs in Brazil imposing lockdowns in the *favelas* – supposedly to safeguard communities – and extortionists in Central America showing occasional leniency to those in their debt. But as described in the chronological section above, our research from Cape Town has unequivocally found these reports to be based on misguided fantasy.



The reality of these truces is more complex. Our team's long-standing research into gangs in Cape Town has found truces to be part and parcel of the ever-shifting set of alliances and disputes which make up Cape Town's gang landscape.<sup>102</sup> Truces may be formed at the level of gang leadership or at lower, more localized levels, and can be broken on any pretext. Counter to popular perception, the frequency and longevity of truces during the lockdown has not differed greatly from the norm. Moreover, while a truce may be an effective way of capturing media attention and portraying the gang leadership in a positive light, it may not result in an actual ceasefire on the ground. Many of our interviewees reported shootings in areas where truces were supposedly in place throughout the lockdown.<sup>103</sup>

The truces struck under lockdown help a gang portray themselves as benevolent and community-minded, while at the same time allowing them to continue other activities and to strategize. In some instances, the 'benevolent' gestures undertaken by gangs actually serve to further their illicit activities. Food parcels distributed under lockdown have sometimes been used to conceal and smuggle drugs and guns. In others, the parcels become currency to buy favour from the communities in which the gangs are active, or serve as a reward to loyal gang members and drug dealers. In other instances, the seemingly generous act of giving a food parcel comes at a heavy cost to needy families, with gangs recruiting the children of these families to deliver illegal goods, carry guns and act as lookouts.<sup>104</sup>

Similar behaviour has also been reported in Kenya. In Kibera, an informal settlement in Nairobi, there were reports of gangs offering communities washing bays and access to clean water and soap as part of counter-coronavirus sanitation methods, and supplying food parcels to families.<sup>105</sup> Mirroring the situation in Cape Town, these approaches are intended to buy loyalty from the recipients, but the darker backdrop to this 'altruism' is that gangs and



Children queue with jerrycans to fill them with free water distributed by the Kenyan government at Kibera slum in Nairobi, 7 April 2020.

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so-called 'water cartels' have been controlling water supply to informal settlements such as Kibera for years, extorting communities with exorbitant prices for poor-quality water and sabotaging attempts to provide better

alternatives.<sup>106</sup> Yet as in Cape Town, the coronavirus lockdown provided an unusually effective opportunity for gangs to cement their position as powerful figures within their communities.

## Criminal-justice systems and corruption

As the lockdown wore on in Cape Town, reports from gang-affected communities increasingly highlighted the absence of police patrols, as overstretched police forces tasked with enforcing the lockdown succumbed to the virus.<sup>107</sup> Poor police-response times to gang violence have long been an issue in the Cape Flats, with community members describing the need to 'police themselves'.<sup>108</sup> Yet it was repeatedly argued that unresponsiveness to gang violence worsened progressively during the lockdown period.

Police officers falling ill with COVID-19 is just one example of the wider impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on South Africa's criminal-justice system. Court work has been restricted during the lockdown, meaning that the prosecution of organized crime and gang-related crime has slowed.<sup>109</sup> In South African prisons, there have been riots over restrictions on movement and visitors and the insufficiency of medical equipment in a situation where levels of infection are unknown.<sup>110</sup> Reports from incarcerated gang members suggest that prison gangs have been able to recruit more effectively as prisoners look to protect themselves in volatile situations.<sup>111</sup> Many prisoners have been released during the pandemic in prison amnesties – either those imprisoned for

lower-level offences or those given medical amnesty – to parole boards that are unable to provide support to prisoners during the lockdown and assist released prisoners in finding new employment.<sup>112</sup> According to civil-society activists working in Cape Town, this has led some prisoners to rejoin gang life as the easiest option.<sup>113</sup>

In Kenya, courts operating at reduced capacity have shifted to working on a priority basis, such as where a defendant needs to make a plea. Minor offences (such as infringements of lockdown restrictions) are dealt with by the police.<sup>114</sup> This lack of oversight over police activity has reportedly facilitated extortion and abuse, whereby young people arrested on the pretext of enforcing lockdown restrictions may be held in jails longer than the usual mandated time of 24 hours before being brought to court.<sup>115</sup> Arrestees have reported being held for several days before being forced to pay for their release, as formal legal channels of release are not available.<sup>116</sup> This form of extortion has been used to target gang members in Nakuru, where reporters working on this phenomenon have speculated that corrupt police have identified gang members as promising targets for extortion<sup>117</sup> in the knowledge that gang revenues have remained strong over lockdown.<sup>118</sup>





As discussed throughout, the greater powers accorded to police across the region during the lockdown have at times exacerbated pre-existing corruption issues. In Cape Town, interviewees described how police have been involved in re-selling weapons and drugs seized from gangs back to rival gangsters:

In fact even the police here is all involved in gun *smokkelary* [gun smuggling] because they will go and mess with the gangsters and maybe raid someone's house after they get a tipoff from another gang ... and in the raid they will *nogal* [hide] the guns that they did get ... and those guns, they will sell back to other gangsters ... what do that make them? Obviously, the police is *mos* gangsters as well then?<sup>119</sup>

One ex-police sergeant stated that 'many times even a raid can actually be a shipment arriving from the police because they are bringing drugs that they raided at another *smokkelhuis* [drug den] and now they drop it off at the gang boss that will pay for it'.<sup>120</sup> Interviewees perceived that lockdown restrictions had given these corrupt officers greater leeway to smuggle drugs and guns without oversight, and a greater drive to make an illicit profit during the straitened times of the coronavirus.

In Kenya, endemic corruption has undermined communities' security during the lockdown.<sup>121</sup> In Nakuru, corrupt officers were reportedly on gang payrolls before the pandemic to protect gang members from arrest and prosecution. This arrangement has evolved into gangs paying for protection against arrest for lockdown-related infractions, allowing them to loot businesses and break restrictions with impunity.<sup>122</sup> Multiple interviewees in Nakuru also reported that gangs had been tipped off about police patrols so officers could share the spoils of looting sprees.<sup>123</sup> Similar incidents were reported in Dar es Salaam.<sup>124</sup>

**Police officers block one of the roads in Eastleigh, Nairobi, during a protest.** © Billy Mutai/Light Rocket via Getty Images



Community-led initiatives have sought to counter criminal groups' aid distributions during the pandemic. Above, food aid is delivered by the Baja California Sur Community Alliance in La Paz, Mexico.

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## COMPARATIVE TRENDS IN LATIN AMERICA

**T**he trends observed in East and southern Africa are sadly not unique: the same hallmarks of increasing corruption and the rising social and economic grip of gangs over communities have been documented globally. In contexts where governments are weak or absent, organized-crime groups have rapidly turned the situation to their advantage.

The phenomenon of gangs ostensibly distributing aid to communities seen in South Africa and Kenya has also been reported across Latin America. In April, members of the Gulf Cartel in Mexico distributed food aid to needy families in Tamaulipas state.<sup>125</sup> Other cartels – both major criminal groups and relatively small groups – have also engaged in distributing aid as they seek to cultivate popular support and consolidate territorial control.<sup>126</sup> In the state of San Luis Potosí, Mexican media reported that the Jalisco New Generation Cartel had distributed boxes labelled with the cartel's name, and proclaimed the aid to be a charitable donation.<sup>127</sup>

Echoing the experience described by interviewees in Cape Town, these aid distributions are not distributed unconditionally, but tie the recipients into obligations and debts to the criminal groups that will be called upon in future. More fundamentally, these strategic acts of 'charity' help portray the gang as a form of alternative government. In the context of Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, these efforts are merely the latest in a long history of attempts by crime groups to act as a 'parallel state' in impoverished neighbourhoods where government support is absent.

The vulnerability of children, too, has been highlighted by researchers monitoring the recruitment of minors into armed and criminal groups in Colombia, including Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia dissidents. Irregular armed groups have reportedly ramped up their recruiting of poor young people, who find themselves even more vulnerable with schools shut down indefinitely to avoid the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>128</sup>

As in South Africa, the restrictions placed on prison inmates have resulted in uprisings and riots in prisons across Latin America, some of which have turned deadly.<sup>129</sup> Analysis published by the Center for Latin American Insecurity and Violence and the Latin American Society of Criminology found that 11 countries of 18 surveyed recorded prisoner riots in the course of the pandemic.<sup>130</sup> Observers have warned that the conditions faced by prisoners in lockdown have further empowered prison gangs, which are increasingly perceived as the sole source of power in prisons during the lockdown.<sup>131</sup> In contexts such as Brazil, where powerful gangs such as the First Capital Command have long controlled prisons, the pandemic has entrenched their power still further.

While many of the trends from Latin America have their counterpart in East and southern Africa, some aspects of the lockdown have manifested very differently. In Colombia, armed and criminal groups have reportedly been enforcing their own social distancing and lockdown rules, with deadly consequences.<sup>132</sup> Such practices form a powerful statement of the political power of these groups, reflecting their desire to assert control over territory, instil fear and obedience among communities and establish themselves as a form of 'parallel state'. There have been no such comparable instances reported in East and southern Africa.





The security of vulnerable communities during nationwide lockdowns has been threatened by police brutality and exploitation by criminal gangs. Above, a South African police officer kneels beside a citizen in Cape Town.

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## CONCLUSION

**T**he approach taken by many governments in East and southern Africa to enforce compliance with lockdown measures has not only unleashed police brutality and abuse but left communities more vulnerable to exploitation by predatory criminal gangs. In this report, Cape Town has provided a lens through which the effects of these dynamics have been documented in day-by-day detail.

Gang members have not been immune to the heavy hand of security forces and indeed have become targets for extrajudicial killings. Yet the overwhelming consensus from interviewees – not only in Cape Town but the other cities across the region where information was collected – was that gangs will emerge stronger in the post-lockdown period. The departure from normality provided by the lockdowns has allowed gangs to recruit, strategize and enrich themselves through new and old forms of smuggling and exploitation. They are likely to be further empowered by the fact that criminal-justice and law-enforcement institutions have been dramatically weakened by the virus and the lockdown.

The coronavirus crisis has driven an unprecedented shutdown of the global legal economy. However, illegal markets and criminal groups exist outside of the confines of the state and are ruled by the unrestrained economic drive of criminal groups to enrich themselves. In contexts where illegal economies and criminal gangs are embedded in local economies – such as in the Cape Flats – the lockdown has meant that the illegal economy has outstripped the legal, and so allowed gangs to cement their grip over impoverished communities and establish themselves still further as an alternative source of authority. Members of the community and civil-society groups trying to hold these fragmented communities together continue to sound the alarm about the greater levels of deprivation and exploitation that loom on the horizon.



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- There will be war, my broe.' Interview with ex-gang leader, now community leader in Steenberg/Mitchells Plain, Cape Town, 27 March 2020.
- 21 Interview with former pastor and ex-gang member, 30 March 2020.
  - 22 Interview with community member in Manenberg, 4 April 2020.
  - 23 Interview with former Mongrels gang member, now community leader, 31 March 2020.
  - 24 Field notes from our research team in Cape Town and interviews with community members described this shift from 11 April onwards.
  - 25 'You will see how mad and crazy this whole thing is going to get. Because these people are mos poor, what else can you expect? You can also mos see that these looters is mos much more ... they a gamma vrag [they are a very large amount of people now] and the police must watch out now ... you got about 200 to 300 people running, stepping on each other to get booze.' Interview with ex-JFK gang member, now community-empowerment leader, 14 April 2020.
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  - 40 'It's very easy to get the community to stand with us gang members because they know that we are actually the ones helping them, not the police and definitely not the government ... the people are all gatvol [frustrated and angry] and so when we tell them to trap [to support us and move with us] then you will find the whole community mobilizes with us and while it started with maybe the superettes [small supermarkets] here in the area or the liquor stores.' Interview with an Americans gang member, Hanover Park, 27 May 2020.
  - 41 'Of course it will be about guns and drug deals, what else? That is the only source of money here in Hanover Park ... it's the only thing that means power and that can bring you maybe an identity if you can say so ... because that power can buy you cars and clothing and bring lots of money and that will obviously bring you respect which means a lot to everyone here because respect counts for a lot here in Hanover Park.' Interview with an Americans gang member, Hanover Park.
  - 42 Interview with a Manenberg resident, 3 June 2020.
  - 43 'You can see how the protesting is now coming outside of the areas because the people are very frustrated with this lockdown situation ... the police work against the community, it's like they are stupid ... who cares about cigarettes and alcohol when there is real crime happening all around. It's like they have their priorities completely mixed up. Before the lockdown I can say that things were almost normal ... in our own abnormal sort of way here on the Cape Flats ... but now, things is completely unpredictable because you don't know what is going to happen next.' Interview with a community member, Heideveld, 26 May 2020.
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- 90 'Unemployment, poverty and the feeling of helplessness you find all over in these communities ... with all the children being home now I worry a lot because even the good children that used to go to school are now roaming the streets here with nothing to do ... that is when the gangs jump on them and lure them into joining the gangs ... that's another innocent life wasted because they join the gangs and with it comes drug addiction, violence, prison and all types of reckless behaviour that leads these young people's life on a path straight to the cemetery. How many more young children must be buried? This lockdown changes things in a big way because it now fast-tracks everyone into gang activity and gang membership because people are hungry and they will do anything to get money to buy food or drugs.' Interview with Jenkins, community member, Lenteguur, Mitchells Plain, 2 May 2020.
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# **GLOBAL INITIATIVE**

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