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ORGANIZED CRIME

CALLING THE SHOTS

**THE STRONG ARM OF
EXTORTION IN GAUTENG**

Jenni Irish-Qhobosheane

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Mata	Mamelodi Amalgamated Taxi Association
MEC	Member of the executive council
Nanduwe	Nancefield Dube-West Taxi Association
NTA	National Taxi Alliance
Putco	Public Utility Transport Corporation
Santaco	South African National Taxi Council
SAPS	South African Police Service
Wata	Witwatersrand Taxi Association



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Extortion is fast becoming an everyday occurrence in South Africa. In Gauteng, in particular, extortion has increased exponentially in recent years, with more people and businesses being targeted, and a growing number of criminal groups profiting from the practice.

This report, the second in a GI-TOC series tracking the spread of organized extortion in South Africa, examines the extortion economies in Gauteng. The first, which focused on Cape Town, was published in April 2024.¹ The series aims to contribute to a better understanding of extortion in South Africa, and to develop appropriate policies and strategies to address and reduce organized extortion in the country.

Extortion takes different forms. It can be either systemic, carried out over an extended period by organized groups, or opportunistic, the latter usually involving low-level extortion carried out sporadically by individuals. This GI-TOC series focuses on systemic extortion.

This report identifies the types of organized extortion economies operating in Gauteng and outlines how they operate. It also examines the factors that have contributed to the entrenchment and growth of extortion, and the various actors and groups involved. It presents research that demonstrates the links between extortion and other illicit activities, and the similarities that exist between the extortion economies in Cape Town and Gauteng. It highlights key areas that need to be addressed to tackle extortion in Gauteng and recommends steps that should be taken to address the problem.

This report follows a similar methodological approach to the Cape Town study. And, as with the Cape Town publication, this research builds on the GI-TOC's previous analysis and fieldwork on extortion practices. Both reports draw on structured and unstructured interviews conducted by a fieldwork team, as well as engagement with various role-players and actors. The research is also informed by media coverage and analysis of extortion practices.

To ensure continuity within the series, the GI-TOC uses a standard definition of extortion (see below).

Understanding extortion in the South African context

Extortion is the practice of obtaining money, goods or services through the use of actual or implied violence or force.² The offence is not defined in South African legislation, but a common law description has developed through historical legal influences. The South African Police Service (SAPS) uses the widely accepted denotation of extortion as ‘taking from another some patrimonial or non-patrimonial advantage by intentionally and unlawfully subjecting that person to pressure which induces him or her to submit to the taking’.³

At a Business Against Crime South Africa conference in Cape Town, Mervyn Menigo of the National Prosecuting Authority explained the concept of implied threat by using the example of a gang member visiting someone’s home and demanding something from them, pointing out that

the awareness of his social standing would be sufficiently threatening. ‘People think he must threaten me with death before I make a case. It’s not [the case]; it’s the pressure,’ Menigo said, adding: ‘Even if a victim of extortion refuses to succumb to the demands, it is still a crime, and considered attempted extortion.’⁴

Extortion requires the victim’s consent, even if it is obtained illegally. Victims often avoid reporting the crime, as they do not want people to know that they agreed to the perpetrator’s demands. It also goes unreported due to fear and intimidation.⁵ These factors contribute to its normalization, as extortion becomes seen as a cost of doing business, or operating or living in a particular area, and can also lead to an increase in the frequency and size of the demands. ■



EXTORTION: A LONG TRADITION REVIVED

Organized extortion has a long history in South Africa. In Johannesburg in the 1940s and 1950s, groups such as Marashea, operating out of Newclare, and the Msomi gang in Alexandra were involved in extorting residents.⁶ More recently, and particularly in the last decade, extortion has increased significantly throughout Gauteng and the number of criminal groups involved in the practice has mushroomed. Extortion now affects a significant number of people and economic sectors in the province.

Although exact figures for the money generated by extortion are not readily available, it is clear that these criminal economies generate significant annual profits. In fact, many criminal groups in Gauteng rely on extortion as the main source of income and livelihood for their members.

The GI-TOC handbook on understanding extortion describes the practice as a crime that 'serves only the extortioners and those who collaborate with them; it is a racket existing to enrich itself'.⁷ However, extortionists will usually attempt to legitimize or justify their demands. In the construction sector, for example, individuals involved in extortion have argued that they are simply trying to ensure greater local involvement in building projects. It is the extortionists, of course, who determine what constitutes local involvement and who should benefit.⁸ Similarly, township gangs involved in extorting local businesses may claim that the fees provide businesses with so-called protection from thieves, in the absence of state enforcement. In reality, however, the victims are paying the very people they need to be protected from. In some cases, extortionists will even use official-sounding terms such as 'taxation' or 'security services' to describe their activities. What distinguishes extortion from genuine security services is that the former offers people no choice; they are forced to comply with the demands made.⁹

Four main drivers and four major economies in Gauteng

There are four main drivers for the increase in extortion in Gauteng:

- The first relates to the growth of organized crime groups and gangs in the province, many of whom see extortion as a critical arm of their criminal enterprises.
- The second involves risk versus reward, where extortion is seen as an equally lucrative but lower risk activity compared to crimes such as armed robbery or cash-in-transit heists. For example, criminals involved in extortion are unlikely to encounter the kind of armed security that accompanies an armoured van transporting cash or valuables.¹⁰

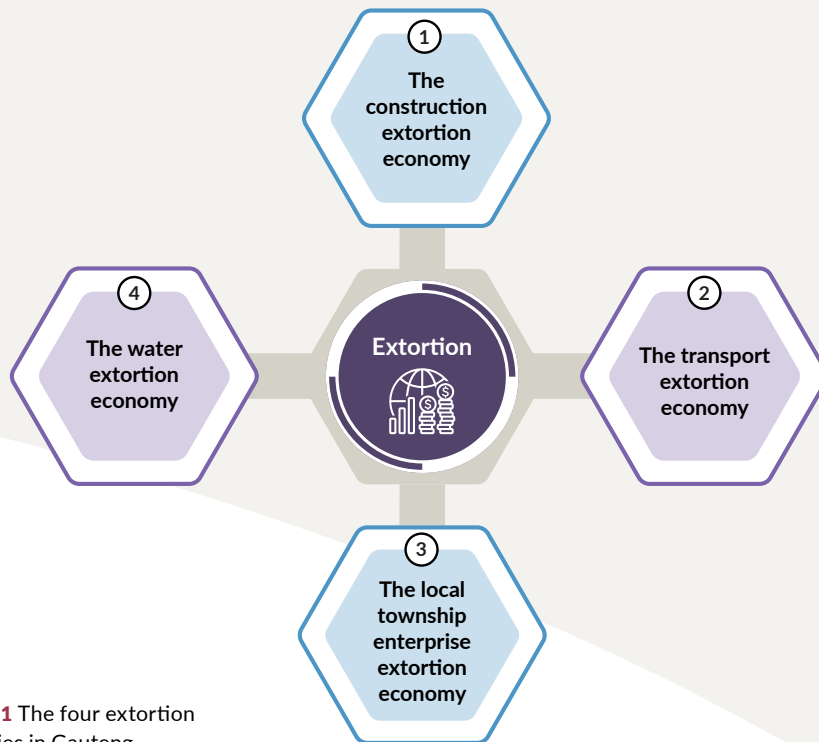


FIGURE 1 The four extortion economies in Gauteng.

- The third concerns the weakness of the state’s response to emerging extortion markets, which has allowed the practice to spread and become entrenched and normalized.
- The final driver is the network of criminal actors that has developed and the resultant inter-organizational learning. Extortion is a learned practice, and international experience suggests that where it emerges and is successful, it is likely to spread, either because of an inherent drive among criminal groups to expand their power and influence, or because new groups, emboldened by the initial groups’ success, seek to copy their activities. A classic example of this is extortion in South Africa’s construction sector, which emerged in KwaZulu-Natal around 2016 and then quickly spread to other provinces, including Gauteng, due to its profitability and the inability of the state to combat it.

Criminal actors involved in extortion in Gauteng operate in both legitimate and illegal markets. In those parts of the province where extortion is prevalent, criminals will initially target specific vulnerable groups, such as foreign nationals. The practice then spreads to more general targets as the extortionists seek to increase their influence and profits.

The GI-TOC has identified four main extortion economies that operate in Gauteng:

- The construction extortion economy, where gangs and groups calling themselves ‘business forums’ target construction and infrastructure projects, and demand a stake in the projects being undertaken.
- The township enterprise extortion economy, where gangs and other criminal groups target formal and informal businesses as well as residents in Gauteng’s townships.¹¹
- The water extortion economy, where groups exploit failing infrastructure and water shortages to extort the state and affected communities.
- The transport extortion economy, where elements within the taxi industry extort rival taxi drivers, other transport operators and even drivers of privately owned vehicles.



GAUTENG'S CONSTRUCTION EXTORTION ECONOMY

Two types of organized crime are prevalent in Gauteng's construction sector. The first is anti-competitive behaviour, such as price-fixing, market allocation or collusive bidding and tendering. The second, which this report focuses on, is the rampant extortion perpetrated by what has become known as the 'construction mafia', referred to in this report as the 'construction extortion mafia'. This activity surfaced in Gauteng in 2017/18, when criminal groups operating in the province began to emulate the methods of extortionists in KwaZulu-Natal's construction sector.

Extortion in South Africa's construction industry is usually carried out by euphemistically named 'business forums', criminal networks that use the threat of violence to gain access to or control over construction sites or a share in construction projects. The first reported instances of this type of extortion in Gauteng occurred in Pretoria in mid-2018, when at least two business forums invaded sites in the suburbs of Arcadia, Menlo Park and Brooklyn in the east of the city.¹² From there, the activity spread to other parts of the province, and by the end of the year the problem had become entrenched.¹³

The construction extortion mafia is brazen in its approach, targeting both government and private development. In September 2023, the then Gauteng MEC (member of the executive council) for human settlements and infrastructure development, Lebogang Maile, revealed that over the previous five years at least eight public health construction sites, worth more than R2.5 billion, had been disrupted by this type of criminal activity. In some cases contractors had been forced to abandon projects altogether.¹⁴ These included:

- Randfontein Clinic
- Phillip Moyo Clinic in Etwatwa, Benoni, where disruptions cost R52 million
- Eersterust Clinic in Pretoria, where disruptions cost R64 million; the contractor abandoned the site
- Dr George Mukhari Hospital in Ga-Rankuwa
- Jubilee Hospital in Hammanskraal
- The Kopanong Hospital in Vereeniging
- Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto
- Anglo Ashanti Hospital in Carletonville, which lost R589 million¹⁵



One of several residential housing projects in Marlboro, Alexandra, using repurposed shipping containers that has been abandoned after so-called community forums extorted the construction firm contracted by the municipality. *Photo supplied*

And it is not just health department sites that have been affected by extortion and forced stoppages. In Randfontein, west of Johannesburg, the development of Montrose Mega City, an R11 billion housing project launched in 2017, was abandoned in 2018 due to extortion and has since been vandalized and illegally occupied. According to a former senior employee, funding ran out after business forums demanded a 30% stake in the project:

Many construction mafia members posing as local business forums came here demanding work. Some were even paid upfront and later abandoned their work, leaving their workers unpaid. They were greedy. They were not interested in completing their tasks; [they were only interested in] funds.¹⁶

Also in Randfontein, ongoing work on a R400 million housing development in Toekomsrus, a R59-million sewerage project in Montrose and a R500 million electricity substation project in Dan Tloome were also disrupted by extortionists.¹⁷

In Alexandra township, adjacent to the affluent suburb of Sandton, several developments have been targeted by extortion groups. The construction of a water treatment plant was halted and abandoned after the main contractors were told they could not work in the area without paying a protection fee. An electrification project was left unfinished after the contractor was given an ultimatum to pay three people R15 000 a month each. Other operations that have not been completed as a result of extortion include the River Park housing project, the Marlboro container housing project, the Vasco da Gama container housing project, the Vezinyawo relocation project, the Nokuthula Centre, a school for children with special educational needs, the Sixth/Ruth housing project, the Alexandra Automotive Hub and the Alex ICT Hub business incubator project.¹⁸ According to a community activist, 'These are all projects that would have benefited residents in this township, but they were left unfinished. Some have been illegally occupied for residential use, while others have been left to vandals.'¹⁹



The construction of a judicial complex in Mamelodi was abandoned after the contractor pulled out for fear of the safety of its staff when a gang allegedly demanded a stake in the development. *Photo supplied*

In the Tshwane metropolitan area, several projects in the townships of Soshanguve and Mamelodi have been delayed or abandoned due to security concerns related to extortion. In Mamelodi, a R94-million development to build a judicial complex (bringing together the high court, magistrate court and family court) was abandoned in 2014, after just one year of construction, with the contractor withdrawing from the site for fear of the safety of its staff. It is alleged that Mamelodi's notorious Boko Haram gang, presenting itself as a community business forum, had demanded a stake in the project.²⁰ The unfinished building has been left to disintegrate and has also been stripped, allegedly by informal scrap metal dealers.²¹

According to Fred Makoko of the Gauteng Department of Human Settlements, many other infrastructure projects in Mamelodi have been affected by extortion, including the development of a school, where up to five people died as a result of the activity. According to Makoko, a number of construction sites in Soshanguve have also been delayed or abandoned because of safety concerns linked to extortion.²²

Commenting on the upsurge in extortion in the province this year, Gauteng Human Settlements and Infrastructure spokesperson Tahir Sema said the construction extortion mafia posed a 'severe risk' to government projects, adding: 'They disrupt and delay project activities and service delivery to those in desperate need of housing.'²³

Extortion targeting infrastructure and housing development projects also drives up expenses. According to Danny Masimene, the president of the Black Building Council in the Built Environment, costs in the industry have escalated because construction companies have to hire security – 'and not just any security but the armed kind' – in order to complete projects safely. 'The money that is going towards the payment of the security to safeguard the project is the taxpayers' money,' Masimene said. 'That money could be channelled to other forms of service delivery.'²⁴

Much of the extortion occurring in Gauteng's construction sector targets government development and infrastructure projects, as this is where the most money is spent. But the private sector is not spared. In one case, a R900-million shopping complex on Rondebult Road in Boksburg, the contractor had to obtain a declaratory order to prevent armed business forum members from entering the site, after work was disrupted four times. The company also filed criminal charges against the extortionists.²⁵

How the construction extortion mafia operates

Extortion in the Gauteng construction sector has followed a similar trajectory to that in KwaZulu-Natal. In most cases, armed groups calling themselves local business forums invade construction sites and demand a share in the project. This may involve the developer paying a sum of money to the group, or the main contractor agreeing to employ or subcontract work to members of the business forum. The groups may also submit highly inflated quotations for the supply of building materials.²⁶

In some cases, once developers and contractors have agreed to the demands of one business forum, they are repeatedly approached by other groups, each claiming to be the genuine business forum and each demanding a similar stake.

The groups that invade construction sites are usually heavily armed and prepared to intimidate workers and management to ensure that their demands are met. One Pretoria-based developer said: 'They told me you have to accommodate them somehow and pay, otherwise they come on to your site with 200 or 300 people and cause complete havoc.'

Many companies are reluctant to take action against extortionists, seeing it as an expensive and ultimately pointless exercise. Roy Mnisi, the executive director of Master Builders South Africa, which represents 4 000 construction companies, said: 'Litigation is costly and, besides, you may act against a group and another one pops up. It is a merry-go-round. There are genuine concerns around economic exclusion, but in an environment of lawlessness, anarchy triumphs and you won't deal with these issues and your economy won't prosper.'²⁷

There have been at least two assassinations linked to the construction extortion mafia in Gauteng. The first was Rand Water executive Teboho Joala and his bodyguard, Sifiso Shange, who were fatally shot at a school function in Johannesburg in January 2024.²⁸ The second was prominent Alexandra-based businessperson Mpho Motsumi, who was gunned down in February.²⁹

The murders of Teboho Joala and Sifiso Shange

On 22 January 2024, Rand Water executive Teboho Joala was gunned down while attending a back-to-school event in Zakariyya Park, south of Johannesburg.³⁰ Joala was handing over school uniforms and shoes to a group of children, and was killed in full view of a large crowd.

In video footage of the incident, a gunman wearing a striped T-shirt enters the hall where learners and parents are gathered and sits down among the attendees. When Joala stands up to speak, the gunman calmly walks towards him and shoots him eight times, killing him and wounding several others. One of Joala's bodyguards, Sifiso Shange, was killed

by another gunman outside the hall. The gunmen then fled the scene in a getaway vehicle.³¹

Joala had joined Rand Water in 2019 as general manager for communications and stakeholder management, and was appointed chief shared services officer in July 2021. In this position, he was responsible for the procurement processes of several Rand Water projects.³²

Three suspects were arrested for the shooting and appeared in court on 22 April 2024. They were charged with two counts of murder and three counts of attempted murder.³³ The case is ongoing. ■

Rand Water is responsible for water supply in Gauteng and three other provinces. Its vast pipeline system serves mines, metros and municipalities, with two large water treatment plants, four main booster stations and 13 tertiary pumping stations, as well as 60 service reservoirs. The maintenance and development of the network is worth billions of rands.³⁴ Less than a year before Joala's murder, a decision had been taken to provide VIP protection for all Rand Water executives and plant managers, based on a risk assessment carried out by the State Security Agency. While Ramateu Monyokolo, the chairperson of Rand Water, played down the decision, saying that the evaluation had been carried out as a routine part of the body's organizational operations,³⁵ one person interviewed said that the move had been made following threats and intimidation against senior Rand Water staff by the construction extortion mafia.³⁶ This claim was supported by anonymous Rand Water officials quoted in the media in the aftermath of the shooting, who linked the reason for VIP protection to intimidation, death threats and rumours of hitmen. According to one source: 'Contractors who were frustrated that they were not getting jobs ended up joining construction mafias. [They] organised izinkabi [hitmen] to hunt and kill Rand Water bosses.'³⁷

Although the motive for Joala's murder remains unclear, some within Rand Water believe it is linked to his influence over procurement and tendering for the utility's projects, and the perception that he had been 'closing taps' to certain contractors and so-called business forums.³⁸

The second assassination to be linked to Gauteng's construction extortion mafia happened on 28 February 2024, when Motsumi, a well-known business mentor and the president of the Alexandra Chamber of Commerce and Industry, was shot and killed outside his parents' home in Alexandra. The nine gunmen, armed with AK-47 rifles,³⁹ had reportedly followed Motsumi to that location, and opened fire on him while he was talking to an unnamed contractor who was renovating his parents' the house. The contractor was also killed, and the bodies of the two men were left on the street as the gunmen fled the scene in a minibus.⁴⁰

Two people close to Motsumi said that he had been a key figure in determining who was permitted to take on building projects in Alexandra, and asserted that his shooting was linked to the construction extortion mafia, who were unhappy with his tight grip on the township.⁴¹

The lack of transformation and the desperate need for greater economic inclusion in the construction sector have created fertile ground for criminality, with groups and individuals using these conditions to justify illegal activity. In this context, it is important to distinguish between genuine community demand for involvement in local development and criminal groups who seek to hijack projects for their own narrow interests, and who use violent coercion to dictate the boundaries of what local participation is and how it should be carried out.



The crime scene where Mpho Motsumi, president of the Alexandra Chamber of Commerce and Industry, was gunned down. Motsumi had been involved in construction in the township and surrounding areas. *Photo supplied*

Social initiatives hijacked by gangs

Criminal gangs operating in Gauteng's townships have developed their own brand of construction extortion, usually involving protection fees or a stake in projects. In Mamelodi, Boko Haram gang members posing as business forums have been known to force construction companies to give them a share of projects or pay protection fees. As Abram Mashishi, Tshwane regional chairperson of the South African National Civics Organisation, explains, what began as an initiative to encourage construction companies to partner with local township firms has been 'hijacked' by the gang: 'This is a case of a noble idea falling into wrong hands as the gangsters' modus operandi is to stop the progression of any and all construction projects whose owners are not prepared to rope them in as partners in their ventures.'⁴² Some of the projects recently affected include the Mamelodi court precinct mentioned earlier in this report, several road construction projects and the refurbishment of a shopping mall.⁴³ These claims were supported by a safety plan developed by the Mamelodi East Community Policing Forum and SaferSpaces.⁴⁴

According to a Mamelodi resident and construction worker, Boko Haram has monopolized the industry, making it impossible for genuine local contractors to gain employment: 'I have not been able to get work anywhere in a long time, and the same goes for many other small contractors. We are in a hard place. If you are not connected or affiliated with them, you will never work. We have received serious threats when we try to intervene during meetings, they arrive with guns.'⁴⁵ The gang is even said to have 'infiltrated' the ANC, at the local level, to advance their interests.⁴⁶

From construction to mining

Extortion in the infrastructure and construction sector in Gauteng has become both normalized and entrenched. In fact, according to Mohau Mphomela, executive director of Pretoria's Master Builders Association North, extortion has become so pervasive that construction firms now view it as 'yet another routine challenge'.⁴⁷ Faced with site invasions, threats and violence, contractors usually choose to accede to the demands of the so-called business forums. This not only fuels and perpetuates the problem, but also leads to copycat groups making similar demands at the same sites. In addition, these business forums, which may be heavily armed, have set themselves up as the gatekeepers of what constitutes local involvement, sidelining legitimate local small businesses.

Given how it has taken hold in the construction industry, extortion has now spread to other areas of the economy, both in Gauteng and elsewhere in the country, and business forums have begun to target the mining sector, especially procurement contracts.

South Africa's largest iron ore producer, Kumba, a division of global mining company Anglo American, has flagged a surge in extortion syndicates demanding a slice of the sector's multi-billion-rand procurement expenditure. The company has warned that the practice could cripple production, noting in its 2023 annual report an increase in activity related to 'unprecedented contractual demands, with extortion, intimidation and threats of violence that may lead to business interruptions'.⁴⁸

The same trend was highlighted at the 2024 Investing in African Mining Indaba in Cape Town, where construction mafias or procurement mafias were named as the most significant problem currently facing South African mining companies. At Richards Bay Minerals, in particular, two top executives were assassinated reportedly over procurement contracts, in 2020 and 2021, with a subsequent investigation uncovering that organized crime had infiltrated the company.⁴⁹



GAUTENG'S TOWNSHIP ENTERPRISE EXTORTION ECONOMY

In Gauteng, a growing number of township economies are falling victim to the practice of organized extortion, with gangs and other criminal groups targeting both formal and informal businesses. This section examines the extortion economies in the townships of Alexandra, Mamelodi, Soshanguve, Westbury and Eldorado Park.

Alexandra: Xenophobia, protection gangs and the Dudula Movement

Alexandra township is no stranger to extortion. In the 1950s, powerful gangs such as the Spoilers and the Msomis – named after notorious KwaZulu-Natal serial murderer Elifasi Msomi, the 'Axe Killer' – roamed the streets demanding protection money from shopkeepers, taxi operators and even ordinary wage-earners.⁵⁰ During this time, the township developed the nickname 'Gomora', after the notoriously sinful Old Testament cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.⁵¹

More recently, particularly since the COVID-19 lockdown, the township has seen a resurgence of extortion, with township gangs and criminal groups even targeting businesses in neighbouring areas such as Norwood, Kelvin, Balfour Park, Sandringham, Bramley, Lyndhurst, Kramerville and Woodmead. According to one resident, 'What started as low-level extortion of some shop owners has become one of the most dangerous practices affecting a large number of formal and informal businesses operating in the area.'⁵²

Alexandra was the flashpoint for the xenophobic violence that broke out in May 2008 and spread across the province and the country.⁵³ Since then, there have been numerous attacks on foreigners living and working in the area. In September 2019, riots broke out again and migrant-owned shops were looted and set alight, resulting in at least two deaths.⁵⁴ In February and March 2022, the township was the scene of street battles between migrant shop owners and groups of residents vowing to rid the area of foreign nationals. Not surprisingly, then, foreign-owned businesses were the among the first to be singled out in the new wave of extortion. Mickey Ibrahim, a Bangladeshi national who owns a spaza shop in the area, finds himself in the absurd situation of being targeted, as a foreigner,

A building in Orange Grove hijacked by a syndicate of criminals extorting money from the owners. *Photo supplied*



to pay protection fees against xenophobic violence: 'It started when there was a protest that ended in the breaking and looting of foreign-owned spaza shops. That was when I was approached and told to start paying for people not to break and loot my shop. I have been paying ever since and the fee keeps going up every year. In the beginning, I used to pay R40. I am now paying R500 weekly.'⁵⁵

While foreign-owned businesses were the first targets of extortion gangs in Alexandra, the practice soon spread to any business that employed foreign nationals. The owner of a shop in Alex Mall told the GI-TOC that he had been forced to pay protection money because he employed immigrants: 'I kept on paying them until I couldn't pay anymore. This forced me to retrench all my employees who came from other parts of the African continent.'⁵⁶

Subsequently, extortion in Alexandra expanded to include all businesses, including those owned by South Africans. Initially, spaza shops and informal traders were affected, followed by more formal businesses. According to a spaza shop owner in the township, different gangs have been formed to deal with specific establishments, for example, one gang may focus specifically on spaza shops and collect money every Friday.⁵⁷

In and around the busy Pan Africa Shopping Centre, extortion by armed gangs calling themselves 'caretakers' followed a similar trajectory. One informal trader interviewed said these caretakers initially demanded protection money from informal traders from other parts of Africa. When some of these victims could no longer afford to pay and left the area, the caretakers started demanding money from South African informal traders. According to the trader, the problem is escalating: 'More and more groups emerged at the mall, all calling themselves "caretakers", and now we all pay these caretakers.'⁵⁸ A community leader told the GI-TOC that the gangs collect up to R500 from each stall every Friday afternoon, and although this is more than some traders earn they are still forced to pay: 'The traders are now essentially working for the extortionists.'⁵⁹

The gangs involved in extorting businesses in Alexandra are usually armed and use violence or the threat of violence to ensure compliance. A South African mobile phone repair shop owner told the GI-TOC: 'Whether you are a foreigner or not, these guys want money from you. We pay them because

they are armed and dangerous. I pay R70 a day. That is a lot of money for me. Sometimes I don't make that amount of money in a day, but I am forced to pay them for fear of being victimized or even killed.⁶⁰

Another, a spaza shop owner, said she was forced to give in to the extortion demands of a gang because if she didn't, her shop would be broken into repeatedly, with no chance of the perpetrators being arrested: 'You rather lose the small amount they demand daily than lose everything. Several local business owners have closed their doors because of these break-ins after being defiant about paying the gang.'⁶¹

There has been a proliferation of small gangs targeting businesses in Alexandra, and often different gangs have been formed to target the same businesses, forcing victims to pay more than one protection fee. This has also led to tensions between rival gangs. According to one resident, 'Killings sometimes happen because one gang seems to be making more money than the other, or a gang member goes behind his colleagues' backs and collects money for themselves without sharing it with others.'⁶²

While the number of small gangs involved in extortion in Alexandra has soared, many of those involved are known criminals with links to larger, more powerful gangs, some of which operate out of the densely populated and under-resourced Madala and Nobuhle hostels. Some of these smaller gangs are also involved in carrying out hijackings and robberies on behalf of the more powerful gangs and criminal networks operating out of Alexandra.

In addition to extortion gangs, Alexandra is also home to so-called civic movements such as the Dudula Movement (meaning 'force out' or 'knock down') and Operation Fiyela ('sweep clean'), anti-immigration organizations. These purport to be 'driven by the burden placed on public health services, job opportunities and social grants due to an "influx of illegal immigrants".'⁶³ In reality, these groups are widely recognised as being xenophobic,⁶⁴ and have been involved in the extortion of foreign nationals as well as South Africans, either because they look foreign or simply because they possess something the groups want.⁶⁵

Mamelodi and Soshanguve: Boko Haram and other extortion gangs

A series of high-profile murders brought into sharp focus the extent and impact of extortion in townships such as Mamelodi and Soshanguve in Tshwane. In 2022 and 2023, brothers and businesspeople Kevin, Ivan and Mandla Shaba were murdered after refusing to pay protection money. In June 2024, two sisters, Tinyiko and Mpfumo Mashaba, aged seven and four, were shot and then burnt to death at their home in Soshanguve by a man thought to be looking for their father, who had recently distanced himself from an extortion group.

In October 2022, Ivan and Mandla Shaba were shot and killed in front of their elderly mother, who reportedly suffered a stroke and died soon afterwards.⁶⁶ Just under a year later, in September 2023, Kevin Shaba was killed in a 'hail of bullets' in Mamelodi, in what appeared to be a targeted hit.⁶⁷ The three brothers owned a brickmaking and plastering company, and were being extorted by the notorious Boko Haram gang, who are alleged to be responsible for their deaths.

An unnamed businessperson from the area said Ivan and Mandla had moved out of Mamelodi because of gang threats: 'They were warned to stop operating in the area or to make way for someone who was willing to pay. They resisted and they were killed.'⁶⁸ According to reports, Kevin Shaba had still been operating the business at the time of his killing and was a key witness in his brothers' murder case.⁶⁹

The Dudula Movement

Following the launch of Operation Dudula in Soweto, a number of similarly named anti-immigrant groups began to emerge across Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu Natal, including the Alexandra-based Dudula Movement.

The Dudula Movement was formed with the stated intention of forcing out migrants living and working in the township in order to secure more job opportunities for South Africans.⁷⁰ The leader of the movement, Simon 'Msayza' Rati, has a long history of involvement in criminal activity, including armed robbery and dealing in stolen goods, although he now claims to have turned over a new leaf and to be 'giving back to the community'.⁷¹

The group has been involved in several cases of xenophobic violence, including attacks on foreign-owned businesses in February and March 2022, which led to street battles between members of the movement and foreign nationals.

Although the Dudula Movement claims that its objective is to combat 'illegal' immigration,⁷² it has in fact expanded its activities to include extortion. Initially, the group targeted foreign-owned businesses, using its reputation to coerce owners into paying protection fees in order to be allowed to continue operating. It then began to extort businesses owned by or employing foreign nationals in areas such as Kew, Bramley, Orange Grove, Lyndhurst and Norwood.

In Norwood, a suburb with a bustling dining economy, a restaurant owner was approached by members of the Dudula Movement and its Soweto counterpart, Operation Dudula, and

told that they could no longer employ staff from neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Lesotho. The Dudula members then arranged for the restaurant owner to pay them to continue employing these workers.⁷³

Following the familiar pattern of Gauteng extortion practices, after initially focusing its energies on foreign nationals, the Alexandra Dudula Movement turned its wrath on South Africans. In March 2022, four members of the group were arrested for carrying out an illegal eviction of South African citizens, who they had falsely claimed were foreigners. The group had reportedly been conducting similar operations for some time. There are more than 200 criminal cases open against Dudula Movement members at the Alexandra police station,⁷⁴ and several houses, mainly in Alexandra's extensions 7, 8, 9 and 10, have been taken over by the group.

The Dudula Movement is also involved in the extortion of South African street vendors and shops owned by South Africans. One street vendor who has been trading outside the Pan Africa Shopping Centre for several years, said that while the group claimed to be fighting crime, they were the criminals themselves: 'They initially convinced us that they were fighting foreigners only. But later, they stopped fighting and chasing away foreigners and started demanding money from them. As time went on, they came with threats demanding money from us or else they trash our stock. We reported them to the police several times, with no action taken against them. We were tired and intimidated. We finally gave in and started paying what they told us to be a protection fee.'⁷⁵ ■

The Boko Haram gang in Mamelodi has its roots in a community initiative for local entrepreneurs and unemployed youth,⁷⁶ but has evolved into a criminal organization specializing in extortion. The group was initially supported by local residents, who hoped it would help facilitate job placements and opportunities. However, as one resident put it, 'the road to perdition is paved with good intentions. Soon the group morphed into a bunch of gangsters who terrorized foreign-owned spaza shops, local businesses, taxi drivers, construction companies and the community of Mamelodi in general. All this in pursuit of what the group calls "protection fees".⁷⁷

As was the case in Alexandra, following the 2014 xenophobic attacks in Mamelodi, Boko Haram saw an opportunity to extort money from foreign-owned spaza shops. The gang promised foreign nationals that they would be protected from violence if they paid a fee. However, according to a foreign spaza shop owner, 'This was a fallacy, as Boko Haram had actually encouraged residents to loot foreign-owned spaza shops during the xenophobic mania.' The shop owner said he and his fellow foreign shop owners were forced to pay the gang between R400 to R500 a month for so-called protection.⁷⁸

As in other examples of township enterprise extortion, Boko Haram soon progressed from the extortion of foreign-owned businesses to include all commercial ventures, including those owned by South Africans living and working in Mamelodi. Inevitably, the gang has also expanded its operations to include illegal drugs, hijacking and robbery.

Between 2017 and 2019, Boko Haram was involved in the illegal occupation of a Mamelodi West hostel, where they sold the street drug nyaope (a mixture of low-grade heroin and other substances) and demanded rent from residents. Two gang members were subsequently arrested in March 2019 and charged with trespassing, money laundering, extortion and drug dealing. According to police spokesperson Brenda Muridili, Boko Haram had cost the City of Tshwane, which owns the building, more than R11 million in unpaid rent over two years.⁷⁹

The murder of Tinyiko and Mpfumo Mashaba

I tumeleng Mashaba, Tinyiko and Mpfumo's mother, was entering her property in Changing Spot, an informal settlement in Soshanguve, through the back gate when she heard a man kicking down her door and saying to her children: 'Where is your father? Where is Louis? You will die because your father loves money.'⁸⁰

A short time later, Mashaba heard gunshots. She ran for help, and was almost captured by the gunman herself: 'He managed to catch me but I slipped away and he said it would not end well. I was about four streets away from my home when I saw smoke and I knew my kids were gone [...] I found my older child hugging her teddy bear with a bullet in her stomach and the younger one just beneath the bed as if she wanted to hide under it.'⁸¹

The children's father, Louis Manganye, had been a member of a crime prevention forum, but had left the group three months earlier after it was allegedly 'hijacked' by criminals who were extorting money from shop owners and residents. The group was reportedly demanding R50 for protection payments and R250 for electricity and water.⁸²

The gunman is believed to have been involved in a shooting at a shebeen just before the two children were killed, which left two people dead and four injured. According to Gauteng police spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Mavela Masondo, 'Preliminary investigation suggests the suspects were after the father of the girls, who was not at home during the incident.'⁸³

Similarly, in 2019, Boko Haram moved into an unlawfully occupied block of government-owned flats in Mamelodi East.⁸⁴ Armed gang members threatened residents who did not speak 'Mamelodi lingo' with eviction or fines, and forced others to pay fees for security, services and rent. They even began selling the vacated properties to new tenants, and by 2023 were selling flats for R15 000 or more.⁸⁵

While Boko Haram is one of the most feared gangs in Mamelodi, it is far from unique. Criminal groups such as Bafarasai⁸⁶ and Al Qaeda⁸⁷ are also active in the township, and clashes between rivals are common. In 2018, for example, Boko Haram's construction extortion mafia were involved in 'running gun battles' with other criminal groups over subcontracts to renovate the Mams Mall shopping complex in the east of Mamelodi.⁸⁸

In 2021, Boko Haram itself became the target of a series of gang-related killings, in which nine people were murdered, including one of the gang's key leaders, Phillip Given Mnguni. At the time, many residents were 'adamant' that the deaths were the work of a lone vigilante nicknamed John Wick.⁸⁹ However, the police and commentators attributed the killings to a breakaway gang known as Bafarasai,⁹⁰ comprising local unemployed youth. Many of the members of Bafarasai are said to be former victims of Boko Haram, seeking revenge as well as control of Mamelodi's extensive extortion economy.⁹¹

More recently, in May 2023, a gang turf war broke out in the area, resulting in the brutal deaths of four Boko Haram members. Eddie Mnguni, chairperson of the Mamelodi East Community Policing Forum, said: 'When I arrived at the scene, it looked like a massacre had happened. And from what we heard, after the suspects shot the Boko Haram members, [they] further went on to smash their heads, almost to ensure that none of them survived.' Mnguni described the attacks as an 'onslaught' on Boko Haram, as groups vied for control of the highly lucrative extortion economy.⁹² It is an economy, after all, in which gang members can reportedly earn as much as R700 000 a month.⁹³

Westbury and Eldorado Park: Drug gangs with a sideline in extortion

Westbury and Eldorado Park, in the west of Johannesburg, have long experienced what has been referred to as a 'cyclical pattern of violence and criminality' deriving from the presence of gangs and organized crime, and the associated backlash in the form of community protests and state responses. Criminal activity in the area mainly involves illegal drugs, as well as robbery, vehicle hijacking and so-called chop shops.⁹⁴

These two areas exhibit slightly different extortion economies from Gauteng's other townships. For the dominant gangs, such as the Varados and Fast Guns, for example, the drug trade is their main business, and although extortion may be a lucrative component of their activities, it is predominantly seen as a sideline.

In Westbury and Eldorado Park, gang territory is clearly defined and demarcated, and turf lines do not overlap. Many local businesses will be allied to the gang that controls the area in which they operate, and gangs focus on extorting protection money from new or foreign-owned businesses. The same principle applies to contractors brought into the area, from whom gangs are known to demand sums ranging from R15 000 to R30 000 per project.⁹⁵

While the established gangs in these areas usually control the sale of drugs, a new system has developed in Eldorado Park. Here, foreign nationals, particularly Congolese, have established what

'We were tired and intimidated. We finally gave in and started paying what they told us to be a protection fee.'

are known as 'e-lounges', some of which are drug sales points. The Varados, the suburb's controlling gang, are said to tolerate this if the owners of the e-lounges pay the gang a tax to operate in their territory. According to one gang expert, the relationship between the Varados and the Congolese nationals goes beyond extortion, as the e-lounge operators may also help the Varados obtain certain drugs, which are then sold by the gang in Eldorado Park.⁹⁶

In addition, the police in Westbury and Eldorado Park are reportedly involved in systemic extortion. Gangs allow certain police officials to collect protection money from drug houses and venues where drugs are sold and, according to one community activist, see this as a better alternative to paying the police directly.⁹⁷

Some elements in the police also target the same foreign-owned businesses and traders as the gangs, forcing them to pay a double extortion fee. According to a gang expert, the police have become completely enmeshed in the local extortion economy, and their actions are tolerated as long as they do not attempt to target any gang-affiliated shops or traders.



THE GAUTENG WATER MAFIA

Gauteng's ailing water infrastructure and mismanagement of the sector, coupled with a rapidly growing population and South Africa's designation as a water-scarce and water-stressed country,⁹⁸ have led to the emergence of a new type of extortionist: the 'water mafia'.⁹⁹

These mafia-style groups make use of connections in provincial and local government to obtain contracts to operate tankers and supply water to areas affected by water shortages and outages. In the Tshwane metropolitan area alone, the municipality spends an estimated R98 million a year on water tankers – a figure that excludes what the city calls 'emergencies'.¹⁰⁰ As Ofentse Madzabatela, a member of the Tshwane Mayoral Committee on Human Settlements, said, 'The provision of water is a basic human right, and the City is committed to fulfilling its obligations in this regard'.¹⁰¹

The groups involved in the water mafia often use unpurified water or draw their water from unsafe, non-potable sources, and charge exorbitant prices.¹⁰² There have also been cases where tanker owners have been contracted and paid by municipalities, only to charge residents again when they deliver. In March 2024, the City of Tshwane received information that water tanker service providers hired to fill up communal water tanks in the Skirlik informal settlement in Mamelodi were diverting their loads to private tanks and selling the water to other communities.

Similarly, in Soweto, when the city announced that the water supply would be shut off for 58 hours in July 2023 for planned maintenance, residents knew they were in for an expensive few days. Grace Ramotlwa, a single mother of two, pointed to the high prices charged by informal water tankers to fill up a 20-litre bucket: 'Our water troubles are endless – whenever municipal taps are dry, which is now suspiciously often, water hawkers fleece us. [...] What angers me is water tankers are already prowling the streets. Who really owns and benefits from these water tanker contracts?'¹⁰³

Illegal water suppliers – who have either lost their tender to deliver water or never bothered to obtain one – are common in areas with water problems. They operate without permits and use dams and rivers to fill their tankers. In Hammanskraal in May 2023, during a cholera outbreak that left 31 people dead, a viral video showed a group of tankers seemingly collecting water from a shallow lake.¹⁰⁴ The City of Tshwane distanced itself from the incident, insisting the vehicles were not contracted service providers, and warned residents not to buy water from unaccredited and unmarked suppliers as it was 'untested and not declared safe for drinking'.¹⁰⁵

To increase their profits and influence, the water mafia will even sabotage infrastructure and maintenance projects, so that their services are needed for the affected area. According to Professor Anthony Turton, a water expert at the Centre for Environmental Management at the University of the Free State, 'these acts of sabotage are occurring at critical points, suggesting that some public workers in the municipalities are complicit'.¹⁰⁶

In Alexandra, one resident told the GI-TOC that during a water outage that affected parts of the township for months, no fewer than 12 tankers roamed the township every day delivering water. According to the resident, Alexandra's water crisis was being driven by the water mafia, who knew where to turn off the supply through their contacts within the municipality. He also said that some teams carrying out maintenance on the main water system were known to be involved in sabotage.¹⁰⁷

According to the former chairperson of the parliamentary portfolio committee on water and sanitation, Robert Mashego, the hiring of privately owned tankers to deliver water has become an accepted practice across the country, with the City of Tshwane now spending more than 10 times as much on private tankers each year as it did five years ago.¹⁰⁸ Mashego also noted that the water mafia and water tanker syndicates have become a notable concern in several provinces, including Gauteng: 'Water tankers have become big business. In fact, several municipalities have reported that these criminal groups have threatened them when maintenance teams go out to repair damage to the infrastructure.' Mashego revealed that he himself had been threatened by these groups on several occasions when visiting sites to ensure that proper procedures were being followed: 'They've said to me, we've heard talk of stopping things [use of tankers], so don't come here again; this is our business.'¹⁰⁹

In Mamelodi, where the water crisis dates back years, gangs such as Boko Haram and Bafarasai control the community's access to local reservoirs and will demand money for water. In February 2024, a community policing forum member said the groups had been intimidating residents of Nkandla informal settlement for years: 'Two weeks ago, I heard the gangs are now collecting fees from [...] residents who don't have water. They tell them to pay money so they will divert water from the reservoir to the settlement. That is extortion.'¹¹⁰

In Phomolong, Boko Haram controls the water trucks that are sent by the municipality. One resident said that people who complain are threatened at gunpoint: 'They will always find you. I cannot be known for speaking out. [...] I bath, cook and wash dishes with that one bucket.'¹¹¹ In Alexandra, gangs are also known to work with members of the water mafia, not only protecting tanker drivers from rival gangs, but also helping to vandalize water infrastructure and cut off supplies to the area.¹¹²



A water tanker in Alexandra. Gauteng's ailing water sector has made tanked water vulnerable to extortion cartels locally referred to as the water mafia. *Photo supplied*



GAUTENG'S TRANSPORT EXTORTION ECONOMY

There are approximately 200 000 registered minibus taxis in South Africa, with the largest proportion – 35 000 – operating in Gauteng.¹¹³ In addition, an unknown number of unregistered taxis operate within the province. (The national number of illegal taxis is estimated to be between 63 000 and 100 000.¹¹⁴) There are 178 taxi associations in the province, most of which are members of one of two so-called mother bodies: the South African National Taxi Council (Santaco) or the National Taxi Alliance (NTA).¹¹⁵ Almost 60% of households in Gauteng spend 10% of their income on public transport, while 70% of households do not own a private vehicle. Although some Gauteng households make use of buses, trains and e-hailing services most (70%) use minibus taxis daily.¹¹⁶

While the minibus taxi industry provides a vital service to commuters in Gauteng, it has long been plagued by shootings and assassinations linked to high levels of competition, mafia-style criminal behaviour and allegations of extortion, generally known collectively in South Africa as 'taxi violence'.

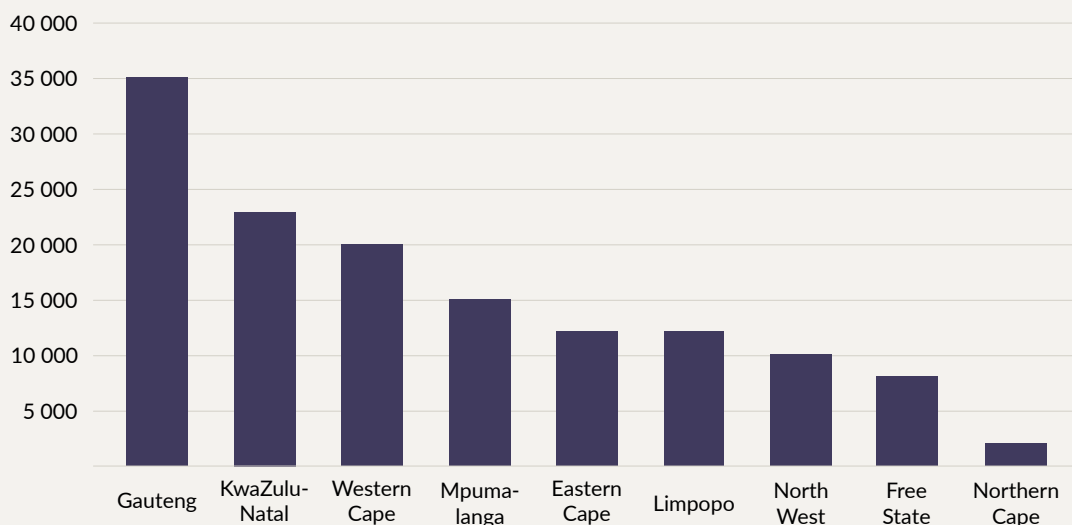


FIGURE 2 Registered minibus distribution, by province.

In September 2019, the then premier of Gauteng, David Makhura, appointed a commission of inquiry to investigate a wave of taxi violence in the province. The announcement came after Makhura told a taxi summit that 'forces' had entered Gauteng with the aim of increasing tensions: 'Taxi violence is not receding in our province. It is getting worse. The killings are getting worse everywhere and the fundamental question is, who is actually feeding this? And who is benefiting from this violence?'¹¹⁷

A year later, in August 2020, the North Gauteng High Court in Pretoria ratified an agreement between the then Gauteng transport MEC, Jacob Mamabolo, Santaco and the NTA, aimed at ending taxi violence and modernizing the industry in the province. The agreement also allowed the MEC for transport to intervene in the administration of taxi associations and internal conflicts. Mamabolo said: 'We are convinced that this court order can only serve to strengthen our efforts to close the leaking of taps of cash and liquidity that is feeding [the] machinery of killers and murderers that have found a lucrative market in our province.'¹¹⁸ Sadly, just 10 days later, two taxi drivers were shot dead and two others wounded by unidentified gunmen at a taxi rank in Pretoria, the scene being 'riddled with shell casings',¹¹⁹ raising questions about the effectiveness of the agreement.

Despite this and other provincial government initiatives, taxi violence and associated mafia-style practices continue to plague Gauteng. In April 2024, the provincial department of transport announced that the MEC, Kedibone Diale-Tlabela, intended to institute 'extraordinary measures' to suspend the licences of two warring Soweto taxi associations, the Witwatersrand Taxi Association (Wata) and the Nancefield Dube-West Taxi Association (Nanduwe).¹²⁰ Commuters were advised to 'make alternative transport arrangements'.¹²¹ The move came just weeks after an upsurge in taxi violence over route disputes in Ekurhuleni, which left two taxi association members dead.¹²²

Extortion as a leading cause of taxi violence

Extortion in the taxi industry has existed for as long as there have been taxi associations, and generally takes one of two forms: the grossly inflated fees charged to drivers for using certain routes, and the so-called bucket system, whereby individual drivers are extorted at the taxi rank.

Taxi associations often charge drivers exorbitant fees to operate on routes under their control, with the excess money then being shared among existing members. In his submission to a commission of inquiry into taxi violence in Gauteng in September 2020, Santaco's chief strategic manager, Bafana Magagula, said the representative body believed this to be a key factor contributing to violence in the industry.¹²³

Furthermore, executive members of taxi associations will often recruit new members, even if their routes are oversubscribed, in order to increase profits. In the run-up to association elections, executive members may also recruit new members to bolster their support within the association. While over-recruitment may help fill the associations' coffers, it also results in dwindling profits for taxi operators who have to share oversubscribed routes with the new recruits. According to Santaco, this practice has also led to conflict and violence within the industry.¹²⁴

The second type of extortion prevalent in the taxi industry is the bucket system or *imali yebakede* (money for the bucket), whereby taxi bosses collect ad hoc sums of money from each taxi at the rank. Failure to pay these fees can result in expulsion from the association or violence against the defiant owner or driver. There is usually no explanation of what the money is for, but in times of conflict it is used to build up the association's war chest.¹²⁵

In their submissions to the commission of inquiry into taxi violence, Phillip Taaibosch, then the president of Santaco, and Magagula cited the bucket system as one of the main causes of conflict and violence in the industry. Magagula said he knew of one case where a taxi association was demanding R50 a day from each taxi, and that the association had about 400 member taxis: 'So, when one does the maths, annually this totals to a lot of money which is not accounted for.'¹²⁶ Taaibosch told the commission that the bucket system was never 'on the agenda' at taxi association meetings, but that the practice was still standard.¹²⁷ Referring to the system in its final report, the commission said that taxi associations had 'become a law unto themselves by collecting money from members daily or weekly', and added that 'the money is not accounted for properly'.¹²⁸

In 2020, Mamabolo declared that it had been legislated that tariffs in the taxi industry should be paid through banks, and that all collections should be properly documented.¹²⁹ But while the Gauteng department of transport's intentions may have been to eradicate the bucket system, implementing this in a highly competitive industry with an emphasis on tradition and a history of mafia-style criminal behaviour is another story. According to at least two taxi operators in the Johannesburg area, several associations still make use of the bucket system, with the money often being used by key players in the industry to hire *izinkabi* (hitmen) to eliminate rivals.¹³⁰

The involvement of key taxi association executives and bosses in these two forms of extortion creates serious tensions in the industry. In addition, the profits are substantial, and as a result executive members can be very reluctant to relinquish their highly lucrative positions. In its final report, the commission of inquiry stated:

The involvement of Associations in the business of taxi operations, including the different money collection methods, makes the incumbent executives resist vacating their positions even where they have been voted out of office. In certain instances, money collected is for the benefit of these executives. The incumbent executives also generally avoid calling for elections that may have them voted out for fear of losing power and money.¹³¹

Taxi bosses have been known to hire hitmen or use violence against opponents, and incidents of assault and reports of targeted killings often escalate around the time of taxi association elections.

Finally, although not necessarily as organized, the practice of extortion between taxi drivers and law enforcement officials is ubiquitous. Operators are frequently threatened and intimidated into paying bribes in return for leniency for real or fabricated traffic offences. According to the commission of inquiry, the practice has become so widespread that it is described as a 'norm', and taxi drivers are reported to 'budget' for daily encounters with law enforcement on the road:

The resultant public perception that taxi drivers are a law unto themselves is made credible especially because some of these transactions of bribery take place right in front of commuters. Both the corrupt officers and the taxi drivers have become so brazen that they no longer conceal the corrupt exchanges.¹³²

'Death threats are not new to us'

Elements within the taxi industry are also involved in the extortion of other transport providers, particularly buses and e-hailing services. There have even been cases of taxi operators extorting owners of private vehicles.

In April 2018, during a bus strike in Pretoria, several motorists, particularly in Mamelodi, complained that they had been threatened by taxi operators when they tried to help stranded commuters. Drivers also claimed that they had been attacked for giving lifts to colleagues or relatives. One person said: 'We are intimidated by taxi drivers when we ferry these stranded people. Is it a crime to help out our fellow community members?'¹³³ The extortion of private vehicles in Gauteng, however, is more sporadic and not as extensive or organized as in areas such as Cape Town.

In April 2021, police in Soweto arrested three people after a taxi association-branded car stopped a minibus on the highway. The car's occupants forced the driver and passengers out of the taxi and demanded money to release the vehicle. Gauteng Traffic Police spokesperson Obed Sibasa said similar activities were taking place across the province, and that the department had arrested a number of people for similar crimes in the Vaal, Ekurhuleni, Soweto and Tshwane.¹³⁴

Conflict and extortion between the taxi industry and bus services in Gauteng has been occurring for several years. In 2015, buses belonging to the state-owned bus company Autopax were attacked in Mamelodi after a dispute with taxis over a tender to operate routes formerly run by the Public Utility Transport Corporation (Putco).¹³⁵ A handful of Autopax buses were damaged during the clashes, and a Putco bus was shot at.¹³⁶

In July 2020, just as South Africa was beginning to open up after COVID-19-related restrictions, Ipelegeng Bus Transport was forced to suspend its services in the Vaal indefinitely due to violence and intimidation by taxi operators, leaving thousands of people stranded. Taxis in the area had recently increased their fares, prompting many commuters to switch to the more affordable bus services. In response, bus drivers were threatened, and one bus was shot at and burnt. Some taxi operators said they would not allow the buses to operate until they raised their fares and reduced their fleet.

According to bus company manager Kamohelo Phele, the situation was not unusual: 'The intimidation and death threats are not new to us. The morning of [last month's] strike, taxis arrived at the depot at 3.30 a.m., dishing out death threats to our drivers. Buses did not operate on that day.'¹³⁷

More recently, in March 2024, a dispute erupted in Germiston after a bus company had been awarded a contract to operate in the area. The National Taxi Association demanded a share of the bus contract, arguing that the development of the routes had been done by the taxi industry, and that it should therefore be given 'at least 30% of the contract' as compensation. In a statement, the association threatened to intensify its actions, saying: 'Should the authorities remain incalcitrant in the matter, the industry will be left with no option other than to escalate the current shutdown in Ekurhuleni to national proportions thus crippling the mobility of the masses as a consequence.' Four people were arrested following reports that commuters who chose to use the buses were being intimidated and assaulted by taxi operators.¹³⁸

There are also long-standing problems between taxis and long-distance bus operators, and these were exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdown. In April 2022, an unidentified gunman fired more than a dozen bullets at an Intercap bus as it left a depot in Cape Town. Four days later, the driver, Bangikhaya Machana, died from his injuries.¹³⁹ In an affidavit to the SAPS for the purposes of opening a case, Intercap CEO Johann Ferreira explained the situation:

As a result of the various lockdowns and lack of tourists, in order to continue their business operations, long distance bus operators have had to slowly decrease their prices. This is a natural consequence when there is a lack of demand. From 2021 when it became clear that long distance

bus operators were charging similar rates as taxis, there has been a marked increase in violent incidents and in the severity of the taxi associations' demands.¹⁴⁰

Between January 2021 and February 2022, over 150 incidents of shooting, stoning, violence and intimidation against bus drivers and passengers were reported to the SAPS in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Gauteng. Although the coastal provinces bore the brunt of the abuse, there were at least two notable incidents in Gauteng.¹⁴¹ In addition, taxi association representatives from Gauteng were present at a series of meetings to discuss the issue, where they made 'thinly veiled threats' against the bus operators.¹⁴² During these meetings, the taxi associations demanded that buses pay a cash levy to use certain routes, limit the number of buses operating each day, change bus operating licences to a timetable acceptable to the taxi associations and increase the cost of bus tickets.¹⁴³

Finally, e-hailing drivers in Gauteng, as elsewhere in the country, have also been the victims of violence, intimidation and extortion by elements within both the metered and minibus taxi industries who see e-hailing as a threat to their livelihoods. In June 2023, tensions between e-hailing drivers and taxi operators resulted in four e-hailing vehicles being torched and three drivers being injured at the Maponya and Protea Glen shopping centres.¹⁴⁴ Several areas in Gauteng are considered no-go areas for e-hailing drivers, where they are prohibited from picking up customers or accused of stealing business from taxi operators. E-hailing drivers operating in these areas are threatened, attacked or ordered to pay fines by taxi operators.¹⁴⁵

One such hotspot is Sam Ntuli Mall in Katlehong. The shopping centre has a designated e-hailing drop-off zone about 100 metres from the taxi rank, but e-hailing drivers are told they are not allowed to operate in the area, and are often attacked or have their earnings confiscated by taxi operators. One local taxi operator, Sakhile Mkhwanazi, said: 'We are here to give service to the people. We think e-hailing operators are here to steal our business.'¹⁴⁶



Firefighters at the scene of a car set ablaze in Sandton during a confrontation between taxi drivers and Uber drivers. © Reuters/Sipho Sithole

In Alexandra, several e-hailing operators interviewed confirmed that extortion did still exist, although not to the same extent as two years ago, and said that there were still places where e-hailing taxis were not allowed to work. An e-hailing driver operating in the Alexandra, Sandton, Woodmead and Greenstone areas said that taxi association members had taken the lead in harassing them and demanding money if they were seen picking up customers in the township: 'Some of our [e-hailing] drivers have been kidnapped, harassed and a ransom paid for doing business in the township.'¹⁴⁷

From taxi operator to Mamelodi's Al Capone

In several areas of Gauteng, criminal gangs have become embedded in the taxi industry. Gang members use their power and influence to extort money from rival taxi operators, and some have even risen to positions of prominence in local taxi associations. Perhaps one of the most notorious examples is the well-known Mamelodi taxi boss and gang leader Vusi 'Khekhe' Mathibela, who, before his conviction in 2023 for the murder of businessperson Wandile Bozwana, was responsible for running a vast extortion ring in the township, targeting both businesses and taxi operators.

Vusi 'Khekhe' Mathibela – 'Mamelodi's Al Capone'

Vusi Mathibela started out in the taxi industry when he left school, having been given two taxis by his grandmother. His business consisted of around 50 taxis, a nightclub in Pretoria and shares in a Johannesburg restaurant. At the time of his arrest in 2016, he was the chairperson of the Mamelodi Amalgamated Taxi Association.

Described as 'Mamelodi's Al Capone'¹⁴⁸ and 'Mamelodi's number 1 tsotsi',¹⁴⁹ Mathibela was alleged to run an extensive extortion ring, demanding protection money from dozens of businesses and taxi owners in Mamelodi. Although he reportedly lived in the upscale suburb of Midrand, he occasionally visited the township – in a convoy of more than 15 cars and over 30 bodyguards.¹⁵⁰

In March 2019, several residents called into a local radio station to publicly express what a feared figure Mathibela was. One caller said: 'I am speaking on behalf of concerned residents of Mamelodi. We are really scared of him. When we hear the name Vusi Khekhe, we hide. We can't even talk about his name at a salon.' Another caller 'made several strong allegations against Mathibela, saying he was responsible

for the death of many Mamelodi businessmen who opposed him.'¹⁵¹

Mathibela denied these allegations. However, in 2019, a group of Mamelodi businesspeople, taxi operators and foreign spaza shop owners laid charges of extortion, intimidation and assault against him. The complainants, however, later withdrew their charges.¹⁵²

In 2019, Mathibela handed himself over to police for the 2015 murder of businessperson Wandile Bozwana, after being implicated by his co-accused. He was released on bail and prohibited from leaving the country, although he holidayed in Mauritius during this time, and was ultimately re-arrested at OR Tambo airport while on his way to Dubai in 2019, and his bail revoked.¹⁵³

In January 2023, Mathibela, along with Siphon Patrick Hudla, Matamela Robert Mutapa and Bonginkosi Paul Khumalo, was sentenced to 30 years' imprisonment for Bozwana's murder, 10 years for the attempted murder of his business partner Mpho Baloyi, six years for the unlawful possession of a firearm and two years each for the unlawful possession of ammunition.¹⁵⁴ ■

In July 2020, the Gauteng MEC for roads and transport, Jacob Mamabolo, dissolved the executive committee of the Mamelodi Amalgamated Taxi Association (Mata), which was allegedly dominated by Boko Haram, accusing it of being responsible for the deaths of some of its own members in an ongoing taxi war. The killing of Mata officials had reportedly started in November 2014, when chairperson Lucky Mahlangu, secretary Busang Maubane and committee member Oscar 'Patch' Letsoalo were shot dead. In the month before Mamabolo's decision, 19 people had been gunned down, including taxi owners, drivers and their families. 'The taxi business must be run through scrupulous means, not by the barrel of the gun,' he said.¹⁵⁵

Boko Haram has also been accused of extorting taxis that do not belong to a formal taxi association in Mamelodi. According to one driver, he and others were forced to pay R50 a week as a 'protection fee'.¹⁵⁶



KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF GAUTENG'S FOUR EXTORTION ECONOMIES

In the Western Cape and Gauteng, specific but interlinked extortion economies have emerged, leading directly to an overall increase in extortion practices. There are also several similarities between organized extortion practices in the two provinces.

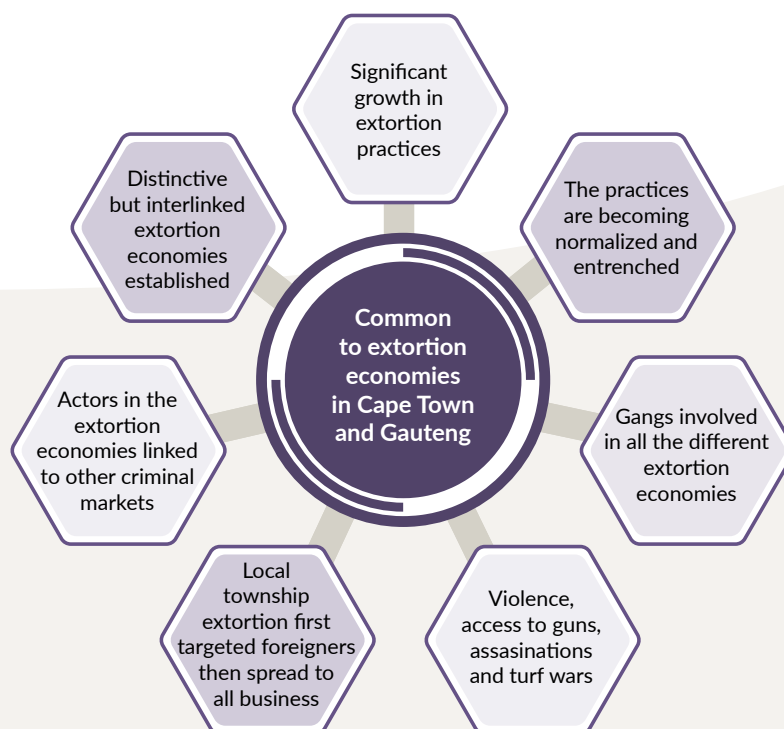


FIGURE 3 Common features of Cape Town and Gauteng extortion economies.

Violence, Gauteng's speciality

Violence plays a central role in Gauteng's four main extortion economies, and the success of the practice depends on the extortionists' ability and willingness to use intimidation, threats and force against their targets. Aggression and the potential for aggression are recurring elements, and those criminal groups that demonstrate an ability to use violence are most likely to be able to sustain their extortion activities and control their area of influence. As in most international extortion economies, once an extortion practice is established in Gauteng, the mere knowledge that the criminal actors are willing and able to use violence means that people will acquiesce to their demands without the need for actual acts of violence.¹⁵⁷

Violence also arises from conflict between different gangs or criminal groups involved in extortion, particularly when groups seek to expand their operations or muscle in on the territory or activities of other groups. A clear example of this is in Mamelodi, where clashes over control of the lucrative extortion economy have led to several killings.

In Gauteng, as in many other places where extortion economies thrive, the local communities and victims of extortion are subject to endless cycles of violence. The early stages, when extortion economies are being established, are often accompanied by high levels of violence, as the extortionists seek to assert their authority and dominance. Thereafter, the levels of aggression often decline slightly, as the threat of violence becomes sufficient to ensure continued cooperation. However, even when the dominant criminal group is secure in its position, violence will not decline for long. By their very nature, gangs and criminal groups are continually seeking to expand their territory and profits, and conflict with communities, law enforcement and rival groups is always on the horizon, not to mention internal disputes.

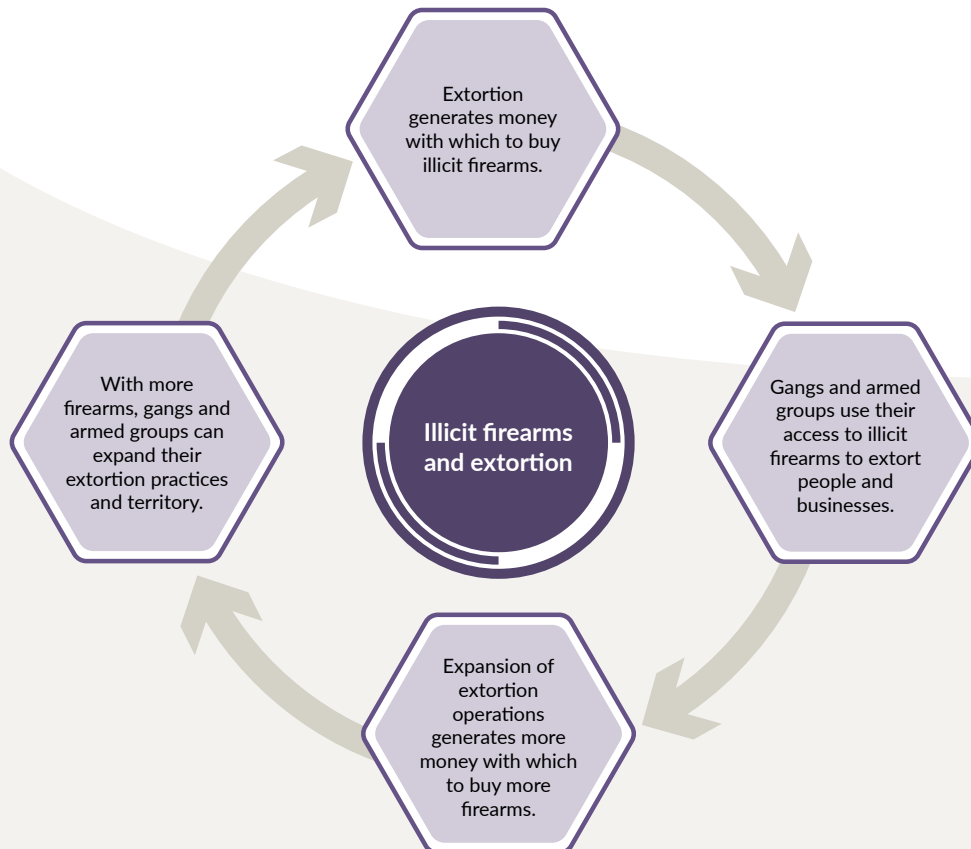


FIGURE 4 The firearms and extortion cycle.

The availability of a sizable pool of illicit firearms and ammunition in Gauteng has contributed significantly to the ability of criminal actors to use violence as a critical tool in their extortion practices. According to the 2020 commission of inquiry into taxi violence in Gauteng, for instance, of those killed in taxi violence, '100% were shot with high calibre rifles as well as small firearms'. Notably, the commission found that a number of the high calibre weapons used were the kind issued to state agencies such as the South African National Defence Force and the SAPS.¹⁵⁸ The diversion of firearms through leakages and losses from both the police and private security companies is a well-known factor fuelling violence in Gauteng.¹⁵⁹

Targeted killings or assassinations are a major feature of Gauteng's extortion economy. One reason for these types of killings is people refusing to comply with extortion demands, as in the case of the murder of the Shaba brothers in Mamelodi or Alexandra-based businessperson Mpho Motsumi. Another cause is conflict between rival groups, such as the assassination of Boko Haram leader Phillip Given Mnguni. Finally, targeted killings may focus on individuals seen to be disrupting extortion practices, as in the case of Teboho Joala, mentioned earlier. In the transport extortion economy, targeted killings and assassinations often increase during taxi association leadership elections, with taxi hitmen commonly being deployed to eliminate opponents.

Gangsters play many roles

The presence of gangs in an area is an important factor to consider in relation to the extortion economy, and gangsters play many different roles. In some cases, gang members will become foot soldiers for the main criminal actors, providing them with protection and the threat of violence, as in the case of the water mafia in Alexandra. In other instances, gangs themselves become the main actors carrying out extortion, as in the case of Boko Haram in Mamelodi, the street gangs in Alexandra and the Fast Guns and Varados in Westbury and Eldorado Park. Extortion may be a sideline, as seen in Westbury and Eldorado Park, where the gangs' main trade is illicit drugs, or it may be the group's main occupation, as in the case of Boko Haram in Mamelodi.

The income derived from extortion in Gauteng is substantial and stable, and often allows gangs to strengthen their structures. It has also allowed gangs such as Boko Haram to expand their activities and move into other criminal markets such as illicit drugs, armed robbery and hijacking.

Strong links between criminal economies

While the four extortion economies in Gauteng have discrete characteristics, they are also closely interlinked. These linkages often involve criminal actors who operate in more than one area, with some key players active in all four. Gangs and criminal elements within the taxi industry also play a key role in connecting the various extortion economies, with many being involved in more than one domain.

Many of the groups and criminal actors active in the extortion economy are also involved in other criminal activities, such as the illicit drug trade and armed robbery, including hijackings and cash-in-transit heists. In some cases, this overlap occurs from the outset, with gangs or criminal actors engaging in extortion as an extension of their existing operations. This is the case in Westbury and Eldorado Park, where gangs involved in the illicit drug trade combined this activity with extortion. Alternatively, some individual criminal actors in Alexandra and Mamelodi began by carrying out armed robberies, and then expanded their activities to include extortion. In other cases, groups and gangs initially see extortion as their primary activity and, once established in this economy, diversify into other criminal enterprises.

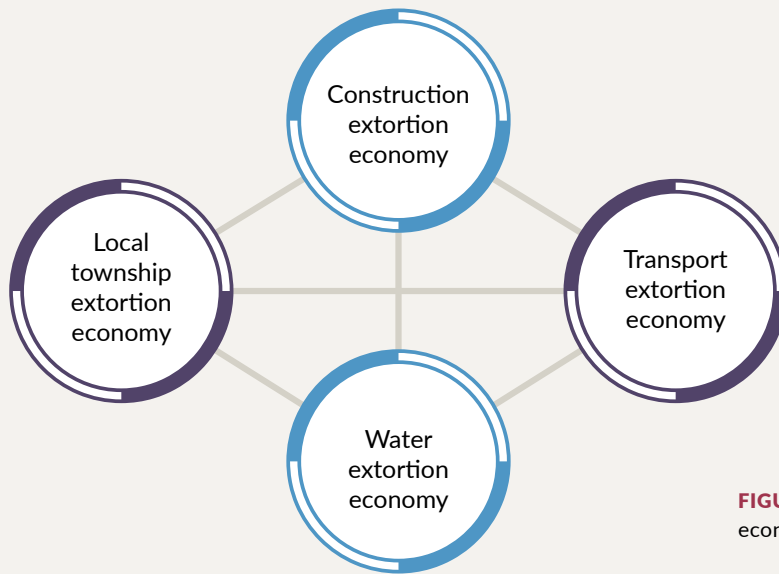


FIGURE 5 Gauteng's extortion economies are interconnected.

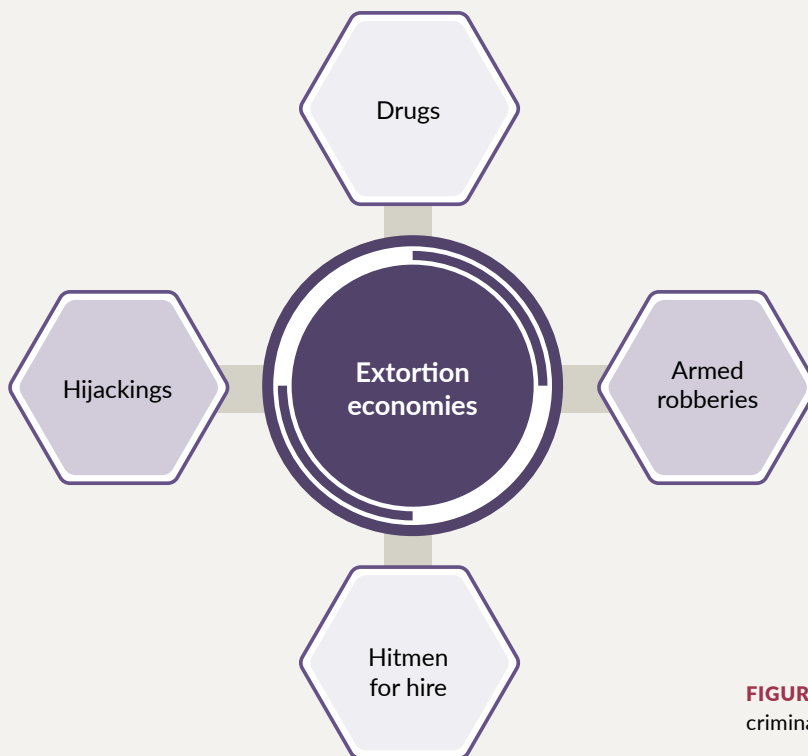


FIGURE 6 Links with other criminal economies.

Legal and illegal business – both fair game

Groups involved in Gauteng's extortion economy target both legal and illegal businesses and operations. In Westbury and Eldorado Park, for example, the dominant gangs extort fees from foreign-run drug houses in their territory. Similarly, elements within the taxi industry and some gangs operating in townships will extort illegal taxi operators, forcing them to pay a fee to continue operating. In Mamelodi, the residents of illegally occupied flats have been coerced into paying Boko Haram for so-called security and services.

State weakness

The entrenchment of the four extortion economies identified in Gauteng is linked to weaknesses in state capacity and response. This is true both in situations where deficiencies in state services have allowed criminal groups to exploit people and businesses, and in situations where the state's inadequate response to the emergence of extortion has allowed the practice to expand and become entrenched.

A clear example of how criminal groups involved in extortion have exploited weaknesses in the state's ability to provide services can be seen in the emergence of the water mafia, which has taken advantage of Gauteng's water crisis. Similarly, extortion in the taxi industry can be linked to the state's inability to regulate the sector.

International research indicates that extortion practices are most vulnerable when they are first established, but are much more difficult to deal with once they become entrenched.¹⁶⁰ Equally, research suggests that extortion is a learned practice. Once they have shown signs of success, extortion practices are likely to spread, either because the criminal groups involved seek to expand their operations, or because so-called copycat groups emerge.¹⁶¹ It is therefore crucial that the state demonstrates its ability to deal with extortion at an early stage. Failure to do so makes the state's job much more challenging. A classic example of this is the construction extortion economy: had the state acted against the groups involved when this activity first emerged in KwaZulu-Natal in 2016/17, the practice would not have become entrenched and spread to other parts of the country.

As is typical of organized crime, the criminal groups involved in extortion have embedded themselves within state structures, further weakening the state's ability to deal with them effectively. State corruption and the infiltration of state institutions provide criminal actors with protection, access to critical information and support for their activities. It also enables them to buy protection, allowing them to operate with impunity. A good example of this is seen in Westbury and Eldorado Park, where



A growing number of township economies are falling victim to organized extortion. © Reuters/Siphiwe Sibeko

'Our water troubles are endless – whenever municipal taps are dry, which is suspiciously often, water hawkers fleece us.'

corruption in the local police force has led to strong links between the dominant gangs and police officers, and where elements within the police have become active participants in the local extortion economies.

In some cases, criminal groups involved in extortion have moved beyond low-level infiltration and corruption to become involved in political and even electoral processes. An example of this is the construction extortion economy in Gauteng, where criminal actors have joined the local branches of political parties or have attempted to capture ward councillors through bribery or threats. Councillors who do not cooperate are intimidated, injured or even killed. In Tshwane, for example, three ward councillors have been assassinated in four years, allegedly by criminal syndicates. The murder of Tshepo Motaung, a ward councillor in Mabopane, in September 2021 was linked to his opposition to elements involved in extortion in the construction sector.¹⁶²

Normalization and entrenchment

The normalization and entrenchment of extortion occur when businesses and communities experience the practice continuously, become accustomed to it and even accept it as a cost of doing business or of living in a particular area. In these situations, victims may feel that they have no choice but to tolerate the practice and absorb the demands made by criminal groups.¹⁶³

In Gauteng, the four extortion economies emerged at different times, with the transport extortion economy developing first and the water mafia being the most recent. What all four have in common, however, is that the practice has become normalized in its domain, and at least three of the economies – the transport, construction and local township economies – have become entrenched.



ROADMAP TO COMBAT EXTORTION

An important starting point in addressing the dominant extortion economies in Gauteng is to recognize that these practices have become normalized and entrenched. It is also important to appreciate that while there are four discrete extortion economies, they are inextricably linked, with criminal actors providing interfaces between the various extortion economies as well as to other criminal economies. Addressing the growth of extortion and the development of extortion economies both in Gauteng and nationally will require a holistic approach that addresses both the interconnectedness and the organized nature of the activity.

In developing this approach, the following issues should be considered:

Countering the normalization and entrenchment of extortion

Any strategy developed to tackle extortion in Gauteng and nationally must first address the fact that these economies are becoming increasingly normalized and entrenched. The strategy would need to find ways to counter this. It would need to disrupt the links between criminal entities involved in extortion and their environment, and address the context that has allowed these practices to flourish.

Reporting extortion

Violence and threats of violence by criminal groups and distrust of government structures and agencies make extortion a crime that often goes unreported. Improving the level of crime reporting will be an essential component in tackling extortion. It would help to address specific cases, but would also assist law enforcement and the government to identify patterns and trends in extortion practices.

To improve the reporting of extortion and overcome the reluctance of victims to speak out, a system that inspires confidence, where people feel they can disclose incidents without reprisal, would be essential.

Elements this system should include:

- Messaging that clearly explains why reporting extortion is essential, and how communities and businesses can report cases safely.
- Establishing the reporting mechanism at a high level in government could help ensure greater cooperation from businesses affected by extortion.

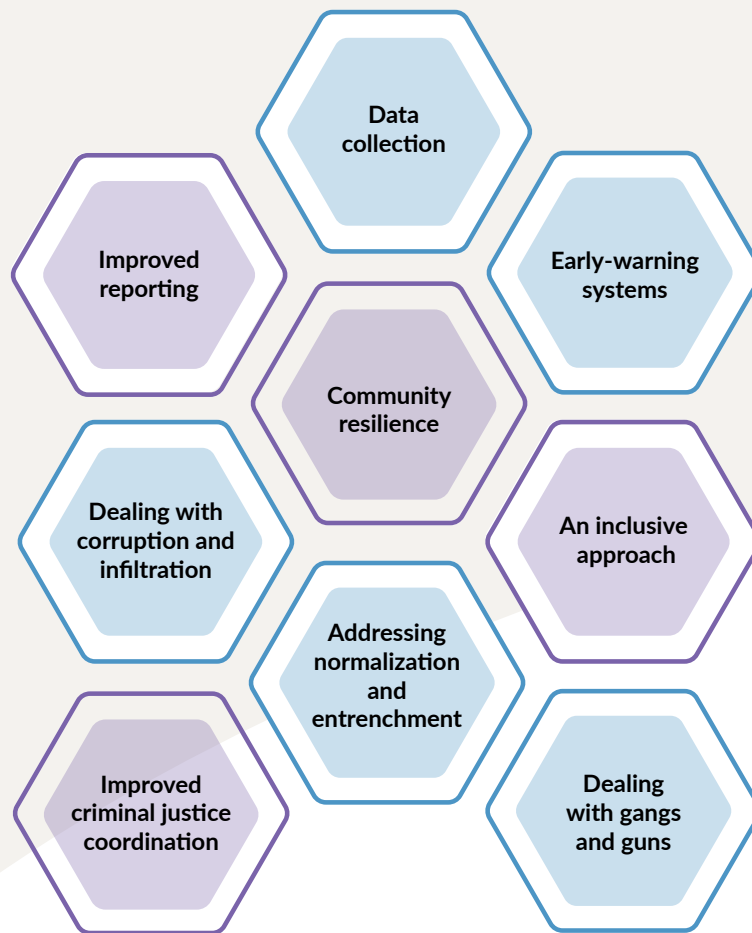


FIGURE 7 Areas to be addressed as part of an extortion response strategy.

- The reporting system needs to address victims’ concerns that disclosing information could result in retribution.
- The reporting system must be responsive to victims’ fears, concerns and needs, and build confidence that effective action will be taken.
- Victims need to feel that reports will be considered objectively.

While the reporting mechanism should be able to accept anonymous complaints, victims and complainants should also be made aware that it is often difficult to assess the credibility of anonymous allegations, and should be encouraged to provide their names. It is important to recognize that people are only likely to provide this information if adequate assurances are made that their details will be kept confidential.

Data collection

Given the scale of organized extortion in Gauteng, reliable data is essential to developing appropriate responses. This data would assist in understanding the magnitude of the criminal market, and could be used to develop evidence-based responses and public policies to contain the problem. Despite the prevalence of extortion in the province and nationally, no data is being centrally collected. Unlike other crimes such as homicide and armed robbery, no methodology exists to collect, produce and disseminate reliable data on extortion.

A system that can ensure that adequate and reliable data on extortion is collected and processed urgently needs to be developed, with a focus on accuracy and quality. This will require specialized and trained staff to record all statistics produced by the relevant institutions, and the establishment of standards for the collection of information.

Developing proper early-warning systems

International research indicates that it is easier to deal with extortion economies when they first emerge, before they become normalized and entrenched. Therefore, the reporting mechanism and data collection process should encompass an effective early-warning system capable of identifying emergent extortion practices and economies as well as the expansion of existing activities.

Criminal justice response

The criminal justice response to organized extortion practices and economies is fragmented, with action spread across various SAPS units, local police stations and task teams. This has had a negative impact on the development of a consistent and coherent approach. There is also a need for greater cooperation and coordination between the police and the National Prosecuting Authority in relation to organized extortion.

Extortion is an extremely difficult crime to prosecute, particularly because victims are often reluctant to testify. Therefore, the criminal justice response to extortion must focus on encouraging and supporting victims both in reporting the crime and during testimony.

Dealing with corruption and infiltration of the state:

As with many forms of organized crime, corruption plays a critical role in the success of the extortion economy. International research shows that corruption hinders the process of developing institutional solutions to extortion practices and limits the state's ability to respond comprehensively.¹⁶⁴

Confronting this problem will involve tackling the small-scale bribery and protection money that allow criminals to operate with impunity, as well as the systemic issues, such as those seen in Westbury and Eldorado Park, and the water mafia, where corruption has led to government officials becoming enmeshed in the extortion economy.

It will also be crucial to address the situations where criminal actors involved in extortion have attempted to embed themselves in political and governmental processes, particularly at the local level, as seen, for example, in the construction extortion economy.

An inclusive and coordinated approach

Dealing with extortion requires a comprehensive approach. It cannot be managed by the state alone and must involve both the communities in which the extortion takes place, and the formal and informal businesses affected by these practices.

At the state level, processes should involve all spheres of government, including national, provincial and local. These levels will need to work together to implement any response to organized extortion. Some of the roles that different levels of government could play include:

- Ensuring that the coordinated approach and strategy developed to combat organized extortion is viable for all tiers of government.
- Taking responsibility for the development and implementation of specific anti-extortion measures, including legislative requirements, investigation and prosecution, and investment in security.

- Addressing tier-specific mismanagement and weaknesses that can be exploited by criminal actors involved in extortion.

Business also has an important role to play in the fight against extortion. The creation of private–public anti-extortion initiatives could provide valuable resources and management expertise to government projects. It is in the interest of the business community to support companies that are victims of extortion and to help individual companies become more resilient to extortion practices.

Civil society and communities where extortion takes place can combat the crime by isolating the groups and gangs involved and by supporting the victims. They can also raise awareness of extortion through communication campaigns and community networks.¹⁶⁵

Building community resilience

Building community resilience to extortion will be a critical part of any strategy or approach developed to address the growth of this practice. In some extortion economies, criminal actors employ affective narratives to legitimize their actions at the community level. A lack of economic development and a community's sense of exclusion provide fertile ground for these narratives to take root. To build community resilience to extortion, communities need to be included in local campaigns and developments.

Communities can also develop their own resilience initiatives to address extortion. Community resilience initiatives in other countries have been most effective when they have focused not only on combating the various groups involved, but also on the complicity of businesses and communities. A particularly successful example is Italy's Addiopizzo (loosely translated as 'farewell extortion'), a grassroots social conscience movement launched in 2004 to combat the entrenchment of the mafia. The core objectives of the Addiopizzo campaign were to change incentive structures and build a community of citizens opposed to the mafia and the culture of extortion, thereby creating a united front against the crime.

Dealing with gangs and the capacity for violence

Gangs play a significant role in all four of Gauteng's major extortion economies, and any approach to tackling this criminal activity would need to address their involvement.

These extortion economies all rely on the capacity for violence for their success, a key component of which is access to firearms and ammunition. These are usually sourced from the illegal firearms pool in the province. It is therefore essential, when tackling extortion, to confront the availability of illegal firearms and the routes by which they are accessed.



CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

Gauteng's rampant extortion is detrimental not only to economic development, but also to the daily lives of many of its citizens. It is also a major contributor to the level of violence in the province, and to the state of fear created by the groups and gangs involved in the practice.

The four major extortion economies operating in Gauteng are not only interconnected, but are often linked to other criminal markets and economies. Extortion is also becoming increasingly normalized and entrenched in both the formal and informal economies. While some forms of extortion have received considerable attention, such as the construction extortion economy, others, such as the township enterprise extortion economy, have received less coverage.

Organized extortion in Gauteng cannot be dealt with by focusing on individual economies. It requires an approach that addresses organized extortion as a whole, with a thorough understanding of how the different economies are linked and operate.

Recommendations

In order to tackle Gauteng's extortion problem effectively, an overarching strategic approach needs to be developed that appreciates the magnitude of the phenomenon and comprehends the criminal network that feeds it. This approach would also need to recognize that organized extortion in the province and nationally has become normalized and entrenched. There are several key areas that would need to be addressed:

- **An inclusive approach:** Extortion affects a wide range of businesses, communities and levels of government, so any strategy to reduce and combat the crime would need to engage the relevant role players and stakeholders. Improved cooperation and coordination between different tiers and levels of government are also essential.
- **Data collection:** An effective data collection mechanism will be the cornerstone of any strategy developed. Resources would need to be allocated to the development of this system.
- **Reporting systems:** Effective and responsive reporting systems that encourage victims of extortion to report the crime will also need to be developed.
- **Early-warning systems:** The strategy should include early-warning systems capable of detecting the emergence of new practices and the spread of existing activities.

- **Building community and business resilience:** A key component of any strategy would be to build community and business resilience to extortion practices. While South Africa's response to extortion will need to be tailored to specific practices and problems at national and provincial levels, a comparative look at successful international approaches, particularly in terms of building resilience, should also be undertaken.
- **Addressing gangs and the capacity for violence:** Gangs, as key actors in many extortion economies, would need to be a focus of any anti-extortion strategy. In addition, factors that contribute to the capacity of extortion networks to use violence, including the availability of firearms and ammunition, would need to be addressed.
- **Criminal justice coordination:** A successful strategy would encompass a coordinated response to extortion, both within police structures and between the police and the National Prosecuting Authority.



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