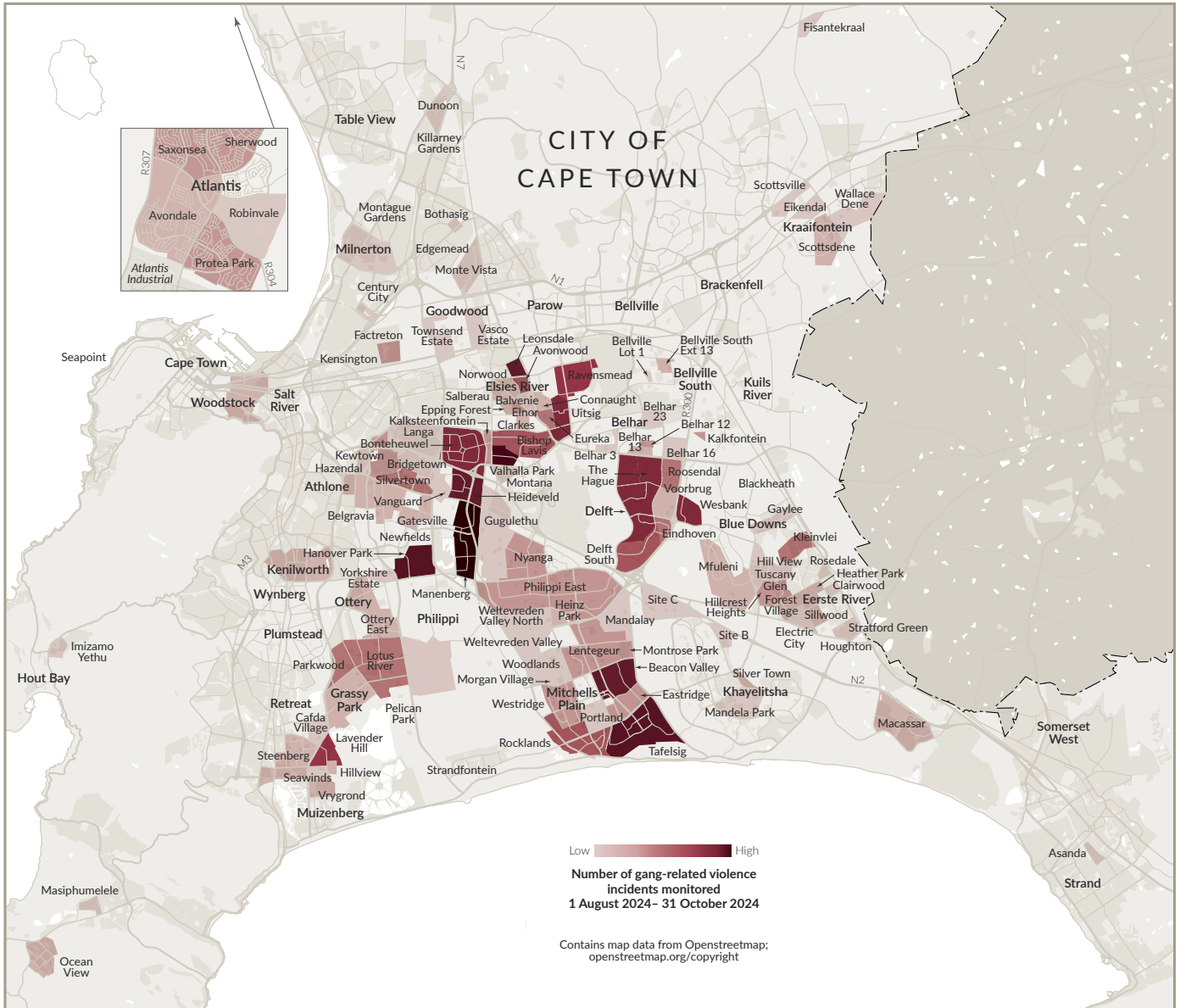




WESTERN CAPE GANG MONITOR



IN THIS ISSUE

The past quarter has seen major developments relating to extortion, from the Cape Town CBD to Khayelitsha. Our monitoring team has been tracking court cases and investigating the impact of these developments. Hundreds of cases of gang-related shootings continued unabated, as the gang landscape continues to be volatile and fragmented.

In this issue, we focus on four main themes:

- The murder of Mark Lifman and its impact on extortion dynamics.
- The role of rogue private security as a channel through which gangs access ammunition.
- The collapsed prosecution of Yanga 'Bara' Nyalara.
- The changing dynamics of the illegal abalone trade.



ABOUT THIS REPORT

This is the fourth issue of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's Western Cape Gang Monitor, an output of our South Africa Organized Crime Observatory. This series of bulletins tracks developments in Western Cape gang dynamics each quarter, to provide a concise synthesis of relevant trends to

inform policymakers and civil society. The monitor draws on information provided by field researchers working in gang-affected communities of the Western Cape. This includes interviews with current and former gang members, civil society and members of the criminal justice system.

Following the murder of Mark Lifman, is it business as usual for extortion rackets?

The murder of underworld figure and extortion boss Mark Lifman, shot dead in George on 3 November, is thought by some unlikely to lead to a drop in so-called 'protection' payments by businesses in the Cape Town city centre and Sea Point, at least in the short run. Business owners subjected to these fees, and gangsters, expect the security racket that Lifman had controlled to continue and that his former associates will take the reins. Lifman's death is an example of how the fundamentals of illicit markets (the opportunity for illicit gain and the enforcement of power through violence) often remain unchanged even when key players are removed.

Lifman rose to prominence in the nightlife 'security' industry following the 2011 murder of racketeer Cyril Beeka. Beeka's operation had marked the beginning of large-scale extortion in the Cape Town CBD in the 1990s. Lifman's associates at the time were Jerome 'Donkie' Booyesen (alleged leader of the Sexy Boys gang), his brother, Colin Booyesen, and bouncer boss André Naudé.¹ Lifman and his team reportedly forced security and bouncer services on businesses, just as Beeka had done before him. Following an initial period of violence, the ensuing years in which Lifman's group controlled the protection enterprise were largely peaceful.²

In 2016 Colin Booyesen split from the group over disagreements and accusations by Booyesen that his associates were stealing from him. In 2017, he joined forces with Nafiz Modack, and formed a group to rival Lifman's, which led to violent flare-ups over competition for the nightlife protection economy. Both sides allegedly deployed Cape Flats gangs on whom they depend for a 'supply chain of violence'.³

Interviews with business owners suggest the violent competition settled after 2017 as the two camps got down to running the city's two major protection rackets. Some business owners are unsure which faction they pay, given that various security companies are used as proxies who enforce the payments. Although Booyesen and Modack are incarcerated and facing prosecutions,⁴ it appears that Lifman's group did not gain a monopoly over nightclub security and that the Booyesen camp still control a portion of the economy.

The circumstances of Lifman's assassination are unclear. He was the fourth suspect to be murdered in a major ongoing extortion

prosecution case. The former boss of the 27s, William 'Red' Stevens, was the first accused to be murdered, a few weeks after his arrest in February 2021, followed by two more co-accused since then.⁵ Western Cape Police Commissioner Thembisile Patekile reported that one of the two men accused of carrying out the hit was a former police Special Task Force member, who had gone on to work as an independent contractor in private security, including for PPA Security, a Cape Town-based firm. In 2018, Lifman said that he was a financial backer of PPA Security, a claim that the company's owner, Alwyn Landman, has denied.⁶ Jerome Booyesen publicly accused Landman of being involved in Lifman's murder, an accusation Landman has vehemently denied.⁷

'There's no change, brother'

The leader has gone, but members of Lifman's network and other gangsters expect his protection business to continue largely as before. Said one member of the Sexy Boys, 'It's business as usual. ... Why would it change? Because they killed one of the bosses? No ways!' adding, 'We got the necessary firepower to get the job done'.⁸

While this could be interpreted as a mobster's bravado, other gang members outside the racket agreed with this assessment, and predict that Jerome Booyesen will control operations after Lifman's death. An American gang leader said: 'There's no change, brother. ... When you have a partnership like Liffie had with Donkie, then it is only logical that the other partner will take the shares of the fallen comrade'.⁹

Others said that what Lifman brought to the operation was an ability to move seamlessly between the legitimate business world and the criminal underworld, a set of influential contacts in business and politics, and money laundering strategies.¹⁰ His associates, along with the muscle of the operation, provide business stability and are likely to outlive Lifman, it is believed.¹¹

Protection rackets are believed to be structured more like a spider's web than a hierarchy, meaning they could continue operating, even with someone as senior as Lifman removed from the picture.¹²

Meanwhile, the business owners forced to give protection money to the racketeers predict they will have to continue paying as before. One said he has factored in extortion as an inevitable

operating expense, a payment of around R1 500 to R2 000 per establishment per month. Speaking in early November, he expected the fee to be collected at the end of the month, the first payment due since Lifman's murder. He did not want to risk stopping the payments, citing safety concerns for staff and patrons.¹³

Several businessmen linked the security racketeering market to the absence of effective policing in the areas in which their venues are located. There is a perception that the police were corrupt or simply incapable of protecting their establishments from both general crime and the security rackets.¹⁴

Police inefficiency means that business owners have come to accept the protection rackets as the lesser of two evils, offering at least some security if they cannot rely on the police.¹⁵ Some said that Lifman's security racket and others provided a service that kept petty crime at bay.

How gangs abuse firearms licensing systems to acquire ammunition

For Western Cape gangs, ammunition is in plentiful supply – gangs can now afford to be selective, choosing newer and higher quality products. 'Four or five years ago ... we were picking up five or six [bullet] casings at a crime scene. Now we are picking up 30 to 60,' said a senior investigator with the South African Police Service (SAPS). 'The casings we were picking up back in the day looked like they were dug up from the Boer War – they were rusted, now they are brand new.'¹⁷ The increase in ammunition availability is starkly illustrated by data from the City of Cape Town's ShotSpotter programme – an acoustic gunshot-monitoring system – which recorded over 7 400 rounds fired in four Cape Flats suburbs between January and August 2024.¹⁸ This suggests that not only do gangs have ready access to firearms, but that they feel no need to conserve ammunition in firefights.

Western Cape gangs obtain ammunition through various illicit channels, including corrupt police officers, military sources, cross-border smuggling and farm robberies. Yet ammunition is also diverted from legal channels for criminal use, with licensed gun owners (including those who manufacture their own ammunition) and private security companies serving as two main sources. The ever-increasing availability of ammunition could further fuel gun violence in the Western Cape, already at crisis levels, and lead to more bystanders being caught in the crossfire.

Circumventing the law

Licensed gun holders appear to have increasingly become a significant source of ammunition for gangs. As a police officer explained: 'I've taken statements from ... witnesses who said it used to cost them R50 or R60 a bullet, now they are handed the bullets for free by their friends or family members who buy them from the gun store legally.'¹⁹

While many anticipate business as usual, there is always the possibility, however, that other, newer, groups could attempt to muscle in on Cape Town's coveted protection economy. Market disruption could be on the cards, with some sources describing the current gang environment as being in turmoil. As many of the older-generation gang leaders – such as Stevens, and now Lifman – have been taken out, traditional gang structures appear to have collapsed. 'There is no leadership any more. There's no strategic decision-making. ... Now, those decisions are made by a kid with a gun. It's chaos. We can't even figure out who is in control of what gang any more,' said a law enforcement official.¹⁶

In an environment where risks and strategy are not taken into account, younger gangsters with little to lose may try to enter this established market, creating new cycles of disruption and violence, as seen in the post-Beeka years.

While South Africa's Firearms Control Act of 2000 allows for legal possession of up to 200 rounds of ammunition per licensed firearm, the country lacks a centralized database to track purchases across different dealers. A security company or gun licence holder could therefore purchase 200 rounds of ammunition from multiple dealers, exceeding the legal limit with no oversight.²⁰ 'Law enforcement officials would have to go and look at the register of every gun store to pick up whether someone has done this,' said one specialist police investigator, describing a clearly impossible task.²¹

There are also special exemptions to the limit for certain categories of licence holders, including hunters and sport shooters,²² for which there does not appear to be a legal limit on ammunition.²³ These exemptions are vulnerable to abuse by both dealers and purchasers. One gun store owner in Cape Town said that he would sell as much ammunition as a customer wanted, as long as they presented a valid Section 16 licence for dedicated hunting or sport shooting.²⁴ Some of these exempt licence holders have allegedly been able to stockpile ammunition in this way and turn it into a business venture by selling the excess to gangsters.²⁵ According to a source in the private security industry, some more unscrupulous gun dealers also sell far more than the 200-round limit to non-exempt licence holders, simply logging the sales at a later date to make it appear as if the buyer was keeping within the 200 round limit, and returning to the dealership after having used up their previous ammunition.²⁶

Gun licence holders can also legally make their own ammunition from parts (including brass casings, primers, gunpowder and projectiles) purchased from registered dealers.²⁷ The Firearms Control Act stipulates that the holder of a firearm licence may not

carry more than 2 400 primers (the compound used to ignite the propellant charge) per firearm owned – a considerable amount, as each primer could potentially be used to make a bullet. Again, however, some licence holders are exempt from this limit.²⁸ Gang members interviewed agreed that some of the people who make their own ammunition, widely known as 'locksmiths', also supply gangs.²⁹

The role of private security companies

Private security companies provide another pathway for gangs to access ammunition. According to gang members interviewed for this monitor, almost all major Western Cape gang leaders have links to security firms, which can legally purchase ammunition through registered dealers. The connection allows gangs to obtain a steady supply of ammunition through ostensibly legal means.

In order to have legal deniability, a gang leader can own a security company indirectly by controlling the company through a family member or close friend who acts as a frontman and is the registered owner or director. 'If you have your own security firm then you can make some of the guys in your gang legitimate security force personnel and they can get legal guns and a steady supply of ammunition,' said a high-ranking member of the Americans.³⁰ A member of the 28s in Mitchells Plain agreed with this assessment, noting that a long-standing relationship between gangs and private security companies has resulted in a steady supply of ammunition, originally acquired legally.³¹

Similar to individual licence holders selling ammunition to gangs, poor oversight allows some of these companies to acquire firearm licences and then access ammunition through registered dealers within South Africa, creating opportunities for diversion and illicit use. One gun shop owner reported that some dealers are not always rigorous in checking licences, meaning that security companies could potentially use licences issued to another security company to purchase ammunition.³² Moreover, it is difficult to prove that ammunition used in a crime was originally purchased by a security company. The ammunition is recorded as legally bought and used in the course of a security company's legitimate activities, and there are no serial numbers on bullets, as there are on firearms. However, the GI-TOC is aware of at least five companies that investigators believe are linked to prominent gang leaders.³³

An ongoing investigation into a security company operating in the Cape Flats provides an example of how some private firms operate outside the law, acquiring firearms and ammunition in excess of what they are legally licensed to hold. This security company came to the attention of police when it was providing VIP guarding services to Congress of Democratic Taxi Association officials. In a series of operations in early 2024, police seized several firearms and a cache of ammunition, alleging that they were

not properly licensed to the company, that paperwork was made out in the name of another company, firearm control logs were not kept and unauthorized personnel were handling the firearms.³⁴

This sort of abuse of the firearms licensing systems is particularly problematic given that the taxi industry has become known as a source of contract killers in South Africa, some of whom have been part of private security companies linked to the taxi industry.³⁵ Police officers in areas of the Cape Flats fear that these security companies may be selling ammunition on to extortion groups and taxi hitmen.³⁶

Other sources of supply

Other sources of ammunition used in gang violence include cross-border smuggling, farm robberies yielding weapons and ammunition caches, and corrupt police and military officers diverting ammunition from state armories and evidence stores.³⁷ One gang member, for example, explained that they receive large quantities of bullets from people they have on the inside at army bases or from military installations across the border.³⁸

Ammunition is also trafficked over South Africa's land borders under the guise of legitimate business.³⁹ For example, an established smuggling network reportedly moves firearms and ammunition overland from military sources in Namibia under the cover of importing fresh produce.⁴⁰ Farm robberies can also provide gangs with caches of firearms and ammunition. As a member of the Terrible Josters gang said, 'When we go there [to rob a farm], we always get a lot of guns, rifles, shotguns and ammunition. Sometimes we know the farmer and he can hit a big insurance claim.'⁴¹

While most law enforcement sources agreed that ammunition purchased from gun stores – whether by individual licence holders, security companies or supplied directly to gangs by unscrupulous dealers – now accounts for the bulk of the ammunition used in gang violence, some gang members argued that larger quantities can be obtained at one time from police or military caches.⁴² However, acquiring ammunition through private security companies was seen as providing a steadier supply.⁴³

Systemic failures enabling diversion

South Africa's firearms licensing system, administered by the Central Firearms Registry (CFR), continues to face significant challenges. In September 2023, the National Assembly's police oversight committee reported that, despite improvements in some areas, the registry is 'still plagued with a range of shortcomings'.⁴⁴ Oversight of ammunition sales appears to be one of them. Corruption in firearms licensing has also been a pervasive problem for over a decade, enabling criminal syndicates to gain unauthorized access to the registry and obtain firearm licences.⁴⁵ Prosecutions of registry-related corruption are ongoing, targeting

some of the most high-profile alleged gangsters in the Western Cape, including Nafiz Modack and Ralph Stanfield.⁴⁶

In a briefing to the National Assembly police committee in May 2023, Advocate Martin Hood, a specialist in firearms law, argued that the South African government had so far failed in its legal obligations to create an electronic database specifically for monitoring ammunition sales, which should have been in place since 2004. 'If the sale of ammunition was digitized, the SAPS would have a tool available to them to look at the sales of ammunition and crime in those areas and be able to investigate what happens to that ammunition and to whom it has been sold,' Hood told the committee.⁴⁷ A contract to develop an electronic system was reportedly awarded in April 2023, but this system is not yet operational.⁴⁸

As of 30 November 2024, the SAPS had begun to roll out a new digitized 'firearm control management system'. It is not clear from the details of this system shared with the National Assembly's police committee whether this new system will monitor the sale of ammunition, as advocated by observers such as Hood.⁴⁹

A potential avenue for reform?

Ammunition diverted from the legal market seems to be a reliable and consistent source of ammunition for Western Cape gangs today, making ammunition control as crucial as firearm

control in combating gang violence. At the same time, efforts to reform essential monitoring systems governing access to ammunition have faced delay after delay. A central database of ammunition sales, which would prove a useful tool for law enforcement, has not yet been implemented despite being mandated for over a decade.

More broadly, civil society groups – including both pro- and anti-gun lobbyists – have been sounding the alarm about corruption and maladministration in the CFR for over a decade. Since 2010, when the then police minister admitted that the CFR was an impediment to the state's crime-fighting efforts, the SAPS has made numerous presentations to Parliament on a 'turnaround strategy' that never seems to fully materialize.

Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that the problem is bigger than the SAPS, and, if left unchecked will, continue to undermine the government's ability to fight organized crime. What may be required is the establishment of a broader intervention team, involving impartial experts, that could be tasked with developing and implementing an effective turnaround strategy for the CFR. A team that can also address the loopholes and weaknesses in the issuing of licences and ammunition and can design a robust oversight mechanism for the CFR to monitor the progress of reforms and maintain accountability.

The case against Yanga Nyalara exposes dynamics of township extortion

Extortionists in some of Cape Town's townships appear to be offering solutions to the very problems they create, manufacturing a form of loyalty under threat of violence. This was made clear in the state's case against alleged extortionist Yanga 'Bara' Nyalara, which recently collapsed after two witnesses refused to testify out of fear for their lives. According to the affidavit filed in opposition to Nyalara's bail application in November: 'He let his own runners rob people and break into houses, then he plays the Robin Hood figure to gain popularity in the community by dealing with these so-called offenders.'⁵⁰

The allegations – which were made in a robbery case against Nyalara – offer a window into the complex landscape of township extortion in the Western Cape, where criminal enterprises have moved beyond merely providing 'protection' to pursuing community legitimacy through a calculated blend of violence, social control and performative justice.

Nyalara's arrest and acquittal

The arrest of the alleged Khayelitsha crime boss in July 2022 was a high-profile event.⁵¹ Nyalara was accused of carrying out a mass shooting on 15 May 2021 that left 12 people dead and several others injured. The state claims that the attack was

carried out in retaliation for the murder of a member of Nyalara's gang, which is known by law enforcement and the community as the 'Bara' group after Nyalara's alias. The gang member was reportedly killed while collecting extortion money from a shop in X-section of Khayelitsha's Site B. Police sources claim that X-section is controlled by a rival group, 'Piri', but that it is periodically contested territory.⁵²

Nyalara and his co-accused were later acquitted of the murders, based on the absence of reliable witness testimony: two of the three state witnesses were murdered before the trial, while the third was shot and wounded two weeks before he was due to testify.⁵³ The state's case collapsed after the sole surviving witness gave a deeply inconsistent account.⁵⁴ However, Nyalara remained in custody for more than two years due to other pending cases against him, including a cash-in-transit heist and an armed robbery case from 2016.⁵⁵

He was released on 26 November, shortly before the trial was set to begin in the Cape Town Regional Court.⁵⁶ Being in custody had allegedly not stopped Nyalara from continuing his operations, and his influence in Khayelitsha is said to remain strong. Police sources in Khayelitsha therefore expressed concern that his release back

into the community could spark violence between rival extortion factions over the festive season.⁵⁷

Manufacturing crisis and legitimacy

In a police affidavit deposed on 30 October opposing Nyalara's bail application in the armed robbery case, the state reiterated the extortion allegations against him as part of an extensive criminal history going back over a decade. The state alleges that the 'Bara' group systematically extort businesses and community members for 'protection fees', even though this so-called protection is to guard against robberies and break-ins committed by the group itself.

According to police affidavits, for example, Nyalara operated what amounted to a quasi-police station out of a container at the Site C taxi rank in Khayelitsha. The choice of location was strategic – as a taxi owner and association member,⁵⁸ Nyalara could leverage existing transport industry networks while maintaining a visible presence in community life. From this base, he allegedly encouraged community members to report crimes such as robberies and assaults directly to him, offering a resolution for a fee through his criminal network.⁵⁹

The success of Nyalara's operation lies partly in its circular nature. Nyalara's own runners allegedly commit robberies and break-ins, creating a climate of insecurity that he can then exploit. By positioning himself as the solution to the problems created by his own group, Nyalara has been able to simultaneously generate income through extortion and build legitimacy as a protector of the community. Community loyalty is ultimately extracted through the threat of the extreme violence that the group uses to enforce its authority.⁶⁰

Nyalara's gang is not the only such extortion outfit active in Khayelitsha. The 'Bara' group is apparently one of three main groups that currently control extortion turf in the Khayelitsha police precinct, alongside the allied 'George' group and the allegedly rival 'Piri' group.⁶¹ Several sub-groups report to these major groups and are responsible for collecting extortion fees and running drugs.⁶²

Unlike traditional Western Cape gangs, these and other well-known township extortion groups such as the Guptas and Boko Haram are more disorganized and loosely structured, with less hierarchical control over members.⁶³ This flexibility allows them to adapt quickly to changing circumstances and makes them harder for law enforcement to disrupt. However, much like other gangs in the Western Cape, these extortion groups are reported to be affiliated with the Numbers gangs, as many of their members have served time in prison and been initiated into the prison gang culture.⁶⁴ This creates a number of overlapping influences and connections to other criminal groups throughout the Western Cape.⁶⁵ Where different groups are competing, as in the contested sectors of Khayelitsha, this can lead to extreme levels of violence in the form of mass shootings.

The scope of these groups' operations reveals their ambition to become de facto governing authorities. While foreign-owned businesses are still the most intensely targeted by extortionists, these gangs now demand 'protection fees' from almost every commercial enterprise in their territory.⁶⁶ This extensive system of taxation mirrors legitimate governance structures, creating a parallel economy that has penetrated government service delivery as far as the education sector.

EXTORTION IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

Some schools in parts of the Western Cape are now also being targeted for break-ins as a pressure tactic to pay protection fees to extortion groups.⁶⁷ The Western Cape Department of Education said that, as of September, they had received seven reports of possible extortion of schools since January 2024, one of which was from Khayelitsha. The department said that such reports are passed to the police for further investigation. Police in Khayelitsha meanwhile report to be aware of three schools that have fallen victim to break-ins related to extortion demands,⁶⁸ and at least one other has reportedly been threatened.⁶⁹

In one case, an acting principal is reported to have been threatened by extortionists. It later emerged that the previous principal had been paying protection fees without his knowledge, and the extortionists were now demanding what they considered to be their dues.⁷⁰ In other incidents, extortionists have been seen parked outside of schools as a form of intimidation or as a sign to other extortionists that the school falls within their turf.⁷¹ The schools in question are hesitant to report these incidents or speak out due to the threat of violence, and there has been little to no public coverage of this developing problem. ■



Usurping the power of the state?

Concerningly, the economic and social control exercised by these extortion gangs is undermining state authority in areas. Thando Pimpi, the ward councillor for Ward 93 in Khayelitsha, noted that contractors were being charged fees of R50 000 just to work in his ward, effectively crippling the delivery of government services. 'We can't do anything,' he said, highlighting how extortion networks have successfully positioned themselves as gatekeepers to basic public services.⁷²

This usurpation of state power is not just opportunistic, however – it appears to be part of a deliberate strategy. According to several police sources, this tactic of extortion and vigilantism is designed to undermine confidence in the state's ability to provide specifically security, creating space for their own authority. JP Smith, City of Cape Town Mayoral Committee Member for Safety and Security, agreed that in parts of the city's poorest areas, 'the authority of the state does not apply because these criminals command such fear'.⁷³

However, the group's success in establishing authority stems not just from this fear but also from the state's own failures. The strategy used by extortion groups appears to exploit the lack of effective policing in Khayelitsha. Jan-Jan Joubert, spokesperson for the Western Cape Department of Police Oversight and Community Safety, acknowledged that there is a perception in the community that police officers are either complicit with these criminal groups or complacent in their response to their activities. This has contributed to mistrust of the state while securing legitimacy for organized extortion rackets.⁷⁴ Over time, community members may become increasingly hostile to police attempts to dislodge the suspected leaders of these groups, as was seen when community protests erupted when police put out a reward for Nyalara's arrest in April.⁷⁵

This is a systemic problem, not unique to the Nyalara case, and in part reflects the stretched police resources in areas such as Khayelitsha – which has one of the lowest police-to-population ratios in the country.⁷⁶ As a result, investigating officers are left with a huge caseload and are less able to effectively oppose bail for repeat violent offenders.

The wheels of justice turning slowly

The Nyalara case also highlights the challenges facing the criminal justice system in tackling the township extortion economy. According to the state's affidavit, Nyalara has been linked to more than 20 different criminal cases dating back to 2011, including several counts of murder and attempted murder, rape, possession of firearms and robbery charges. However, securing convictions has proved almost impossible, largely due to witness intimidation. In at least six cases, the state alleged, witnesses withdrew out of fear for their lives, received threats or were killed.⁷⁷

This pattern became clear when just two weeks after the allegations were made in court, the state's witnesses withdrew their cooperation 'for fear for their lives'.⁷⁸ On the day the trial was set to start, the complainant and chief witness withdrew his cooperation after reportedly claiming that Nyalara knew him and would be able to recognize his voice even if he testified in private.⁷⁹

A senior police investigator explained that in areas where crime bosses rule in the way Nyalara is alleged to have done, it becomes extremely difficult to secure reliable witnesses. These extortion groups are known to be particularly brutal, and any perceived betrayal can lead to murder.⁸⁰ Witnesses living in informal settlements, the investigator explained, are especially vulnerable because of the physical conditions in which they live. Hitmen can easily hide in the densely populated townships,⁸¹ while law enforcement often struggles to navigate the maze-like layout.⁸² 'That's why they don't come forward,' said councillor Pimpi. 'They know that these guys are very dangerous.'⁸³

The justice system itself appears to have stumbled in this case. Despite his alleged danger to the public, Nyalara was granted bail in multiple cases, before his release after the recent prosecution against him collapsed. More than half of the crimes the state alleges he committed – including 16 murders – were carried out while he was on bail from previous charges. In 2017, Nyalara was charged with a rape allegedly committed while he was out on bail. He was granted bail again in this case, but investigating officers failed to verify the bail address, allowing him to potentially abscond.⁸⁴ This revolving door of arrest and release undermines public confidence in the state judiciary while strengthening the power of alternative systems of order. In the words of an investigating officer, 'The wheels of justice ... have been moving incredibly slowly'.⁸⁵

Lessons learned from the Nyalara case

To respond to township extortion, law enforcement officers have suggested practical steps such as the introduction of signal jammers in prisons, which would help to disrupt criminal groups such as the one allegedly run by Nyalara from being guided by incarcerated gang leaders.⁸⁶ However, Nyalara's case also suggests that other practical reforms within the criminal justice system would be transformative.

Changes to the criminal justice system could include more robust review mechanisms for bail decisions, particularly in cases involving repeat offenders. Courts need clearer guidelines on how to handle cases involving repeated bail applications, supported by information systems that can track bail histories across jurisdictions. Witness protection programmes need to be better resourced and adapted to the particular challenges of informal settlements.

However, the most crucial reforms must address the conditions that allow criminal groups to present themselves as legitimate alternatives to state authority, including strengthening service delivery and improving relations between law enforcement and the community. The case of Nyalara, as outlined in an affidavit

deposed before the court, demonstrates the need to look beyond law enforcement for a solution – it requires a comprehensive approach to restoring state legitimacy in communities where it has been eroded by years of neglect and ineffective governance.

The killing of Peter Jagers may indicate an emerging link between the illicit abalone trade and cocaine trafficking

The circumstances surrounding the killing of Peter Jagers, the leader of the Terrible Josters gang, might provide insight into the complex and evolving criminal landscape along South Africa's Western Cape coast. Jagers' killing could indicate an emerging link between cocaine trafficking and abalone poaching gangs.

In July, Jagers was kidnapped along with an associate, allegedly in connection with a cocaine deal gone wrong.⁸⁷ In mid-October, the bodies of the two men were found bound and dumped in a river in the Free State province.⁸⁸ Sources close to Jagers and the Terrible Josters confirmed that the murders were linked to a dispute over a 750 kilogram shipment of cocaine that went missing after being dropped off in the sea around Saldanha Bay.⁸⁹ The shipment was meant to be picked up by Jagers' gang and delivered to another criminal group, but it never reached its destination.

Jagers played a major role in the illegal trade in South African abalone (*Haliotis midae*), a species of large sea snail highly sought after in markets in Hong Kong and China. The Terrible Josters, who are linked to the 28s prison gang, have territorial strongholds around Hawston, a fishing village on the Western Cape coast, and are deeply embedded in the abalone market.

While the abalone trade has been intertwined with drug markets (for example, methamphetamine precursors) for decades, an expansion of this relationship to include cocaine trafficking, one of the world's largest and most lucrative drugs markets, could have a significant impact on the local criminal economy around abalone.

Territorial foundations

In the 1990s, the Terrible Josters, with the backing of the 28s, began strategically securing territories along the Western Cape coast that were rich in abalone stocks.⁹⁰ This positioning allowed them to become the gatekeepers of the abalone market, systematically taxing all abalone poached within their territory.⁹¹ During the 2000s and early 2010s, the Terrible Josters then developed a reputation for maritime smuggling that extended far beyond abalone, leveraging their entrenched presence along the Western Cape coast. As one member of the 28s recounted, the Terrible Josters became adept at moving a wide range of illegal goods by sea – from cannabis and methaqualone to guns and diamonds.⁹²

Historically, the connection between abalone and drugs in this region has been primarily transactional. A complex barter economy developed in the 1990s between Chinese criminal groups and Western Cape gangs. Initially, this involved the exchange of abalone for precursor chemicals used in the production of methaqualone (widely known in South Africa by the brand name Mandrax) and crystal methamphetamine (locally known as 'tik').⁹³ This mutually beneficial arrangement dramatically expanded methaqualone and domestic methamphetamine production in South Africa and transformed abalone poaching from a marginal activity into a major criminal enterprise. As the black market boomed, violence around the market increased.⁹⁴

The evolving intersection with cocaine represents a more sophisticated and potentially more lucrative development. According to one poacher, notable figures in the abalone trade have been landing cocaine from boats for several years.⁹⁵ Investigative sources confirmed this, noting that the 28s have been collaborating with Bulgarian organized crime groups to collect cocaine off the Cape coast since at least 2018.⁹⁶ One particularly revealing case highlighted this convergence: three of the five men accused in a massive cocaine trafficking operation had previous convictions relating to illicit abalone dealing and extortion.⁹⁷ Their operation came to light after an 800 kilogram haul of cocaine was seized from the hull of a boat being towed on a Gauteng highway.

Some gang sources suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these maritime criminal adaptations. With land-based movement restricted by lockdown regulations, criminal groups increasingly relied on boat-to-boat transfers at sea.⁹⁸ As a former member of the Terrible Josters described, 'When COVID hit us in 2020, the gangs were desperate to not lose money and power and so even more of a focus went to the boat-to-boat exchanges at sea.'⁹⁹ The restrictions forced organized criminal groups to adapt their operations to safeguard their income streams. Their deep-rooted presence along the Western Cape coastline provided them with the right infrastructure and networks for expanding their illicit maritime operations.

Operational transformation

The evolving cocaine link is not the only change that has taken place in the abalone market in recent years. The Terrible

Josters' operational model has evolved significantly from one of volume-based taxation of abalone. Today, the gang actively manages all aspects of the trade: recruiting experienced abalone divers from the Eastern Cape,¹⁰⁰ deploying gang members to act as runners and lookouts on the shore,¹⁰¹ and strategically placing individuals at boat launching sites to monitor the movements of law enforcement officials.¹⁰²

An emerging link between abalone and cocaine has the potential to offer these criminal networks links to other transnational organized criminal groups, access to further drug markets and a powerful new source of income. Through involvement in cocaine trafficking, gangs embedded in the illegal abalone trade,

such as the Terrible Josters, may be able to finance increasingly complex and expansive criminal operations. This convergence could dramatically amplify the existing harms inflicted on coastal communities.¹⁰³

Seen in this light, Jagers' murder is not an isolated incident but a symptom of a broader transformation in maritime criminal economies. Just as the advent of the barter trade in abalone and other drug precursors brought with it increased violence and criminality around coastal areas, an emerging role for cocaine trafficking using boat-to-boat transfers could escalate tensions and violence over control of gang territories in coastal areas.

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