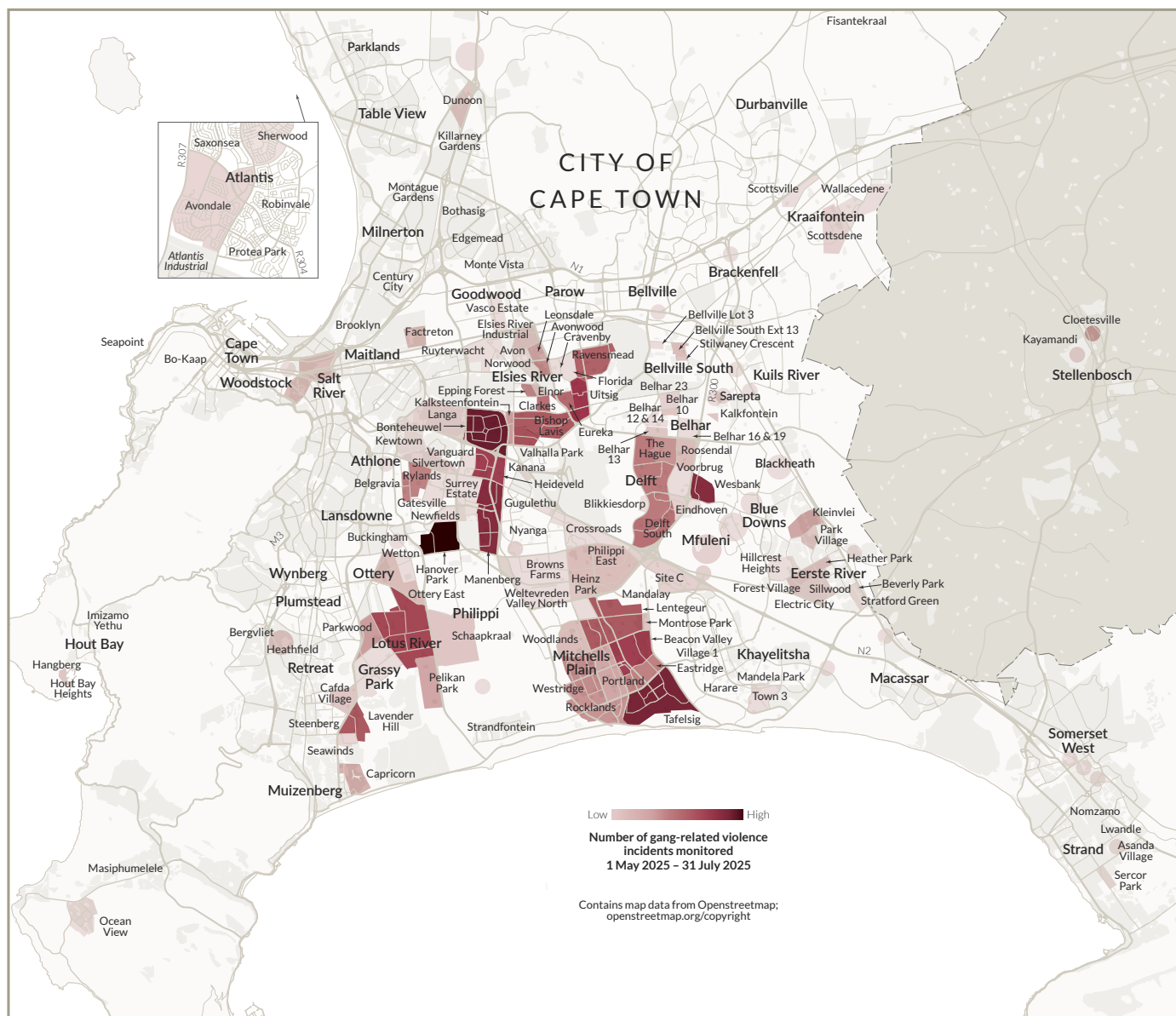




WESTERN CAPE GANG MONITOR



IN THIS ISSUE

In the past quarter, South Africa has faced national-level scandals relating to policing, corruption and organized crime. At the provincial level in the Western Cape, things have been no less turbulent, with gang violence spiking in areas with high levels of territorial conflict such as Hanover Park. Our research team has mapped out gang territories, showing how disputes over turf have driven violence.

In this issue:

- The smuggling of weapons from Namibia to Western Cape gangs.
- How the removal of extortionists in Khayelitsha has opened the door to new violent entrepreneurs.
- Gang statistics are not always what they seem.
- The challengers to the Americans gang's historical hold on Hanover Park.



ABOUT THIS REPORT

This is the sixth 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.

Police and military weapons smuggled from Namibia are supplying Western Cape gangs

Nine people appeared in court in Windhoek in late August, charged with 16 counts of theft, for stealing weapons including AK-47s from a military stockpile and attempting to smuggle them to South Africa. The South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Namibian Police Force (Nampol) have been investigating the smuggling of Namibian state weapons to the Western Cape ever since a cache of Namibian police pistols was seized in 2020, in a chance find at a traffic stop. Yet evidence continues to come to light suggesting that this smuggling route is more widely used than first thought, involving firearms from both police and military sources. One of the ways these weapons are smuggled across the border is using trucks moving fresh goods such as flowers and fruit, which have short shelf lives and need to be moved quickly.¹ This flow of guns stolen from Namibian state armouries echoes the case of former SAPS colonel Christiaan Prinsloo, who sold thousands of former South African police weapons and firearms earmarked for destruction to members of the Cape Town underworld before his arrest in 2016.²

The smuggling route where firearms are hidden among flowers

Gang members first reported that Namibia was one of their many sources of firearms as far back as 2016.³ Subsequently, smuggling on this route appeared to increase, and in early 2021 gang sources reported regular shipments of dozens of firearms at a time.⁴

The trucks used to smuggle these weapons are allegedly operated by a small number of companies trading in fresh goods between South Africa and neighbouring countries, acting as a conduit for the weapons on behalf of suppliers in Namibia.⁵

One of the nine people accused of trafficking firearms stolen from a Namibian military armoury was an employee of one of the South African trucking companies that are alleged to be involved in cross-border smuggling.⁶

A gang member who claimed to have received some of these weapons reported that compartments added to some of the trucks had space to hide 15–20 firearms.⁷ Others claimed the same networks and route are involved in moving illegal diamonds, abalone and human smuggling.⁸ A person linked to the fresh goods trade and familiar with the companies allegedly involved

estimated that most of their illicit income comes from the diamond trade.⁹ An alleged illicit abalone trader confirmed that the same route was used for abalone smuggling to Namibia.¹⁰

No single gang monopolizes this smuggling route. Gangs in the Grassy Park area of Cape Town, such as the Junky Funky Kids (JFKs) and the Six Bobs, were frequently mentioned as being among the recipients of the weapons.¹¹ The owners of one of the trucking companies implicated in the smuggling reportedly have close family ties to the JFKs.¹² The leadership of the Six Bobs reportedly received more than 100 firearms in a single shipment in 2022.¹³ Larger shipments are split among the leaders of different gangs.

Investigations focused on Namibian police-issue pistols

In February 2025, Western Cape police commissioner Thembisile Patekile said that police had seized 'more than 90' firearms that could be traced back to Namibia.¹⁴ A Namibian police source confirmed that 90 of these firearms were Nampol pistols, mostly older weapons that had been declared redundant as newer firearms were issued.¹⁵

A leaked August 2023 memo drafted by the Namibian police commissioner, Moritz !Naruseb, said that several pistols seized in South Africa were engraved with 'NPW' (Namibian police weapon), meaning investigators were confident they were police firearms even though most had had their serial numbers filed off.¹⁶ Nampol investigators are in the process of filing a request for mutual legal assistance for the repatriation of these pistols.

Gang sources also reported that these weapons originated with the police. A high-ranking member of the 27s said that his associates had received 'new cop guns from Namibia', clearly knowing either from the markings or their suppliers that they were police-issue firearms.¹⁷ This shipment included pistols that they described as 'Z88s'. The Z88 is a South-African-produced replica of a 9 mm Beretta, the same type of weapon later reported stolen from Nampol stores.¹⁸ However, the sources said these were new weapons rather than older models, contradicting the findings of Nampol investigators.



Investigations on both sides of the border into pistols seized by the SAPS can be traced back to an initial cache of 12 firearms seized in Cape Town during a vehicle search in October 2020. The April 2024 conviction of Namibian national Urbanus Shaumbwako is the only conviction relating to smuggled Namibian weapons in the Western Cape. (Shaumbwako's case also made headlines because he was one of the Namibians who allegedly broke into President Cyril Ramaphosa's property at Phala Phala in February 2020, stealing more than US\$4 million hidden in a sofa. This was according to a statement made by former State Security Agency director-general Arthur Fraser.¹⁹)

Shaumbwako was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment by the Cape Town regional court in 2024 on charges relating to possession of these firearms.²⁰ Namibian investigators believed he was an intermediary, rather than the leader of the smuggling operation,²¹ and a friend of Shaumbwako said he smuggled firearms on behalf of a Namibian supplier.²²

While investigating Shaumbwako's case, Nampol shared a handwritten list with the SAPS of 187 weapons missing from its firearms depot. The discovery that weapons were being siphoned from police stores led to the arrest in March 2022 of four officers. They were charged with the theft of 90 firearms and ammunition,²³ and their trial is scheduled for September 2025.²⁴

The four arrested officers included a police gunsmith and colleagues,²⁵ one of whom compiled the handwritten list sent to the SAPS, meaning the only tangible record that the weapons had been stolen was provided by one of the alleged thieves.²⁶ Nampol's electronic firearm database was also derived from this list, meaning no more reliable record of these firearms existed at the time.²⁷

This saga has reportedly triggered changes in Nampol's arms management and investigations. In 2023, the leaked memo from !Naruseb recommended that Nampol and the SAPS establish a joint unit to further investigate this transnational firearms syndicate and 'establish a firearms database'.²⁸ Nampol sources claim 'the issues detected have been resolved' in its firearms management system and weapons theft is no longer seen as an active issue.²⁹

Namibia as a source of military-issue firearms

While weapons of Namibian origin seized in South Africa have so far almost all been pistols, Namibia is increasingly seen as a source for automatic weapons such as AK-47 assault rifles. A South African police officer specializing in firearms investigations described Namibia as the primary source of AK-47s arriving in the Western Cape. The weapons have reportedly become so widely available that sellers have offered two for R40 000, about half the usual illicit market price.³⁰

This tallies with other evidence suggesting that AK-47s have become increasingly widespread in the Western Cape. As Patekile told reporters in February 2025, 'We've seen the recovery of many AK-47s in the city of Cape Town in particular, and in South Africa we are not licensing AK-47s'.³¹ In 2024, videos circulated on social media of gang members shooting AK-47s in Joe Slovo Park in Milnerton.³²

Some gang members said they had been supplied with Uzi sub-machine guns from Namibia.³³ One of them, speaking in 2022, said the weapons had cost R22 000–R27 000. This correlates with a SAPS report to the Nampol investigation team that two Uzis had been seized from a Namibian truck driver, and they were suspected (but not confirmed) to have been smuggled across the border.³⁴

These more deadly weapons were alleged by gang leaders to come from Namibian military stock,³⁵ something police sources also suspect but have not confirmed. Police investigators in the Western Cape and gang sources said the AK-47s are imported using the same transport networks that have historically imported police firearms.

The investigation in Namibia into 16 weapons stolen from a military armoury may shed some light on the origin of automatic weapons appearing in the Western Cape. Those accused in the case were intercepted in Windhoek, attempting to smuggle the weapons to South Africa.³⁶ The trial of the nine accused, originally scheduled for August 2025, was postponed after the legal representation for several of the accused failed to appear before the court.³⁷ As mentioned above, one of the accused was an employee of a South African trucking company, whereas the eight other accused procured the firearms through contacts at a military armoury.³⁸

The incident of AK-47s being smuggled to South Africa may not be isolated. In 2022, weapons from the Namibian police, military and intelligence were intercepted while being smuggled to Angola in a similar incident.³⁹ A senior Namibian investigator said that more AK-47s may also have been diverted from military bases after the South Africa incident.⁴⁰ In February 2025, the Namibian Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs was found to have denied government auditors access to audit its equipment.⁴¹ The absence of external oversight over equipment makes it more difficult for other authorities, including police investigators, to know whether equipment has gone missing.

The trafficking of AK-47s may also involve some of the same Western Cape intermediaries identified in previous investigations. At the time of Shaumbwako's arrest, police believed he had been part of a Namibian housebreaking group based in Hout Bay. In September 2019, an alleged member of this group was apprehended during an attempted housebreaking in the suburb

of Fernwood. On his phone, authorities found a picture of him holding a Chinese Type 56 AK-47 derivative.⁴² In November 2024, an associate of this group was reportedly arrested in Gugulethu and charged with possession of an AK-47 (he has since absconded after being released on bail).⁴³ Investigators who have monitored the flow of Namibian firearms saw this group of housebreakers as being influential in starting this smuggling route, though other groups may have copied their approach.⁴⁴

Western Cape gangs obtain guns from many sources. Firearms and ammunition are diverted from gun dealerships or bought

with fraudulently obtained firearm licences. Weapons seized by police make their way back onto the market and guns licensed to private security companies are used for criminal activities. In numerical terms, the firearms flow from Namibia is relatively small. However, the smuggling route appears to be active and perhaps more diversified in the types of firearms being trafficked than seizures suggest. Fully automatic weapons such as AK-47s are not licensed in South Africa, so it may be more difficult for gangsters to obtain them by diverting firearms from the legal market. The Namibian smuggling route could be offering gangsters a chance to fill the gap.

How the removal of Khayelitsha extortion bosses reset the cycle of violence

The removal of the leaders of two of Khayelitsha's most dominant extortion groups – one killed, the other arrested – has weakened extortion turf boundaries. After the killing of Yanga 'Bara' Nyalara by police in the Eastern Cape on 20 February 2025 and the arrest of Ayazola 'China' Fulu on 12 April,⁴⁵ smaller extortion 'subgroups' are crossing these boundaries and targeting victims on rival turf.

This has led to a resurgence in violence – described by police as a 'spree' of new murder cases⁴⁶ – following a period of calm after Fulu's arrest. News reports suggest that several groups are now extorting victims at the same time, forcing some business owners to close their doors.⁴⁷

At the same time, the police's reactive approach to extortion in Khayelitsha has drawn criticism from prosecutors and judges, who

say it allows new extortionists to move into the vacuum left by those arrested or killed.

The hierarchy of township extortion networks

Extortion in Cape Town townships is predominantly controlled by groups of a few dozen members. These organizations, such as the 'Bara' or 'China' groups, extort large swathes of territory by maintaining control over subgroups that collect payments on their behalf.

Subgroups are confined to smaller areas, often a few streets of residential housing and informal businesses in a local neighbourhood. They receive a percentage of collections from the dominant groups, which mediate boundary disputes. These subgroups have a degree of independence, however, which can create problems

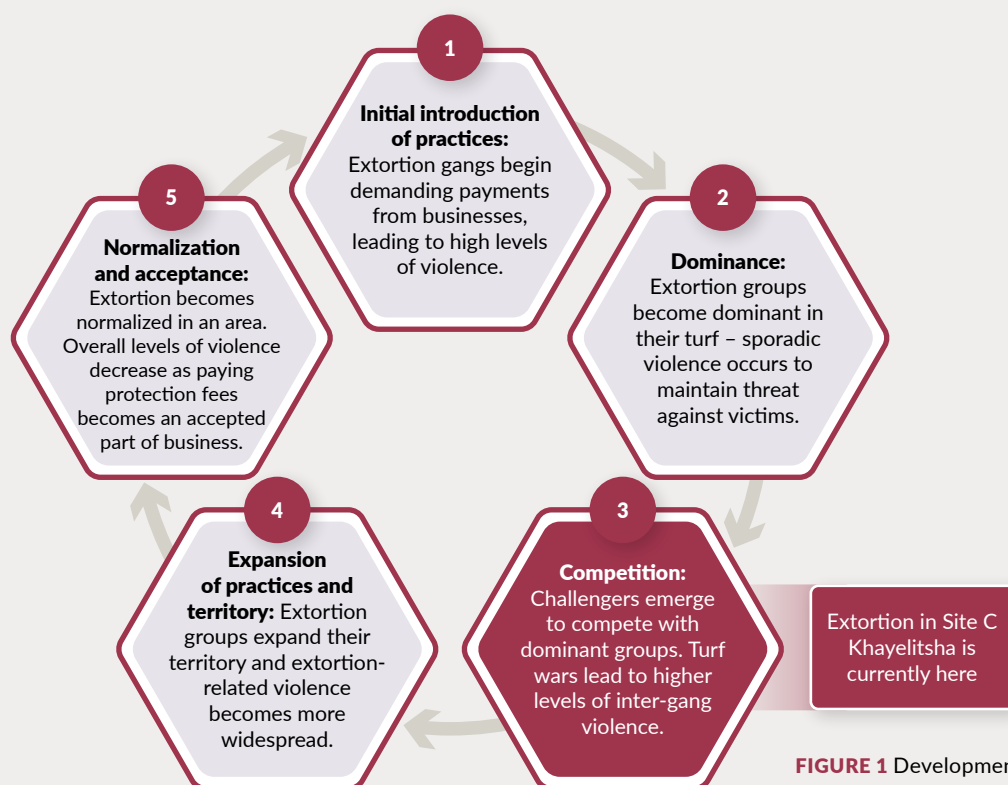


FIGURE 1 Development of extortion-related criminal activity.



when they enter the turf of other subgroups or extort businesses too often or too heavily.⁴⁸ Victims may be unable to keep their businesses operating, making the extortion business model unsustainable.⁴⁹

Until recently, the Bara group controlled Khayelitsha's Site C neighbourhood and the China group controlled X-section in Site B. The China group acted on behalf of Fundile 'Phiri' Maseti's more dominant group. Maseti and his associate Gcinithemba Beja were sentenced to seven life prison terms by the Western Cape High Court in April 2024 for the murders of seven people in an extortion-related massacre in March 2020.⁵⁰

Some law enforcement sources suggest that even the dominant extortion groups, such as the Phiri and Bara groups, are local components of much larger organized crime networks involving politicians and politically connected businesspeople.⁵¹

The Phiri group gained public notoriety as part of the so-called 'Gupta gang'.⁵² It adopted this moniker when it became prominent in late 2020 as an upstart rival to the established Boko Haram extortion group.⁵³ In April 2021, GI-TOC research found that the Guptas and Boko Haram were the two main gangs controlling extortion in Khayelitsha and surrounding townships. At the time, they did not seem to have a clear structure or hierarchy.⁵⁴ The extortion landscape appears to have developed since then, with the emergence of more complex hierarchies and leading figures such as Nyalara, Maseti, and Xolisa 'Eto' Ndlumbini, an alleged rival to Bara in parts of Site C. A swathe of Site B is also controlled by a network known as the George group, which was reportedly allied to Bara before his death.

KEY INCIDENTS RELATING TO EXTORTION NETWORKS IN KHAYELITSHA

- MAY 2021:** Phiri group leader Fundile Maseti arrested on multiple murder charges and denied bail. Continues to control Site B through the China group.
- JULY 2022:** Bara group leader Yanga Nyalara arrested on multiple murder charges and denied bail. Continues to control Site C through associates.
- NOVEMBER 2023:** Fundile 'Phiri' Maseti and Gcinithemba Beja are convicted of the murders of seven people in an extortion-related massacre in March 2020. Maseti continues to control parts of Site B through the China group.
- 20 FEBRUARY 2025:** Nyalara is killed by police in the Eastern Cape. The Bara group loses dominance, leaving a power vacuum in Site B.
- 11 JUNE 2025:** Three Somali nationals are gunned down in Site C, as remaining extortion groups fight for control of territory.
- MID-2023 TO MID-2024:** Eto group emerges to challenge the Bara group in Site C, leading to multiple extortion-related murders in Site C.
- JUNE 2024:** Eto group members and leader arrested.
- NOVEMBER 2024:** Nyalara is released after robbery charges withdrawn.
- 12 APRIL 2025:** Ayazola 'China' Fulu and associates are arrested, leaving no dominant group in X-section, Site B.

The decline of the Bara group

At the height of his dominance, Nyalara was one of Khayelitsha's most feared individuals. He was tried for the murders of 12 people – killed in a retaliatory attack against the Phiri group – after two state witnesses were murdered and the third survived an attempted hit weeks before he was due to testify.⁵⁵ This remaining witness then gave inconsistent testimony, resulting in Nyalara's acquittal. Last November, the state dropped robbery charges against him after two witnesses who feared for their lives refused to testify.⁵⁶

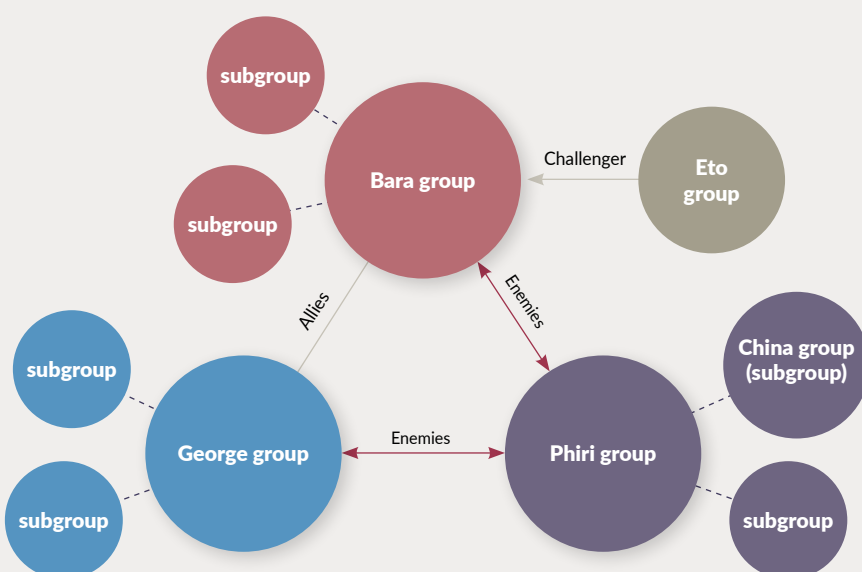


FIGURE 2 The relationships between the China, Phiri and Eto groups.



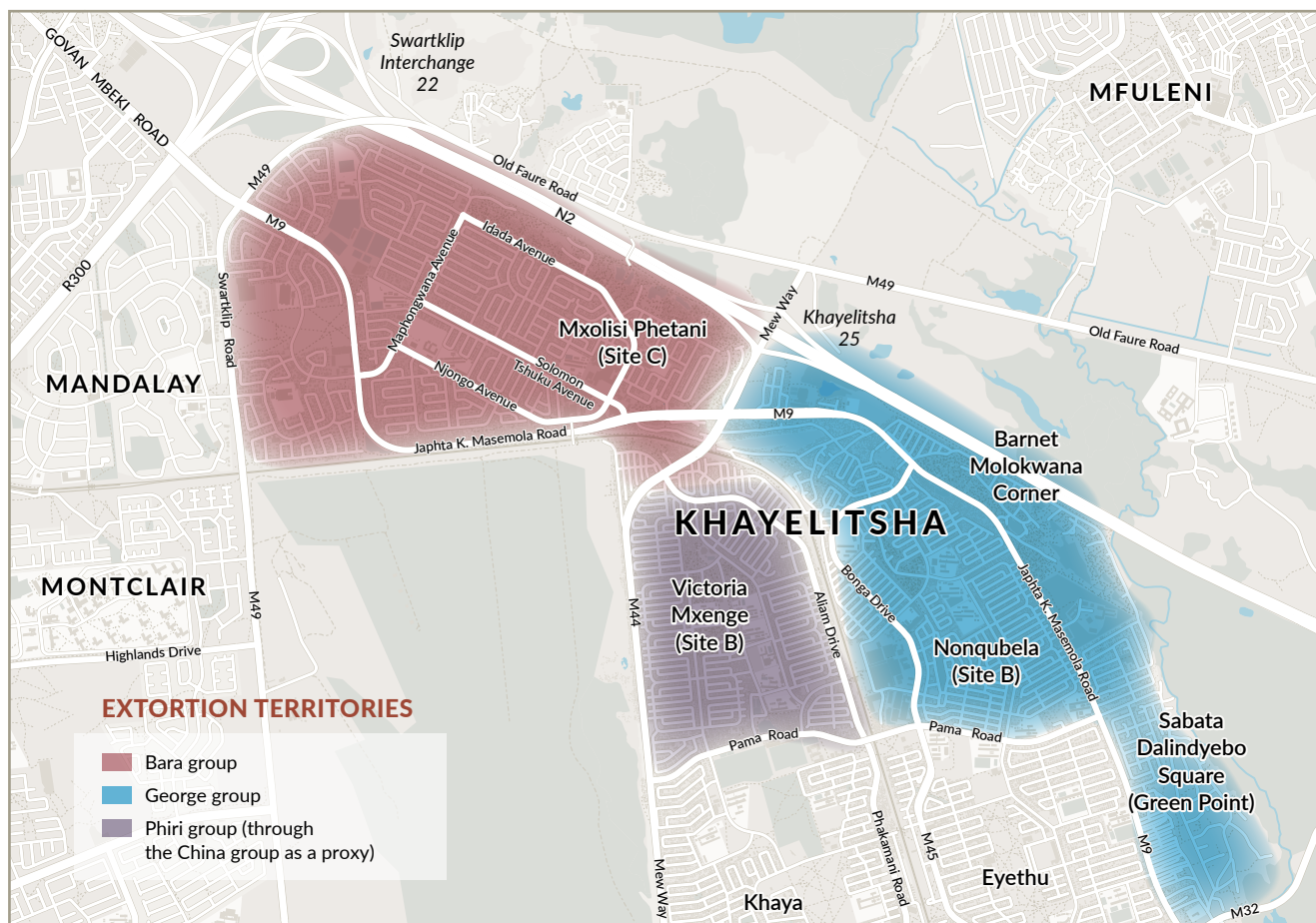


FIGURE 3 Extortion territory in Khayelitsha to February 2025.

Note: After this point, due to the arrests or deaths of key leaders of extortion groups, the territories have begun to break down, meaning current rates of violence between extortion groups has increased.

Nyalara was a prominent member of the Cape Organisation for the Democratic Taxi Association at Site C taxi rank,⁵⁷ where he operated a quasi-police office from a shipping container. For a fee, he resolved community complaints, some of which were related to the extortion and crime he was responsible for.⁵⁸ He allegedly started in the taxi business after gaining notoriety as one of the *izinkabi*, hitmen linked to the taxi industry. There is a strong correlation between township extortionists and the minibus taxi industry.⁵⁹

Many of the Bara group's members were killed by rivals over the years. After Nyalara died in a shootout with police, none of the few who remained emerged as a new leader. Some expected that Nyalara's sister – a consistent supporter during his court cases and believed to be closely involved in his business interests – would take over his taxi business and extortion enterprise. However, a police source involved in investigating Nyalara said the patriarchal nature of the taxi business meant a woman would not be accepted at the helm of his taxi fleet.⁶⁰

Rampant extortion in Site C suggests there is no dominant group and the Bara group is no longer a formidable threat. A similar

dynamic could play out in Gugulethu, a township a few kilometres from Khayelitsha, after the killing by police of another extortion boss, Ayanda 'Stix' Yisaka, on 31 July 2025.⁶¹

The decline of the China group

After Maseti's arrest in May 2021, his group reportedly retained control of its territory by using the China group as a proxy.⁶² Maseti's brother-in-law is an alleged member of the China group, a sign of their close links.

This is not the first time township extortion groups have been influenced by imprisoned criminal actors. Nyalara maintained control over Site C through associates and proxy groups while he was imprisoned awaiting trial.⁶³ Similarly, from mid-2023 the Bara group was challenged in parts of Site C by the Eto group run by Ndlumbini.

Police sources believe Ndlumbini had support from the 28s in prison, enabling him to challenge the Bara group suddenly and violently. Members of the Eto group were arrested in June 2024 after a spate of shootings in Site C allegedly linked to their take-over attempt targeting the Bara group.⁶⁴

Yet with 'China' Fulu and several of his associates now in custody, the Phiri group looks set to lose control of X-section. According to a local police source, both X-section and Bara's former territory in Site C are being taken over by a powerful figure linked to the taxi industry and his associates. Reports of shootings and murders in both areas are believed to be the result of clashes between remnants of the Bara and Phiri groups and these new challengers.⁶⁵

Police response in Khayelitsha faces criticism

Responding to the arrests of China and Eto group members, the Western Cape deputy director of public prosecutions, Advocate Mervyn Menigo, said the police reacted to mass shootings rather than proactively investigating extortion networks.⁶⁶

'If the South African Police Service allege that crimes are extortion-related, then they should engage in proactive, intelligence-driven disruption operations or register project investigations ... where the kingpins and the surrounding financial network and soldier network are addressed holistically,' he said.⁶⁷

Most current and previous investigations of alleged extortionists relate to murders, and Menigo said 'no investigations are conducted to gather evidence of extortion or the existence of an extortion gang, making Prevention of Organised Crime Act [POCA] charges impossible'.⁶⁸

This is not the first time the handling of extortion cases by Khayelitsha police has come under scrutiny. In November 2023, the judge in the prosecution of Maseti and Beja found evidence of complicity between police officers and extortionists.⁶⁹ Information was leaked to Gupta gang members that the state's sole witness in the trial had made a statement to police about the shooting. The gang then tried to hunt down the witness, even at his family's remote village in the Eastern Cape, and he was placed in witness protection. The witness told the court he was scared to make a statement at the police station because he was being watched by police officers who 'socialized' with the accused.⁷⁰

Extortion groups seek to usurp the state's authority and create legitimacy for themselves, presenting themselves as above the law, in control of local security and as the recipient of 'taxes'. Police corruption or unprofessional conduct accelerates this process of undermining the state's power by eroding the public's confidence in its ability to provide security.⁷¹

What's in a number? The conflicting statistics circulating in debates about Western Cape gangsterism

Since May 2025, at least three media reports from South African outlets have quoted the same statistics: the Western Cape has between 90 and 130 gangs with a total membership of about 100 000 people.⁷⁷ Unsure of where these statistics originated

Police sources investigating Khayelitsha's extortion syndicates say their biggest hurdle is obtaining statements from victims or witnesses. This is a direct result of the public's lack of confidence in the state, in part due to perceptions of corruption.⁷² Accusations of complicity, as highlighted in the 2023 judgment, may make witnesses even more hesitant.

Other approaches to prosecuting extortion groups

To confront these extortion networks more effectively, law enforcement sources and prosecutors have suggested creative uses of existing laws. They argue that POCA provisions could be used to bring money laundering charges against suspected extortionists as they try to move the proceeds of their illegal taxation. In this way, extortion victims would not need to make statements against their extortionists, reducing the risk of witness intimidation.⁷³

Alternatively, Menigo also said that in light of the absence of the kind of proactive investigations into extortion he has called for, prosecutors have considered workarounds, such as using crime intelligence information to link these accused and their activities as criminal gang activity. 'But ultimately, we will be met with a hearsay challenge to these allegations as there is no hearsay exception for gang-related charges as there is with racketeering,' he said.⁷⁴

South African courts do not generally allow hearsay evidence, which is any statement by someone not called as a witness and therefore not susceptible to cross-examination. Hearsay is permissible in certain circumstances, including under POCA concerning racketeering charges.⁷⁵ These strategies have not yet been tested by investigators and prosecutors.

Without a concerted effort to tackle extortionists holistically, remaining members of these networks will fill the voids created by the exit of dominant actors. In the words of Judge Daniel Thulare during his 2024 sentencing of Maseti, 'the [extortion networks] deem themselves entitled to the share of any income, not just profits. Unless they meet the authority of the state face to face, they remain unstoppable.'⁷⁶ If they remain unchecked, the mass shootings that have come to typify township extortion disputes may increase in the short term.

(and what evidence they are based on), our research team investigated and discovered them to be 25 years old. They have been quoted repeatedly in the media, however, often giving the mistaken impression that they are current estimates. The continued use

of these outdated statistics has the potential to misinform policies and interventions aimed at addressing gang-related issues, and to shape a misleading public perception of the scale of gang activity in the province.

Tracing the source of the statistics

The estimates first appeared in a monograph by Professor Irvin Kinnes titled 'The changing face of gangs in the Western Cape', published in June 2000.⁷⁸ They were provided by the South African Police Service (SAPS) Gang Unit, which reported that 'approximately 137 gangs are operating on the Cape Flats with membership ranging between 80 000 and 100 000'. The estimate of 100 000 was also used in confidential police briefing documents in the late 1990s. Data at the time was scanty, as Kinnes notes that the only previous public estimate dated back to the mid-1980s. While Kinnes remains today a highly respected authority on gang activity in the Western Cape (currently at the University of Cape Town), these statistics cannot be assumed to hold true today.

An update to the 2000 estimate was provided to the National Assembly safety and security committees in November 2001. The SAPS deputy commissioner for the Western Cape at the time, Jeremy Vearey, said that 150 gangs were active in the province, with a total membership of about 120 000.⁷⁹ The committee did not ask the SAPS to elaborate on the statistics, how they were collected, or why the estimated number of gang members had increased by at least 20 000 in a year.

The 2001 SAPS estimates have never received the same level of media or academic attention as the 2000 estimates. The estimates of '90 to 130 gangs' with 100 000 members appear on the 'Gangs in South Africa' Wikipedia page, which may be the first port of call for those seeking headline statistics.⁸⁰

The SAPS does not appear to have released gang membership statistics since 2001, and no comprehensive academic study of gang numbers and members has been conducted since then. The historical figures are therefore the convenient choice for media reports attempting to portray the scale of gangsterism in the province, keeping them in circulation.⁸¹

Previous GI-TOC estimates of the scale of gang membership

This is a key question that the GI-TOC has tried to address in the past. Between 2018 and 2019, our research team gathered information estimating the gang membership of 13 of the most prominent gangs in Cape Town. These numbered, we estimated, just under 72 000 gang members, with the largest organization at the time being the Americans gang, with an estimated 21 240 members.⁸² It is worth emphasizing that this is not an estimate of all gang members in the city or the province, but only the manpower of these 13 most prominent gangs.

This data was gathered by field research going area by area, identifying the number of gangs present in each area of Cape Town in order to identify which were most prominent, and gathering data on their numbers. Interviews were conducted with gang members in each area, including gang bosses and those lower down the chain of command, to ask how many members of the gang they commanded within their area. These were cross-referenced with members of the same gang in different areas and used to calculate an estimate,

These interviews with gang members were then cross-referenced with further interviews in each area, with members of the community, including activists and people involved in community work to mediate between warring gangs, pastors and imams in various areas, and local civil society organizations. These sources –

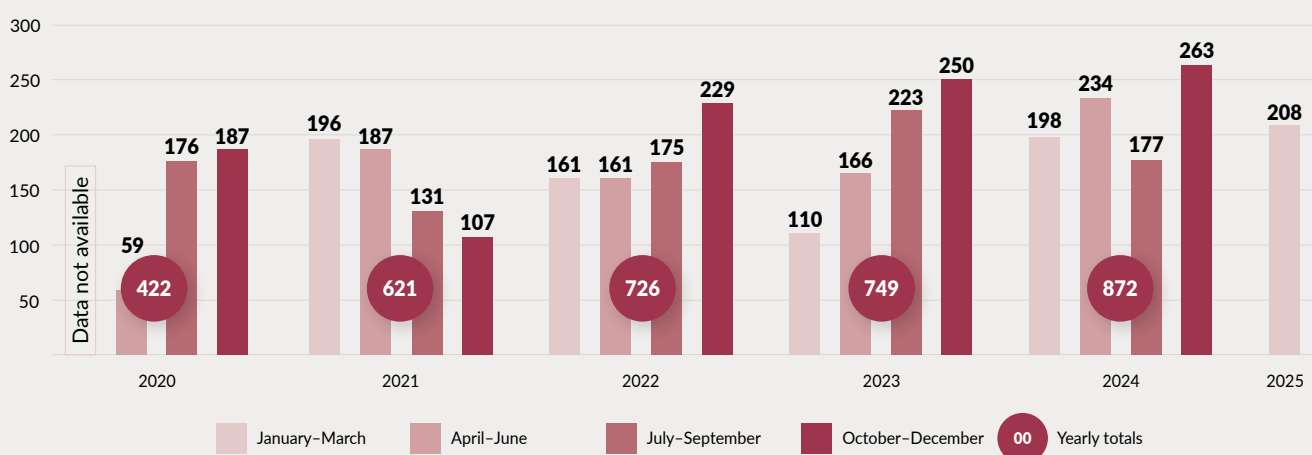


FIGURE 4 Frequency of gang-related murders in the Western Cape, 2020–2025.
SOURCE: SAPS

who know these gang-affected communities inside out – can provide a balance and external view to the gang members' interviewed, who may have an incentive to over-estimate the size and power of their own criminal organizations.

While our work since 2019 has continued to monitor and gather data on gang dynamics, gang-related violence and gang territories, we have not gathered an updated estimate to these figures. Such an exercise would require dedicated resources, extensive fieldwork and, above all, time.

Estimating the number of gangs and gang members

The fragmentation of Western Cape gangs has increased significantly in recent years, so the number of gangs is continually in flux. Splits increase the count as each breakaway forms a new entity with a leadership structure, identity and activities. The Americans gang, for example, has seen several groups break away from its ranks, including the Inglorious Basterds (IGBs), Dollar Kids, Spoilt Brats and Pitbulls.⁸³ There are also many examples of 'junior gangs' or 'youth gangs'. These groups, made up of child recruits, have their own structures and identities but are allied to and indirectly controlled by a more established or 'senior gang'. The junior gang may also serve as an entry point into senior gang membership.⁸⁴ How far these can be considered as separate entities, and counted as separate gangs, varies case by case.

At other points, gangs may merge and combine forces. There have been instances where gangs have capitalized on the fractured landscape and absorbed smaller gangs, placing them under a single banner.⁸⁵ The Fancy Boys, for example, have rapidly expanded their territory across the Western Cape by incorporating smaller gangs into their ranks since early 2022.⁸⁶

While estimating the number of gangs may offer insight into the landscape, it can tell only part of the story. Gangs vary hugely in terms of their membership numbers, how powerful and active they are in certain areas, and how violent they are. One of the reasons the Fancy Boys have been able to expand so rapidly is that they have been well supplied with illicit firearms. This means they often have an advantage in turf wars and can attract recruits from other gangs.⁸⁷

The number of gang members also fluctuates. Gangs constantly recruit in areas where they hold territory, particularly targeting vulnerable children. When breakaway gangs form, it is common for each gang to embark on a recruitment drive, increasing provincial gang membership numbers.⁸⁸

Much like the number of gangs, even an accurate tally of members cannot reflect the scale of the gang phenomenon. When gangs recruit children, for example, they might start in minor roles as lookouts or couriers. They contribute to day-to-day criminal

activities even though they are not yet 'fully-fledged' members. Other academic studies have discussed how distinguishing between fully-fledged members and those on the periphery, including those used as runners for the gang or community members who store drugs and firearms, is challenging.⁸⁹

Because the number and membership of gangs changes so much over time, it is not plausible to believe that 25-year-old estimates (such as the ones widely quoted in the media) – or even our 2019 estimates of prominent gangs – remain applicable.

Potential alternatives and proxies for gang activity

Various media organizations have used these historical statistics in attempts to communicate the scale of the gang phenomenon clearly and simply.⁹⁰ While this is understandable and appropriate, it highlights a broader issue. Similar 'zombie statistics', as they are known, regularly appear in media articles about other forms of organized crime, including illicit finance, wildlife trafficking and drug trafficking. For example, a statement by the White House in 2021 (during the administration of President Joe Biden) noted that 'acts of corruption sap between 2 and 5 per cent from global gross domestic product'.⁹¹ This statistic started life in a 1990s estimate by the managing director of the International Monetary Fund, who hedged his bets by saying that it 'would probably be a consensus range'.⁹² Yet, like the 'zombie statistics' about Western Cape gangs, this estimate seems unwilling to die. The reason is that it is inherently challenging to measure the scope of many forms of crime, as they are hidden due to their illicit nature.

Conducting an updated comprehensive study to arrive at current overall estimates of gang numbers and members in the Western Cape will require significant resources. However, other measures are already available that could provide proxies for the level of gang activity. For example, numbers of gang-related murders by province have been part of SAPS quarterly crime statistics since 2020, offering a clear, easy-to-understand indicator of the scale of gang-related violence. (Murder statistics are often considered a reliable proxy for measuring violent crime, as they tend to be less prone to under-reporting when compared to other crimes.⁹³) The available data shows an increase in the mean number of gang-related murders over the past five years.

This data is used by policing agencies, government officials and the public to measure the scale of the issue and the success of programmes to curb gangsterism. However, murders are only one aspect of gang-related crime. Other crimes that gang members commit, such as drug offences, extortion and sexual offences, are not always disaggregated in official statistics. Statistics for gang-related murders are also not made publicly available at police station level, which would allow external observers and researchers to analyze the spatial distribution of gang-related violence more accurately.

Technologies offer other innovative ways to form a picture of gang activity. ShotSpotter, a gunfire detection system that uses acoustic sensors to provide real-time information on shootings,⁹⁴ has been rolled out in four gang-affected areas of Cape Town – Hanover Park, Manenberg, Lavender Hill and Nyanga – since late 2022.⁹⁵ Data released in 2024 found that across these areas, a shot was fired on average every 47 minutes from January to August, painting a more accurate picture of gun violence linked to gangs at this local level.⁹⁶

The sensors may pick up shooting incidents that are not reported to the police and may not be captured in murder or attempted murder statistics. The data can also show the number of shots fired in a gunfight (perhaps an indicator of how much ammunition gangs have available) and information on the types of firearms used. However, ShotSpotter provides only limited coverage, leaving many gang-affected areas unobserved, and it cannot differentiate gang-related gunfire from other shootings.

It would be useful to have up-to-date estimates of the number of gangs and gang members in the Western Cape. As demonstrated by the recycling of old statistics, accurate current estimates would help the public and policymakers visualize the scale of

the gang phenomenon, and what proportion of society may be directly (or indirectly) involved. As discussed above, conducting this kind of comprehensive study would require significant resources and a rigorous methodology – for example, this could build on our previous approach of drawing on a large sample size of interviews with gang members and affected communities, but could also be cross-referenced with other sources such as police estimates and data from court records.

No estimate will ever be perfect, due to the challenges in collecting this kind of data and the constant fluctuations in gang structures and membership. But from the perspective of policymakers, it is important to know the overall size of the gang phenomenon as best as possible, to help mobilize resources and shape responses.

Yet what we can say is, if the data from ShotSpotter and SAPS gang-related murders indicates anything, it is that – regardless of the number of gangs or their members – the gang phenomenon has increased in its lethality over the past five years, to the extent that the most heavily gang-affected areas are facing near-constant violence.

AREA PROFILE

Old rivals, new rebels: Gang fragmentation and the Americans' fight to maintain their dominance in Hanover Park

This is the second in a series of articles drawing on the GI-TOC's mapping of gang territories across the Western Cape. Delving into the information gathered during the mapping and data-gathering exercise, each area profile investigates a particular gang-affected neighbourhood of the Western Cape and examines its place within broader criminal trends in the province. Here, we look at Hanover Park and consider the violent territorial competition between gangs and the impact of this on the community.

Some of the Western Cape's oldest and most established gangs are clashing with new-age splinter gangs over long-held territories, causing a dramatic rise in violence in communities across Cape Town. In Hanover Park, the powerful Americans have come under attack from their splinter gang, the IGBs, undermining their territorial dominance. Wider attacks on the Americans across Cape Town have forced them to consolidate their resources to protect strongholds.

While Hanover Park shares a similar history of gang activity with other Cape Flats communities, it is now the epicentre of Western Cape gangsterism, with levels of violence matched by few other areas. Its long-standing rivalries and turf wars launched by splinter gangs, all within an area of about 2km², mean it is often

compared to a war zone. In 2023/24, 112 murders were recorded in the Philippi policing precinct of which it is a part, nearly 40% more than a year earlier.⁹⁷

A legacy of territorial control

Most of Hanover Park's history has been marked by territorial rivalry between gangs, and some of the province's oldest gangs have been active in the suburb since the 1970s.⁹⁸ For generations, it has been a stronghold of the Americans, which occupies most of the gang turf.⁹⁹ A high-ranking member of the Americans said, 'We are the biggest gang here ... that's why these other guys [gangs] want to fight us ... because we always had the turf.'¹⁰⁰ Other gangs that occupy smaller blocks of territory but are just as firmly embedded in the community include the Mongrels, Ghetto Kids and Laughing Boys. They are fierce rivals who have been competing over turf for decades.¹⁰¹

Local sources, court documents, government reports and media articles indicate that each of these gangs has been involved in turf wars since at least the 1980s, with the Americans at the centre of many conflicts.¹⁰² Incidents include the Americans clashing with the Vulture Kids and Backstreet Kids in 1987,¹⁰³ the Laughing Boys in 2001,¹⁰⁴ the Mongrels in 2010¹⁰⁵ and the

Ghetto Kids in 2019.¹⁰⁶ The Vulture Kids and Backstreet Kids have faded from the area but the territories of the others have remained largely stable.

Contestation over turf continues, and community sources say the Americans, Mongrels and Ghetto Kids are competing for control of drug-selling points in 'Ghost Town' (an area named for its high number of deaths in gang fights).¹⁰⁷ The violence has reportedly spread to the nearby Pinati area, where gangs are said to be fighting over extortion turf in a business park with a large concentration of established companies, making it a prime source of illicit income.¹⁰⁸

The intergenerational presence of gangs in Hanover Park means that many people, sometimes entire families, have been caught up in these cycles of violence. In many cases, children join their parents' gangs.¹⁰⁹ A resident said, 'These young boys will tell you that they belong to the Americans because their fathers were Americans, and their sons will do the same.'¹¹⁰ This is one of the reasons these gangs still hold sway in Hanover Park, and why their territories and rivalries have remained stable.

More recently, however, younger members have sown divisions within the Americans, in part due to a generational divide in beliefs and attitudes.¹¹¹ The younger generation are said to be

more likely to give up long-standing gang traditions for economic opportunities.¹¹² This has resulted in internal contestation, ultimately leading to the formation of splinter gangs such as the IGBs and Dollar Kids.

Americans' territory under threat

When the IGBs and the Dollar Kids broke away from the Americans in 2022, a new wave of violence struck Hanover Park.¹¹³ Clashes between the Americans and the IGBs are said to have been the bloodiest, with more than 50 people being killed at the peak of the conflict in 2023 and 2024.¹¹⁴ The Americans' pool of foot soldiers is said to have suffered major losses, not only in terms of those killed but also those who left to join splinter gangs. 'They [the Americans] are being shot all over ... It's the IGBs that are causing this ... a lot of Americans also moved over to the IGBs now,' said a local source.¹¹⁵ The spike in violence is reflected in murders recorded in the Philippi police precinct, which rose from 64 in 2021/22 to 112 in 2023/24. The IGBs have since taken over portions of Americans territory, and the rivalry continues.

Clashes between the Americans and the IGBs may have knock-on effects on the community as other gangs attempt to capitalize on the situation and move in on the Americans' turf, leading to more violence.¹¹⁶ 'The problem is that this also opens the door for the Americans' enemies to try and take over their turf as

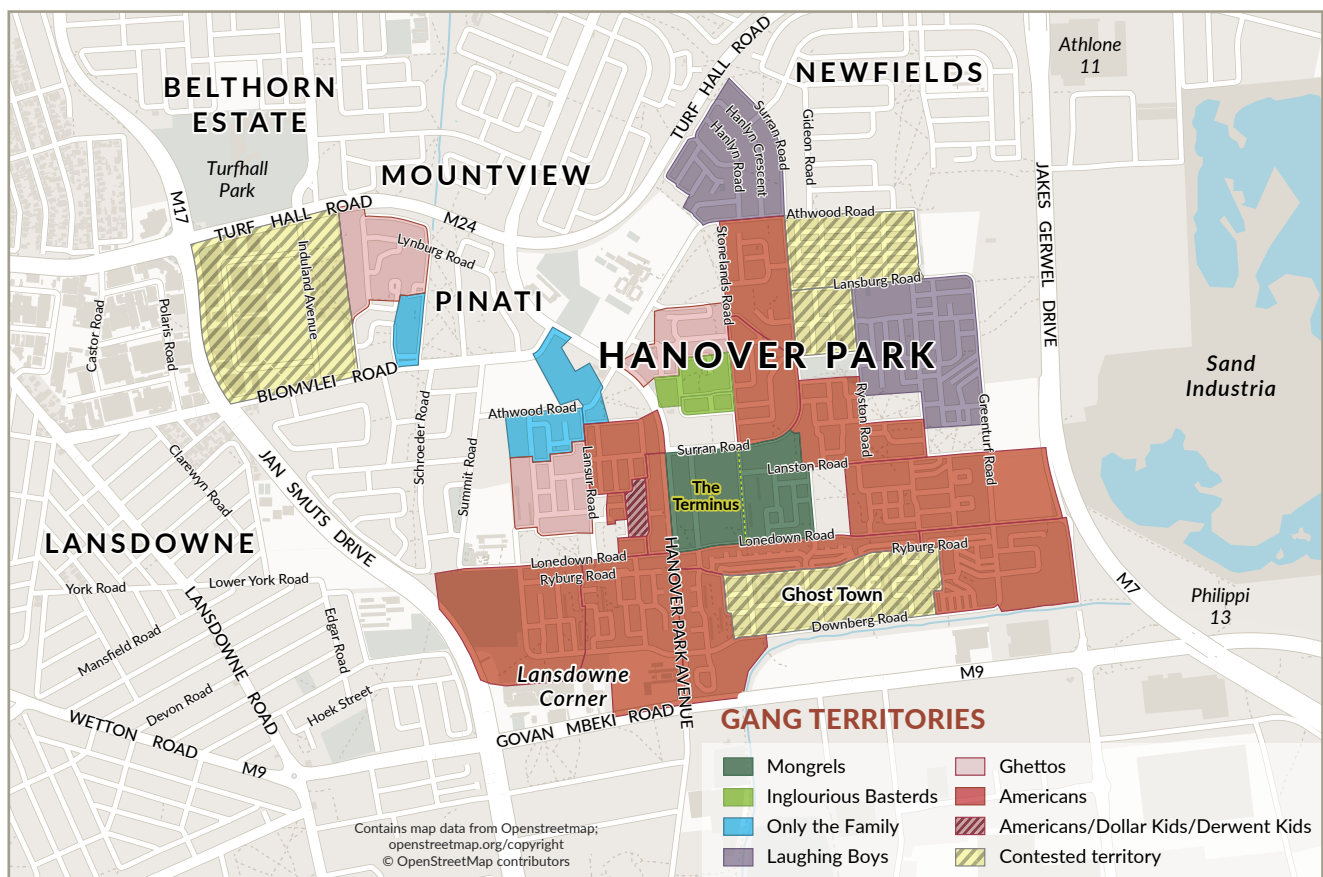


FIGURE 5 Gang territories in Hanover Park.

well,' said a local source.¹¹⁷ The Mongrels' recent takeover of 'The Terminus' (an area with bus and taxi terminuses), which was previously regarded as contested or 'neutral' territory between the Americans and the Mongrels,¹¹⁸ may be an indicator of this.

According to local sources, these events have seen a substantial weakening of the Americans in Hanover Park.¹¹⁹ However, they also appear to be indicative of a wider trend of the Americans being attacked and suffering territorial losses throughout Cape Town. Since the start of 2025, the GI-TOC has recorded a string of assassinations of Americans leaders across the city. They included the killings of key figures in Parkwood,¹²⁰ Kensington and Manenberg, as well as Hanover Park.¹²¹ In a turf war with the IGBs, the gang also suffered significant territorial losses in 'The Vlei' in Belgravia.¹²²

These events have forced the Americans to consolidate their resources in Hanover Park to protect their stronghold, resulting in the formation of fragile alliances to ward off attacks.¹²³

In a fractured landscape, alliances still exist

Despite the infighting between the Americans and the Dollar Kids, the groups negotiated a truce and banded together in an alliance with the Derwent Kids (a smaller Hanover Park gang) to stabilize the landscape.¹²⁴ According to a member of the 28s gang, the Derwent Kids and the Dollar Kids 'will both stand and fight with the Americans against any gang who is targeting

Americans'.¹²⁵ They do this to ensure the protection of their own territories through the preservation of the current order,¹²⁶ and the alliance has withstood attacks by the IGBs.

Further conflict arose when the Fancy Boys allegedly made initial inroads into Hanover Park and tried to take over Americans' turf.¹²⁷ The Fancy Boys have rapidly expanded their territory across the province since 2022 by capitalizing on the increasingly fractured gang landscape.¹²⁸ However, the Americans, Dollar Kids and Derwent Kids once again banded together, and this time the IGBs also joined the alliance after their leader, known by his street name 'Wessie', was killed by the Fancy Boys in Mitchells Plain.¹²⁹ After significant fighting, the Fancy Boys were driven out.¹³⁰ This unusual alliance highlights the unpredictable nature of gangs and shows how they may form short-term alliances to ward off aggressive rivals. According to a former member of the Americans, this alliance was formed because the Fancy Boys had threatened all their territories.¹³¹

For now, the Americans have thwarted attacks in Hanover Park by the IGBs and Fancy Boys. But the recent killings of two Americans leaders – one known by the street name 'Abbie' in July 2025, followed a week later by another known as 'Nammies' – show that the area remains volatile.¹³² Fifty years since the Americans established themselves in Hanover Park, there is no sign that their rivals are ready to let them rule in peace.

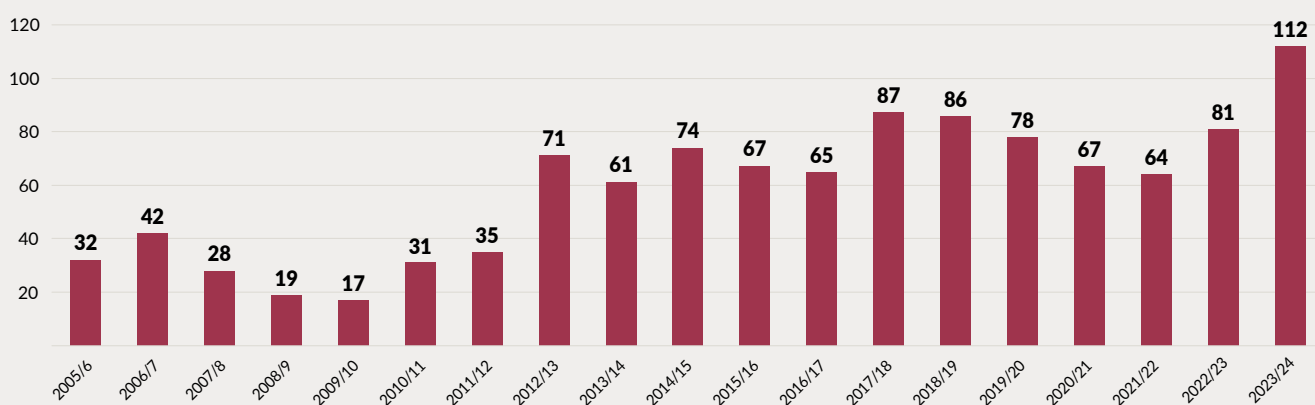


FIGURE 6 Annual murder statistics from Philippi SAPS precinct (Hanover Park), 2005–2024.

Source: SAPS via ISS Crime Statistics Wizard

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 - 123 Interview with a former member of the Americans, Hanover Park, 3 August 2025.
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 - 125 Interview with a member of the 28s, Hanover Park, 4 August 2025; research by GI-TOC fieldworkers, 14 August 2025.
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